



The Old Church

1840 - 1906

The Church

IT may be wondered why, when there was already a church (the "Relief") in Milngavie, another was needed. A modern historian, explains that such secession, churches, "even in poor districts, were places for the well-to-do rather than for the working folk who needed them most." Dr. Thomas Chalmers, the great Scottish church leader of the time, was fired with a desire to "bring religion to the industrial poor . . . the poor could not afford to build churches for

themselves." Between 1836 and 1841 he had 216 new parish churches built. One of them was in Milngavie.

When he visited the village in the late 1830's, Chalmers had found that "souls were perishing for lack of sustenance." Presumably the mass of the people went neither to the parish church at New Kilpatrick nor to the meeting house in Mugdock Road, and drunkenness was certainly rife among them. Having failed to persuade the "Relief" minister

to assume responsibility for the whole community, the Presbytery of Dumbarton and the Kirk Session of New Kilpatrick took steps in 1840 to build a parish church for Milngavie.

Services were held in that year, but the actual church building (now the Civil Defence Headquarters) was not opened until May, 1841. It cost £1,500. In the circumstances, the *new* congregation was bound to have difficulty making ends meet. Little wonder that the first minister, a keen-faced young man named **Peter Dale (1841 - 1843)**, was glad to get away to a settled parish at Houston and Killellan after less than two years. It is doubtful if he ever received all the meagre stipend due him. He died twelve years later.

After some difficulty and delay, no doubt aggravated by the great 1843 Disruption in the Church of Scotland, another innocent youth was persuaded to take the charge. He was **Hugh Markland (1844-1847)**, aged 27 and unmarried. For just on three years he bore the burden and heat of the day, and then ill health compelled him to return to his home at Irvine, Ayrshire, where he died in June, 1847.



Rev. **PETER DALE**
1841 - 1843

He was quickly succeeded by **James Hannay (1847-1855)**. A farmer's son from Wigtonshire, he had worked as a missionary at Richibucto, New Brunswick, for some years—a tough, rough job. But Milngavie seemed to be too much for him. Eight trying and frustrating years took toll of his strength, and he died at Port William in his native county in June, 1855, aged 56. He left a son of the same name who gained some distinction as a surgeon and eventually emigrated to Canada. Entries in an old cash book of this period show that four carts of coal to heat the church cost a total of £1 16/-, that the beadle (Thomas Nicol) was paid £7 per annum and the precentor (William Bulloch) £5.

It was during Hannay's ministry that the visit of Hugh Macdonald, already mentioned took place. The author's remarks on the ecclesiastical situation in Milngavie are of interest:

" There are two places of worship in the village, one in connection with the Established Church, and the other a United Presbyterian meeting-house. The Free Kirk has also, we understand, a considerable number of adherents among the population; and a still larger proportion are Irish Roman Catholics: the former, we were informed, generally attend the ministrations of the Free Church clergyman at Baldernock, while the latter have their spiritual wants supplied in the Chapel at Duntocher."

In December, 1855, **David Skinner Maxwell** (1855-1858) was ordained and inducted to Milngavie Church. Two months later he received his first payment of £20 " to A/c of Stipend, about to be married." A modest measure of success appears to have attended his efforts, for soon the proposal was made that a manse should be built, at Woodlands. First, however, the Elders had to represent to Mr. Maxwell " the necessity of be-



Rev. DAVID S. MAXWELL
1855 - 1858

ginning a course of visitation." Perhaps his main bent was preaching!

The Managers' minutes also record that at a meeting held on 25th December, 1856 (no thought of it being Christmas Day!), " the Church was granted to the Band (Choir) for a Soiree on condition that only sacred music was used." Some soiree! A subscription was raised and the erection of a manse was begun, but it cost £1,018 and a debt of £518 remained, so it was necessary to borrow £400 on the security of the new building. This may be why a proposal had to be made " that the minister should be paid at fixed periods, quarterly": he, poor man, had never

known whether or when he was likely to receive any stipend, Soon afterwards Mr. Maxwell was being asked to explain for what purpose he was requesting a testimonial! He was translated to Montrose, Melville Church, in December, 1858. In his parting words to the congregation he said he was "extremely sorry to leave a people among whom I have received so much unfeigned kindness." From Montrose he later went to Monimail Old Parish, Fife, but left in 1875 for Australia, surviving there until 1914. In January, 1966, Mr. William Spence, an elder in Monimail Church, was able to tell us that his mother, who had died a few years earlier in her nineties, spoke frequently about Mr. Maxwell up to the end of her life and held him in great reverence.

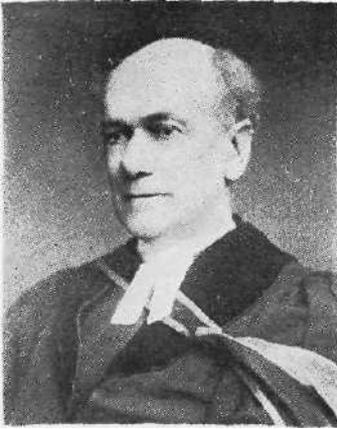
There followed a time of dire adversity. For lack of money the new manse, scarcely occupied, had to be sold (the house still stands in Mugdock Road and bears the name "The Old Manse"); regular income slumped; five of the leading office-bearers resigned; and, worst of all, several candidates who were invited to fill the ministerial vacancy, in the end declined to come. At the elec-

tion meeting for one of these we read "vote of Wm. Gardner objected to on the ground that he was not in a state to give an intelligent vote, which objection was sustained."

It appears that the annual income of the church a hundred years ago was made up of approximately £40 from collections in church; £60 from pew rents; £20 as a contribution from New Kilpatrick parish; £25 from a Home Mission grant; and a few sundry donations. In 1867 the annual accounts showed, Income £160 18s. 11¹/₄d.; Expenditure, £160 18s. 3d.: the credit balance of eightpence farthing surely comes as near fulfilling Mr. Micawber's famous prescription for happiness as well could be.

Such happiness was not quite yet for Milngavie Church, however, though with the appointment of the Rev. **Robert Bell** (1859-1898) in October, 1859, the decisive step towards it was taken. Hard up though the congregation was, hospitality had to be honoured. The ministers assisting at the ordination were given "a dinner such as is customary on such occasion": it cost £7 16s. 6d.

Mr. Bell came to a pathetically poor inheritance. There being no manse, it was proposed that



Rev. ROBERT BELL
1859 - 1898

he should occupy a cottage "sadly in need of repair" which stood in front of the church. As a bachelor then, and for the thirty years following, he preferred, however, to take lodgings for a time. By steady conscientious endeavour, he gradually, slowly but surely, built up the strength of the congregation. In this he was assisted by a faithful group of office-bearers and other supporters, names which appear frequently including those of John Blackwood, Robert Dalglish, M.P., Campbell Douglas (Mains), and I. G. G. Glassford (Dougalston). Most prominent of all was James Spens Black of Craigmaddie, who died with tragic suddenness aged 51 in February, 1867, and who was

commemorated in the church by a large plaque, a smaller replica of which is to be seen in the present building.

Within a few years it was possible to re-purchase the manse, and then Mr. Bell set himself to gather sufficient money to endow the Church and have it declared a full and independent parish church. This happened in **1873**. By that time the number of communicant members was 320. The first Kirk Session was composed of Alexander Strathdee, James Sprout, Matthew Dickson, Peter Buchanan and John Cranmer, and other office-bearers were Robert Bell, James Watt, John Strathdee and William Hunter. In 1879 the precentor who had hitherto led the praise was joined by a harmonium, the gift of Mr. J. Gibson Fleming of Clober. The change was effected without objection. Mr. Coutts, pianist to Milngavie Musical Association, was appointed organist and paid "£10 per annum and his dinner."

Mr. Bell was greatly beloved by his people. He had studied medicine before turning to the ministry, and it is said that he frequently ministered to the ailing bodies as well as to the souls of his parishioners. When he married late in life a lady

much younger than himself who was organist in New Kilpatrick Church, Dr. King, the minister there, employed a local fiddler to appear outside the manse the morning after and play; "My luv she's but a lassie yet" — this we had from a lady who remembered the incident well.

The first Roman Catholic church in Milngavie, dedicated to St. Joseph, was opened in 1872 in Woodlands Street. St. Andrew's Episcopal Church was begun as a mission station a few years later. Then in 1896 another church was built in the village, when Baldernock Free Church transported itself to the growing community from which most of its members were drawn: this is the church we know today as St. Luke's.¹ Also in the 1890's an assembly of the Christian Brethren began to meet in Milngavie: they continue today in the Allander Hall. But the parish church went on growing and at the time of Mr. Bell's death in 1898 had as members almost half the adult population.

The inscription on the plaque erected to commemorate his long ministry, and now to be seen in the porch of the present-day church, is a tribute of which any Christian minister might be proud. It reads: "*The members and friends of the congregation desire to place on record their warm esteem for him as a man and their grateful recollection of (he long and faithful services he rendered as a pastor and preacher. For thirty-nine years he laboured with untiring zeal and fidelity in the ministry of the Word, endearing himself to all by his character, his ability and his devotion to duty. He was an eloquent and fearless preacher, a lover of truth and sincerity, a friend of the poor, a wise counsellor.*"

The worth of Mr. Bell's ministry may be judged from the fact that at the end of it Milngavie Parish Church, once so poor a thing, had become a desirable charge. From the many ministers who were willing to come the choice was finally narrowed to two, and on a vote being

¹ (Note)—Thus for four years, 1896 to 1900, Milngavie had the pattern of church life familiar in most Scottish towns and villages in the second half of the 19th century—three Presbyterian congregations existing side-by-side, each the rival and competitor of the others. It was said that the parish church bell tolled out, "*We are the Church! We are the Church!*"; the Free church bell gave tinny reply. "*No, you're not. No, you're not!*"; whilst the bell of the U.P. church, which was noted for financial liberality, merely said. "*Collection! Collection!*"



Rev. JOHN EDGAR
1898 - 1925

taken the Rev. **John Edgar, M.A.** (1898-1925) was elected by a majority of 27: 152 votes were cast against both the candidates!

Undeterred by such an inauspicious beginning, the new minister set out at once to give strong leadership and to show he was a man of energy and vision. There had been a Sunday School since at least 1856, but Mr. Edgar sought to make this more efficient by forming a "Sabbath School Society." He also gave every encouragement to the Boys' Brigade Company (1st Milngavie) which had been begun in 1897 by Mr. J. Arnold Wilson with the support of all the churches. Then in 1900 he promoted in the congregation the formation of a branch of

the Woman's Guild, an organisation which has been a tower of strength ever since. Characteristic of the conscientious fidelity of this time is the record of service of Mr. William McArthur, who retired from the post of church officer in October, 1901. He had carried out his duties, which included ringing the town curfew bell morning and evening, for 22 years, without missing a single service. His salary was £15 per annum.

Mr. Edgar's greatest undertaking was to be the building of a new church. The congregation had grown apace, reaching 700 members by 1904, and more accommodation for worshippers was needed. Considerations of prestige may also have counted, however, for new buildings had just been erected for Cairns, the "U.P." church, which, with the Milngavie and Baldernock "Free" Church (St. Luke's), had gained strength when their two denominations came together in 1900 to form the United Free Church of Scotland, and the "Auld Kirk" now had the least satisfactory premises of the three. There were those who would have extended the existing building as the best solution, and plans providing for this are still

preserved. But John Edgar saw that this would never be adequate. For a 20th century church, not only a sanctuary of beauty and dignity but also a spacious suite of halls was requisite.

The opposition was far from negligible, several of the office-bearers going the length of resigning in protest against so grandiose a plan. By persistence and persuasion, however, the minister finally had his way. the

architectural competition instituted to obtain the best possible design.

Meanwhile, there was money to be raised. £1,500 was soon subscribed by members and friends, and a grand three-day Bazaar held in the Royal Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts (McLellan Galleries) in October, 1904, yielded some £3,000. Thus it was with confidence and enthusiasm, and high hopes for a new era of growth and



Site of New Church, c. 1900

voting at the decisive congregational meeting being 131 for a new church, and 55 for extending the old. A site in the Newtown at the foot of Garwhitter Hill was given by Mr. J. Ripley Ker of Dougalston, and an

progress, that minister and congregation watched the Memorial Stone of the second Milngavie Parish Church being laid by Her Grace the Duchess of Montrose on the afternoon of Saturday, 20th May, 1905.