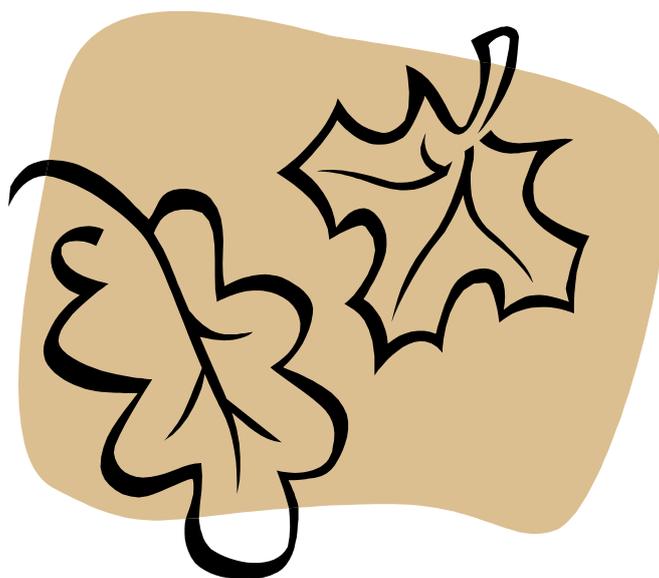


# AUTUMN LEAVES

## Volume 3



**Alasdair Gordon**

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## Foreword

I have much pleasure in presenting the third volume of my *Autumn Leaves*, consisting of items that I wrote as a younger man and which I am now re-issuing in my own “autumn” years.

As always, I trust friends will enjoy these contributions from my younger self and will also forgive their many shortcomings.

Alasdair Gordon

Hamilton  
South Lanarkshire

February 2014

## Historical Notes on Fintray Parish Church

What follows is the text of a brief pamphlet that I issued almost exactly forty years ago to the day, to mark the 150th anniversary of Fintray Parish Church (built 1821). At the time I was minister at Fintray and also at the neighbouring linked charge of Kinellar and Blackburn. Apart from a few minor updates and omission of some obviously outdated material, the pamphlet reflects the position in 1973.

This is not intended to be either an exhaustive or a scholarly work and makes no such pretensions.

Since Rev John Catto's *Jottings on the Parish of Fintray* was printed in 1901, there has been nothing comparable published and readily accessible. It is hoped that this modest little pamphlet may perhaps partially fill this gap.

It should be pointed out that this pamphlet really deals with the history of the church as distinct from the civil parish. In former days it was often difficult to draw any such distinction but nowadays the line is clearer. No one would pretend that the life of the average parish in Scotland really revolves round its church.

Accordingly, those who may wish to know something of Fintray's secular history will find little in the following pages. Perhaps at some future date, someone will be able to fill this gap.

Like many churches - large and small - in Scotland, Fintray has quite an interesting past. It is always pleasant and encouraging for present day Christians to look back at the various ways in which God has moved his people in days gone by. Yet it is never enough just to look back with sighs of nostalgia at the perceived glory of yesteryear. The church of God is set down in the present day and God's commands and injunctions to men and women to be his disciples hold as strongly as ever.

Church buildings, however fine they may be will one day crumble into dust. Traditions however high they may be in their aspirations will be forgotten. Only Him whom we worship remains, the same yesterday, today and for ever (Heb 13: 8), the one who lives not in any temple made with hands (Heb 9: 24) but is the living Person of Jesus Christ.

No one other than God himself knows the future of the church at Fintray but his command is to follow in faith. So, this booklet is put out in the prayer that this may be the spirit in which our Kirk will lead its life now and in the future.

Fintray Manse  
February 1973

Christian witness in this parish without doubt goes back to the Celtic period of the church. An evangelist named Drostan, along with three followers - Colm, Medan (or Meddan) and Fergus - laboured to bring the Gospel to this north east part of Scotland.

In spite of evidence in the Book of Deer that suggests a later date, it would seem that this took place during the fifth century of the Christian era and so, even before the time of such monumental figures as Columba who laboured in the following century.

Drostan and his associates were almost certainly trained at the missionary school at Whithorn in Galloway, founded by Ninian in 397 AD and known as *Candida Casa* (White House). Medan founded a chapel at Cothal on the north bank of the River Don at the eastern end of what is now the parish of Fintray. Just across the river, in the parish of Dyce is "Pitmeddan". There is also a Pitmeddan in the parish of Udney and both of these names give testimony to his labours.

The original church of Dyce was founded by Fergus and the two little churches - Dyce and Fintray respectively - faced each other across the Don. Today, as populations have moved, the modern parish churches are quite a few miles apart.

Later in the history of Fintray, under Roman Catholicism, it seems that Medan was partially ousted as patron saint of the parish in favour of Saint Giles.

After the time of Medan and his followers we really pass into a "dark" period of history. It seems virtually certain, however, that the parish bounds were marked out in the twelfth century during the reign of King David I, son of Malcolm Canmore and Margaret. Around 1196 David, Early of Huntingdon, Lord of Garioch and a grandson of David I founded the Benedictine Abbey of Lindores near Newburgh on the Fife bank of the River Tay and endowed it generously. Among the endowments he granted was the "church of Fintreth" which, in practice meant the whole parish. Provision had to be made, however, by the ecclesiastical hierarchy for the support, from the teinds of the parish, of a vicar <sup>1</sup> to attend to the religious ordinances in Fintray.

Around this time too, it seems that a chapel was built and dedicated to Saint Giles in the region of what is now Chapelyards croft. At some time before the Reformation, most of the church lands were sold off including Disblair, Milton, Logie, Blair and Foresterseat. The Barony jurisdiction of Fintray came into the hands of William Forbes of Craigievar in 1621. Heritable jurisdictions were abolished in 1746 but the lands remained in the ownership of that family for many centuries.

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<sup>1</sup> A "vicar" means someone who takes the place of a beneficed clergyman or "parson" (person). The title has long passed out of common use in Scotland although it lingered for a while after the Reformation.

It is of interest to note that in the Minutes of the Presbytery of Aberdeen of 16 July 1601, it is recorded that a deputation visited the parish in connection with a petition from Rev William Neilson, minister at Fintray, for an increase of Glebe.

One of Fintray's ministers in the seventeenth century was Rev Andrew Abercrombie <sup>2</sup> who was a Covenanter. His manse and crops were burned by the Marquis of Montrose in 1645. Mr Abercrombie resigned his living before men of his convictions were ejected by Parliament in 1662. Unfortunately, he took all the Kirk Session records with him and these have never been recovered. The seventeenth century was a troubled century for Christendom in Scotland (and in England).

After Rev James Hutcheon, Minister at Newhills, was inducted to Fintray in 1702, it was decided that the time had come to erect a new church. Since Celtic times, the ecclesiastical centre of the parish had been at Cothal but, in the centuries that followed, the population had tended to move westwards. The new church was constructed in 1703 at Halltoun (Hatton) of Fintray on a small mound that was probably the site of an original mansion or "hall". The new church was a very plain building probably containing two lofts - one for the Laird <sup>3</sup> and the other a common loft. Remains of the old church at Cothal can still be seen.

Mr Hutcheon died in 1712 and was succeeded by Rev William Osborne, son of the Professor of Divinity at Marischal College. During his ministry, a new manse (long since demolished) was built near the church at Hatton.

It is of interest to note that Patrick Copland LLD (1749-1822), Professor of Natural Philosophy at Marischal College, was a

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<sup>2</sup> A list of ministers is appended to this pamphlet.

<sup>3</sup> Many of the Scottish Lairds were – and are – Episcopalian although in practice they have often adhered to the parish church.

native of Fintray. His father was Rev Samuel Copland MA, Minister from 1745 to 1796 and contributor to the "Old" Statistical Account of Scotland.

The church now in use was built in 1821 on an elevated position to the north of the 1703 building. A fragment of this old building still stands, surrounded by the Old Churchyard. In 1830, a vault was built in the churchyard to store the remains of deceased persons until they had putrefied beyond the stage of being any use to the anatomists. Thereafter they were buried. Such vaults or mort-safes, sometimes referred to as "resurrection houses" were by no means uncommon at the time.<sup>4</sup>

The parish of Fintray was largely untouched by the secession movements, even the Disruption of 1843. The Free Church of Scotland did have a Mission Station in Fintray but no church was built and no minister was ever inducted. This is in marked contrast to most of the surrounding parishes and particularly with Aberdeen itself where all of the ministers within the City Parish of Saint Nicholas "went out" in 1843.

### *The Parish*

Rev Samuel Copland records in the Statistical Account that the parish comprised 7,388 acres and was in the shape of an Irish harp. The Third Statistical Account records the acreage as 7,270 acres. When the parish bounds were originally marked out, the River Don formed the southern boundary. In the course of time, the Don slightly changed its course, leaving two smallish areas of the parish stranded on the south side. In October 1948, these two areas were formally ceded to the parishes of Dyce and Kinellar respectively. The present civil parish boundaries can be easily traced on an up-to-date Ordnance Survey map.

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<sup>4</sup> One of the most famous is the "Round House" of Udney.  
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The boundaries can be more particularly described as follows: starting at a point just below Waterside, Kintore it follows an irregular line to a point just north of Greenlands, moving then east and south east to join the Newmill or Aultlather Burn; it follows the line of the burn until it is joined by the Denburn tributary; it then follows the latter and crosses the Kinmuck Road; thereafter it follows an irregular line again until it reaches its most northern point just about a mile north of the Blair; it then follows an irregular line in a south easterly direction to meet the Burn of Straloch; it follows the line of the burn until just south west of Newmachar village where it cuts across country in a south westerly direction to join the Red Burn the line of which it follows for a short distance only; it then follows another irregular line east, then south until it joins another (unnamed) small burn which flows into the Don at Heugh-head; thereafter, the Don itself forms the remaining boundaries.

The neighbouring parishes to Fintray are Dyce, Kinellar, Kintore, Keith Hall and Newmachar. In 1970, Fintray was linked with Kinellar and Blackburn to form one pastoral charge linked over two parishes.<sup>5</sup>

The population is fairly widespread over Fintray parish. The main centre of population is at Hatton of Fintray which has a primary school, a post office and a shop. There are also small centres of population (1) at the hamlet of Disblair, which had a small school until quite recently, but no post office and (2) Cothal, which has a post office and shop.<sup>6</sup>

The main mansion house was Fintray House, built as the main residence for the Forbes-Sempill family in 1827 to the design of John Smith, who also designed the parish church. There was a rival plan for Fintray House offered by the distinguished

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<sup>5</sup> After the writer demitted the charge at the end of 1975, there was a further linking with the neighbouring parish of Keith Hall.

<sup>6</sup> This paragraph reflects the position in 1973.

architect William Burn. Subsequently, the house was substantially rebuilt in 1880. It was requisitioned during World War II and was never occupied again thereafter by the family. It was demolished in 1952 although the stable buildings and lodge houses survive. Much of the estate is now the property of an absentee landlord.

Disblair House (formerly Disblair Cottage) is a pleasant small mansion, the main wing being over 300 years old. Unfortunately this part of the house was gutted by fire on 18 January 1973.

### *The Church*



The present church, built in 1821 to the design of John Smith, the distinguished Aberdeen architect is a substantial, handsome, if plain building, with a high pulpit on the south wall and a gallery on three sides including a (disused) laird's pew facing the pulpit. In 1960, the church was modernised and electric light and power brought in for the first time.

At the same time, the organ was moved from its former position in front of the pulpit to its present location under the gallery on the east wall. A small vestry was taken out under the west gallery at the same time and a cupboard provided for the minister's coat and gown. Previously there was no vestry for the minister.

There is an externally rung bell dated 1821 mounted on the west gable. The church is so designed that there is an entrance and gallery staircase on the east and west sides.<sup>7</sup>

The pulpit is high and pleasing in appearance with an attractive decorative sounding board. Unfortunately, the stairs leading up to the pulpit are rather clumsily arranged.

Like many churches built in the last century, Fintray church is really too large and inflexible for present needs.

### *The Manse*<sup>8</sup>

The Manse of Fintray, which now serves the linked charge, was constructed between 1851 and 1855 to the design of William Smith, Aberdeen City Architect and son of John Smith who designed Fintray Church. William Smith designed many fine buildings including Balmoral Castle (in close cooperation with Prince Albert), Trinity Hall, Gilcomston Free Church (now Gilcomston South), the (former) College of Domestic Science in King Street and the steeple of the Kirk of St Nicholas.

The manse is a large irregularly-shaped building, quite impressive by any judgment and well situated in its own grounds. It was also serviced by substantial outbuildings (now semi derelict) including a bothy for the "minister's man" and a most impressive back-to-back privy!

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<sup>7</sup> An extension containing hall and toilet facilities was added on the west side in 2002.

<sup>8</sup> The manse described here was sold in the 1980s and is now in private hands.

By modern standards, the rooms in the manse are rather large but yet the house is well proportioned and more convenient to run than many houses of its vintage. As is also the case with the church, the outward appearance is somewhat spoiled by having been covered, in typical Scottish manner, with drab grey harling.

A twin manse to that of Fintray may be seen at Methlick where a manse was built in 1861 to the same design. There are also a number of other manses across the north east of Scotland built to a similar design.

### *Communion Vessels*

Fintray Church is fortunate enough to possess a very old silver cup inscribed *For the Holie Communion at Fintray. Mr Adam Barclay Minister 1633*. This cup, sometimes referred to as *Saint Medan's Cup* is priceless in monetary value and of considerable historical interest since various stories are attached to it.

Some claim that the cup is actually older than its inscription and point out that there is a pre-Reformation recess in the north wall of what remains of the old church at Cothal into which the cup fits perfectly. This in itself proves nothing apart from the fact that a cup of similar size could have been kept in this recess.

There is another story that that the cup was made from the silver head or image of Saint Medan that, in pre-Reformation times, was carried round the parish on the saint's day (14 November) or in times of drought or trouble. The full truth of the history of this cup will probably never be known on this side of eternity.

There are also two extremely fine silver beaker shaped cups still in regular use at communion which were presented in 1699 by Sir

John Forbes of Craigievar, who bought them out of the vacant stipend of the parish.

Individual cups are now used at communion, although their introduction is fairly recent.

### *The Organ*

On 27 July 1901, a bazaar was held in the grounds of Fintray House to raise funds to purchase an organ for the church. It was in connection with this bazaar that the little book "Jottings on the Parish of Fintray" was published and sold. Though anonymous, it was the work of Rev John Catto, Minister at Fintray and also Clerk to the Presbytery of Aberdeen.

As a result of the money-raising efforts, the present "Dulsanell" organ was purchased in 1901. It is a single manual extension organ with three ranks of pipes and still gives excellent service in leading congregational praise. Originally it was manually blown. An electric motor was fitted in 1960 and the instrument was overhauled and cleaned.

### *Communion Tokens*

- 17<sup>th</sup> century - very small rectangular token inscribed "MAF". These initials stand for Mr Alexander Forbes who was inducted as minister in 1681.
- 18<sup>th</sup> century - plain square lead token bearing the inscription "Fintray 1761".
- 19<sup>th</sup> century - plain oval token inscribed "Fintray Parish Church 1854" with an indication as to which table the communicant should attend. On the reverse are inscribed the words "This do in remembrance of me, Luke 22: 19 But let a man examine himself 1 Cor 11: 28".

### *Communion Table*

The handsome Communion Table bears a small brass plate carrying the following inscription: "Presented to Oldmachar United Free Church by Robert Clark to the Glory of God and in memory of his wife Mary Helen Forsyth who died on 8<sup>th</sup> November 1927 and of their son George Clark killed in action at Hooe on 25<sup>th</sup> September 1915. Jesus said 'I am the Resurrection and the Life'".

Through the process of union and readjustment, the church that originally housed the table was closed and the item passed into the possession of the Kirk Session of Saint Machar's Cathedral. The Session, in turn, kindly presented it to Fintray Church in May 1960. A suitable inscription to this effect was added just below the original.

It is of interest to note, in passing, that the Oldmachar Church (later renamed Saint Mary's) had as its minister from 1848-60, Rev Dr Alfred Edersheim, a famous Biblical scholar and writer whose works are still read and valued. The building now houses the University of Aberdeen Geography Department and, surprisingly, in secular use, retains the name "St Mary's".

### *Communion Table Chairs*

The three oak chairs behind the table were presented in 1960 by past and present members of the Convener Court of the Seven Incorporated Trades of Aberdeen in recognition of the services of Rev Dr P C Miller, a former minister at Fintray who was their Patron (Chaplain) from 1948-60.

### *The Font*

A matching oak font now in use was the generous gift of James T Ogston Esq of Fintray Mills who is an elder in the congregation.

## *Pulpit Bible Plate*



The author in 1971 outside Fintray Parish Church, holding the plate

In a frame on the west wall of the sanctuary may be seen a brass plate bearing the following inscription: "This Bible was presented to Rev John Leslie, Minister of Fintray and to the Elders of the Kirk Session and their successors in office by Thos Morrison of Elsick & Disblair for the Church built this year. Disblair Cottage 1<sup>st</sup> October 1821".

This Thomas Morison would probably have been a son of James Morison of Elsick, Provost of Aberdeen, who married Isabella Dyce, the daughter of James Dyce of Disblair.

How the plate came to be in its present position is both a remarkable story and an unsolved mystery. Clearly, the plate was once attached to a pulpit bible presented on the opening of the "new" church in 1821. In 1926, this plate was found lying on the ground at Dyce by a young man named John Forbes who, at the time was an apprentice painter. It remained in Mr Forbes' possession until 1971.

The present minister came to know of its existence through Mr James Duncan, an elder in John Knox (Gerrard Street) Church. When Mr Forbes was approached by the minister, he readily agreed to present the plate to Fintray Church in October 1971 to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the opening of the 1821

building. So, 150 years almost to the day, this plate was presented to the church for a second time.

The Bible to which the plate was originally attached has long since disappeared and how the plate came to be lying on the ground in Dyce is a mystery that will probably never be solved.

At the October Communion in 1971, the story of the plate was recounted to the congregation and a special prayer of thanksgiving was offered to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the building of the present church.<sup>9</sup>

### *Praise Boards*

Some of the members of the congregation suggested that it would be helpful to have two praise boards in the church. After some enquiries, the minister located two suitable boards, formerly belonging to Saint Andrew's Church, Kirkcaldy and no longer required, due to a union. These boards were kindly donated to the church in 1974 and proved to be a useful addition.

*Appendix - List of Ministers from 1567 to 1975 on the following page:*<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The story of the plate is recounted briefly in Nigel Tranter's *The Eastern Counties; Aberdeenshire, Angus and Kincardineshire*. The minister supplied Mr Tranter with the information.

<sup>10</sup> Taken from *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae* ©

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### Appendix: Ministers of Fintray from 1567 to 1975

1567	Alexander Howie (Reader)
1567	Thomas Fleming (Reader and Vicar)
1571	Stephen Manners (Vicar)
1574	Robert Wood (Reader at Fintray and Dyce)
1574	John White (Minister at Dyce, Skene and Kinellar)
1576	John Innes
1578	Walter Richardson
1580	John Currie (Reader)
1583	Thomas Gardyne
1594	William Neilson
1625	Adam Barclay
1635	Andrew Abercrombie MA (Covenanter)
1662	George Meldrum
1681	Alexander Forbes MA
1693	Alexander Thomson
1699	Robert Burnett MA
1702	James Hutcheon MA
1712	William Osborne
1732	Patrick Gordon
1745	Samuel Copland MA
1796	John Lesie MA
1838	William Leslie
1851	James Gerard Young
1856	William Ogilvie MA
1885	John Catto MA
1909	James Andrew Crawford BA
1937	William Cowie Farquharson
1947	Peter Carmichael Millar OBE DD
1961	Thomas Crawford MA
1970	Alasdair Bothwell Gordon BD LLB EdD

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