

It is almost impossible for us to imagine how the ordinary country folk of Scotland lived in 1738. As we step out of our comfortable weather-proof houses, can we really conceive that in the early part of the 18th century roads were practically non-existent; the inhabitants of such villages as there were spoke an uncouth dialect, dressed in rags, lived on grain supplemented by a few vegetables and an occasional piece of meat or fish and lived in hovels with thatched roofs? And yet these people, in spite of their desperate poverty, considered Sabbath observance to be compulsory and made no complaint. This lack of dissent was more remarkable when we consider the state of the majority of parish kirks. These buildings were usually dark - panes of glass were extremely precious and often protected by wire grilles (nothing has changed!) Floors were of beaten earth or flagstones, and there were few if any fixed seats. Since straw was too valuable to use for thatch, most roofs were covered by heather, fern or turf and leaked miserably as these coverings decayed. Most of us would be horrified to take part in the standard form of service as practised by most congregations every Sunday.

Few of the parishioners owned clocks - the day was regulated by the hours of daylight but on Sunday the bell dominated life. Usually hung in a tree outside the building, it first rang about 10 a.m. to gather the people. On its second ringing, the congregation moved into the building where the precentor led the singing of a psalm - without books since few could read or write. A third ringing of the bell heralded the entrance of the minister who began the service which went on for the remainder of the day with a short break which was variously used by different folk. Some went to the local inn and others stayed in church to be regaled by local pupils reciting the catechism.

When we investigate further the state of the Church in Scotland during the early years of the 18th century we find that the ecclesiastical

life and work was in a parlous state. By law, the Patron of a Parish had the right to enforce the appointment of a man of his choice to the living of the Parish Church. Often these appointees were quite unsuitable and had to be inducted in the face of considerable hostility from the congregation. Eventually, a few courageous ministers met at Kinross on 6 December 1733 and took the decision to call themselves the Associate Presbytery and thus the Secession Church came into being.

The Parish of Denny, like many others in Scotland, had many worshippers who were dissatisfied with the Patronage system and there were those who firmly believed that the congregation should have some say in the choice of a new minister. When the Rev. T. Watson, Parish Minister at Denny died in 1733, the Patron's choice was a Mr. Stirling; the popular choice by a huge majority was Mr. Penman. After two years' bitter wrangling, the inevitable conclusion to induct Mr. Stirling was reached by the Commission of Assembly in 1736 - not altogether surprising since the Patron was King George II. Poor Mr. Stirling, it must have been too much for him - he died the day before his induction. Sadly, George II again paid no attention to local feelings and his nominee, Mr. William Bennet, was inducted on 22 August 1738.

It is reliably reported that during the service for the presentation of Mr. Bennet to his new congregation all those opposed to him attended as required. However, at an appropriate point during the proceedings, 117 people - heads of families, elders and others of import - left Denny Parish Church. From this action we can start the story of the Church at Loanhead of Denny.

Though there were many groups of people who were dissatisfied with the Established Church, they were mainly very scattered and the few buildings which served the Seceders were required to serve large areas. Often they met in barns and sheds under the leadership of an elder for the spiritual nourish-

ment they craved. The people of Denny, together with others from Falkirk and Cumbernauld, eventually joined the Associate Presbytery and met in the barn at Lochgreen Farm, which was in the Parish of Falkirk. The first name on the Roll of Elders of Dennyloanhead is William Spiers of Lochgreen. For some reason, about which we can only speculate, the congregation very soon changed its meeting place to somewhere in Bonnybridge called Bridge-End of the Water of Bonny - apparently near to the current site of the Community Centre. Also around the same time, the members who walked from Falkirk and Cumbernauld, having such a distance to come, branched off and formed their own congregations. It was around 1743 that the remaining members at Bridge-End decided to build their own church and chose as the site the meeting place of two of the most important roads in Scotland - the highway from Glasgow and the West to Edinburgh via Falkirk and the highway from Glasgow and the West to the North via Stirling. The Loanhead of Denny was a stage in the coaching days for those who could endure the hardships of such travel and here in 1743 the first church was erected.

Again we can only guess as to the appearance of that first building. Probably built of large blocks of undressed stone, it certainly would be very plain and more like the barn which had been its predecessor than a church. There is evidence to suggest that the dimensions (apart from height) of the current building are similar to those of the original structure i.e. 60 feet by 45 feet with extremely thick external walls.

In the early years of the Secession Church congregations were being formed so fast that it was impossible to supply each one with its own minister. Dennyloanhead had no minister of its own and relied on the services of visiting ministers until 1747, when permission to call a full-time minister was granted. The gentleman in question was subsequently proved to be "unsuitable in his moral character" and his ministerial status was removed before he could take office! At

last on 25 July 1751 the Rev. John Walker of Abernethy was inducted to the charge as full time minister. Since there was no manse, Mr. Walker lived at Middle Bankhead farmhouse and probably cultivated the fields there. Under his ministry, the size of the congregation grew until it was actually necessary to build another church to serve those of the congregation who came from Denny. Mr. Walker was minister until 1797 - forty-six years - and was succeeded by a probationer from Cumbernauld Parish - the Rev. James Stark.

The numbers of people attending Dennyloanhead Church continued to grow by the labours of James Stark. By 1815 it was necessary to increase the size of the building and this was done by extending the walls upwards and adding a gallery on three sides of the upper storey. Tall windows were added on two sides of the church and in the rebuilt building the congregation continued to prosper. Mr. Stark, a gifted scholar, published a book of sermons in 1818. This achievement was recognised by the College of Princeton, New Jersey, U.S.A. and he was awarded a D.D. As a result of his faithful work, especially amongst the parishioners in their homes, the flock continued to flourish and expand. Dr. Stark was zealous in conducting his examinations of Scripture and Catechism. To this end he met, at various houses throughout his extensive parish, young and old for discussion and oral questioning. Because of the difficulties involved in travelling long distances on foot, Dr. Stark on his pony was a familiar sight throughout the district. Such was his work load that in 1841, an assistant minister, the Rev. John Edwards, was appointed at a stipend of £120 per annum. Continued prosperity and excellent pastoral care by the two ministers saw the United Secession Church in Dennyloanhead become the United Presbyterian Church in 1847. Once again turmoil within the wider churches over Patronage caused friction leading to this second secession and left Dennyloanhead one of the strongest dissenting congregations in Scotland. Shortly after the Rev. John Edmond

was called to Regent Place Church in Glasgow Dr. Stark died in May 1850 - at the age of 75 years and having been in the ministry for 53 years.

Vacancies seemed quite short in those days, and by November 1850 there was a new minister in Dennyloanhead. He was the Rev. James Stevenson from Kilmarnock. By all accounts he was a popular preacher and pastor of the flock - his stipend was £180 per annum, 12 guineas for expenses and a manse and garden. To a young man these must have seemed riches indeed and when he was called to serve the United Presbyterian Church in Dublin in 1866 he went with some misgivings since this was virtually a foreign land! He returned to preach in Dennyloanhead several times during his long ministry - and his work was rewarded with a Doctor of Divinity degree from the University of Glasgow.

Another probationer minister was called to fill the vacancy caused by Mr. Stevenson's removal to Dublin - the Rev. Charles Jerdan, from Dalkeith. He was ordained on 19 February 1867 and continued in the charge until 1878 when he accepted a call to Dundee. Once again Dennyloanhead was privileged to have been the early charge of a respected and prominent minister. Mr. Jerdan received his Doctor of Divinity degree from Edinburgh University for his untiring services as an author and as a committee member about the business of the church - serving in several different capacities - but finally as one of the clerks to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. During the Ministry of Mr. Jerdan, our church owned a fine library - this was sold during 1878 probably because few people were making use of the volumes which were all non-fiction titles.

In 1878 the Rev. David Keir was inducted on 1 July. By all accounts, and some of our older members remember him, he was a formidable man. Active in all aspects of church work, including Presbytery affairs he helped to conduct the negotiations which led to the joining of the United Presbyterian Church and

the United Free Church in 1900. Mr. Keir wrote avidly about his parish and his colleagues - especially the three junior ministers who assisted him during his long tenure until his death in 1933. These three men, the Rev. F.S.M. Walker, the Rev. T. Loudon Cox, and the Rev. Peter Lovie, each worked with the Rev. David Keir in complete harmony. Mr. Keir says in one of his many leaflets, "Our relations as senior and junior ministers have been of the most cordial nature."

In the 250th year of our congregation we owe much to Mr. Keir, his various colleagues and their untiring efforts on behalf of his flock. The fifth and final denominational name change - to the Church of Scotland - took place in 1929. Admittedly this was after Mr. Keir's official retirement in 1922, but he was still very active in the affairs of the Congregation. During his ministry the Muirhead Memorial Hall was gifted to the Church to commemorate the Muirhead family connection with the congregation. Central heating was installed in 1904 - a real benefit to all apart from the luckless persons who had to stoke the stoves! Electric light came to us in 1923 and the beautiful oak communion table was gifted by the family of the late James Brand in 1929 - the Rev. D. Keir and the Rev. T.L. Cox officiated at this service. Major reconstruction work took place in 1932, during Mr. Lovie's ministry, but ably supported by Mr. Keir. The two side galleries were removed, leaving only the gallery on the west wall. Opposite this gallery a chancel was built and the pulpit was removed to the entrance of this chancel. It is sad to record that Mr. Keir lived to see all this reconstruction but the beautiful stained glass windows to the memory of Mr. and Mrs. Keir were erected barely two years later - after his death on 2 April 1933. At the special service to dedicate the windows the unveiling was done by the Rev. David R.M. Keir, of Perth - son of the Rev. David Keir. Much re-decorating and rebuilding between the Muirhead Memorial Hall and the Church took place around this time including

the erection of the bell tower - leaving our building much as we know it today.

When the Rev. Peter Lovie moved to Coatbridge in 1937, the Rev. A.E.M. Thomson from Crail was inducted to serve here. He had the honour of conducting bi-centenary celebrations in a building refurbished and rededicated after 200 years on the same spot. One wonders how he felt when preparing his sermon for the bi-centenary service, especially when we remember that the whole of the country was in turmoil and at that time the future was so uncertain.

Mr. Thomson retired in 1953 and a succession of short ministries, linkages and general decline has followed. The Rev. James Keiller served us for eight years to be followed by the Rev. Peter Barrow, during whose tenure a linkage with St. Helen's, High Bonnybridge was formed in 1963. The church buildings at Dennyloanhead were then found to have dry rot and woodworm infestation. Accordingly an extensive programme of restoration and repair work was planned and completed in 1964. It was during these renovations that the churchyard was landscaped and levelled. Very few burials took place after the 1870s though one grave stone still remaining is dated 1891. Naturally there were some misgivings regarding the disturbing of the graveyard, but the few bones which were turned up during the levelling process were re-interred appropriately and the remaining gravestones can still be seen against the boundary walls. Mr. Barrow and former minister Mr. Keiller re-dedicated the church and grounds in 1964. In 1972 Mr. Barrow, who had been in Dennyloanhead since 1961, left with his family to take charge of the Presbyterian Church in Georgetown, Ontario. However, like most former ministers we have had several visits from him.

Mr. Barrow was succeeded in the linked charge by the Rev. John Watson who remained the minister of Dennyloanhead with St. Helen's until that linkage was severed in 1978. A new linkage with Hags was proposed and very

soon the Rev. John Holland became the Minister of Dennyloanhead with Hags. Mr. Holland left us to go to Strone and Ardentiny in 1982.

The present minister, the Rev. R.A.F. Dean, has been with us since 1983, and to him falls the task of reminding the congregations of 250 years of continuous worship at Loanhead of Denny. In this work he is supported by the Session and Board of the Church. As he writes his sermons for the Sundays leading up to the Commemoration Sunday in August his feelings must be very mixed. All over Scotland congregations are being combined, united with others and indeed dwindling to dangerously small levels. When we come together on Sunday 21 August 1988 at 11 a.m., for our Service of Thanksgiving, to be conducted by the Rev. Prof. Robert Davidson, MA, BD, DD, Principal of Trinity College, University of Glasgow, and again at 6.30 p.m. on the same day for an Open Air Service at Lochgreen Farm, we should ask ourselves, "Will Dennyloanhead, once one of the strongest congregations in Scotland, celebrate its 300th anniversary on the spot chosen by those dedicated men in 1738?"

Our grateful thanks for preparation of this booklet are due to:

J. Auldjo
P. Jones
S. Livingstone
C. Webster

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