

The people of St. John's, Wick
- a congregational history.

by

Gordon Johnson

2nd edition; Wick,

The People of St. John's Scottish Episcopal Church, Wick: a congregational history of 150 years.

by

Gordon Johnson

Contents:

1. [Before the present congregation: 17th Century Episcopalians.](#)
2. [Formation of the present congregation - the Academy years: incumbents.](#)
3. [People in at the start: church members 1855-1920](#)
4. [Erecting the church \(1870\) and parsonage \(1879\)](#)
5. [People: activists of later times - The clergy 1950-1963](#)
6. [People: activists of later times - The congregation: 1950-1963](#)
7. [The congregation linked with Thurso, 1963 onwards](#)
8. [Centenary of opening of church, 1970, to the 150th celebrations in 2005, and further](#)

Before the present congregation: 17th Century Episcopalians.

Because the Scottish Episcopal Church is part of the world-wide Anglican communion, there is a tendency to regard this national church as an offshoot of the Church of England. It is not, and never has been, but historical events brought English priests to serve within the Scottish church, to cope with a shortage of Scottish priests.

Here's a potted history, to help explain:

At the time of the Scottish Reformation, the one and only Christian Church in Scotland was Roman Catholic, and when the reformed church came into being in 1592 it was unsure how the new national church should be structured. Some of the early leaders wished to retain bishops, but without the title of bishop, and call them Commissioners. Others wanted to dispense with bishops entirely, as too easy to equate with Roman Catholicism. The national church for long afterwards had no such thing as a Presbyterian minister, and so for many people the reformation had little effect. There followed a long struggle between the ideas of Episcopacy (i.e. with a bishop (Greek: Episkopos, or overseer of an area) and Presbyterianism (where the local congregation had power through their representatives (presbyters, i.e. the minister or a senior elder)), with politics rather than religion determining which was in the ascendant at any time.

The monarchy was ambivalent, but preferred an Episcopal (with bishops) organisation, as it was more susceptible to political control by the king. A Presbyterian structure was viewed as anti-establishment, as it allowed more egalitarian decision-making, and while tolerated, the king actively sought to reinstate bishops, and thus make the churches of the entire island of Britain all the same basic structure.

King Charles 1 imposed on the Scottish Church a Book of Canons and Ordinal, and finally in 1637, a new prayer book, which caused another revolt against the Episcopal form of worship, and military battles were fought over the issue. Presbyterianism became the norm until 1661 when the Scots parliament passed the Recissory Act, which reverted to the 1637 position. When William of Orange became king he was anxious to win the support of the Scottish bishops, and met the bishop of Edinburgh, Alexander Rose, in London. The king said, "I hope that you will be kind to me and follow the example of England"(which had gone along with him). The Jacobite bishop replied, "Sir, I will serve you as far as law, reason or conscience will allow me." It was a bad answer, for Episcopacy was then disestablished and the Scottish church reverted to Presbyterianism again, at least in theory. Even by 1707 there were still 165 Episcopalian priests ministering in the parish churches of Scotland.

The Act of Toleration in 1712 gave protection to Episcopalians who were prepared to abandon the claims of the Stuart pretenders to the throne. Many clergy continued to support the Royal House of Stuart, so in 1719 a Penal Act came from Parliament whereby no Episcopal priest could legally minister to more than nine people at one time, unless he took an oath renouncing the exiled Stuart king and promised to pray for King George.

Following the defeat of the Jacobites at Culloden in 1745, the government army burned Episcopal churches or made their congregations demolish them, and a harsher Penal law came in 1746 reducing the limit to four people at a time.

Before the establishment of the United States of America, American clergy were ordained in London, and afterwards when the clergy of Connecticut elected Samuel Seabury as their

bishop, he sought consecration in England. The oath of royal supremacy proved too much to overcome, and instead he came to Scotland and was consecrated at Aberdeen in 1784. He was the first Anglican bishop to serve outside the British Isles, and this was the beginning of the world-wide Anglican communion of churches.

During the following century, the Episcopal church became democratised in Scotland, with the laity having ever greater say in the running of the church, including the election of bishops. This trend continues today, enriching the life and service of the church, nationally and locally.

Clergy of the 17th Century.

In Caithness, Wick's Episcopal clergy began with **Patrick Clunies**, M.A., a native of Ross - born about 1642. He was educated at King's College, Aberdeen, gaining his M.A. 17th July 1662. His ministry at Wick began before March 1682, and ended with his death in 1691. While he died locally, no identifiable gravestone survives.

He was succeeded by **William Geddes**, M.A., born about 1630, a native of Moray, educated King's College, Aberdeen (M.A. 1650). He began his career as schoolmaster of Keith in 1650, then was Tutor to Hugh Rose of Kilravock in 1652. His ministry at Wick began 23 Nov. 1659, then he moved in 1677 to Urquhart, Moray, but was back at Wick from 1692, dying there in 1694.

He built local connections by marrying Katherine Dunbar, daughter of John Dunbar of Hempriggs, but messed it up by failing to have their banns proclaimed - an astonishing lapse for a minister - and he was censured for this. He wrote several books, for which he got church permission to publish, but most never appeared in print.

From 1694 until 1730 the post appears to have remained vacant, possibly because of the anti-Episcopal pressures in Scotland at the time.

William Longmuir, another Moray man, born 1692 in Grange parish, was next appointed. His education again was at King's College, Aberdeen, 1708-1710; then Marischal College, Aberdeen, 1710-1712, gaining his M.A. in 1712. He became schoolmaster in Rothiemay in 1716, then was assistant priest at Rathven (Buckie) from 1723-1726, being priested in Aberdeen in 1725. He became priest at Rathven from 1726-1730, followed by his incumbency at Wick 1730-1734, after which he retired to the south, possibly due to ill-health. He returned to the priesthood in 1743, being the incumbent at Keith until 1769, when he may have died.

Wick's Episcopalian church then went into abeyance from 1734 for over 120 years, during a period when Episcopalianism was regarded with suspicion, especially after the 1745 rebellion, when the established authorities viewed churches other than the Church of Scotland as of doubtful loyalty.

The formation of the present congregation: the Academy years

1855 saw the revival of Episcopalianism in Wick.