

Extract from The Churches and Graveyards of Berwickshire by G.A.C. Binnie
1995

AYTON OLD PARISH CHURCH

Ayton was originally in Coldingham parish but became a separate parish after the Reformation. The date is uncertain, but it was possibly in 1627, when Lamberton was added to Ayton parish. Lamberton was united with Mordington parish in 1650.

The first parish church was built and dedicated to St Dionysius some time early in the 12th century shortly after Ayton had been granted to Durham Monastery, although the exact year is unknown. It was a chapel dependant on Coldingham with a chaplain. Robertus, Parsona Capella de Ayton, *Robert, parson of the chapel of Ayton*, was in office for some period between 1166 and 1232, and was mentioned in 1220. There was an altar in the old church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, which had endowments from various lands in the parish. As the first church of any size in Scotland, Ayton Church was used for various meetings between representatives of England and Scotland. In 1380 John of Gaunt met Robert II's commissioners in the church to arrange a renewal of the truce between the two countries, and there was a similar meeting in 1384. In 1497 a seven years truce was signed in Ayton Church by Andrew Forman (of Hutton) on behalf of James IV, who was to meet his death at Flodden in 1513.

The remains of the old parish church are in the cemetery, not far from the steep bank of the Eye. The west and east gables have gone as has much of the south wall, but most of the north wall, north aisle and the belfry tower remain, to a maximum height of 5.5 metres. The writer in the First Statistical Account wrote that the building "has lately received several improvements which its former state rendered extremely necessary", and the New Statistical Account speaks of the tower and belfry and north transept having been added "upwards of 20 years before". Carr has an illustration of Ayton Church showing a sundial on the south-west corner similar to that at Chirnside. In addition it shows the gable of what could have been the east end of the chancel, with the bell tower and church as described by Ferguson. That east gable has now gone apart from its footing, but it can be seen that there was a rectangular building measuring about 21 by 6 metres. It was made T shaped by the insertion of a north aisle almost at the centre of the north wall with a 3 metres square bell tower in turn in its north wall at its centre. It looks as though the original entry

into the bell tower was through a door in its west side and that when a gallery was added at some later date, that door was built up and access to the bell tower and gallery obtained from the back of the north aisle itself. A window in the north aisle could well have been closed off at this time also.

In the north-east angle between the north aisle and the rest of the church is the much overgrown private burial aisle of Alexander Skene who has a marble plaque to his memory on the adjacent inside wall of the church. This records that he died in 1823 aged 56 when in command of HMS Britannia.

Corresponding to the position of Skene's burial aisle across the width of the church at its south-east end is another burial aisle. This was assumed by Carr and Ferguson to be a south transept, but it has manifestly been added to the east end of the south wall. This is a burial aisle, probably built for the Fordyce family of Ayton Castle who used it in the late 18th century.

James Home of Ayton Castle was unwise enough to join the Jacobites in the 1715 Rebellion and led the Mersemen. As the result he was dispossessed of his estate in 1716. The Commissioners of the Sequestered Estates sold it to the Dowager Countess of Home (mother of James) in 1724. She in turn sold the estate in 1731 to Alexander Fordyce who had been one of the commissioners. The earliest Fordyce gravestone in the burial aisle is dated 1798. Ferguson thought that the unusual window at the south end of the Fordyce aisle was probably 17th or 18th century, despite having a Norman style semi-circular arch with three massive mullions with iron bars.

It is likely that this burial aisle was constructed as part of the works mentioned in the First Statistical Account. Probably the north aisle was added at the same time with its later gallery giving a total of 400 seats. At the same time the original walls at the extreme east end of the church were demolished leaving the east gable to be removed between Carr's illustration in 1836, and Ferguson's description 55 years later. The Hood burial aisle stands fairly near, and was made in 1830 from similar red sandstone to that of the church and it could be that some of the east end of the church disappeared in that direction.

There was a bell in the tower dating from about 1500. It was last recorded as being seen at a meeting of the Berwickshire Naturalist's Club somewhere in Ayton in 1868, three years after the move to the new church. A rubbing of the inscription on the bell is held in the British Museum. It

reads" Campana Sancte Cuthberte Tommas Balrno", *The bell of St Cuthbert*, and the name of the donor or founder.

.References

Anon. 1911, Reports of meetings for 1911: Ayton for Coldingham and St Abb's Head, History of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club, 21, 241

Carr, A, 1836, Coldingham Priory; Edinburgh; 128, 130-32