

The Early Church

Dempster's Ecclesiastical History states that there was a Church in Banff, in honour of St. Bey, about 816. In his Annals of Banff, Dr. Cramond thought it more probable that a church was dedicated to St Columba who had travelled from Iona through the Great Glen and on to Inverness from whence he went to Kinloss, Elgin, Alvah, Turriff and Old Deer. It is said that he blessed the well at the foot of the Hill of Alvah, known as St. Colms or St. Combs Well.

The Parish Church in Banff was founded before the date when Matthew, Bishop of Aberdeen (1178 -1199), gave a Charter of the Churches of Banff, Inverboyndie, Gamrie, etc. to the monks of Arbroath. The Virgin Mary was the patron saint of Banff Church.

The earliest known vicar was Henry of Spynie, 1323. There is a record that, in 1470, the town burgesses let the salmon fishings to obtain money for the founding of a chaplainry, and for slating the Church and it is thought that the kirk of Banff was rebuilt by the town council in 1471 and a chaplain was endowed with a stipend of ten merks, besides a living from the common fund.

Before this time, the chaplaincy of St. Mary, of the Order of Carmelites, was the only other place of worship in the Burgh. The site of the Chapel of the Holy Rood was most probably in the Parish Church. It is known that, in 1567, William Lawtie was minister of Banff, Boyndie, Fordyce and Cullen. Banff was separated from Alvah in 1591 and from Boyndie in 1634 when Alexander Seton, the minister of Banff brought an action of valuation and modification of the teinds against the heritors, by which the union was declared void, and each held to be a separate parish, with distinct congregations.

The army of Montrose destroyed the Church, school, etc. in 1645 and the burgesses petitioned Parliament in 1647 for a grant to assist in rebuilding them.

Alexander Seton died in 1679 and was succeeded by Patrick Innes, minister of Deskford (died 1699) and then by William Hunter, minister of Tyrie. Mr. Hunter was suspended from preaching in 1712 for refusing to take the abjuration oath but, the following year, he returned to his charge. He died in 1716. James Innes followed and died in 1753 to be succeeded by Robert Trail, minister at Kettins, until 1761 when he was appointed to the Chair of Divinity of Glasgow University. His successor, Andrew

Skene, formerly minister at Keith was the last minister of the Old St. Mary's Kirk and the first in the present building.

The rebellion in 1745-46 did not seriously affect Banff Parish Church but it is known that the fabric of the Church was in a ruinous way by 1749. The bells and clock were removed and part of the steeple was taken down in 1761. Thirty six years later, in 1797, the old church was completely pulled down, except for the Banff Aisle, part of which still stands.

The Present Church

The present Parish Church stands on a feu which was known in ancient times as 'Muckle fill the Cup' - the feu upon which the nearby Court House was built was called 'Little fill the Cup'.

The Church was built in 1789-90, and was based on the model of a, then, new church in Dundee. It was stated at the time when the Church was built that it was built in a style that does credit to the place, and shows an enlargement of mind in the Presbyterians, who now begin to think that the Lord may be praised in the beauty of holiness.

The spire was added about 1839, designed by a Mr. Robertson, an architect from Elgin and containing a bell presented to the town of Banff by Mr. Grant Duff of Eden, author of the history of the Maharattas, and renowned as one of the earliest breeders of short horned cattle in Scotland.

When built (in its original form and before the relatively recent addition of the chancel and apse), the church measured eighty feet in length and fifty feet in width. Four ionic columns supported the galleries which formed five sides of an octagon - the missing three sides were adjacent to the present car park at the south elevation - the original pulpit was on the south wall and was perhaps raised to an incommensurable height, being an ascent of twenty one steps.

Originally, the church would seat 1500 persons. The pulpit was substituted when the Church was renovated in 1877 and at the same time, a harmonium was introduced for use in public services. Among the other improvements was the insertion of five stained glass windows in the south wall, one of these windows, immediately behind where the

pulpit was situated, is a memorial to the, then, recently deceased minister, Rev. Dr. Bremner.

In 1927, the congregation unanimously resolved to adopt a scheme of renovation and reconstruction to the interior of the building, which was not in keeping with its exterior. In this scheme, which was revolutionary and involved heavy expenditure, the Misses Katherine, Helen and Susan Martin of St. Catherines, Banff generously offered to erect a chancel and apse, as well as an organ chamber and vestry, provided the congregation were willing to meet the cost of renovation of the interior. The Misses Martin also erected three stained glass windows in the chancel and provided a Communion table, pulpit and baptismal font. They were also responsible for the donation to the Church for the suite of halls.

Former Trinity and Alvah Parish Church

On the 18th May, 1843, the Disruption of the Church of Scotland resulted in the formation of the Free Church. The root cause of the Disruption movement was the wish of congregations to have as minister whom they voted for, not for a minister foisted on them by a patron of the church. The minister of Banff Parish Church, the Rev. Francis Grant, left with about half the congregation to form the Banff Free Church although there is no record of this in the Church records. The Banff dissenters had not been unprepared for the secession. The Earl of Seafield granted them a piece of land opposite the Castle, and by August 1843, the foundation stone was laid. The congregation became Banff United Free Church in 1914 after union with Trinity United Church. In 1929, the congregation reunited with the Church of Scotland and became Banff Trinity Church. There were then two Church of Scotland churches in Banff.

In 1961, Banff Trinity joined the Alvah Parish Church. Banff Parish Church and Trinity and Alvah Parish Church had very similar forms of worship, doctrine and government. Both churches sought the Christian good of Scotland and it seemed only natural that they should work together instead of competing with one another. In September 1994, one hundred and fifty years after the Disruption, Banff Trinity and Alvah Parish Church united with St. Mary's to create (again) a single Parish Church in Banff. The union was

executed expeditiously and harmoniously and the minister of St Mary's was appointed minister of the new Banff Parish Church.

An appropriate legacy of Trinity and Alvah Parish Church is the furniture at the back of Banff Parish Church. This includes a communion table and chairs, a lectern and a font. These were set out after the removal of several rows of pews. Also at the rear of the church is a space where the congregation can gather for fellowship after services.