

Ulster-Scots churches and Graveyards in North Down

General History

To some degree, every church in the Ards and North Down has an Ulster-Scots story to tell, because for the past 400 years the vast majority of the people who have made up their congregations have been Ulster-Scots. People often think that Ulster-Scots is just a Presbyterian story – in fact there is a Scottish chapter in the story of every denomination.

Some of these stories are reflected in the North Down graveyards. A graveyard can be likened to an open air museum of tombstones on which the inscriptions on these memorials provide vital links with the past. Not only do they record dates of death and ages at death, they can also include information on family, relationships, occupations and contributions to society. Within North Down there are two graveyards in particular that give an insight into the Ulster Scots that once lived in the locality located at two pivotal churches in the Borough within Bangor and Holywood. The depth of history is evident.

The Ulster-Scots beginnings in North Down

The Presbyterian Church has of course been the biggest, and most influential, denomination throughout those four centuries, with Revival in 1625 and congregations being formed long before the official Presbytery of 1642. The famous emigrant ship Eagle Wing was led by four Ulster- Scots Presbyterian ministers (from Bangor, Newtownards, Ballywalter and Killinchy) when she sailed from Groomsport in 1636. Presbyterian Covenanters fleeing from persecution in Scotland in the 1660's and 1670's were regularly arrested at Donaghadee. In spite of this, Covenanter "United Societies" could be found in Newtownards in the late 1680's. Even the more recent denominations, such as the Brethren, can trace an important part of their history to Scotland - many Gospel Halls sprang up here in the late 1800's following a visit to Stranraer by a Newtownards man called John Patton.

Throughout the 20th Century, many Scottish clergy, ministers and preachers visited the Ards and North Down area. The Ulster-Scots link has always been a two-way flow over at least four centuries, not just a one-way single migration in the early 1600s.

Patrick and the Ancient Churches

Since earliest times, ancient churches have been built in the Ards and North Down. St Patrick is said to have been born around 385AD, possibly spending his early years near Dumbarton just outside Glasgow. Perhaps the most important, yet forgotten, Patrick site in the area is the small graveyard and bay at Templepatrick just south of Donaghadee. It is said to have been the place where Patrick arrived in Ulster – and significantly is just across the North Channel from Portpatrick in Scotland, which Scottish tradition holds is the place where he sailed from. Bangor Abbey is said to have St Patrick stories associated with it.

Anglo-Norman Churches and Abbeys

Over six centuries later, when the Anglo-Normans arrived in Ulster in the 1100's, a number of important abbeys were built. Anglo-Norman knight Sir John de Courcy arrived in 1177, and his wife Affreca had Grey Abbey built in 1193. Within 130 years, from 1142 – 1273, the Cistercians built two abbeys in east Ulster (Grey Abbey in 1193 and Comber Abbey in 1199) and three just across the water in south west Scotland (Dundrennan Abbey in 1142, Glenluce Abbey in 1191 and Sweetheart Abbey in 1273).

From Reformation to Ruin

During the 1500's the Protestant Reformation swept across Europe however it was not as effective in Ireland as it had been in either Scotland or England. Local Irish chieftain Sir Brian O'Neill famously burned any standing abbeys of the Ards and North Down to prevent them being used as garrisons. In the decades that followed, ongoing English / Irish strife left the area depopulated and wasted. The former church buildings lay ruined until the arrival of the Ulster-Scots in 1606, as the Montgomery Manuscripts confirm. As the 1500s drew to a close, religious life in Ireland and Ulster in particular was in a shocking condition.

Ulster-Scots and the Church of Ireland

Within the Established Church / Church of Ireland, a number of new bishops emerged. The most important of these was James Ussher (1581 – 1656) who went on to become Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of

All Ireland, and his influence would help the Ulster Scots' Presbyterians in the decades that followed. In fact, in the early 1600's, a series of Scots were appointed to Bishopricks in Ireland.

The Arrival of the Ulster-Scots

Following the death of Queen Elizabeth I of England and Ireland in 1603, she was succeeded by her ambitious relative, King James VI of Scotland. The new King James I of England and Ireland would make a number of decisions which would change life in Ulster forever. Hamilton and Montgomery, close associates of the King, were to lead the first permanent lowland Scottish settlement in Ulster, which began in May 1606.

From Ruin to Restoration

The old Dominican Priory of Newtownards was the first church building to be restored by the new Ulster-Scots settlers, and by 1607 it was once again ready for worship. This was a new, Scottish, Presbyterian influenced theology. However, it would be another 36 years until there was an official Presbytery in Ulster (established in 1642 in Carrickfergus) so the first generation of these new settlers, whilst mostly Presbyterian in outlook, worshipped in restored Church of Ireland / Episcopal parish churches. This period in Ulster is sometimes called the "Prescopalian" era.

Bangor Abbey

This church is still in use today and it is one of the most important Christian sites in Ireland, tracing its origins to St Comgall in 558. Comgall was born at Magheramorne near Larne in 517. He was a close friend of Columba and both of them founded churches in Scotland. The abbey went through various periods of growth and decline for the next 1000 years, until it was burned by Sir Brian O'Neill in 1572 and in the early 1690s improvements were carried out to the tower. In 1833 the body of the church underwent significant refurbishments and in 1844 a chancel and transepts were added.

Memorials inside the church

Bangor Abbey has the finest collection of seventeenth century memorials of any church in Ulster. The earliest is in the tower, dedicated to Thomas Bradshaw who died in 1620. Another tombstone in the tower commemorates William Stennors who died in 1626. He was a master mason and very possibly the man who rebuilt Bangor Abbey. Appropriately his memorial features carvings of the tools of the mason.

Holywood Priory

Among North Down's most interesting ecclesiastical remains are those of the old Priory in Holywood which lies in ruins today. The site is one of considerable antiquity and there has been a religious establishment here possibly from as far back as the 7th century. The ruins, as they stand, are essentially of an early 13th-century church with a 15th-century addition to the west end. In 1572 Holywood was one of a number of churches burned by Brian O'Neill to stop them from being occupied by the forces of the Crown.

The Ulster-Scots restore the Priory

In the early 17th century Holywood came into the possession of James Hamilton, Lord Clandeboye. The site of the pre-Reformation church continued in use in the seventeenth century. The Royal Visitation of 1622 noted that the church had been partly repaired. The four round headed windows in the south wall would appear to have been rebuilt at this time. In 1615 the first Protestant minister was appointed to Holywood. Robert Cunningham came to North Down in 1615 to begin a new ministerial career there. Most of his congregations were settlers from Scotland.

In 1657 the church was in good repair, but in 1679 it was described as ruinosa. Sometime after this it was repaired and was in use as the Church of Ireland Parish Church until 1844 when a new church was built in Holywood.

The 1798 Rebellion

Faced with a hostile, aloof government, the people of 1798 in Antrim and Down felt that they had no option but to take up arms in an effort to overthrow tyrannical authorities. The events of the 1798 rebellion have been etched into the community of the Ards and North Down. The report explains out the misunderstanding and misrepresentations of the stories over the generations. These groups were similar in Scotland who had similar objectives.

As Dr Carol Baraniuk writes, the aim of the 1798 rebellion "was to unite Protestants (Anglicans), Catholics and Dissenters (Presbyterians) as Irishmen, to work for a reform of Parliament and to try to achieve greater

independence for Ireland from Britain. The term 'United Irish' was coined however the intention was to encourage Irish people to embrace a common cultural and national identity regardless of their different religious affiliations.