

## Christianity in Strathglass & the Foundation of Marydale Church

### **The beginning of the Church in the Highlands**

The first mention of Christianity in the Highlands is Saint Columba's famous journey up Loch Ness to convert the Pictish king Brude at Inverness, where his miracles in the Name of Jesus overcame the druid priests. On the way to Inverness he encountered the Loch Ness monster, at that time a fierce beast, and by the sign of the Cross tamed it, so that today the monster is very shy and retiring. In a later journey St. Columba administered the first recorded baptisms in Glen Urquhart.

### **St. Bain and Clachan Comar**

St. Bain (also spelt Bean, Beathan, Baithene: pronounced Bãn) was the cousin of St. Columba, succeeding him as Abbot of Iona. He is traditionally supposed to have evangelised Strathglass and gives his name to *St. Bain's spring*, which is on the hillside across the road from Clachan Comar, and was till the mid-twentieth century, the drinking supply for Kerrow.

Clachan Comar was originally known as *Kilbeathan*, from *cil*, a monk's cell, and St. Beathan. Pre-reformation records place it in the parish of Inverness. Early records trace the *Clach-a-bastaidh*, the natural cupstone supposed to have been used for baptisms in the glen since earliest times and now standing at the entrance of Marydale church, to Clachan Comar. At the entrance, on the left side of the doorway is a cut in the stone. Local tradition says that a sword thrust aimed at the last priest during the Reformation hit the stone instead: however he was caught and killed at Cannich bridge.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, coffin bearers rested at the place where St. Bain's spring reached the road. The water of the spring fell into a wooden basin, from which the holy water was obtained to sprinkle the coffins.

### **Strathglass 'pestered with popery' & Knockfin**

Many Highlanders retained Catholic practises after the Reformation. In 1579, Thomas Chisholm, laird of Strathglass, was imprisoned for being a Catholic. Around 1670 Father Robert Munro, to be known as *the Apostle of Strathglass*, was appointed to the Highland mission. In 1699/1700 confirmation was administered in the Highlands for the first time since the Reformation. Two years later the presbytery records 'Strathglass and ye parish of Commir is so pestered wi' popery that a total defectione is feared there if not speedily prevented'.

Colin Chisholm of Knockfin, the second son of Alexander Chisholm, laird of Strathglass, was instrumental in opening mission stations at Guisachan (*Achad - na -eglaise* - church field), and Clachan Comar. At this time, the *Clach-a-Bastaidh* was placed near the door of the chapel at the Clachan. The holy water stoup from Knockfin is still in use in the porch at Marydale. In 1681 another Mass centre opened at Tomich.

In 1707 Bishop James Gordon confirmed 123 candidates in Strathglass alone, and over 2,000 in the Highlands altogether. By the census of 1709 there were 640 Catholics in Strathglass.

### **The Jesuit Mission & Fasnakyle**

Alexander MacRae S.J (who founded the church at Dornie) took over the Strathglass mission when Father Munro was captured. By 1714 there were over a hundred Catholic families and Mass was openly celebrated. By 1720 Father MacRae had made 395 further converts in Strathglass alone.

He was joined by a famous triad of Jesuits -John Farquharson and his brother, and Alex Cameron. Father John built the priest's house and chapel at Fasnakyle. Mass houses were also built at Crochail and Strathfarrer.

Father John, or *Maghistair Ian* as he was known locally, dressed in kilt and tartan hose, learnt Gaelic and was the first person to make a collection of Gaelic poetry, which unfortunately did not survive. There is a short story of his altercation with the devil as an 'old carle, with a noise like a thousand thunders, and spitting fire, flame and smoke' who dived into the river at Cannich bridge.

After the '45 and the defeat at Culloden, the penal laws were reinforced. Father John was captured at Balnain, and transported to Hanover, but the captain of the convict ship smuggled him back to Scotland. He returned to Cannich and the three priests hid up Glen Cannich in a temporary hide at the Brae of Craskie. It was at this time that he is supposed to have baptised the locals in the *Clach-a-bastaidh*, now at Marydale.

The Farquharson brothers gave themselves up when the redcoat captain threatened them with burning every Catholic home in Strathglass: Alex Cameron was captured later. They were sent to a prison ship where Alex Cameron died. After 15 months the brothers were released, Fr. John later returning as chaplain to his nephew at Balmoral.

### **Chisholms & the Strathglass 'nursery of priests'**

In 1773, the same year that the Jesuits were temporarily suppressed the emigration from Strathglass to Nova Scotia took place, and from 1803-31 the Highland clearances in Strathglass and Glen Affric. It was at this time that the 'fair brothers,' John and Aeneas Chisholm were priests in Strathglass, and the 'fair lady' Chisholm tried desperately to prevent the clearances in the lets she controlled.

John was priest in Strathglass for 17 years before being made Bishop of the Highland District in 1791: Aeneas succeeded him as Bishop in 1814. Father Aeneas built a small chapel at Inchullie, for lower Strathglass, which was replaced with a slated chapel at Aigas in 1801: he rebuilt the mission chapel at Fasnakyle on a grander scale. The old cross from Fasnakyle chapel, dated 1780, Leo XIII, was saved and now tops St. Ignatius well at Guisachan.

In 1810 he procured a mission room in Inverness, forerunner of today's St. Mary's. In 1826, under father Aeneas' successors, Eskadale church was built by Lord Lovat. Between 1833-48 another Chisholm, Father Thomas, was appointed to Fasnakyle. In 1846 Father MacKenzie dubbed Strathglass 'a nursery of priests'. In this period three lists produced names of 25, 17 and 27 priests from Strathglass respectively, the last 27 named being in Canada and Nova Scotia. 5 Bishops came from the Strath - the 2 Vicars Apostolic of the Highland district (the Chishom brothers): Bishop Alexander MacDonell of Kingston, Ontario; Bishop William Fraser of Arichat, Nova Scotia; and Bishop Aeneas Chisholm of Aberdeen.

### **Marydale**

Marydale was completed, according to the date on the original drainpipes (still in place) in 1866. The architect was Joseph Hansom, also associated with the hansom cab. The priest, Father Colin Grant lived at Glassburn during the building works, and 'sold off his cows and some furniture, and all the farm things' to meet the cost of the buildings, although he could not stretch to a new bell before the Solemn Blessing (12th May, 1868). Colin Grant was consecrated Bishop of Aberdeen in 1889 and died 6 weeks later.

The school, which opened a few years later, was very successful and numbers reduced by the clearances were boosted by Irish immigrants building the hydro-electric dams and power station in Glen Cannich and Glen Affric. A severe fire damaged the building in 1928 and a later parish priest, a monk from Fort Augustus, added the gold stars to the roof after its restoration. The present restoration work was completed in 2004.

*Mass of Thanksgiving June 27th 2004, celebrated by Rt. Rev. Peter Antony Moran, Bishop of Aberdeen*