

CHAPTER THREE

THE NEW KIRK AND THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the **New Statistical Account** of 1843, the **Reverend Robert Simpson** writes that the church stands in the burgh near its boundary with Keithhall and Fintray. The parishioners are fortunate that none of them has to travel more than four miles to Church.

The church described in the NSA is the existing church and was completed in 1819 to a design by the famous Aberdeen architect **Archibald Simpson**, who also designed nearby Thainstone House and many of Aberdeen's most elegant buildings including the Music Hall, the façade of the High School for Girls (now Harlaw Academy) and several churches and granite mansions. Archibald Simpson was the nephew of Kintore's minister at the time, **Reverend John Shand**, and perhaps the uncle was doing a favour for the young architect at the beginning of his career. Whatever the motive, the choice of architect was a very fortunate one for Kintore.

The church could seat 700 in a circular formation of pews. All sittings were "appropriated" i.e. allocated to specific people. The inhabitants of the burgh part of the parish had complained bitterly that they did not have enough seats because the country families had taken over too many. It was customary to pay a small rent for the right to sit in a pew and the money raised usually went to church funds for the relief of the parish poor.

A number of ancient features were preserved in the new church. The most important of these is part of the old **Sacrament House** of the pre-reformation Church of Kinkell which is built into the wall on the stairs leading up to the gallery. This relic was rescued from Kinkell when it was deconsecrated and allowed to decay in the late 18th century. It was placed in position in the new kirk by Robert Shand, son of the minister. A pew door panel, dated 1653, is built into the chancel of the church, but this feature was probably not added until the church was redesigned in 1915. At that time the semi-circular arrangement of the pews was replaced by the current lay-out and the chancel was built.

When the **Castle Hill**, a mound which once stood opposite the old church, was demolished to make way for the railway in 1854, a number of interesting finds were made inside its 30 foot high/ 150 foot diameter interior. Along with granite blocks and cinders, the excavators found burial urns and interesting pieces of sculptured stone. At virtually the same time another sculptured stone was dug up in the area of the churchyard. It had been used rather carelessly as a grave cover! It is still on view today near its original location. Referred to by J. Dawson Scott in his "Story of Kintore Ancient and Royal" as the **Ichthus stone**, it shows some of the ancient **Celtic symbols of Christianity** including the mirror and fish. So it is virtually the only piece of evidence of Kintore's early Christian past which remains.

Dawson Scott also refers to the **morthouse** which was built on the churchyard wall opposite his home, Hawthorn House. Morthouses were built either of solid stone or even lead to store bodies and protect them from grave robbers and body snatchers. It was common practice in the late 18th/ early 19th century to steal bodies for use at the

medical school in Aberdeen. Doctors were reduced to using the services of body snatchers to obtain cadavers for dissection at a time when the church condemned the practice of dissection as evil. It was therefore illegal to donate one's body for research. Unfortunately the ban led to a much more evil trade and relatives of the dead had to resort to morthouses and metal mortsafes over graves for the protection of their deceased loved ones. Churches also employed watchmen to guard against grave robbers, but these were easily bribed and often turned a blind eye to evil activities among the gravestones.

In 1843 there were about **560 communicants** and the minister's stipend consisted of 112 bolls of meal, 33 bolls of barley and £87.9s 10d in money. Out of this the minister even had to pay for the communion bread and wine because the church teinds (money which had been left for the purpose) were exhausted.

The manse had been built in 1784 and repaired in 1835-36. (The building referred to here is now known as Goose Croft House.) The minister also had the use of two separate pieces of Glebe (church owned ground). One of these is the area where the Scout Hut now stands. The houses on Northern Road known as Mansefield were built on what had once been part of the manse garden, so no prizes for guessing how they acquired their name! The next manse in the Square, now a private house, was originally called Maryfield, and then belonged to the Gordon family who rechristened it Gordondale. It was bequeathed by them to the church and did not become the Manse until well after the Second World War.

But we need to return to 1843 which was a very traumatic year for the Scottish Kirk. There had been growing discontent throughout Scotland among many ministers and elders at the increasing dominance of the Church of Scotland by the **Heritors** (wealthy landowners) in the parishes. At the **Reformation** in 1560, Protestant leaders such as **John Knox** had declared the new Church of Scotland to be self-governing with its ministers being chosen by the people. A system of **Kirk Sessions, Presbyteries and Synods** was set up through which **elders** appointed from congregations would run the church and work with ministers appointed by themselves.

Unfortunately over the years this commendable system had gradually broken down and the local heritors, the most important landowners of each parish, had gained so much influence that they were virtually appointing the ministers themselves. This could and did lead to a great deal of corruption and nepotism and many unsuitable ministers were being appointed. Many of them had no interest in running their parishes or would only do what the heritors told them. The situation in Kintore was not as bad as many and the quality of its ministers had remained good overall. However the leading heritor was the **Earl of Kintore** and he did not even live in the parish!

Matters came to a head in **1843** with the event that is now known as **The Disruption**. A large number of ministers and congregations left the Church of Scotland to form their own church in protest. It became known as the **Free Church of Scotland**. One of the defecting ministers was **Reverend Robert Simpson** of Kintore (writer of the New Statistical Account) and he took a large number of his flock with him. They built a **Free Church** on **New Street** (Northern Road) opposite what is now Smithfield. It

opened its doors to worshippers in 1847 and a Free Church Manse was built for Reverend Simpson. (This is now Overdon Nursing Home.) It was not until 1929 that the rift between the two churches was healed. The Free Church became a hall until it was burnt down in 1937.

In his new manse, Robert Simpson settled down to father twelve children, many of whom travelled the world, settling in Australia, New Zealand and India, working in the army, navy, medicine and the law. Simpson lived on to a ripe old age and was Free Kirk minister until his death in 1870. Somewhat ironically, given his defection, he is buried in the parish churchyard, beside the building that he abandoned.

So how did the parish kirk survive the disruption? Things must have been difficult but fortunately Kintore was entering a period of growth and prosperity due to the coming of the railway, and this cushioned the blow by bringing in more parishioners. The elders must have felt reasonably confident about their future because a new **session room** was completed in 1847.

William Ross replaced the departed Reverend Simpson and served the congregation until 1872. He came from Edinburgh but had also been tutor to the young Earl of Caithness. **John Craig Smith** from Longside filled the charge until his death in 1896 and then **Thomas Ogilvie Duncan MA** led the parish into the 20th century, leaving to take up the ministry at Whitburn in 1910. His successor, the **Reverend John Maclagan MA**, asked the permission of the Kirk Session to be temporarily released from his duties to go to serve his country during the **First World War**. He had been unsuccessful in obtaining a post as Chaplain to the forces and so decided to become a combatant instead. During the war his place was taken by two interim moderators, the Reverend Downie from Kemnay, followed by the Reverend Black from Inverurie. Reverend Maclagan survived the war, unlike several of his parishioners, but only remained in Kintore for a year or two after it.

The old order had been completely disrupted by the war and Kintore was entering a very different kind of world.