

## 2. A Lost Renfrewshire Kirk – Burntshields (1739-1826)

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This article originated as a report for Gordon McCrae's Local History and Archaeology class in Paisley University in 2004. Gordon was keen that it should be included in the next Forum publication, and it is fitting that it should be part of this tribute issue. His enthusiasm for his subject and willingness to pass on his extensive knowledge through the Forum, and more recently through his Paisley University class, have engendered a thriving local interest in the archaeology and history of Renfrewshire. It is thanks to Gordon's encouragement and commitment that this article was written - Helen Calcluth.

The article investigates the early 18<sup>th</sup> century Burgher Church at Burntshields, situated about half way between Kilbarchan and Lochwinnoch. It shows how, starting from knowing nothing about the site, it was possible to uncover not only its history, but physical remains of the buildings, gravestones and relics from the church.

### History

The history of the Seceders of Burntshields began in 1739 and lasted less than 90 years, ending in 1826 when the church was closed. The life of the Burgher Church covered an important period of considerable increase in population and expansion of the textile industry in Kilbarchan parish.

The events which led to the building of the church began in 1712 when an act was passed restoring patronage to the Church of Scotland, thus depriving a congregation of the right to choose its minister. Under this system, John Warner was ordained in Kilbarchan Old Parish Church in 1739. However the dissenters founded a separate Secession Congregation which met at Burntshields, initially in the open air. Due to various other unpopular appointments of ministers in the area, the Burntshields community was joined by Killochries community from Kilmacolm in 1740 and within five years the community had also been joined by seceders from seventeen parishes. A permanent minister, John McCara, was ordained at an open-air ceremony on the 11th of September, 1744, before the church building was completed. At his first open air communion in 1745, known as the Burntshields Sacrament, 336 people attended, the attendees being as follows: from Paisley (47), Houston (20), Kilmacolm (32), Lochwinnoch (51), Kilbirnie (7), Kilbarchan (78), the shore (82), Beith (3) and from other parishes (16).

Burntshields church building was completed in 1745 and opened in 1746. However, dissention arose the following year over interpretation of the Burghers Oath (1746), where those in public office had to swear loyalty to the "true religion". The dispute was whether or not the true religion was the creed of the national established Church of Scotland from which the Burghers had seceded. The congregation split over this issue, the minister and eight elders remaining at Burntshields faithful to the Burgher cause and five elders joined the Anti-Burghers.

By the time of the *Old Statistical Account* (1791) the church is referred to as a house of worship 'on the hills about a mile to the west (of the village) belonging to the Seceders'. The same year a second split occurred, due mainly to the rise in population and the vast increase in the membership. The church building could no longer accommodate the congregation. A three-way split was effected. One group

removed to Johnstone with the Rev. Lindsay in 1792, another moved to Lochwinnoch to set up a new church there and the third group remained at Burntshields.

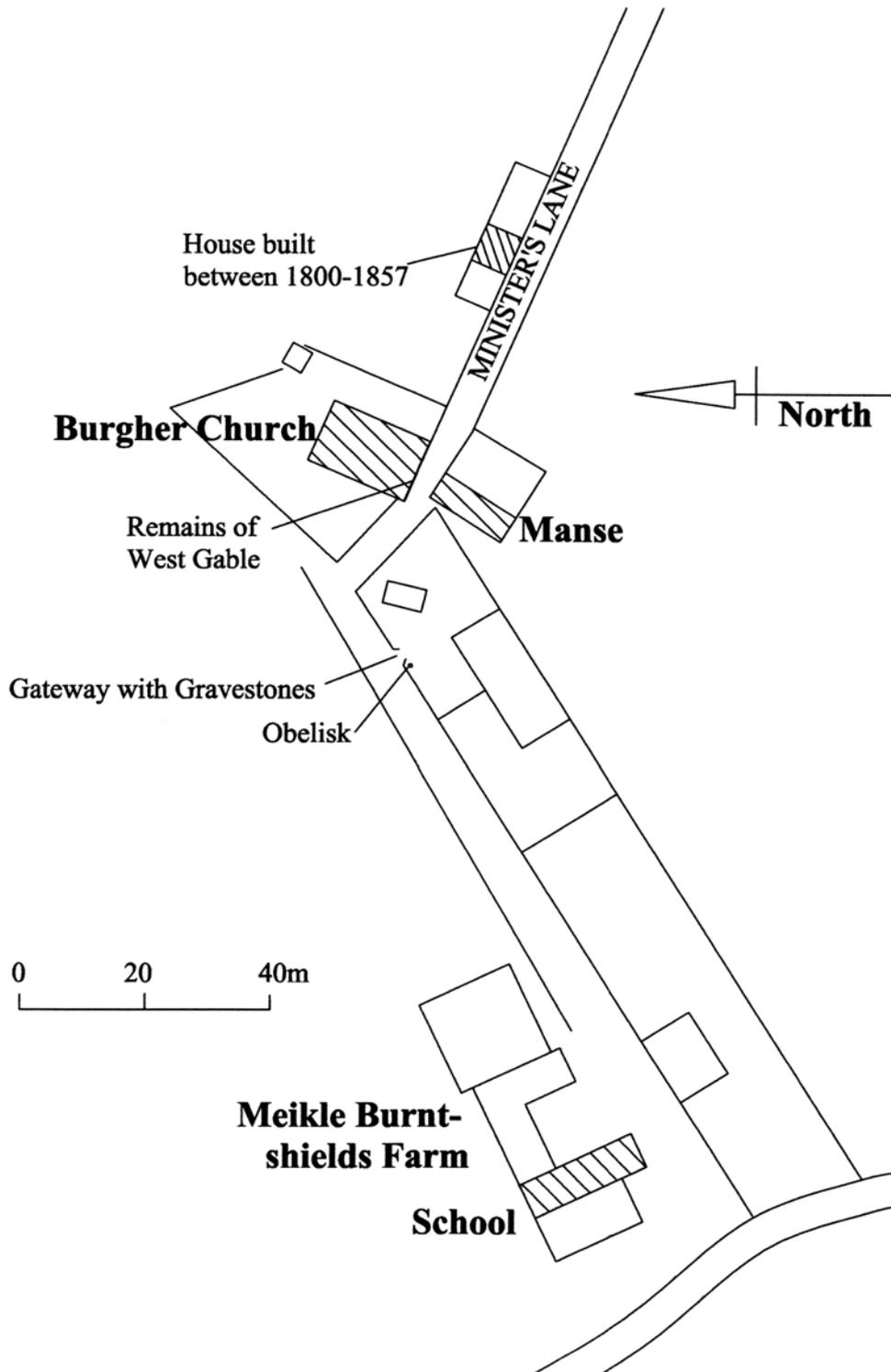
After this split, numbers gradually declined. The church was without a minister from 1796 to 1801 and during this period the congregation split once again and those remaining at Burntshields joined the 'Old Light Burghers'. In 1826 the church closed and the congregation moved from the country to Bridge of Weir, where there was more need of a church, due to the rapid increase in the population with the new cotton mills on the Gryfe. This chapel later became Freeland Church in Bridge of Weir.

During its life the Burntshields Burgher Church had five ordained ministers. The first, John McCara (1744-67), seems to have been a little controversial. He is mentioned at length in Crawford (1842) and in MacKenzie (1902). It seems that he was a popular preacher, and in 1760 was left a legacy of 2000 merks by one of his elders. However it was felt that he spent too much time working at his local farm of Huthead. Some years later, the congregation, fed up with his obsession with agriculture and his materialistic attitude, locked him out of the church, forcing him to preach outside. The matter was brought before the presbytery, and after twenty three years as minister at Burntshields, McCara resigned in 1767. The later ministers, John Lindsay (1772-79), David Stewart Wylie (1793-96), Alexander Brown (1801-10) and William Scott May (1821-26) appear to have been well respected. The Rev. Alexander Brown, was buried under the altar of the church, and was so well respected that an obelisk was erected to his memory more than forty years after his death.

### **Archaeology of Burntshields Church**

The church was demolished long ago, and for many years the site has been forgotten, with much dubiety surrounding the precise location. What appears to be the church ('Branchill') is first shown on Ross's map of Renfrewshire (1754). Both the church and its associated manse are then shown on Ainslie's Map of the County (1796), annotated as "Burgher Meeting House" and "Manse". By 1857 the first edition OS map shows the outline of the church as a ruin and the manse still standing. From this evidence, the actual site (NS 3824 6236) appears to lie within the grounds of what is now Burntshields House. The site is a gentle south-east facing grassy slope used for grazing horses, 140m north of Burntshields Road and 2km WSW of the village of Kilbarchan.

As the church had been demolished, rather than allowed to fall into a ruinous state, it was considered that visible remains were unlikely. However, a field walking survey of the site was undertaken in November 2004 (Figure 5). No visible evidence remains of the east, north or south walls of the church. However, the moss-covered remains of the full nine metre length of the west gable are still standing, with the dyke of Minister's Lane built on top of these remains. Seen from the east, in the grounds of Burntshields House, the remains of this west gable appear as a ledge 0.2m wide, rising to a height of 0.4m at the north and south corners, and up to 0.9m in the middle. Corner stones are evident at both the south and north ends of the wall. There is no evidence of an opening or break in the wall so the door was apparently not situated in the west gable.



**Burntshields Church: Plan of Burntshields**

**Figure 5**

Ainslie's rough sketch of the church on his Map of the County of Renfrew (1800), if the orientation is accurate, indicates a door and three windows on the south wall. Seen from the west in Minister's Lane, the north and south corner stones, with possible original walling between, are visible on this side. The dyke built on top is flush with the original wall. The corner stones were mistakenly assumed by Ferguson (1988) to be rectangular dressed stones used in the building of the dyke. The original gable wall at the north corner stone measures 0.65m in width, and the dyke on top has a width of 0.4m. The stonework in the gable wall is discernable as of a more regular build than that of the dyke.

Written sources give further knowledge of the original building. Ferguson (1988) states that the church was barn-like, like other seceded churches. The 1857 OS survey confirms the shape of the church as rectangular with a south-west, north-east orientation. The associated OS Name Book states that at that time the side walls were still standing to a height of twenty feet, but the roof was gone. The Rev. James Inglis' *Account of the West UP Church, Johnstone*, in MacKenzie (1902) tells us that the walls were built by the people themselves and the rafters had been dragged up from the Clyde by horses. Mackenzie also states that the church had seating for six hundred and was referred to as 'The Bigg Sclate House', from which we can assume that the roof was slated, a novelty at the time among the thatched houses of the ordinary people. Some time after the church closed in 1826, the building was utilised as a barn, and the OS Report of 1857 classifies the site as arable land. The structure was demolished, except for the west gable, in 1859.

### **Old Manse and School**

The site of the manse, which Mackenzie states was built at the same time as the church, is shown on the OS map of 1860 as across Minister's Lane, to the west of the church. No remains of the structure are in evidence, although Ferguson (1988) claims that the building was occupied into the twentieth century. Ainslie's sketch of the church on his Map of the County of Renfrew (1800) suggests that it was a substantial two-storied building.

The 18th century congregation at Burntshields had its own school. Mackenzie (1902) informs us that the school continued at Burntshields long after the church had closed and several inhabitants of the village, 'not yet old' in 1902, had been educated there. This would infer that the school may well have functioned as late as the 1860s. The school is later believed to have been used as a barn on Meikle Burntshields Farm. This barn survives, measuring about 30m in length and 6m in breadth, comparable in size to another 18<sup>th</sup> century school, the former village school in Kilbarchan Steeple, built in 1755.

The surviving interior of the barn is wholly occupied by a single large room with no evidence of dividing walls. The high pitched roof is clad internally in timber and is supported by timber trusses in the form of an inverted 'W', joined by iron tie bars. There are twelve skylights in the roof and a large window in the south gable. The interior has certainly not been designed as a barn, as the walls are lined in white glazed tiles to a height of one and a half metres with a narrow dark top border. The roof construction and tiled walls are compatible with a late 18th century school building.

### **Gravestones and Memorial**

Two gravestones are built into the wall at the gateway to the Burntshields Farm Cottages. The stones have rounded tops, and act as pillars, one at each side of the gateway. Adjacent to each, are two other slabs which also appear to be gravestones. All four stones are positioned upright and are rendered so that carving and inscriptions on the stones is largely obliterated. Only the round topped stone to the west of the gateway shows traces of carving, with lines radiating from a central point to the top edge of the stone. These stones are almost certainly robbed from the former graveyard.

The memorial to the Rev. Alexander Brown in 1860 also survives, about 30m west of the church site and a few metres north of the site of the old manse. It consists of a square obelisk 2.8m high, sitting on a double plinth, with a base 0.9m square. The inscription on one side is a memorial to the much respected Rev. Alexander Brown, who was minister of the church from 1801 to 1810. The inscription on an adjacent side lists the succession of ministers of Burntshields Burgher Church. The other two sides are blank. The memorial was funded by a series of lectures held on the site of the church between 1826 (when the church closed) and 1855. The inauguration ceremony was conducted by the Rev. George Allison of the United Free Church, Kilbarchan. It was attended by 'a great concourse of people' from the parishes of Kilbarchan, Lochwinnoch, Paisley, Houston and Kilallan, Port Glasgow and Greenock. A full account of the ceremony is contained in Ferguson's *The Killochries Community*, (1988) produced by Freeland Church.

### **Inscription at Burntshields Obelisk:**

IN MEMORY OF THE  
REVd ALEXANDER BROWN  
MINISTER OF THE GOSPEL AT BURNTSHIELDS  
ORDAINED 2ND OCTOBER 1801, DIED 25TH JANUARY 1810  
HE WAS A GOOD MAN, A SOUND DIVINE, A FAITHFUL PREACHER  
AND AN AFFECTIONATE PASTOR HE WAS INTERRED AS HE REQUESTED  
UNDER THE COMMUNION TABLE WITHIN THE CHURCH  
THE TABLE WAS REMOVED IN 1826, THE CHURCH WHEN DOWN (sic) IN 1850  
HIS GRAVE IS ALMOST FORGOTTEN NOT SO HIS MEMORY  
FOR THE RELIGIOUS SHALL BE IN EVERLASTING REMEMBRANCE

In 1987 the monument was repositioned by Kilbarchan Civic Society to its present location, but now sadly stands among sundry building debris. During its removal, a vessel containing papers and documents, inserted into the monument at its erection, were found. These included newspaper cuttings from 25th August 1860, the date of the inauguration of the monument, a bill publicising the inauguration, an obituary notice about Rev. Alexander Brown, a historical sketch of the church and a summary of its history.

### **Communion Vessels and Tokens**

When the Rev. William Scott May moved with the congregation to Bridge of Weir in 1826, the pewter communion service accompanied the move, but was lost for many years. In the mid-twentieth century, it was re-discovered by Mr Gibb Stuart in an old basket in a loft, where it had lain forgotten for years. Since 1971 it has been in the

possession of Freeland Church, Bridge of Weir and consists of four communion cups, two flagons, and four plates, all in pewter. When the collection was assessed and valued, It was reported that:

"The cups are typically Scottish ..... The flagons too are fine. You will notice on the bottom side of the lid, a little rim or circular edge which fits into the body of the flagon and keeps the lid, when closed, from moving sideways. This is quite peculiar to Scotland and shows the maker was a Scot".

The two smaller plates were considered to be bread plates and the two larger plates, as their condition was less pristine, were considered to be collection plates. As part of this investigation, the collection was viewed and photographed at Freeland Church. The four cups are identical, being 20cm in height, with the diameter of the rim measuring 11cm inscribed around each is: BELONGING TO THE ASSOCIATE SESSION OF BURNTSHIELDS 1774.

The two flagons are also identical, each being 21cm in height, with the diameter of the base measuring 16cm and the diameter of the lid measuring 12cm. The lid bears the Latin inscription: VERITAS ODIUM PARIT and around the flagon is inscribed: GIFTED TO THE ASSOCIATE CONGREGATION OF BRWNTSHIELDS AWGWST 1759 BY JAMES SEMPLE (sic).

The bread plates are 36cm. in diameter and the collection plates 42cm

### **Communion Tokens**

Two communion tokens from Burntshields Church are included in the collection in Paisley Museum, both dated 1793. These metal tokens are square in shape, each side measuring 20mm and are quite ornate. One token is almost in mint condition while the other is much worn with the comers completely worn away. The tokens are inscribed with the letters ACB (Associate Congregation of Burntshields).

In *the Statistical Account of the Parish of Kilbarchan*, Douglas (1845) states that at Burntshields the "respected body of Dissenters had their earliest settlement, to the west of Glasgow, soon after the beginning of Secession". This was soon followed by a church in Greenock. As the first seceded church in Renfrewshire, Burntshields Burgher Church must be regarded as of significant historical importance. The church was highly regarded in the county, and Douglas, the Church of Scotland parish minister, refers to the Burghers as 'the respected body of Dissenters' and the OS Name Book (1857) calls it 'this celebrated kirk'.

The church appears to have been well attended throughout the latter half of the eighteenth century. On one occasion during Rev. Lindsay's ministry, (1772-1792), 700 communion tokens were required and an exceptional attendance during Rev. McCara's ministry (1744-1767), 1400 tokens were needed (Mackenzie (1902). In fact MacKenzie notes that the Established Parish Church communions could not be 'compared in magnitide and importance' to those at Burntshields. The OS Name Book mentions how 'the Burntshields Sacrament used to be a great annual solemnity and was resorted to by vast multitudes from the neighbouring parishes'. Inglis, in MacKenzie (1902), reports that "the communions at the Brenchall were famous until the beginning of the nineteenth century; but latterly the were attended by undevout persons, disorders ensued, and eventually they were limited for the most part to the members of the congregation and ceased to attract'. Undoubtedly, for a long period,

the Burntshields Sacraments were well attended and important events in the parish.

The influence of Burntshields Burgher Church is still a force today. Three present day churches have their origins in the Burntshields Church - Calder U.F Church in Lochwinnoch, St. Paul's (formerly the West U.P Church) in Johnstone and Freeland Church in Bridge of Weir.

This study is of wider significance, as the existence of the remains of the church gable and the early school in the barn have not been documented to date. Also, the church site contains not only the remains of the Rev. Andrew Brown (buried beneath the site of the communion table) but also, on the evidence of the gravestones around the site, the graves of many other parishioners.

## Sources

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The potential to uncover further details of the history of the church lies in the Session Minute Books (1744-58, 1792-93), accounts (1744-65, 1773-89) and baptisms records (1743-81) in the National Archives of Scotland.

### Maps

- Ross, Charles: Map of Renfrewshire (1754), Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- Ainslie, John: Map of the County of Renfrew (1800; survey 1796).
- OS Maps of Renfrewshire, Sheet XI, plan 6, page 49 (1860: survey 1857).
- OS Name Book (1857) associated with above map.

### Web Sites

NMRS Collection Details available at [www.rcahms.co.uk](http://www.rcahms.co.uk) County Maps available at [www.nls.uk](http://www.nls.uk)

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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