

Kilmacolm: A History

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Introduction

Who would have thought that a quiet and respectable village like Kilmacolm would have had such a colourful past. It is difficult to imagine the village and its surroundings as a setting for battles, sieges, feuds, intrigues and civil disorders. But all this— and more— happened in Kilmacolm during its eventful history.

From pre-historic times, long before the name of the village was even thought of, through all the major historical periods Kilmacolm has its story to tell. In the fields and moors around the village is the evidence of prehistoric settlements and tombs from the Stone Ages, the Bronze Age and the Iron Age: of Roman roads, forts and signalling towers following the line of the Roman frontier across the parish, designed to keep out the unruly highlanders from across the Clyde: and of Dark Age settlements with their tools and equipment, bringing the story to the time of recorded history.

During the eventful times when feudal lairds ruled the land, a Kilmacolm laird, Lord Lyle of Duchal, was a ringleader in a rebellion against the king. It was a serious challenge that brought the king and his army to Duchal Castle, a couple of miles to the west of Kilmacolm. The villagers watched in awe as the roads were cleared to give passage to the king's army and his huge cannon, dragged through the village by teams of oxen. The canon made short work of the castle, but by this time Lyle had slipped away to the safety of the more secure fortress at Dumbarton, leaving his unfortunate followers to their fate.

At this time loyalties and allegiances changed at a bewildering pace, and only a few years later the king was back at Duchal, this time as the guest of Lord Lyle who was now his loyal supporter. The king had his sights on Lord Lyle's cousin, Marion Boyd, who was staying at the castle. Marion Boyd became the king's mistress, and some time later bore him a child at the castle.

All of the lairds spent a good deal of their time embroiled in bloody feuds, but it was the Cunningham family of Finlaystone (then part of the parish of Kilmacolm) whose feud with the Montgomerys of Ayrshire became the most deadly and intractable ever known in Scotland. It lasted for two centuries, through seven generations of the Cunningham family and the reigns of six sovereigns. It was a major conflict during which several of the lairds and an unknown number of their peasants met with violent deaths, and several castles were razed to the ground.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Kilmacolm was in the thick of the religious upheavals at the time of the Reformation. John Knox visited the castle at Finlaystone to dispense what was possibly the first Protestant communion in Scotland. In the aftermath of the demise of the old religion, Kilmacolm ministers were ejected from their churches and took to preaching in the fields. New ministers were imposed and found themselves preaching in empty churches.

The village was not spared the horrors of the late seventeenth century when the persecution of witchcraft was at its height. The moors above Kilmacolm were said to be a favourite spot for witches to rendezvous with the devil, and Kilmacolm was unfortunate to get a minister who was zealous in seeking out witches. He claimed to find one in the parish, but luckily for her he left the parish before she could be put to trial.

By the eighteenth century, the village was a thriving place. Upwards of thirty muslin weavers kept a weekly carrier going to Paisley. Market fairs were held regularly, where people congregated to meet their friends and to trade their farming produce and cattle. Afterwards they had a choice of half a dozen alehouses for their refreshment- a surprising number for a village that was dry for much of the twentieth century, and had a population only a fraction of its present size. Twice a

year people flocked to the village from all the neighbouring parishes, walking from as far afield as Largs for the famous 'Kilmacolm Preachings', sacrament days that had all the characteristics of Burn's 'Holy Fair'. The neighbouring parish churches closed for the event, their ministers coming to Kilmacolm to help. It was a marathon of preaching from morning until night. Between the sermons, many felt the need for liquid refreshment and kept the alehouses busy. What with the crowds, the excitement of the occasion and the effects of alcohol, things got out of hand. The Rev. James Murray described the event a century later, no doubt consulting the records of his predecessors. He could only hint at the more extreme behaviour : 'Drunken men and women reeled homewards shouting and singing, with profane and filthy language. It was attended also with even grosser moral delinquencies'

Over the next few decades, Kilmacolm went into a period of decline as the innovations of the Industrial Revolution and new methods of transport passed the village by. As yet there was no railway, and Kilmacolm was too far from the Clyde to be able to take advantage of the new paddle steamers. The fairs and the Kilmacolm Preachings came to an end. By the start of the Victorian era the village came close to disappearing altogether from the map, until the railway came to the rescue, making it possible for wealthy merchants to set up their desirable residences in the unspoilt environment of Kilmacolm and commute to their places of work in Glasgow and Paisley. The untidy cluster of houses and barns soon gave way to the handsome villas of the incomers, the population grew and the village began to take on its modern character, soon shedding the image of its colourful and sometimes disreputable past.

When in the 1890's James Murray, minister of the parish, started work on his book Kilmacolm, A Parish History, he had no great expectations of uncovering any events of great importance. As he glumly remarked in his introduction:

'...no event of national importance has taken place within its borders; ... few of its inhabitants have attained to eminence either in thought or action... no poet has drawn attention to the beauty of its scenery, or invested its hills and dales with the halo of romance'.

It was an unpromising beginning. Yet as you read Murray's book, you discover – somewhat buried within his restrained prose- that in earlier times Kilmacolm was anything but a dull place. It seems that Murray wrote his introduction before writing the body of his book and never troubled to go back and revise it in the light of his research. His work has long been an important source of information about Kilmacolm's history, though it is now over a hundred years old and not easy to obtain, being long out of print.

A few years before Murray published his history, Matthew Gemmill, a schoolmaster in Bridge of Weir, published extensive historical notes about the village in the Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette, which were issued in book form in 1892 as Kilmacolm Past and Present, a source from which James Murray almost certainly drew. In 1856, James Slater, another school teacher, wrote about the village in articles published in the Greenock Telegraph and Clyde Shipping Gazette entitled A Run through Kilmacolm. And in 1872 Alexander S Gibb published his book Much about Kilmacolm, A Famous Old Health-Giving Part of Scotland. More recently, in 1975 Charles Bowser published A Short History of the Life and Times of The Old Kirk, and in 1993 Elizabeth Main's A Kirk without a Steeple: A History of the Old Kirk and Parish of Kilmacolm gives us a more up to date account dealing principally with the history of the Old Kirk. Other histories and personal reminiscences are listed in the bibliography

Many of the early accounts focus on that period in the early nineteenth century when Kilmacolm was viewed by the outside world as something of a curiosity, a remote and secluded place that had been left behind by modern developments. 'Out of the world and into Kilmacolm' they used to say, even though it is only seven miles from Greenock, two or three hours away if you were able to hitch a ride on the daily milk cart. Alexander Gibb confidently asserted:

'We may safely say that it is as queer and droll-looking a hamlet as any in broad Scotland'.

Matthew Gemmill noted that Kilmacolm had been described as:

'Territorially the largest parish in Renfrewshire, and spiritually the most destitute, dark and neglected'

(a view that he did not share however). James Slater found the people 'somewhat quaint in language and uncouth in appearance', and the village itself:

'an irregular cluster of barns, byres and cart sheds, tagged onto the end of ranges of low thatched houses of all shapes, and standing in all positions, their exterior appearance giving unmistakable evidence that they were not erected in the present century. No public works are within its boundaries, no tall brick chimneys are seen blowing forth volumes of smoke to taint the fine and salubrious air, nor is the clank of machinery to be heard'

None of the early accounts has much to say about prehistoric or Roman times in Kilmacolm, about which little was then known. Since then, modern archaeological techniques have provided a great deal of information to help complete the story of Kilmacolm from pre-historic to modern times. Since these early histories were written Kilmacolm has grown considerably in size, but otherwise remains substantially unchanged from the pattern set by the Victorian villa-dwellers, who used their considerable influence to ensure that as Kilmacolm entered the twentieth century they could continue to enjoy the village in its peaceful rural setting, with:

'no public works within its boundaries, no tall brick chimneys seen blowing forth volumes of smoke to taint the fine and salubrious air, and no clank of machinery to be heard'.