

church burned by shooters

Gretna Old Church was burned down in 1736 when the thatched roof was set alight by men shooting swallows. This is part of the interesting information given by the late Mr J. W. Brown when he wrote an article for the "Annandale Observer" on the history of Gretna Church.

The article on Gretna by the late Mr J. W. Brown published recently has created considerable interest. Mr Brown also wrote a short history which is reproduced this week of the Gretna Old Church.

Little is known of the early history of the church. The troubles which prevailed in the Border Country, with its debateable land, for centuries prevented any permanent settlement except for the Border strongholds in which the inhabitants could take refuge and defend themselves against the marauding bands from both sides of the disputed land.

The Rev. James Gatt, a distinguished minister of the church in the 18th Century, states in the church records that the church had its origin in Pictish times at St. Bridgid's Well on Gretna Hill. It is almost certain that there was an early Christian connection with the district as an adjoining parish, named Reinpatrick, indicates that it was probably an outpost of St. Patrick's mission field. By the 16th Century the church of Reinpatrick, or the Red Kirk, had fallen into decay and was joined to the parish of Grainsney.

In the records of York Minster, Gretna or Grainey Church is mentioned as being under the jurisdiction of the priory of Guisburn in Yorkshire. It is evident that the church had some connection with the Bruce family who had been granted lands by the Normans in Yorkshire, and were lords of Annandale. Whilst under Norman influence the church and church lands were associated with the Abbeys of Melrose and Holme St. Cultram. This was probably due to the fact that salmon fisheries and the salting on the Solway played an important part in the monastic food supply.

During the later part of the Middle Ages the churches on the Borders fell into decay and church lands were seized by Border reivers who had built the many peat towers and strongholds in the Debateable Land.

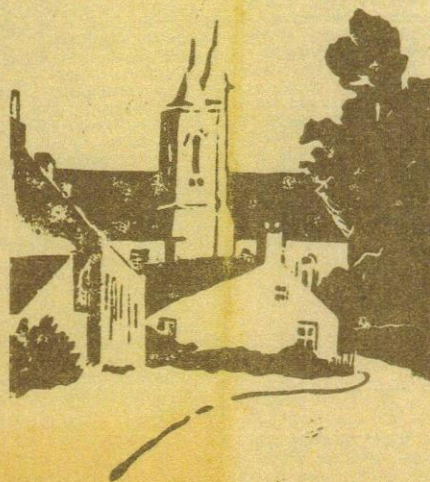
After the Union of the Crowns in 1603 James I, on one of his salmon like visits to his native Scotland (1619), passed through the parish. Seeing the state of the church and the surrounding country

he ordered John Murray of Cockpool to put the church in order and make a drove road from Annan to Gretna. At this time the trade in cattle was growing in importance. Later, it is said that thirty thousand head of cattle passed across the Solway ford to England annually. For this purpose they were shod with iron plates to withstand the long journey. At the time John Murray presented a Bible to the Church, but all trace of it has been lost.

During Covenanted times the church was under the Episcopacy for a brief period as a minister was deposed at the time.

The most notable period in the story of the church was during the 18th Century after the Rev. James Gatt became minister in succession to Mr Black to whom he was appointed assistant in 1729. Gatt was a distinguished classical scholar who knew several languages and was a noted writer and poet. His diary begun in 1730 - written in Latin and some of his writings are in the custody of the Kirk Session. His entries in the Books of Discipline are full of interest and give a vivid picture of life in the parish during his sixty year's ministry. At the beginning of his ministry he protests against irregular marriages and the "Penny Bridals" which were often the occasion for drunkenness and licentious behaviour.

Notes of 13th July, 1741 states "After the disillation of the Kirk by the indiscretion of those who shot for a wager at swallows, May 24th, 1734, when the church was repaired in 1735, as the masons thru down big stones with images since the time of the popery around the church. Mr Hamilton's grass lair, or through stones set up eighty years ago, was broke to the great grief of the honest people in the parish and countryside." In his series of articles "The History of Gretna" - Rev. E. W. J. McConnel writes "At last, to Mr Gatt's joy, the



church was repaired. It was pulled down in 1797, and the present one built a few yards away."

In 1736 the church was burned down, the thatched roof having been set alight by men shooting swallows. It is recorded that the bell fell from the burning church tower and landed upright on the top of the church wall. Many fine memorials were destroyed including one to the Rev. John Hamilton, 'a noted Scottish Divine', who died in 1666. When Gatt died in 1792 an epitaph to Hamilton was inscribed at the head of Gatt's tombstone.

Until the church was rebuilt the congregation worshipped in summer in a tent made by John and George Forsyth at a cost of five pounds. In winter a neighbouring barn served as a place of worship.

In Gatt's Catechetical Roll, among other interesting information are the measurements of the church at the time. Originally the church was a simple rectangular shape with an outside stair on the east wall giving access to the east and west lofts or galleries. The position of the doors and windows can be traced on the walls. The tower was narrower than the present one and the difference can be plainly noted by the stonework low down at the north-east corner. The mason's mark is clearly cut and it has a brass or bronze plug in the centre.

The main door was in the east wall and the 'quire' entrance on the west where the present porch now stands. Inside the church the pulpit was situated on the north side where the war memorial

is placed. The church had no organ and the praise was led by a precenor. Oak pews provided seating for the congregation who paid rents for sittings in the lofts, at least, the rents of the sittings were graduated, the dearer ones at the front. The heritors of the church, the landowners of Stormont, Springkell, Annandale and Mossknowe, maintained the church property and had the right to certain pews for the use of their tenantry. Though no such right now exists the crowns which now mark a number of pews, were placed there to preserve the association they had in the past with its chief heritor and benefactor, Lord Stormont, Earl of Mansfield, who was Lord Chief Justice of England.

In the Books of Discipline recording the proceedings of the Kirk Session Gatt has described in brief entries the passage, in 1745, of contingents of Highlanders who marched through Gretna Green on their way to Carlisle. But it is very improbable that Prince Charles ever came through Gretna as the main force appears to have crossed the Esk further east; certain clansmen came this way and are named by Gatt. One interesting note records that Lady Balfour and Lady Lovat followed their husbands who had accompanied Prince Charles to Carlisle. They travelled along the old road towards Rockcliffe intending to ford the River Esk at Gerriestown. However, the river was in flood, so, unable to cross, they retraced their steps and attended the church service on Sunday, November 24th, 1745. Mr Gatt preached

on Amos 5 4. Gatt himself avoided the Highlanders and actually fled to Bowness in Cumberland crossing the Solway on horseback and returning, after visiting Comlongon Castle, when the clansmen were clear of the district. He states, however, that the rebels threw stones at the manse door and stole a beehive. Later, in 1746, during the Highlanders' retreat from Derby, fleeing bands of rebels passed the church pursued by detachments of the Duke of Cumberland's forces.

Some one hundred and forty clansmen were taken captive and imprisoned in the church during a Sunday on their way to Carlisle for trial. The congregation unable to occupy the church that day attended service on the village green. On the next day the church officer, Wright, occupied his time removing the traces of the unorthodox use of the building. Afterwards it was reported to the Kirk Session that certain persons had associated with officers of the army.

The church records subsequently are mainly concerned with parish events - administering the poor law, misconduct, smuggling, observance of the Sabbath and interesting comments on the weather and life in the community.

Mention is made by Gatt of the state of the Redkirk then in ruins. An occupant of the marsh land was reported to the Kirk Session for preventing access to the Solway shore and for digging trenches to drain away water. Later in 1771 a great flood swept down the firth from the swollen rivers and carried away the Redkirk, the graveyard, and a considerable area of the adjoining land, into the sea. It is said that some families retrieved memorials of their forebears and re-erected them in the graveyard of this church. Those stones standing against the east wall are probably the memorials saved but time and the elements have obliterated the lettering from the soft red sandstone.

The Rev. James Gatt died in 1792 and the church was served by three ministers during the next century. The last of them, the Rev. William Bell was a strong personality and a very worthy pastor who strove to maintain the rights of the church and parishioners. After his death he was succeeded by the Rev. J. C. Stafford under whose guidance the church was reconstructed in 1902. The pipe organ was also installed and later an electric blower was added when electric lighting replaced the oil lamps. The

Woman's Guild provided the carpeting. The bronze plaque on the north wall is the memorial to those from the parish who made the supreme sacrifice in the 1914-18 War. Among them is the name of the minister's son, Lieut. K. Stafford, M.C., who was fatally wounded in the closing days of the war. The minister himself was tragically killed by an enemy bomb dropped on Gretna in 1941. In remembrance of a long and devoted ministry the congregation erected the brass memorial on the south wall.

The church possesses Books of Discipline of the 18th Century written by the Rev. James Gatt and his diary written in Latin, also his Catechetical Roll of 1730 which contains the names of people living in places of which all traces have now disappeared. There are also interesting personal notes and the measurements of the church. Some of his writings and poems are preserved.

The church also retains the old communion plate which consists of a bowl, flagon, two cups and three plates, all made of pewter. The plates are very much worn and damaged - and pitted with what appears to be particles of lime. From their appearance it seems likely that they were buried under masonry when the church was burned down. One of the plates is punch marked round the rim with the inscription "This basin belongs to Grainey Kirk 1707". The communion plate at present in use was gifted to the church in 1862 by Sir Edward Johnson-Ferguson of Springkell, who was one of the heritors. More recently individual cups have also been brought into use. The brass flower vases were gifted to the church in memory of James Mitchell, R.A.F., who perished on a bombing raid. The lectern is a memorial to Mr George Currie, for many years an earnest and devoted elder of the congregation.

Peace be to this House and to all who worship therein.

Peace be to all those who enter and go out therefrom.

Peace be to all who seek strength and truth as here they share in the ministry of Word and Sacrament the heritage of their fathers.