

THE AULD KIRK OF ARNGASK

By Iain MacDonald

Do you ever take a walk up by the auld Kirk and Kirkyaird on Arngask hill? Maybe you have never given the ruined walls a second glance. As they stand they may not be very eye-catching. When complete this Kirk must have been a squat, unpretentious, nae whigmaleeries building. In the words of the writer of the second statistical account of our parish in 1842, it was "a plain but substantial edifice." The little belfry and bell - carefully saved from an earlier kirk, for the thrifty parishioners of Arngask were not the people to throw money away recklessly - added a light touch to one gable, while white-painted windows and painted doors added a touch of colour to the exterior. And yet, in its own quiet way this little kirk is full of character, and if we can look at it with a sympathetic eye it will in return tell us something of the way our forefathers worshipped.

First of all, count the number of doors it had at one time. There is the door into the wee session-house, and the main entrance makes two, and the one to the gallery makes three. Then if you walk round the back you will find a fourth door blocked up in the middle of the west wall, and yet another in the south wall, making five altogether. Five doors into one kirk, that's a bit odd. Aye, and gae draughty too. Surely there must be a reason for that.

Look at the colour of the stones forby. The builders have brightened up the walls by introducing a pinky-red sandstone at each corner - I'm sure they may have borrowed this idea from Balvaird Castle where coloured stones are used to good effect. Look closer, though, at the doors and windows. In contrast to the corner stones the two huge windows in the south wall and three of the doors are carried out in yellow sandstone. But the door into the gallery, the two small windows in the north wall below the gallery and the door and window of the session-house are all in red sandstone. This seems to be a clear indication that all these red sandstone features have been tagged on as afterthoughts. The original building, therefore, had no session-house, and no gallery. That means that when erected the kirk was lit only by two very large windows on the south wall. There was one door each on the east, south and west walls, but neither doors nor windows on the north.

Later on we will re-examine this original structure to see what it can tell us of kirk-life in 1806, the year it was built. But before trying to work this out, let us look first of all at the parish it was meant to serve. What was this parish like in the year 1806?

In our last issue of the News Sheet we asked the question, "What was this parish like in the early years of last century, at the time when Arngask Kirk was built?" On the basis of figures given in the Statistical Accounts we would not be far wrong in placing the population at just under the 600 mark (but remember that not all of these were members of the parish kirk: there were quite a few Seceders). When you come to think of it, this figure of 600 isn't really so very different from that of the present day. What is equally striking is that this population was much more widely scattered than at present. Today Glenfarg is by far the largest community in the parish. This was not always so. In the early 19th century there were two main villages, Duncrивie, a pretty little place in a fine setting, and Damhead, only slightly larger, and the nucleus of the present Glenfarg. In addition there were three hamlets, Abbotsdeuglie and Newton of Balcanquhal both happily still with us, and Lustylaw, though this last was now on a sad decline but still important enough at this date to be the scene of an annual cattle fair.

Duncrивie, Damhead and Lustylaw were strung out along the length of the road leading North to Perth. At the time that the walls of Arngask Kirk were rising no doubt there would be rumour of a "new road"

leading to Perth, just as we hear of a new road that will by-pass Glenfarg in some wonderful age of the future.¹

The new road eventually came, of course, and is now the main road to Perth. After that, and with the coming of the railway, Damhead grew, while Duncricvie and Lustylaw were left out on a limb. Perhaps, though, the wheel will come full circle. Our new road when it comes apparently will bypass Glenfarg and cut over the hills, roughly on the line of the old route to Perth. And who can tell? The time may come when the ghost village of Lustylaw may rise anew, a village of filling-stations, motels, and houses commanding one of the finest views in Scotland over Strathearn to the ice-blue Grampian mountains beyond.

All these developments, however, lay in the future, and as it was, the Kirk enjoyed a fairly central site. Not that there was ever much doubt about where the new Kirk should be built. A Kirk and Kirkyaird had stood on Arngask hill for centuries, and it was natural that the same site should be used again.

At this point we might ask ourselves why it was that the parishioners of Arngask decided in the early years of the 19th century to "ding doon" the existing kirk and erect the one which now stands on the site. Possibly a search through the extant documents might give us an answer, but until that is done we can guess at the reasons. This period was, first of all, a great period in kirk-building. Not just in Arngask but all over Scotland many new kirks were being erected, many of which (e.g. Comrie Old, St. Paul's Perth) are among the most delightful features of our towns and villages. There was the background factor that many of the old pre-Reformation kirks that were in use never did (and still don't) make very satisfactory buildings for Reformed worship. Certainly the new kirk that was built here in 1806 was admirably adapted for Reformed worship, as we shall see. Again, we mustn't forget that the population was increasing which often forced congregations to provide themselves with a bigger kirk, but since the Arngask kirk was bursting at the seams from the moment it was built that can hardly be the reason here. Very often, too, the local laird might take the notion to rebuild the parish kirk in the latest, up-to-date style, usually "elegant Gothic". However there is nothing stylish about the Arngask rebuild. The most likely reason in fact seems to be quite simply that by the opening of the 19th century the kirk of Arngask was old and worn out, and was beyond repair...

Here we are on thin ice indeed. Our knowledge of the pre-1806 kirk is extremely limited. Our only clue appears to be that most enigmatic remark in the First Statistical Account where the minister of the time, Lang, makes the comment that, "Part of the church, at least, must have been built before the Reformation, as there is a place in the wall for the font....". Just what are we to make of this statement? Mr Mackie, a most cautious and careful historian, wisely refuses to commit himself. We, less wise, will continue to skate further on to the thin ice.

Lang was writing about 1791, a time when not much was understood about the mediaeval styles of architecture. Generally speaking, in Scotland within a mediaeval kirk there was no architecturally defined space to contain a font, such as Lang believes to be the case here. It could be that he is merely describing a holy water stoup, or a piscina, a little stone sink for washing the altar vessels, such as you will see in St. John's Kirk, Perth. There is, however, one other, much more exciting interpretation. It is just conceivable that the "place in the wall for the font" of Lang's description is an apse.

An apse is an extension to the East end of a kirk, rather like a bow window, built usually to contain the High Altar. Now an apse of a kind that could be mistaken by Lang as "a place in the wall for the font" in Scottish mediaeval architecture is a feature only of the Romanesque or Norman period. Our sister

¹ Whilst the first section of the M90 opened in 1964 to coincide with the opening of the Forth Road Bridge, the section from Arlarey to Arngask junction [8] opened in March 1977 and the final stretch from Arngask to Muirmont opened in August 1980. A large part of the of the northern section follows the route of the former main railway line between Perth and Edinburgh via Glenfarg, Kinross and the Forth Bridge, which was closed in 1970.

nation down south has been celebrating with postage stamps, pageants and television programmes the famous Norman Conquest of England 1066 (rather oddly: after all the English lost!) It was only later that the Scots were to be directly affected by this Norman intrusion, one visible symbol being the building of kirks in an international style closely associated with the Normans. The splendid kirks at Leuchars and Dalmeny are our best examples built under the patronage of the powerful Anglo-Norman family of de Quincy. Mr Mackie has shown how this family owned estates in this area. It is possible to speculate, therefore, that through the example or influence of the de Quincy family, the parish kirk of Arngask might have been a faint echo of the splendours of Leuchars. If this is so then the Kirk that was pulled down and replaced by the present structure may have incorporated the apsidal east end of an earlier Norman structure, and would have been already at least 600 years old.

The money for the building of the kirk would come mainly from a body of people known as the heritors. These were generally the local landowners, some of whom were absentees. This was fine so long as the heritors were wealthy and generous, for then you would get a fine kirk with all the trimmings. And this is exactly what Arngask did NOT get, Maybe the harvests were bad, maybe there was uncertainty due to the French Wars, maybe the heritors were downright stingy, but nothing is clearer than that the building of the Kirk was scrimped from the start. No tower, no session house, (unless the little roofless structure in the kirkyard served both as a detached session house and a watch-house), no vestibule, no gallery, and even the belfry was second-hand. It was far too wee in any case, since the heritors were forced to build a gallery within 20 years of its completion to accommodate everyone comfortably. Probably, to save money, as many pews as possible would be crammed into the available space, with nasty hard little seats fitted with even nastier, harder, relentlessly unyielding backs.

Simple though this structure might have been, however, several centuries of tradition lay behind its final shape. The completely blank north wall, for instance, occurs commonly in Scotland both before and after the Reformation - Mr. Inglis's old kirk at Carnbee has the same feature. It was as though the kirk had turned its back on the cold north wind and looked towards the south and the sun. Accordingly on the south wall we find two very large windows to light up the whole kirk. Traditionally the pulpit was always placed in the middle of the south wall between the windows so that the sun flooding in would warm the members of the congregation, lighting up their faces before the eyes of the minister. You will notice how the minister here was provided with his own special door which opened, rather surprisingly, from the kirkyard straight into the pulpit. The pulpit no doubt would be provided with a grand sounding-board in the traditional manner, and would probably have a little lectern (the small pulpit, as it was known) in front for the precentor. In the centre of the kirk, too, would be a special pew for the "penitents", those men and women who for a breach of ecclesiastical discipline and of the moral law, had to sit before the face of the whole congregation while rebukes and admonitions poured down on them from above.

The arrangements made for the celebration of the Lord's Supper are also interesting. Communion was celebrated in the traditional Scottish manner with its wonderful emphasis on fellowship, fellowship with God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, fellowship with all the Church in heaven and earth, and fellowship with each other in this act of communion. Accordingly, as the redeemed family of God, they sat as a family round one common table, using a common cup and a common piece of bread. Clearly, however, only a small portion of the congregation could participate at one time, and so, while one group of people sat round the table the rest of the congregation generally stood outside in the kirkyard. When the first "table" was finished they went out and the next group of communicants took their place and so on until all had communicated.

Now, with one group of people going out and another coming in, there could easily be a lot of delay and congestion. So what was to be done? The answer was quite simple: build two doorways. Thus at Arngask, and elsewhere, we find two doorways, in this case facing each other from opposite walls. The

presence of this second door in the west wall (i.e. underneath the belfry) does seem to indicate that the kirk once enjoyed a much more open and commanding site than is now the case.

As we remarked earlier, the kirk was "ower wee" and about 1823 a horseshoe gallery was fitted inside. Space was so tight that access to the gallery had to be by means of an external forestair, a rather charming and unusual feature. The new gallery darkened the interior and two windows had to be pierced in the formerly blind north wall. The session house appears to have been tagged on at the same time.

Changing fads and fashions in kirk design left their imprint on Arngask. When the common communion table went out of fashion the need for the west doorway disappeared, and it was subsequently blocked up as was the minister's door. Later, too, the heating apparatus was installed where the west door had been and a new belfry was added, which also contained the disguised chimney of the stove.

And so we leave it there upon the hill,
this little kirk.
Silent now, those walls that sheltered once the slow
uplifted psalm.
Silent, though the chattering sparrow darts through
empty round-arched windows.
Leave it, floored deep with dark-green nettles,
its walls lit by the yellow glowing lamps of ragwort
its skews softened by the wispy purple stalks of willowherb.
Leave it, to the quiet, all concealing hands of ivy, that stretch out slim
clutching fingers over stone and mortar.
Leave it, to its past,
its unheard memories and silent echoes.

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