

Historic Walk-About in Burntisland

The walk commences in front of the Town Hall in the High Street, next to the Public Library. A little history lesson first. A Pictish fort considered to be 4,000 years old is still above Dunearn House on the highest part of the Binn Hill. A Cinerary Urn of 4,000 years old was found at the building of the Binn House (now demolished) in 1866, and there are reports of Agricola, the Roman General, landing here in AD83, in the year before his battle at Mons Graupius with the Pictish leader Calgacus. This area has therefore been inhabited for at least 4,000 years, but it was in 1586 before a Provost was first elected and the town represented in the Scottish Parliament. Head east from the town hall, and start off up the Kirkgate, turning left at the top passing the Parish Church, and moving along to the Parsonage.

At the wide paved area in front of the building you should stop to read the plaque with its inscription. On then to the rear of the building and on to the large drying green which provides a panoramic view of the Firth of Forth and the Lothian coastline. In this quiet oasis, you may read the story of George Hay Forbes, the Episcopalian parson who organised the building of the Parsonage and in some cases actually dressed the stones for the mason to continue his work. The remarkable building is one of the most important domestic buildings of the mid-Victorian period and is considered to be one of the finest works of the London architect R.C.Carpenter (1812-1855). It was his last work.

The Activities of the Reverend George Hay Forbes

The Reverend George Hay Forbes was ordained in 1848 when he came to Burntisland. In 1849 he started a school with one mistress and 13 pupils in a house in Kinghorn Road now occupied by the Inchview Hotel. By the end of the summer he had 90 pupils. Forbes decided later to build his own school, but first a residence. He purchased the present site of the Parsonage and with an estimated cost of £10,000 the building proceeded. By the early summer of 1854, the house was in his estimation ready for occupation.

This was a remarkable achievement for a man who had been severely crippled by disease early in life and spent many years in bed. He had not wasted his time there, having learned a number of languages which served him in good stead later on in life. Only a few events of this remarkable man's life can be related. When he first came to Burntisland, his crutches slipped on the street and as he lay there no-one would come to his aid. They had no time for such an incomer as an Episcopalian priest. To assist in moving around his house, he fixed up a rope from the top joists, and when he came down from the top floor he slid down the rope! In the basement of the building he instituted the Pitsligo Printing Press, and installed a speaking tube to save travelling up and down stairs. When he wished to bathe his feet in seawater, he hired a two-wheeled cart and horse. Taken down at half tide, he sat in the back of the cart and dangled his feet in the water.

Probably his greatest feat was that in publishing the Book of Ecclesiastes from the Bible in many different languages. He could apparently speak in 20 languages and knew about 50. Along with his brother who was the Bishop of Brechin, and other great philosophers, a discussion at Keble College, Oxford, resulted in each agreeing to translate different books of the Bible. Forbes selected Ecclesiastes. He printed it in many languages, and Dr Lockhart in his "Church of Scotland in the 13th Century" had this to say:

"Forbes had printed the Pontifical in his own press at Burntisland called the Pitsligo Press. There exists a list of 41 classes of type used in this press, including Hebrew, Arabic, Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopic and Greek. Mr Forbes told me of the delight he had experienced on perusing the original Pontifical in Paris, the very book used in 1243 by De Bernham in consecrating the church at Kirton."

Forbes was the Provost of Burntisland in 1869, but resigned within a year due to dissension between the Town Council and the builders of the then new dock. In 1872 Forbes was in a hotel at Nancy in France when his crutches slipped on the polished floor and he received a severe bodily shock. In 1873 he pursued the translation of Ecclesiastes in Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek Hepaxla Syriac, Armenian, Latin, Peshitto, Polyglot, Persian and Venice Greek. Only he could set the type, and it was a long and tiring job. Before he passed away on 7th November 1875, Forbes had completed the Parsonage, built a school next door, and had partially built a huge church on the East side of the building. And so passed a genius of the 19th century.

The Parish Church

Moving back along the way we came the hundred yards or so back to the Parish Church, we stop at the entrance to the door and look up to see the date 1592 and an anchor, upside-down, cut into the stone. This indicates that the church is anchored to Heaven, and stems from the founding members who were mostly seafaring people. Inside the church, should it be open, there is an opportunity to sit and peruse the surroundings, and read a little more on the history of this fascinating edifice.

The Panels

The painted panels on the gallery with the old guild signs immediately impress, and an explanation of a few of them is here: "A.N. 1622" is when the Kirk Session and the Prime Gild agreed on a frontage. "1711" is the year that the Charter of Incorporation came into practice. "1733" - the Guildry first enjoyed the Act passed in 1732 when 14 members had seats on the Town Council. "4" was the figure used in early times to indicate the first four burghs resulting in the Convention of Royal Burghs - Edinburgh, Stirling, Berwick and Roxburgh. There are two guild signs which disappeared after a fire in the gallery in 1822. These panels, the Weavers, dated 1597, and the Prime Gild of 1609, were recovered from a house in Kirkcaldy in 1973, restored by the Department of the Environment, and replaced in the Kirk in 1980.

Model of the Great Michael

The model of a ship, "The Great Michael", provides a story of how a number of the crew, after a shipwreck, found their way to the old church at Kirkton. In recognition of the hospitality and assistance provided by the local people, the survivors made a ship's model which hung in the old church. When the Parish Church was built, a hook was embedded in one of the main supporting columns and the model ship hung from the hook. As time passed the model deteriorated and was removed. Around 1963, when the interior of the church was being refurbished, a Mr Watson provided the present model to keep the story alive.

The Council Seats

The canopied seat facing the pulpit provides information on the days of the church in its early period. The Arms of Sir Robert Melville and his wife, and the date of 1606 are clearly seen. Sir Robert Melville was famous in his day as secretary to Mary, Queen of Scots, and owner of Burntisland Castle. His son, also Sir Robert Melville and latterly Lord Burntisland, was a member of the Privy Council, and travelled to London when King James VI of Scotland and I of England took up residence in the English capital. In the 19th century the owners of the castle seat exchanged it for the Town Council seat, and until the end of the old form of local government (1970's) it was used after elections for the Kirking of the Council.

The General Assembly of 1601

Of the many interesting and historic events to happen in the church the one which had repercussions throughout the world was the proposal to have a new Authorised Version of the Bible. King James VI had changed the venue of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in May 1601 from St Andrews to Burntisland, and during discussions it was agreed to form a committee to pursue the object of a new authorised version. James gave a great dissertation on his knowledge of the Bible, but despite this he was not appointed to the committee. However, at the end of the day it was he who chiefly influenced the version known ever since as the King James version.

When James succeeded to the English throne after the death of Queen Elizabeth, he was on his way to London when Scots people met him and implored him to continue with the proposed new Bible. He did in 1604 hold a convocation at Hampton Court where agreement was reached, and the Authorised Version was published in 1611. All this emanated from the General Assembly meeting in Burntisland Kirk

A reading from the frontispiece of the Bible emphasises James's part in this work:

"To the Most High and Mighty King James, by the Grace of God King of Great Britain, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, the Translators of the Bible wish Grace, Mercy and Peace through Jesus Christ Our Lord, Great and manifold were the blessings, most dread Sovereign, which Almighty God, the Father of all mercies, bestowed upon us the people of England, when first he sent Your Majesty's Royal Person to rule and reign over us..... For when your Highness had once out of deep judgement apprehended how convenient it was, that out of the Original Sacred Tongues, together with comparing of the labours both in our own and other foreign languages, of many worthy men who went before us, there should be one more exact translation of the Holy Scriptures into the English tongue; Your Majesty did never desist to urge and excite those to whom it was commended that the work might be hastened, and that the business might be expedited in so decent a manner, as a matter of such importance might justly require."

The Great Disruption

The Parish Minister in 1843 was the Reverend Dr Cooper. The whole country was in a ferment of religious discussion of whether the Queen should appoint ministers, or the Kirk members. This eventually led to what is known as the Great Disruption. Dr Cooper led practically all of the members of his congregation out to form a branch of the Free Church of Scotland. To pile on the agony, the new church was built a few yards away from the Parish Church gates. It no longer exists, but the site is marked and easily visible from the gates. Feelings were not appeased when the ringing of the bell in the new church exposed that the old kirk bell was cracked. Arrangements went ahead to repair the old bell, and when these were completed the workmen met to "wet the bell". In the ensuing celebrations, one of the apprentices decided to test the bell, hit it with his hammer, and cracked it again!

If the church is open to the public, look around to see the seats named after many of the communities of the early days. In the entrance area is a Visitors Book available for signing, and the display cabinet reveals some interesting items of antiquity - a 16th century bronze alms dish and a 13th century wooden collecting dish, survivors from the old church at Kirkton, a Baskerville Bible dated 1792, and a collection of tokens and dies for the tokens. There are early Communion vessels, and an extract from the minutes of the Convention of Royal Burghs stating that on April 12 1589 John Celphane, Provost of Burntisland, appealed to members of the Convention for funds to build a Kirk at Burntisland. Once these have been viewed, head out into the kirkyard to search for gravestones concerning interesting and famous personalities.

The Kirkyard and Gravestones

Near the Kirk entrance is a stone dedicated to one George Arnot. He was a dock labourer and a bit of a local worthy. At Kirk he could memorise the minister's sermon and repeat to others the whole content. He was a likeable character, always ready to tell a joke or sing a song. One day he was offered a glass of whisky which had been dosed with snuff. The result was disastrous, as George died. The townspeople were shocked by his death, and raised a public subscription to erect a tombstone. In addition a competition was organised for a poem which would best describe the man. There were 30 entrants, and the most suitable was engraved on his headstone.

"His mind was weak, his body strong,
His answer ready with his song;
A mem'ry like him few could boast,
But suddenly his life was lost."

Round behind the church is the largest memorial in the yard, that of the Watsons. This memorial is dated 1689 and has the initials AW & IB, for Captain Andrew Watson and his wife Isobelle Boswell. Another set of initials JW & EO stands for John Watson and Euphamie Orrock. John set up what is known as Watson's Mortification, a fund now supervised by Kirkcaldy District Council. The beneficiaries are three poor widows of Burntisland. Preference is given to those whose maiden or married names are Watson, Orrock or Boswell, who benefit by way of an annual distribution of money.

Facing this memorial across the green sward is the headstone of Admiral Sir William Fairfax and his wife Margaret Charters. Sir William was a Bailie and member of Burntisland Town Council for many years. He was the hero of the Battle of Camperdown, and has a history all to himself. Nearby is the gravestone of the Reverend James Wemyss, brother-in-law of the admiral and minister of the parish for almost 43 years.

Kirkgate

Coming out of the churchyard gates you are faced with an area which represents the old Free Church set up after the Great Disruption. This was destroyed in a fire over 20 years ago, as was the building used as the Free Kirk school.

Turning down Kirkgate, on the left is a large double villa which has an interesting history. Over 100 years ago this building stood on a high point and in line with the houses at South View, Lammerlaws. At the building of the docks, this house stood in the way of the present railway line so was removed, stone by stone, and rebuilt on its present location in the Kirkgate.

Somerville Square

Turning left into Somerville Square (previously known as Midgait, Back Street or Quality Street), look left to see the building known as Mary Somerville House. A plaque on the wall indicates that this was the home of Admiral Sir William Fairfax and his famous daughter Mary, afterwards Mary Somerville. Mary's grandfather Samuel Charters was Town Clerk of Burntisland for 47 years. Mary first came to prominence nationwide when she had her first book published in 1831, "The Mechanism of the Heavens". Practically the whole edition of 750 copies was sold at Cambridge University. The King granted her a pension of £300 a year to encourage others to follow the bright example she had set. She had other works published - "The Connection of the Physical Sciences", "Physical Geography" and "Molecular and Microscopic Science", all of which were printed in various languages and on into its 17th edition. Somerville College, Oxford is named after her, also Somerville House at Brisbane High School for Girls, Australia. The house itself dates back to 1596 when Captain Watson obtained the property. It became the home of many famous people including John Watson of Dunnikier; the Orrocks of that ilk; Alexander Leslie (later Lord Lindores); William Greig, shipmaster; before being purchased by Captain Fairfax in 1789.

Next door to Mary Somerville's house there is a Masonic Lodge which in its earlier history was also the home of famous people. Probably the most interesting was James Robertson, who was born at Newbigging in 1720 and died in London in 1788. He enlisted as a private in the army and ultimately became the Civil Governor of New York. In 1782 his description was "His Excellency James Robertson, Esq. Captain General and Governor in Chief of the Province of New York and Territories thereupon defending in America, Vice-Admiral of the same and Major General of His Majesty's Forces". James Robertson senior of Newbigging owned this house from 1704 to 1727, when George Robertson continued in ownership until 1754.

Further along the Square are two houses with outside staircases originally described as Watsons West tenement. On one there is an old marriage lintel with similar initials to that on the Watson Memorial in the churchyard, concerning the names Watson, Boswell and Orrock. In the title of Watson's Mortification this property had four houses, occupied free by the schoolmaster and three widows. All the houses in that side of the Square were modernised by Burntisland Town Council during the late 1950's.

Moving towards the High Street, we pass under a house and on the East wall there are two marriage lintels which were removed from an old building that stood on the site before being demolished in 1957. The date is 1626 and records the ownership of Richard Ross and Agnes Michaelson, daughter of the famous Rev. Dr John Michaelson, who was deposed as parish minister for refusing to sign the Covenant around 1639, and came to live at his daughter's home. On one lintel are the letters R.R. and a crest, on the other A.M. and a crest.

Cross the High Street and pass the Star Tavern, built in 1671, with a traditional crow-stepped gable, and down to the path which leads up towards the railway bridge and Rossend Castle. This recently landscaped area replaced a row of shops and houses, and used to be known as Well Close.

Rossend Castle

West Broomhill road leads up over the railway bridge to the Arches, the original entrance to Rossend Castle Estate, now a housing scheme where the streets are all named after former owners of the castle ; Melville Gardens, Shepherd Crescent, Rossend Terrace, Durie Park and Abbot's View. There are three coats of arms above the Archway dated 1119, 1382 and 1563. Respectively, they represent the date of the building of the earliest part of the castle; the Royal Arms of Scotland; and the date of the visit of Mary, Queen of Scots. Wander up through the park and take a good look at the Castle from here.

The Arms of the Duries of that ilk are clearly seen above the doorway with the date 1554. The Duries were Abbots of Dunfermline and at that time were more or less lords of all they surveyed throughout the Kingdom of Fife. The one who arranged for the Coat of Arms to be installed was responsible for bringing the relics of Saint Margaret in a silver casket to be hidden there during the Reformation. He is also credited with in 1554 fixing the Arms of Queen Margaret to the east wall of the castle. During the Reformation period the castle was in the possession of Sir William Kirkcaldy of Grange, who led 600 horsemen provided by the Lords of the Congregation. French troops who harried the people of Fife found Kirkcaldy a great opponent, and he prevented them from gaining any victories in this area. He was eventually appointed Governor of Edinburgh Castle, which he defended in favour of Mary, paying for his deeds by being executed in Edinburgh.

Mary, Queen of Scots

When Mary, Queen of Scots visited the castle in 1563 she was followed by Chastellard, a French poet who had been on friendly terms with the Queen. However, he came via a secret stairway and entered her bed chamber. This was the second time he had done this (previously pardoned for a similar offence at the Palace of Holyrood in Edinburgh), and he was duly executed at Saint Andrews. Legend has it that his last words were "Adieu, most beautiful and cruel Princess".

Sir Robert Melville, who had been secretary to Mary, succeeded his father-in-law Sir William Kirkcaldy in ownership of the castle. Around 1586 when the first Provost of the town was elected, Melville took advantage of his position and forced the newly formed Town Council to bow to his wishes. Proof of this lies in a bond, signed by the Provost, bailies and council to Sir Robert Malvill of Murdocarny, by which in gratitude for his having secured ratification of their charter, they engage to aid him, his eldest son and their heirs, in all just and lawful actions to admit them as burgesses without any payment, to relieve them of all impositions levied by or upon the burgh and to allow them the first 'coff' of all merchandise brought into the port. Sir Robert's son was provost for a number of years but eventually the town survived for a number of years without a provost as they could no longer stand such a set of vultures as head of the Town Council. Sir Robert Melville Younger became a member of the Privy Council in London during the reign of James VI and I, and when James made his only visit back to his native Scotland in 1617 he visited the castle as a guest of the Melvilles.

Sir James Wemyss of Bogie was the owner of Burntisland Castle in the mid 1650's. He was anxious to obtain a title and purchased that of Lord Burntisland, as Sir Robert Melville Younger had died without issue in 1635. In 1672 he married Margaret, daughter of the Earl of Wemyss, when she was only 13 years of age. On the death of the Earl of Wemyss in 1679 Lord Burntisland's wife became the Countess of Wemyss. Her second son David succeeded to the title as third Earl of Wemyss.

In August 1957 a painted ceiling was removed from the by then derelict castle and rebuilt into a room in the Museum of Antiquities in Queen Street, Edinburgh.

Just across from the castle can be seen the impressive Coach Houses, which have now been made into housing.