

‘A highlight of a fascinating historic town’

John R Hume considers the architecture and history of Linlithgow: St Michael’s.

IN reviewing possible subjects for articles in this series I was taken aback by my omission of Linlithgow: St Michael’s, an exceptionally fine and important pre-Reformation building. For many years I saw it several times a week from the Edinburgh and Glasgow railway, with its modernist steeple as often as not gleaming in sunlight. Some years ago I acquired an excellent guide to St Michael’s, written by the late Very Rev Dr David Steel, and most of what follows is based on his text.

The present church was constructed in the 15th and 16th centuries, but it appears to have been built on the site of a much earlier religious settlement, probably dating from the 4th century AD, and very

likely founded by St Ninian or another missionary from Whithorn, rather than by a Columban mission from Iona, as suggested by Dr Steel. The Lothians later came under Northumbrian influence, and by the 12th century Linlithgow was an administrative centre for the Church throughout the Lothians and part of Stirlingshire. In 1138 David I, as part of his programme of linking the Church in Scotland with the monarchy, assigned all the property of the church at Linlithgow to the Cathedral Church of St Andrews.

The dedication of the Linlithgow church to St Michael was made by David de Brenham, Bishop of St Andrews, in May 1242, probably to recognise the change of the organisation of the Church in Scotland from Celtic to Roman Catholic practice. Already by that time there was a Royal residence at Linlithgow, and during the Wars of Independence in the late 13th and early 14th century Edward I of England used St Michael’s as a storehouse for materials to be used for besieging Stirling Castle. The Stuart kings of Scotland chose

Linlithgow as the site of one of their principal residences, and to complement the development of their palace St Michael’s was rebuilt on a very grand scale. The present nave was complete by 1450, and the choir by 1500; the apse at the end of the choir was added in 1531. Following the completion of the

church the town was given a Royal Charter.

After the Reformation the church was ‘cleansed’ by removal of Catholic furnishings, and adapted for Protestant worship. The subsequent history of the building is complex. I will just highlight two interesting episodes. In 1645–6 when there was an outbreak of the plague in Edinburgh the nave was partitioned into classrooms and the University of Edinburgh was transferred there. Also from the 16th–19th century the chancel was used as a burying ground.

As completed in the 15th century, the church had a ‘crown’ steeple, like those of St Giles, Edinburgh, and of King’s College at the University of Aberdeen, symbolising their connections with the Scottish monarchy. The Linlithgow crown was taken down in 1821 as dangerously decayed. The building was beautifully restored between 1894 and 1896, and in 1964 the present wood and aluminium crown was added to designs by Geoffrey Clarke, at the suggestion of Dr Steel.

St Michael’s is one of the largest and finest mediaeval churches in Scotland, and a highlight of a fascinating historic town, as is the adjacent palace, in which Mary, Queen of Scots was born. Save St Michael’s in your mind as a ‘must-visit’ after the present emergency is over. Allow plenty of time for your visit for you will be amazed at its sheer beauty. For me its highlight is the superb traceried window in the south transept with stained-glass made in 1992 by Cear McCartney, one of Scotland’s greatest stained-glass artists, but the whole church is full of the Holy Spirit. ■

