Tweedsmuir Parish: The 2nd Hundred Years

IN a previous article (/index.php/history-heritage/before-1800/26-the-foundation-of-tweedsmuir-parish), I recorded the foundation of Tweedsmuir Parish in the early 1640s, the opening of the original kirk building in 1648 and the problems of the new parish in the turbulent times of its early decades. I shall now recount the events in the parish, mainly by reference to the ministers, during the following period up to the time of the Disruption of the Church of Scotland in 1843.

From 1721 to 1754 the minister of Tweedsmuir was James Welsh, the first and only native of the parish to become its minister. He was born at Over Menzion and after graduating at the University of Edinburgh became a probationer assistant to William Higgins – the minister from 1698 to 1718. The congregation wished James Welsh to succeed Mr Higgins when the latter died, but initially this was opposed by the heritors, who had their own favoured candidate. However, in 1721 the synod ordered the presbytery to proceed with the appointment. During his time as minister Mr Welsh had a long fight to keep the kirk in repair and to make his manse habitable. In 1732 he chose as his assistant Christopher Cairns, a young man with a similar background to his own. Mr Cairns succeeded in 1755, but only lived on for six years as minister.

In 1761 Mr Thomas Muschet became the minister at Tweedsmuir. He was a Gaelic speaker and former schoolmaster, who had first served in the parish as a probationer in 1746 and had worked for six years as a Dissenting Minister in Yorkshire. After returning, he remained in Tweedsmuir until his death in 1793. During his period of office the first school was opened in the parish – after a long struggle. Mr Muschet was also involved in a legal dispute with the
Tweedies of Nether Menzion over his entitlement to the Broadmeadow. This was finally settled when the minister won the right to cut sprots (grasses or rushes in meadows before drainage) for thatch, but not hay.

Thomas Muschet was the author of the section on Tweedsmuir parish in the First Statistical Account of Scotland, which was compiled between 1791 and 1799. This noted, inter alia, that there were about 15,000 sheep in the parish, as well as a number of horses and black cattle. The Tweedsmuir bred sheep were particularly esteemed in the north of England, where they were regarded as being “healthy and good thrivers”. The human population had decreased in recent years, from 397 in 1755 to 227 in the 1790s. About 70 years before the report was written the lands of the parish had been occupied by 26 tenants, but over the years the farms had enlarged in size, presumably by amalgamation. Although 15 farms remained, there were only three farmers resident in the parish. There were 51 dwelling houses, of which three were inns.

In 1793 James Gardner succeeded as minister, after serving for two years as an assistant. His stipend was £75 sterling per annum. At this time there were 7 heritors but only one of them (Tweedie of Oliver) was resident in the parish. Mr Gardner was an authority on agriculture and particularly on sheep. He won many prizes for his contributions; a medal from the Highland Society of Scotland for “drawing up a perspicuous(sic) account of Mr Laidlaw at Menzion’s successful improvements in sheep farming on an extensive scale”, laid before the Society in 1808, is still in the archives of Tweedsmuir Kirk. In 1798 a new manse was built, the previous building having been dilapidated for many decades. Elsewhere in the parish, the present Carlowe’s bridge crossing the Tweed had been built in 1783, replacing an earlier bridge erected sometime between 1694 and 1741. Mr Gardner married the daughter of the minister at Broughton and they had 13 children. He died aged 70, after 37 years as Tweedsmuir’s minister.

Dr George Burns became minister in 1831, moving from New Brunswick. He was a noted speaker and writer and was the author of the Tweedsmuir section of the Second Statistical Account of Scotland (1834). While Dr Burns was in Tweedsmuir the numbers attending the kirk apparently grew to such an extent that a new communion cup had to be purchased. This cup is no doubt the one, dated 1838, which is still in use to this day. It cost £4.10s. Dr Burns was much involved in the controversy about interference by the state and the courts with church reforms, which led to the Disruption; he was censured by presbytery for holding meetings in neighbouring parishes “calculated to create discord”.

Professor David Welsh (himself a native of Tweedsmuir and to whom there is a plaque in the kirk), was the retiring Moderator of the General Assembly when, in May 1843, he led out the 190 ministers and elders at the time of the Disruption. Dr Burns was among them and as a result of joining the Free Secession, he was declared to be no longer a minister of the Church of Scotland or of Tweedsmuir Parish. In 1844 he was admitted to the Corstorphine Free Church and died in Edinburgh in 1876. According to the late Professor Dr A C Cheyne, who was
Professor of Ecclesiastical History at the University of Edinburgh, the Disruption was almost certainly the most important event in the history of Scottish religion since the establishment of Presbyterianism in 1690 which had very considerable implications for both Kirk and nation. About a third of ministers, elders and members left the Church of Scotland to join the Free Church at that time.

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*This article is based upon a talk given to the Upper Tweeddale Guild in 2005. I am again indebted to Mr Tony Hope for his advice and also acknowledge the details of the ministers found in church documents, which to believe to be based upon Dr Gunn’s “Books of the Church” series.*