

An 'inspiring' church

John R Hume reflects on the industrial heritage of a village church in Ayrshire.

IT was a delight recently to hear from the minister of Lugar Parish Church of the Kirk Session's plans to transform this very unusual building into a heritage information centre and community hub.

The village of Lugar is probably best known outside East Ayrshire for its junior football team, Lugar Boswell, but it is a very interesting place, with important historical connections.

Before the mid-19th century, it was known locally for its water-powered corn mill, Bello Mill, serving the parish of Auchinleck. During the 18th century agricultural improvement corn-milling became a crucial part of the rural economy. Mill machinery was then made of wood, which limited the power that could be developed. In the 1760s the miller, John Murdoch, aware of the capability of the new Carron Ironworks near Falkirk, commissioned that company to cast iron gear-wheels for the first time, an innovation with the most profound implications for the development of mechanical engineering (or millwrighting as it was termed at the time). Murdoch had a son, William, who learned millwrighting skills from his father, and then looked for employment with the recently-formed partnership of Boulton and Watt in Birmingham. There he ensured the success of the company's steam-powered pumping engines in the Cornish metal mines. He was also instrumental in the adaptation of the Watt engine to produce rotary power, with cast-iron gearing as devised by his father; I believe that the 'rotative' engine should be known as the Watt/Murdoch engine.

Murdoch also invented the steam road vehicle and the first successful steam marine engine; he also developed coal-gas lighting, for which he is justly celebrated. It is no exaggeration to say that he was the most important individual in the development of the use of steam power and gas lighting.

The name of Lugar, however, did not become widely known until the mid 19th century, when an iron-smelting works was established there, which became one of the most important of a series resulting from the building of railways from the late 1830s. The first Lugar works was built in the 1840s by Lanarkshire ironmasters. In the late 1850s there was a depression in the iron-smelting industry, and the Lugar works was acquired by the Eglinton Iron Co. They rebuilt the Lugar works on a site above the first one, more convenient for railways from coal and ironstone pits to the north of the works.

The new works made redundant the engineering workshop for the first works. James Baird, head of the Eglinton Iron Co, gave the building to the villagers, paying for its conversion into a 'Workmen's church'. The history of the building is visible in the

blocked-up doorway in its east wall. Its bell was cast in Bristol in 1867.

The second ironworks closed in 1928. Most of the workmen's houses have been demolished. The adaptation of the church as a community hub and a place to remember the fascinating history of the place, open all week and not just on Sundays, is inspiring, and should be a model for other small churches. Just as we remember the people who lost their lives in war, we should also, I believe, remember those whose lives contributed to the making of the good in the world in which we live, and whose family and work lives have made us what we are. (I write this mindful of family links with Lugar, for the parents of my father were both born in Lugar, their families linked with the ironworks. My father's father died in 1922, when he was 16. The then manse family gave him the post of organist in the 'Workmen's Church', starting a musical career which continued for the rest of his life). ■

