

## Stirling's churches and the town of Stirling, 1560-1800

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In January 1800, the Rev. John Russell was appointed to the 2<sup>nd</sup> charge in what is now the Holy Rude Church in Stirling. A man of 60 years of age, he came from Kilmarnock to be colleague to the slightly younger Rev. James Somerville. He was known widely as a 'hell-fire preacher' and was the frequent butt of Robert Burns' satire, being referred to variously as 'Black Russell', 'Black Jock' and 'Rumble John', figuring in *The Holy Fair*, *The Ordination*, *The Twa Herds* and *The Kirk o Scotland's Alarm*. In this last he receives the following description:

*Rumble John! Rumble John, mount the steps with a groan,  
Cry the book is with heresy cramm'd;  
Then out wi' your ladle, deal brimstone like aidle,  
And roar ev'ry note of the damn'd.  
Rumble John!  
And roar ev'ry note of the damn'd.<sup>1</sup>*

Called Black Russell from his dark complexion, he was a big, brawny man, had a stern look, a voice like a bull's, and tremendous energy of address, according to a contemporary, according to his contemporary John Wilson, better known as the essayist Christopher North. But his forthright style and old-fashioned views made him a popular preacher and the Town Council, Kirk Session and heritors of Stirling, who appointed him in the days of patronage, felt he was a man to appeal to the people of the town, and he did. Post-reformation Stirling tended to appoint ministers who belonged on the conservative wing of the church for the next 250 years, and on the whole this seems to have reflected the views of the people.

So the theme of this paper is how the people of Stirling looked on their churches and ministers from the reformation to 1800 and how the post-reformation churches of Stirling together with their ministers interacted with the Town of Stirling, both its institutions and its people as a whole.

Broadly speaking, throughout this period the Royal Burgh of Stirling (a much more significant status than being a 21<sup>st</sup> century city), was controlled by a triangle of institutions, the Town Council, the Guildry of Stirling and the Church. The control of these institutions however lay with a comparatively small number of families and indeed of men. Another two institutions also had significant roles, the Castle, its rulers and garrison, and the Trade Incorporations.

The Town Council was dominated by the Merchant Guildry, 14 members out of 21 after the 1690s, and always chaired by the Dean of the Guildry, <sup>2</sup> the Kirk Session always had number of councillors or magistrates on it, and was also largely made up of Guildry members and, to all intents and purposes, self elected, so in effect the Merchant Guildry ran the town.

However there was one substantial difference; even within its restricted constituency, the Town Council changed from year to year, members of the Kirk Session were ordained for life.

So on occasion, the Kirk session might be at odds with the Council and it was on these occasions that conflict arose between Council and Church. It was particularly prone to happen when the church had called a minister who was pursuing a religious agenda that didn't necessarily fit with the politics of the time. There was also the added complication that usually Stirling had two ministers and on more than one occasion the two ministers were at odds with each other; in fact on a number of occasions the two incumbents represented quite different factions..

It's hard to tell from this distance what proportion of the inhabitants of the burgh formed this elite; probably fewer than 200 of the 5000 or so inhabitants or 8% of the male adult population. A recorded vote in the guildry in the 1790s shows 68 voting.

In 1560, there was only one main church for the people of the burgh, Roman Catholic until August, protestant in a rather non-specific way after that. Other churches and chapels that had existed were for discrete bodies, Chapel Royal for the court, Greyfriars and Blackfriars for their communities. Cambuskenneth Abbey did serve both its monastic community and the people that lived nearby.

The protestant church did not instantly take on the form of government that we associate with it today. Kirk Sessions with input from the laity started very shortly after 1560, but bishops and abbots, monks and priests were all still around for a good number of years, albeit with much reduced influence. Presbyteries took about 20 years to appear. As it happens, the records of Stirling presbytery are the earliest to survive, and from them we can see that by 1581, as well as the ministers, Stirling was represented by four elders, Adam Erskine, the Commendator of Cambuskenneth Abbey, Humphrey Cunningham, Commissary of Stirling, Mr. James Pont, Commissary of Dunblane, and John Laing, Burgess of Stirling. The Clerk to presbytery was James Duncanson, Reader in Stirling. Four of these five had prior church connections; commendators held former church land and in some cases, were often the former abbot or prior, commissaries administered church courts which had been secularised and specifically looked after wills and inheritance, James Duncanson had been a priest and was now a 'Reader' The ordinary people of Stirling were not yet heavily involved.

Looking at the situation with the former religious houses around the town, it can be seen that Cambuskenneth Abbey had 19 priests attached to it

prior to 1560, two of them immediately entered the reformed church, one at Cambuskenneth itself and one at Lecropt, a third became a reader at Polwarth, near Edinburgh.<sup>3</sup> Others simply remained happily in receipt of their stipend and sat tight enjoying a life of leisure while some left. In some cases the abbots and priors effectively became the laird of the monastery's former estate, often they were young byblows of the landed families or of senior churchmen in any case. Often however the opportunity was taken by the government to appropriate the income for the use of local landlords whom it wished to appease or reward. The Erskine family took on Cambuskenneth Abbey, hence Adam Erskine becoming commendator. Meanwhile the Town Council took over such church possessions as they could within the burgh, although the Erskines also managed to gain control of much of the Dominicans' (Black Friars) property.

The priory of the Dominicans disappeared; to be left only as a memory in Friars Street, but there is some evidence to suggest that many Dominican priests became ministers elsewhere in Scotland. Greyfriars also disappeared, although the parish church was later referred to mistakenly as Greyfriars church.

The minister of Stirling itself, appointed by the council in October 1560, was Mr. John Duncanson. He had been a pre-reformation priest, a canon of St. Andrews who saw the reformed light.<sup>4</sup> In the Scottish reformation there was a different attitude to the clergy than in England. In England, prizes largely stayed put and served their parishes from catholic to protestant, back to catholic under Mary and back to protestant under Elizabeth. Their own views hardly seemed to matter and they only lost their living if they stuck their heads above the parapet.<sup>5</sup> In Scotland, contrariwise, there were fewer than 300 reformed ministers to serve 900 parishes in the first instance, so most churches only had 'readers', who were considered laymen and generally did not preach, there's also a

shadowy role called 'exhorters' who exhorted but didn't do much else. <sup>6</sup> James Dalmahoy, priest at Cambuskenneth was described as an exhorter there in 1571, and then as reader. <sup>7</sup> In Stirling the new minister, and we don't know whether he had a prior connection with the town, was called and provided with a manse. <sup>8</sup> And the people? They attacked the images in the Parish Church and Cambuskenneth, pulled down the priories, but otherwise life went on pretty much as it had.

By 14<sup>th</sup> October, however, the Council had decided that Thomas Duncanson, be employed to read the prayers in the town, one each day and twice on Sundays, So Stirling was in the privileged position of having both a minister and a reader. <sup>9</sup> However, the people were more involved. Services were in English, the Bible was read in English, ministers faced the people. Incidentally, Thomas Duncanson was suspended for fornication, not the last Stirling cleric to have that fate. <sup>10</sup>

The ethereal music of plainsong and polyphony disappeared though. Whether the ordinary people of Stirling ever actually heard the compositions of Stirling's greatest composer, Robert Carver, is in doubt, but pre-reformation priests were required to be singers and music was a major part of the service. The reformation brought a major change and it must have seemed almost as revolutionary as hearing the bible in their own tongue; the people were expected to sing psalms. The evidence is that the office of 'reader' so often filled by ex-priests led the singing and the people were expected to join in. They also sang versions of the Lord's Prayer, the Apostle's Creed and the Ten Commandments. Some burghs instituted 'sang-schules', St. Andrews, for example, and psalm books began to appear complete with four part harmony. There was a song school in Stirling by 1620. The work of the reader Sir Thomas Wode in preserving the tunes of the time can be seen through a project currently running in Edinburgh University and shows 16<sup>th</sup> century versions of tunes still in use in Scotland today. <sup>11</sup>

The reaction against music and the restriction to twelve tunes for all psalms came at a later stage.

When it came to the sacraments, the seven of the pre-reformation church dwindled to two, the two which Christ himself experienced, baptism and communion. Infant baptism remained the norm, although within a few decades there were many who held that believers' baptism was more scriptural. Communion was given in both kinds, bread and wine, but far less frequently. Despite Knox's wishes it dwindled to an annual occurrence, sometimes far less frequent even than that, and the 'fencing of the table', restricting participation to those who were both worthy and theologically informed became the rule. When the communion service did take place, it dominated the whole day and it is recorded in the Kirk Session minutes of 1597 that bell rang for church at 2.30 in the morning so that people could attend the first service starting at 4 a.m.<sup>12</sup> At the other end of the life cycle, burial became essentially a civil process; a mere disposal of the body. Both the First Book of Discipline (1560) and the Westminster Directory (1645) warned against any religious element during the funeral, keen to eradicate any trace of Popish practice in Scottish life.

By 1561, the council was selling off the church silver, or some of it, the chalices of Saint James Altar and St. Peter, to pay for road repairs.<sup>13</sup> Selling off the family silver isn't a new phenomenon in politicians. There is no proven pre-reformation church silver in Scotland.<sup>14</sup> Like all the rest of the pre-reformation church's wealth, it was submitted to uses of the new rulers. Landowners, burgh councils, the crown, they all carved up the wealth of the church and little of it was left for the use of the infant protestant church. How then did the church celebrate the sacraments? According to the recusant Ninian Winzet, 'Calvinian precheouris' used table basins and tavern cups in the dispensation of communion. He complained in 1563:

*Quhy hef ze wappit doun al the affixit tabellis of the Lord, be al auncient fatheris afoir our dayis callit altaris, togiddir with font of baptim, and vseis zour tabillis baissinis, and coupis furth of ony prophane taueroun?*<sup>15</sup>

By 1617 an act of parliament though, ordained that all parishes should provide vessels for sacramental purposes.<sup>16</sup>

Late in the 16th century, the established church in Scotland settled on the Presbyterian form of governance and bishops became as welcome as giant hogweed. The English Bible was universally used, the King James Bible/Authorised Version of 1611 having largely superseded Scotland's previously favoured 'Geneva Bible' in general use despite it's being prepared in order to bolster James's view of the monarch/church relationship. 1618 brought the 'Five Articles of Perth' which brought back bishops and started a war.

A time of national turmoil followed; the 1630s and 1640s saw the Glasgow Assembly of 1638, the National Covenant, the Solemn League and Covenant and the Westminster Directory. Possibly most significant, 1647 brought the Westminster Confession which defined Scottish Presbyterianism, set its theology as Calvinist until the 19<sup>th</sup> century and still holds sway for some.

With the death of Charles I in 1649, and the ascendancy of the Commonwealth, a kind of tolerance of all religious views, so long as they were protestant, became general in Scotland and England. The Church of Scotland, as the national church, threatened to go into meltdown; an Edinburgh diarist, John Nicoll wrote; "the names of Protestant and Papist were not now in use, ... in place theairof rais up the name of Covenanteris, Anti-Covenanteris, Croce-Covenanteris, Puritanes, Babarteres, Rounheids, Auld-hornes, New-hornes, Croce-Petitioneris, Brownistes, Separatistes, Malignantis, Sectaries, Royalists, Quakeris, Anabaptistes." <sup>17</sup>

The Cromwellian armies which invaded Scotland had a strongly religious fervour to them, anti-episcopalian, largely independent, they were suspicious of 'organised' religious institutions; many were Baptists or anabaptists, and hostile to infant baptism. They introduced new ideas into Scottish Christianity and the Church of Scotland struggled to maintain a consistent doctrine, although only one of the non-presbyterian varieties currently existing in Scotland actually traces its Scottish origins to that time. That is Quakerism which had a small, but faithful and enduring following. The Quakers didn't have much impact in Stirling but do appear in the town in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

In this porridge of different views, one of Stirling's ministers became prominent, James Guthrie. Guthrie is the only Stirling minister to be judicially executed, so far. Born about 1612, he was in his late 30s when he was inducted to the charge of Stirling in 1649.<sup>18</sup> In succession to Henry Guthrie, later bishop of Dunkeld after the restoration, who had been presented to the living by the king, James Guthrie was opposed to all his predecessor stood for. By the time he came to Stirling, he was known as an upholder of the covenants and the Presbyterian way, and was chosen for various tasks representing the church as a whole in negotiations with King Charles II. Broadly speaking he was the last man you wanted to have in negotiations as he had the knack of creating dispute everywhere. He took the opportunity of excommunicating General John Middleton, the king's main representative in Scotland from the pulpit in Stirling, an action that was to lead to his execution eleven years later, and then he led a schism in the national church between two groups, Resolutioners and Protesters. Under Cromwell, the 'Act of Classes' of 1648 which debarred large groups of men from holding public office was rescinded; 'Resolutioners' accepted this, 'Protestors' did not. As a result, Guthrie was deposed from the ministry by the Assembly in Dundee. There is some doubt as to whether the deposition was ever intimated formally either to Guthrie or to the people of Stirling. In any event he continued in his



pulpit, and he and his fellow Protesters formed a presbytery of their own and generally behaved as though they were the only church in Scotland. This continued for several years and Guthrie represented the Protesters in negotiations with Oliver Cromwell. With his usual lack of judgement, Guthrie supported the covenants in speaking to Cromwell, but also spoke up for the king's right. But for all that he had stood up for the power of the king, when the king returned in 1660 and despite the fact that Guthrie and his fellow Protesters were planning to send an address of congratulation to Charles II, he was arrested as a result of being betrayed by one of Stirling's butchers. One story has him being run out of town by a band of butchers throwing stones. Whatever the truth, he was captured, tried for treason and hanged. <sup>19</sup>

However, how did Guthrie fit into the situation in Stirling? most of the time, he was one of two ministers who looked after the burgh. His first colleague was David Bennet, probably a Resolutioner and very much the junior partner. After he died, in 1654, the session, led by Guthrie, called Robert Rule to be the second minister but against the wishes of the inhabitants of the town. Although Guthrie claimed that he had the approval of a majority of the magistrates and it was only "a dissatisfied party opposing godliness and reformation" that opposed him. In between the call and the induction the elections happened and a new group of magistrates must have come from Guthrie's opponents. Rule was inducted in the church by the Protesting Presbytery. In the ensuing riot, 60 of the leading burgesses of the town were arrested and afterwards sent to trial in Edinburgh, but were absolved. Guthrie was not a popular man with the town council, and his Kirk session were clearly at loggerheads with the Council who refused to meet them to discuss the settlement of Rule. The council itself accused Guthrie of demanding that "they may in all things condescend to him" <sup>20</sup>

Of course even when in opposition to the minister, the burgesses at least were expected to turn out to church; in 1653, 2 were fined by the council

for not being present in the Merchants' loft, and while another two were fined for wearing /not wearing their blue bonnets.

Rule himself remained in Stirling in a rather anomalous position, not receiving his proper stipend. Guthrie himself was one of the plethora of religious figures celebrated with a monument financed by Peter Drummond in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the unveiling, he was hailed as martyr to freedom of the press, freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, and freedom of the church. Reading about him, it is hard not see him as simply thrwn, continually painting himself into corners that he couldn't get out of.

But what then of Stirling's church, with two ministers, one technically deposed, one technically never appointed, what did the Town Council, now disenchanted with Guthrie, do? They decided to appoint a minister of their own, and settled on Matthias Symson, one of a huge family of ecclesiastical Simpsons who filled pulpits all over Scotland from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He had been a Presbyterian minister in England between graduating from Edinburgh University and being called to Stirling by the Town Council.<sup>21</sup> Despite Guthrie's protests, Rule was paid off, although he was actually paid by the council, and Symson took his place. As a result, Stirling acquired two rival congregations worshipping in the same church, each following a minister at odds with his colleague. Just as Rule's induction was followed by a riot of burgesses, so Symson's was disrupted by an invasion of soldiers from the castle demanding a delay until legal authority be provided. However the Governor gave the go ahead and Symson was inducted although the laying on of hands, an integral part of the process, was 'impeded'. The Court of Session, no less, got involved; Guthrie wouldn't give Symson access to the church and so the Courts therefore took the decision to order the Town Council to split the Church into East (Guthrie) and West (Symson) with a great wall down the middle, and thus the situation was resolved in the summer of 1656.

That Symson had the support of the guildry is shown by the records that the Guildry built a loft for themselves in the West church in 1659, so that they could hear Symson. On Guthrie's execution, Symson applied to be translated to the senior charge, with the permission of the town council and so for the remainder of his brief life he was senior minister, dying in 1664 at the age of 39.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century church, seating was personal property, the space rented from the church (with the proceeds going to poor relief) and a loft or desk or pew built at the owner's expense. The Guildry had their own loft, the Trades had theirs, sometimes corporately, sometimes individual trades. Often permission to put in a desk or pew was conditional on its being moved out of the way to allow for the celebration of the Sacrament of Communion. Keeping up standards was important: in 1680, on being told that the trades loft had been refurbished with green cloth with silk facings, the Guildry resolved that the front seat of their loft be done in same manner.

The Church of Scotland, became Episcopalian again until 1690 when Presbyterianism became the preferred mode of governance. In the meantime however, Kirk Sessions and Presbyteries had survived, although with their power somewhat diluted. Unfortunately the Kirk session minutes don't exist between 1677 and 1695, so we don't have details about how the church coped with the transition. We do know that one of the ministers, James Hunter, was accused of getting drunk on the communion wine in 1684.<sup>22</sup> He was deposed in 1689 with the help of a regiment of soldiers, but was still around the town, preaching in St. Ninians and in houses of the gentry for several years, and finally took the Oath of Allegiance to Queen Anne. To the shame of the town, Stirling Town Council was guilty of corruption on a scale unacceptable even in the 1690s, resulting in the Long Act. That changed the sett of the burgh, how

councillors were elected and for how long and laid down all rules about not disposing of the council property for the benefit of the councillors. <sup>23</sup>

Prior to that, the Town Council, felt that it fell to them to appoint the elders to the newly Presbyterian church. The ministers, and more importantly, the Presbytery felt differently. The Council's list consisted of 17 men, Provost, all four Bailies, four former Bailies, Dean of the Guildry, one Laird, three merchants, the Deacon Convener of Trades and two tradesmen. <sup>24</sup> The Kirk Session finally appointed was very different, only one name is common to both lists, and the Town Council complained that two were ineligible, since they lived outside the Burgh, although within the Parish of Stirling, these being two members of the Erskine family resident in the Castle. <sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately the Presbytery records too are lost for the 10 years that cover the Revolution and the re-establishment of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Nor do the earliest histories of the town spend much time on matters that show the Council in a poor light, but of course the printed minutes of the council do give detail.

Councils, though, have a knack of getting back at those who oppose them, in 1696, the minutes record the minister being criticised for letting his cattle graze in the churchyard and even enter the church; in contempt of the authority in this place has most unwarrantably broken up the lockes and doores of the said church and church yaird and still keeps his kyne in the church yaird.<sup>26</sup>

As the dust settled on the Long Act, the session found themselves at odds with the Council over money due to the poor's fund by the Masters of Cowane's Hospital. The Council declared it had been paid back, the Session responded by claiming annual rents over the previous 12 years. The situation was complicated by the fact that various of the masters were also members of the session. What made it urgent was the increase in the

number of the poor requiring assistance at the time. The Session minutes records the following decision:

*From the consideration of the present great scarcity and dearth of meal and victuals the session ordains the weekly pensiones of the poor to be doubled for the effectuating of which they doe impower thair thesaurer to borrow a summ of money and the poors box to pay the annual (@) rent.*

It has to be said though that there is nothing under new under the sun; there were always those prepared to defraud the system. It was reported that;

*one Issobell Paterson whose expressive complaints for necessary subsistance (otherwise according to her she would have starved) prevailed on the session to enroll her among the weekly pensioners, and yet when she dyed their were found in her house salted beef, mutton, and (according to information) money and gold besides other things.*

The Session therefore enacted that:  
*in all tyme coming whoever of the poor doe supplicat for maintenance ere they be inrolled they shall be oblidge to constitute the poor box their heir and to assign at their decease all their goods and geirle and for the use of the surviving poor.*

The minister in 1695 was Robert Rule, the same man who had been appointed briefly to assist James Guthrie 40 years previously. Clearly there was a party locally who looked back to Guthrie with pride, they called back his assistant from 40 years previously

The remnants of the episcopalian ministers were still around, of course. Some remained in their charges, protected by congregations who supported them, the Episcopal minister of Aberfoyle remained in charge for many years, others were 'rabbed' driven out by parishioners who disliked what they stood for. Others survived for a while but were later deposed, One such was Adam Peacock, deposed in 1695 from the parish of Morebattle in the Borders for negligence and neglect of services. In 1703 he turned up in Stirling and opened a small meeting house. Bailie John Allan, one of the established kirk elders and a magistrate, entered during a service and had Peacock imprisoned in the Tolbooth. Peacock was soon released and took the Town Council and magistrates to court for false

imprisonment. He lost his case, and was last heard of being deposed from ministry in Edinburgh for failing to pray for George I.

The right of selecting ministers has always been a matter of controversy in the Church of Scotland. Patronage; the right to present a minister to a charge, was the trigger that precipitated the first Secession in 1733, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Secession in 1760 and the Disruption in 1842. The right was given to congregations in 1690, but in 1712 it was restored to the old patrons, local landowners, the crown, burgh councils, etc. The Church of Scotland protested, but could do nothing. Who appointed Stirling's ministers? The minister of the first charge was appointed by the Town Council, the minister of the 2<sup>nd</sup> charge was appointed by a consortium of Town Council, Kirk Session and heritors. (Heritors were those who held land outside the Burgh but within the Parish of Stirling.)

After his death, the town selected Alexander Hamilton, minister of Airth. Hamilton's claim to fame was that as a student he removed the pitch covered head of James Guthrie from the Netherbow in Edinburgh where it had been displayed for 27 years, to give it decent burial.<sup>27</sup> There is a good deal of doubt as to whether the tale was true, however the fact that it was given currency shows the mindset of the town. Hamilton was an unusual man, probably one of a very few ministers to have financed his divinity course by bare-knuckle boxing<sup>28</sup>

By 1729, Hamilton was old; and his colleague unwilling to take on an extra burden. The town council therefore agreed to appoint a third minister to the Burgh. Hamilton and Moore were to use the East Church, the new man, the West, reopened for worship. The stipend was to come from the 'multure' the fees paid to the town's mills. It seems to have been fixed from the start that Ebenezer Erskine would be invited; there was an unspecified support group for him, and he was very much in the Alexander Hamilton mould. He was already well known, and like Guthrie

a known leader of the 'conservative' wing of the church, one of the so-called marrowmen, a group of evangelical, pro-covenanting ministers.<sup>29</sup> Moor, on the other hand was a moderate and had been placed in Stirling as a sop to the Duke of Argyll and his brother, who effectively ruled Scotland at the time.<sup>30</sup>

The terms 'moderate' and 'evangelical' are frequently used in any discussions about the established church between 1700 and 1850. Used to describe opposing wings within the established church, they actually stand for different points of view at different times, but in general, 'evangelicals' were conservative, more likely to be thirled to traditional Calvinism, the covenants, the Westminster Confession and so on, while the 'Moderates' were more liberal theologically and interested in progress. Later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the moderates were closely involved in the enlightenment and philosophy but accused of being more interested in dry morality than in spirituality, and perhaps more interested keeping on good terms with the wealthy.

So Erskine was the leader of the evangelical party. Erskine's protests when the General Assembly decided to drop their objections to patronage led to his deposition from the charge of Stirling in 1734, however, like Guthrie before him, he held onto his church and stipend because he had the support of the Town Council and people.

Like James Guthrie before him, Erskine could alienate people, friends as well as opponents. A letter exists from the Dean of the Guildry, one of Erskine's own supporters, written to the Provost, the M.P, James Erskine of Grange, complaining: 'Our minister Mr. Erskine and his wife and son-in-law have been going though the town and clamouring that the council have been guilty of perjury. .... Council seems very dissatisfied with Mr. Erskine or any of that family in meddling. .... If you be in company with [Mr. Erskine, we ask] that you advise him not to meddle in any of our

affairs seeing it does not belong to his function”<sup>31</sup> To this Grange gave the answer “Honest men should submit to checks because of knaves who follow them” An answer that should be on every politician’s wall. Not that Grange was entirely blameless in his life style, but that’s another story.<sup>32</sup>

At around the same time, Erskine also alienated John Gillespie, one of the most influential people in the burgh, by suggesting questions might be asked about the circumstances in which his mother had recently drowned. That particular incident led to physical fights between supporters of the two men.<sup>33</sup>

Finally he lost the support of five of his seventeen elders, including John Gillespie, when they insisted that elders should allocate the communion tokens for their districts, and Erskine insisted it was the minister’s job to make sure only the worthy took communion.<sup>34</sup>

At the council election in 1740, it was this group who took over the running of the council and Erskine found his church door barred against him on Hogmanay and the deposition from his charge was put in place. At this point too, the new Secession accepted their role as a separated church

So, by 1740, Stirling had a burgh church split in two, run by the ruling class of the burgh and it also had a large Secession movement with some of the elite, but largely dominated by the trades. As well as these two congregations it had a tiny remnant of the Episcopalians. They didn’t like the new regime after 1688, and although outwith the burgh, people like the Murrays of Murrayshall may have had the responsibility for keeping the parish church, they also kept their own way and so Stirling had a small Episcopalian church down in Torbrex and a priest called Ninian Niving who ministered to their needs. The position of Episcopalians was



precarious; they were banned from gathering in any numbers and had to design their churches with that in mind, but in Stirling they were tolerated to the extent that Episcopalian baptisms are recorded in the baptismal register of the parish church in the 1730s and early 1740s. This was apparently rare in Scotland and perhaps reflects a local toleration, although it also was a small income for the session clerk.

What scuppered the Episcopalians though was the '45 rebellion. All Scottish Episcopalians were by definition suspect of being Jacobites. The church in Torbrex disappears, and the little group is ministered to by a Mr. Skene, who went around the houses of his tiny flock, such as Murrayshall. Gradually they became more visible, and small churches established in Spittal Street and Broad Street.

The congregation was small, around 50, being mixture of landed gentry and about 20 highland servants to whom episcopalianism was more attractive than the alternative. In 1787, George Gleig was appointed to the charge and it prospered under his care, with a new chapel being at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century at the corner of what became Murray Place and Barnton Street.

Another group outwith the established church were the remnants of the covenanters who formed independent 'praying societies' and worshipped largely in farm buildings. These groups existed around Stirling right through the 18<sup>th</sup> century, but their 'institutional' history dates from the last quarter of the century and will be dealt with there.

So how did Stirling accommodate its new Secession congregation; initially it met in the open, in an orchard up what is now Spittal Street. The land belonged to one of the more prosperous members, the merchant and former Bailie John Gibb, it had an attending number in excess of 3000, not all from the Burgh by any means, about half of the people of St

Ninians, but also people from about 28 other parishes from Balfron to Blackford and from Tillicoultry to Crieff. The new 'meeting house' (because it could not legally be called a church) was largely built physically by the congregation, possibly the first in Scotland to be so built. Farmers gave carriage, labourers who were employed worked for very low wages, and colliers from Bannockburn carried off earth in creels or baskets.<sup>35</sup>

Unusually, the Incorporation of Mechanics rented a loft in the church. Possibly the only burgh in Scotland where an incorporation took a loft in a dissenting church.

One snag that the seceders faced was the legal status of the building as the seceders were not 'a Corporation known in Law' so could not hold property; nor was it legally a church, but a meeting-house. What they had to do was get Bailie Gibb to dispose of the property to some of the congregation and their heirs who lived in Stirling, who then drew up a heritable bond in favour of a committee of management as individuals who had a right to appoint others in their place. They also granted a Tack in favour of Tacksmen. The interest on the bond counteracted the tack duty payable and the theory was that it involved so many interests that no-one would bother taking them to law over the title. It actually established a form of government where the secular affairs of the church were looked after by a board of managers and the ecclesiastical affairs by the Kirk Session and 250 years later this became the model constitution of the Church of Scotland.

Because of this we can look at the numbers of baptisms in the various available churches and use that as a guide to the relative strengths of the churches. This shows the relative strength of seceder and established churches in Stirling itself.

	1738	1739	1740	1741	1742	1743	1744	1745	1746	1747	1748	1749	1750	Total
Stirling; Established Church	136	145	76	102	67	67	89	70	64	91	57	57	72	957
Stirling; Seceders		4	32	50	50	66	62	56	46	60	66	62	59	613
St. Ninians Established Church	241	214	223	163	150	172	233	190	203	168	179	173	168	2236
St Ninians Seceders/Burghers		6	34	58	83	91	93	94	84	75	81	76	79	854
St Ninians Anti-burghers												5	6	11
Total		224	289	271	283	329	388	340	333	303	326	316	312	3714

36

But dissenting congregations were gathered congregations, drawing members from far afield. This is still a feature of smaller churches. It has implications for ancestor hunters too, who may have to search records far away from where their forebears actually lived.

	1742
Balfron, Drymen, Killearn	4
Kilmadock, Callander, Lecropt, Muthil, Blackford	13
Dunblane	5
Clackmannan, Alva, Alloa, Tillicoultry	9
Gargunnoch, Port of Menteith, Kippen, Fintry	8
Kincardine	7

Falkirk, Denny, Airth, Kilsyth, Larbert, Dunipace, Muiravonside, Slamannan, Cumbernauld	26
Logie	8
St Ninians	83
Stirling	50

These figures for 1742 show the way that the congregation was spread right over historic Stirlingshire and Clackmannanshire, and extending into Dumbartonshire and Perthshire.

The social composition of the Secession church tended not to include the elite of the burgh, certainly after Erskine's first group of supporting elders leave the scene. It probably also did not include the lowest strata. The threat of losing access to the Kirk's poor relief would have had its effect, although Stirling was well off for secular foundations which looked after the poor.. But the seceders did try to put into place a parallel poor relief scheme. Broadly though, the Secession church relied entirely on its members to fund its building, its minister and its social obligations, which means that the members had to be prepared to contribute more than their established neighbours whose church and stipend were supported by Town Council and heritors. Indeed members of former Secession churches had a much higher rate of giving than members of the Established church throughout Scotland right up until 1900 at least, sometimes by a factor of four or five. <sup>38</sup>

Shortly after this Jacobite Rebellion came along and the town was threatened by the rebels. Erskine led opposition to the Council's plan to surrender and raised a regiment among his congregation although it did not in the event fight. He was the last leader of opposition to the rebels to flee the town, heading for Tullibody. The brand new meeting house was turned into a magazine for the Jacobite army, but was spared the explosive fate of St Ninians Kirk.

If Erskine and his people did not actively fight the Jacobites, their support for the government was recognised; Erskine was officially thanked, and perhaps more importantly it came to be recognised that opposition to the

established church did not imply opposition to the political establishment.<sup>39</sup>

The Jacobite rising had of course another effect on the churches; a rise in the illegitimacy rate, with fatherhood always being laid at the door of a soldier in the castle, or a soldier lately in the castle and now gone away. Sometimes this was true, sometimes it was seen as a way of letting a local lad off the hook. Only one Jacobite was blamed. The girls were all supporting government troops. The larger number of troops in the castle after 1746 also led to a spate of Sabbath-breaking, barbers being asked to shave the hairy soldiery on a Sunday crop up periodically.<sup>40</sup> One more unusual case though was of the seceder who was accused of oath-breaking by the session on the grounds that he had sworn for his own safety not to take up arms against the Jacobites, but afterwards did so.<sup>41</sup>

Although the Seceders had attained some sort of respectability, the triumphant government still wanted to strengthen its hold on the country by imposing an oath in Glasgow Edinburgh and Perth which made aspirant burgesses swear to uphold the church as established. The Seceders split bitterly over this, despite it only being imposed in three towns.<sup>42</sup> The effect in these towns would have been that dissenters could not become burgesses, thus reinforcing the tendency for secession churches to be socially lower than their established counterparts. The result was what became known as the 'the breach' with two churches, Burgher and Anti-burgher each claiming to be the true way. In Stirling Erskine remained with the Burgher faction who accepted the oath, Falkirk Seceders, with Erskine's nephew as minister, went the other way and became Anti-burghers. Some congregations split down the middle, but in fact only a few left Erskine's church and established their own, Anti-Burgher Meeting House. Among the new church's first acts was to set up and order to be kept a record of all baptisms, and incidentally there were no Stirling baptisms before 1751 and only 9 from St Ninians.<sup>43</sup> This

example, also from the antiburgher congregation in Stirling, shows just how bitter the 'Breach' was:

*"Compeared John Henderson in Castlehill and was interogate as being guilty of the sin and scandal of Ante-nuptial fornication and irregular marrying to her who is now his wife the which he acknowledged and compered and likewise that he had dishonoured the Lord by hearing Mr. Erskine after he had put under the sentence of Greater Excommunication"*

44

Having built their churches, and found large numbers of people going to it, the Seceders then gradually lost groups of the members as they established churches in their own communities, so over the years the two congregations tended to become less gathered and smaller.

So over 20 years, one established Presbyterian denomination had three all represented in Stirling. This was not purely a religious phenomenon. Religious movements always have their routes in social and economic contexts as well as in religious ones. As well as the religious dimension, the Secession and represent a pattern of the non-elite looking to establish institutions of their own. With burghs under the control of an oligarchy of guild brothers, the trades incorporations are drawn to an institution where they can be influential. In Edinburgh at around the same time, the trade incorporations which were the preserve of the master craftsmen employing others are joined by a parallel set of institutions of journeymen craftsmen with no likelihood of becoming employers.<sup>45</sup>

Meanwhile other things were happening in the established church, and a wave of revivals came about, largely but not entirely in the wake of George Whitfield's visits to Scotland. The best known of these were at Cambuslang and Kilsyth, but there was also one in St. Ninians. These were disapproved of by the seceders; emotion and spirituality didn't mix for them. Again we can look, to some extent, at the people who were affected, and here we find that the main people to be converted at a

revival tended to be young and ill-educated, probably from a rural or unskilled background. Few of the 18<sup>th</sup> century revivals had a long-lasting effect however.<sup>46</sup>

Having already lost a third of its members to Stirling's Burgher congregation through the 1740s and 50s, St. Ninians church had its own secession in the 1760s, again over the question of who appoints ministers, but instead of joining existing burgher or antiburgher factions, they joined yet another body, the Relief Church. Founded in 1760, the Relief Church was theologically more liberal than any of the other Presbyterian churches, to the extent of opening communion to members of any Christian denomination and of being the first Presbyterian denomination to sing hymns. A similar split at the neighbouring Logie Parish led to a Relief church at Blairlogie, although it muddied the waters by trying to call as minister a deposed anti-burgher minister of fairly old fashioned views.<sup>47</sup>

Having fought against the rights of elites to choose their ministers, the secession churches were very bad at agreeing who to call, with the result that long vacancies happened and sometimes ministers were chosen for them by presbytery. In one of the Stirling vacancies there were three candidates, the vote split three ways, the bottom name dropped out, and the vote retaken. It generally happened though that a split in the voting of 60-40 or 51-49 augured ill for the ministry and at time the secession churches were faction ridden and unhappy places. 'Once a seceder always prone to secede' might be their motto. A split in one of the secession churches in 1776 led a group of seceders to make common cause with local Reformed Presbyterians, form a joint congregation with Linlithgow, and finally split away and build a church of their own. Their first minister was John Macmillan, grandson of the minister who effectively founded the Reformed Presbyterians 80 years previously.<sup>48</sup>

After the accession of William and Mary, several group of covenanters remained outwith the establishment because the King and Queen had not accepted the covenants. These groups called themselves 'praying societies' or 'corresponding societies' They had no minister until 1706, but John MacMillan of Balmaghie joined thm on being deposed from the establishment. Between 1706 and 1742 he was the only minister, travelling the country ministering to his supporters. His baptismal roll survives and shows that he baptised children from families in and around Stirling.<sup>49</sup> When the Secession happened in the 1730s, feelers were put out to these groups to see if they would join a church that was inherently close to their own beliefs, but most declined, although a few did come into Erskine's congregation.

In 1742 the praying societies nationally had the temporary addition of another minister, Thomas Nairn, which allowed them to establish a presbytery as 'The Reformed Presbyterian Church' and ordain new ministers, which was just as well because Nairn was fairly soon deposed and left the church. The new ministers included MacMillan's son, also John MacMillan and in time his grandson, also John Macmillan, was ordained and inducted to the new church in Stirling in 1776.

These praying societies gathered in strength. Largely rural, they had very firm views about the government. Because the King had declined to sign the covenants, they would have no truck with him. Not wishing him any harm, nonetheless they wouldn't join the army, vote, take part in any legal process. In short, they stood outside Scottish society. Indeed one group of praying societies, the Howdenites in the far South West actually declared war on both Jacobites and Hanoverians in 1745, although without doing anything about it.

Long gone, the name of the church is enshrined in the street name 'Cameronian Street'. A tiny church, very plain and cheaply built, it



ministered to a small congregation whose strictness put the even seceders to shame. None of them would be burgesses at all, let alone Guildry brethren, for oath taking of any sort was anathema under an uncovenanted government. Most were country people for whom Stirling was the hub, some walked miles to get there. Like the Seceders before them they had to make special arrangements to protect their property, with an additional problem of being known to refuse going to law. In a curious bit of brotherly support though, much of the money to build the church was lent by the established church minister, possibly as a way of undermining the seceders.

At about the same time too, Quaker records show that the Town Council allowed them the use of a room in the Tolbooth, although Council records don't confirm this. Quakerism was so hated by the authorities throughout the country, that this is almost a unique occurrence of council broadmindedness.

By this stage though, the church's hold on the behaviour of the people was beginning to wane. William Creech wrote a comparison between the Edinburgh of 1763 and the Edinburgh of 1783 which draws attention to the slump in moral standards between those dates. Town councillors became more blatant in their 'jobbery' and Stirling lost its council and its right to vote for an MP as a result of the discovery of the 'black bond' which effectively carved up council benefits among three men. It's an interesting reflection that two were elders of the established church and one an elder in the Secession.<sup>50</sup>

So that was Stirling with four different Presbyterian denominations and a fifth on the doorstep.

But a sixth and then a seventh were on their way. The 'New Light' Controversy hit first the burghers, then the anti-burghers. The term 'New

Light', brought from America implies a realisation that 18<sup>th</sup> century thought could bring new light on Christianity, that the Westminster Confession of 1647 was not the last word on Scottish theology. In Scotland it particularly referred to a change in attitude to the dual governance of church and state in which the state had no responsibility or rights in the church. 'Old Light' or 'Auld Licht', was a back formation and an useful shorthand for those who harked back to the 'good old days' when Calvinism ruled the country.

In Stirling though, the Burgher Church split formally in last years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century when an Old Light Burgher Church formed. They worshipped in a church built for 1600 people in Spittal Square in 1803, at the back of the site that became the old High School, but prior to its building they worshipped in a cotton factory at the foot of Friars Street and were therefore known as the 'cotton kirk'

But in Stirling there was relative calm; in 1792, the minister of the first charge numbered the population thus;

Established church;	2 ministers;	2795 people
Burgher Secession;	2 ministers	1411 people
Anti- Burgher Secession;	1 minister	275 people
Cameronians;	1 minister	120 people
Episcopalians;	2 ministers	89 people
Presbytery of Relief;		74 people
Bereans;		33 people

51

Here then are another couple of denominations appearing: the Relief Church has already mentioned. They worshipped outwith the burgh boundaries, but they were strong enough to have the need for their new 'hymnbook', the first Scottish Presbyterian hymnbook ever to be compiled, reprinted in Stirling in 1804.<sup>52</sup>

The Bereans were never a large body anywhere; founded in Edinburgh in 1773, they moved away from Calvinism and ultimately merged into the

congregational tradition. The Stirling church met in the Allan School in Spittal Street, and occasionally in larger premises across the road.<sup>53</sup>

However in the established church, all was not well with the town's 2<sup>nd</sup> minister, The Rev. Dr. William Innes was having his own private battle. He had been influenced by the Haldane brothers, formerly of Airthrey Castle, and decided that an established national church was not the way forward for faith in Scotland. He resigned his charge, left the town, and finally became a Baptist, and it was the vacancy caused by his departure that Black John Russell was called to fill.<sup>54</sup>

So finally, what is the underlying character of Stirling's church history? It shows a community often riven with strife, but developing its own distinctive identity. It shows institutions riddled with corruption at times but also filled with people who were prepared to take a stand for what they believed in. It shows a community filled with people who are really very similar to the people of today with the same driving forces, good or bad, that still govern life today.

What about Black Russell, newly arrived in Stirling in 1800? What sort of a man did the good people of Stirling call? In Burns' satires he is depicted as a throwback, as a bigot, as a figure of fun. All accounts of him make him out to be stern, old-fashioned and totally committed to his brand of Presbyterianism, but there was another side to him. He deserves credit as one of the leaders of Scotland's contribution to the fight against slavery, speaking out for the rights of black slaves in the West Indies and America round about the time Burns was thinking of going to Jamaica as a slave overseer.<sup>55</sup> I don't know if the people of Stirling in 1800 knew about that aspect of their new minister, but perhaps Stirling should be proud to have called such a preacher.

January 2011

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- <sup>2</sup> *Extracts from the Records of the Royal Burgh of Stirling, 1667-1753* (Glasgow, 1889)
- <sup>3</sup> Haws, Charles H. 'Scottish Religious Orders at the Reformation' *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, Vol. 16, 1969, p207-10
- <sup>4</sup> Scott, Hew, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae, Vol. IV, Synods of Argyll and of Perth and Stirling*. (Edinburgh, Rev. ed, 1923), 317
- <sup>5</sup> Duffy, Eamon, *The Voices of Morebath, Reformation and Rebellion in an English Village*. (London, 2003)
- <sup>6</sup> Kirk, James, *Patterns of Reform* (Edinburgh, 1989) 96-153, suggests about 240 ministers by the end of 1561
- <sup>7</sup> Scott, Hew, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae, Vol. IV, Synods of Argyll and of Perth and Stirling*. (Edinburgh, Rev. ed, 1923), 301
- <sup>8</sup> *Extracts from the Records of the Royal Burgh of Stirling, 1519-1666* (Glasgow, 1887), 75 31/10/1560
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 74 14/10/1560
- <sup>10</sup> Haws, Charles H. *Scottish Parish Clergy at the Reformation, 1540-1574* (Edinburgh, 1972) 224
- <sup>11</sup> <http://www.ed.ac.uk/schools-departments/divinity/research/projects/wode-psalter/historical-background>. (retrieved 1<sup>st</sup> Feb. 2011)
- <sup>12</sup> 08/12/1597 quoted in Thomas Burns, *Old Scottish Communion Plate* (Edinburgh, 1892) 11
- <sup>13</sup> *Extracts from the Records of the Royal Burgh of Stirling, 1519-1666* (Glasgow, 1887), 78 10/04/1561
- <sup>14</sup> Burns, Thomas *Old Scottish Communion Plate* (Edinburgh, 1892 ) 187
- <sup>15</sup> Winzet, Ninian *Certane tractatis for reformatioun of doctryne and maneris in Scotland*,(Edinburgh 1835) 84
- <sup>16</sup> Burns, 196
- <sup>17</sup> quoted in Spurlock, R. Scott, 'Anie Gospell Way; Religious Diversity in Interregnum Scotland, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, Vol. 37, 2007, 89)
- <sup>18</sup> Kilpatrick, John, 'James Guthrie, Minister at Stirling, 1649-1661' *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, Vol 11, 1955 176-189
- <sup>19</sup> Scott, Hew, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae, Vol. IV, Synods of Argyll and of Perth and Stirling*. (Edinburgh, Rev. ed, 1923), 318
- <sup>20</sup> Drysdale, William, *Auld Biggins of Stirling*, (Stirling, 1904) 98-99
- <sup>21</sup> Couper, William J., 'The Levitical family of Symson III' *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* Vol 4. 1932, 247-253
- <sup>22</sup> Scott, Hew, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae, Vol. IV, Synods of Argyll and of Perth and Stirling*. (Edinburgh, Rev. ed, 1923), 324
- <sup>23</sup> *Extracts from the Records of the Royal Burgh of Stirling, 1667-1753* (Glasgow, 1889) 243-4 3/8/1695
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid* 68, 11/11/1693
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 69. 25/1/1694/session minutes
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid* 80, 2/5/1696
- <sup>27</sup> Scott, Hew, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae, Vol. IV, Synods of Argyll and of Perth and Stirling*. (Edinburgh, Rev. ed, 1923), 321
- <sup>28</sup>.Drysdale, William. *Old faces, old places and old stories of Stirling*, (Stirling, 1896) Vol. 1 p.257)
- <sup>29</sup> Scott, Hew, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae, Vol. IV, Synods of Argyll and of Perth and Stirling*. (Edinburgh, Rev. ed, 1923), 328
- <sup>30</sup> Fulton. Henry L., 'The Managed Career of the Reverend Charles Moore of Stirling' *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, Vol 20, 1980, 239
- <sup>31</sup> James Alexander to James Erskine of Grange, 1<sup>st</sup> Sep. 1736 NAS GD124/15/1460/1

- <sup>32</sup> James Erskine of Grange to Baillies and Deacon Convenor of Stirling, 7<sup>th</sup> Sep 1736  
NAS GD124/15/1460/4
- <sup>33</sup> Archibald Campbell to Lord Milton, 26<sup>th</sup> Sep. 1735, Saltoun Papers, NLS Ms.16559/204
- <sup>34</sup> Stirling Parish Church Session Minutes, Stirling Council Archives, CH2/1026/8 23<sup>rd</sup>  
Mar. 1737 and 22<sup>nd</sup> Apr 1737. SCA CH2/1026/8
- <sup>35</sup> Gentleman, Ebenezer. *Memorials of Erskine Church, Stirling*. Uncalendared MS in  
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- <sup>37</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>38</sup> Robert Howie, *The churches and the churchless in Scotland: facts and figures*.  
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- <sup>39</sup> *Extracts from the Records of the Royal Burgh of Stirling, 1667-1753* (Glasgow, 1889)  
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- <sup>40</sup> Stirling Parish Church Session Minutes Stirling Council Archives, CH2/1026/7 25<sup>th</sup>  
Jul. 1744
- <sup>41</sup> Stirling Associate Session Minutes. SCA. CH3/559/1, 25 May 1746 and 2<sup>nd</sup> Jun. 1746
- <sup>42</sup> The Statistical Account of Scotland Vol VIII, (Edinburgh, 1792) 280
- <sup>43</sup> Stirling Anti-burgher Session Minutes. SCA CH3/552/1
- <sup>44</sup> *Ibid*. 30/12/1751
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- <sup>52</sup> *Sacred songs and hymns on various passages of scripture approved by the Synod of  
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- <sup>53</sup> W. B. Cook, *Stirling Antiquary Vol. 1* (Stirling 1893) 9-10
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- <sup>55</sup> Whyte, Iain, *Scotland and the abolition of black slavery, 1756-1838* (Edinburgh, 2006)