

The Covenanters

During the reign of James VI the church was becoming increasingly under the influence and control of the sovereign. When he ascended the English throne he tried to introduce a system of governing the church by bishops. This caused a great mistrust of the government which continued under the reign of Charles I who condemned private prayer meetings and conventicles in Scotland. A deep discontent festered in the hearts of Scotsmen, true to the religious teachings of the Scottish church. They refused to be pressurised by the government and rebelled.

A large gathering of prominent clergy and Scotsmen assembled in Edinburgh to vindicate the cause of liberty and religion. All classes were represented, and in the Spring of 1638 at Greyfriars they subscribed in supporting the National Covenant, with almost the entire nation following in demonstrating on behalf of civil rights and religious freedom. This document circulated throughout every parish and was subscribed to with enthusiasm. A few years afterwards the differences were settled between the Scottish Parliament and the English Commissioners and Charles I paid the penalty for this and other injustices, with the loss of his head.

During the protectorate of Cromwell the country enjoyed a great deal of spiritual freedom, legitimising Protestantism. This freedom was short lived when Charles II came to the throne to restore religious discontent to Scotland. He strove to bring the Church under his control and was more oppressive than his predecessors. Hundreds of followers of the Covenant were sent to the gallows as Scotland was subjected to his tyranny, as were many ministers. All those who refused to submit to the will of Charles were either imprisoned or evicted from their parishes. Nearly four hundred ministers did not and thus began the bloody inquisition of Scotland. Ten thousand troops were let loose upon the country to execute and kill, without mercy, every armed Covenanter.

'Bloody' Graham of Claverhouse led the onslaught, but suffered defeat at the Battle of Drumclog in 1679. It is thought that Graham of Clavers (Bonnie Dundee) may have used Patrickholm House as his headquarters during the persecution of the Covenanters locally, for its occupants the Hamiltons of Raploch, were at that time fiercely opposed to the Covenanters. The proprietor of Patrickholm, William Hamilton, was extremely unpopular for his severity towards the Covenanters. Surprisingly, his two sisters were both married to prominent Covenanters. It must be remembered, however, that not everyone supported the Covenanters and their cause, especially in the Highlands. Although many regarded Graham of Clavers' as a villain, during the struggle for religious freedom, he was the toast of many during the early years of the Jacobite risings. He was killed at Killiecrankie in 1689 despite winning the battle.

John Morton was the only Covenanter lost on the field of battle at Drumclog. Five others died afterwards from their wounds, including James Thomson from Stonehouse. Gravestones mark the spots in the different churchyards where their remains rest. In June 1880, on the 201st anniversary of the Battle of Drumclog, around 2000 people gathered for a service in St. Ninian's churchyard, to commemorate the event.

On an old map of the parish, crossed swords are found at Sodom Hill indicating a battle site. The battle may have been a skirmish between the Covenanters and 'Clavers'. The only other record found of this battle taking place is from Robert K. Chalmers song 'In praise of the Avon', in the lines:

*Sodom Hill and Drumclog Field
Where weavers fought and wadna yield;
Where Scotland's richts were firmly seal'd
Beside the winding Avon*

It was the Battle of Bothwell Bridge only three weeks later, that sealed the fate of the Covenanters. Persecuted and hunted for their faith their monuments stand as a silent reminder of their oppression.

James Thomson

James Thomson was a farmer from Tanhill on the West side of Lesmahagow Parish, bordering Stonehouse Parish from which his family is said to have departed around 1780; having been tenants there for near 350 years. Little is known of this martyr, except that he died from wounds inflicted at the Battle of Drumclog in 1679. He was later interred in St. Ninian's churchyard where his tomb reads:

*Here lays or near this Ja Thomson
Who was shot in a Rencounter at
Drumclog, June 1st 1679
By Bloody Graham of Clavers House
for his adherence to the
Word of God and Scotland's
Covenanted Work of Reformation - Rev xii 11*

On the other side:

*This hero brave who doth lye here
In truth's defence did he appear,
And to Christ's cause he firmly stood
Until he seal'd it with his blood.
With Sword in hand upon the field
He lost his life, yet did not yield.
His days did End in Great Renown,
And he obtained the Martyrs Crown.*

The original headstone was erected in 1734 some years after his death, probably because to erect such a stone at the time, would in itself been seen as treasonous. His descendants renewed his headstone with a tablestone in 1832. Both monuments are still to be seen today. In 1955 the original stone was repaired due to damage caused by the elements of nature. James Thomson's wife along with his only son John, who was also a farmer, were captured and imprisoned at Blackness Castle, four miles from South Queensferry. Their fate is unknown.

The family of the martyr was in earlier times located in a place called Cunningair or Collingair in the parish of Stonehouse, opposite Dovesdale. It was from here that James Thomson's family was to travel to the lands at Tanhill. His descendents have been numerous, many of them have been ruling elders in the Church of Scotland. Many inhabitants of the village today can trace their origins from this family line. His gravestone in St.Ninian's churchyard stands as a solitary reminder of part of the village's historical past, a man who stood for a valiant cause in which so many sacrificed their lives.

Margaret Law

Margaret Law was the maiden name for the wife of John Nisbet of Hardhill. She came from the parish of Loudon near Drumclog, and was to prove herself a true heroine of the Covenant defending her husband's beliefs to the last.

John Nisbet and his wife lived quietly and happily together until the year 1661. It was then that John Nisbet made his stance clear after the burning of the Covenant. After its renewal in 1666, John Nisbet was threatened with his life, and thus was forced to keep himself armed and vigilant at all times. At the Battle of Pentland he received seventeen wounds, was stripped naked and left for dead on the field, but was able to gather enough strength to make his escape. He took a year to recover from his wounds before playing his part in the triumphant victory at Drumclog. This success was short lived, for on the morning of June 21st 1679 the Covenanters were to be defeated at the Battle of Bothwell Bridge.

John Nisbet led a troop of Covenanters on that day but despite the bravery of these men the day was disastrous and they found themselves being hounded and hunted to their deaths. A reward of 3000 merks was offered for the capture of Nisbet with punishment dealt out to those who sought to protect and shelter him.

Constantly on the run and suffering great hardships Margaret Law was resilient throughout, keeping the family together, whilst comforting and encouraging her husband during his support to the cause of free their religious beliefs. It was during this time in hiding Margaret brought her family to Stonehouse near to the lands of Hazeldean. She is said to have dwelt in a cot house, where due to starvation, ill health and persecution she died at the beginning of December 1683. John Nisbet returned from hiding to find both his wife and daughter dead from ill health. Grief stricken he carried his daughter all the way to Stonehouse churchyard and buried her beside her mother. The minister at the time, possibly John Oliphant, refused to allow the burial of his family in the cemetery, but after being threatened by a mob in support of John Nisbet the minister was forced to let the burial go ahead.

John Nisbet was later captured while at a prayer meeting in Fenwick, taken to Edinburgh, tried, condemned, and executed at the Grassmarket on December 4th 1685.

James Hamilton of Kittiemuir

One of the earliest defenders of the Covenant was James Hamilton of Kittiemuir. He was captured at the Battle of Pentland, with those inscribed on the Hamilton churchyard monument. Along with ten others, they were executed on the same platform in Edinburgh, on December 7th 1666. Their heads and right arms were struck off, and displayed throughout the country as a warning to those of similar sympathies. James Hamilton's head now rest in Cadzow Street graveyard in Hamilton along with Gavin Hamilton, John Parker and Christopher Strang. James Hamilton is said to have been a prominent yeoman (a gentleman serving in a Royal or noble household); for public records state he was said to have been mounted and armed with a sword and pistols. He, along with Gavin Hamilton of Mauldsie Mains (possibly his brother), who suffered with him, were members of Maclellan of Bascope's troops, and appear to have joined the rebels when the Covenant was sworn. In J.H. Thomson's, "The Martyr Graves of Scotland" James Hamilton is said to have been a tenant at Killiemuir, but this is inaccurate, probably caused by the researcher not noting the t's being crossed thus "Killie" instead of "Kittie". This theory can be backed up by Robert Naismith's book 'Stonehouse Historical and Traditional' and parochial records.

John Boyd

John Boyd lived in the parish of Stonehouse and died at Craigbank in the parish of Dalserf, February 2nd 1718. John Boyd seems to have been well versed in the scriptures and well able to defend the beliefs of the Covenant. Due to his convictions, he, along with his family, were forced to flee their home to Ireland, where he was to bury six of his children and his wife before returning with his only son. He suffered great hardship during the persecution of the Covenanters but was able to elude capture until his death in Dalserf. In researching the 1696 parochial record Boyds are to be found at Burnfoot but it is not possible to ascertain if this is a direct line or not.

James Robertson of Hazeldean

James Robertson was a travelling merchant who is said to have lived in the area of Hazeldean. Details of his life are scarce but what is clear is his strong adherence to his faith and the principles of the Covenant. He was well educated and possessed considerable literary talents. In 1680 he is reported to have affixed a paper in defence of the Covenant to the door of the old parish kirk, so well written and with such passion and conviction, that he was soon to make many enemies.

In Kilmarnock, October 1682, he went to see a prisoner of his acquaintance, John Finlay, when without provocation, he was seized and held captive for ten or twelve days. While in prison he was interrogated, mistreated, then taken to Edinburgh and further examined by the Committee of Public Affairs. Despite his strong religious beliefs and well versed testimony he could not say enough to save himself from the charge of treason. He was executed, along with William Cochrane and John Finlay, from Kilmarnock, on December 15th 1682 in the GrassMarket, Edinburgh. When he attempted to speak upon the scaffold the drums beat, and drowned his words; and when he complained, the town major beat him.

Others to have been persecuted

After the Battle of Bothwell Bridge the Covenanters were persecuted and hounded to their deaths. Many who supported the government became informers and were rewarded for their information. Sympathisers and friends of the Covenanters suffered at the hands of the government troops. Some were imprisoned and others evicted from their homes, many to perish in the cold winters of the countryside. Robert Findlay, from this parish, along with a number of others from the villages of Glassford and Avondale, were murdered in cold blood on the road near Hamilton by the King's soldiers after the Battle of Bothwell Bridge. They were on their way to hear a sermon in the camp when they were murdered. The following is a list of persons cited in the Parish of Stonehouse in May of 1683, as being Covenanters or connected with them:

James Stobo in Kittiemuir (Several Stobo(we)'s were present at Kittiemuir in the 1696 parochial records); John Hamilton in Milneholm; John Gillies; Thomas Weir in Crumhaugh (in 1696 this family can be traced to Laigh Crumhaugh); John Hamilton in Brigholm (family still present here in 1696); James Reid in Tweedie-mylne; James Wilson in Sandford; Archibald Fleming; James Miller, Boig; (this family can be traced to the area until 1841); Hans Miller in Dykehead (present in 1696 records); Thomas and James Scott in Hisledane (several Scot(t)'s can be traced within 1696 records); Thomas Miller in Stainhous; Thomas Hamilton; John Hamilton in Lenloch; James Hamilton; James Kinnock (beddell the Clerk to the session waiting); James Mutter in Stanehouse and Gavin Wood of Corslett (family can be traced to 1696 records).

In the fugitive roll for 1679 two names appear as belonging to Stonehouse: Alexander Hamilton of Langrigg (Alexanders family can be traced to both the 1696 and 1841 census), and Thomas Doicks in the village of Stonehouse.

On 26th June 1679, William Richardson of Stonehouse and others were charged with treason for joining the rebels the previous year. They appear to have been held in the Tolbooth, Edinburgh, but no record has been found of Richardson's execution.

On December 19th 1683, John Douglas of Stonehouse, along with others, was held prisoner in Edinburgh. The name of John Walker of Stonehouse appears in a fugitive list on May 5th 1684.

On 26th July 1685, John Hamilton of Millholm, was imprisoned in Dunottar Castle, but after taking an oath of allegiance, was liberated under a bond of 5000 merks (family is still present here in 1696).

In the month of January 1686, a party of soldiers searching the country for Covenanters, came to Stonehouse and carried away eight men and two women prisoners for allegedly listening to an outlawed minister.