

## **An Early Church**

Wigtown's parish church stands on a site that has been identified with Christian worship for at least one thousand years, as three ancient crosses in or near the church bear witness. On display within the present church building is a significant cross shaft (approximately tenth century) carved with Celtic-style interlacing design. This stone, originally found in the vicinity of the ruins of the old church, has been identified with the "Whithorn school" of crosses and dates to the period of Northumbrian control of the Christian church in Wigtownshire. A cross of arcs, carved in sandstone and believed to be a dedication stone from at least the 13<sup>th</sup> century, is set into a window on the south side of the old ruined church, marking what is believed to be the earliest area of the ecclesiastical site. Another medieval carved cross can be seen not far from the church within the precincts of Wigtown's 13<sup>th</sup> century Dominican monastery.

The first church of Wigtown's parish bore the name of St. Machute or Machutus, a sixth century British evangelist. Tradition describes him as a Gospel preacher who sang Psalms loudly as he rode about the countryside on horseback. His name is also connected with Lesmahagow in Lanarkshire and St. Malo in Brittany. During the period of time associated with the lifetime of Machutus, Southern Scotland was still inhabited by the native tribes of Britain. Very soon after that time many of the ancient Britons were forced by invaders from the north (Picts), from the west (Scots) and then from the south (Angles and Saxons) to seek refuge in Wales and Brittany.

Little is known of Wigtown or its church during the centuries known as "the Dark Ages", but there were tales of famous Vikings on the streets of Wigtown and some evidence that the Vikings in the area became Christian.

## **Medieval Church**

It was during the medieval times that the town began to come into prominence. Wigtown Castle, possibly first a Viking stronghold, was designated as one of twenty three "Guardians of Scotland." Just below the church, a Dominican monastery was founded in 1267 by the famed Devorguilla, daughter of Alan, Lord of Galloway, and widow of John Balliol. Devorguilla. In Galloway she is best remembered for the building of Sweetheart Abbey, and for "Devorguilla's Bridge" over the River Nith at Dumfries. Her husband's name is still commemorated in the foundation of Balliol College at Oxford, and their son was renowned for his brief reign as King of Scots.

Wigtown's castle, having been occupied in turn by the English and the Scots during the wars that raged between England and Scotland, was eventually demolished, but the monastery and the nearby town flourished above a natural harbour in the tidal Bladnoch River. By the 15th century, Wigtown, a charter confirming its royal burgh status, was regarded as the principal place in the sheriffdom, with increasing power and prosperity.

During the three centuries of its existence, the friary at Wigtown was known for its horticulture. A special Pippin variety of apple developed there. The monastery owned a mill, fishing rights on the Bladnoch River, agricultural land and burgh properties. Some of the fields and properties bear names that reveal their church connections: the Jeddarland, the Bell Yett, the Lightlands (leggatlands) and Monkhill. Several monks served as provosts of the burgh. Among pilgrims who claimed hospitality at Wigtown en route to the shrine of St. Ninian at Whithorn was Scotland's King James IV. Others, including Mary Queen of Scots, bypassed Wigtown using the "Mushy Morton" road that ran below Kirvennie hill to the Bladnoch ford.

## Reformation

Sir Patrick Vans, who was the second son of the distinguished family of the estate of Barnbarroch, served as Rector of Wigtown's church at the time of the Reformation. Reportedly trained as a priest in France, he participated in the Reformation movement and became the first Presbyterian minister of the parish. Such was his influence in the nation that he was appointed, with Sir Thomas Young, Commendator of Wigtown and former tutor of young Prince James, to search the continent for a suitable Protestant princess to marry James VI who had become the King of Scotland. Princess Anne of Denmark was their eventual choice, and the two Wigtown dignitaries were guests at the royal wedding. Eventually the minister's brother abdicated his position as head of the Barnbarroch family, and Sir Patrick Vans succeeded to the family title. He designated that his burial place was to be "in his ain aisle of the kirk at Wigton." The "Vans Tomb" in the churchyard, ornamented by the ancient arcs-shaped cross in its window, features an old half-buried arch, reminiscent of arches in the nave of Whithorn's ancient priory ruin. There are evidences of the Vans (or Vaux) coat of arms carved on various stones in what is obviously the walled-off section of a former transept, aisle or side chapel once part of the main building of Wigtown's Reformation-period church.

In December of 1996, Professor Charles McKean of Dundee University pointed out during a visit to Wigtown that details of windows, buttressing, and carvings still visible among the remaining ruins of the old church give clear testimony to the fact that Wigtown was a place of considerable importance during medieval/Reformation times in Scotland.

## Covenanter Times

During the seventeenth century, Galloway was the setting for some far-reaching events connected with Scotland's Covenanter Wars, Wigtown featuring in several dramatic episodes of the period. Rev. Samuel Rutherford of Anwoth parish, in the Stewartry, was imprisoned for a short period in Wigtown's tolbooth prison before he was sentenced to exile in Aberdeen. As a minister beloved by his people in Anwoth and one of the authors of the Westminster Confession of Faith, he was a man of great influence and reputation both locally and nationally.

Wigtown's own parish minister, Rev. Archibald Hamilton, was "outed" (forced from his parish) for his Covenanting sympathies in 1663, and left the area for long exile in Bangor, Northern Ireland. Local people endured many years of military occupation, troops sent by the government to quell the religious rebellions in the area being based in the county town. Bishop-imposed ministers and billeted soldiers alike became embroiled in disagreements with townspeople, contemporary burgh records betraying considerable tension and ill-feeling in the place.

In October, 1684, the Privy Council for Scotland sat in session for three days in Wigtown, giving itself the task of examining the cases of the Covenanter rebels of the shire. The local ministers of each parish in the shire had been ordered to compile a census providing information about any persons within their own parishes who refused to bow to the government dictates against Covenanter principles or to disown Covenanter supporters. Each adult over the age of thirteen years in every parish of the county had previously been required to swear publicly to his or her loyalty to the King as Head of the Church, and also to promise to betray to the authorities any relative or neighbour known to be in sympathy with the illegal movement. Those identified as recalcitrant endured interrogation with torture in the town's tolbooth prison followed, for some, by banishment

to the colonies. The investigations and the resulting punishment of those found guilty in the three-day session are published in the national records of the Privy Council of Scotland. Local Kirk Session minutes containing further descriptions, and compiled within living memory of these events, are now held by Register House in Edinburgh and are available to the public.

On 11th May, 1685, two women from neighbouring parishes who had been declared guilty of Covenanting crimes in a trial held in Wigtown were executed by drowning in the tidal Bladnoch River below the parish church. Having maintained their belief that only Christ, and not the King, was the Head of the Church, and having refused to promise to betray Covenanter fugitives, Margaret McLaughlin, a 63-year-old widow from Kirkinner parish, and Margaret Wilson, an 18-year-old girl from Penninghame parish, were taken by dragoons from the town's tolbooth prison, led down past the church to the old harbour in the bend of the river, and tied to stakes in the river channel. Accounts from those who had been there on the day described a terrible scene. A great number of local people were there, protesting, weeping, and praying, but there was no mercy granted to the two women or to the three men who were hung at about the same time and for the same reasons.

These tragic events were among the last of the infamous "Killing Times" of the Covenanter struggles in Scotland. Soon after William and Mary came to the throne, the people of the town were free to recall their former minister to return to the parish that still honoured him as the true minister. Rev. Archibald Hamilton did return, after a twenty-year-long period of exile in Ireland, and he remained minister of Wigtown until his death in 1695. At that time he was the oldest serving minister in the Church of Scotland, "The Father of the Church of Scotland." After his death a deeply incised tombstone, telling of his years in the parish and his having been forced into exile, was placed over his grave, just beside the main entrance to the old church.

It must be noted that during the middle of the nineteenth century it became popular in certain quarters in Scotland to claim that the story of the Wigtown Martyrs was fiction. When that claim was made, an immediate sense of outrage was expressed in Wigtown and the surrounding area. Letters were published in the local newspaper and a book was written by a parish minister, all expressing horror at the knowledge that people could even doubt such a well-known part of the Wigtown history. Townspeople who had witnessed the scene had told the story to their children and their grandchildren, and for well over 150 years the tale of the sorrowful day in Wigtown's history had been passed from one generation to another. The story had never been disputed in any way, from the actual time of the events, until this late date. The responses from the people of the area to the challengers from elsewhere can be read today, by any who will take the trouble to read them, in copies of newspapers on file in local libraries. At the very time when the claims of "fiction" had appeared in other parts of Scotland (never locally) Wigtown people raised money to erect a monument, on the top of the town's highest hill, honouring the memory of the two Margarets and others who had suffered. People who took part in the establishment of this stone monument were among those who had heard the story of the martyrdom from some whose own relatives had been witnesses to the deaths of the women. Not one local person, either from Wigtown or its nearby parishes, was ever known to have said other than that the story was true in every respect. Further witness to the truth of those accounts comes still to Wigtown, three hundred years on, as descendants of families who emigrated from the district return to the town of their roots. The very story always remembered in Wigtown was faithfully carried on in family histories in other lands. Generations have passed the tale down and the people still return with it, sometimes proudly owning their descent from Covenanters and others acknowledging relationship to some of the "villains" in the story.

### 18th and 19th Century Developments

From the time of its beginnings until the middle of the 18th century, the Christian church in Wigtown had been Celtic, Catholic, then Presbyterian, for a time Episcopalian, and then Presbyterian again. In 1745 and again in 1843, great divisions occurred in the Presbyterian denomination itself, and Wigtown's church was split, then split again. Both divisions were prompted in large measure by the continuance of the much-criticised system of patronage and the influence that it gave the landowners in church matters.

In 1745 a Secession Chapel was built on the outskirts of Wigtown alongside the road to Kirkcowan. This Anti-Burgher Meeting House, as it was known, adopted its strong stance against the required Burgher Oaths of Loyalty. Later known as the United Presbyterian Church, and then the United Free Church, the church eventually had a manse built beside it (presently known as "Craigmount").

In 1843 the Free Church of Scotland was formed nationally and a building for the worship of a third Presbyterian congregation was erected, with another manse near it, in Harbour Road.

In spite of these divisions, the parish church remained strong under the very long ministry of Rev. Peter Young. When he came to Wigtown in 1799, the door of the ancient parish manse in the Low Vennel still bore the coat of arms of the Vans family, as it had done since the time of Sir Patrick Vans at the Reformation. Rev. Young eventually built his own manse at the top of the road leading from the town's main street to the new harbour.

During the years of his ministry, the old church of the parish began to sink into its ancient burial ground. The structure had become a damp and unpleasant place, and some people produced official notes from the local doctor excusing them from church attendance on

the grounds that attending worship was damaging their health! The surviving early building had been reconstructed in 1730, that reconstruction was repaired in 1770, and the church was re-roofed in 1831. The decision in 1850 to abandon the ancient place of parish worship for a new site, even one just beside the old church, was not taken lightly. In a booklet written for the occasion of the centenary of the new church, Rev. Gavin Lawson reported, "...that the Heritors insisted that 'in taking down the old church the portion of wall opposite the burying ground of the family of Vans of Barnbarroch be preserved.'" In order to save on building costs, stones from the remainder of the old building were used in the new structure. There seems, thus to be ample evidence of, not only a pursuit of economy, but a marked reluctance to altogether abandon the ancient church for an entirely new building: the new church was sited as close as possible to the ancient place of worship; the very stones of the building were as much as possible re-used in the new structure; and the ruin's wall near the most ancient and distinguished part of the original church was carefully preserved. Further, the very design of the new church somehow echoes the shape and features of its venerable predecessor: there are noticeable similarities in the "double buttressing" shape at the corners of both buildings and also in the design of a single transept chapel or "aisle" in the old church identified with the famous Sir Patrick Vans.

Labelled as Gothic in style, and constructed with "modern" Victorian techniques such as machine-cut stone, however much the new building resembled the older one, this was still a very fashionable church shape during a period of Gothic revival in the nation's architectural tastes. Further description of it, in the Centenary booklet, points out that, "Its twelve corbals correspond with the number of the apostles: its three-light windows suggest the Trinity, and the cinque-foil windows above them, the Alpha and Omega." The building, erected in the last years of the patronage system, was funded to a major extent by the generous patron of the parish, the Earl of Galloway. It was his own decision, Rev. Lawson records, to add the tower to the plainer design previously agreed upon, entirely at his own

cost, "As a mark of regard for the inhabitants of the Burgh and neighbourhood." He also contributed the fine stained glass windows in the north and south gables and the side windows in the east transept. The church opened for worship in May, 1853. Rev. Young died in 1864, aged 92 years, after 65 years as Wigtown's parish minister, and the beautiful windows of the eastern transept were created soon afterwards as his memorial.

In 1859 there was a religious revival in Wigtown, as there was in many parts of the country. Affected by this movement, the local churches began to join together in united prayer services, taking turns using each other's premises for these gatherings. By the turn of the century, the Free Church in Harbour Road and the United Presbyterian Church on the Kirkcowan Road joined into one congregation, the latter building serving as the place of worship. In 1929, this united church rejoined the Church of Scotland. For a time there were two Churches of Scotland in Wigtown. The original parish church took the name Laigh Church, and the former Secession Chapel was designated the West Church.

### **The Present Scene**

In 1910 Rev. Gavin Lawson became the minister of the Laigh Church. Unusually, in the Great War he served as an ordinary combatant soldier rather than as a chaplain. When he returned to his parish, he effected a great number of changes in the church fabric. Under his direction the Laigh Church installed electricity and an electric organ, both early for their time, and he went on to raise money for the building of a suite of church halls in Lochancroft Lane. Recognising that union between the Laigh Church and the West Church would be right for the people of the town, he stepped down from his charge when his colleague at the West Church retired and Wigtown Parish Church was again established at its traditional site. Rev. Lawson lived on in the Laigh Manse (now known as "Laigh House") in Church Lane, carrying on his active involvement in the town's affairs well into his nineties, nearly to the time of his death.

After the union, the former Free Church Manse in Harbour Road became the official parish manse. In recent years, this manse was sold and a new manse was constructed on the glebe in Church Lane, near to the church.

In 1879, under the patronage of the Marquis of Bute, a Catholic chapel and house for resident priests were established in Wigtown's South Main Street. For a time, a small monastery there was involved in producing and printing Catholic literature and thus, after an absence of three hundred years, monks and priests again walked the streets of the ancient county town.

A hundred years after that, another Christian denomination formed in Wigtown. In the 1970's, a Baptist group began to meet in the County Buildings in a room above the tolbooth prison where Samuel Rutherford and the Wigtown martyrs had been incarcerated. For a time, the Baptist Church used the house built by the well-known 19<sup>th</sup> century parish minister of Wigtown, Rev. Peter Young, ("Applegarth") as their manse. It then acquired the building formerly used as a school by the Catholic church, and has transformed it into a modern Baptist Church.

As the 20th century drew to a close, there were three churches in Wigtown bearing witness to the faith first established in the town more than a thousand years before, sharing in fellowship amongst their congregations and in joint witness to their common purpose of proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. With the establishment of a Quaker Meeting House near the Baptist and Catholic churches, there are now four places of worship in the ancient town whose motto has remained:

**"O GOD, LET WIGTOWN FLOURISH  
BY THY WORD IN CHRIST, WHO IS OUR ONLY HEAD!"**

