A 'POSITIVE STATEMENT OF BELIEF'

John R Hume examines the roots of a striking church in Edinburgh.

PRIESTFIELD Parish Church is one of the most striking buildings on the south side of Edinburgh. In *Edinburgh: an Illustrated Architectural Guide* it is dismissed as 'Another no-nonsense Italian Romanesque façade for the United Presbyterians', an odd comment, for there is nothing quite like it either in Edinburgh or elsewhere in Scotland.

Far from being 'no-nonsense', it has a very likeable fantastic quality. Nor is it what I would describe as a façade building, rather there is a clever interplay of the blocks from which it is composed with the Romanesque details which so richly encrust it.

The background to its construction, as outlined in the Rev R Small's monumental Congregations of the United Presbyterian Church 1733-1900, was a suggestion by the Extension Committee of the United Presbyterian Church that a new charge should be established to serve the growing southern suburbs of Edinburgh. The first intention was to plant the new church 'between Grange Road and Morningside', but on October 3 1877 the Committee reported that they had secured a site at Dalkeith Road for the proposed new church, which 'now seemed to be a more eligible opening'.

The emerging congregation first met, with the

approval of the Presbytery, in Clare Hall, Minto Street, on the first Sabbath in November 1877. Subscriptions of £1200 were quickly raised. Professor John Cairns, of the United Presbyterian Theological Hall, a noted figure in the Church, was an early supporter, regularly preaching at evening services. The 'station' was formally constituted on June 4 1878, with 42 members. Five elders were inducted, all of whom had previously served in other United Presbyterian congregations, in Broughton Place, St James's Place, Grange Road and Lauriston Place.

The new church, at first known as Rosehall United Presbyterian Church, was designed by Sutherland and Walker, an Edinburgh firm of architects. It was opened on 12 December 1880. It had 650 sittings. The building itself cost £7300, but with furnishings the total cost was £8675.

The congregation was a wealthy one, and initial donations included three of £500, one of £250, seven of £100 and eight of £50. The first minister, the Rev William Morison, came from St Andrew Place, Leith. The initial membership was 75; by the end of 1881 there were 221 members.
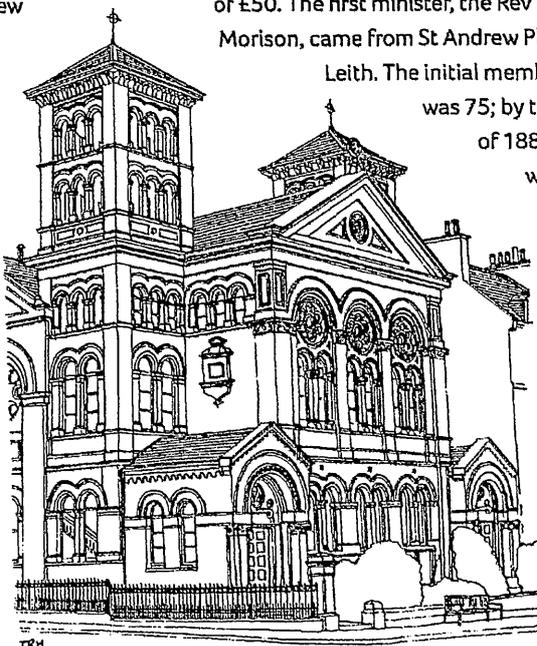
The debt of £5000 was being tackled, but 'the standard of liberality required all along has militated against growth in numbers' However, by 1899 the congregation had risen to 408.
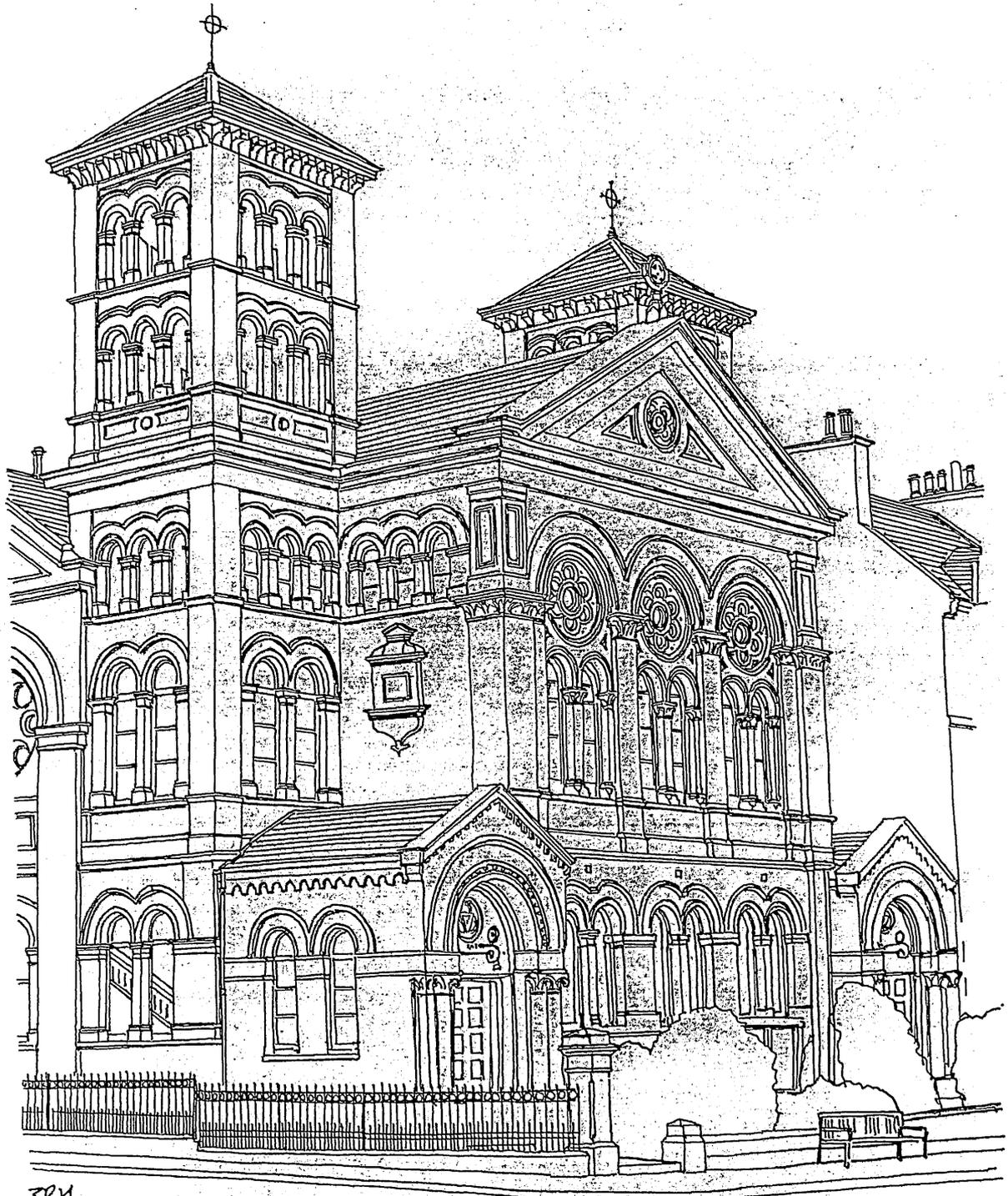
In the following year the United Presbyterian Church amalgamated with the Free Church and Rosehall became Rosehall United Free Church. When in due course the United Free Church and the Church of Scotland came together in 1929, the charge became Rosehall Church of Scotland. It gained its present name on October 6 1974, when Rosehall united with Prestonfield Parish Church, which was at Cameron Toll.

Priestfield is a fine example of the United Presbyterian Church's determination to express its individuality as a denomination in architectural terms

Where the Church of Scotland, the Free Church of Scotland (as well as the Scottish Episcopal Church and the Roman Catholic Church) all warmly embraced the Gothic Revival as the most appropriate style for Christian places of worship, the United Presbyterians often chose classical or other styles, or put their own imprint on the Gothic.

The 'Italian Romanesque' had a brief vogue in Scotland in the 1870s, with other examples in Dalkeith (now demolished) and in Chambers Street and Hope Park Terrace, Edinburgh (both now in other uses). Of these Priestfield/Rosehall is unquestionably the finest: dramatic, confident, richly detailed, a very positive statement of belief, as valid today, when it is the focus for a vigorous ministry to its parish, as it was when first built. ◻

JRM