

2. The Relief Society Church at Kilbarchan

Bill Curran

Patronage for the established churches of England and Scotland was reinstated by parliament in 1712. But the Presbyterian church had, in 1689, replaced the Episcopalian church as the established state church of Scotland, and to Presbyterians, the appointment of ministers by congregations was an essential point of religion. It was therefore inevitable that differences of opinion would arise between those who held the patronage and the congregations.

The patronage of Kilbarchan Parish Church had been purchased by James Milliken, who died in 1776. When, ten years later, the Kilbarchan minister died, James Milliken's trustees selected the successor, the first time since 1605 that a lay patron had exercised his right in Kilbarchan. The choice was endorsed by most of the heritors (landowners) in the parish, by the elders of the church and many others. The opposition, led by William Barr of Cartside, John Galbraith in Thirdpart, John Cochrane in Linwood, James Lyle in Torr and William Lang in Bridge of Weir had the support of 260 heads of families and inhabitants in Kilbarchan (1).

These parishioners decided to form their own church and on the 5th May 1786 "a numerous and respectable meeting in the Town Hall of the inhabitantsagreed.....that it is absolutely necessary that there be a church or Meeting House built with all convenient speed.....and that it be of the Relief Denomination" (2). On the last Sunday in May a Mr Bell was invited to come to Kilbarchan and he preached, in the open air on Steeple Knoll, to a congregation of a thousand (3).

In July 1786 a collection was started for the building of the Relief Society church so that the congregation "might have a free choice of their pastor according to the Word of God". The preamble to the list of subscribers asserted that "the people in Town, having no interest in the Parish Church as it belongs to the Landed Interest, cannot be accommodated with Seats, nor is it sufficient to contain above one half of the inhabitants of the Parish" (4).

James Stewart, grocer in Kilbarchan, Peter Speir in Mill of Gryffe, James Lyle in Torr and Peter Barr in Woodend Farm of Kilmacolm were appointed to "get as many subscriptions as they can" and 125 people contributed £1.00 or more to the building fund: the largest subscription was £15. Among the subscribers were Peter Speir in Mill of Gryffe (£9.00), James Lyle, farmer in Torr (£3.30), Robert Erskine, farmer, Hill (£5.50), Robert Lang, smith, Bridge of Weir (£1.00), William Speir, shoemaker, Burnhill (£1.00) and Peter Speir's four daughters, Janet (14), Elizabeth (12), Jean (10) and Mary (8) who subscribed one shilling each (5). The total sum collected was £230.

At this time the widowed Mrs James Milliken was living at Milliken with her daughter Jean, widow of Captain Napier. The new Relief Society sent a petition to her "letting her know some of the reasons for building a church in Kilbarchan" and asking for "her concurrence and support". The managers were soon recording the receipt of "a letter from Mrs Milliken letting us know that she doth not approve of building a Relief Church in Kilbarchan" (6).

Nevertheless, land was bought in October 1786, the plans considered in December and the foundation stone laid on the 28th March 1787. Although the church was occupied during the next two winters the building was not really finished until well into 1789. The first minister, Mr John Maclaren, was ordained in the open air in May 1788. His stipend at first was £90.00 but by the end of his ministry it had risen to £140.00.

The new church had its effect on the Kilbarchan Parish Church as the Sessions Clerk noted in the parish register – "Since the Relief Society ... commenced... the Register is neither full nor regular, very few of that Society or of the other children's names to be registered" (7).

Burnhill, the Speir home, was actually in the adjoining parish of Houston and Killellan and the sessions clerk there also had his difficulties in trying to record the births in the parish, complaining in 1794 about notice of a Speirs baptism "in Kilbarchan not given timeously in here" and in 1809 recording a batch of Speirs and Aitken births from 1796 onwards, marking them "Descenting Families" (8).

Apart from the congregation having the right to choose the minister, the services, doctrines, organisations and discipline of the Relief Church differed little from those of the Parish Church. The finances were controlled by an elected committee of managers and the morals of the people were supervised by "the Kirk Session of self-important elders, acting conjointly with the minister, which interfered in ordinary life to an excessive degree" (9).

The first entry in the Kirk Session minutes book is dated November 1788 and records that a member was permitted to sponsor her grandchild's baptism "in consideration of "her" moral and religious character and the parents of the child being under scandal".

Thirty years later the minutes record that "the delinquents compeared for the sin of fornication... having given evidence that they were sincere in their penitenceappointed them to appear publicly in the church next Lord's Day to be absolved from the Scandal and then to be admitted to the privileges of our Holy Religion".

Even as late as 1874 the elders noted that a parishioner "guilty of antinuptual fornication, compeared, when she was rebuked and returned to the fellowship of the church".

Today, the church is Church of Scotland and is known as Kilbarchan East.

Notes

1. Kilbarchan Parish History. Rev. R. D. MacKenzie
2. Kilbarchan Relief Church Managers' Minutes. SRO CH3/1130/3
3. Same as 1
- 4, 5, 6 Same as 2
7. Kilbarchan Old Parish Register
8. Houston and Killellan Old Parish Register
9. English Social History. G. M. Trevelyan OM
10. Kilbarchan Session Minutes SRO CH3/1130/1