

# The Church of St. John the Evangelist



*Johnstone*



**A SHORT HISTORY OF  
THE CHURCH AND ITS PEOPLE**

PART 1

**8. JOHN'S CHURCH HALL**  
**OPENING AND BAZAAR.**

THE HALL WILL BE OPENED  
AT 11.30 A.M.,

On **FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 30th.**

BY

**R. T. N. SPEIR, Esq.,**

Of Colches and Blackstone.

AND THE BAZAAR WILL BE OPENED

At 12 o'clock, Noon, in the Hall, by

**MRS BINE RENSHAW,**

Of Barochan and Garvock.

CHAIRMAN—

**GEORGE L. HOUSTOUN, Esq.,**

Of Colches and Blackstone.

ON **SATURDAY, DECEMBER 1st,**

THE BAZAAR WILL BE OPENED AT 3 P.M.,

BY

**JAMES FINLAYSON, Esq.,**

Of Merchiston.

CHAIRMAN—

**PETER McLAURIN, Esq.,**

Cartside House.

ADMISSION—

ON **FRIDAY**, FROM 11.30 TO 5 P.M. 1/-  
FROM 7 P.M. TILL 10 P.M. 6d.

ON **SATURDAY**, FROM 3 P.M. TILL 10 P.M.  
ADMISSION 6d.

Vocal and Instrumental Music will be  
given at intervals on both

## THE EARLY YEARS

Our church had very modest beginnings. It began over 140 years ago as a small, episcopal mission under the leadership of the Rev. William McDermott, an enthusiastic, young clergyman, who was born in Ireland about 1843 and who came to Johnstone in 1873. The nucleus of a congregation was formed, which in those early days met in the Temperance Hall in the upstairs of a building in McDowall Street. It was known as the “umbrella” church due to the leaky roof.

Among this early group of worshippers were some prominent and wealthy people who were to become involved in the founding of St. John's and who during their lifetime gave devoted service to the church. One such person was Mr. Robert Thomas Napier Speir of Culdees in Perthshire and Burnbrae in Renfrewshire. He obtained the land in Floors Street described as part of “the lands of hag” from George Ludovick Houstoun the sixth and last laird of Johnstone Castle. The Feu Charter was granted on 26th August 1874 and in the same year Glasgow architect David Thomson {*not to be confused with Alexander “Greek” Thomson*} drew up plans for a cruciform building with a simple, early, pointed, Gothic exterior which is now B listed.

The church building was originally built in several stages. According to the booklet published in 1974 to celebrate the centenary, the first section the nave was dedicated on Christmas Day 1874 and this was followed at a later date by the chancel, the transepts and the vestry. The whole was dedicated on St. Cecilia's Day the 22nd of November 1879.

We cannot give a definitive date for the erection of the church as there are no minutes available for this early period of our history, either they are missing or perhaps they never existed. Our only source of information is the newspaper obituaries following the death of Rev. McDermott in 1910 and unfortunately they are not consistent regarding the dates. Sir Charles Bine Renshaw, who was a prominent member of St. John's Vestry and a close friend of Wm. McDermott, wrote the obituary published in the Glasgow Herald on Thursday 10th February 1910. He states that a church was built in 1877, largely through the generosity of Mr R.T.N Speir, to which considerable additions have since been made and in connection with which a parsonage and a church hall have been built. The dates 1874, 1877 and 1879 are mentioned in various reports. In the early 1970's the then vestry had the same problem pinpointing the exact date. After much debate they finally decided that on the available evidence 1974 should be the year of the centenary celebrations as that was the year in which the nave was built.

The Rectory, a fine building which appears to incorporate features of the arts and crafts movement, was built in 1880. We can be certain about this because if you look at the chimney you will see the date 1880 inscribed there.

Plans for the church hall were drawn up in 1894. On Friday the 30th November and Saturday 1st December of that year a grand opening Bazaar was held with an entrance fee of 1/- (not an inconsiderable amount in those days) reduced to 6d on the Friday evening and the Saturday afternoon. From the advert

## R.T.N. SPEIR

in the local newspaper we can see that many prestigious and influential people from the Johnstone area participated in the official opening ceremonies which lasted over two days.

With this group of buildings, which are undoubtedly of a high architectural standard, the building work was complete apart from a later addition to the hall in 1929-1930. St. John's church was fully up and running.



*The Rectory Chimney with the Date Inscription*

The majority of Johnstone people will no doubt be familiar with the name George Ludovick Houstoun who gave the ground on which St. John's Church is built. But who was R.T.N. Speir who acquired the land from him and performed the opening ceremony of the church hall. He was as we shall see a very significant player in the life of St. John's.

Robert Thomas Napier Speir was born on 15 October 1841, the only son of Robert Speir of Culdees and Burnbrae and Mary Napier, daughter of Sir William Milliken Napier of Milliken House, Renfrewshire. Educated at Eton and Christchurch Oxford, he married the Hon. Emily Gifford in 1868 and they had five sons and two daughters. Prior to inheriting the estates he was a captain in the 4th Battalion Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders.

**An extract from the Dictionary of Scottish Architects in which he is listed reads as follows.**

Robert Speir was for forty years chairman of the Executive Committee and Home Mission Board of the Scottish Episcopal Church and the author of one of the essays on church reform edited by the Bishop of Birmingham. In November 1883 the Reverend Farquhar of St. Ninian's Cathedral, Perth stayed with him at Culdees when taking the service at Muthill and described him as "a tall, handsome, aristocratic – looking man in the prime of life. He is a church architect and has erected several small churches, he makes beautiful coloured windows with his own hands and paints beautifully on china etc. There is something very manly about him."

How Speir acquired his architectural skills is not known; his practice was confined to Episcopal Churches where family or friends had a controlling interest. He died at Culdees on 3 April 1922 and is buried at Auchterarder in Perthshire.

**Below is an extract from the minutes of a vestry meeting held at St. John's on Sunday 9th April 1922.**

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The rector [Mr Edwards] moved that the vestry put upon the record the great loss sustained by the Scottish Episcopal Church and in particular St. John's by the death of Robert Thomas Napier Speir of Culdees to whose initiation and material assistance the church of St. John's largely owed its being. Mr Edwards recalled the noble work done by the late Mr Speir in conjunction with the late incumbent Mr McDermott and his long service as a vestryman.

The Honorary Secretary of the Vestry wrote to Mrs Speir enclosing an excerpt of the minute and expressing the vestry's sorrow and their deepest sympathy.

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The Dictionary of Scottish Architects tells us that in 1882 Mr Speir designed the church of St. James the Less in Penicuik, Midlothian and that in 1898 he was the sole architect for the church of St. Colman at Burravoe on Yell in Shetland. In 1884 he was the architect of a mosaic reredos of the ascension in St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, St. Andrews in Fife.

St. John's Church is not listed in the works of Robert Speir in the dictionary of Scottish Architects, and there is no recorded evidence that he was involved in the design of the building. Although it is attributed to David Thomson who was well known for his work on country houses and churches, from the evidence available, it seems likely that Robert Speir would have had considerable input into the design not only of the church but of the whole trio of buildings. What we can say for certain is that he was very much involved in the establishment of our church and that his involvement with and commitment to St. John's lasted for fifty years right up until his death in 1922.

Strangely of all the brass plaques to be found in St. John's Church there is none commemorating Robert Thomas Napier Speir and the part he played in it all. Perhaps the church building itself is a fitting memorial.

Three other places connected with Mr Speir are of some interest.

### **Burnbrae House**

Burnbrae was the Renfrewshire estate of the Speir family. The house was said to be one of the most beautiful mansions in Renfrewshire. It was built in the Gothic style with a turreted roof, stone carved balustrades, pillared porches, bay windows and balconies and set in idyllic rural surroundings with farmland, woodland and beautiful gardens. Sadly this paradise no longer exists. The estate was sold, the house was demolished in 1940 and in the 1960's the pressed steel plant and the car factory at Linwood were built on the site.

## R.T.N. SPEIR



*Culdees Castle from an Early Engraving*

### **Culdees Castle**

Culdees was the Perthshire Estate of the Speir family. It was situated in beautiful countryside a few miles from the little town of Muthill near Crieff. Culdees Castle was a handsome building, with its own chapel, built in the Gothic style in 1810. It was later updated in the Baronial style with interiors by Robert Lorimer. In the grounds were the remains of an old medieval chapel associated with the Culdees hence the name. The Culdees from the Irish Celi De meaning the children of God were members of ascetic, monastic communities in Ireland, Scotland and England. They lived in monastic fashion but without taking vows. The house which is B listed is now in rapid decline. By all accounts it is a strange, eerie sight. The glass windows are intact as is much of the roof, however the old walls are covered in creeper and the floors and stairs have fallen in on themselves. It is on the Buildings at Risk Register and had full consent for demolition in 1967 but it was never implemented. It has been left to the mercy of the elements and allowed to decay naturally.

### **Blackstoun, Blackstone**

In early times the lands of Blackstone belonged to the Abbey of Paisley and the Grange of the Abbey [Abbey Farm] was built upon them. The house which was rebuilt in the early 1700's was situated on the banks of the Black Cart two miles west of Paisley between Paisley and Linwood. It had connections with Robert Speir's mother's family the Napiers. The first Napier to live there was Alexander who was born in 1644 and was the grandson of John Napier of Merchiston Castle in Edinburgh, who was the renowned mathematician who invented logarithms. Alexander married Catherine Maxwell only daughter and heiress of John Maxwell of Blackstoun, so the estate came to the Napiers by marriage.

In December 1745 Blackstoun was the home of Alexander Napier a distinguished soldier and Hanoverian Officer who had succeeded in harassing the Jacobite army. Old scores were settled when the rebels ransacked the house and demanded a thousand stone of hay and a large quantity of corn. At this time it was a farming estate but in the late 19th century it also had shale, coal and oil workings and brickworks. In 1843 William Napier of Blackstone sold the house and lands of Blackstone to Thomas Speir the twin brother of Robert Speir of Burnbrae and Culdees. When Thomas died in 1874 the estate of Blackstoun was inherited by his nephew Robert Thomas Napier Speir. All that remains of Blackstone House today is one wall on the gable end.

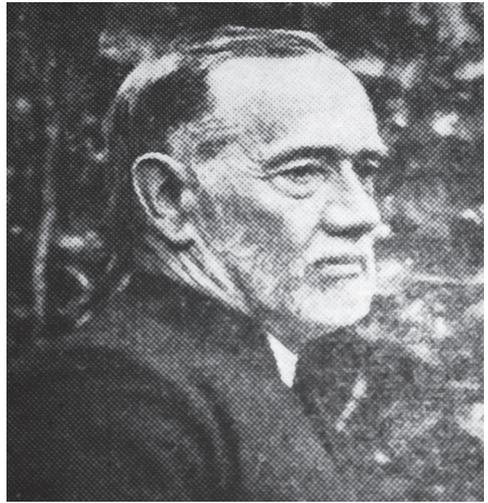
The glory days of Blackstoun, Burnbrae and Culdees are now long gone.

## REVEREND WILLIAM McDERMOTT

The Reverend William McDermott was the first rector of St. John's. We know little about his early life, only that he was the son of a gentleman, born in Ireland about 1843 and that in 1871 he was at Trinity College, Glenalmond in Perthshire. Trinity College was a boys' boarding school and theological training college connected to the Scottish Episcopal Church, and according to the census of that year William McDermott was a student of theology and a music master.

He came to Johnstone in 1873 possibly at the invitation of Mr Speir. Mr Speir said in the obituary that he wrote in 1910 " We started the mission together and since then I have been in close contact with him and his work." Bearing in mind that Mr Speir was involved with various committees of the Episcopal Church and that his Perthshire estate was in close proximity to Trinity College it is possible that they already knew each other before they started the Johnstone mission.

If the church building came into being due to the vision and generosity of Robert Speir, undoubtedly William McDermott's charisma and enthusiasm was the driving force behind the growth of the congregation. His flock consisted of many of the wealthiest and the poorest of the district. According to the obituaries written after his death, he was devoted to his work and ministered to the spiritual and temporal needs not only of his own flock but to every human being regardless of their religious belief. He was described as open handed and large hearted to a fault and it was said that no one in need



*Reverend William McDermott*

was ever turned away. Attentive to the poor, the sick and the aged he visited hospitals with remarkable regularity and interested himself especially in the local cottage hospital where he held services every Sunday afternoon. Of particular interest to him was the moral and spiritual welfare of the young men of the community and there were few of them that he did not know by name. It was said that there was a good number of young men in his large congregation many of whom attended the service that he had introduced on a Wednesday evening. This service was very popular with many who could not come on a Sunday. He abhorred alcohol and gambling and he encouraged the young men to attend the self improvement classes that he held at the rectory. He also ran an outreach mission in Linwood.

## REVEREND WILLIAM McDERMOTT

The following extract from a newspaper article of 1893 gives us an insight into his thoughts on football and his perhaps rather unorthodox method of attracting the young men of Johnstone into the church.

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### A Scotch [sic] Minister on the Game

The Rev. William McDermott, minister of St. John's Episcopal Church Glasgow [Johnstone], lecturing to a crowded congregation on the debasement of football, spoke in the highest terms of outdoor sports as aids to the physical improvement of man, but he denounced the football of the present day, which was becoming debased through the introduction of professionalism, followed by the brutal conduct of the players and the profanation and blasphemy of both players and spectators.

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In conclusion, he offered a donation of £10 per year to assist in paying for the rent of a field for the young men of his congregation to practise all sorts of manly games conducive to their physical improvement, the conditions being that there be no swearing on the field, that the games were not to be discussed on Sunday, and the members of this games guild were to attend church at least once every Sunday.

For 37 years he ministered to the people of Johnstone and when he died on Tuesday 8th of February 1910 after a long and painful battle with cancer, his loss was felt not only by his own congregation but also by the wider public. By all accounts he was a remarkable and exceptional man who was much loved and highly esteemed by all who knew him. He was described by one layman as the best Parish Priest in Scotland.

The following description of Rev. McDermott's funeral was written in the local press.

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*The church was filled to overflowing. Amid widespread manifestations of personal grief and public sympathy, The Lord Bishop conducted the funeral service at the burial of Rev. William McDermott. The coffin, which lay on a violet covered bier, was profusely covered with the most beautiful crosses and wreaths whilst the late priest's stall was decorated with white flowers and had a floral anchor suspended above. His Lordship was attended by Canon Low who carried the staff, Dean Hutchison, Canons Lennox and Wilson and many local clergy. Whilst the funeral march was being played, the coffin was carried down the aisle, followed by the bishop, clergy and surpliced choir. Audible sobs could be heard proving the people's devotion to their late pastor.*

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The deceased priest's body was interred in the south east corner of the churchyard being lowered into a grave lined with flowers and ivy. At the conclusion of the service the choir sang the Nunc Dimittus. The churchyard was filled to capacity and many people joined in the proceedings from outside in Floors Street.

The Nunc Dimittus is based on The Song Of Simeon, the prayer recited by Simeon at the presentation of Jesus at the temple [Luke 2: 29-31]. In the anglican church it is traditionally sung at Compline or Evening Prayer.

Lord now lettest thou thy  
servant depart in peace  
according to thy word

For mine eyes have seen thy  
salvation,

Which thou hast prepared  
before the face of all people;

To be a light to lighten the  
Gentiles and to be the glory  
of thy people Israel.



*The grave of Reverend William McDermott*

A fitting ending to what must have been a very moving and emotional funeral service.

## THE HOUSTOUN FAMILY OF JOHNSTONE CASTLE

The **H**oustoun family originated about 1160 with Hugo de Padvinan a Norman Knight Templar who was given lands in Renfrewshire on which Houstoun Castle was built. The castle was built on the site which is now Houston House and was the origin of the village of Houston. The family held it until 1740 when they sold it and moved to Whitburn, West Lothian One branch of the family had gone to Northern Ireland and from there to America. They are said to have given their name to many places there, the best known being Houston in Texas.

Another branch had set themselves up nearer to home. In 1645 the lands of Little Mains of Johnstone on the left bank of the River Black Cart were purchased by Sir Ludovick Houstoun of Houstoun who gave them to his second son George who became the 1st Laird of Johnstone.

In 1733 the Houstouns of Johnstone bought the 16th century tower house and estate of Easter Cochran and moved across the river taking the name of Johnstone with them and changing the name of Easter Cochran to Johnstone Castle. From that day the name of Johnstone was applied to the castle and to the lands on which the tower now stands.

George Houstoun the 4th laird inherited the estate in 1757 at the age of 14. He was laird for 58 years during which time Johnstone grew into a prosperous, industrialised town.

He extended the castle, developed extensive coal mines at Quarrelton and opened limeworks at Floor Craig. In 1781 he began to sell land for housing near the Bridge of Johnstone and to plan the layout of the new town. The plan included two mirroring civic squares and a parish church which was built by 1794. Using water from the River Black Cart the cotton and flax spinning industry grew quickly to over twenty mills. He became a wealthy industrialist and was a partner in establishing the Paisley Union Bank. He died in 1816 and was succeeded by his nephew Ludovick who became the 5th Laird.

Ludovick Houstoun who was born in 1780, married Anne Stirling of Kippendavie. The Stirlings of Kippendavie were a prestigious, Perthshire family. It was Anne Stirling who invited Chopin to stay at Johnstone Castle during his visit to Great Britain in 1848. Ludovick had no heir as his son George, who was born in 1810, predeceased him in 1843. When he died in 1862 the estate of Johnstone passed to his nephew George Ludovick Houstoun who became the 6th Laird.

George Ludovick Houstoun was born in 1846 and was to be the last laird of Johnstone. It was he who in 1874 gave the land on which St. John's Church was built. He also created Gordon Square, the small square off the Beith Road at Quarrelton, in memory of General Gordon of Khartoum whom he had known personally. He married Anne Douglas Stirling in 1903. They had no children. They spent

the later years of their lives in Cyprus where they both died, George in 1931 and his wife in 1950. They are both buried in St. Andrew's Graveyard in Kyrenia in Cyprus.

All that remains of Johnstone Castle today is the Tower surrounded by a modern housing estate.



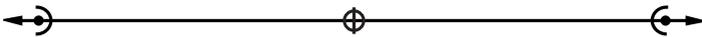
*Johnstone Castle, how it looked circa 1880 and how it looks today*



*Note: Ludovick Houstoun is the spelling of the name which is found in the old records.*



The Church of  
**St. John the Evangelist**



*Johnstone*