

Piries Story

Pirie was born in 1851, and his first quality was the gift of timing: he was an aspiring ecclesiastical architect born into a boom of Kirk building. The son of a sea captain, he attended Ledingham's Academy in Aberdeen, then served his articles with the practice of local architect Alexander Ellis. In the incestuous world of Scottish architecture, Ellis's partner Robert Wilson had in turn worked for the famous Glasgow architect, "Greek" Thomson. Pirie would later be influenced by Thomson's work, which he came across when he worked for David Bryce, for whom he travelled throughout Scotland to supervise country houses under construction. Pirie's future business partner, Arthur Clyne, became an assistant to the great Andrew Heiton in Perth: Andrew Heiton (father and son) were Perth architects who designed much of Tay Street in their native city, and palaces for nearby Dundee's jute barons and Heiton senior was a pupil of David Bryce.

In 1877, Pirie set up in practice in his own right in Aberdeen, and his earliest known work is the fountain in Victoria Park, designed before he formed a partnership with Clyne. Following a well-worn path to gaining commissions, Pirie entered design competitions, and the resulting three major kirk commissions made his reputation: the first being Fraserburgh South Kirk, of around 1878; the last being Millbrenn Kirk, near Fyvie, of 1881–82, and in between the two, Queen's Cross Kirk in Aberdeen. Queen's Cross was won in competition in 1879, and it's worth noting that Pirie was around 28 years old when he entered the contest: nowadays, this fact alone would mark him out as being exceptional. Architects may make their mark, but it habitually takes thirty or forty years in practice for them to ditch their influences; to recognise the superfluous and then purge it; to find their own voice, then make it say something. There are exceptions to this rule— but not many. Pirie's early work has an assurance which shows that even then his ideas were well developed, underlining his precocious talent.

Aberdeen's Carden Place was feued and laid out in 1860's, with St. Mary's Episcopal Kirk— the cute, polychromatic Tartan Kirkie— designed by Alexander Ellis, being one of the first buildings. However, the new tabernacle for the Free Kirk has an entirely different expression, because it had a different job to do. The scale of Queen's Cross is symbolic of the Free Kirk's challenge to the Established Kirk: coming after the schism of the 1840's, the Free Kirk's building

programme was vigorous. The congregation's financial muscle was also an important factor: the kirk was built on a prominent, and therefore, expensive gushet site. The competition brief stipulated that, "the buildings shall be of the best Aberdeen or Kemnay granite," and right enough, the kirk was built using the silver granite from Paradise Hill, which lent itself to the sharpest and most inventive detailing in Aberdeen.

John Morgan was the master mason who carried out the building work at Queen's Cross. His hallmark was to blend the white Kemnay and pink Corrennie granites, as on the western entrance front to the kirk. Morgan acted as both building contractor and developer-client, for whom Pirie & Clyne later built Argyll Place, Hamilton Place and Morgan's own house at No.50 Queen's Road. Interestingly, it seems that Morgan was an inspiration as well as a source of work: his influence on Pirie may even have been greater than Arthur Clyne's, since Morgan introduced Pirie to the writings of John Ruskin, the architectural philosopher who inspired the Arts & Crafts movement. Morgan travelled widely, with his grand tours taking in both Europe and North America: it is known that Pirie joined him on his trips around Britain, although not necessarily to Montreal and Boston.

The planning and organization of Pirie's galleried kirks is, literally, orthodox: but the details show a powerful originality. The Art Nouveau aspects of the kirk are perhaps its most unexpected quality: the extraordinary keystones above the side door on Albyn Place, effectively voussoirs with sinuous, interlocking sides, are unlike anything else in Scotland. The quotation carved into the masonry above the door screen on the west front, "God is Light", shows off a particularly fluid style of lettering which is also highly unusual for a Presbyterian kirk. You would expect to see it, instead, on a Parisian Metro station. The muscular, battered walls relate to Scots and Continental prototypes, hinting at the tapering planes of both Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the Viennese Secession. The wooden-coffered roof, however, has more traditional Scots precedents, and is certainly of its time.

A mark of Pirie's architectural confidence is the genesis of a consistent and developing language which he applied throughout his career: to Argyll Place and Crescent through 1880–85; Macduff Town Hall of 1884; Hamilton Place from 1884–91, plus No.50 Queens Road, designed in 1885 and completed in 1886. Pirie later came third in competition with his entry for Aberdeen Free Library in 1889, but the house at No.50 was his second masterpiece. This house, which

John Morgan built for his family in 1887, became the embodiment of both Pirie and Morgan's ideas on architectural form and detail.

No.50 was a true one-off which Pirie never surpassed: coming only a few years later, his memorial to James Saint in Allenvale Cemetery was to be Pirie's last work, and according to his obituary, "its execution relieved many an hour of illness, and not improbably, the dying architect may have felt it to be his last work, so made it his best." At a tragically young age, Pirie contracted tuberculosis and died of consumption in 1892: his inspiration was also to play a r™le at the end of his life. As John Morgan said of Pirie in his Memoirs, "He died early in years, yet he left abiding memories of his taste, still, and genius, and it gives some idea of his influence when one finds some of his details all over the town." In fact, Pirie died a poor man— despite having run an apparently successful practice— and he was such a bad risk that he found it impossible to obtain life assurance. He left behind a young widow and five orphaned children for whom John Morgan raised money after Pirie's death.

How wonderful