

# A TALE OF TWO CHURCHES

by Gordon Scott

## PART 1: THE FIRST CHURCH AT HEYLIPOL

In 1772 the Duke of Argyll instructed his factor on Tiree to convert a house in Scarinish into a church and by 1776 it was functioning as such. In the mid-1780s it was extended. Neil MacLean, Church of Scotland minister on Tiree between 1815 and 1859, wrote in 1840 that the Scarinish church could accommodate 500 sitters but that it was rarely full. The problem, he felt, was that it was situated 'in a corner', that is, inconveniently placed. Mr MacLean also considered it to be no longer fit for purpose.

In 1841 the Presbytery of Mull approved a plan to build two churches on Tiree, one to serve the west, the other to serve the east. In April the contract to build the first of these churches (on the same site as today's Heylipol Church) was won by McNab and McInnes of Oban. They quoted £648.00 sterling (somewhere in the region of £68,000.00 today) for a building which would accommodate 600 sitters. Substantial administration costs were added on top of this by the Presbytery.

The heritors of the parish of Tiree and Coll (the Duke of Argyll and also the heritors of Coll - Hugh MacLean, John Campbell and Alexander Campbell) were obliged to meet all costs. To formalise this the Presbytery passed a discernment, or judgement of guilt, against the heritors of the parish making them liable for the costs in terms of their title deeds which included, among other things, a responsibility to maintain the churches on their land.

The amount each heritor would pay was 'in proportion to the valued rent of their respective properties'. The scheme of division arrived at was:

The Duke of Argyll:	Four hundred and seventy five pounds, six shillings and ten pence, three farthings.
Hugh MacLean of Coll:	One hundred and eighty three pounds, ten shillings and a penny, three farthings.
The Campbells of Caolis and Cornaig:	Thirty one pounds, thirteen shillings and a halfpenny.

Less than a year later the church was completed and the heritors of the parish were, in the legal terms so beloved by the Presbytery, 'assoilzied'. To put it in everyday language the previous judgement against them was annulled.

Modern technology can help us pinpoint the location of the church. By overlaying a map surveyed in 1878 with a present-day Google Earth satellite image and matching it to scale we see that the church, which had an upper gallery, was a rectangular building and occupied roughly half the area occupied by the cruciform Gothic-style church of today. Maps from the period show a vestibule on the western wall.



An interesting feature on the map overlay is the track (or path) which deviates south-west from the road approaching from the east. The area is now overgrown but aerial photographs which were taken during a dry spell of weather suggest its

former existence. The track must have continued in use for some time into the 20th century as it leads to a gate in the present-day church's eastern boundary wall. This gate appears to have fallen into disuse some considerable time ago.

The Presbytery records pertaining to the planning and building of the church consistently refer to 'the church at Balinoe' even though township boundaries of the period suggest it was actually built upon the Barrapol common (Bailtean is Ath-Ghairmean) and so we should not assume that it was initially known as 'Heylipol Church'. However, in 1875 the west and east of Tiree were disjoined, becoming two separate parishes and from this time forward the church was definitely named 'Heylipol'. In 1877 a dedicated parish minister was appointed.

The first Heylipol Church did not enjoy the longevity of its smaller counterpart at Kirkapol. In the 1860s new wooden flooring had to be installed. By 1890 the roof and gallery were found to be unsafe as the ends of the joists which rested on the walls had decayed through damp. New joists and heavy iron brackets were installed and new windows were also deemed necessary. By 1899 the situation was no better. The roof was leaking, the damp in the walls was worsening and the new joists, iron brackets and windows, installed less than ten years previously, were judged to be 'in an advanced state of decay'. By 1900 it was decided that nothing could be done to save the building and subsequently it was demolished, replaced by the present-day church in 1902.

## PART 2: KIRKAPOL CHURCH

In March 1843 the Presbytery of Mull acknowledged that the church for the west of Tiree had been completed. It was now time to proceed to the building of the church for the east of the island. The plans and specifications called for a building capable of seating 450. At the meeting in May that year the Duke's Chamberlain suggested the church at Kirkapol be delayed for a year given the recent expense of building the church in the west. However the Presbytery was adamant that Kirkapol church be built 'with all convenient speed'.

At the meeting in June 1843, McNab and MacInnes of Oban again won the contract, this time for £679 sterling plus administration costs. The heritors were consequently discerned and a scheme of division was calculated as follows:

The Duke of Argyll:	Four hundred and ninety six pounds and two shillings.
Hugh MacLean of Coll:	One hundred and ninety pounds, fourteen shillings and three pence
The Campbells of Coll:	Thirty four pounds, eight shillings and ten pence

With administration fees the church cost almost £722 sterling (about £75,300 today). At Tobermory on the 7th May 1844 the Presbytery minutes record Kirkapol Church as being completed.



Contrary to popular belief, Kirkapol Church is not square but rectangular, measuring approximately 14.5m in length by 11.1m in width. The walls are 0.7m in thickness. The dressed stone is recorded as being sandstone but looks more like gneiss. The granite in the cornerstones came from the Ross of Mull and was procured by the Commissioners for Northern Lights who were then using this type of stone in the construction of Skerryvore Light as well as the shore station at Hynish. The walls are topped by a hipped roof.

The belfry, most likely purchased from a specialist firm in Glasgow, has a pinnacle in the shape of a pyramid. The bell last rang in 1980s (at the latest) when there was a failure in the axle from which it swung. It was operated by pulling an external rope which, when not in use, was pulled back into the church through a opening located near the front window. The porch was added in the 1960s. The accompanying photograph (reproduced by permission of *An Iodhlann*) is taken from an early-20th century postcard and provides a view of the church before porch and wall were added.

Kirkapol Church, like the church that stood at Heylipol from 1843 until the early 1900s, has an upper gallery supported on iron pillars. The pulpit we see today at the north-west wall was installed in 1893, perhaps to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the foundations being laid. On the ground floor, the seating on either side of the pulpit and the long centre pew at the rear are what remains of the original seating. The seating in the gallery is original.

Over the years there has been considerable confusion regarding the date for the church. This was again the case when the building was recently offered for sale. The advertisement in *An Tirisdeach* seems to be based on an erroneous entry on a website detailing British 'listed' buildings. This site states that Kirkapol Church was built in 1776. While the building is undoubtedly 'Grade B listed', 1776 is the year in which a church was built in Scarinish and not Kirkapol.

It must be conceded, however, that the design of Kirkapol Church evokes an earlier period of church design. Externally, for example, it is strikingly similar to a parish church built on Colonsay in 1801. But it is the interior of the church which is particularly interesting. We note a lack of adornment and no suggestion of symbolism. On the ground floor there is no real sense of space between pulpit and seating, leading to a sense of intimacy and connectedness with the preacher. In the upper gallery this sense of intimacy continues but in a different way: unlike galleries in later traditional churches one has a very real sense of looking down upon the pulpit, almost as if one might fall into it if one were not careful. In essence, Kirkapol Church is a *theatre* in layout, a device employed by many different Christian congregations in the early 19th century to engage worshippers and diminish the sense of 'them and us'.

It is a sign of the times that this iconic church has been put up for sale. Apart from the structure itself many great men have ministered there. In the 19th century alone we have Neil MacLean, whose incumbency lasted from 1815 - 1859, making him the longest continually serving minister on the island. He was followed by John Gregorson Campbell, acknowledged to this day as a great folklorist. And then there was Hector MacKinnon, the first native of the island in modern times to have served as its minister, the first to have been appointed by the congregation of Tiree following the revoking of the Patronage Act, and a man whose ministry beyond Tiree gained him a reputation as a remarkable preacher and great humanitarian.

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