

A brief history of Ayton Church building

by Irvine Inglis

There has been a Monk's Cell/Chapel/Church in Ayton Churchyard, beside the old Roman Road and close to the Eye River Ford at (Nether) Ayton since at least 1127. As well as being a place of Worship and Sanctuary, at least three important Treaties between the Kingdoms of Scotland and England were negotiated/signed here (1380, 1384, 1397 involving John of Gaunt and representatives of King Robert II), also the Treaty of 1497 for the marriage of James IV and Margaret Tudor (1503) which led to the eventual Union of the Crowns of the two Kingdoms. The fabric of the much altered ancient building was repaired circa 1560, and improved about 1790.

The Foundation Stone of the present Parish Church was laid on the 8th of September, 1864 and the building was completed in 1865. It is constructed of white sandstone from a quarry at Swinton and roofed with dressed (i.e. graded for size and thickness) slates from Ballachulish near Fort William. (The opening of the Caledonian Canal a few years earlier simplified this journey immensely.)

The church is of cruciform shape and was claimed to originally hold 720 worshippers, although various alterations and changes in human body mass have reduced that number considerably. The new building comprised of nave, cloister, apsidal chancel, south transept, laird's loft and gallery. The ceiling is vaulted in shape, with exposed timber work which gives an echo-free environment for speakers. (although the acoustic quality deteriorated slightly when the pulpit was moved off-centre in 1920). The Main doorway is situated in the front of the Tower, which contains the stair to both belfry and gallery and is surmounted by the spire which is around 120 feet high (over 36 metres). The late John Heron (B 1855) must have been about eight years old when he started as an apprentice joiner on the project. He "Often recalled events from when the new church was built; how the horse was almost at Peelwalls Cottage, a quarter of a mile away as it pulled up each of the last stones for the apex of the spire with geared "three and two" block and tackle". (Ayton Sawmill p27) **A major design fault in this area leads to a build-up of leaves and twigs in the lead lined boundary-wall gutter behind the spire. If this accumulation is not removed regularly, at least twice yearly, the water overflow causes serious structural problems.**

'The traceried windows are enriched with coloured glass, the west light above the gallery being an architectural feature of much beauty, this Rose window, shaped like a wheel, is filled with geometric and foliated glass. At the east end of the chancel or apse are three twin light windows representing the Six Acts of Mercy; that in the South Transept consist of four upright lights, the subject being "The Adoration of the Magi and the Shepherds" who are represented offering their gifts to the infant Saviour. On the North side are three upright lights depicting the "Sermon on the Mount." As well as the coloured glass windows already mentioned, there are fine examples of carved stone, especially at the cloister and the linen-fold panels on the pulpit are among the many items worth a closer look. To coordinate the manufacture and delivery of those intricate items and also complete the building, all within a two-year time scale was an impressive feat, especially remembering the means of transport and communication available at the time.

The organ was installed in 1893 at a total cost of £800. A two-day bazaar in the Volunteer Hall raised £1,013 so there was reputedly enough left over to pay off the debt on the new village water supply from Heugh Head haugh, buy a fully equipped "Merryweather" manual fire engine and invest surplus money in an Organ Fund. There was a lot of discussion

regarding the siting of the organ, especially whether the pulpit should be moved aside to do it justice. The compromise was that it was sited behind the pulpit with the Communion Table crammed in front.

In 1897 the candle lighting was replaced by a full installation of gas lighting, paid for by Mrs Allan of Peelwalls in commemoration of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee.

Events of the Great War of 1914 – 1918 cast new light on the old controversy of the organ being crammed in behind the pulpit. So that when the decision was taken to make the new Communion Table and Lectern there was more or less unanimous agreement that they would be central to the village worship. The half-dozen or so pews situated between the organ and the vestry door were removed, the pulpit was moved into this new space and a raised floor was built on the new area now opened up in front of the organ to accommodate them properly.

The table (dedicated 22.8.1920) was to commemorate the thirty-nine youths and young men of the parish who were killed in the Great War. Put another way, one in every ten of the volunteers and conscripts from Ayton Parish who served in the armed forces during the 1914 to 1918 conflict was killed. The new Communion table was designed and made in Mr Heron's workshop and every man and boy in the firm did work on it. Partly home-grown in the parish, and partly imported oak. Every piece was sawn, dressed, marked out and shaped on the premises.

The designs for the carvings are copied from Scottish pre-Christian Pictish stones.

Pretty well every family in the village was proud of having close links with the new communion table, either through relatives named on the brass plate or through the dozen or so joiners and apprentices who were associated with making it. It was a powerful link with the recent tragic past and just as powerful a statement of intent for the future. It had to have pride of place in the parish church, nothing less would do.

A Commemorative Service and unveiling of the Parish War Memorial was held on the fifth of June, 1921.

In the mid nineteen-fifties the gas lighting was replaced with electric lighting. This involved the removal of a veritable forest of shiny brass candelabra and wall-bracket lights and made a huge difference to the appearance of the interior. At the same time the boiler was converted to oil burning and a new large bore central heating system was installed. To facilitate this the floor level in the aisles was raised to that of the pews.

In 1973 there was a major change to the layout of the Church interior. Up to now the pews had been positioned in a very traditional Scottish layout, closely facing inwards from three sides to the centrally positioned pulpit and communion table. Now the remaining pews in the East end of the Nave were removed completely, along with the Lairds Loft, and also the Transept pews from the East door forward which were now re-positioned as a continuation of the Nave seating. This allowed an access to be formed from the Cloister into the body of the Church.

A raised floor was built over the whole area where the pews had been removed from the East end of the Nave and a reredos screen formed from material salvaged from the front of the Lairds Loft, all giving an enlarged impressive area for the Communion Table, Font and Lectern. A minor snag is that the new Communion Table position cannot be seen from the back pews in the Transept making the pews in that area superfluous for the last forty-odd years.

In the nineteen-seventies part of the rear pew in the knave was removed in an effort to relieve congestion in that area and more recently the East doorway has been adapted to form wheelchair access.

*Some of the material in this document has been taken from the 1932 booklet which marks the Jubilee of the Reverend J J Marshall Lang Aiken. (He Christened me!) The following list of "Interesting Church Property" is also copied from that source.

A (silver) Communion Cup engraved "This cup originally given by Magdallan Rule of Pilwalls to the Church of Ayton in 1677. Renewed and enlarged in 1780."

A Communion Cup engraved "The Parish of Ayton, 1780."

Two Pewter Cups, 1680, and two similar flagons, 1766.

Handled Almsboxes

Communion tokens (discontinued 1876)

Silver Trowel in glass case used in laying foundation stone, 1864.

Parchment embodying Crown Presentation to Ayton Parish Church of Rev. Daniel Cameron, 27th October, 1842, with Great Seal of Scotland attached (in good condition).

Note – Records of my direct family connection with this building start with the Baptism of my father and his five sisters in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by Rev Aiken, also my grandfather's ordination as an Elder in 1916. He was a leader of the team of joiners who designed and made the oak communion table and lectern in 1920. They also relocated the pulpit to make room for this new furniture. My ex-soldier father was part of that team. My grandfather was Session Clerk in nineteen thirties /forties. In the mid nineteen-fifties I did the joiner work involved in the new lighting and heating systems. In 1973, assisted by young joiners Sandy Laidlaw and Ian Nisbet I did the joiner work in the major alteration to the Church's interior. On a personal level I was baptised by the Parish Minister in 1931 and was admitted to Membership of Ayton Church on tenth April 1949, serving as an Elder in the nineteen seventies to the late nineteen nineties.

Irvine Inglis, September, 2016