

Ecclesiastical Account of Parish

Although Stonehouse's ecclesiastical history can be traced to around the 9th century, the sessional records can only be recorded to the days of [Rev. Archibald Foyer](#) around 1696. Documentation prior to this period may have been lost during the covenanting conflicts, or the early days of the Jacobite uprisings. What remains, provides valuable and enlightening information on the discipline, organisation and educational influence of the church in Stonehouse.

The records depict the strict authority of the church by ensuring parishioners compliance with the teachings and principles of such. The ecclesiastical leaders of the day held considerable influence in civil disputes, whereby the church was able to exact punishments, or fines, on persons for minor offences, or acts against the church. Although there are no records of such punishment being carried out by the parish church in Stonehouse, in some parishes an iron collar was affixed near the door of the kirk to reprimand parishioners, not complying with fines imposed.

Drinking was frowned upon and closely monitored by the congregation. This led to the establishment of local organisations such as the Total Abstinence Society (1858), which publicly rebuked those who dabbled in the demon drink. In more serious crimes, such as incest, the perpetrator had to stand at the Kirk door, bare footed and legged, from the ringing of the second bell to the last, at every church in the presbytery.

Prior to 1752 the minister and his session were predominantly responsible for providing education within the parish. An Act of Parliament in this year ensured that the parish kirk provided a building, until such times as a [school house](#) could be found. This provision also ensured healthy numbers of congregations, that would be the envy of every minister today. Early extracts indicate several schoolmasters appointed by the church including; John Watson (1697), Alexander Cochrane of Avondale (1698), Richard Steil (1701), William Walker (1702), Gavin Hamilton of Vicars (1707), Walter Weir (1718) and Thomas Clark (1722). A school house was procured in 1708, provided by Thomas Cure.

Other indications of the authority of the church include a document in September 1696 stating, *“the session unanimously appoint that no persons within the congregation be married out of the church unless a fourteen pence levy be given to the poor”*. Complying with such principles and in particular the day of the Sabbath was to be strictly adhered to in every respect. In November of the same year a complaint was made with regards to, *“servants wandering up and down among their friends on the Lord’s day, to the dishonour of God and offence of people”*, further intimating *“that both masters and servants be warned against such an evil publicly, with certification of censure to be inflicted upon the disobedient”*.

The power and influence of the church was all too apparent in January 1698, when the parish records stated, *“John Fleming and Robert Wilson being called, acknowledged their playing cards, for which they professed their sorrow. The session rebuked them both. Both of them promised amendment, and Robert Wilson engaged himself to burn the cards when they went home”*.

The church, however, not only provided for the educational and spiritual needs of the parish, but in times of hardship; charity and understanding. In June 1697, *“Thomas Robertson, the kirk treasurer, declared that he had got a sentence against some who had not paid their fines for their fornication, but the session, in regard of their extreme poverty, delayed to exact anything for the time”*. This reflected the generous nature of local dignitaries of the period, for in 1790 Rev. Morehead stated, *“The produce of the year 1782 fell short of what was necessary, for the consumption of the parish. The deficiency was made up, by some of the more wealthy inhabitants, who purchased foreign grain, and sold it without profit”*. He further observed, *“none of the parishioners are allowed to beg, though we are troubled much with beggars from other parishes”*.

Prior to the turn of the 20th century, it was uncommon not to be a member of a kirk. In 1836 Rev. Hugh Dewar wrote, *“The due observance of the Sabbath is likewise a characteristic mark of the inhabitants of Stonehouse. The hallowing of the Sabbath day is here most scrupulously attended to, by all ranks of persons, both in town and parish; except in going to and from church, you will hardly see a person on the street. All public houses are shut on the Sabbath, unless to the traveller for refreshment”*. In Robert Naismith’s publication of ‘Memoir of Rev. James Hamilton’ (1896), Rev. Hamilton around the end of the 18th century is said to have stated, *“In my youth the Sabbath was observed with great respect. Family worship was generally observed. In the whole parish of Stonehouse, containing about 300 families, only three were without the daily worship of God”*. He further stated *“The use of ardent spirits was almost unknown.*

There were not above three tipplers in the whole parish of Stonehouse; and in the five parishes of Stonehouse, Lesmahagow, Avondale, Glassford and Dalsersf, there was only one drunkard amongst the farmers”.

In Scotland today, only 12% of the [population](#) are members of a church, a figure that has halved over the past 50 years and is still declining. In 1891, over 33% of the population of Stonehouse attended a church regularly on the Sabbath. Stonehouse still retains three churches and the chapel hall in Wellbrae, serving the community. These churches still play an integral part in the rural life and affairs of the village, promoting community participation and the welfare of the people of Stonehouse. In writing ‘Wha’s like us?’ I provided a brief history of the churches origins and the influence of Ninian in the parish. The following timelines of the local churches, past and present, provide an easy to understand account of the ministry of the church and important events in the history of the various congregations.