

History of Toward Church

Before considering the history of the present Toward Church, built in 1839 it is interesting to note that there was at an unknown date, on the same site, a Chapel of St. Nary with a burial ground. Steps of this building were uncovered during alterations to the existing building in 1935.

Also in the adjoining ground there are still to be seen the remains of a circle of stones believed to date from the iron age and marking an area of pagan worship.

When the present building was erected it was in the united parish of Dunoon and Kilmun. This covered a very wide area; the extremity of Kilmun parish being near the entrance to Loch Goil, while Dunoon parish stretched to Toward Point. Dr. Mackay, the parish minister at that time, was concerned about the difficulties of attending to the spiritual needs of his extensive parish, and Presbytery minutes of 1835 record his call for additional help in the 'ministerial labours' and a committee was formed, which reported in 1836 that Probationers (or missionaries) be appointed to "certain stations or districts within the bounds where the population was considerable and situated at distance from the parish churches". This report was adopted and a circular was to be sent to the Heritors, and collections made at the stations themselves. Strangely the minutes do not refer specifically to any of these mission stations, but there is an entry, 30th June, 1838, in the Presbytery minutes under "Examination of Treasurer's Books" which says 'the Treasurer's book at the Toward Mission having been examined and found correct there was found to be collected there since the last distribution £8 15s 1d.' This indicates that a mission station must have existed at Toward before the erection of the church. It would probably have met in the school.

Thus with this local appeal for help from Dunoon and with the advent of steam navigation increasing the Cowal population, especially during the summer months, it is not surprising that the Church Extension Committee set up by the General Assembly of 1835 would be turning attention to parts of the country like Cowal. We know that Dr. Chalmers, Convener of this committee, visited Dunoon Presbytery in 1838 and the committee had before it in 1839 proposals for a new church at Colintrave eventually built the year after Toward - 1840. The New Statistical Account (1845) mentions "two chapels of ease or preaching stations having been recently erected in the parish - one at Toward and the other at Ardentinny." It also tells us that probationers of the church, acting as parochial missionaries, officiated at these stations; at Toward on alternate Sabbaths." The missionaries here paid by an annual collection made at each station and in each of the parish churches. The average attendance at Toward, alternate Sabbaths is given as 180. This evidence of a great hunger for the Word in earlier days is striking, but, since the seating capacity today is only 120 it does seem to cast some doubt on the accuracy of the figure, unless of course it took into account more than one service. But in Pigot's Directory, 1837 edition, it records "A chapel of ease to Dunoon was erected rear Toward Lighthouse in 1836-37 by subscription; it is a neat gothic structure, containing about 200 sittings, and cost £400." The date discrepancy is puzzling, but George Hay in his "Architecture Of Scottish Post-Reformation Churches" gives the date of 1839 and, of course, this date is carved in the stonework above the entrance. The cost seems accurate enough because Church of Scotland records for 1837 show the amount subscribed for Toward Church as £412 with an additional grant of £78 from the Church Extensions Committee in 1839. There seems no doubt that finance for the building came from the Church Extension Committee and from subscription, the principal subscribers being Alexander Lamont of Knockdow and Kirkman Finlay of Castle Toward

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Alexander Lamont (1784-1861) became a Writer to the Signet in Edinburgh in 1812 and Laird of Knockdow in 1829. He worked in Edinburgh, spending most of the summer at Knockdow. He remained in active practice in law until 1841. Beyond these facts and that in "The Lamont Clan" it simply says "with Mr. Finlay of Castle Toward, he built Toward Kirk", there is not much known of him. One quote about him says "He was regarded as the best of land lords, and never flitted a tenant." His granddaughter, Augusta Lamont, wrote of him as an unknown and shadowy figure" and said that his widow used to say of him "He was a very just man."

It is difficult also to find much about the character of Kirkman Finlay (1773-1842) who is reported to be a very private man, but there is no doubt from the list of his appointments and what is known of his public life that he must have been a very dynamic personality indeed. He was a very important figure in the commercial and civic life in Glasgow and among the offices he held Member of Parliament For Glasgow in 1812-18; Lord Provost of the city and Lord Rector of the University; eight times president of the Chamber of Commerce and Dean of Guild. His father James Finlay, was the Founder of Jas. Finlay & Co., but Kirkman was the mainspring of its early success and for many years was head of this great house of cotton spinners and traders

In the Glasgow Herald obituary it said that by the time of his death he had touched on most of the world where there was anything to buy or sell. He took a prominent part, in 1793 in opposing the monopoly of the East India Co. in the cotton trade: showed the way to the east to the Glasgow merchants, and established a system of running Napoleon's blockade of continental trade to this country.

Kirkman Finlay had purchased land in Toward in 1820, and built Castle Toward in 1820/21. It is not surprising that such a man would become equally involved in local affairs around his new mansion. He paid for the building of the school and teacher's accommodation at Toward; planted 4,000,000 trees in his estate and introduced new productive methods of husbandry to the farms.

A marble store, set into the stonework of the inside wall above the church door is in memory of Kirkman Finlay and his wife Janet Struthers Finlay. Mrs. Finlay and members of the Family are buried in Inverchaolain churchyard, but it is an indication of the high esteem in which Kirkman Finlay was held that he is buried in the Blackadder Aisle of Glasgow Cathedral and there is a stained glass window to his memory in the Cathedral..

It may seem strange to us today considering the relative number of residents in Innellan and Toward that there was a church in Toward before any of the Innellan churches. But this is the case. In 1851 the Established Church was built in Innellan and was disjoined from Dunoon Parish in 1873. Probably at that time Toward would come under Innellan Parish and certainly the Innellan minister presided over many changes of minister for Toward from 1855 until 1926. Records show that the ministers at Toward, usually after only short years of service went on to churches in Glasgow or Greenock often as assistants there.

The affairs of the church here in the hands of a Committee of Management from 1892 until 1937 when the first meeting of Toward Kirk Session was held on the 10th October of that year. And it was not until 1950, in the ministry of the Rev. Donald Stuart that it was decided to appoint a Congregational Board. Even then it was found to be not a simple matter because the Church Solicitor and the General Trustees delayed the proposal for "further consideration" since Toward Church, being previously a Chapel of

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Ease, was not yet the property of the General Trustees. They hoped, however, that in due time consent could be given for the appointment of a Congregational Board. It was almost another year before Presbytery gave the authority and January 1952 before the first Board was elected.

The church records throughout its history are incomplete. The first records are the minutes of the committee of Management from 8th August 1892 until 1st October 1906 and this committee dealt with all matters relating to the church - from finance to appointing new ministers. From this period there are three items which perhaps throw some light on the development of the church.

On 6th May 1896 we find the first discussion to replace the Precentor by a Harmonium. Put to the congregation the following Sunday it was agreed by 53 in favour and 1 against. It does not say if this was the Precentor. And they did not take long to give effect to the decision. By 17th May the Secretary was instructed to inform the Precentor that his services would not be required after 10th June. The following advertisement was to be inserted three times in the Glasgow Herald "Harmoniumist wanted for Toward Church. An essential part of his duties will be teaching of the Congregational singing class. Salary not less than £15."

In October 1902, Mr. Lamont, Knockdow suggested that funds be raised for buying or building a manse, and he promised £50 towards this. A house was bought, from Mr. Archibald MacFarlane in 1903, for £600 to become the church Manse.

In October 1906 it was proposed to create a Church Endowment Scheme, and it was agreed to hold a bazaar for this purpose in Rothesay. There is no record of the success, or otherwise, of this since there are no further records from that meeting until 1922

In January 1926 the church of Toward was re-opened after having been closed for seven weeks for a "complete overhaul" as the Dunoon Observer puts it. In March of that year the minister, Rev. John Alexander, died and there was some difficulty in obtaining another ordained minister. In August 1926 the Presbytery asked that proceedings towards filling the vacancy be suspended, and it was at this time that Toward united with Inverchaolain Church and the Rev. J. Scoular Thomson, who had been minister of Inverchaolain since 1918, became minister of the united charge.

Again there are no church records between 1926 and 1937, but the Dunoon Observer reported in March 1935 that it was proposed to extend the church to provide a chancel, vestry and boiler room. Plans were submitted to the Presbytery in April when Mr. Thomson said "some people look upon a chancel as a wicked thing, but in my opinion a church without one is like a room without a fire." The cost of the work was to be £1400.

This led to the church almost as it is today. The plaster was removed from the walls revealing the distinctive stonework. The timber, for the ceiling and floor, was provided by Sir Norman Lamont from his estates in Trinidad. The Portland stone font was gifted by Mrs. Andrew Coats of Castle Toward, who also paid for a large part of the reconstruction of the church. The mahogany lectern was presented by Mrs. Couper of Tollard House.

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A special service was held on 17th August, 1935 when the church was re-opened following the alterations. Present at that service was the Hon. Mrs. Durant, wife of a grandson of Kirkman Finlay. She had gifted the two stained glass windows in the South Gable which are dedicated to the memory of A.S. Finlay (1806-1886) and A.K. Finlay (1844-1883) son and grandson respectively of Kirkman Finlay.

The Dunoon Observer in reporting this service also referred to an unwelcome intrusion in the proceedings under the heading "Clergy put to flight by bees." It appeared that a swarm of bees had taken up their abode in the belfry during the renovation, and in fact, a quantity of honey was found when the walls here stripped of plaster.

The paper reported that when the bell was rung by Mr. Donald Ferguson, "the bees emptied like a cloud of volcanic ash from the belfry." It continued that a well known laird was seen to take refuge in the shrubbery, his kilt being an irresistible attraction for the angry insects.

A service was also held on 14th June, 1936, conducted by the Rt. Rev. Daniel Lamont, Moderator of the General Assemble of the Church of Scotland. At this service the pulpit and communion table (fashioned in mahogany and almond wood from the West Indies) were dedicated.

On the 10th October, 1937 Toward Kirk Session held its first meeting. The members were Andrew Chisholm, James B. Couper, James Gordon, Duncan Mackay and Duncan Robertson. Inverchaolain maintained a separate Session of Sir Norman Lamont and Archibald McCorkindale until 5th July, 1938 when the Sessions joined.

On the 14th September, 1938 a congregational meeting was called to petition that the Act X111 of the General Assembly of 1928 be annulled and to have the church of Toward erected into a full charge with the right to appoint its own minister and to disjoin from the Parish of Inverchaolain. This was subsequently refused by the Presbytery.

In June 1939 the Session had agreed to ask "Professor Main or other Professor to take the service one Sunday in September to commemorate the centenary of Toward Church." By July the Session minuted that Professor McGregor, of Trinity College, was to preach at the centenary service on 10th September, 1939. But, of course, war was declared on Sunday 3rd September, and at the Session meeting on 6th September, 1939 it was minuted that "owing to the state of the country" the centenary service was cancelled and it was agreed not to hold an evening service in Toward Church meantime. The centenary was however, marked by the presentation to the church, by Mrs J.B. Coupar, of a silver communion flagon.

Mr. Coupar, of Tollard House died in October 1946 and the Session minutes, I paying tribute to this prominent member and benefactor, listed the following donations:-

1. A stained glass window. This is the small window by the organ in the chance1.
2. A handsome rug. This was a Persian rug sold in 1985 and forming the fund now known as the Couper Bequest.
3. A communion chalice. Already mentioned in connection with the church centenary.
4. A legacy of £1000..

The Session minutes For 2nd October, 1949 record the death of Sir Norman Lamont,

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senior elder, on 2nd September, 1949 at his estate in Trinidad, and pay tribute to his loyal service to the church.

Apart from the features of the present church which have already been mentioned as donations, the following should also be noted.

The stained glass window - Death of St. Columba - - in the west wall. This is in memory of two members of the original main benefactors:- Colin Campbell Finlay (1843-1899) and Alexander Lamont (1872-1897).

In 1948 a small pipe organ was purchased from a legacy bequeathed by Miss Isabella and Miss Jeannie Landell in memory of their brother William. The pipes of this organ remain in the church, but the present organ was bought, about twenty years later by members of the congregation.

The stained glass window in the chancel was presented in 1950 by Mrs. Withycombe in memory of her husband, who was minister of the church from 1939 - 1949.

Individual communion cups were presented to the church in 1962 by Mr. And Mrs. Meiklejohn.

The church carpet was presented in 1984 by Miss Agnes Kemp, of Kippen, in memory of her parents. Mr. Kemp was church treasurer from 1945 – 1955.

A flower stand was purchased in memory of Mrs. Margaret Midgley, organist and devoted servant of Inverchaolain and Toward Church from 1969-1985. The balance of the legacy from Mrs.. Midgley was put to the basis of an organ fund.

Mention should also be made of certain features which have enhanced the church in recent years and which though small in themselves, are the work of loving hands devoting their skills to the Glory of their Lord. There are two banners - one with the inscription "Bless the Lord O my Soul" made by Edna McIntyre, Jean Campbell and Nancie McGeachy; and the other "Christ the Lord is Risen Today, Alleluia" made by Edna McIntyre, Angela McMaster and Nancie McGeachy. There is also a ceramic Nativity Set, made by Nancie McGeachy, and displayed at Christmas; and at Easter it has become a custom to make, in the chance¹, an Easter Garden of mosses and spring flowers. This was started by Eleanor Taylor and is continued each year by some of the ladies.

In 1984 there was erected, at the church entrance, metal handrails given by Mrs. Hutchison of Dunoon in memory of her daughter, Mrs. Lilian McCormick of Innellan.

To bring the church story up—to—date, here are some facts taken from the minutes of the last forty or so years:-

Voting for women Elders took place on Sunday 16th December, 1945 which resulted in 3 for and 25 against. The Session were all against.'

In May, 1948 the Session approved the opportunity of securing a hall. They had been considering the possibility of getting a wooden hut from the Army, but the opportunity which arose was to get an old timber built United Free Church which stood at Tayvallich. The First time it was officially mentioned in use was 12th January, 1950 when the Presbytery of Dunoon met there at the induction of Rev. Donald Stewart.

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On 9th May, 1979 Mr. Abercrombie, Session Clerk, intimated that he had written to the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland accepting their offer to purchase two silver communion cups by Alexander Campbell, of Edinburgh, dated 1750. The cups are inscribed with the name of the Parish of Inverchaolain, and at least one can be seen in a case of Communion Silver at the Museum.

When the Rev. Ian Isdale came, in April 1977, as minister of Inverchaolain and Toward it was as a "terminable appointment" and, on the retiral of Mr. Logan from Innellan Church in 1980, the Presbytery Union and Re-Adjustments Committee decided on the linking of Innellan with Inverchaolain and Toward. An operation of this nature is often apt to be fraught with difficulties, but it can be said that on this occasion the basis of linking was amicably agreed between the two congregations and the relationship continues to be of the friendliest. A service of linkage was held in Toward Church on Wednesday 13th May, 1981 and on Sunday 17th May the first service at 10:00am in Toward and at 11:30am in Innellan took place.

The Innellan Church manse became the new manse for the linked charge and considerable modernization was carried out, met partly by grant and partly from the sale of Toward Manse

On 27th October, 1981 the Rev. Howard G. Taylor was inducted as the First minister of the linked charge of Innellan with Inverchaolain and Toward.

There have been many staunch servants of Toward Kirk over the years, but in the past forty years there are two people whose contribution was special.

Margaret Midgley, elder from 1979 until her untimely death in October, 1985, but church organist for much longer, clerk to the congregational board from 1980-85 and tireless worker and invaluable help to successive ministers and session clerks.

Rev. Douglas Sommerville. Who was the longest serving minister of the united charge of Inverchaolain and Toward for 18 years. It is doubtful if there is anyone more widely known and loved in this part of Cowal. If ever a man was a legend in his own lifetime it is Douglas Sommerville for, although he had to give up the ministry of Toward in 1976, on health grounds, he has been blessed with a "second wind" which has enabled him to serve his Master in several corners of Cowal, Bute and Glasgow, and in each place add to the extraordinary number of people who count it a blessing for having made his acquaintance.

What would the Toward area be like around 1839? It is difficult to get an accurate picture: the minute book of the Cowal District Road Trustees in 1839 refers to a new road being constructed from, Dunoon to Ardyne. This would take some time to complete. The Rev. John C. Hill, in his book on Innellan, writes of a narrow, rough road from Toward to Dunoon when Kirkman Finlay came to Toward, but that by 1851 there was a good road from Innellan to Dunoon. Mr. Murdo MacDonald, the archivist for Argyll and Bute District Council, has no records relating directly to the Toward area for that period, but says that "clearly there must have been quite a buzz of activity in the area." On the water steam ships were multiplying. On land new villas were springing up at Dunoon and elsewhere, and the population was rising. In the wider parish of Dunoon in the 1830's Toward Church was part of a fairly busy building programme which saw extensive additions to Dunoon Parish Church and a chapel of ease erected at Ardentiny.

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In the absence of good road communication the gateway to Toward would be the quay and much of the traffic with the world outside would be by sea. We have already heard how a bazaar was held in Rothesay in 1906, which was no doubt more accessible than Dunoon. Speed of postal communication could be remarkable; for a letter addressed to the Rev. A.M.. Stewart at Inverchaolain sent from Edinburgh and date stamped 7:15am February 1st, 1895 is also date stamped, on the back of the envelope, Greenock February 1st, and Toward Point February 2nd.

Among other interesting facts about the area, revealed in the 1845 Statistical Account, are these:-

“A detailed and accurate register meteorological observations was kept by Kirkman Finlay for 20 years and show the rainfall at Toward for 1840,41,42 as 43.2, 46.4 and 39.37 inches.” Winds are described as “exceedingly variable” and “the south-west is by far the most experienced as bringing rain and heavy gales.”

Yet we are told “judging from results the climate of this parish may be considered highly conducive to health.”

And though many things have changed, one feature is unaltered – “Midges during the earlier Autumn months are considered to be both numerous and offensive, especially in the more wooded and sheltered localities along the coast.”

In 1935, when plans were presented for the extension to the building to form the church which we know today, Mr. J.B. Couper, of Tollard House, was quoted as saying “if these plans are carried out there would be, in Toward, a church second to none for beauty, on the Clyde.”

Many who have entered this sanctuary since that time would be inclined to agree, and many members, in this 150th year of its erection, pray that many generations to come will appreciate worship in this simply designed House of God, with its distinctive character, and set in one of the most attractive corners of Cowal.

Ministers at Toward

1855-56	Rev. James Stirling Muir
1856-63	Rev. Andrew Edgar
1863-79	Rev. James Geikie
1879-80	Rev. A.W. Wotherspoon
1880-83	Rev. D. McArthur
1883-85	Rev Alex Loudon
1858-92	Rev. Ronald MacDougall
1892-93	Rev. W. Swan
1893-94	Rev. J.S. Burns
1894-97	Rev. Gavin Warnock
1897-97	Rev. A.J. Marshall
1900-06	Rev. T. Murray Inglis
1906-09	Rev. Robert Muir
1909-18	Rev. M. Babington
1918-18	Rev. George Petrie

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1918-20	Rev. W.G. Brown
1920-22	Rev. William Thomson
1922-26	Rev. John Alexander
1926	Combined with Inverchaolain
1926-38	Rev. J. Scoular Thomson
1939-49	Rev. D. Graham Withycombe
1950-57	Rev. Donald Stewart
1957-58	Rev. David C. Allan
1958-76	Rev. Douglas Sommerville
1977-81	Rev. Iain Isdale
1981-86	Rev. Howard G. Taylor
1987-	Rev. Hugh C. Conkey

Session Clerks

1937-50	Duncan Mackay
1950-62	W. Wright
1964-65	R. Peden
1965-74	T. Brown
1975-78	W. Baillie
1978-81	J. Abercrombie
1981-84	H.J. Campbell
1984-87	E.M. Elliot
1987-04	N. Anderson
2004-	Mrs. E. McIntyre

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