

## Rothiemurchus and Aviemore.

### Rothiemurchus - The Early Church

The Rev. Donald MacDougall was the Established Church minister from May, 1874 till July, 1917 when he retired back to his native Pitlochry. He was an antiquary and during his ministry in the late 1800s he completed a history of the area which he entitled "*The Strathspey Highlands*".

This article quotes extensively from this work and the diligent work and hand of local historian Walter Dempster.

It must be remembered that until the railway came to the Strath in 1863, Aviemore had the "Inn"; shamefully demolished in 1969 to enable road-widening to take place, with some half-dozen houses and virtually nothing else. The main community was in Rothiemurchus, about a mile east of Aviemore and that was where the church began.

You may be familiar with the old churchyard at the Doune, Rothiemurchus and it was there in the hallowed ground close to the present church that the "cell" or humble home of the first evangelist to the area was constructed.

The original church was dedicated to St. Turchaldus which was known locally as "Taldi's Kirk". St Turchaldus was the ninth Bishop of St. Andrews in around the year 1065 and at that time there was a College of Culdee's (Monks) in St. Andrews at that time; this may be our man. It may even be that he was made a bishop thanks to his good works in Rothiemurchus.

The first mention of St Turchaldus and the church of Rothiemurchus was in 1229, in the Register of the Bishops of Moray. It would, however, be safe to say that the wandering Culdee missionary (Travelling Monk) was in Rothiemurchus long before that date. Donald MacDougall talks of Taldi, working the local land and even building a watermill to grind grain. He said some two hundred yards of this lade (water course) was still evident when he was writing. Taldi had also established a "Feile" or Fair which was held on the brae above the "cell". Eventually the Fair was moved to other locations within Rothiemurchus and it was still being held till the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

There was a further evidence of the antiquity of the churchyard in the grave of Shaw Mor, who died in 1405. He had taken part in the clan battle on the North Inch of Perth in 1396 when thirty men of the clans fought to the death before a crowd which included the King. On Shaw Mor's grave are five stones like kebbucks or wheels of cheese; although in some early books only four are mentioned. To move these stones will, according to local legend, bring tragedy to the perpetrator. The two gravestones are not far from Shaw Mor's grave bear testimony to this.

There is a story about two footmen by the names of Latham and Scroggie who were said to have removed one or more of the stones - they both drowned in the River Spey! My own

grandfather moved the stones to photograph the inscription underneath the stones and shortly afterwards slipped on a slide the pupils had made in the school playground.

He suffered injuries which left him with a permanent limp. The stones are now covered with a metal grille.

Until 1625 the Church at Rothiemurchus had been quite separate but in that year it was linked with Duthil. The minister lived in Duthil but came to preach every third Sunday if the weather allowed or the River Spey was not in flood. This linkage continued into the nineteenth century.

The book, "The Memoirs of a Highland Lady" Elizabeth Grant in 1812 talks of the dilapidated condition of the church. The door and windows were badly fitted, plaster was falling from the ceiling and the graveyard was covered in nettles. There were two services, one in English and one in Gaelic and at that time the attendance was very poor.

In 1824 the parish of Rothiemurchus and Duthil divided and by 1835, Rothiemurchus had its own minister. There were in the district at that time some 560 people of whom only two were not Church attendants.

Because of the state of the building in 1829, John Peter Grant of Rothiemurchus offered to rebuild the church if the Government built a manse and paid the minister's stipend. The church was rebuilt in 1830 at a cost of £395 with the completion certificate for the manse being dated July, 1830. It was built to a Telford design and stands off the road to Loch an Eileen, near the Pottery. Thomas Telford may well have also been involved in the plans for the Church.

The first minister was the Rev. Charles Grant, who was inducted in September, 1830. Soon after, though, he had problems.

In 1831 a report on churches in the Highlands and Islands, showed that the congregation of Rothiemurchus stood at, 291, who were over the age of 10 and were able to read of sorts and a further 134 who were, illiterate. The settlement of Rothiemurchus had a suggested population at that time of just under 600 of whom many were probably itinerant wood workers. Rothiemurchus and Glenmore have always been a valuable source of timber, much of which was floated down the Spey. The natural forest cover would have been much greater at that time although much had been felled during the Napoleonic Wars especially in Glenmore

In a questionnaire for the Presbytery of Abernethy in 1835 the number of local Church communicants was between 150 and 200 of whom some 50 were parishioners. A total of 20 seats were allocated within the church to the Duke and Duchess of Bedford, who rented Doune House for some time.

The daughter of Duchess Jean is buried at Kinrara. A further 8 seats were allocated to the minister and 8 to the elders. The emolument was £120 sterling granted by Act of Parliament.

It should be noted that there was a chapel at Achnahatnich and there may also have been one between Drumintoul and Guislich.

In 1842, in the Statistical Account, which still carries on to this day, written by the Rev Grant stated that the Church rebuilt by Sir John Peter Grant for £395 was in a state of good repair. The manse however, built by the Government at a scandalously enormous expense of £750 was not. It had, he said, "been very carelessly constructed and required attention and an occasional outlay of money by the minister to keep it in proper condition". He went on to say that "the garden wall was a hideous object, built in such a slovenly manner that portions of it were continually toppling to the ground".

In the graveyard there is a fairly simple mortsafe (iron coffin), proving that no burial ground however remote was considered safe from the "Resurrectionists or Body-Snatchers". It is now inside the remains of the church at the west end.

However the religious way of life of the Highlands and Islands was shattered in 1843 with the Disruption. A situation had been smouldering for some time but came to a head in that year when the decision to leave the established Church was taken by many within its ranks. Their main objection was what they saw state interference and rights granted to wealthy landowners to appoint a minister often in direct opposition to the wishes of the congregation so many decided the only solution was to break away from the established Church and form their own Church - the "Free Church". To them "Free" meant "free of patronage and interference by the heritor's, the local landowners".

I have not found any suggestion that the minister in Rothiemurchus joined their ranks but certainly in the years following a Free Church was constructed some quarter of a mile from Coylumbridge Hotel on the path leading over towards Lochan More.

Local legends talk of an outdoor preaching area opposite the entrance to the Sled Dog Centre on the road to Glenmore. Certainly the bank of an old bend in the River Luineag, facing Glenmore would have made excellent seating.

There were two entries from the Baptist Home Missionary Society Reports, by William Hutcheson, who was based in Kingussie. He describes the area as having been barren spiritually but now, around 1830, more and more are seeking the way to Zion. He had twelve preaching stations and there was a great desire everywhere to hear the Gospel. However, in 1840 he writes, "June. I frequently go to preach at Rothiemurchus Well. There is not a more important station in our northern districts. Hundreds come to the well on the Lord's day, and multitudes through the week." The Rothiemurchus (Mineral) Well is across the Luineag River opposite Moormore.

Many people came from Braemar and further afield to drink the waters there. You knew you were close to it by the strong smell of sulphur.

Gradually Inverdrue became the hub of the area and in 1885 it was decided that a stone building should be erected for the Free Church of Scotland on ground given by the Laird, Sir John Peter Grant of Rothiemurchus. The fine building was very quickly erected and the first service was held on the 15<sup>th</sup> of August, 1886.

Some may remember the Service that was held in 1986 to mark the Centenary. This building is now the Cairngorm Mountain Rescue Centre.

One event in 1904 cast a cloud over Rothiemurchus. On Sunday, the 31<sup>st</sup> of January, the Rev. Donald MacDougall's wife was drowned in the Alltnacardoch Burn between the Manse and The Polchar. Some passers-by spotted the body and the news was conveyed to the Doune where my grandfather who was precentor had to break the news to the minister during the service. Mr. MacDougall retired back to Pitlochry in August 1917. The Rev. John Will was inducted in the December. In the Kingussie minister's report in the Badenoch Record he describes the interior of the Doune Church as a plain rectangle, with stiff pews, a small pulpit, a bulky harmonium, a hideous iron stove half-way down the side, large windows on one side only and a tiny vestry in which the Presbytery found themselves huddled together in rather unseemly fashion conducting their preliminary business in a somewhat noisy fashion. He goes on to say that the praise was remarkably hearty and musical. The schoolmaster led it, the organist sustained it, and the people sang. That is as it should be.

The next major event took place in 1929. The differences of opinion in the Established Church which had forced the split in 1843 had gradually been resolved and the Established Church and the United Free Church were able to form a union. The church at the Doune Rothiemurchus, the centre of worship for hundreds of years, finally closed its doors and the U.F. Church, newly named St. Columba's, became the parish church and the U.F. manse became the parish manse.

The Doune Church continued and was used by the military during the second war for storing medical supplies and was finally unroofed in 1949.

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## Rothiemurchus and Aviemore.

### Aviemore - The Early Church

In Aviemore at this time was "The Inn", built around 1765 on the General Wade Road and virtually nothing else. Balladern was only a clachan or small hamlet between the Inn and Craigellachie. It was not until 1870 that Aviemore or the "Inn" appeared on the Ordnance Survey Map.

The Inn stood on the corner of the road in front of the now Winking Owl, part of which was the original inn. Having spent the night at Pitmain, Kingussie, it was here that Robert Burns had breakfast during his Highland tour in September, 1787.

With the opening of the railway line to Inverness via Forres in 1863, Aviemore began to grow with more and more tourists coming to the area. However it was only when the link via Slochd was completed in 1898 and Aviemore became a junction that the development was speeded up.

The splendid Station Hotel, close to where the Four Seasons Hotel now stands, was opened in 1901, and the Cairngorm Hotel soon after. The Station Hotel was unfortunately completely gutted in a fire on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September, 1950.

Aviemore was on the boundary of the Duthil parish but by 1901 it had its own place of worship in a mission building designed by James Gilbert, who was the architect for Seafield Estate, which would suggest the Duthil Church was responsible for the outreach.

The feu (land tenure) charter of October, 1899 was granted to the Trustees of the Church of Scotland by the Dowager Countess of Seafield. Within the area she was a caring proprietor and a generous benefactor. This building is the present St. Andrew's Church, Aviemore.

At the time of the union of the Free Church and the United Presbyterian Church there was no manse but in 1904 the Laird made a site available in Rothiemurchus, and the work began, being completed in 1905. The estimated cost was £2000 but in 1912 there was still a sum outstanding and a work party was organised to raise the necessary funds. The main fund-raising event was to be a bazaar in August, 1913.

The building, situated near the Rothiemurchus Visitor Centre later became the manse for St Andrews Church, Aviemore. It was later sold and is now The Old Minister's Guest House.

In 1904 Sir John Peter Grant had built a wood and corrugated church, known locally as "The Tin Tabernacle", in the corner of the field between Corroul and the road, for the local members of the Episcopal Church of Scotland. It soon proved inadequate and Sir Ninian Comper, the famous church designer, was commissioned to design a building with the cost limited to £2850.

He intended it to be a small cathedral and the foundation stone was laid in 1913.

However the war years intervened and the resulting lack of finance meant a new design had to be used and the present much simpler building, completed in 1930, was dedicated the following year.

In 1905 the “Wee Frees” erected a somewhat brightly coloured corrugated church close to the spot occupied by the Ambulance Depot in Aviemore and this survived till developments took place in that area. This building had been known as “The Tin Temple”.

Aviemore was still a part of the Duthil parish but in 1917 it was disjoined and added to Rothiemurchus, hence the name “Rothiemurchus and Aviemore” which it is still to this day.

Following the opening of the railway lines Aviemore grew year by year but it still lacked a hall for social events. The United Free Church was able to rent a site from the Highland Railway Company and by the end of 1913 a hall was completed. The hall was used extensively and remained as a “Youth Club” until it was recently demolished.

In 1920 the Comrades’ Memorial Hall was built but only the base survives two or three hundred yards south of the Harkai Fish Restaurant. It had a badminton court and the Miniature Rifle Club met there. Many of the older members will well remember the dances, film nights, weddings many other functions held in the wooden building.

Following the closure of the Doune, Rothiemurchus in 1929 the liturgical furniture was taken to be used within St Andrews Church, Aviemore. The first minister following the union was the Rev. Robert Howie, who was admitted on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of September, 1931. I was thought that James Benson was responsible for starting the outdoor services at the Doune and it is to be hoped these will continue. It is a lovely spot, with many centuries of history, and such a peaceful atmosphere that one can visualise Taldi there in the midst.

In 1952 the Catholic Chapel, St. Aidan’s, was built and dedicated to the men of the 51<sup>st</sup> Highland Division. Two local ladies, Miss More-Smeaton and especially Miss Keogh, an Irish Catholic, had been instrumental in getting the chapel erected. Now the local Catholics in the area did not have to make the journey to Kingussie.

As a result of the diminishing number of Ministers within the Church of Scotland in 2007 Rothiemurchus and Aviemore Church linked with Alvie and Insh Church. The Minister and Church Manse for both parishes are now in Aviemore.

In conclusion, there is a great deal of “Church” history; nearly 800 years, in this small yet beautiful part of the Scottish Highlands – long may it and our story continue....

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