



The Church Architecture

The present church was erected during the time of Rev. Donald McNicholl, in 1802, on foot of an estimate of £444. 11s. 6d.; the design is credited to Michael Carmichael, who was employed in various works at Inveraray by the then Duke of Argyll. In point of fact the building shows a remarkable similarity to a rather larger and more accomplished church in Kintyre, at A' Chleit, ascribed to Thomas Cairns as builder and constructed a decade earlier; the architect of that church is believed to have been George Haswell, who had died in 1784, "chief wright to the Dukes of Argyll". The first minister to serve at A' Chleit was Rev. Alexander Stuart who had served the parish of Jura (including Colonsay) 1786 – 1791; thus, knowing both charges, he may have recommended the design and it may have fallen to Carmichael merely to modify the original based upon Haswell's plans. The church in Colonsay stands upon natural granite and close inspection will reveal that in some places the builders chose to incorporate it into the structure rather than to quarry down to a level base. Although the exact sequence of construction is uncertain, it is clear that the church, the inn and the parochial school form part of an architectural composition, as intended to be viewed from the line of the old approach from the harbour (i.e. the old road, beside The Pantry).

The Church Exterior

The church is a Listed Building (Grade 2) and shows typical Georgian features of proportion, symmetry and restraint. The hip-roofed construction is very pleasing, and although unusual locally at the time, is reflected in the neighbouring parochial school. The church was originally built without rhones or chutes, but hooks can be seen beside the windows, suggesting that at one time they were provided with external shutters. The eastern facade has "an advanced and pedimented centrepiece, fronted by a single-storied and round-ended vestry... there is a blind oculus... and the pediment is surmounted by a simple bird-cage belfry with ogival-topped canopy and ball-finial" (RCAHMS). There are two fine Georgian round-headed windows on each side of the building, and the porches and windows at either end replace the original stairs and doorways which led to interior galleries. It is said that the building was designed for 400 sitters, although that does seem to be rather optimistic.

The Church Interior

The church was re-ordered c. 1912, but was originally fitted with a gallery at each end, accessed by external stairways; and a sounding-board was installed above the pulpit, to amplify the sermons. From Blaeu's map (1654) one can see that the present church replaces an earlier foundation, and a neighbouring cist grave shows that the site was revered since the Bronze Age (c. 2500 – 600 BC). Some earlier traditions are reflected in the building, for example although there is no apse or altar, it is orientated according to the "point of interest", this being the podium with pulpit and vestry (i.e. the minister). At the head of each window can be seen a fleur-de-lys, the symbol of purity and a reference to Mary, Mother of Jesus. The pulpit itself is eight-sided, reflecting a traditional concept of heaven as being round and the earth being "square" or imperfect – thus the minister's position is poised between the two. In many churches the octagonal concept is echoed in the baptismal font, but here the pewter basin rests in a hinged bracket attached to the rail, simply inscribed as COLONSAY.

The combed wooden ceiling is worthy of special attention, a very fine feature in such a homely building. On the sidesmen's seats will be seen the two "ladles", long-handled wooden trays to uplift the offering. On a plinth one can inspect an ancient, pre-Christian well-marker which was modified in Christian times when the well itself was sanctified by St. Catan, a 6th century Irish monk; outside the main door one can see a holy-water stoup from the mediaeval parish church, the ruins of which survive in the present graveyard at Kilchattan.

Some History

Following the Scottish Reformation of 1560, the numerous church buildings in Colonsay and Oransay were allowed to lapse into decay and it was not until the late 18th century that any attempt was made to replace them. During that early period, Colonsay was in the possession of Clan Donald and featured in the counter-reformation movement organised at Louvain, being partially funded by the Spanish Infanta. Operating from a base at Bonamargy, Co. Antrim, Franciscan missionaries made their way throughout the Hebrides and the surviving records show that they "converted" a large number of people in Colonsay, over 250 of whose names are preserved at the Vatican.

The missionaries were issued with letters of introduction, one of which was to Colla Ciotach MacDonald, the laird of Colonsay at the time. Subsequently, Colla was asked to provide a reference for three of the Franciscans ("Cornelium Wardaeum, Patritio Hegerty et Patre Jacobo Oneill"), and a copy of this document survives, dated April 1st 1629, in the name of "Ego, Collatius Kiotach Macdonell, dominus de Coluossa et Orbusa" and witnessed by "Daniel Mhac Mhuireadhuigh".

Under these circumstances, and in view of Colonsay's significant role in the Wars of the Three Kingdoms (1639 – 1651), it is hardly surprising that the Reformation made little immediate headway in the island; from the Presbyterian point of view, the Restoration created further problems because the MacDonalds were reconfirmed in Colonsay under a presumably Episcopalian form of worship.

Colonsay & Oransay were just part of a very large parish, which was centred on Jura and also embraced Gigha, Cara, Scarba, Lunga and the Garvelloch Isles. Following the Revolution Settlement of 1690, steps were taken to remove the existing "prelatorall incumbent", John McSuine, who was suspended in 1697 and removed in 1703. In the interim, whilst ad hoc arrangements applied, various fornicators were disciplined, notably Marie McCoran with Donald McCravi in Oransay, and Mary Nclbreach with both Donald McKay in Colonsay and Donald Gorm McGoun in Islay (revealing travel opportunities that do not exist today).

From October 1702, Presbytery ordained that the minister of the combined charge was supposed to spend "five and a half months at Colonsay, yearly", but this was hard to achieve and religious

instruction was largely delegated to the care of a catechist. Dr. Domhnall Uilleam Stiubhart has kindly researched the work of one such worker, James Moore, Colonsay Catechist 1728 – 1736. The years that followed are punctuated by complaints about the hardship of the ministry, the inadequacy of the stipend, and the absence of a glebe or manse. In 1727, Neill Campbell had to justify the non-administration of the Lord's Supper in Jura or Colonsay: "he was discouraged from attempting such a work in regard he found little appearance of the reality of religion amongst them, and that he has no constitute eldership in his parish".

He evidently stuck to his guns throughout his ministry of 54 years since, in July 1772, Thomas Pennant remarked that "from the reformation till within the last six years, the sacrament had been only once administered"; and in 1764 Dr. Walker had remarked that "the Sacrament of the Supper has never been but once dispensed in this Parish during the present Century. Few such instances, it is to be hoped, are to be found in Christendom". Any improvement may be attributed to Rev. Alexander Hosack, whose incumbency commenced in 1766; it is believed that he initially celebrated the Eucharist at Glaic a' Phubail (Dell of the Tent), in Garvard. Somewhat later a rather primitive building was erected in a more central location, at Machrins, known as A' Tigh Searmonachaidh (The Preaching House), and also as Tigh na Suideachan because it was equipped with turf benches for the benefit of the congregation. This was perhaps erected for the use of the catechist, Patrick McRuer, whose cabin was nearby.

In a more positive sign of engagement the current church was erected c. 1802, during the ministry of Rev. Donald McNicholl; the same minister began to keep Baptismal and Marriage records for Colonsay, now an invaluable resource for genealogists. Yet this was an unhappy time in the parish, with emigration at its height, and the Established Church being somewhat beholden to the landlords who nominated and underwrote the clergy. Unsurprisingly the passionate evangelism of an itinerant Baptist minister, Rev. Dugald Sinclair, was well-received when he visited Colonsay c. 1812, and it is recorded that by 1834 the relatively new and substantial parish church was already in need of repair. Both landlord and Presbytery took notice and at last, c. 1838, a manse and glebe were provided for use by Rev. Alexander Kennedy; nonetheless, in 1857 a visitor could say of the church "it is now dingy and desolate-looking. Its largest windows are decaying, and have been injured also by the storms. They are now clumsily shut up by pieces of undressed wooden boards".

The Modern Ministry

A new approach was clearly needed and, on 27th February 1861, both Colonsay and Oronsay were disjoined from Jura "quoad omnia" and thus formed a new parish, to be administered by its own Kirk Session. Matters quickly improved – a parochial school was maintained, to supplement the work of the SSPCK at Kilchattan. The first minister to be called was Rev. James Bannatyne Mackenzie, a native of St. Kilda, and an accomplished photographer and antiquarian. Rev. Dugald Carmichael made his mark by commencing the earliest surviving Session Minutes and Communion Roll for the parish; on 9th July 1882 there were 58 communicants (population 320). A later incumbent, Kenneth Macleod, is perhaps best-remembered as the author of "The Road to the Isles", which was written in the upstairs back study of his manse, in Scalasaig. The parish was blessed by a succession of devoted servants, whose names are recorded overleaf.

The Future

Services are held jointly with Colonsay Baptist Church, taken by the generosity of a rota of visiting ministers and readers. Parishioners work hard to spread the Faith and to maintain this splendid building as a resource for all. It is a venue for music, poetry and for lectures – especially on ecology, wildlife and environmental matters. The Glebe is being managed with a view to maintaining and enhancing the natural flora and fauna, without poisons or fertilizers. Access is open to all.

Ministers whilst Colonsay and Oronsay were part of the extensive Parish of Jura
Colin Campbell "rector of Jura", fl. 1614
Alexander McAlister M.A. (Glasgow 1614) c. 1626 - 1629
John Darroch M.A. (Glasgow 1625) 1635 – 1646: deposed "for preaching to and gross compliance with the rebels".
John McIlvaine, in office c. 1660
John McSuine, in office before 1688, deposed 1703 "for drunkenness and other misdemeanours".
Neil Campbell, 1703 – 1757 (deceased)
Neil MacLeod M.A. (Aberdeen 1728) 1759 – 1765 (deceased)
Alexander Hosack (Marischal College and Univ. Aberdeen) 1766 -1785 (deceased)
Alexander Stuart (Univ. Glasgow) 1786-1791 (translated to Killean and Kilchenzie)
Francis Stewart 1791-1794 (translated to Kilchrenan and Dalavich)
Donald McNicholl 1796 – 1811 (translated to Kilfinan)
Archibald MacTavish 1812 – 1823 (translated to Kildalton)
Alexander Kennedy 1823 – 1849 (deceased)
Lachlan MacKenzie 1850 – 1876 (deceased)

Ministers whilst Colonsay and Oronsay formed an independent quoad omnia parish
James Bannatyne MacKenzie 1861 – 1872 (translated to Kenmore)
Donald MacLean 1873 – 1881 (translated to Harris)
Dugald Carmichael (Univ. Glasgow) 1881 – 1915 (deceased)
Kenneth MacLeod (Univ. Glasgow and Edinburgh) 1917 – 1925 (translated to Gigha)
Angus McFadyen 1925 – 1930
J. Bryce MacCalman 1935 – 1938 (translated to Kinclaven, Perthshire)
John Y. Clark (translated from Braemar) 1943 – 1952 (deceased)
Samuel Lipp 1954 -1956
A.R.E. Macinnes 1957- 1963 (deceased)
Frederick R.Hurst 1965 – 1971
Ronald L. Crawford 1974 – 1988 (ill-health)

The Ministry in Colonsay and Oronsay since 1988

There is no immediate prospect that the vacancy can be filled on a permanent basis, but in recent years weekly services are conducted by visiting ministers and readers, and the parish is in the care of an Interim Moderator, appointed by Presbytery:

Walter Ritchie (Easdale) 1988 – 1991
David Watson (Oban) 1992 – 1996 (translated to Prestwick)
Freda Marshall (Kibrandon and Kilchattan) 1997 – 2004 (retired)
Robin McKenzie (Strachur) 2005
Richard West 2006 – 2008 (translated to Craigrownie)
Brian Wilkinson 2009 – 2013 (retired)
Elizabeth Gibson 2013 –