

Rosslyn Chapel
Rosslin, Midlothian,
Scotland

My First Trip
June 23, 1997

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May 23, 2000

I was very excited about going to see Rosslyn Chapel. My wife, Kay and I were in Edinburgh, Scotland having arrived from Chester, England by train on Sunday evening, June 22, 1997. Our oldest daughter, Tracey was working for MBNA and volunteered to go to Chester, England to train staff there in MBNA's procedures. While there she met Kelvin Dickenson who later proposed marriage and they were married on our lawn in October of 1995. We were planning a joint vacation to visit his parents in Toulouse, France and they wanted to go to Chester again. I requested that if possible I wanted to visit Edinburgh and Rosslyn Chapel. Kelvin set the itinerary with stops in Chester, England with them, and Edinburgh, Scotland by ourselves while they flew to Toulouse to visit his parents before Kay and I arrived.

Monday morning we went sightseeing in the center of Edinburgh and early afternoon we had some lunch in a pub. We went to the bus station and purchased our tickets to Rosslyn Village, only 6 miles south of Edinburgh. We thought it wouldn't take very long to get there since it is close to Edinburgh. We had about a 45 minute wait for our bus. It was uncharacteristically hot as we waited. I began a conversation with a bus driver who told us of a quicker way to get to Rosslyn Village. We boarded his bus and he dropped us off enroute to wait for another bus that had left the station earlier but had not yet passed by our drop off point. After being left by the roadside by one of those little shelters, we hoped this driver wasn't misleading us. Finally our bus arrived and we boarded it for the final leg of our journey to Rosslyn Chapel in Rosslyn, Midlothian.

I had first heard about Rosslyn Chapel from my friend C. Granville McVey who had been there. He impressed me with his commentary about the beauty of the stone carvings in the Chapel, particularly the Entered Apprentice Pillar and the story behind it. He also related the connection of the St. Clair family with the Knight Templars. Since he had piqued my interest I had kept watch for articles about Rosslyn Chapel. There was one in the Philaelathes Magazine which only heightened my interest. Later there was another article about Joppatown and old Knight Templar graves. Joppatown is north of Edinburgh on the Firth of Forth. I decided there wasn't enough time to visit there and see Rosslyn Chapel too.

We located the narrow lane leading to the Chapel. I was very excited about actually being there. The Chapel came into view as we rounded a curve in the lane and walked up College Hill. The first thing we saw was the temporary roof over the Chapel while the roof was being repaired and made watertight again. We went in the temporary entrance in a small stone building to purchase our tickets. It was also a gift shop.

Rosslyn Chapel was started by Sir William St. Clair, the third and last Prince of Orkney. The last name is commonly pronounced Sinclair. He was supposedly a remarkable man of considerable intelligence, surnamed "Prodigus", a Knight of the Cockle and Golden Fleece, who lived during the reigns of the Scottish Kings, James I, II and III. Queen Margaret was attracted to his wisdom and King Malcolm made him her Cupbearer. He was also given the Barony of Rosline – so called because it represents a peninsula being bounded on almost all sides by water. It is not known when the St. Clairs took the name of Rosslyn, nor when they became owners of

the castle. But the Barony of Rosslyn and the castle belonged to a family named 'Roskelyn' long before the St. Clairs appeared on the scene.

The Chapel is characterized as "essentially Scottish in character, with a richness of detail and exuberance in carving not found anywhere else" according to the Earl of Rosslyn. There are Scottish influences through out while the basic design draws on almost every phase of Gothic architecture to be seen in England with a similarity to the 14th century cathedral in Edinburgh. It was erected on the former sight of Rosslyn Castle on College Hill which slopes down to the River Esk. The foundations were started in 1446 and completed in 1450.

The Chapel was intended to be the Collegiate Church of St. Matthew. It was not to be a large church but a fair sized sanctuary in the form of a cross, with a lofty tower in the center. As a collegiate church, there was to be on the foundation a Provost, six Prebendaries and two Choirsters. This seems to be a strange assortment according to modern thinking. The building of collegiate churches for the spreading of spiritual and intellectual knowledge was a noteworthy feature of that particular age.

'The Collegiate Church of St. Matthew was intended to be exceedingly magnificent of fame and glory throughout all the countries' (I Chronicles 22, 5). It is not known who the architect was but it is possible that it was Sir William himself. He was described as a patron of the arts, as one who was skilled in the Masonic art, and who was devoted to building in an age in which it became one of the more favored pastimes and an engrossing pursuit of the Scottish Kings in particular. He wanted the story of the Chapel to preach the story of the bible speaking in allegorical form.

Sir William St. Clair died in 1484 and was buried in the unfinished Chapel. His son did not fully carry out his father's original plan. He finished the Chapel by roofing in the choir with its stone vault. The condition of the carvings inside, and the rather fragmented state of the cornice over the Lady Chapel, show a lack of completeness. The foliated string course going around the building, banding the vaulting shafts, going over the top of doors, and under the windows, and climbing over a Piscina in the southeast Chapel, stops entirely in the west bays.

" 'If the entire project had been carried out, it would have formed a unique composition in the country' (John Watson, F. R. I. B. A., *Trans. Edin., A.R.C.H., Assn., 1928*). "All other eccentrics of construction are trivial compared with the proposed vaulting of the nave, as they are small I scale. The eastern wall of the transept is complete, and it shows that the nave was to have been an enormous barrel vault embracing Quire, center and aisles, and generally rising to a far greater height. The proposal was to discard the usual Scottish tradition of treating the transept roofs as separate units, opening by massive arches with gables above them, and to have the transept vaults break into the central one, while not rising to such a great height – any steeple would have been projected from the northwest corner.' (Ian C. Hannah, *Story of Scotland in Stone, 1934.*)" writes the Earl of Rosslyn.

The Chapel took forty years to build. Craftsmen from France, Italy, Spain and Portugal joined Scottish craftsmen during its erection. The plan was that the work should be unique in character and elaborate in detail. He caused the "draughts (draft plans) to be drawn upon 'eastland

boards', made the carpenters to carve them according to the draughts and gave them as patterns to the masons that they might cut the like in stone." This was a common practice in those days. Rosslyn Chapel is the most interesting example in existence of this type of church, built wholly in stone.

The Chapel consists of five bays, with north, south and east aisles, and a retro-choir or Lady Chapel. The inside dimensions of the Chapel are as follows: the choir 48' 4" by 17' 10 ½", the height 33' 6" to the springing of the arched roof. The total length including the aisles and Lady Chapel is 69' 8", the width 35' and the height to the apex of the roof is 44' 4". The main part of the building – the Choir, stands upon thirteen shafted or beaded pillars, with carved capitals 8" in height and forming an arcade of twelve pointed arches, five on either side and two under the east gable. The other three pillars divide the east aisle from the Lady Chapel.

We entered the Chapel grounds and saw the Chapel with its rich, mellowed coloring. Then we entered the Chapel through the front doors. Once inside we gazed around to get our bearings. I headed for the Entered Apprentice Pillar and was immediately struck with its beauty and intricacy. It was beautiful. The trip here was worth it just to see this magnificently sculpted column. At times we listened to a guide as she described various stone sculptures and other features of the Chapel. She said Rosslyn Chapel has been described "as one of those architectural wonders whose intricate beauties and peculiarities exhort our admiration while they baffle description."

Variety and elegance are two of the chief characteristics of the Chapel. There are thirteen different kinds of arches and elaborate ornamentation of the architraves, the capitals of the pillars, the window traceries, the crocketed pinnacles, the flying buttresses and five compartments of the vaulted roof. Canopied niches and bracketed pedestals are found on both the inside and outside of the Chapel. The Chapel was a pioneer in the use of ornamentation and has been called a 'Bible in Stone.'

There is so much ornamentation in the Chapel that there is not enough time or space to properly describe it all in the paper. One would have to have a sufficient knowledge of biology to identify all of the foliage and also understand the symbolism at that time to fully appreciate just a small part of the carvings. There are many Bible scenes as well.

There is one story that has been passed down through the years that bears telling. The famous Entered Apprentice Pillar is only eight feet high making the details of the sculpture easily discernable. The legend is this: "The Master Mason having received from the Founder the model of a pillar of exquisite workmanship and design, hesitated to carry it out until he had been to Rome, or some other foreign part and seen the original.

He went abroad, and in his absence, an apprentice, having dreamed that he had finished the pillar, at once set to work and carried out the design as it now stands, a perfect marvel of workmanship. The Master Mason on his return, seeing the pillar completed, instead of being delighted at the success of his pupil, was so stung with envy that he asked who dared to do it in his absence. On being told it was his apprentice, he was so inflamed with rage and passion that he struck him with his mallet, killed him on the spot, and paid the penalty for his rash act.' It is

known that some dreadful act did occur at about this time since the Chapel had to be re-consecrated a short time afterwards.

This pillar is quite different in design, and in the quality of workmanship from any of the others. It shows both a grandeur and a delicacy in chiseling and it never fails to overwhelm the visitor with astonishment and delight. Incorporated in the various carvings that are not part of the pillars are replicas of the Master Mason, the apprentice and his mother. All sixteen of the pillars are different.

Over fifty Mason's Marks have been identified. It seems the stone masons were given some freedom to incorporate items they wanted included in some of the carvings as long as they carved the design from the founder. This includes some whimsical figures and scenes not from the Bible.

The Crypt or Sacristy may have had some connection with the Castle and a previous building almost certainly existed on this site. It is 15' high, 14" wide and 36" long with little ornamentation.

There are over twenty family members buried at the site. Most are interred within the Chapel. Sir Francis Robert St. Clair Erskine was the first to be buried outside in the southwest corner of the Chapel Garden in 1890. Inscribed on his stone marker is the following:

Safe, safe at last from doubt, from storm, from strife,
Moored in the depths of Christ's unfathomed grave
With spirit of just, with dear ones lost,
And found again, this strange ineffable life,
Is life eternal: death has here no place, and
They are welcomed best who suffered most.

We enter life, but through death.

Thus ended my first visit to Rosslyn Chapel. It was hot outside, but cool inside the Chapel. We were both tired by the time the visit was over. I used all the film I had brought with me that day. I certainly could have used more but I used some in Edinburgh that morning and did not have time to go back to the hotel for more. As it turned out time was the more limiting factor. We were worried about missing our bus back to Edinburgh so we left in ample time to catch it. We found out we had just missed it and had to waste an hour waiting for the next one. The next time will be better!

Today Rosslyn Chapel awaits your visit. Renovations are still underway. The trust that administers Rosslyn Chapel reports it has been successful in gaining funding for Phase 2 of the Chapel Conservation Program. The work will involve a new roof for the Crypt, repairs to the Crypt stairs, essential structural work to the east boundary walls, repairs to the roadway outside the Visitor Center and improvements to enhance the visitor experience in the Crypt area. Work should be finished by the spring of 2000. Phase 1a and 1b was to erect the protective canopy over the Chapel, a high level walkway attached to it for a unique view, conversion of the Old Stables into a new Visitors Center and repairs to the roadway. When

I was there in June 1997 only the canopy had been erected. Over 1,000,000 pounds have been raised so far.

You can find more about the Chapel on their website on the internet at <http://www.rosslynchapel.org.uk>. There are several books, gifts and a video offered by the Trust.

If you go to <http://www.northerlight.com> and type in the words "Rosslyn Chapel" in the search box, you will get over 1,100 reference sources. Only the first few offer any serious information while the rest are references to the Chapel in books and magazine articles.

The next time I visit the Chapel I will much better prepared to view all the ornamental carvings, the structure itself and be able to see Rosslyn Castle.

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