

RUTHRIESTON WEST CHURCH

Nowadays a new church is established by the Presbytery and the National Church Extension Committee, who select and settle the first minister. These bodies plan and provide its buildings, though a contribution is given by the young congregation. There was also a church extension movement last century, to which most of the churches founded in the city during the second half of the century owe their origin.

But our beginnings were quite different, the work of one man, Mungo Fairley Parker, a native of Galston in Ayrshire, a distinguished student, the Senior Minister of Brechin East Free Church, who while still in middle age retired from ill health, and came to live near the Bridge of Dee at the foot of what is now Ruthrieston Road.

Concerned for the Christian good of the district in which he lived, (there was then no church between Holburn Junction and Banchory Devenick and no Free Church nearer than Union Street) Mr. Parker rented a room from an innkeeper in the village in autumn 1855 and held services each Sunday evening. The beginnings were small, the pews, benches borrowed from some of the six public houses in the village, the desk of the plainest description and the lighting provided by penny candles. Growing success led to a move to a larger cottage towards the foot of Ruthrieston Road. It held 140 and the congregation regularly overflowed into the garden and sat on the dyke round it.

On 8th August, 1858, we achieved our first 'church', a plain, unpretentious lath and plaster building which cost £250, a sum the congregation provided. They also started a Penny Bank and a Day School, which ten years later was run by 'one certificated female and two pupil teachers' and had upwards of 100 pupils.

The work was still centred on Ruthrieston Road, depending for its effectiveness on the crossing of the railway. The site was 1½ miles from the then Holburn

Free Church (they subsequently moved nearer) and $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles from Banchory Devenick. The churches of Ferryhill South, Mannofield and Ruthrieston South were not yet in existence.

Mr. Parker ministered till his death on 1st April, 1867, and two years later the petition to the Presbytery recorded that 260 sittings were let and gave the forenoon attendance as 165 and the evening as 250. Some at least of these were adherents only or members of other congregations, for in 1868 the first communion roll numbered only 40.

While recognition was being sought from the Free Church authorities, a succession of probationers cared for the Mission Station and this was still the case when we were granted permission to celebrate the sacraments. The first celebration in April, 1869 marked the beginning of our official existence. The century that followed has seen only four ministries.

The first minister, Dr. Robert Semple, came as a probationer missionary in 1871, was ordained and inducted in February, 1872 after Ruthrieston became a full charge of the Free Church, and continued in Ruthrieston till his death in 1922. In 1918 Dr. Semple had retired and the Rev. A. R. Taylor, M.A. who had been minister in Mauchline and Kinross, was called as his Colleague and Successor and likewise remained till he retired in 1944. Both were in their time Clerks to the Presbytery of Aberdeen, and Mr. Taylor, like his predecessor, was honoured with a Doctorate of Divinity. Meanwhile of course we had become a congregation first of the United Free Church and then of the Church of Scotland. In 1944 the Rev. James K. Napier, M.A., then minister in Forfar, was called as Colleague and Successor to Dr. Taylor and remained till 1962 when he moved to Irvine. He is now in Balmaghie and we are glad to have him with us to-day.

Each ministry has seen the work develop. Dr. Semple's ministry saw the firm establishment of the congregation, its movement to our present site and the building of two churches there, the first accommodating 390 (our present hall) built in 1876 at a cost of about £2,800, and the second, with room for 700 (in which we now worship) opened in 1901 at a cost of £4,500. Both sums were

raised entirely by the congregation, which had grown in Dr. Semple's time to a number rather over 300. His ministry was also the time of the great influence of David McHardy of Cranford House, whose father Baillie McHardy had attended the very first service, and who was Treasurer and Sunday School Superintendent for over 40 years.

Dr. Taylor's ministry saw the congregation grow, particularly in its later years, by 50% to 450 and a considerable enhancement of the furnishings of the church. A Pipe Organ was built in the 1920's and in later years the Oak Communion Table and Chairs, the Font and Lectern which we now enjoy, were given by members.

In Mr. Napier's time also the congregation grew by a further 300, a manse was provided, the heating system modernised, the organ overhauled and the memorial window to Dr. Taylor was dedicated.

More recently the church has been redecorated, new choir chairs provided, the choir area opened up and for this centenary carpeted, and money has been gathered and plans made for the improvement and modernisation of our halls. The congregation continues to grow and now numbers over 900.

Youth work has always been an important part of our life, and the numbers involved in it have been particularly large over the last quarter of a century, whether in organisations or in Sunday School and Bible Classes. These have all owed an immeasurable debt, as has the life of the whole congregation, to a succession of gifted and dedicated office-bearers and members who have worked loyally here and seen a rich reward of their labours. It is above all for a century of rich congregational life and service that we now give thanks.

And we have much to be thankful for in this time in which a country kirk has become a city one, a small family has become a very large one. Here many hundreds have come to faith and many more have found their faith nourished and their life upheld. We pray that the blessings God has poured upon Ruthrieston through the years may continue long, and that he will lead us as he led those before us to serve his cause in new and worthwhile ways.

