

The History of Bonhill Parish Church

By William Scobie

Dedicated to the memory of Jimmy and Lizzie Baxter
of Bridge Street, Alexandria

“In the beginning was the Word”

In truth, the history of Bonhill Church began on a hillside in Galilee around 30 A.D., when Jesus gave his disciples their “Great Commission” –

“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” (Matthew 28:19)

It was then only a matter of time before the people who lived by the River Leven became members of Christ’s universal Church. Exactly when and how the Gospel first reached this community we cannot honestly say. There were several paths by which the Good News of the Kingdom of God may have been brought to our valley.

To begin with Christianity spread quickly throughout the Roman Empire. Agricola's first Scottish campaign commenced in 79 A.D. and for a time (142 A.D. to circa 165 A.D.) the Antonine wall was the northern frontier of the Roman province of Britain. The Vale of Leven, only a few miles beyond the wall's western terminus, was well within the influence of the Empire. In fact modern historians calculate that there may even have been a Roman fort located on the banks of the Leven. If so it would have been a link in a chain of garrisons along the highland line which were manned by Roman soldiers within a lifetime of the Crucifixion.

It is entirely possible, therefore, (although we have no evidence to confirm it) that from soldiers of the Empire, Roman officials or Mediterranean merchants, Vale folk could have received their first word of the Christian Faith within a few generations of the Gospel events.

Christianity became the official religion of the Empire long before the Romans left Britain in 410 A.D., and it is known that a British Church was established as early as the 3rd century. For some time the capital of the Britons of Strathclyde was Dumbarton and the people of the Leven would have included Britons. The territory of Strathclyde extended from Loch Lomond, in the north, to Morecambe Bay, in the south.

Two great missionaries were Britons. Saint Patrick (385 A.D. to 461 A.D.), who Christianized Ireland, and Saint Ninian (360 A.D. to 432 A.D.), who, from an existing Christian community in Whithorn, Galloway, evangelized the Southern Picts.

Given the missionary endeavour of Saint Ninian with the nearby Southern Picts and the enduring and widely-held belief that Saint Patrick himself had been born to a Christian family at or near to Dumbarton, it would be strange indeed if the Faith had not taken some hold by this time in the valley of the Leven.

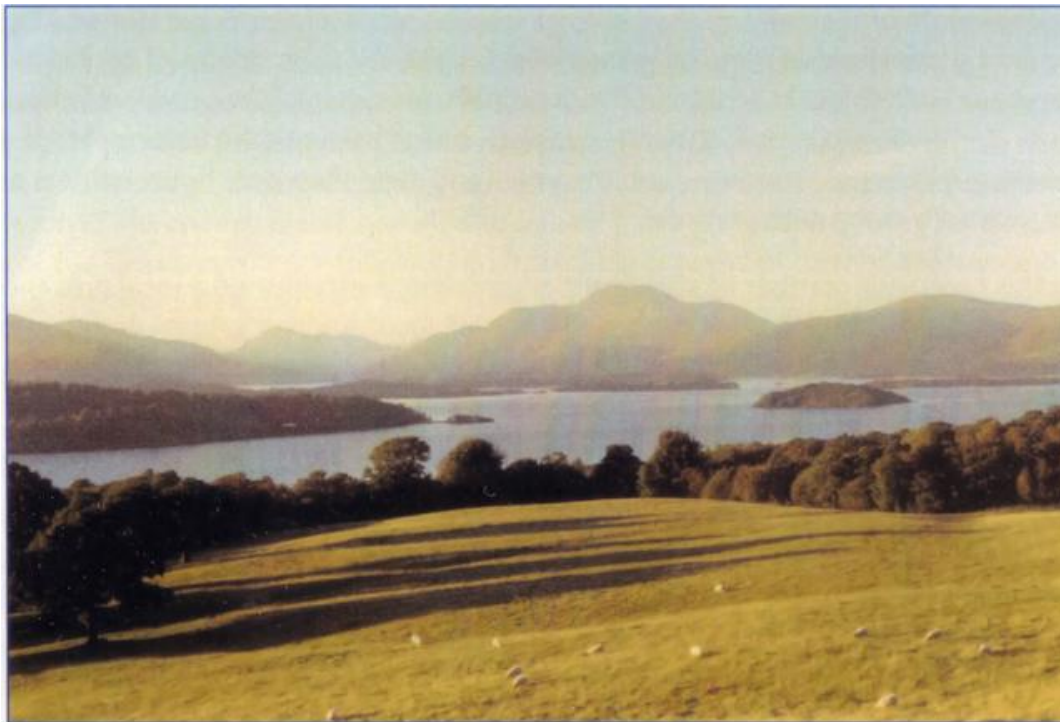
A disciple of Saint Patrick (and a fellow-Briton who may also have been born locally) was Saint Mahew. He carried-out his ministry around these parts early in the 6th century and founded a church at Cardross, overlooking the Clyde. Today, on that precise location, there stands a beautiful little 15th century chapel which remains a living centre of worship.

We are given to understand that Saint Mahew was the spiritual teacher of another highly important local servant of God. Some accounts of Saint Kessog have it, curiously, that he too was a locally-reared Briton, but a heavier weight of tradition would have him a descendant of Irish royalty. However that may have been, indications are that Saint Mahew passed on to Saint Kessog

responsibility for the on-going missionary endeavour in that area which was to be known as the Lennox - roughly what we know as Dunbartonshire, but of rather greater extent.

Saint Kessog's seat was the island of Inchtavannach (Isle of the Monks) on Loch Lomond, near Luss. Indeed, at Luss the present church remains dedicated to him. Kessog became a bishop and the Patron Saint of the Lennox.

Interestingly (and we do not know why), Kessog appears to have been an archer and he was revered as a "warrior-saint". He is depicted, for example, in the Roman Catholic Church of Saint Kessog, in Balloch, in military garb with bow and arrows. So significant was he in this particular role that, centuries after Kessog's death, Robert the Bruce kindled the spirit of his Scots army with the inspiration of the saint's memory on the occasion of the Battle of Bannockburn, the climax of the Scottish Wars of Independence.



Loch Lomond and Her Islands

Two years later the king established "to God and the blessed Kessog" an area of three miles around Luss Kirk as sanctuary within which no person, whatever crime they may have committed, could be arrested.

Saint Kessog appears to have died a violent death, either murdered at Bandry Bay, just south of Luss, or (as would befit a warrior-saint) in battle. We do well to remember that his was an age in which the spiritual and martial forces of Christian peoples and those of older pagan religions were yet pitted against each other in epic conflict, with much ebb and flow over the centuries.

It is a great part of our rich spiritual heritage that the islands upon, and the lands around, Loch Lomond are steeped in close association with the Celtic Church and her saints - Saint Mahew, Saint Kessog, Saint Kentigerna, Saint Ronan... Of the presence and the Christian labours of these great souls in our district there can be little reasonable doubt, but it requires to be said that, when it comes to the saints of the Celtic Church, much of what is handed down to us is tradition rather than history in the strictest and most academic sense. Yet it is surely fair to say also that these traditions, if they give us not the very letter, do give us the spirit of truth.

In summary, then, we may conclude that the Gospel of Christ reached the valley of the River Leven by a path which was trod by Roman soldiers and eastern traders, by Christian Britons such as Saint Patrick and Saint Mahew, then by the Celtic Church in the persons of Saint Kessog and those who followed him.

*“And He saith unto them, Follow me,
and I will make you fishers of men.”*

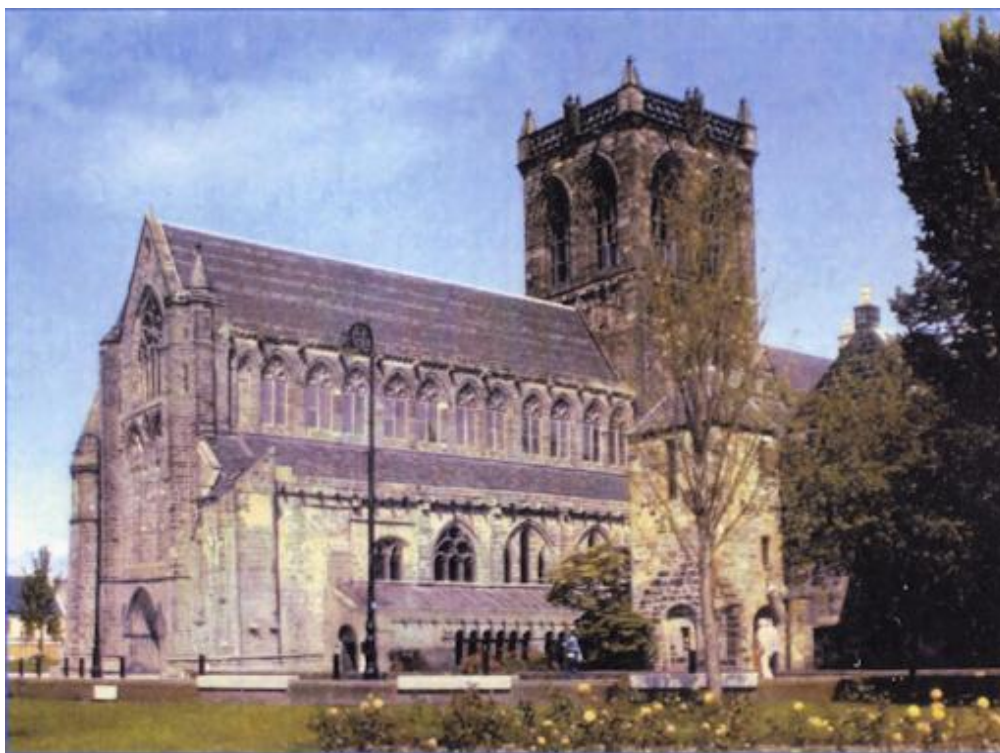
From the 12th century everyone in Scotland was embraced by the international Catholic Church, a spiritual empire which took in all of Western Europe. Its centre of power was Rome and it was the most extensive and efficient administrative body of its time. For political reasons Scottish bishops answered directly to the Pope (rather than to archbishops, as elsewhere). Accordingly Scotland was known as a “Special Daughter” of the Church.

Power in that age was shared between the Church and the Crown. The feudal system was introduced to Scotland by the Royal House of Canmore under Anglo-Saxon influence. This brought about changes which were not only social, economic and military, but also ecclesiastic. With feudalism came the diocesan and monastic organization of the Church. This created the Parish of Bonhill which was within the Deanery of Lennox which, in turn, belonged to the Diocese of Glasgow.

At this time the Vale of Leven would have been sparsely populated and entirely rural. The people lived under the authority of the Earls of Lennox who, in all likelihood, would have built the mediaeval parish church of Bonhill. We cannot say that this was on the site of an earlier Celtic place of worship, but this must be a distinct possibility. Different theories have been put forward as to the derivation of the name “Bonhill”. It has been spelt in various ways over the centuries, but is said to come from Gaelic words meaning “the foot of the burn”, the original community having clustered around the confluence of the River

Leven and the burn which flows down from Pappert Hill on the eastern side of the valley.

Monasticism was originally an eastern concept. It was adopted by some early Christians in the deserts of Egypt. Saint Martin of Tours (who greatly influenced Saint Ninian, founder of Scotland's first monastery) helped to introduce monasticism from the east to Western Christendom. The Cluniac Order of monks was founded in Burgundy in 909, with the initial purpose of reforming the earlier Benedictine Order. In 1163 Walter Fitzalan, High Steward of Scotland (the descendants of whom would become the Royal Stewart dynasty) founded Paisley Abbey. Dedicated to Saint Mirren, it was to be a house of Cluniac monks.



Paisley Abbey

On St. Valentine's Day 1273 Earl Malcolm, 4th of Lennox, gave grants of land and the fishing rights to Linnbrane Pool on the River Leven to the monks of Paisley. Here in the Parish of Bonhill, they maintained dwellings, netted salmon and operated a ferry. To this day the site is known as "Dalmonach" - the field of the monks. Their work and example we must presume, would have introduced a fresh spiritual current to revitalize the legacy of the Celtic missionaries of previous centuries.

During the 15th century around twenty collegiate churches were founded in Scotland. Generally these were established by wealthy, landed patrons. Their

main purpose was the perpetual saying of prayers and masses for the souls of the founder and those of his or her family. "College" in this sense, it is helpful to remember, comes from the Latin and means a community of priests.

In the year 1425 Duke Murdoch of Albany, his sons Walter and Alexander, along with Duncan, Earl of Lennox, were beheaded at Stirling Castle. They had been charged with treason. James the First of Scots had become king aged eleven. Captured at sea by the English, he spent nineteen years in captivity. During this time his relatives, the Stewarts of Albany, took over the governance of Scotland. When James was eventually released he returned to Scotland apparently convinced that the House of Albany had not only done very little to expedite his release, but was in fact a rival power. Hence the executions.

Duke Murdoch's wife was the Lady Isabella, who was also the daughter of the Earl of Lennox, thus she was Duchess of Albany and then Countess of Lennox. Considered guilty by association, she was imprisoned in Tantallon Castle, East Lothian, and later "retired" to the island of Inchmurrin (believed to be named after Paisley's Saint Mirren) on Loch Lomond.

On May 11th 1453, the Countess of Lennox was granted by the baillies, council and burgesses of Dumbarton the Chapel of the Blessed Virgin Mary for the purpose of creating a collegiate church the provost and six priests of which would say continual masses and prayers for the souls of her executed father, husband and sons. The collegiate church (situated where Dumbarton Central railway station presently stands) would have been a grand and prestigious presence and probably the pride of the Burgh of Dumbarton because, in a sense, collegiate churches were like small cathedrals. We know that attached to it there were a mansion house for its provost, manses for the priests, a hospital (or almshouse) for the poor, and it was surrounded by a garden and orchards. It had also a "sang schule" in which young students were given an education in spiritual music.

To maintain its upkeep Saint Mary's was granted the revenues of certain churches, one of which was Bonhill. It was further endowed with farmlands such as those in upper Bonhill which, because of their resulting association with Our Lady, became known as "Ladyton" - hence the name of the present Bonhill housing scheme.

With the Reformation, around 1560, the collegiate church was no longer able to function. It was seriously vandalized and thereafter treated as a quarry, with many of its stones being used in the construction of some of the town's houses. It is satisfying to record, however, that one of the tower arches of the Collegiate Church of Saint Mary now stands with quiet dignity in the gardens of

Dumbarton's Municipal Buildings.

Countess Isabella's love of her men-folk, and her concern for their souls, expressed in the founding of her collegiate church, introduced a new relationship with a different dimension of faith to the Christian community of Bonhill.

***“Take these things hence;
make not my Father's house an house of merchandise.”***

Just as no human being is infallible, so no human organization is faultless. By the beginning of the 16th century the degree of corruption within the Roman Catholic Church had reached a critical point. There were plenty of godly and able people at all levels in the Church but too many leading clerics lusted after power and wealth, living worldly lives and leaving parish priests with neither the means nor the education to satisfy the spiritual needs of their congregations. To its credit the Church acknowledged some of its failings and made attempts to correct them. For many, however, it appeared to be too little, too late.

In 1517 Pope Leo X was raising money by the sale of indulgences. That is to say, the Church was claiming to effect the immediate release of souls from purgatory on payment of cash. A priest of the Augustinian Order was so offended by this that he nailed a notice of ninety-five theses, in objection, to the door of his church in the German town of Wittenberg. In this way Martin Luther provided the spark which ignited the Reformation.

In essence the Reformers rejected Papal authority, stressed justification by faith rather than by works, held to the priesthood of all believers and insisted on the supreme authority of Holy Scripture. These ideas spread swiftly throughout much of Europe.

The Reformation in Scotland can be said to have begun in reaction to the martyrdom of Patrick Hamilton and of George Wishart. Both men were burned at the stake at the insistence of the Roman Catholic authorities for preaching the ideas of the Reformation. In all twenty-one persons were executed in Scotland for Protestant beliefs between 1528 and 1558. Countless more fled into exile.

Under the leadership of John Knox the Reformation triumphed in Scotland in 1560. It was the hope of the Reformers to return to the ways of the early Church. They rejected the power structures of Rome and introduced a more democratic system of Church government. People were allowed to read and interpret the Bible printed in their own language, rather than listen to the Latin

of the priest. A new form of Church service and discipline was introduced in the elected elders and Kirk Session, based on the New Testament precedent (Acts 14:23), preaching became much more important and the introduction of parish schools was set in hand.

Although inspired by the consciences of sincere Christians and paid for in martyrs' blood, the Reformation was not all goodness and light. As with any revolution it gave expression to some of the worst aspects of human nature. There was comparatively little bloodshed arising from the Scottish Reformation, but much deplorable vandalism and destruction of Church art and architecture. Some of the nobility sided with the Reformers, not for reasons of sincerely held belief, but so as to get their hands on Church property. Indeed, so successful were they in this that two thirds of the wealth of the old Church ended up with the landed gentry (rather than going to the Reformed parishes as had been hoped). Thus the Reformers were not able to fulfill all of their ambitions.

The first Provost of Dumbarton's collegiate church had been George Abernethy, who happened to be the nephew of the Countess of Lennox. He had lived very comfortably off the revenues of various parishes (including Bonhill), while a poorly-paid vicar (answerable to the Bishop of Glasgow) struggled to do his best for an equally impoverished congregation. Abernethy, who as a priest should have been celibate, was in fact succeeded as Provost by his son, Walter. In this we have a local (albeit mild) example of the sort of abuses which in part fuelled the Reformation.

The Deanery of Lennox became the Presbytery of Dumbarton and to begin with after the Reformation there were not enough trained ministers to go round, so many parishes were served by "readers". These were laymen who were able to read the service and deliver homilies which had been prepared for them by an ordained minister. One of the earliest readers at Bonhill was Ninian Galt in 1567, and it illustrates how this role has endured that Bonhill's minister was assisted by reader John McCutcheon, in 2006. The parish's first Reformed minister was George Lindsay whose ministry spanned the years 1599 to 1616.

To a great extent the Reformation shaped the way things have been done in Bonhill Parish Church to this day. Although imperfect it was a fresh and powerful wave of cleansing and rejuvenating spiritual energy.

With the Reformation the Church *in* Scotland may be said to have become the Church *of* Scotland, but this must not be misunderstood. The congregation of Bonhill belongs first to the universal Church of Christ, to its Reformed part secondly, and is Scottish thirdly. Our Father's House has many mansions. Not from the very beginning has the Christian Church spoken (or sung) with one

voice. At Bonhill the focus is on those essential beliefs which are shared by all Christians. The congregation is instinctively and actively ecumenical. A sincere welcome and the hand of friendship are extended to all.

***“Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's;
and unto God the things which are God's.”***

Arising from the Reformation, the Scots Kirk took the position that it recognized only one head, neither pope nor king, but the Lord Jesus Christ, and that it would govern its own affairs democratically through the General Assembly of its ministers and elders. The king would rule in temporal matters, the Kirk in things spiritual.

James VI was a fascinating man and a most significant monarch. In his person he united the crowns of Scotland and England. He gave the world the “Authorized Version” of the Bible, the influence of which is incalculable. James held, however, to a notion of the “Divine Right” of kings to absolute rule over Church as well as State, his attitude being expressed – “No bishop, no king.” and “The bishops must rule the ministers, and the king rule both.” The stage was therefore set for a bitter and often violent struggle between the Scots Presbyterians and the Stuart monarchy which was to last for 130 years (1560-1690).

In 1584 King James imposed the Episcopal system with its bishops on his Scots subjects. His son, Charles I, became head of the Church of England and considered it his right to be head of the Church of Scotland. It was his further intention to force the Scots into the same forms of worship as the English. To this end he attempted to impose the “Book of Canons” (effectively an English prayer book which included Roman-style ritual) on Scotland. This provoked the “National Covenant” of 1638.

The signing of this powerful document commenced in the kirkyard of Greyfriars, Edinburgh, and very soon copies were being signed by all classes of Scots throughout the length and breadth of the land. While insisting on loyalty to the king, the Covenant made it clear that Scots Presbyterians would reject any return to Roman ideas and methods, that they were determined not to be swallowed up into the Church of England, and that they would defend to the utmost the independence of the Kirk. Those who signed the Covenant, and who lived and died according to its spirit, became known as the Covenanters.

The General Assembly of 1638 abolished Episcopacy and there followed a long and complex period of warfare (made more complicated by the English Civil War). Although Charles II signed the Covenant in 1650, in order to be crowned

King of Scots, he reneged on this in 1660 and yet again Episcopacy was imposed on Scotland. It was at this time that the Covenanters walked out of churches which had been compromised in this way in order to worship freely in open-air “conventicles”.

Three hundred Presbyterian ministers were evicted from their own churches, homes and livelihoods by the government for refusing to conform. At first to preach at a conventicle was punishable by death. Later to simply attend a conventicle was also a capital offence.

Savage persecution of Covenanters ensued. Much blood was spilled in the name of Christ. The Presbyterians were, however, divided among themselves. Most were men and women of sincere and courageous principle, but there were among them, it must be recorded, some murderous fanatics. It should be remembered that these were times when, in general, religious tolerance or willing compromise could not be expected from one persuasion or another.

Bonhill Parish had its Covenanters. One was John Bredin, an elder of the Kirk. He and his family were much persecuted simply because they refused to attend the church services which had been officially sanctioned by the government. They worshipped secretly at the forbidden field conventicles. Bredin survived. Robert Nairn did not.

Nairn was a local shoemaker who lived at Napierston. Military and Civil power was brought to bear on the Nairn family. For not attending the services of the Episcopal minister who had been placed over the Bonhill congregation Nairn was at first fined. Then his home was frequently looted by soldiers.

Nairn’s wife was imprisoned, his children abused and Robert was forced to flee to the open moorland above the valley of the Leven. He was hunted and fired upon by dragoons from Dumbarton Castle. Although aided by courageous friends and neighbours, Robert Nairn, alone on the hill throughout a merciless winter, finally succumbed to starvation and the elements in April 1685.

The persecution of the Nairn family did not end with Robert’s death. The Reverend William McKechnie, minister of Bonhill Church at that time, was a man courageous in his own principles. Loyal to the Stuart king, McKechnie felt unable to permit Nairn to be buried within the church graveyard. Only when local people took matters into their own hands did Nairn find a resting place in the kirk-yard.



Kirk from the Tomb

Robert Nairn, by the best possible definition, died a martyr. This particular Covenanter is remembered and revered for his heroic contribution to the religious heritage of Bonhill Parish.

At the terrible price of many thousands of lives the Covenanters were, in the end, victorious. With the Revolution Settlement of 1690 the Stuart conceit of a “Divine Right” to rule over the Kirk was finally extinguished. Our present Queen Elizabeth was the thirteenth successive monarch to swear in the Accession Oath that she would “...inviolably maintain and preserve the worship, discipline, rights and privileges of the Church of Scotland.”

We may picture a small village in a country parish of no more than four hundred souls. Where the burn flows into the river a cluster of buildings is set astride the Dumbarton - Stirling road, and through this hamlet runs the cattle drove trail which has wound from Argyllshire, forded the Leven, and will reach out over the eastward hills to Falkirk market.

The kirk is a small, spartan building set a little way from the river. High in the branches of a tree in the churchyard there hangs a bell inscribed:

*“Furnished by the Heritors, Minister, Kirk Session
and Parishioners of Bonhill 1712.”*

The eighteenth century was an age of dramatic and far-reaching change, internationally, nationally and within this parish. This was the century of the Union of the Scots and English parliaments, Jacobite uprisings, the American and French Revolutions, and the Industrial Revolution. A time of profound political, social and philosophical challenge.

The Union of the Parliaments in 1707 was considered wise and progressive by a wealthy few and an outrageous betrayal by the many of ordinary Scots folk. The Church of Scotland opposed the Union. Passions were expressed by rioting in the towns and the commissioners who had voted the Union into being were reviled as having been bribed. Fortunately the Scots legal and judicial system remained independent and the treaty included a guarantee that the Scots Kirk would remain presbyterian.

In the first half of the century there were several unsuccessful attempts to return the Stuarts to the throne. The unpopularity of the Union acted as a recruiting agent for the Jacobites. The hope of recovering Scottish independence was linked to the Stuart cause and many lowlanders joined with those highland clans which fought in these rebellions. “Saint Andrew and No Union” was engraved on the blades of some Jacobite swords.

The uprising of 1715 touched Bonhill parish in a dramatic way. On Michaelmas Day (29th September) a Jacobite force of some three hundred men, led by Rob Roy MacGregor’s nephew, Gregor Ghlun Dhubh (Black Knee), carried out a raid deep into the lands of the Duke of Montrose. Their prime objective was to secure all the sailing craft and the estuaries in the south of Loch Lomond, which included the rivers Endrick and Leven. At midnight a party sailed from the island of Inchmurrin, down the Leven into Bonhill. The folk of the village, who for the greater part had more reason to fear the clansmen than support them, sounded the alarm throughout the district by ringing the kirk-bell. Dumbarton Castle was alerted and warning cannon were fired. The MacGregors, having accomplished their main objective, withdrew to Inchmurrin.

Jacobite ambitions perished on the field of Culloden in 1746. They have been presented to us in a romantic light. They were colourful and heroic. They represented that Celtic spirit of independence which survives yet somewhere in the Scottish soul, but theirs was a cause which, if successful, would in all probability have brought back Episcopalianism or Roman Catholicism. Accordingly the Church of Scotland took the Hanoverian side.

Tobias Smollett of Bonhill, novelist and poet, used his pen to liken this valley to idyllic ancient Greece:

*“On Leven’s banks, while free to rove,
and tune the rural pipe to love;
I envied not the happiest swain
That ever trod th’Arcadian plain.”*

Smollett was born in 1721, yet six years earlier an innovation had appeared which was to change Bonhill parish and the Vale of Leven profoundly and forever. The pure, swift-flowing water of the River Leven, fed by highland burns and surrounded as it was by wide, flat fields, provided the ideal setting for cloth-bleaching. At Dalquhurn, near the village we now know as Renton, the first of the valley’s bleach-fields was established. This was the beginning of a textile industry which would expand massively and become the dominant economic reality of the several communities which, largely arising from it, would come to flourish on Levenside. An industry and an art-form which would sustain and endure for well over two hundred years. During the eighteenth century the population of Bonhill parish trebled. Highlanders from Argyll and Perthshire were drawn to work in the bleach-fields and that which had been quietly rural became aggressively industrial.

“In that hour Jesus rejoiced in spirit, and said, I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.”

It was during this century that the “Enlightenment” took place. Science and Philosophy persuaded many leading European thinkers (some of them Scots) in the precocious conceit that Man’s intellect could answer all the questions and solve all the problems of the human condition. These men, and those who were influenced by them, came to look upon the Bible and traditional Christian beliefs with a critical eye. During the reign of terror, at the time of the French Revolution, the “Goddess of Reason” was enthroned on the altar of Notre Dame and atheism was encouraged.

In Scotland religious “Moderates” took the ascendancy. They considered enthusiasm in the Faith to be inappropriate (recalling the violent excesses of previous centuries). They were scholarly rather than passionate. They contributed much which was reasonable and accommodating. The emphasis of their sermons tended toward moral behaviour and their tone suited the landed gentry.

Against the Moderates were ranged the Evangelicals. They seem to have been more in tune with the instincts of the majority of ordinary parishioners, favouring a more robust and traditional Gospel faith. Inspired by revivals, such as that of Cambuslang in 1742, they held to the Christian duty of spreading the word and bringing souls to Christ.

There was, beyond the spiritual, a political dimension to this divergence. In 1712 the Patronage Act had returned to landowners the right to “present” ministers of their choice to those parishes which lay within their estates. This was in breach of the Act for the Security of the Scottish Church and it was strongly resented by many. The Evangelicals were opposed to it. It led, in 1733, to the break-away Secession Church and, in 1761, to the Relief Church. Although Bonhill ministers were presented to, rather than imposed upon, their congregation, over a hundred parishioners elected to travel to the Relief Church at Gartocharn or the Secession Church in Renton.

A church was built in 1747 to replace the 1643 kirk, the bell of which had sounded to warn the parish against the Jacobite MacGregors. In 1797 another replacement building was erected.

There were two particularly long-serving ministers at Bonhill in the eighteenth century. The Reverends John Baine and Gordon Stewart, who were presented to the parish by the Duke of Montrose, were Moderates.

It is unfortunate that the most enduring portrait of the Kirk Session of this time comes from the pen of Robert Burns in his brilliant satirical caricature “Holy Willie’s Prayer”. Burns himself was fined and sat upon the stool of repentance, being publicly rebuked for sexual conduct which would have been generally frowned upon as recently as the 1960s. His view of church discipline was not that of an objective third party. Kirk Sessions did have the power to impose fines and, in extreme cases (as they saw it) suspend Church membership. Such a sanction in those days could have serious social and even economic implications. The Session did act as a moral police force. No doubt this was seen as no more or no less than Christian duty and it may well be that, on balance, communities were the better for it. These things should properly be regarded within the context of their time. Another genius who lived during those years was the painter Goya. He was interrogated by the Spanish Inquisition because it considered his art to be dangerous and immoral. Their methods were somewhat more severe than those of Scots Kirk Sessions.

Although Burns was critical of certain elements in the Church of Scotland, we know from his poems and letters that he was a sincere Christian believer. It may be that the rich and educated friends of the poet felt that they should be above

the law of Church discipline. The clergy themselves certainly were not. An Aberdeenshire minister, for example, was made to appear before his presbytery for powdering his wig on the Lord's Day.

Long before the State took over administration of such matters, Kirk Sessions were responsible, in association with local heritors (landed proprietors), for the provision of education. Thus Bonhill parish was provided, during this eighteenth century, with a schoolmaster and school-house on each side of the Leven, to cope with an expanding population, at Cameron on the west side (thanks to James Smollett of Bonhill) and at the Mill Dam of Balloch on the east (thanks to Lord Stonefield). According to respected local historian, Dr. Iain MacPhail, "The standard of education in Scotland at the end of the 18th century was almost certainly higher than in any other country in the world."

The Session, seldom more than six men, worked diligently to relieve hardship within the parish through the Poor Relief Fund. No doubt hypocrisy and self-satisfaction of the "Holy Willie" variety did exist. Elders were (and are) but human. There is, however, no reason to doubt the general integrity of those who served on Kirk Sessions. All aspects of such service - discipline, education and social care are witnessed in the eighteenth century records of Bonhill parish.

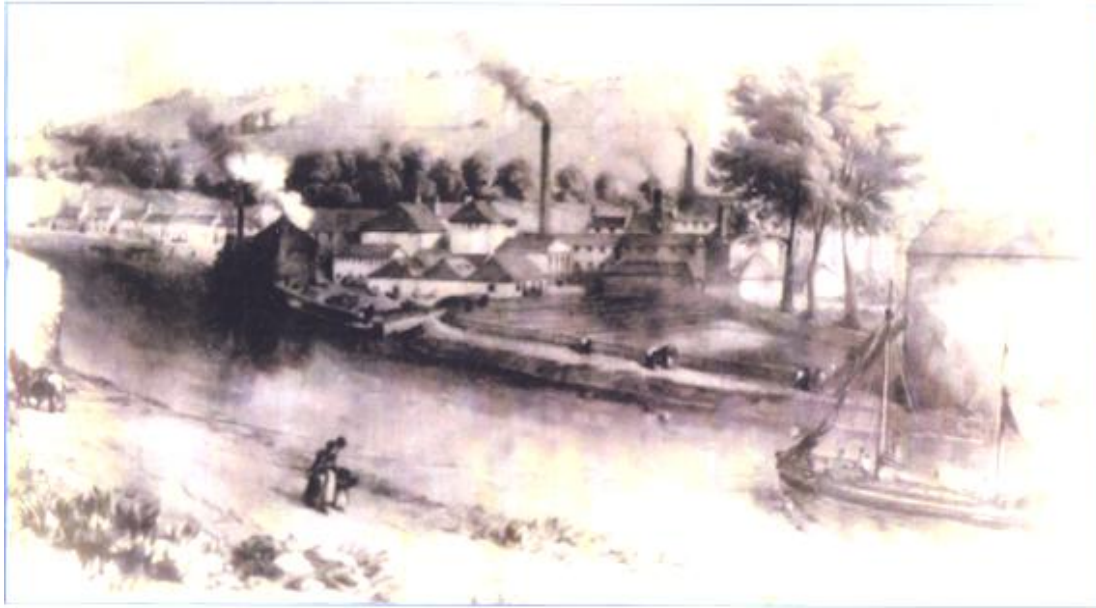
***"Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest,
that He will send forth labourers into his harvest."***

It was the century in which the generations of Bonhill parish, from being reluctant participants in the political union with England, became proud citizens of a mighty empire - the Second City of which was but twenty miles distant.

The nineteenth century was an age of phenomenal expansion and growth, of great scientific and technical advances with gigantic leaps in exploration and engineering. This was the era of iron and steel, coal and steam power. The new technology which emerged with the latter part of the Industrial Revolution made possible a vast increase in manufacturing production and the British Empire opened up enormous global markets. As a result factories proliferated and the working population soared.

As far as Bonhill parish and the Vale of Leven were concerned industry meant predominantly textiles - the bleaching, printing and dyeing of cloth, particularly calico printing and "Turkey Red" dyeing. The great quality of Turkey Red was its fastness. It could withstand bleaching and sunlight without losing its strength of colour. In 1827 Turkey Red dyeing commenced in Bonhill parish at the Croftengea Works of Messrs. Turnbull & Jones. The Vale of Leven companies

of William Stirling & Sons, John Orr Ewing and Archibald Orr Ewing quickly followed.



Old Kirk with Gabbart c 1838

Before long, acre upon acre of textile factories were built, densely-packed and with bristling chimney-stacks belching smoke - Dalquhurn and Cordale (Renton), Dillichip and the Wee Field (Bonhill), Dalmonach, Ferryfield and Croftengea (Alexandria), Milton and Levenbank (Jamestown). By the banks of the River Leven these Vale companies came to completely dominate the Turkey Red dyeing industry, exporting to India, the Far East, Pacific islands, Africa and South America. Interestingly, differing design patterns were required for each market depending on culture and taste. Often native motifs were reproduced. Agents from the Vale visiting and surveying their markets in India, for example, discovered that the Muslim peoples there disliked any designs which bore close resemblances to nature, while Hindu customers were particularly fond of peacock patterns.

During forty hard-working Victorian years the people of the Vale of Leven multiplied by thirty times the extent of their textile produce. This flourishing of industry inevitably led to the growth and shaping of local communities. Alexandria (named after local landowner, Lt. Col. Alexander Smollett) evolved around a general store, “The Grocery” which had stood almost in isolation beside an ancient oak, where the ornamental fountain now stands. This was on the west bank of the river, opposite the old village of Bonhill. Just as Alexandria’s streets grew around its textile works so, as indicated above, did those of Jamestown to the north and Renton to the south.



Levenbank Textile Works

During the eighteenth-century the means of communication were considerably improved. Although a bridge across the Leven had been built at Dumbarton in 1765, north of it the river could only be crossed by fords or ferries at Balloch and Bonhill. These were dangerous and, indeed, lives had been lost. However a Road Act, passed in 1834, gave landowners the right to erect bridges (and to charge for their use). Accordingly Admiral Smollett had a fine suspension bridge built at Bonhill (at the site of the present bridge) in 1836, and Sir James Colquhoun of Luss had another span the river at Balloch five years later.

Industry (and tourism) naturally attracted the railway. Previously goods had been transported by horse-drawn carts or by gabbarts (sailing barges) which plied from Loch Lomond, by the Leven, passing the church, to and from the Clyde ports with Highland trade. Timber from Balmaha, for example, was transported to Paisley by gabbart to be used to make bobbins for the thread which was manufactured there. The Vale's first railway line was laid between Bowling and Balloch by the North British Railway Company in 1850. In 1856 another line was built between Balloch and Stirling, then, two years later, the Bowling line was extended to Glasgow.

In 1817 the "Marion" had been the first paddle-steamer to sail on Loch Lomond and a Loch Lomond Steamboat Company was formed in 1825, its fleet accommodating the flourishing tourist trade which had discovered and made fashionable the natural beauty of the "Queen of Scots Lakes".

In 1846 a clean water tank was sited on Carman Hill. This being insufficient for the needs of the community, the Bonhill Parish Board arranged for a water supply from Loch Lomond which commenced in 1880. Gas lighting was provided for the streets of the parish from 1855.

The American and French Revolutions of the previous century, and the new industrial relationships between workers and employers, gave rise to an informed and keenly-felt political consciousness among the new working-class. More numerous schools and public libraries improved education and literacy, and brought about a closer awareness of the world of ideas and events. With the repeal of acts against trade unions in 1824, labour became more organized. Industrial relations were often bitter and occasionally violent.

The Victorian era was one of extreme class-consciousness. This was expressed in almost every sphere of living. Perhaps most visibly it manifested itself in the houses in which the different classes lived. There were low tenements for the cheap labour and their families (often slum dwellings), cottage sandstone villas for the managerial and professional classes, and impressive mansion houses set in acres of well-tended parkland for the owners. These prosperous men secured their interests in the London parliament and maintained a firm “paternal” hand on the parochial boards and the parish and county councils.

A Whig government introduced a Bill for the reform of parliamentary elections in 1831 and went to the country with it. During the resulting election campaign Lord William Graham (son of the Duke of Montrose) stood as a Conservative candidate. His effigy was hanged by the radical element of Bonhill.

In 1836 the Chartist movement was founded in London when a group of skilled workmen collaborated with left-wing M.P.s to draw up a “People's Charter” which had six principle demands - the vote for all men, voting by ballot, equal electoral districts, annual parliaments, no property requirements for M.P.s and M.P.s to be paid. Prior to the Reform Act of 1832 only those who owned substantial property had been allowed to vote, but this Act permitted only the middle classes to vote, and they saw the ambitions of the Chartists as dangerous and revolutionary. The Chartists became active throughout the country and were strongly supported in the Vale of Leven.

Throughout most of the century Dunbartonshire was represented in the United Kingdom parliament by local landed men, or industrialists. 1841-1868: Smolletts of Bonhill (Conservative), 1868-1892: Archibald Orr Ewing of Lennoxbank (Conservative), thereafter Alexander Wylie of Cordale (Liberal Unionist). It was not until the Reform Act of 1884 that working men - not

women - won the vote (and even then only householders and lodgers, not sons living with parents).

During this century a number of significant organizations established a local presence. By way of example, in 1826 the first meeting of Bonhill Saint Andrew's Royal Arch Lodge (Freemasons) was held, the Dunbartonshire Constabulary began serving the community in 1858, and the Vale of Leven Co-operative Society commenced its long and extensive local role in 1862.

In the year 1775 there had been 901 souls in the parish of Bonhill. By 1831 there were 3874. This greatly increased population, made possible mainly by demand for labour, meant that the existing Bonhill Parish Church building was simply no longer big enough. Situated too near the river it had also become structurally unsound. Work on a new church building commenced, therefore, in 1835 and was completed in the following year. Thus, in the year before Queen Victoria took the throne, the Glasgow architect John Baird gave us the present solid, enduring and quietly dignified church building in the gothic style.

It was the heritors - the local landed class - who funded this new place of worship. In a manner which (from the perspective of our own time) made a mockery of the democratic spirit of the Church of Scotland, the best seats in the church were the preserve of these mighty families, and much deference was accorded to them. In fairness it should be recognized that not only did they pay for the church building, but they also endowed the minister's stipend and provided his new manse. Later they commemorated their families with gifts to the church of beautiful stained-glass windows.

This welcome increase in the number of Christian folk in the valley required the Kirk to build other churches. In 1840 Alexandria St. Andrew's Church was built in the town's Main Street, and in 1869 Jamestown Church was built. Bonhill now had two daughter parishes.

It is arguably a serious weakness of democracy that it can lead to disintegration. Many people have many opinions and in the nineteenth century this led to disagreement, disruption and the formation of many different churches. Among other points of divergence, the old problem of patronage had never been satisfactorily solved. The Moderates had been content to accept the right of the gentry to "present" ministers to their congregations, but this was increasingly opposed by the Evangelical opinion within the Church of Scotland. In 1842 the Kirk's General Assembly set out a "Claim of Rights" which was rejected by parliament. The following year around 190 ministers walked out of the General Assembly effectively establishing the Free Church of Scotland. One third of the Church of Scotland's ministers in fact set up alternative churches at this time.

In 1831 a Relief Church, the Hill Church also known as “Mount Zion”, had been opened in Bonhill. At first Bonhill’s Free Church held its meetings in a store-room of the “Wee Field” textile works, but four years after the “Disruption” the Bonhill Free Church was built. At its inaugural service Dr. Thomas Chalmers, a great Free Church leader, made an address in which he spoke of the new building as being “...designed as a school of preparation for eternity.” His speech is still available to us and it makes most inspiring reading. On the heels of the Disruption there followed an incredible process of further division and disintegration resulting in a complex, ever-changing array of churches from which Christians of the day could take their pick. By the end of the nineteenth century in Bonhill parish there were seven protestant congregations - three of the “established” Church of Scotland, the Relief Church, Bonhill Free Church, Bank Street (Alexandria) Free Church and Bridge Street (Alexandria) United Presbyterian Church.

From the middle of the century a considerable percentage of the Vale’s workforce was made up of Irish immigrants. Indeed, it is true to say that for the greater part our community was essentially a blend of Scots Highlanders and Irish people. Most of the Irish being Roman Catholic, we can add to the above list of churches Our Lady and St. Mark’s in North Street (Alexandria), which had been established in 1859.

During these interesting times the Church of Scotland introduced Parish Missions and various Fellowship organisations. In 1847 there was in Bonhill Church a Sunday School attended by around 200 children. In 1862 the Church Choir was formed. In 1885 Bonhill introduced its Young Men’s Guild. The following year the church got its first company of the Boy’s Brigade. In 1894 the Women’s Guild. By 1891 a fine new church hall had been built to accommodate these organizations.

The hard-worked population managed to find time for a wide range of sporting activities. There were brass and silver bands, literary and dramatic societies, athletic and aquatic sports. (Touching on literature, it may be of interest to those fond of tales of mystery and imagination that William Ewing, one-time tutor of Edgar Allan Poe, is buried in Bonhill churchyard.) Local men excelled particularly in football. The Vale of Leven Football Club was formed in 1872. The team won the Scottish Cup three years in a row (1877, 1878, 1879). The Valemen were founder members of the Scottish League in 1890. In our neighbouring parish Renton F.C. as Scottish Cup Champions in 1888 went on to beat English Cup-Winners, West Bromwich Albion, and were thus regarded “Champions of the World”.

One of the Renton players on that glorious day was outside-right Bonhill man, Neilly McCallum. He promptly left Renton to join the formative Glasgow Celtic. That club's first game was against the Rangers and Neilly McCallum scored the first goal in Celtic's history. In his obituary in the Lennox Herald of 13th November 1920, we are told that Neilly (then 51 years old) had died in Glasgow on the previous Friday, and that he was buried in Bonhill Churchyard - his unmarked grave has been officially identified. This is all the more remarkable (indeed poetic) given that Bonhill's present minister, the Rev. Ian Miller, somewhat unexpectedly for a Church of Scotland minister, has been a dedicated Celtic supporter (on principle) since the days of his youth. Which brings us to clergy. The nineteenth century brought to Bonhill parish a few ministers well worthy of note.

The Reverend William Gregor was presented to the congregation by the Duke of Montrose in 1808, and he commenced a forty year ministry in the following year. Described as tall and lean (his portrait yet hangs in the old tower vestry), Gregor appears to have been mildly eccentric, an accomplished scholar versed in classical and Semitic languages, and an author. A Moderate, he was a paternal, much loved and respected minister, a colourful local personality. During a period of prolonged drought Gregor prayed from the pulpit for rain. As he was doing so, torrents descended on the roof of the kirk. "In measure, Lord." he cautioned the Almighty. The story is told of a wedding at which he was officiating. On his late arrival complaints were voiced. Gregor eyed the obviously pregnant bride and replied "About six months too late". It is sadly the case that this great servant of the Kirk died in poverty and in broken health, after an accident at the Ferry of Balloch in November 1848. He is buried in Bonhill Churchyard.

Gregor was followed by the Reverend William Shaw. During his brief ministry this progressive thinker founded the Kirk's Sunday School and the Bonhill Church Library.

The Reverend Frederick Lockhart Robertson began a ten year ministry in 1851 and during this term of office he appointed a Parish Missionary who worked in support of the poorer families of the parish. This minister was also active in funding the relief of famine overseas.

The notorious Patronage Act having been abolished in 1875, the Reverend William Simpson was the free choice of the Bonhill congregation in 1878. He was clearly a man of great ability. An effective teacher of the all-important Bible Classes, he conducted weekly Prayer Meetings. It was during Simpson's ministry that the church's pipe-organ was installed. He was an expert on Church Law and, among many other important offices he held, he became Chaplain to

the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and was a Parish and County Councillor.

One of the great Christian concepts of the Victorian age was that of Evangelical Revival. A twenty year-old American, Dwight L. Moody, was converted to Christ in 1857. He was called to evangelism and began his mission among the rougher elements of Chicago. In 1870 he was joined by the singer, Ira D. Sankey. The revival campaigns of this famous partnership were spectacularly successful. Their tours of American and British towns and cities brought literally hundreds of thousands of souls to Christ. Undoubtedly many people felt excluded by the “respectability” of the churches of their day, or simply failed to respond to their message, but clearly the Holy Spirit worked powerfully through Moody and Sankey who made the invitation of the Gospel vital, immediate and personal.

Archibald Orr Ewing Junior was a nephew of the Orr Ewings who were proprietors of the Alexandria and Levenbank textile works. When he heard Dwight L. Moody in Glasgow’s St. Andrew’s Hall in 1882, he was so affected that he determined to bring the evangelist to the workers of the Vale of Leven. So it was that in June of that year Moody addressed a full house in Alexandria’s Public Hall (in anticipation of which a special prayer meeting had been held in Bonhill Church on the evening beforehand). We know that Moody’s talk on the occasion was based on the words of Jesus to the tax collector, Zacchaeus – “For the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost”. A series of evangelistic meetings were held in the Public Hall and in the nearby Independent Chapel that week. These were addressed by another great evangelist, Henry Drummond. Born in Stirling in 1851, Drummond was a scientist, traveller and author as well as a preacher. In those days, when Darwin’s new theory of evolution seemed to many (as it still does) to undermine biblical authority, Drummond was able to convince doubters that science and religion were, in fact, complimentary. When he addressed the Vale folk his theme was “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God”. The written works of both Moody and Drummond are still very much in print and can yet be read to great advantage.

Two months after the visit of these men to Alexandria a meeting was held in the Independent Chapel, Bridge Street (later to be the site of the Y.M.C.A. hall). The outcome was the formation of “The Vale of Leven United Evangelistic Association”. As its name implies this initiative brought together several of the Vale’s churches in common missionary purpose. One of its founding directors was the Reverend William Simpson, whose ministry was to take Bonhill Church into the twentieth century.

***“Let them alone: they be blind leaders of the blind.
And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch.”***

The Edwardian first decade of the twentieth century was one of relative prosperity and apparent security - sufficient for Bonhill's minister to have a chauffeur-driven motor car. Although Britain was involved in a colonial war (men of the parish were serving with the Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders in the Boer conflict), her empire was the largest and most populous in history, with a quarter of the globe under the British Crown. At the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria, in 1897, Gurkhas from Nepal, Sikhs from the Punjab, Hausas from Africa, Dyaks from Borneo and Chinese from Hong Kong had been among the soldiers who escorted the queen to St. Paul's Cathedral.



Old Bonhill

In the Vale of Leven the textile industry, although affected by the price of cotton and famine in India, remained viable and in Alexandria an ambitious industrial experiment got underway in 1906. The Argyll Motor Works, owned by Alexander Govan, was set up in surely the most magnificent piece of architecture in the valley. Of skillfully-carved red sandstone, with pavilions, a towering copper dome and a 540 foot frontage, it was an eccentric extravagance to house the manufacture of motor cars. Nevertheless it was a most welcome arrival in the community, quickly scoring the highest production levels in Europe and employing over 1,500 workers. Regarded as the best motor car of its day, the Argyll set up 13 world speed records. Tragically and suddenly Mr.

Govan died at 41 years of age, in 1907, and the following year, partly because of the enormous expense of the building and partly because of legal costs arising from a dispute with rivals Daimler, the company went into liquidation.

Curiously it may be said that Alexandria's Argyll Works made a contribution to changing the world. A young man from just over the hill served a part of his apprenticeship in the factory. Helensburgh son of the manse, John Logie Baird went on to invent the television.

Life went on by the Levenside. Work, rest and play. At Bonhill's Northfield the Vale of Leven Golf Club was founded in 1907. In the following year tramways came to the Vale and the year after that an improved water supply came into operation from the beautiful Glen Finlas on Loch Lomondside. Old Age Pensions were introduced then and Labour Exchanges first appeared a year later. Politically the Vale of Leven was a Liberal stronghold. Another sign of changing times was the introduction of the cinema to Alexandria. In 1909 the town's Public Hall began to be used as a picture house called "The Bioscope". In 1911 "The Vale Empire" was opened in Steven Street, and "The Palace" (later known as "The Strand") was built in Bank Street.

Much has been written about the causes of the First World War. It is important to know something of the mood of the nation at the time. In 1911 the Vale of Leven Natives and Residents Association had been founded. To be a member one had to have been born in the Vale or to have resided here for at least 45 years. At its inaugural meeting the toast was to the King, the Imperial Forces, Natives and Residents and the Commercial Interest. The late John Agnew, a local historian who was working in Ferryfield at the time, has written – "To us, the alternative to the British Empire was the German Empire. Other possibilities have all been thought up after it happened." Perhaps this sums up the way most folk felt then. Patriotism combined with propaganda created a sense of duty to fight for King and Country and it was in this atmosphere that Bonhill's minister of the day, the Rev. Dugald Clark, preached zealous sermons urging the young men of his parish to enlist.

To begin with young men seemed keen enough (or at least willing) to join up and fight. Those who were reluctant could expect the social cold shoulder or the public humiliation of being handed a white feather - symbol of cowardice - by young women.

Dumbarton Castle housed the barracks of Ninth Battalion, Argyll & Sutherland Highlanders. Bonhill's church halls were occupied by men of the Royal Scots Fusiliers. Troops were lodged in Dalmonach barracks and throughout the war the Argyll Works was used as a munitions factory.

When a vacancy had arisen for a new minister at Bonhill, such was the reputation of the parish that there were eighty candidates. The Reverend Dugald Clark came from Kilmichael, Glassary and was a native Gaelic speaker (he was to preach at the Gaelic Church in Renton). He had the courage to practice what he preached and in June of 1915 he enlisted as a chaplain to the expeditionary forces bound for France.

It has been estimated that around 10 million men were killed in the 1914-1918 conflict.

Thirty-six men from Bonhill parish were killed in action. Their names are inscribed on a war memorial in the church vestry. Around the Vale at memorials such as the one in the Christie Park many other local men who gave their lives in both world wars are remembered.

The “Great War” had begun as a European conflict and ended as a world war – a world forever changed. It led to a significant decline in British military, political and industrial superiority and was, in fact, the beginning of the end of empire.

In 1917 the Russian Revolution had heralded a new phase in world history. Also, among Britain’s colonies nationalist feeling for independence gained strength. In India, for example, although many accepted that the “Raj” had established peace with law and order, hospitals, schools, improved communications and the foundations for an industrial society, as Gandhi famously put it, the Indian people would even have preferred their own bad government to the good government of a foreign power. Similar sentiments were to prevail throughout the empire.

In Bonhill parish the slow demise of the all-important textile trade began in the aftermath of the war. There was profound disillusionment and a sense that the people had been betrayed by their leaders. The Federation of the Vale of Leven’s Discharged Sailors & Soldiers expressed these resentments locally. Survivors had not returned (as promised) to “a land fit for heroes”. The old social order began to fall apart at this time, with some of the large estates of the gentry being sold off or broken up.

In terms of Christian faith the scale and the nature, the sheer horror of this war had turned many away from faith and from the church. It could not even be argued simply that all the suffering had been the result of human mischief. Just as many millions had perished during those years through an epidemic of influenza as had been killed in the conflict.

The Reverend John Roland McNab was born in Crieff. As a student of Glasgow University he sang in the choir of Moody's and Sankey's Scottish evangelical revival campaign and was much influenced by them. He was 56 years old when he began his ministry in Bonhill in 1918. A small man with a powerful voice, he preached as he worked, logically and methodically. His parish visits were undertaken on foot or by bicycle.

Having worked with the Young Men's Christian Association in France during the war he was greatly interested in the youth organizations of his parish. It was, indeed, during his ministry that companies of Scouts and Guides were established in Bonhill. His work in the valley came at a very difficult time. The 1920s and 1930s saw periods of severe industrial and economic depression. In 1922, for example, there were over 3000 persons registered as unemployed at the Alexandria Labour Exchange, which was the busiest in Scotland.

Around this time the Vale had the second highest rate of unemployment in the United Kingdom. The textile works at Ferryfield, Dillichip and Milton closed. In 1921 the Scottish Board of Health passed responsibility to local parish councils to pay "dole" to all uninsured able-bodied unemployed. The hungry were being fed at soup kitchens.

This era saw a new wave of political radicalism and the left, represented by the old Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party and the Communist Party, was strongly supported by the working class of the Vale, for which it did a great deal to alleviate the cruelest ravages of poverty. In 1926 matters reached a climax with the General Strike.

This was a time of much bitter animosity between employers, government and workers. The industries of Clydeside and Dunbartonshire on which so many Vale folk depended, such as shipbuilding and textiles, were severely affected. The financial support provided by the

state was entirely inadequate and the church tried to help in practical ways. Acts of the Apostles tells of a woman of Joppa called Tabitha (Greek: Dorcas) who performed many acts of charity and who was raised from the dead by Saint Peter. The church's Dorcas Society regularly supplied money, coal and food to the poor of the parish. One of the church's stained glass windows depicts Dorcas and her acts of loving care.



Industrial Protest; United Turkey Red, 1931

During the ministry of Rev. McNab the Church of Scotland Property and Endowment Act (1925) was passed. Through this legislation the church took over from the heritors full possession of church property and increased responsibility for fabric and finance. It also lost many of its old legal and civil powers and responsibilities.

In 1923 construction began on the main Dumbarton - Glasgow highway, to be known as the "Boulevard", and in 1927 buses replaced tram cars locally. In 1928 the Roman Catholic Church, Our Lady and St. Mark's, was relocated in grounds off Alexandria's Bank Street. It is most pleasing to record that in October of the following year the United Free Church of Scotland and the Church of Scotland joined to form a renewed church bringing about almost a total reunion of the Kirk of the Reformation.

In 1930 Bonhill Parish Council took in Renton, Luss and Kilmarnock parishes to become the Vale of Leven District Council.

The ministry of the Reverend John McDougal was relatively short. Another Gaelic speaker he came to Bonhill in 1932 from West Calder. He had worked in the highland parishes of Tobermory, Fort William and Aberfoyle. He became known for his personal generosity to the needy of the community and he took a fond interest in the church choir. It was during his period of office that Bonhill Church celebrated the centenary year of the present building. Shortly thereafter Rev. McDougal left the parish to be minister of yet another highland church, Daviot, Inverness-shire.

“...but deliver us from evil.”

If there had been retrospective doubts about the reasons for the First World War, there were few regarding the Second. There was little appetite for war in the nineteen-thirties but eventually it became inescapable to the British people that the rise of fascism, and in particular the aggression of Adolf Hitler's Nazi party, was an evil which had to be resisted. In September of 1939 Germany invaded Poland and war was declared. Before long the Nazi forces occupied most of Europe. When Germany invaded the Soviet Union and Japan attacked the United States, it was world war again.

The ministry of the Reverend Walter James Gordon began in 1938. Quickly the Vale of Leven became once more a largely militarized area. Dalmonach was again used as a barracks. Again there were munitions works. These were years of conscription, mobilization, rationing and air-raid blackout. To begin with the devastating air attacks of the Luftwaffe “Blitz” affected only the towns and cities of England, but on the 13th and 14th of March 1941 the shipyards of Clydeside were targeted, and Clydebank was hammered. Only eight of that burgh's 12,000 houses escaped damage and over one thousand lives were lost in Clydebank and West Glasgow. Bombs fell on Dumbarton and Dalquhurn, with stray explosions on the hills of Carman and Auchencarroch. The Vale of Leven provided temporary homes for many of the refugees of the Clydebank Blitz and Bonhill Church Hall was used as a first aid post.

It is often forgotten that as well as the political and military dimensions of warfare, there is also the spiritual conflict. At the time when the British Expeditionary Forces appeared to be doomed on the beaches of Dunkirk, for example (and some in government were contemplating defeat), the king called for a national day of prayer. The hugely successful evacuation of Dunkirk thereafter was so much against all reasonable odds that many consider it yet to have been miraculous. In the face of intense Nazi propaganda sales of the Bible in Germany far exceeded sales of Hitler's “Mein Kampf”. In almost all of the occupied countries the churches opposed the Nazi invaders and were a focal point for spiritual and patriotic resistance.

In Bonhill, as elsewhere in Britain, Christian faith and church activity strengthened during this war. Rev. Gordon was chaplain to the soldiers at Dalmonach and he shared the Gospel with 28 young folk who attended his Bible Study Class during the hostilities. The Rev. Gordon was a popular minister, friendly, sympathetic and with the priceless ability to encourage. He left the parish for Larbert in the spring of 1944.

Victory came in 1945 with very natural expressions of relief and joy. There was a National Thanksgiving Day on Sunday 13th of May, with the three congregations of Bonhill packed into the Old Kirk. In a gloriously Christian gesture of reconciliation the Reverends William Robertson (Bonhill Old) and George Griffiths (Bonhill South) shared the service with German-born Reverend Joachim Ehrlich (Bonhill North) of Hamburg. The choir sang “Jerusalem”.

Six men from Old Bonhill’s congregation lost their lives in the Second World War. Their names are commemorated in the vestibule.

The ministry of the Reverend William Robertson commenced in March of 1945. The Ayrshire man gave spiritual guidance and support to his parishioners through bleak years of post-war shortages and rationing. During his time at Bonhill electricity was introduced for church lighting, the church hall was restored and the minister wrote the parish entry for the Third Statistical Account of Scotland in 1949. The Girls Association and Men's Guild were introduced. Rev. Robertson left for Paisley Greenlaw in October 1950 leaving these wise words in his farewell message:

“Ministers come and ministers go, but the Church itself remains, always changeless, yet always changing, a school for saints, a centre of evangelism, a pioneer of Christ's Kingdom in the community...”

The Reverend Norman Bowman was inducted to Bonhill in June 1951, another Ayrshire man, born in Saltcoats. As a military chaplain he was wounded in active service. After the war he did five years missionary work in Calabar, West Africa. On coming to Bonhill he described himself and his congregation as – “The Servant of the Word and the People of the Covenant”.

Rev. Bowman was a much accomplished man. A theologian, teacher, musician and craftsman. He wrote plays, was an actor and a composer of music. Through his teaching skills his were most effective Bible Classes. In his time the Church was completely redecorated. 1953 brought the Coronation of our present monarch, Queen Elizabeth. In this same year the “Tell Scotland” campaign was undertaken to take the Gospel and the invitation of the church to non-church folk within the parishes. This undertaking led on to the hugely successful revivalist meetings in Glasgow of the American evangelist, Billy Graham, in 1955. In June of the following year there was held in Bonhill Kirk a special communion service to commemorate the 400th Anniversary of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper According to the Reformed Rite. Two years later a new vestry was built onto the western side of the church. It was dedicated by the Moderator of the Presbytery of Dumbarton, Rev. Edward Taylor of Knoxland.

During this decade a merger of the Church of Scotland with the Church of England was suggested. This provoked much opposition and was dropped.

It has been noted that an effect of the First World War had been to undermine Christian faith and church membership. The increased role of the government in people's lives, with the state much reducing the role of the church in provision of education and poor relief, had the effect of lessening the influence of religion. In these decades, also, alternative belief systems such as socialism and scientific rationalism came to challenge Gospel faith. Even so, partly due to revivalist campaigning, statistics reveal that Scotland was a more religious society in the mid 1950s than it had been a hundred years earlier. Rev. Bowman left Bonhill for Edinburgh's Church of St. Mary's in June 1957.

The 'Sixties decade was one of tremendous confidence and optimism. Employment levels were higher with many local folk working for the Strathleven Industrial Estate firms such as Westclox, Burroughs and Polaroid. New public sector housing schemes had improved accommodation. Working people could afford a wide range of luxuries which had not been available to previous generations - washing machines, refrigerators, televisions and motor cars. Ordinary folk could now look forward to occasional holidays abroad. Great scientific and technological advances gave rise to a feeling that things could only get better. This was perhaps most dramatically expressed in the "Space Race" between the Soviet Union and the United States of America which reached its historic climax on the 21st July 1969 when Neil Armstrong of the Apollo 11 mission became the first man to walk on the moon. (It is an interesting footnote that a subsequent moonwalker, Alan Bean, proud of his Scots ancestry laid on the lunar surface a measure of Clan MacBean tartan - a fragment of which he passed into the keeping of the Church of Scotland, Fowlis Wester Parish Church.)

Underlying this confidence was a terrible dread of extinction. The "Cold War" tensions between the capitalist and communist worlds was never more terrifying than at the time of the Cuban Crisis in 1962 when the Soviet Union attempted to place missiles in Cuba well within range of the United States and for a time it looked as though global nuclear conflict was inevitable.

We may picture the scene: Bonhill's minister conducting worship for a party of C.N.D. Ban the Bomb marchers who, having been given overnight accommodation in the church hall, are on their way to protest at Coulport on Loch Long.

The comfortable materialism of the 'Sixties unfortunately brought a return of

the old illusion that religion was a primitive superstition which clever humanity had now outgrown. This was an age of protest and all forms of authority were being challenged and brought down - including the church. The baby was too often thrown out with the bath-water. This was a time when young people began to worship pop stars such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones whose opinions carried infinitely more weight than those of clergy. At this time everything had to be “new” and the church was that worst of all things - it was old-fashioned. Natural spiritual hunger sought satisfaction in unnatural drug abuse and (more reasonably) in eastern philosophies. It was a period of marked decline in church membership.

In Bonhill, after a great deal of agonizing and tense discussion, it was accepted that the crisis could be met by linking two churches - Alexandria Bridge Street and Bonhill Old - under one minister. It was perhaps symbolic that it was at this time that the old 1712 church bell was stolen and then destroyed.

In such circumstances Bonhill parish needed a rather special man. The Reverend John Muir Haddow was that man. He was born in Falkirk. He served with the Iona Community and was a chaplain to the forces. He was awarded the Military Cross for his conduct in battle. In 1947 he became minister of the Scots Kirk in the Dutch city of Rotterdam. The church had been ruined by German bombing and Rev. Haddow was responsible for its rebuilding. For a time he was minister of the Glens near Kirriemuir. He came to his joined congregations in the Vale of Leven in June of 1959.

He took on a formidable burden of work. Because of the nature of his charge much of his effort had to be duplicated. He had, for example, to deal with two Kirk Sessions and conduct three services each Sunday. Rev. Haddow was a particularly effective organizer and administrator. These strengths he employed in the service of the great causes of the moment, implementing local campaigns on behalf of War on Want, Oxfam, Christian Aid and the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children. In May of 1963 he organized a Freedom from Hunger Campaign which involved all of the Vale’s congregations.

Reverend John Muir Haddow left Bonhill for Garioch in 1974. Tragically he died in Aberdeen within the year. He was a gentle and patient man. His strengths were quiet ones. By the grace of God his Christian qualities benefited the Vale at a time when they were sorely needed.

When John Muir Haddow left Alexandria the linkage between his two congregations came to an end. The Bridge Street Church, however, carried on until 1987 as a “continuing vacancy”, which meant in effect that it did not have a full-time minister, but in fact it was well-served by the highly regarded

“retired” Rev. William Grieve.

For a combination of reasons by the early ‘Seventies the congregation of Bonhill Old had diminished and the physical fabric of the church was badly in need of attention. The Presbytery of Dumbarton decided on a union of Bonhill Old and Bonhill South churches. Throughout Scotland congregations were being united in this way to meet the challenges of the day. On a Wednesday evening in November of 1974 a poorly attended service of union was conducted by the Rev. Tom D. Allsop, Moderator of the Dumbarton Presbytery, and the sermon was preached by the Rev. George Stewart Smith of Renton Trinity. A man of exceptional quality was looked for to carry forward this new union.

The Reverend Ian Hunter Miller comes from the Renfrewshire village of Kilbarchan. Having, as a young man, been for a short time a travel agent, he went on to train for the ministry firstly at Glasgow University (under the incomparable Dr. William Barclay) and then through the Open University. With his mission-hall background Ian Miller came to Bonhill in August 1975. He knew instinctively and at once that Bonhill was the parish for which God had intended him. A man of incredible energy, he has become a considerable personality, known and much-loved well beyond the bounds of the Vale of Leven - and no stranger to local and national media. An enormously positive and friendly man, he finds it difficult to say “no” to anyone. It has been said of him more than once that to spend but a short time in his company is to leave feeling greatly uplifted. Behind the welcoming smile and the restless activity are qualities of tact and strong natural leadership. Behind the mask of the entertainer there is profound Christian sincerity and a keen intellect.

The story of Ian Miller’s ministry is very much an unfinished chapter (which will hopefully be recorded in full in his own memoirs one day), therefore only the main headlines so far will be touched on here.

United into his single congregation were folk of two quite distinct reformed traditions - the Established Church and the Free Church. It may be said that, with much patience, goodwill and the minister’s sensitive management, the union proved a success.

Physical renovation of the church was much-needed and taken effectively in hand. A building with the seating capacity for over a thousand people was no longer appropriate. Also, the church halls had been condemned for demolition. The new plan incorporated a smaller area for worship with a new suite of halls, the combination of which would allow the building to be used to full advantage. Invaluable to the undertaking was the contribution of property convener and project co-ordinator, Arthur Menzies of Ladyton - a Bonhill Church member for

over twenty years at that time. The work was carried out to a great extent by volunteers, and much generosity of time and money was extended by the community of the Vale of Leven.

The church was closed on the 15th of March 1987 and during the two and a half years when work was being carried out the congregation gathered for worship at Ladyton School. In October of 1990 around six hundred worshippers packed the renovated church for the rededication service. The Rev. Ian Miller was assisted by the Moderator of the Dumbarton Presbytery, Rev. Jim Brown. On the occasion, symbolic of a new lease of spiritual life, there were two baptisms and seventeen new communicants.

For the year 2000 and the occasion of the “Millennium” Bonhill Church with Dumbarton People’s Theatre staged a magnificent musical production entitled “The Romans Stopped at Bowling”. Sponsored by Allied Distillers Ltd., with a script written by Andy Allan, Ronnie Armstrong, Sean Brady, Janette Barnes and Dave Watson, the show, which was based on an idea by Rev. Ian Miller, starred mostly members of the congregation and the Sunday-school. It dramatized the history of Bonhill Church and parish. Recorded on the 24th of August 2000, it was made available on video and was generally reckoned to have been a huge success.

On Tuesday 30th August 1859 the great French writer, Jules Verne, passed through Alexandria Station on his way to Balloch Pier and steamer cruises on Loch Lomond and Loch Katrine. His first book was actually written about this Scottish tour. Thirteen years later Verne wrote “Around the World in Eighty Days”, a novel which was to be one of his enduring successes, with several cinema versions subsequently produced. The core idea of the story is that methods of travel in Verne’s day had improved so dramatically as to make the “incredible” claim to circumnavigate the globe in a mere eighty days a demonstrable fact. Perhaps, though, the most remarkable feature of the *following* century, the twentieth, was the extent to which technological advances had in effect made our world a very much smaller place. In the age of the satellite and the internet it is now possible for a person to physically travel around the world in around twenty-four hours.

This concept of the global village has, of course, touched Bonhill parish. During Ian Miller’s Ministry Bonhill Church has formed special friendships with communities in three continents. The congregation of Rockville in the State of Maryland, U.S.A., the congregation of Kerwa Presbyterian Church in Nairobi, Kenya, and Patan Hospital, Nepal (for which the Bonhill folk sponsored two nurses and our own Ann Crawford served as an infection control nurse).

“For everyone who asks will receive, and anyone who seeks will find, and the door will be opened to those who knock.”

Alexandria was physically changed almost beyond recognition in the 1970s. Most of the old red sandstone houses, which had in a way symbolized the warm heart of the community, were demolished. Vast areas were laid waste. New roads, houses and a shopping centre were built, but the empty spaces and seemingly pointless pathways in the sky left a disjointed and unfinished effect. The old traditional industries were dead. On the western hillside the Alexandria by-pass drew traffic away from the town and on the eastern slopes the far-flung housing schemes of Ladyton, Nobleston, O'Hare, Pappert and Redburn comprised an almost separate community.

To a certain type of mind change is always felt as a threat or a disappointment. The past seems ever better than the present. Such an attitude is unhealthy and unhelpful. The Vale of Leven is alive and for the most part well. There are, of course, serious causes of concern, such as unemployment, drug addiction and crime, yet fundamentally there remains great goodness in the hearts of the folk of this valley. Compared with some of the really dark times through which previous generations have struggled our present era is, for most, a relative paradise, though sadly we do not always regard it so.



Outdoor Service

Two emphatic features of Ian Miller's ministry have been the "open door" policy of Bonhill Church - all are welcome - and the very real ways in which kirk has engaged with community. For twelve years Rev. Miller served tirelessly on the local Health Board, under its various designations, striving in the face of considerable adversity to secure the best possible medical services for the people of the district. Listed below are some of the ways in which the community interacts with the church –

Monday to Friday: The Bonhill Out of School Group.

Monday: The Brownies.

Tuesday: The Anchor Boys, The Ladies' Circle.

Wednesday: The Girls' Brigade.

Thursday: The Church Healing Group.

Friday: The Junior Boys' Brigade (1st Vale of Leven)

Sunday: The Church Sunday-school,

Meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The congregation of Bonhill is large by present standards, at over 900 members and (also somewhat against the national trend) there is a well-attended Sunday-school. In an average week the minister conducts around six weddings and the same amount of funerals.

An example of the kirk's local concern is its active support for "Teen Challenge". This organization was founded in 1958 in New York by a Christian minister, David Wilkerson. Since then Teen Challenge has developed its work in eighty-eight countries and is presently the world's largest voluntary organization offering help to addicted young people. Its work in the Vale of Leven is led by Pastor Jim Turner. Teen Challenge has a charity shop in Alexandria's town centre and a special bus which invites on board addicts, gives them tea and understanding, and offers an effective residential programme for those seeking liberation from the nightmare of drug or alcohol addiction. The work of Teen Challenge is based on Christian faith and it achieves notably greater success than alternative secular programmes.

Amnesty International was launched in 1961 by a Christian lawyer, Peter Benenson. It is now the world's biggest international voluntary organization

dedicated to the defence of human rights. It has more than a million members, subscribers and regular donors. Bonhill Church is affiliated and over the past ten years a team of church members has worked closely with the local Amnesty group on several campaigns which have resulted in the release of a number of prisoners of conscience.

We have travelled, as it were, along the river of the years. We have encountered the more dramatic landmarks and personalities of Bonhill's Christian story - the Roman Empire, the Celtic Missions, the monks of Paisley Abbey, the Reformation, the Covenanters and the great Evangelical Revivals. In human terms it is easy to discern an apparent pattern of ebbing and flowing with great spiritual tides punctuated by periods of seeming doldrums. In truth the Holy Spirit is constant and the quiet souls who struggle unsung through the less colourful times are probably as much heroes of the Faith as those who leave a more vivid memory. Very many people, good servants of the church present and past, deserve to be mentioned by name. This has not been possible simply because of the physical limitations placed on this small publication... but the Lord knows his own.

We are told that, although seventy per cent of the U.K. population claim to believe in God and to pray, only around ten per cent are regular church attenders. Since the middle of the twentieth century the strength of Britain's main denominations appears to have diminished. Congregations have become smaller and more aged. Fewer people want to become ministers or priests. Until the 1960s most people were expected to have some degree of Christian belief and it was understood that the United Kingdom was a Christian state. Christianity was built securely into the system of education. Now those who control the commanding heights of our national affairs seem to be embarrassed by Christianity, with every day more emphasis being placed on the multi-cultural, multi-faith nature of contemporary British society. There is a dangerous and irrational fear of offending those of other faiths by the use of Christian language and symbols. It may prove, however, in the longer term, that a strong challenge from other faiths may give Christianity in this country a renewed vigour.

Paradoxically, in global terms Christianity has never been stronger. With over 2,000 million followers it is the largest religion in the world. When Jesus sent out his disciples to spread the Gospel he initiated the greatest movement in human history.

The people of Bonhill Church do not think of themselves as especially good. Jesus came, after all, to save sinners, and Ian Miller has called his church a hospital for souls. Yet there is a sense in which he sees Bonhill Kirk as a beacon

of light shining out for the community of the Vale.

Since 1691 the heraldic badge of the Church of Scotland has been the Cross of Saint Andrew and the Burning Bush surrounded by the motto -

NEC TAMEN CONSUMEBATUR (*Yet it was not consumed.*)

Nor will it be.

So what has it all been about, this tale of two thousand years ? What is this “Gospel” which means and has meant so much to so many for so long ? Perhaps it is summed-up briefly and best by Jesus himself :

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

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