Kiltearn Old Kirk

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Kiltearn Old Kirk (MHG8130) sits as a roofless shell near the shore of the Cromarty Firth, with only the late 19th century manse, manse steading, now converted to housing (MHG16729) and remains of the manse barn (MHG16170) nearby. The Evanton Community Trust wanted to find out more, to highlight locally the importance of the church, and to start a discussion on the kirk’s future. In 2017 a multi-strand project was launched, where around 50 participants shared memories; explored old documents and maps in libraries, archives and online; recorded inscriptions and photographed all gravestones in the old kirkyard; undertook a full photographic record of the kirk and did a standing building survey of the east wall; and learned how to do family history searches which allowed names thrown up in research and gravestone recording to be investigated. The group then produced a display and text for a signboard.

The historical research revealed far more information than expected. From archives and other published sources participants were able to build up a picture of the church and vicinity, summarised in a document made available online (‘Kiltearn Old Kirk Timeline’). Although the church is now isolated, charters from the 16th century and later show in the 1500s and 1600s the church was part of a thriving hamlet, with ale house, mill and crofts. Mapwork suggested that by the mid 1700s the settlement had shifted inland.

The kirk session records supplied a wealth of unexpected detail. While primarily concerned with moral issues, information about church and manse buildings including the need to gather materials for thatching (and the financial levies for this), and the building of church lofts was recorded. A communion table and bowl were commissioned in 1699, and repairs to tables noted in 1728 along with linen cloth for the table. A bell existed by 1700, and a sandglass to mark time was needed but could not be found in Inverness. Jougs, iron rings for punishment, were attached to the kirk door by 1708. In the 1830s a preaching tent for the Gaelic service during communions was purchased.

Disputes in the late 17th century and then again in the 1840s can be traced from documents. The minister Thomas Hog was imprisoned for holding illegal services and later fled to the Netherlands. Issues on choosing ministers are revealed in depth from the documents, and in 1843 the entire congregation walked out and transferred to the Free church.

A full photographic survey of the kirk was produced, clearly showing different phases of building. Although outwardly a classic T-plan Post-Reformation building, remains of Medieval windows and buttressing can still be seen in the east wall. These could have been hidden if desired, so must have been a deliberate decision to show the earlier Catholic church. The current church dates to 1790, but a blocked window and differences in corner quoins show that the current structure is a reworking of an earlier T-plan church.

All the inscriptions of gravestones in the old kirkyard were recorded, ranging in date from 1670 to 2014, with over 50 dating before 1800. Many were extremely worn and indecipherable. One Medieval slab had been reused, preserving Medieval decoration only on its side, with the main face chiselled away for a new memorial. However, Hugh Miller’s description of a visit in the early 1800s suggests there were medieval tombstones with swords.

A database of stones and names was produced, and a listing sorted by surnames extracted, made publicly available online and on paper. This has already been used by people tracing family history, including visitors to the kirk while recording work was ongoing.

The historical research uncovered a range of new information, including previously unknown ministers. The kirk session records in particular were full of extra details. An interesting notice in 1700 reminded the session against burying in the church in 1700, a practice which should not have occurred after 1581. A number of entries refer to mortcloths, used to cover the coffin, especially the difficulties in collecting the dues. In 1706 a mortcloth was ordered from Holland, and when one, perhaps the one from Holland, is mentioned in 1708 it was said to have cost £16 sterling. In 1711 Far. Munro was instructed to brush it and expose it to the air, for which he received 5 merks Scots yearly. In 1698 a local man was paid £4 to make a communal coffin, used and re-used for parishioners unable to pay for their own.

The project is a good example of the wealth of information which can be gathered to shed light on a Highland church, and the advantages of a project with multiple foci, attracting different people. The project clearly managed to engage locals in the history of the building, though the issue of the future of the building remains uncertain with the costs to even regularly inspect and conserve the present building beyond local funds. The work also produced possibilities for more organised family history research.

Further Information:

The intent of the project was to make information widely available on line and on paper. The Cornerstone Café in Evanton has (as of October 2020) the full paper archive and the digital files listed below. Binders of information were deposited at the Cornerstone Café, the local libraries and primary school.

Historical Research: Timeline available from the ARCH website, in the Kiltearn Old Kirk folder within the ARCH Projects Reports folder, with links from the Evanton Community Trust project page (www.ect.scot).

Standing building survey: pictures submitted to the Highland HER. A plan was also produced and elevations of the east walls of the church. A copy of the report is available on the ARCH website, again with links from the Evanton Community Trust website.

Gravestone recording information: Archive at Cornerstone Café. Spreadsheet of names on ARCH and Evanton Community Trust websites. Database of names searchable on the Evanton Community Trust website. The results were also published by the Highland Family History Society.