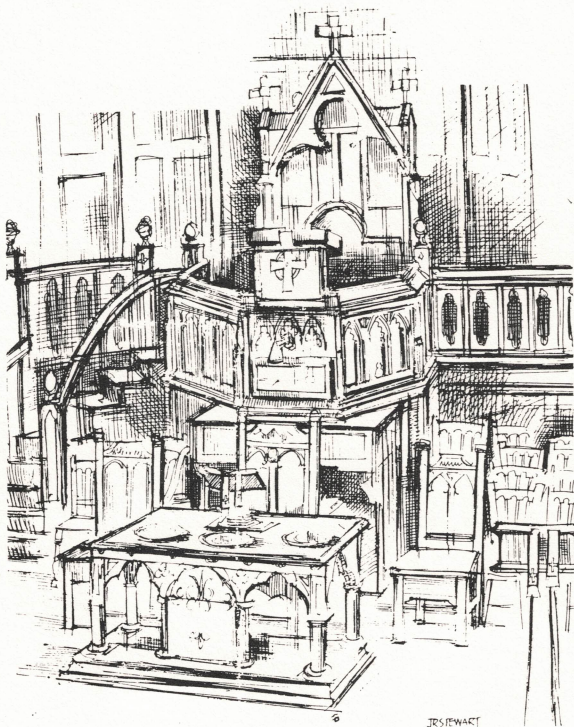


LARBERT EAST CHURCH



**A Short History
by
Robert Arthur**

OPENING PRAISE

O Lord of Hosts, we gather here
To worship, and unite
Our hearts in praising Thee, our God
And Father infinite.

Lord, with Thy presence sanctify
The rites we celebrate
Bless those who now before Thee come
Their love to dedicate.

In strength and beauty, Lord, they come
To stand before Thy face,
Give them Thy strength, and on them pour
The beauty of Thy grace.

Lord, let Thy Spirit fill their minds,
And Christ, stand Thou beside
That what is said and done this day
For ever may abide.

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PREFACE

Let me say at the outset that it was not my idea that I should compile this history. As many of you know, I am a comparative "new boy" here; my wife and I came to Larbert as recently as 1973. There was therefore no reason for me to think that I might write a history, or that the writing of a history would be either desirable or even possible. The idea took root in the fertile brain of Mr. Frank Rae, our Session Clerk; at any rate, it was he who first approached me with the suggestion that I might undertake the task. Precluded as I am by advancing years and bodily disability from playing any very active part in church affairs, this seemed to be something I might manage, and I agreed to try.

Here you have the results of my efforts, and I hope find them of interest and benefit; it is always helpful to know something of one's roots, of what has been done in years gone by to make today possible. Now we can look at today and determine whether we are being true to our heritage and our destiny.

After the manner of all good Session Clerks, Mr. Rae took the precaution of ensuring that he had the support of the Minister, and I would wish to express my deep gratitude to Mr. Murray as well as the Mr. Rae for their help and encouragement — help and encouragement without which this history might never have seen the light of day.

Larbert
June, 1978.

ROBERT ARTHUR

CHAPTER I

There is a saying - almost a proverb - to the effect that "Every time one door shuts another door opens." Many of us could doubtless recall incidents within our own experience which would tend to demonstrate the truth of this maxim. However, it is no part of the purpose of this treatise to give vent to personal reminiscences, no matter how interesting they might be. Our purpose is to examine the events surrounding the history of Larbert East Church, and in particular, the events surrounding its origin, to see if these events have any bearing on our maxim.

In the year 1843 there occurred an event which had a profound influence on Scotland in general and on the Church of Scotland in particular. This was the Disruption when thousands of members, clerical and lay alike, disapproving of various aspects of the Church's organisation, seceded from it and formed themselves into a number of smaller, independent ("Free") Churches. It is perhaps worthy of mention that most of the congregations so formed have since become reunited with the Church of Scotland. But at the time the Disruption caused much heart burning, and there was not a little ill feeling between the various Churches. A most unchristian state of affairs, we may think, forgetting that even today, over a century later, there is not complete peace and amity between different denominations in Scotland -- or anywhere else, for that matter.

Surely, it is not entirely without significance that the year 1843, which witnessed the Disruption and the closing of so many doors, also witnessed the opening of at least one new door, in the formation in Larbert of the congregation which is now Larbert East Church.

So far we have made particular mention of the year 1843, but the story of Larbert East Church begins at an earlier date. Its real beginning was a meeting held in November 1840, in Larbert Parish Schoolhouse, for the purpose of forming "Larbert Working Men's Association for promoting the interests of the Church of Scotland". There have been many Working Men's Associations of various types, but has there ever been one with so definite a bias towards the Church? I think not. When we look at the many Working Men's Associations which have existed, and which do exist we are, I fear, faced with the inescapable conclusion that the interests of the Church did not occupy a position in the forefront of their founders' minds.

The new Association continued in being until at a meeting held (again in Larbert Parish Schoolhouse) on June 29, 1843, it was decided that the Association should become the nucleus of a new congregation of the Free Presbyterian Church, to be known as Larbert Free Church. It continued to bear this name till 1900, when the

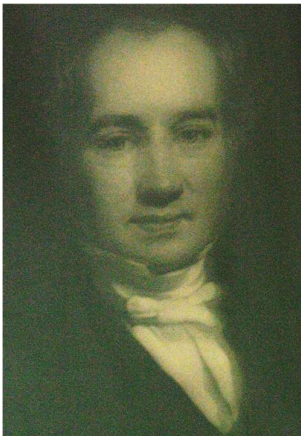


congregation decided to merge with the then newly-formed United Free Church of Scotland. The name was then changed to Larbert East United Free Church, and this name lasted till 1929 when, with the majority of United Free charges, Larbert East became a Church of Scotland charge in the Union of that year. The words "United Free" were then dropped from the name.

By coming so far in so short a time, we have omitted many important considerations to which we must now return.

CHAPTER II It may be of value at this point to look at the church in which the new congregation was to worship. It was a small building, standing on almost exactly the same site as that occupied by the present church. We may gain some idea of the difference in conditions between 1843 and 1978 by considering that this "new" church was lit entirely by candles. Nevertheless, it served its purpose for over fifty years, till work started on the erection of the present church in 1900.

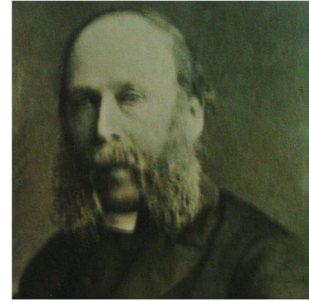
The new church was opened in 1844, its erection having cost the massive sum of seven hundred pounds. Today, the congregation of Larbert East Church could probably raise such a sum "without looking over their shoulders" but in 1843 conditions were very different, and the amassing of so much money represented many sacrifices by many people.



But the sacrifices were made, the money was raised, and the new church was built and opened free of debt. It is not surprising that their minister was constrained to say "what they have done is even more than an equivalent sum of money."

This first minister of Larbert Free Church was Reverend John Bonar. He was himself the son of a minister, and he had three cousins, John Bonar, Andrew Bonar and Horatio Bonar, who were all noted churchmen. He was also doubly the brother-in-law of Dr. Purvis of Edinburgh, each having married a sister of the other. All the Bonars and many of their friends and relations were Seceders in 1843, and we need not therefore be surprised that Reverend Bonar, accepted the call to become minister of Larbert Free Church, when he received it. He was duly inducted and, to use a classic phrase, he "laboured with much acceptance" till he was transferred to Aberdeen in 1846. It is not, by the way, any exaggeration to speak of Mr. Bonar as having "laboured". He was well known over a wide area as a man zealous in the execution of his pastoral duties, never sparing himself in his efforts to do what he saw as the Lord's work.

CHAPTER III With the departure of Mr. Bonar, Larbert Free Church remained without a regular minister for two years. However, even a two-year vacancy comes to an end, and the Larbert Free Church was no exception. The year 1848 brought the ordination and induction of Reverend Finlay Macpherson, who spent the whole of his ministerial career in Larbert, retiring in 1891, after forty-three years' devoted service. He died two years later at the age of seventy-two. During the last years of his ministry Mr. Macpherson was plagued by a combination of ill health and family bereavements. The ill health may well have been due very largely to years of unremitting labour in his parish; in this respect, he was another John Bonar.



In these later years, it was found necessary to provide Mr. Macpherson with a succession of assistants. The last of these, appointed in 1888, was Reverend Peter O. Balfour. In 1891, when Mr. Macpherson retired, Mr. Balfour received and accepted a unanimous and hearty call from the congregation to become their minister. He continued in the charge, to the great pleasure and profit of his congregation, till his untimely death from typhoid in 1895. (Now, eighty-odd years later, the idea that a minister should die of typhoid may be alien to our way of thinking, but we have to remember that since that time there have been vast increases in medical knowledge and skill, and many improvements in general living conditions).



The next minister of Larbert Free Church was Reverend (later Dr.) A.N. Bogle, who toiled with unflagging zeal till 1903, when he accepted a call to Ferry Road United Free Church in Leith. It may be of interest to note that Dr. Bogle, who was a man of considerable gifts and attainments, later occupied a post in the Church's headquarters in Edinburgh, and still later became Moderator of the General Assembly.

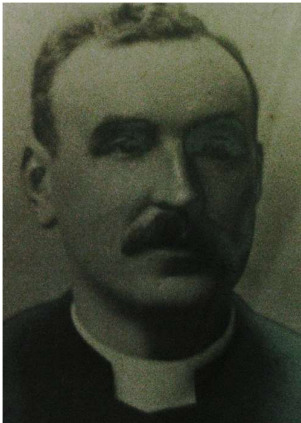


It was during Dr. Bogle's Larbert ministry that the present church was built. The necessity for such a step forward had been foreseen for some years, but as we still find today, finance proved to be a considerable stumbling-block, and progress was slow - so slow, indeed, as to be almost non-existent. A Building Committee was formed in 1897, and after that things began to happen. Work started on the building in 1900, and the church was opened for worship on March 9, 1902. Efforts had been made to fix earlier opening dates but had proved abortive, usually on account of labour troubles in the building industry. Where have we heard that before?



The final cost was in excess of £5,000 shades of 1843, but the money was raised and the church was opened, like its predecessor, free of debt. It may be of interest to note that the biggest single fund-raising operation was a three-day "Kirk Bazaar" which raised over nine hundred pounds, a very good effort indeed for 1898.

CHAPTER IV



On the departure of Dr. Bogle, the vacancy (now, of course, in Larbert East United Free Church) was filled by the induction of Reverend A. Easton Spence, who came from a charge at Inch, in Aberdeenshire. Mr. Spence served his new congregation faithfully and well, until he was called to Dollar in 1911. He is said to have "endeared himself to his congregation and to a wide circle of friends outwith its ranks." He appears to have been a man of considerable charm of manner as well as of considerable ability. He was one of those who foresaw, without any pleasure, the coming of the war, which broke out in 1914, after he had left Larbert. He was sorely concerned for the effects of the struggle on the people of Britain.

One subject which was particularly close to Mr. Spence's heart was the possibilities of and opportunities for work among troops serving overseas, and it was to this type of war work that he particularly addressed himself. We shall see something of the outcome at a later stage of this narrative.

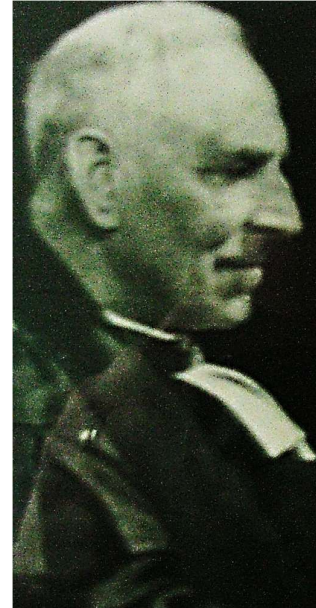


The 1911 Kirk Session.

Reverend W. Chisholm Mitchell, who came from Greenock, succeeded Mr. Spence in the charge of Larbert East United Free Church. Mr. Mitchell has been described as "a man of wide and deep learning

Possessed of literary abilities of no mean order". And when that has been said, what more remains to be said?

Mr. Mitchell remained in Larbert East till 1925, when he retired on grounds of ill health. He led his flock with loving care through the parlous days of 1914-18 and, though his health was beginning to fail, he still retained apparently boundless energy, and it was largely due to his urging and example that the greater part of the church's present suite of halls was built. (I say "the greater part" for, as most of us are aware, there have been recent additions to the halls).



The outbreak of war in 1914 brought many changes to every part of Britain, and Larbert was no exception. The largest forces that had ever been known in Britain were assembled, and the carnage of the battlefields, on land and sea, necessitated the enlistment of ever more and more men. On leave in this country as well as overseas these men required more comforts that were provided in Service scales of rations and clothing. Any additions to these Service scales had to be provided by the people at home.

One of the main fields for work at home was the provision of canteen facilities for men who were on the move for one reason or another. The people of Larbert were particularly active in this respect, and there were several canteens in the area. The chief interest of the people of Larbert East Church was in one combined rest-room, reading-room, writing-room and canteen which came to be known as "The Kettledrum". Thousands of men passed through its portals and many, grateful for what had been made available to them, wrote afterwards to say how much these facilities had been appreciated. This was definitely one case where virtue was its own reward.

One wartime tragedy which, strange as it may seem, affected Larbert, was the Gretna Disaster of May 22, 1915, when a troop-train carrying officers and men of the 7th Royal Scots, who had left Larbert in the early hours of that day, was

involved in a collision near Gretna. The death roll was over two hundred and as many more were injured.

Let us now return and see the outcome of the heart-searching, to which we have previously made reference, of Reverend A. Easton Spence, who left Larbert for Dollar in 1911. As we saw, his chief interest lay in working among troops serving overseas. On the outbreak of war he volunteered for service in this field, and underwent training during the greater part of the war. In 1918 he spent some months in France with the Churches' Army Huts. His work was so highly esteemed that he was invited to undertake a second tour of duty, this time in Germany after the cessation of hostilities. This tour was short-lived. He fell victim to a combined attack of influenza and pneumonia, and died in 1919. (There are still some of us who remember the ravages of the "Spanish Flu" epidemic of that year).

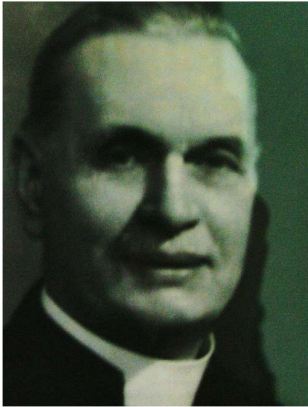
It might be thought that Mr. Spence had already "done his bit" for his country even before he went to France in 1918. His eldest son, Alexander, (who had been a member of Larbert East Church choir) had enlisted in the Gordon Highlanders in August 1914 and was killed in action in 1917. Now Mr. Spence was himself called upon to follow his son in making the supreme sacrifice.

CHAPTER V After the war was over, the people of Larbert East, in common with millions of their fellows all over the world, had one main thought in their minds to get back to normal as soon as possible. They wanted to get their sons and husbands and brothers who had survived the holocaust back home again. In general, they wanted to get back to the business of living - in peace. There was a great deal of what proved to be mere clap-trap talked about "hanging the Kaiser", about "a land fit for heroes to live in", about "the war to end war"

For the people of Larbert East there was to be no quick return to normality. During the war it had been borne in on them that their organisations were growing at a rate. This made it obvious that the question of hall accommodation was about to develop into a pressing need. The position was exacerbated when, in 1918, fire completely destroyed the church hall. Police investigations suggested that a group of small boys were responsible for the fire. It was ultimately agreed, in view of the delinquents' extreme youth, that no steps should be taken to press charges in the matter. In the light of hindsight, one must agree that this was the right decision.

But now the need for halls was a priority, and Mr. Chisholm Mitchell's energy, his powers of leadership, and his organising ability, were to come into full play. He worked tremendously, and his people worked with him. Plans were drawn up, work began, and in 1924 the new halls were opened, at a cost of £2,800. It had not proved possible to collect so much money in the time, and when the opening ceremony took place the congregation was faced with a burden of debt. Then Mr. Mitchell's health finally gave way, and he was forced to retire in 1925. His

successor, Reverend J. Wilson Fulton, of Kilmarnock, was inducted in September of that year.



The gloom of the Depression was now beginning to cast ominous shadows before it, and it was against this background that Mr. Fulton took up his new charge, faced at the outset by the task of extinguishing the debt on the halls. Once again for the first time since 1898, when the church was being planned that time-honoured institution, the "Kirk Bazaar" was brought into action. This was held in December 1926, for two days, and was a magnificent success, the proceeds totalling over £1,100. This made it possible for all debts to be extinguished, and the church was once again, financially speaking, on an even keel.

Some of the calmness for which they had hoped now settled on the congregation, a calmness broken only briefly by the Union of 1929, when Larbert East United Free Church became Larbert East Church of Scotland (if that is not too cumbersome and perhaps inexact a title).

One other item, however, was beginning to call for attention. This was the question at a Manse. The existing house, "Norwood" had proved in some respects unsuitable for use as a Manse, and was in addition beginning to call for the expenditure of a great deal of money which the church could ill afford -- to keep it in proper repair. After long and careful consideration it was decided that efforts should be made to find a more suitable house and that "Norwood" should be sold.

After a few false starts, choice was ultimately made of a site in Carronvale Road, and the new Manse was built there. It was completed in 1939, and Mr. Fulton was able to move into his new abode. The cost of the flitting, incidentally, was £5. (How far could you go for £5 today?).

It is worthy of mention that this house is still in use as Larbert East Manse.

The sum received when "Norwood" was sold to Stirling County Council was £430, which was only about a quarter of the cost of the new Manse. This meant that by the time Mr. Fulton moved house there was still a considerable debt outstanding - a debt which was not cleared for seven years.

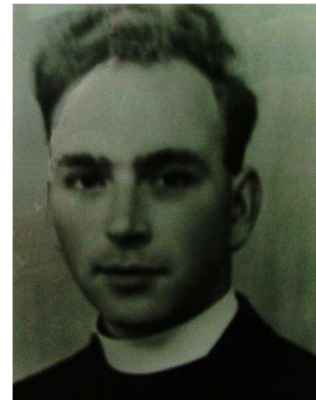
The new Manse was opened, of course, at a time when the clouds of war were again looming over the world. Those clouds broke in September 1939, and the world was not to know peace till the summer of 1945.

I was out of Britain all through the Second World War, and my impressions of those days are necessarily second-hand. But I get the impression that, as a

congregation, the people of Larbert East were in some ways less affected by the Second World War than by the first. Conscription there was, and food rationing on a scale never before experienced, but these things affected individuals rather than bodies of people. Aerial warfare meant blackout everywhere, but this again was the concern of individual householders, though of course the church windows were blacked out and the Evening Service was brought forward to 6pm in an effort to conserve power. The Army requisitioned the church halls, which were occupied by troops till 1946. There was, of course, the almost inevitable damage to the halls during this military occupation, and when it came to the point of Government paying for the damage it was found that the Government thirty years ago did not move any faster than we find the Government doing today, and some years elapsed before everything was squared up.

War conditions took people's minds back to 1914-18 and when they wondered what they could do their thoughts almost inevitably turned to the provision of canteen facilities for forces personnel living in or passing through Larbert. It was in this connection that there occurred an incident, which at first caused a great deal of puzzlement. Arrangements had been made to take over, as a canteen, a place that for some years had been in use as a tailoring establishment. During the preliminary cleaning operations, several ladies sustained what have been described as "embarrassing accidents". The exact nature, either of the accidents or the embarrassment is not clear; they may have been of a nature which the sufferers would not wish to hear mentioned in public or to see published in print. We shall therefore "let that flee stick tae the wa'." The accidents ceased when someone produced two large magnets and drew them back and forward over the carpets. This scheme proved successful, several pails full of pins were recovered, and the work could go on.

Shortly after his removal to the new Manse (and, it was said by some, as a result of the removal) Mr. Fulton's health began to give way, and though he managed to struggle on until after the war was over, he was far from well. In 1946 he retired on account of ill health. This was a heavy blow to the congregation, for Mr. Fulton had been a very popular and highly respected minister, and there was general grief at this untimely termination of what had been a very successful ministry. At the end of the same year (1946) Reverend P. McPhail was inducted as Mr. Fulton's successor.

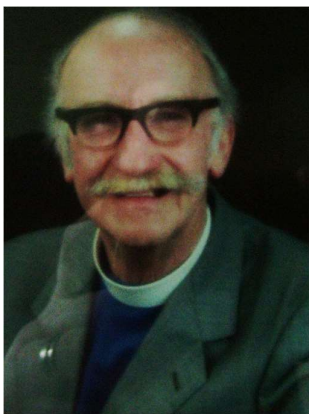


In one way, at least, in spite of Mr. Fulton's departure, 1946 proved quite an auspicious year. In June of that year it was announced that the debt on the new Manse had been cleared off, and that the church was once again "in the black". Once more, the congregation had found that "it's a long lane that has no turning".

They had travelled this lane for seven years, but now it was over, and they could look to the future with hope.

CHAPTER VI A previous historiographer (whose work, unfortunately, does not seem to have quite reached the final stages of the story) has described the years following 1946 as "obscure". It is not the word I would have chosen but, to use a classic phrase, "I see what he means". The events of the last thirty years are clear enough but they contain little or nothing of a "world-shattering" nature. There were of course, always the usual domestic crises which, like the poor, are ever with us. The organ required attention, pianos needed to be tuned, the church windows required repair, draughts in the church had to be traced and eliminated, halls were in need of repair or renovation, and there was work to be done at the Manse. Well might the members have said, "The Kirk's aye wantin' money." (They probably did say something of the kind). There was always something to be done, and it says much for the faithfulness of the members (and for the zeal of the office-bearers) that the money was, nearly always forthcoming. Indeed, in one minute we read that the Treasurer, presenting his annual accounts to the Deacon's Court, said he was "very happy" with the state of the church's finances. Who ever heard of a happy church treasurer? As Dickens' Mrs. Sarah Camp so often said, "There ain't no sich thing".

In 1958 there occurred an event, which, though it was scarcely "world-shattering" certainly disturbed the even tenor of the church's way; this was the departure of Mr. McPhail who, after eleven years faithful service, accepted a call to Prestonpans. Towards the end of the year Reverend James Loudon Melrose succeeded him in the charge of Larbert East. I had the privilege of meeting Mr. Melrose in the spring of 1964, a few months after he left Larbert East, and he impressed me as a young man of considerable ability. He remained in Larbert East for only five years, leaving in 1963 to take up a teaching appointment in Glasgow.



Mr. Melrose's successor in Larbert East was the present minister, Reverend E. J. Murray, who was inducted, in the early months of 1964, who had recently returned from mission field in Kenya.

CHAPTER VII

At such a close range, what can we say of Mr. Murray? Obviously, we must say something, he is the minister of the church, and one cannot write the history of a church without making some mention of its minister that would indeed be "Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark". My impression is that he might well like to see himself

described as "a man of the people" or even as "a man for the people" and indeed either of those might be an accurate tag to pin on him. His enthusiasm for the work of the Church is undoubted, as is his desire to see his own church and congregation take what he considers to be the Church's rightful place at the heart - and in the heart of the community. Children love him - one thinks of the little girl, who, going

out from the morning service to attend Sunday School, handed him three pence, making it very clear to him that it was for him. He was just going on holiday, and she intended that he used the money to buy himself some rock. One hopes that he did buy the rock, and that he enjoyed it. Mr. Murray's gifts in his pulpit ministrations make themselves very clear, though he expresses his views simply and without pomposity. His charm of manner makes him a welcome visitor in the homes of his people; well does he merit what used to be the highest praise that could be bestowed on a minister - "He's afa' nice in the hoose." When I think of some of the men who have ministered here since 1843, it seems to me that Mr. Murray is a very worthy successor to the giants of the past. It is my earnest hope that he may be long spared, in health and happiness to carry on a work so well begun.

And the final question -- what of the future? The answer to that question is, of course, another question -- who knows? No one can say what the future holds, either for himself or for other people. Without embarking on what could only be a vain prophecy, there is one thing we can say; the people of Larbert East Church are in good heart, ready to move forward into the future, whatever that future may be, filled with hope and confidence. May God grant that that hope and that confidence may never be confounded.

THE DEACONS COURT MINUTES OF OCTOBER 4, 1899

The question of starting a Coy. of the Boys' Brigade was introduced. This had been remitted at last month's meeting. It was moved by Mr. Wm. Braidwood, seconded by John McDonald, that the use of the Church Hall be granted to allow the Brigade to be formed. This was unanimously agreed. It was further agreed that two members meet and arrange with Mr. J. Wright Elder and proposer regarding requirements of the company. At a later meeting it was reported that the company would be known as 3rd Larbert under the captaincy of Mr. John Wright Elder.

DEACONS COURT MINUTE OF AUGUST 10, 1916

A letter was read from a number of local boys stating that they wished to form a Troop of Boy Scouts and requesting permission to hold their meetings in the Church Hall. This was agreed by the court and a small committee formed. Rev. W. C. Mitchell, J. Neil, A. Brown and D. Wright to meet with the boys and make the necessary arrangements for the proper management of same. There being no further business the meeting was closed with prayer.

W. BRAIDWOOD, Chairman
D. WRIGHT, Clerk

THE DREAM

Coming from Church on a winter day
I looked at tombstones cold and grey,
The bitter wind was searching and snell,
'Twas surely a day to wrap up well.

The sermon? Oh well, 'twas on visions and dreams,
Up in the clouds stuff or so it seems,
As I hurried away I glanced around
At the sad, rather desolate burial ground.

I stopped for a moment and closed my eyes,
Imagined summer and bright blue skies,
All round God's House a pleasant retreat,
Where all could come and friends would meet.

"Think on these things" the Minister said,
"Consider them well when you lie in bed"
Visions and dreams! What can we do?
We can make these visions and dreams come true.