

# Yarrow Kirk

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The original Church of the parish of Yarrow was the historic 'St Mary's of the Lowes' or the 'Forest Kirk' and was built about the twelfth century on the lands of Kirkstead high on the hillside overlooking St Mary's Loch. Magnificent as its situation was, it was at the extreme western end of the parish as it was then, and attendance at worship must have meant a long and arduous journey for most of the parishioners. Prior to the Reformation in 1560 their needs were supplied by subsidiary chapels at Deuchar and Kirkhope. After the Reformation these chapels were no longer maintained and the ancient Forest Kirk itself was in a state of sore dilapidation and in need of rebuilding or replacement, due partly to age and partly to damage suffered when it was raided by the Scotts of Buccleuch in 1557 while searching for an enemy.

Although abandonment of the original site meant the relinquishment of a long historic link with St Mary's Loch, the movement of population compelled the choice of a site more convenient and accessible to the parishioners, and in 1640 a new Church was erected on the Buccleuch property of Whitehope, in almost exactly the centre of the parish. Only the ancient Kirkyard now remains at Kirkstead, but the historic link is preserved by the well-known open-air Service of the 'Blanket Preaching' held in St Mary's Kirkyard on the afternoon of the fourth Sunday of July annually.

For all the proud history to which it was heir, Yarrow Kirk was from the beginning never intended to be more than a simple country kirk. Erected during the stormy days of the National Covenant, a time when Church architecture was at a low ebb, it conformed to a design common among Scottish churches of that period, being T-shaped in its ground plan with the pulpit on the south wall at the crossing. Traditionally this shape is described as 'Kirk and Ile' (sic), the east-west oriented head of the T being the 'Kirk' and the leg of the T being the 'Ile'.

The original building was extremely simple and artless. The main walls were only thirteen feet high and though the roof was slated there was no ceiling and only an earthen floor below. Such light as there was came from a few low windows set in the south wall and from the circular window facing the doorway in the east wall of the aisle. A tiny belfry was mounted on the end of the western gable.

In 1772 a major reconstruction was required, caused by deterioration of the fabric and the need for more accommodation to serve an increasing population. The walls were raised three feet all round to provide headroom for the provision of 'lofts' or galleries erected at each end of the Kirk and in the aisle, a second row of small windows was inserted to give more light for the galleries, the roof was re-slatted, the uneven floor levelled and gravelled, and "a proper bell-house" replaced the former belfry, all at a total cost of about £250. Astonishingly there was now accommodation for 770 parishioners.

This was the Kirk known to Sir Walter Scott, to James Hogg and Willie Laidlaw, whose names are forever associated with Yarrow Kirk. From his home at Ashiestiel, then within the parish bounds, Scott occasionally rode over the hills to worship in what he called "the shrine of my ancestors", and to visit the grave of his maternal great-grandfather, John Rutherford, Minister of Yarrow from 1691 to 1710, whose grave is marked by an inscribed mural tablet set in the north wall just outside the Session-room windows.

In 1826 further improvements took place at a cost of about £370. The small windows in the south wall were replaced by six large ones, the door in the east wall of the aisle was built up and a new one opened in the north gable instead, the familiar crow-stepping of the gables appeared, the finial crosses on the east and north gables were added and the bell-tower enlarged. Vestibules screened off the extremities of all three gables, and the interior was ceiled and floored for the first time. Doors were added to the pews to restrain the herds' dogs who then accompanied their masters to the Kirk. The Kirk then bore the appearance immortalised by the drawings of Tom Scott, and its interior and exterior aspects are shown in the pictures hanging in the Session-room.

So far the alterations had not basically changed the building but the next major alteration during Dr Borland's ministry made a considerable difference. In 1906 the apse was built in the middle of the south wall, sacrificing two of the large windows in the process, while the remaining four were shortened. What had been the 'Kirk' became the transepts and the 'Ile' became the nave. Two large windows were opened in the east and west gables respectively to accommodate stained-glass memorial windows commemorating the Russells, father and son, who were successive Ministers of Yarrow for nearly a century until the death of the latter in 1883. The belfry was removed from the west gable and rebuilt above the apse where it now is. The galleries, no longer required by a much smaller population, were removed, the ceiling was vaulted and the interior woodwork replaced in Austrian oak.

But this transformation did not last long. During the ministry of Dr Borland's successor, Dr Roger Kirkpatrick, on the night of Easter Sunday 1922 the Church was almost gutted by fire and left with hardly more than the ancient walls standing. The 18th century Communion pewter, the memorial windows, the old collection ladles, the brass tablets commemorating Scott, Wordsworth, Hogg, Laidlaw and others whose association with Yarrow is an honoured part of the story of the valley, were all destroyed. Only the War Memorial on the floor of the apse, and the old bell in the belfry above survived the conflagration. But Dr Kirkpatrick's love for Yarrow Kirk equalled that of any of his predecessors, and under his devoted oversight rebuilding took place which largely conformed to the 1906 restoration. There were a few changes which may justly be called improvements. The new Russell Memorial windows, by Douglas Strachan, are now in the apse instead of the east and west gables, the woodwork was replaced in British oak, the door in the north gable was built up again and the original doorway in the east wall of the 'aisle' reopened, with a vestibule and Session-room now added to the building. The four south windows were restored to their 1826 dimensions, and the centre of the Kirk kept clear of pews at the crossing and paved with stone, with the font in memory of Dr Borland placed in the centre. Above the font the ceiling decoration symbolises in its quarterings the Holy Spirit, Faith, Hope and Love. The back of the pulpit now frames a panel from St Mary's Chapel in St Nicholas Church, Aberdeen, exemplifying Scottish craftsmanship of the same period as the Kirk. Dr Kirkpatrick's own labours for Yarrow are remembered by the matching prayer desks in the apse.

Disastrous though the fire was, some cherished possessions of the past survived. Two Communion Cups of Sheffield plate dated 1768 remain in use, the often-moved Kirk bell inscribed "Gift of James Murray to the Kirk of Louchar (sic) 1657" continues to record its caster's spelling error, and the ancient sun-dial built into the outside south-west corner of the Kirk still gives its message to all who come to Yarrow - "Watch and Pray/Tyme is Short".

Still the walls stand, as they have stood since 1640 to enshrine the worship of the people as they come Sunday by Sunday to glorify God in the hallowed place where some eleven generations of their forebears have worshipped, the spiritual heart of the valley of the "dowie dens".