

A MOST UNUSUAL RECORDING STUDIO ON OUR VERY DOORSTEPS

Many of us are unaware of just what we have on our doorstep in terms of history both past and present. The people of East Lothian are fortunate to have more than their fair share of notable sites of genuine historic and architectural interest. St. Mary's Parish church in Haddington is one of these sites. A beautiful and ancient building, people from East Lothian and beyond have worshipped here in one form or another since 1486, but the church and its grounds have a much darker past other than quiet spiritual meditation and sadly is no stranger to violence. In 1548 a marauding English army destroyed all but the nave. The grounds around the church were used as part of a bloody (and famous) siege which you can still read about if you visit the church itself. Thankfully, St. Mary's today has put this tragedy well behind it and the restoration of the choir and transepts were completed in the 1970's. It took over four hundred years to rebuild, but everyone is confident that the English will leave St. Mary's well alone now.

Recently, St. Mary's has played host to a new kind of invader, happily of a much less violent variety in the form of musicians. The church already boasts a strong musical tradition as noted by the Lammermuir Pipe Organ built in nearby Oldhamstocks and inaugurated in 1990. In November of last year however, St. Mary's played host to one of Scotland's finest groups...the "Scottish Guitar Quartet".

The Scottish Guitar Quartet, or SGQ for short, comprises four of Scotland's finest guitar players/composers who are attaining huge international success in the music world with their incredible compositions and virtuoso guitar techniques. The band chose St. Mary's for their third album release "Landmarks" not only because the acoustics within the church are so wonderful, but there was actually a strong tie in with one of the group, Malcolm MacFarlane. Malcolm who along with his family have adopted East Lothian as their new home, was awarded a commission by the Scottish Arts Council based on an idea he had to write music which depicted the local landmarks and area of the surrounding countryside. What better than to actually record the music in the land that some of the album's music referred to, which is exactly what has happened. St. Mary's however, was not only playing host to four world class musicians. Involved in the recording of the group inside the church was another of East Lothian's notables in the form of reknowned producer Calum Malcolm. Calum is responsible for a host of world class recordings; everything from the Blue Nile to the RSNO and was working with the SGQ for the first time.

It is now over two months since the recordings took place over three days in early November 2004 and both the group and Calum Malcolm have been delighted with the results. The resulting music sounds truly wonderful as the sonorous tones of the guitars resonated into the upper spaces of the church, each note captured with a wonderful airiness around it that can only be derived from such a space as that provided in St. Mary's.

The only problem that the musicians found was that as the microphones were so powerful the heaters in the church had to be switched off due to the hum they emitted. As many of you may be aware, when the sun goes down it can become very cold indeed within minutes of the heat being cut in buildings of this age and size. There was some light hearted banter and grumbling from one or two of the assembled minstrels but all were agreed that the finished work was well worth this small inconvenience which the people of the past would have had to put up with all the time.

It is sometimes hard to believe that the landscapes and architecture that we have on our very own doorstep will have an impact further than the area that they occupy. St. Mary's, however, will be heard all over the world as the resulting CDs international launch is undertaken on the 14th of April this year. If you would like to know more about the SGQ, or indeed listen to the wonderful music that the group produced in St. Mary's you can learn more on the group website, or indeed buy the album once available on-line. The SGQ website is www.scottishguitarquartet.com and you will be able to purchase a CD from www.circular-records.com. You can read more about the wonderful church that is St. Mary's at <http://www.kylemore.btinternet.co.uk/stmarys2.htm>