

A Walk around Barclay Church
Stewart Tod, September 2005.

We will start off from the Pillar Hall with an introduction to the building, giving a short **explanation of how the building arrived here and a few notes on the architect.**

In 1843 at the time of the Disruption of the Church of Scotland, **the Tollcross area** was a busy commercial terminus to the canal system which linked Edinburgh and Glasgow. The canal basin, where barges loaded and unloaded and turned round was in the area now occupied by the Lothian Road Cinema building backing on to Semple Street. The area around the basin was industrial. By 1860, the **Free Church** at St. George's West (-not at that time in Shandwick Place) had established a Mission in Grove Street and the Rev. James Hood Wilson became its first Minister once it was recognised as a charge. Pressure was on the Presbytery of Edinburgh to consider a further building in the Tollcross area. This coincided with the death of **Miss Mary Barclay**, a supporter of the Free Church who wished to have her name attached to a new church. It was thought because Miss Barclay was from the north side of the city that the church might be built there, but Rev Hood Wilson's request was instead agreed to and preparations were made and a site located near to Wright's Houses, where a Georgian Mansion with a fair sized garden was available.

The entire site however was on the small side for the accommodation desired. There was to be a **competition** and leading architects were invited to submit designs. The winner in 1861 was **Frederick Pilkington**, later described as a designer of Victorian Gothic with heavy elaborate detailing and a "Rogue Architect"! I suppose the description is apt because although he was very successful with the many buildings he had constructed, he never created a cult which others followed –he was a definite "one off".

Some of his buildings in Edinburgh and beyond you will recognize immediately.

- a) The shops and tenement at the end of Grove Street.
- b) The South Church in Penicuik and the nearby mill houses on the other side of the road.
- c) One or two houses in the Grange area – no.50 Dick Place for example.
- d) He also designed churches at Kelso (-very similar to Barclay but smaller), Irvine (-again slightly smaller than Barclay and now abandoned) and Innerleithen as well as tenements in the Stockbridge area of the town.

Latterly he went to London and built a huge hotel, now demolished, where the entrance door was deliberately made to appear as though it extended 2 storeys, which created a distorted sense of scale. All of his buildings had unusual design features and some clever solutions to design problems.

The **problem** that he faced at Barclay was that the site was really too small to fit in a conventional building which would provide 1000 plus seats. His solution was to build "up" at 3 or 4 levels i.e. with 2 balconies and 2 "gods" and utilize the entrance Pillar Hall for additional "overflow" space. We shall see how this happened as we go round the building.

OUTSIDE

Startpoint: the hall doorway and heading north.

The **Halls and Church Officer's House** were built in 1892 to a design by Sydney Mitchell. This part of the building necessitated the demolition of the original round Session House which was in form similar to the Vestry/Boiler House feature on the West side of the building. The "Pilkington" Church starts immediately to the right of the Church Officer's house door.

On this side of the building, the character and style are quickly apparent. The large windows into the church are roofed in the most intricate manner. Rain Water Pipes were originally internal and of lead. They choked repeatedly and were eventually replaced with the rather ugly arrangement of Cast Iron bends and joints. When major roof repairs were being carried out approximately 10 years ago, we contemplated trying to reinstate the original pipes, but the connecting point in the street was not easily located and the cost of searching for it would have increased the cost of the work well above grant levels, so was not attempted. Some day it may be possible to run a surface (-below pavement slab) channel across to the street and replace the lead pipe with plastic drain. This was done at St.Stephen's Church in the New Town 20 years ago where a similar problem existed. The access on that occasion was much simpler.

You will note how the boundary of the church site is so close to the extreme edge of the building and how the building form **seems to grow organically from the ground**, splaying inwards and then corbelling back out again. Interesting to think how the architect drew the plans to represent the different levels which altered course by course as the Stonemasons built. The door alongside the disabled access has a boiler fan through it now but it was originally a porch door. At an intermediate stage, the door was sealed and the porch became a small toilet which was accessed from the Pillar Hall. The sealed door became one wall of the W.C and with a 2' 6" bolt, must have been a record.

The **small side tower** which is slated with a pattern in colour was described by an early (romantic) critic as the thumb of the Lord with the spire as the pointing finger and the unusual roofs over the windows along with the main roof as the knuckles of the hand. A good selling point for the Architect when he was explaining his competition scheme no doubt!

The only roof access is through a trap door on the small flat roof behind the side tower and at the same level as the top of the roof running into the tower from the North. We will see the entry point inside the main church auditorium.

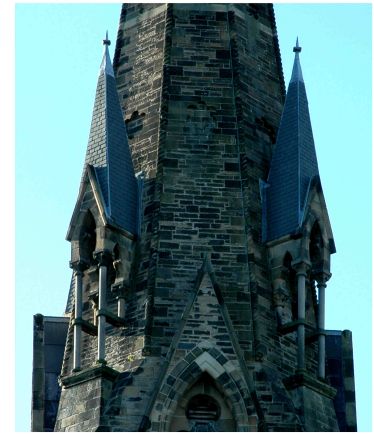
Around to the **North side** and here we see **the large round window** which is such a striking feature inside the building, mainly for the benefit of the Preacher and his Elders (sitting around the pulpit) and for worshippers who have made the long climb to the top gallery (- again we will see that inside).

It is from the North side that the "growing out of the ground" effect is most easily seen with the lower stages of the stonework sloping inwards like the trunk of a tree. Basil Spence in the 1960's used the "organic growth" description in his ill fated Gorbals flats -they didn't last as long as Barclay!

Approaching from the North, the scale of the spire and the size of the **entrance** "porch" roof which covers two large doors draws the worshippers to the door up a flight of rather high steps. When the decision was taken to stop using the entrance, it was not popular. We produced various schemes to convert the doorways into windows which could be suitably decorated, but the idea never caught on. Something striking will no doubt be done one day. The inside is so very shabby and the doors, of course, now out of use.



The tower at 250 feet is second only to St.Mary’s Cathedral in height. St.John’s Tolbooth Church, now the Festival Hub, stands higher on the skyline but is less than 200 feet in height. In its original form, the spire had a very elaborate finial, with 3 large gold balls which encouraged some irreverent Victorians to name it “the Pawnbrokers Kirk.” The large golden ornaments came down in the late 1920’s and an eye-witness described to me how amazed he was to discover that each ball was more than a metre in diameter! In recent times, the spire has been inspected and repaired with Historic Scotland grant assistance. The light coloured ring of stone was inserted stone by stone at that time without taking the tower down. There is now additional stainless steel reinforcement within the tower to take the place of iron cramps and dowels which had started to crack some of the stones. If looked down on from above, the various roofs are symmetrical and form a cross, which is remarkable in a building of this kind and since much of the rest of the church is asymmetrical.



At the entrance, the **column capitals are not completed** and much carving work has been omitted. Some say, as a result of representations in Edinburgh Presbytery, accusing the Architect and Builders of idolatry. It may however simply be the result of overspending. At £12,000 it was already well above budget and savings by the omission of expensive carving would have been an obvious choice.



The full extent of the site would have been **fenced** but the section (-now used as a car space by the Minister and others) at the side of the North square would have lost its fence during the 1939-45 war when railings were removed for melting down for armaments. There is still a variation in the paving which indicates the outline of the site. There were 2 large



lamps, one on either side of the main stair. They were removed some years ago when they became dangerous.

Moving around to the **West side** we can see the **same pattern of carved and uncarved stonework**. Access from the side is straight into the main hall and away from the staircase entrance. There is a section of roof high up above the two doors. If you look closely you will see that there is a stripe of “**glass slates**” giving light to the otherwise dark space. I didn’t myself know of this until we were doing the large Historic Scotland roof repair contract some years ago. I discovered that the glass slates had been painted over during the 1939-45 war to prevent any possibility of light escaping outwards where it might have served as a guide to enemy aircraft.

It was on this elevation that the **south-west pinnacle** fell into the street in 1974. We were able to replace it in glass-fibre with assistance from the Edinburgh Planning Committee as our insurance could not pay for its replacement in stone. The plastic replica lasted approximately 25 years until the last phase of the Historic Scotland Grant Scheme which at this stage received assistance from the Baird Trust and the General Trustees of the church, as well as a grant from Edinburgh City as an aid to the preservation of the skyline of the Capital City.



There was at one time a large zinc and steel round ventilator with coolie-hat top on the ridge of the high roof. It was very necessary in the early years of the church when 900 or so worshippers might have squeezed in. It was removed in the 1960's long after it had ceased use and when it became unstable.

You may be able to make out the **organ chamber** on the extreme south. It is the flat section of building which connects to the gable of the tenement. The church was originally 5' or so clear of the tenement.



The massive **decorative stone chimney** acting as an apex terminal to the conical slate roof is in the centre of the vestry wing, with a stair down to the boiler and up to the top vestry, the stair winding round the flue.

You will have noticed the **number of doors into the church**. There were at one time 9 entrances to ensure that no matter which way the wind blew, there should always be a sheltered entrance. It has never worked in my time.

Worshippers prefer to enter regularly at one particular entrance (-there are now only 3) and they continue "rain, hail or shine" – or wind - even if it causes a hurricane in the Pillar Hall!

Now we shall go **inside** into the **Pillar Hall**.

A WALK AROUND BARCLAY CHURCH INSIDE.

The **Pillar Hall** was originally where the Sabbath School met for children. This did not coincide with the morning service so the space was available as an extra arrival space with the external doors leading into it, with windows towards the pulpit. All of **the glass windows into the church** could **slide downwards** allowing a direct sight of the pulpit. There were at that time no doors into the church from the Pillar Hall. The kitchen area also includes the porch where there had been a small toilet. The present toilet facilities all date from 2000 when male, female and disabled toilets were provided along with the much increased kitchen accommodation.

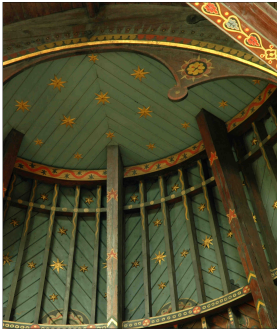
The curved beams on top of the pillars in this hall are laminated. A Victorian novelty which allowed beams to be made up in thin bendable slices in situ. Laminated timber beams are regarded at present as very modern!

We move now into the **main auditorium** down the centre, which was not possible prior to 2000 as the doors were limited to the 2 side doors and 2 other small doors at the extreme back corners. The **pews** extended right to the back of the church, so there was always fun trying to synchronise the entry of parades from the 2 main doors to arrive at the sanctuary together. Another hazard was the very low front edge of the balcony which made it quite difficult for Boy's Brigade, Guides etc entering with flags on 7 foot long poles! The pews were removed entirely from the centre section and the sanctuary extended outwards with the moving of the organ – all in the 2000 scheme. This arrangement made possible the formation of the present **spiral staircases** into the upper gallery which had previously been accessed from the very steep and slightly dangerous staircase, which is now not used at all (-except for special access to the top gallery).



If we move now down to the Pulpit and look back to the entrance you can see the **scale of the building** and some of the features I have alluded to. There are 2 galleries, one above the other and if you look closely (especially to the East right hand side) you will see an outline on the wall high up, which was the doorway

entrance to a further small gallery above the Upper Gallery. There was another slightly larger one on the West side also.

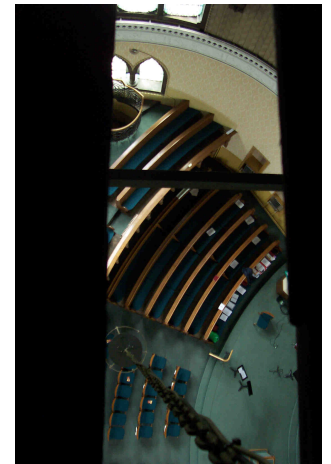


The **ceiling** has some painted timberwork and the slightly splayed ceiling which we see was fitted after the opening of the church to reduce heat loss and noise from rattling slates.

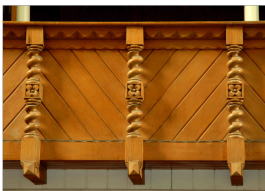


There is a small opening in this ceiling which is accessible from within the roof space. A dramatic floor plan of the church can be produced by a photograph from that opening. The **lights** have to be lowered by pulley in the roof space for the changing of bulbs. At one

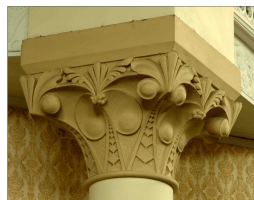
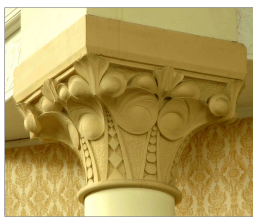
time it was a joint exercise between Property Committee and Boy Scouts! The Scouts did not go into the roof space but changed the bulbs on the floor of the church. Health and Safety nowadays demands that all such work is done by suitably qualified contractors using the proper equipment.



The **Pulpit** is large and ideal for a minister with an “acting style” –almost possible to march about. It is said to be of Caen stone but has been painted over.



The **balcony front** with barley sugar posts is typical of the period. Elsewhere the **plastering and carvings** are interesting in that, although they balance, they **do not in fact match exactly** –they are simply similar. In Victorian times it was more economical to give good craftsmen complete freedom to interpret, rather than to slavishly copy which required much



measurement and checking. The interior gives the impression of symmetry about the pulpit and the entrance axis but if you glance at the windows on either side and at the length of the balcony beyond the large pillars, you will see how **asymmetrical** the building really is. This is caused by the usable area of the auditorium extending right to the boundary of the site on east and west.

The first **organ** (not the present one) was added in the 1890’s after a successful tour of the U.K by Sankey and Moody. They visited Barclay with their “Kist of Whistles”.



The repeating **alcoves** around each side of the church create a useful design pattern with some being used as doorways and others simply as alcoves. They are unfortunately narrow and as the church walls are very thick, difficult to widen to provide easier access to the halls suite. If we go **upstairs** now you will see how convenient the new staircases are, the original main stone staircase we shall see when we go to the Upper Gallery.

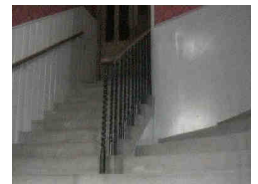


At the back of the front gallery we have a feature similar to the sliding windows in the Pillar Hall. All of the **panels along the back** slide down to provide “standing viewing” from within the Gents Cloakroom (-truly a coat room and no toilet facilities).

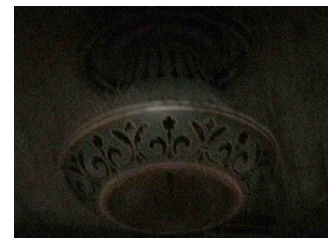
There is a second staircase from the east corner of the gallery leading down to the N.E entrance porch. Seating in the front gallery gives excellent all round viewing much as in the “Dress Circle” of any theatre. We can look up from here and see the **painted roof work**; it will be even clearer from the Upper Gallery. Let’s go there now.



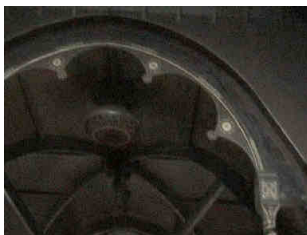
Upper Gallery. We have to go into the original glazed entrance porch and out to the original stone staircase. Take care as it is very steep. We can go down a few steps then turn and go up the upper flight which simply veers away from the flight to the first gallery – very novel and economical on space but a bit tricky to negotiate and without a handrail, can be difficult. We continue all the way to the Upper Gallery and note a **small balcony** above and a **ladder** leading to it (-see next page for photo). This was for the Beadle to climb each Sunday and ring the bell (-the bell is cracked so now never rung). What looks like a doorway at the bottom of the ladder was entrance to a further high level balcony similar but larger than the one described later at the east side of the church.



We go into the main auditorium at this high point and the view of the church is quite dramatic. The ornamented object slightly above you is a “**gasolier**”. The Victorian ventilation system which must have been necessary when the church had 1000 hot worshippers inside, possibly many of them soaked from trudging through rain or snow. The ventilation ducts were opened and closed by a system of ropes and pulleys. You can see they still exist, although not now operational.



Pilkington studied Mathematics at Edinburgh University before he studied Architecture and some of his mathematical calculations are evident in the shapes he uses e.g. the “parabola” shape seen here, a much better structural shape for effective load bearing than a semi-circle on vertical columns.



The **painted boarding** is unusual and very “Pilkington.” It can be reproduced very cheaply but not patched. Any in situ painting is laborious and slow. The blue ceiling and gold stars must have been painted in part prior to the addition of the ceiling because **inside the roof space**, which is large, there are **areas of coloured panels** –surely not intended to be hidden.



The large stone **pillars** which are painted are not entirely of stone. Part of the decoration has been formed in plasterwork and made to look like tooled stonework. The small **quatrefoils/holes** around the wall below



the windows on both side of the church are really decorative grilles for heating pipework which was small bore high temperature steam heating (very noisy due to expansion).

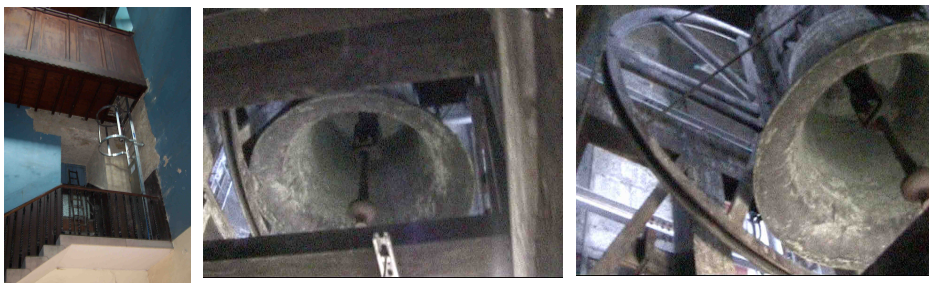
There is above the window immediately to the west, a **large room** which is lit by the top trefoil of the window. The room is floored but accessible from within the roof space only. The **roof space** is very large and worth visiting at least once to get an idea of the scale of the building and the complications of its construction.

This **door at the east of the top gallery** goes into a short flight of steps leading to the door high up on the wall. It was the access to the additional high side Gallery (-a bit like “the gods” at the Kings). One or two might care to have a look but *be careful*. It’s rather like the experience of David Balfour in “Kidnapped” when he opens the door to a sheer drop –very scary! This is now the **access** (-one of the accesses to the roof space) **to the roof** for the contractors working on slate repairs and gutter cleaning. As I said outside, it proceeds by a long ladder in total darkness to a trap door which opens on to a small flat roof halfway up the side spire and close to the massive beginnings of the spire.

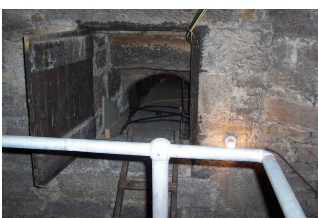
The boiler house and vestry down at ground level and basement are the only others parts of the original church. The present Counting House and Halls were designed by Sydney Mitchell and built in the 1890’s.

BARCLAY – INSIDE THE ROOF SPACE.

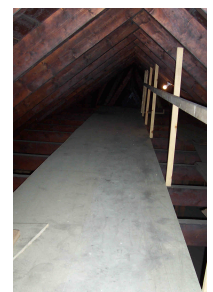
Access to the roof space is best approached from the main staircases and the “Beadle’s Ladder” via a second ladder to a trap door leading into the Belfry. The trap door is now modified to a small door, opening inwards to the bell chamber. Inside this space the bell is clearly visible directly above approximately 12 feet away. The crack in it is not visible but very obvious when the bell is struck. In the middle of the floor is a raised area which is a trap door for lowering the bell for repair. There is another floor above with access to the tower at a much higher level. Above this upper floor, the spire narrows inwards. In that narrowing space there are steel ties to the stonework helping to stabilize the structure. This steelwork is new and replaced wrought iron cramps and dowels which had started to crack the stone with rust.



Back down at Belfry level there is, on the east wall approx 4 feet above the floor, an opening with a small “cupboard door” approx 2 feet 6 inches wide by 2feet 9inches high. This is the access to the roof space and goes 5 feet through the thickness of the tower wall before emerging in the ceiling area. The arrival point is approx 3 feet below the general level so the first move is to scramble out of this “box” on to the main ceiling tie level. The wall to the left is the mansard gable above the large round north windows. Move along this wall about 12 feet to be on the centre of the gable then turn 90 degrees right and the length of the church extends south with a walkway which can easily be followed, albeit in a definite

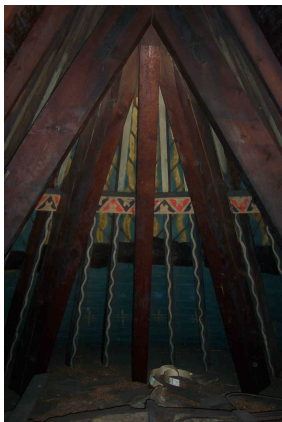


crouch position. At the end of this section there is an opening to the right and a scramble over a large extract vent pipe and then down a makeshift ladder to the lower roof area approx 4 feet down. At this stage, the massive truss rafters and ties are very prominent.

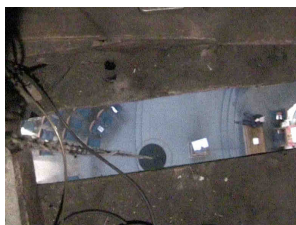


They look much larger than when looking at them from the church floor. There are various ropes to be negotiated here.

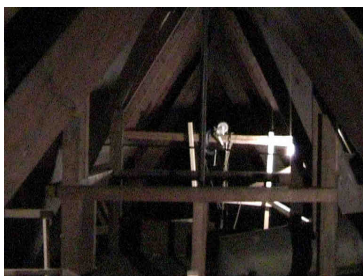
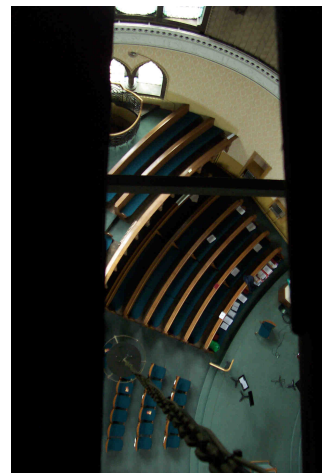
These belong to the ventilation flaps and we saw them tied to a yacht hook down in the gallery. Approx 10 feet or so on from this point and we are at the centre point of the roof where the side roofs link in as though they were transepts.



Continuing on to the south, the blue sloping ceiling appears ahead with the gold stars. On this section there is a steel cable and a short piece of chain beside the walkway. There is a point for central light through and as a floor spectacular!



very small trap at this lowering of the main fitting. A peep the church is laid out plan directly below –



Go back to the centre point of the roof and there are to right and left the “transept roofs” which each have a light fitting and each can be lowered from this level using a pulley to ground level where bulbs are changed.



We still have not seen the “lost room” I described whilst in the top gallery. Retrace our steps to the main north gable wall. The next section is a bit of a clamber. Return to the entrance box but without going down into it; instead, step over it and moving on main beams as far as possible move south again. We are moving parallel to the main central walkway but further west. Having moved on this route for approx 20 - 25feet look right and there is a trefoil window. It lights a large square space some 10 -12 feet below our present standing position. There is a ladder which allows descent to the floor of the “lost room”. The floor will be some 20-25 feet above the upper gallery –what use can be found for this space?

We retrace our steps to the access box then crouch down (or if tall, lie down) and shuffle back to the opening through the tower wall and into the belfry. There is an alternative access to the roof space which is slightly more circuitous but useful if it is related to work on the outside of the roof. This second access starts from the door at the east end of the top gallery arrival corridor. Through this door is a short flight of stone steps which curve to the south; the door is on the top step. Take care opening. There is a ladder lying in this stair and it has one side extended with a steel hook on it. Open the door and negotiate the steel hook and ladder outwards and upwards to a steep angle projecting from a beam overhead. The hook fits snugly and the ladder sits neatly on the very edge of the top step. Climbing the ladder can be hair-raising as the view straight down between the rungs is downwards to the full height of the church down to the pulpit. At the top of the ladder there is a small balcony stopping space from which, to the right, another ladder rises. It goes up quite steeply to an intermediate floor where an opening can be found to the left of the ladder. This opening leads through into the main roof at the same level as our starting point on the north gable when entering from the main tower. It is possible to stand up almost as soon as the opening has been negotiated (-it is only approximately 3 feet high). At this point turn right on a good walkway and arrive at the gable end not far from our north end starting point. Go back the way we came and remove ladders and lock and bolt doors.