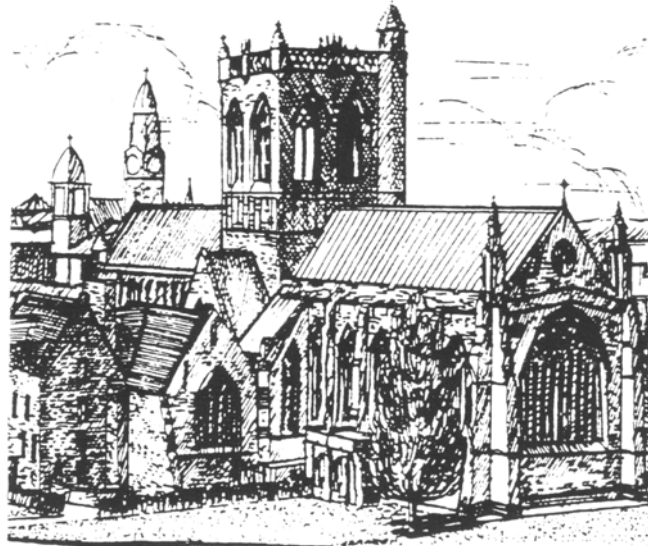


5. Troubled Times

John Malden

The period between 1520 and 1620 was one of radical change on the religious front when not only did the method of worship alter, but also the administration of the local economy moved into secular control.



By 1520 the Monastery and Abbey of Paisley were under the control of Abbot Robert Shaw who was elected Bishop of Moray in 1525. Shaw was the nephew of the previous Abbot, the builder George Shaw, and saw the position of Abbot and the worship in the Church at its height of power, ceremony and colour. It is often forgotten that the churches were full of colour, as today we are used to the austere plain stonework and lack of ornament. An example of the richness of the fittings in the Abbey at this period is given by the printed, and coloured, Missal presented by one of the Monks, Robert Kerr, to the altar of the Virgin in the early 1550's. The high quality of the text, printed in Paris, and the jewel-like appearance of the illustrations gives a hint of the grandeur on public view. Now in the care of the National Library of Scotland, this Missal is the only known service book to survive from the Monastery.

Shaw was succeeded, as the last religious Abbot, by John Hamilton, a young monk from Kilwinning, who was the illegitimate son of the Earl of Arran. Hamilton became one of the outstanding figures during the time of crisis which led to the dissolution of monasteries in Scotland. At the time of his appointment we know that there were at least sixteen monks resident in the monastery, participating in the services and the administration of the vast landed property. The Paisley Cartulary, which records land transactions of the monastery during the early 16th century and is kept in Paisley Museum, on a number of occasions records the names of all the monks as witnesses to transfers of property. It is reasonable to assume that this number of monks

was in residence until the dissolution of the monastery, but several continued to live in Paisley after that date.

In August 1560 the Scottish Parliament passed an Act banning the jurisdiction of the Pope in Scotland. This effectively led to the dissolution of the monasteries in Scotland but, as often seems to have been the case, Paisley reacted to the situation in a unique manner. In 1557 Abbot John Hamilton had obtained a Papal Bull transferring the monastery and lands to his nephew Claud, but retaining the rents during his own lifetime. Claud, who was in holy orders, was aged about fifteen at the time. This meant that by 1560 and thereafter the properties of Paisley Abbey had passed into the control of the Hamilton family and were immune from later Acts of Parliament confiscating church property to the crown.

By this stage John Hamilton was also Archbishop of St. Andrews and was leading the fight to retain the old forms of worship throughout Scotland. In 1563 he, and a number of the former monks of Paisley and other clergymen, were prosecuted for leading a rebellion to return to the old forms of worship. In fact, it was not until after Hamilton's death in 1571 that the first minister of the reformed church was appointed to Paisley. Until then one of the former monks, called as it happens John Hamilton, acted as the priest in charge.

The most unusual feature of this period relating to worship occurred in the Abbey itself. At some stage around 1570 the great central tower, built by Abbot John Hamilton, collapsed causing the demolition of the crossing and choir. As a result the nave was walled off at the east end to form the parish church for Paisley, whilst the St Mirren Chapel continued as a private place of worship for the Roman Catholic Hamilton family. This unusual partnership continued, uninterrupted for about fifty years. It is interesting to note that the nave of the Abbey is the only monastic church in continuous use for worship in Scotland.

The last eleven years of Abbot John's life were full of turmoil, not only for himself, but also for Paisley and the nation. The monastery was occupied by the Earl of Angus, and Hamilton fought to get back the Place of Paisley and, more importantly, the Register of early charters and the Conventual seal of the Monastery and Abbey lands. The Register is now in the National Library of Scotland and the matrix of the conventual seal is lost.

On the national front Hamilton baptised the future King James VI with full Roman Catholic rites in 1566 at Holyrood. In 1568 he was a staunch supporter of Mary, and tried to prevent her leaving the country after her defeat at the battle of Langside. His nephew Claud had to flee the country and the Abbey lands were given to the Semples of Glencairn. Hamilton was eventually imprisoned and then hanged at Stirling in 1571. He was buried at Paisley. His tombstone remains in the Abbey, but we do not know the exact location of his grave. Claud Hamilton did not regain the Abbey lands until 1584.

Following Hamilton's death the first minister was appointed to Paisley but, because of the continuing opposition to reform, he did not dare to live in the town. In fact it was not until Alexander Knox was appointed in 1592 that a minister had a house in Paisley. It is said that Knox had his own bodyguard for protection.

In 1576 the King confirmed the foundation of the Royal Grammar School, but it is certain that a school was in existence well before this date, probably founded by one of the Abbots. On the memorial to Marjorie Bruce in the choir of the Abbey is a coat of arms hanging from a crozier. This coat of arms is repeated on the 1586 stone in the entrance to the present Paisley Grammar School with the crozier defaced. The same coat of arms was later used on occasion by the town of Paisley as its own. The 1586 stone is probably to emphasise that the lands from the monastery handed over to fund the school were exempt from legislation, passed in 1587, whereby all monastic properties not handed over to others before 1560 were confiscated to the crown. So, in effect, the armorial stone is an early tax exemption certificate.

More clues as to the unrest of the times can be found in the records of the Privy Council. In 1592/3 "Mr George Kerr, was waiting about the mouth of the Firth of Clyde, ready to embark in a vessel bound for foreign parts. Some previous rumours, or something in the demeanour and talk of the young gentleman himself, having roused suspicions, Mr Andrew Knox, the minister of Paisley, attended by a company of zealous neighbours got together for that purpose, apprehended him in the isle of Cumbrae, and took possession of his papers". These included letters from Scottish Jesuits to William Crichton, a Jesuit in the Court of Spain. Knox, living up to his namesake, was an ardent prosecutor of those who did not conform to the reformed worship. In 1600 Mr John Gilchrist, master at the Grammar School, took Mr Andrew Knox, minister of Paisley, to court for malicious persecution and slander, at the same time taking action against the presbytery for illegal proceedings. He complained at the trial that Andrew Knox - "having conceived hatred and malice against the complainer" - had removed him from teaching at their school.

A report in the Privy Council in 1597 states that on "the 15th of July..... William Cunningham, minister at Lochwinnoch, lame of one leg came for his lawful business to the town of Paisley, riding on a mare, which, by some evil treatment, chanced to die, which being perceived by Robert Alexander, William Mundie and John Wilson, indwellers of the said town of Paisley, enemies to all such as profess the true religion, they came with all and other provisions and poured drink in the mare's mouth, and thereafter danced and sang the Soul Mass and Dirge for the minister's dead mare, as they called it".

The sense of unrest in Paisley at this time is clear and it is not surprising that it sounds like a scene from the wild west. A complaint to the Privy Council in 1601 by the Master of Elphinstone that "Alexander Mure, brother of Robert Mure of Caldwell "kitted himself in public streets and markets in the town of Paisley with hakbutts and pistols against the Acts forbidding this".

By 1608 things were settling down and the last great family blood feud was brought to an end. This feud, between the Glencairns (Cunningham) [Protestant] and the Eglintons (Montgomeries) [Catholic], had started c.1574 over the baillieship of Kilwinning Abbey, and had deteriorated into murder. It was not resolved until 1608 when the parties were summoned to Edinburgh – “they are to come in peaceable manner, without any kind of armour, except their swords; and the whole number on either side must not exceed 40 persons”. The feud was settled by shaking of hands.

In 1612 the Minister of Paisley, Archibald Hamilton, felt secure enough to build a manse at Wallneuk. It may be coincidence or malice that the ‘Silver Bells’ horse race, thought up in 1608 by 1st Earl of Abercorn, but first run in 1620 under 2nd Earl, finished outside the manse.

The reports in the Privy Council begin to appear more normal. Such as the story of a French lady, Janet Quenlie, “who accuses John Hamilton of Ferguslie of having married Margaret Stewart illegally in Ireland, as she had previously married him in France and been deserted, and she wants her coffers back - he being married in France with a French woman and maintained her some years in Bordeaux like a gentleman, enticed and persuaded her to come to Scotland, and as they came together by Ireland within a few days after their arrival he did forsake her utterly and married himself to a Scottish woman. When he took his unlawful bride out of Ireland he brought with him great sums of money and two great coffers full of silks, satin and velvet belonging to her (the French woman) and she was left in a strange country desolate and destitute of all means”. She petitioned everyone, obviously “batting the eyelids”. This resulted in a response – “This distressed French woman mightly wronged”, and as a result of her unfounded statements Hamilton and his wife were thrown into jail, and the coffers moved to Edinburgh. An inventory of the coffers gives great detail of curtains 'keiking glasses', doublets, painted face cloths etc. Eventually Janet admitted that the story of her marriage to John Hamilton was a lie, and all she wanted was her coffers back.

However, not all was love and light. There was still opposition to the reformed worship. There was a complaint to the Privy Council in 1619, by James Primrose, that the publication 'God and the King' was to be distributed throughout the kingdom. Although Primrose with “great pain, travail and trouble has done his best endeavours.....some undutiful subjects” namely Patrick Stewart of Blackhall “very shamefully abused Primrose within the town of Paisley.....having struck him with a baton and struck Thomas Cumming, officer, through the head with a winger”. Stewart did not appear and was denounced a rebel.

During all this time from 1560 until 1626 the Hamiltons had continued to practise as Roman Catholics in the St. Mirren Chapel and had been tolerated because of their position and influence. However, in 1626 a new minister,

Robert Boyd of Tochrig, was appointed and almost immediately prosecuted the widow of the 1st Earl of Abercorn as a papist due to her undue meddling in the town's affairs - which the Abercorns as successors to the Abbots had a right to do under the 1488 charter.

The preceding century had seen radical change in Paisley and the rest of Scotland, but Paisley reacted in its own unique way during these Troubled Times.