Greenock Burns Club.

Greenock

Church Tokens.
GREENOCK

CHURCH TOKENS

IN POSSESSION OF

GREENOCK BURNS CLUB.

A little book on certain Communion Tokens of the Presbytery of Greenock, 1706-1878.

BY THE

REV. W. CHISHOLM MITCHELL, M.A.

Greenock:

"Telegraph" Printing Works, Sugarhouse Lane.

1903,
Greenock Church Tokens.

With a laudable desire to foster the historic and preserve in some measure its emblems, the Greenock Burns Club has added to the treasures housed within its rooms a case containing specimens of local tokens. The collection, though it betrays some blanks which probably cannot be filled up, does credit to the zeal of the collector, and should serve to stir up interest in these quaint and instructive relics of the past. Token-collecting to-day is no easy task; according to an ‘old hand’ only a personal visit will extract the desired specimen from many ministers. If this suggests or implies an appeal to force, the ‘craft’ is not to be lightly esteemed, still less to be lightly entered. To judge by this collection, zeal has been crowned with success, a success that rejoices not in single specimens but in battalions.

To tell the story of these tokens would be to tell the history of the local churches, a tale too long for this place. But could they speak they would be eloquent of past and stately communions, of generations now forgotten, of things of which it is not lawful to speak, and of ecclesiastical divisions—‘old unhappy far-off things and battles long ago.’
For the benefit of a young generation a few words of explanation may be necessary. The token was the visible symbol which gave its possessor right of admission to the Lord's Supper. While once its use was general, to-day it obtains only in the Huguenot Churches of France, in remote Highland and rural parishes, and among Reformed Presbyterians in Scotland and America.

The usage connected with the token struck its roots deep into the Scots national life. In Scotland, where the Reformation was not a move in a king's policy but a religious and popular effort, Presbytery as a system was in consonance with the Scots mind and character. There was character enough in the grim Reformation jest:—

"Scotland hath three Bishops—the Lord Bishop, my Lord's Bishop, and the Lord's Bishop." The first signified the old prelatic influence, the second was the place-holder of the nobility, vulgarly called a 'Tulchan' or stuffed calf, and the last was the Presbyterian clergy, of whom were Melville and Knox. The custom of the token, emerging from these times of stress, seemed to embody the democratic elements which distinguish Presbytery. Handed on from generation to generation of worshippers, it was bound up with all that was sacred and memorable. Hence, it grew into the fibre of the nation and sent tendrils round its heart.

A few words will describe the ceremonial. On the Fast Day in former times, a day of Sabbatic strictness, the Minister and Session gave a token to each communicant whose life was free from scandal. On the following Sabbath this was given to the officiating elder on sitting down at the communion table. The ceremony was simple, but it was a simplicity none the less awe-inspiring. Nor was the practical forgotten. An intimation from a pulpit in 1756 laid down that "it is usual upon these occasions to exhort you to be liberal in your charity to the poor." It is an unjust and flippant ignorance that jests at the piety and customs of our fathers.
My purpose, however, is not to moralise but to write a few notes on these tokens. The oldest specimen in the case (Old West) bears the date 1706, the letters G R, and a rude ornament representing the star of Bethlehem. It was cast during the ministry of Rev. Andrew Turner, seventh Minister of Greenock Parish, Thomas Watt, grandfather of James Watt, being an important member of Session, and for some years its Treasurer. According to the ‘Poll Tax Roll of 1695,’ the total population was 746, there being 282 families. As the streets (with one exception) were not named till 1775, when the Council so ordained it, in dividing the parish districts boundaries were defined by the name of the tenant for the time being, as ‘Home’s Croft.’ The exception, which enjoys the true odour of antiquity, was the Vennel, a word probably derived from the Latin *venalia*, a market-row where articles were exposed for sale.

The next specimen bears the date 1761, and the letters O L D P (Old Parish). In the centre are the first two words of S. John 13, 35, ‘By this,’ a text which is, so far as my knowledge goes, unique as a token inscription. Before it was cast the New (or Mid) Parish had been disjoined in 1741, the population having increased to 4,100. (Of this New Parish two examples are shown, the 1802 token being the older.)

The next in succession is 1775, struck the year after the East Chapel of Ease was founded. (One token of the East Church is shown, dated 1809.) Presbytery records take notice of a ‘band of music’ in the East Chapel, which was then in Bogle Street. The ‘band’ was none other than the modern ‘choir,’
and it numbered among its members Neil Dougall, composer of *Kilmarnock*, and Robert Simpson, composer of *Balerma*.

It was after the erection of the South or Gaelic Chapel of Ease in 1792 that the next Old Parish token was struck in 1798 (O P, 1798). Contemporary with the Burgher Chapel in Nicolson Street, this charge was not erected into a parish *quoad sacra* till 1834. The token shown of the Gaelic Parish Church, 1855, belongs to another era, the church having been closed for a term of years after the Disruption; its pre-Disruption token resembles illustration 4, with date 1799 and G C in the centre.

Returning again to the Old Parish tokens—in 1823, due to growth of population and lack of room in the Old, New, and East Parishes, the Presbytery agreed to the erection of another chapel of ease. The West Blackhall Street Chapel was therefore built, and was known as the North Parish Church, or 'Morren's Kirk,' the Rev. Nathaniel Morren being its first and only minister. The circular and octagonal tokens, stamped 'West Chapel,' belonged to this church. At the Disruption, Mr. Morren having been translated to Brechin, it was closed, and did not return to ecclesiastical uses till 1857, when a Free Church congregation bought it.

The next token of the Old Parish is dated 1833, and was cast during the ministry of Dr. Patrick M'Farlan. It was in 1838 that he removed with the congregation to the New West Parish Church in Nelson Street.
The token next in order is St. Thomas', 1839. A Royal Commission had been appointed to consider the religious condition in Scotland, and one result was to show that in Greenock 1,200 families were in habitual neglect of Divine ordinances. The Presbytery therefore resolved to place in the midst of that teeming but neglected population a ‘territorial charge.’ (Mr. George Williamson in his ‘Old Greenock,’ a work to which I am indebted for much information, describes the houses as old and insanitary. At the foot of Harvey Lane, near which St. Thomas’ was built, one house bore on its lintel the figures 1669.) To this charge the late Dr. Laughton was called as first minister, and there the congregation was formed. Without going at any length into details which do not concern us, it may be remarked that many well-known names were associated with this ‘Kirk i' the Laigh Street.’ At the opening ceremony, the Rev. Nathaniel Morren of the North Parish and the Rev. James Stark of the Old Light Burghers, Messrs. Robert Dow Kerr, William Rodger, and John Denniston were among the speakers. Being a parish quoad spiritualia, St. Thomas’ congregation was ruled by Presbytery assessors, but in 1842, the eve of the Disruption, a Session was formed, namely—Messrs. Thomas Fairrie, Erskine Orr, James M‘Kutcheon, George Bruce, Henry M‘Murtrie, and William Gilchrist. Though the congregation joined the Free Protesting Church, they retained the building, for the bond for debt granted by the Established Presbytery to Captain M‘Gill had not been paid off, nor was the Presbytery inclined to do so. Accordingly the building was rented by him to the congregation till 1857, when they removed to the West Chapel. This church of the North Parish, having stood empty since the Disruption, had been sold for arrears of feu-duty. The late Captain Kincaid, who had bought it, re-sold it to Free St. Thomas’ congregation, which migrated westward carrying its tokens with it, and uniting with them the old ‘West Chapel’ tokens. In the building thus vacated was formed after a time the Free North congregation,
a specimen of whose token is in the collection. The later home of this church, on the other bank of the West or ‘Kirk’ Burn from the Old West Kirk, completes an ecclesiastical circle whose sweep goes very far round.

The tokens of the Free Middle and West churches are good specimens of the modern style; they are adorned on the reverse with the symbolic Burning Bush and Church. The Free Gaelic token dated 1843 recalls that at the Disruption the Gaelic Parish Church was closed, the Rev. Angus M’Bean and his congregation adhering to the Free Protesting Church of Scotland. Being houseless, they obtained the use of the Old West Church, then unoccupied, and for a year they worshipped there. Thereafter the Old West building stood empty for twenty years until its restoration in 1864. Its token (1865) marks the re-occupation, and in 1872 it became the North Parish quoad sacra.

Returning now to Dissent, the token of Wellpark Free Church, though dated 1854, recalls the fact that this church has a long and honoured history. Passing through Rue-end Street, one may see from the lofty eminence of the top of the car an old square building in Stanners Street. Anyone who cares to make the pilgrimage through an adjoining entry in Rue-end Street may read the inscription upon the gable, ‘Built 1745, rebuilt 1828.’ This was the Cartsburn Kirk, the church of the Old Light Burghers, and still associated with the name of the Rev. James Stark. At the First Secession in 1733 many who had left the Established Church gathered together as a ‘Corresponding Society for Prayer.’ Till 1745 they worshipped in the open air, but in that year they built a church at Cartsdyke. In 1747 occurred the ‘Breach’ into Burghers and anti-Burghers, and the Burghers retained their church. In 1799 they left the
Associate Synod, joining the Original Associates or 'Old Lights.' In 1828 they built their second church, which still stands in Steaners Streets. In 1839, the time of the Voluntary controversy, Mr. Stark with his congregation joined the Established Church, and in 1843 they entered the Free Church. In 1854, as the token tells, they removed to the present Wellpark Church.

Retracing our steps in the narrative to the 'Breach' in 1747, ten anti-Burghers separated from the Cartside Kirk and were joined by others. For more than ten years they worshipped in a tent pitched near the present Cathcart Square. In 1758 they built a meeting house in 'Wee Kirk' Street (Smith's Lane), near Market Street. In 1803 they removed to a new church in Inverkip Street, partly incorporated in the present Infirmary buildings. It was nick-named the 'Canister' Kirk from its appearance. Thereafter the congregation removed to George Square. Their token, which is oval, bears the inscription: 'Associate Congregation, Greenock, Rev. S. S.' (Sutherland Sinclair). This congregation now worships in Greenbank Church.

Again from the Cartside Kirk there hived off another congregation. This was the Burgher Kirk in Nicolson Street, built in 1791. It migrated afterwards to Union Street as Trinity Church. Its Token bears the inscription: 'Nicolson Street Church, 1832, Rev. R.W.' (Robert Wilson). Of Mr. Wilson's predecessor, the Rev. William Wilson, it is recorded that his love for the violin was displeasing to his Session. Accordingly he was waited upon by a deputation, righteously indignant, yet mildly apologetic, sitting on chair-edge, waiting for boldest member to do his duty. Minister seizing the situation resolves to assume the offensive, offers some generalities, and finally says in a friendly tone, "Well, brethren, I am not ill to satisfy, but there are two things I don't know how I could get on without—my Bible and my fiddle." Deputation, feeling that its case is gone, soon escapes. Ah, there were giants in those days!
In 1806, a Relief Church had been formed, due to ‘lack of room in the Mid Parish,’ Presbytery records bearing the complaint that ‘many for this reason joined the Dissenters,’ and the ‘Old Statistical Account’ showing that the population had grown to 14,230. It was built in East Shaw Street, then the avenue leading to Greenock House. The present edifice is the second building. This ‘Relief’ token is lacking from the collection, but the church is represented by one bearing the later and more familiar title, ‘Sir Michael Street United Presbyterian Church.’

From the Burgher Chapel in Nicolson Street, in 1834 there went forth the nucleus of the congregation of Union Street U.F. Church. The earlier of the two specimens bears the inscription: ‘U. A., Congregation, 1835, Rev. T. Finlayson.’ (U. A. means United Associate).

In the barren waste left by the transference of Cartsdyke Kirk to Wellpark, the Cartsburn parish quoad sacra was erected; it is represented by some specimens of the modern token. The Port-Glasgow parish tokens, 1761, and 1778, are very fine specimens. As the parish of the port of Glasgow they bear the Glasgow city arms. When the Glasgow Town Council in 1668 approached the Dumbarton magistrates with a proposal to build a harbour there, they strenuously opposed the scheme, ‘as the great increase of mariners and strangers would increase the cost of food to the inhabitants of the burgh.’ This short-sighted policy sent the Glasgow arms and trade to the parish of Newark.

It may suffice to call attention to the token of Martyrs’ Church, formerly West Shaw Street Reformed Presbyterian congregation, and to that of West Stewart Street Reformed Presbyterian Church, unique in that it is still used at communions.

While on the theme of an old custom now obsolete, it is worthy of notice that many of the buildings referred to
are turned to other uses. There is the Cartsdyke Kirk, till recently a Roman Catholic chapel; the Associate Church in George Square and St. Andrew's in West Stewart Street, now warehouses. There is the Burgher Kirk in Nicolson Street, part of a drapery establishment; and the curious may trace in the wall of Waverley Lane three ecclesiastical windows of the 'Brick Kirk,' the first Free Middle Church, built hurriedly in Disruption days. Amid such scenes of change one may well wonder what untoward fate befell some tokens of other days. Under what unkindly dust do they repose? Where be they of the Cartsdyke Kirk, the 'Auld Lichts,' and the Burghers, of the old Gaelic Chapel, the 'Tent,' and the 'Canister'? Who knows! Did some Laodicean elder consign them to the melting-pot? Did some mercenary 'beadle' sell them as waste metal? Did they voyage over-seas as sanctuary treasure to found fresh causes in Nova Scotia? Or did some scrupulous son of Levi (saintly soul!), fearing the contamination of vulgar use, bury them in the friendly soil? Who knows! Or perhaps they lie wrapt in obscure darkness, like that tombstone men had made a paving-flag in Stanners Street Chapel entry, till the chance spade or some spark of the old Covenanting fire reveal them and restore them to honour. Again, who can tell! Vanished are preachers and worshippers. Silent are the voices, hushed 'those strains that once did sweet in Zion glide.' The tokens that remain adorn the study of the collector. But this generation will be the poorer if it forget utterly the ways of the Scots Kirk and the stones of our ancient Zion.