

St.Ninian's Old Parish Church (New Street)

In 1894 the poor condition of the Parish Church resulted in a survey being requested to investigate whether the church could be adapted to accommodate a congregation of 900. John Wilson (112 Bath Street, Glasgow) was commissioned to survey the church and report his findings.

Prior to his investigation concerns had already been expressed regards the suitability and safety of the church. Having served the congregation as the Parish Church for over a century, it was clearly apparent that the building would not sustain the needs of the congregation.

The following extract is the report submitted by John Wilson to the management committee for their consideration and provides a valuable resource, enlightening the reader as to the interior of the former church.

The condition of the Parish Church, Stonehouse

“Plan: The Church is a plain rectangular building of the old square box type, with no architectural pretensions, and is situated near the centre of the town, with streets on all four sites. It is entered from two ends, and at each entrance stairs lead up to the galleries. The pulpit is placed in the centre of one of the long sides, and a very deep gallery surrounds the Church on the other three sides.

Seating: The seating is of a very primitive and uncomfortable form, with upright backs and narrow seat boards, and is much too narrowly spaced throughout. The front seat of the gallery of the only one with reasonable space, being 3 ft 11 in. wide, a few are 3 ft 5 in. wide, but the other average from 3 ft 4 in. to 3 ft 2 in. from back to back. The minimum space allowed in modern churches is 3 ft 8 in. from back to back. It is difficult to accurately compute the number of sittings, as they do not appear to have been planned with any regard to a fixed seating place. Taken upon the basis of 20 inches to each sitter, I reckon the number of sittings at 604 in all, inclusive of Choir; or at 18 inches per sitting, the number would be about 716. If the Church was seated in accordance with modern requirements, at the minimum space of 36 inches by 20 inches to each sitter, the number of sittings would be under 550.

Vestry, etc.: There is no ministry accommodation of any kind attached to the Church, neither Hall, Session House, nor Vestry. Rooms on the other side of the road are used as Vestry and Session House, from which the Minister has to cross the street in going to and returning from the Pulpit.

Heating and Ventilation: Two iron stoves have been at one time in use for heating the Church, but they are worn out and disused, and the fire pipes for them, which are carried through the wall to the outside of the Church, have partly disappeared. There are no appliances or arrangement of any kind for ventilating the building, and the damp and unhealthy atmosphere was very apparent on the day of my visit.

Structure: Structurally I consider the building to be in a very dilapidated, if not dangerous condition. The walls have been erected and repaired in several places and are also off plumb at ends and back. Upon examination of galleries I find that at each end there are plain stairs of movement, the gallery joists having been drawn about 1 1/2 inches from their rests on the walls, and the linings also separated from the walls. The gallery facing pulpit has also moved from the wall, though to a lesser degree. On lifting a portion of the floor the ends of some of the beams and joists were found to be rotten, to what extent this prevails could not be ascertained without further opening up of the gallery floor. From what I saw, however, I consider that the galleries would be very dangerous with a crowded congregation.

Stairs: The stairs from the gallery on each side I consider to be highly dangerous in their construction having long and narrow straight flights of steps, with insufficient egress at the foot, and would, in event of any panic or rush, were veritable death-traps.

Roof: The roof has been from the first of light and insufficient construction. The main couples, of which there are only three completely framed, are too light in scantiling and of improper form for the span they have to cover, though they appear to be still in good condition and of fairly sound and good material. The end couples are not fully framed, and have sunk considerably, cracking the ceiling underneath. The rafters and ceiling joists seem to have been composed of indifferent material and are of varied and random sizes, and in many places are badly rotted away, and at the eastern end and the roof has sunk considerably. There is also leakage in several places, but this would I think, be capable of repair.

General: As a result of my examinations, I am clearly of opinion that the building is quite unsuitable for the requirements of a Parish Church in almost every respect. Apart from the uncomfortable nature of the pews, the space is too small, and to reseat the Church, even at the minimum seating allowance, would still further reduce the accommodation. There is also the need of Hall, Vestry, Session House, as well as the essentials of Heating and Ventilation, all required to properly carry on the work of the Church. Unfortunately the situation of the building surrounded by streets, and with no available spare ground, precludes the idea of extension or enlargement and even if this were not so the condition of the structure would make rebuilding the only alternative.

The question of cost of enlargement to seat 900 persons which has been put, I have not gone into, as I have already pointed out that there is no place for extension. The only possible way of enlargement to that size would be by two tiers of galleries, which would mean practically a new building, and even for that plan the site is too limited. On the whole, I am unable to advise any scheme of alteration or rebuilding as either advisable or practicable, and am of opinion that the requirements can only be met by the erection of a new Church upon another site. I am, gentlemen, your obedient servant, John Wilson.”

After a great deal of debate and disagreement over the future of the Parish Church, it was decided to establish a fund to raise the necessary finance to construct a new Parish Church and identify land for its erection. Much has already been written within previous publications on the history of this church, but only through the uncovering of this survey have I been able to reconstruct the interior of this historical piece of architecture.

St.Ninian's Pewter

Pewter was once common place but now turns up in many antique shops, with the finest specimens fetching large sums. Most Scottish pewter, however, has emigrated. Scottish pewter was generally of better than average quality in the workmanship and metal, but comparatively scarce. Dented, worn or leaky pieces were valuable as scrap and were melted down to make new as the country did not have plentiful supplies of tin, one of the main ingredients in pewter.

The most famous and highly prized Scottish pewter items are tappit hens; vessels of elegant design. Most tappit hens hold one Scottish pint, which was the equivalent of three Imperial pints. The earliest known to have survived dates from about 1669 but most date from between 1750 and 1850. Scottish pewter plates may be unrecognised, masquerading as English because they lack the marks that should distinguish them. Many Congregations used pewter communion cups, wine flagons, bread plates and offering plates with the name of the church sometimes engraved on them. Church pewter has survived in greater quantity than household pewter due to its limited and careful use.

Pewter tarnishes with time and with exposure to air becomes scaly. Its surface may become blemished with pock marks and small bubbling eruptions which can never be cured. Newly made and highly polished pewter looks like silver, especially at a distance with indoor light. This was one reason why people bought it. Sometimes the makers helped along the deception by putting on their products marks which looked like the hallmarks on silver ware.

Pewter declined as better materials were devised. Iron with a coating of tin, called white iron, was a strong competitor from about 1725. A better imitation of silver was invented in the 1740's - Sheffield plate, which is copper between two thin sheets of silver. Tea ousted beer as the people's everyday drink from the beginning of the nineteenth century onwards; and tea does not taste right in pewter. Pottery and porcelain became comparatively cheap in the second half of the 18th century and hit the pewter traders badly.

Within an old chest at St.Ninian's Church were found two pewter communion plates, three pewter flagons and several hundred communion coins. The largest flagon was made by partners Robert Graham and James Wardrope from Glasgow around the year 1790 only seven years after the end of the American wars of Independence. Both Robert and James were obviously in favour of American freedom as their makers mark shows a sailing ship with the words "SUCCESS TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA" inscribed around the ship. Another of the pewter flagons was made by J.Wylie of Glasgow around the year 1840. Both these vessels are prized 'tappit hens'. The third flagon is highly ornamented with the makers mark PA & S inscribed, but nothing is known of its origins.

The two pewter plates are some eighteen inches in diameter, one of which has the words 'STAN HOWSE KERK', with Stonehouse inscribed clearly in two separate words. Further round the rim IM is inscribed above the letters AD. Initially it was believed that this represented a date (999AD) but after the plates were analysed by Kelvingrove Museum it was thought that this marking was either a makers mark or a ministers initials. Pewter was not in use in Scotland as early as our first assumptions, though the Romans were known to use pewter earlier than this but to a far greater standard of material and quality of craftsmanship. I initially disregarded the idea that the mark was a minister's initials as there were no ministers with the initials IM as far back as 1560. After researching the pewter flagons, which I was able to date fairly accurately, I found no mention of the makers mark in connection with the plates. What I did find however was that a 'J' shown on a makers mark in the 18th century and earlier was shown as an 'I'. Just as Indiana Jones tried to cross the stone tablet causeway in 'The Last Crusade' trying to step on the tablets to spell Jehovah, I was faced with the same problem. Like him, I tried to spell it as it sounded with a 'J', but to no avail. With the new information I again traced previous ministers to find 'James Muirhead' who was ordained on "25th Sept. Anno Domini 1760". This date not only coincided with the flagons, but also with the communion coins dating to 1767, all of which were found in the chest. [James Muirhead](#) ministered in the old kirk and may have been the first minister in the parish church built in New Street in 1771-2. The plates are almost certainly communion plates but through time have decayed considerably. Unfortunately pewter is difficult to preserve and nearly impossible to repair; such is the condition of the Stonehouse plates.

Communion Tokens

Churches in Scotland used to issue worthy and godly folk with tokens to allow them to take communion. These communion tokens are inexpensive to collect and give an insight into long-dead customs.

Tokens are small discs, up to one and a half inches across and generally made of lead, though some were made of brass, tin, copper, iron and even leather. They are square, oblong, round, triangular, or in various other shapes. Each coin had to be unmistakably designed or imprinted for a particular parish or congregation to prevent imposters from getting to the communion table. Tokens thus, had the initial letters of the parish, or its full name, or the minister's initials or a picture of the church inscribed.

Communion was usually held once a year, but in some places only once in seven or nine years during the end of the seventeenth century until about 1750. The people and the churches wanted to be sure they were ready for the sacrament. Tokens got worn out or lost, or if they had the minister's name, became obsolete when a minister moved. They were treated with almost superstitious reverence because of their connection with the sacrament. Old tokens were occasionally buried beneath the pulpit; or melted to make new.

The makers were local blacksmiths, plumbers or pewterers. Punches or dyes were used to imprint the design; or molten metal was poured into stone moulds; or a copper coin was hammered out and the metal was crudely engraved by hand. Sadly, this tradition died out towards the end of the Victorian period when printed cards came into use.

Stonehouse was no exception in producing communion tokens. The earliest recorded token is from the year 1736 when John Scott was the parish minister. The next coin is very similar in design from the year 1767 when James Muirhead ministered until 1780. The coins of 1824 and 1835 date to a time when the coins were slowly going out of circulation. From 1821 to 1829 David Wilkie was ministering in Stonehouse as was Hugh Dewar from 1820 until 1860. The United Secession Church which is inscribed on the 1835 communion coin, later joined the Church of Scotland in 1956.