

## **Disruption at Kilninver 1843**

Martin Petrie, Kilninver

Anyone travelling on the Oban to Lochgilphead road may catch a glimpse of the Old Kirk, Kilninver. As part of my job I welcome holidaymakers into the building that sits partially hidden in trees near the shore of Loch Feochan. Many of those visitors ask about the building and I regularly answer that it used to be the Free Church and was built about 1863. Being interested in local history I felt I should know more, but it wasn't until a conversation with my mother and the discovery of a family connection that I began to look into church history. I already knew from the Annals of the Free Church that the congregation had been formed at the Disruption and was put under the charge of the minister of Kilbrandon.

To help understand the local picture you have to take into account what was happening nationally. A large proportion of the Church of Scotland's troubles can be traced back to the 1712 Patronage Act that allowed landowners the right to choose ministers over the congregation's wishes. Evangelical factions grew within the church and finally gained a majority at the 1832 General Assembly. The resulting 1834 Veto Act gave parishioners rights to reject a minister nominated by their patron and therefore put church constitution in direct conflict with civil government. After ten years of conflict the Evangelical party adopted their Claim of Right and presented their grievances to Parliament, but this was rejected in January 1843. Things were now on a collision course with the church's spiritual independence at stake and the most serious breach of unity within the Church of Scotland was imminent. After reading the protesting statement the outgoing Moderator Dr. Welsh led around 200 ministers out of the Assembly at St. Andrew's Church, George Street, Edinburgh on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May 1843. Crowds thronged the streets as they made their way to Tanfield Hall a mile away to establish the Free Church of Scotland and duly installed Thomas Chalmers as their first Moderator<sup>1</sup>. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May the Act of Separation and Deed of Demission was signed and almost 450 ministers effectively gave away their manse, church and livelihoods<sup>2</sup>. So there began the work of raising money for a new wave of church building across the country that included a Sustenation fund of a penny a week from the dissenting parishioners and the gradual establishment of that familiar picture of multiple churches in the community.

At Kilninver, Donald Campbell the 83-year-old retired Church of Scotland minister had died in January 1843 and with his successor John Ferguson (also the schoolmaster) dying back in 1841 the parish may not have yet appointed a new minister by time of the disruption. The Statistical Account of the time reports only a few dissenting families, but it had been John Ferguson who had written part of the statistical entry. By August 1843 the Breadalbane factor, James Heggie Mudie was offering to fix up the old schoolhouse next to the church to be used as a temporary meeting place for the Free Church. On 31<sup>st</sup> August the Rev. Colin Hunter was admitted and appointed to the Church of Scotland at Kilninver. He was one of a number of ministers who had originally joined the Free Church, but later withdrew. On the 14<sup>th</sup> November of that year the Rev. Hunter wrote to Laurence Davidson W.S. protesting to the Marquis<sup>3</sup> about using the schoolhouse for the dissenters and Hunter was shocked that during his latest sacrament at Kilninver Mr MacPherson from Kilbrandon had preached as close to his church as he possibly could and it had resulted in much improper bickering between the two sides almost to the point of being out of control. The Rev Hunter was sure the Marquis wouldn't sanction any schoolhouse proposal as it would "mar the peace" of the Lord's Day. McPherson had certainly been provocative, perhaps against Hunter's withdrawal from the Free Church.

Lord Breadalbane was becoming a leading supporter of the Free Church. On 23<sup>rd</sup> November Mudie had received word from the Free Church Building Committee in Glasgow thanking the Marquis for authorising the furnishing of a tent for 500 to 600 in the neighbouring Kilbrandon Parish.<sup>4</sup> The following year, April 1844 Mr McPherson wrote to the Marquis worrying over the need for a permanent place of worship. He complained the tent would not stay up in the storms and most of the last winter's services were out in the open.

Looking through the Kilninver and Kilmelford Free Kirk Session records there was church business at other locations such as at Ardnahua on Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> November 1847. After catechising by the elders, John McCallum and Euphemia Graham were found guilty of fornication. After being put to shame in front of the congregation, they were absolved of their guilt and an end put to the matter and prayers were said. Many of the early entries were of a similar nature and often signed by Donald McGillivray.<sup>5</sup> The Annals say a temporary place was used up until 1852 when that was no longer available. The records of Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> July 1849 show a new

church opening with 34 communicants but this could relate to Kilmelford rather than Kilninver. Robert Stevenson plans were drawn up in 1852 for Kilninver Free Church but the church was not completed until 1863. One 1855 map marks a church on the present site, so perhaps there was a temporary building at the same site, and Lord Breadalbane or Mudie had picked a dominant but less sensitive site than the old schoolhouse. Many dissenting ministers had a miserable time being denied access to the land by opposing landowners.



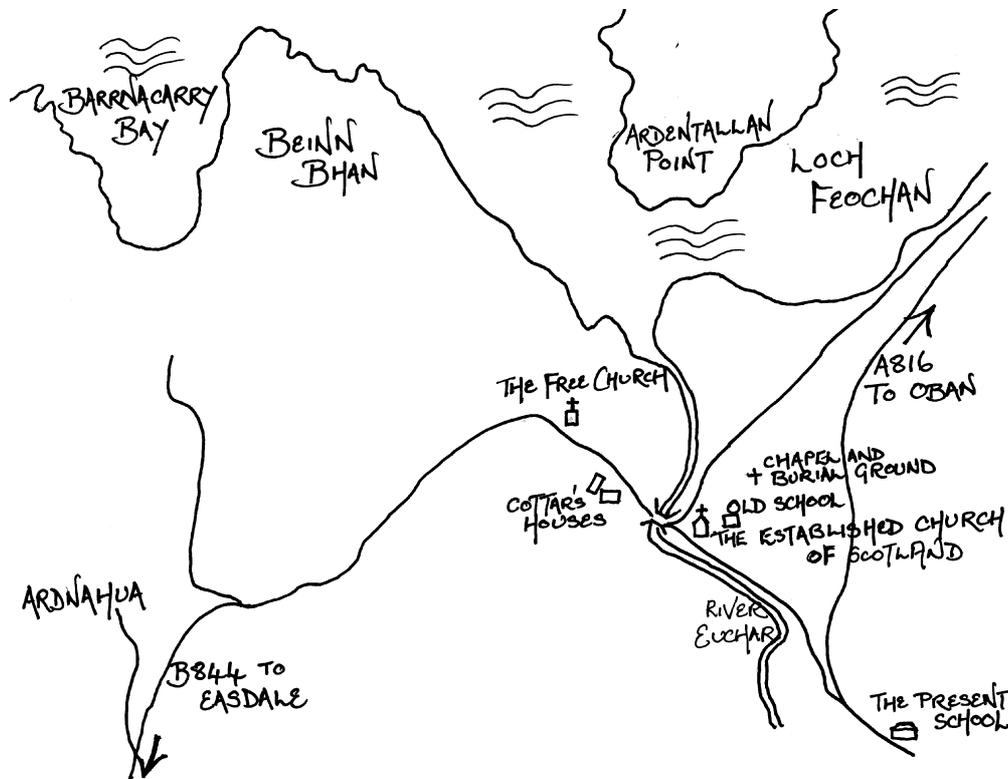
View over cottar houses at Kilninver post office towards the Free Church c1880. Sketch from an 1870's photograph by May Petrie.

Returning to the national scene, after a succession of unions and church wounds beginning to heal, it became the United Free Church in 1900 and the final reunification with the Church of Scotland came in 1929. After this date official records stop, although some Kilninver locals still went to the "Free Kirk" to swell numbers and there was much socialising on the knoll beside the church. The Clarks of Kilninver used the Post Office porch for prayers, as they were perhaps the last true members of the Free Church in the area. One local resident recalls services as a boy and being put out as giggling and capering started whilst listening to the squeaky voice of Rev. Ferguson of Kilbrandon. Another story claims the last time the church was

used had been in the early 1960's but there may be some dispute on that one.

My mother informed me her uncle's house in Blairgowrie had been called 'Kilinver' and the spelling of it had always bothered her. After speaking to her cousin the story unfolded that her uncle's father had been a gamekeeper at Kilninver. Her uncle, Ian MacAndrew had been born at Keeper's Cottage, Kilninver. To me the spelling does not seem strange as you hear Obanites pronouncing it in just such a way. Perhaps neither pronunciation is wrong just Gaelic influences and dialect differences. I was pleased to find the MacAndrew parents on the Communion rolls of the United Free Church from 1909 to 1917. In 1916 the communion list had only 23 names.

By the 1970's Kilninver estate had acquired the building that had been broken into at one point with brass fittings being stolen. Apparently it had a pinkish interior and the pulpit was rotten. In a conversion, the floor was jacked up 18ins so that the occupants could get the benefit of the fine views, to make it into the popular 8 bed self-catering unit that it is today. So the Old Kirk at Kilninver turns out to be the young Kirk.



Locations of the old Free Church and of the current Established Church of Scotland.

## **Bibliography**

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## **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Chalmers. A Calvinist, he was an expert organizer, popular evangelical preacher and writer of great standing. He was Moderator of the Church of Scotland in 1832 and was well prepared for the schism of 1843.

<sup>2</sup> 444 Ministers were reported as having protested by the Scotsman on 29<sup>th</sup> May 1843 although a list of 386 was published at the time. The dissenting ministers had not completely rejected the principle of Establishment. Some evangelicals stayed within the Established Church hoping to retain some unity.

<sup>3</sup> Sir John Campbell, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Marquess of Breadalbane. His vast land holdings stretched from Loch Tay to the Isle of Luing. A Liberal M.P. for Perthshire from 1832 to 1834 when he succeeded to title and he later held government office. From 1839 to 1862 he was Lord Lieutenant of Argyllshire. In 1842 he had entertained Queen Victoria and Prince Albert at his grandest property, Taymouth Castle.

<sup>4</sup> Laurence Davidson W.S. of Davidson and Syme had received written accusations that factor Mudie oppresses Established Church members.

<sup>5</sup> Ministers who signed free kirk session books:

Donald McGillvary 1844 - 1892

George Murray 1894 - 1902

Hugh Gunn 1903 - 1912

Iain.M.Fraser 1912 – 1923