



Heritage Newsletter



Issue 25

The Story of the Church on the Hill (by Hugh McGrattan)

BALLYWILLAN Presbyterian Church, with its 80-foot tower, is a familiar landmark, standing high on the hill overlooking Portrush and the north Atlantic. For the past 130 years this building has been a beacon, visible from far out to sea and many miles around.



Ballywillan Presbyterian Church – the church on the hill.

This is not the first church to have stood here. Two, possibly three preceded it. Nor does the story of the Ballywillan Presbyterian people begin when the first place of worship was erected here some three centuries ago. That properly began a mile to the east, at Crossreagh crossroads, where the ruined walls of an ancient pre-Reformation church stand silent witness to an eventful past.

It was in this old church – built probably in the 14th century – that all the Christian people of the Parish of Ballywillan originally worshipped. Then, after the Reformation, it became a responsibility of the Established Church - the Church of Ireland.

During the period that followed the execution of Charles I in 1649, the Commonwealth authorities gave parishes into the hands of ministers of various theological backgrounds – Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Independents – so long as they were considered of good character and had appropriate educational and theological qualifications.



There was already a strong Scottish influence in Ulster as a result of the Plantation of earlier years when, in the early 1640s, the resentment of the native Irish against the Plantation came to a head. The Scottish army of General Monro, brought over to quell the rebellion, contained, significantly, five army chaplains and four ruling elders of the Presbyterian faith. It was they who constituted the first permanent Presbytery in Ireland.

By 1655 the minister (rector) in the church at Ballywillan was Gabriel Cornwall, from St. Andrews, one of those clergymen who had come to oversee the spiritual lives of their fellow countrymen in a land which promised freedom of worship. Exactly when he had been installed at Ballywillan is not known, but it was no later than 1655.

Gabriel Cornwall and many of his colleagues preached a Presbyterian form of worship that suited their congregations but with the return of the Monarchy in 1660, pressure grew for them to adopt Episcopalian worship.

For refusing to adopt the ways of the Established Church, which would have meant his having to be re-ordained by a Bishop, Gabriel Cornwall was ejected from the church with a number of his followers in the year 1661. It is from that date that the Ballywillan Presbyterian congregation is reckoned to exist. It was thus against a background of political and religious turmoil that the congregation was born. Today, it is the second oldest congregation in the Coleraine area.

The aim of the authorities was to have one established Protestant church – the Church of Ireland – and Presbyterian ministers and Catholic priests were thus discouraged, even prevented, from organising public worship. However, many Presbyterian ministers had put down roots in their parishes and continued to live there, unobtrusively continuing with the care and instruction of their people.

The Ballywillan story moves yet again, this time to the west, to Maddybenny, where Rev Cornwall had leased property from the Earl of Antrim and lived with his wife Katherine and five children. There, in a barn, local tradition says, he continued his Christian work, now furtively and with little salary, but none the less with remarkable success.

As conditions improved throughout Ulster, the Presbyterian clergy began to preach openly to their people once more. Thus it was that by 1668 simple meeting houses were being built and Presbyterians coming together for worship. In 1672, King Charles II even reinstated a grant to Irish Presbyterian ministers amounting to £7 or £8 each, this Regium Donum or Royal Bounty being added to their stipends (salaries).

This continued to be paid until the Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1869, although over the years both Presbyterians and Catholics were expected to pay tithes for the upkeep of the Episcopalian churches! Nor could they perform marriages or burials. This uneasy co-existence was to continue among the various Irish Christian denominations until long after Disestablishment.

The years following the erection of their first churches were not easy ones for Ireland's fledgling Presbyterian congregations and Ballywillan was isolated on a windswept hill with the only large centre of habitation being the village of Glenmanus.

There was no meeting house in the adjacent parish of Ballyachran (Agherton) and so the Presbyterians of what was to become the Portstewart district were expected to support the church at Ballywillan, which included paying part of the minister's stipend. It was not an uncommon situation.



In 1705 the Presbytery of Route was ashamed to admit that Ballywillan had “ye worst account in this Presbytery”. The minister, Rev. William Houston, was unpaid for three years and presumably survived on the annual grant from the Government. It is believed he was eventually paid in a combination of cash and corn!

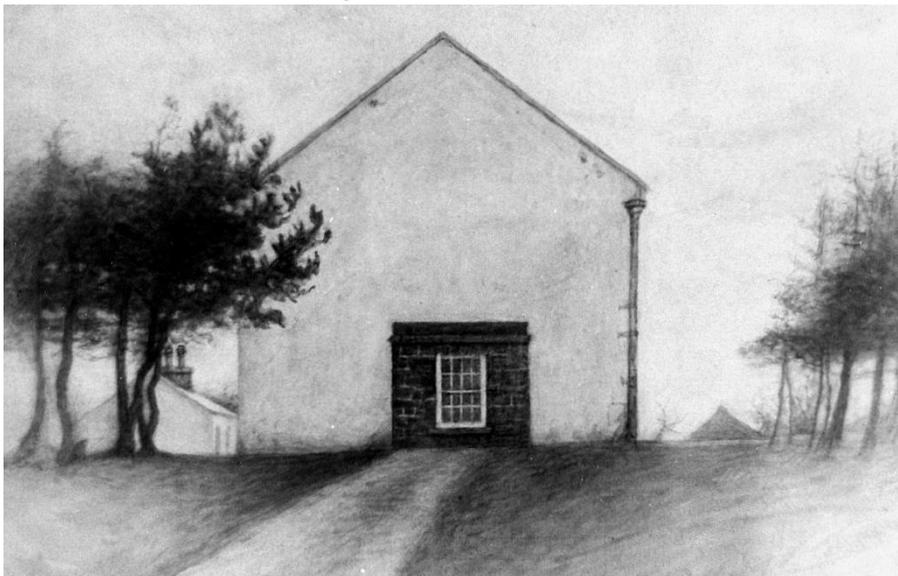
Despite these early difficulties, however, it should be pointed out that Ballywillan was to greatly assist in the establishment of the Presbyterian “chapels of ease” in Portstewart (1828) and Portrush (1842). And today the congregation generously supports a special Outreach fund making donations to various charities and causes!

Exactly when the first meeting house was built on the hill – in the townland of Ballymacilvennon West, to be exact – is not known, but it was probably in the late 17th century. The walls may well have been of sods, with more sods inside to provide seating, despite services which usually lasted two or three hours. Sermons, also long, were sometimes delivered in Irish!

The building which preceded the present church served for only 60 years and appears to have been not much better than the 18th century building that came before that - a plain and practical structure with a thatched roof and outside steps leading to the gallery.

Its replacement was built in 1828 at a cost of £600 and was probably the best that Ballymoney architect Angus Cameron could create for that kind of money. It was again a bare whitewashed two-storey building, measuring 54 feet by 30, with 16 windows. Its severest critics unkindly described it as being more like a barn than a church.

We have a fairly good picture of it, thanks to Jeannie Newton McNeill who lived at Ballylaggan and whose father was an elder and later the Ballywillan Clerk of Session, a fact which did not stop her being very blunt in her views on the building.



“More like a barn...” A contemporary sketch of the simple meeting house that stood on the hill from 1828 to 1889. (From Ballywillan Presbyterian Church archive

It was, she said “a big bare white building, severely plain as to the outside, and not unduly given over to adornment within. The pulpit was a round wooden erection, standing on a stalk, and strongly resembling an extremely over-grown eggcup. “Below this, in a sort of box - lidless be it understood – sat the precentor, and very uncomfortable he must have found it. The pews were high, much after the style of a loose (horse) box, and when the door was shut the view was somewhat restricted.”

The pulpit, which she so graphically describes, was known to members

of the congregation as “The Churn”. The size of the church also left a lot to be desired. In June 1862 when a new minister, Rev Matthew Woodburn, was installed, the service of ordination had to be held in the field beside the church. It was very wet, with a gale blowing, but the clergy taking part were mercifully protected by a screen platform!

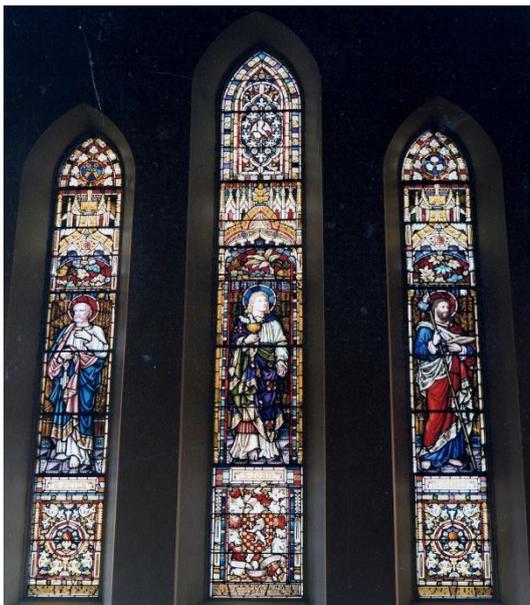


When the Rev. Hugh Wells became minister at Ballywillan in August 1879, after a two-year vacancy, he was dismayed at the state of the church property and the congregation was canvassed over the cost of repairs. Having found that £800 could be raised, he and the Kirk Session decided that rather than spend such a large sum on an old building, a new church be built. More funds were raised in England and in April 1888 the old meeting house was demolished.

Masonry work started immediately, and a foundation stone was laid in August. The new church, built of black stone faced with sandstone quarried at Dungiven, was opened for worship and dedicated on 14 July 1889. The architect was W.J. Anderson, the builder James Kennedy and the carpenter James Esdale.

Some people felt that the beautiful church was too large for a congregation the size of Ballywillan, but it was pointed out that it had been created in faith for future years. And so it came to be, for Ballywillan today, with some 400 families and many summer visitors, enjoys large congregations all year round. Two Sunday morning services are required during the summer months.

The minister of the church for the past 16 years has been the Rev. Dr. Stephen Williamson. He is the 15th pastor of Ballywillan Presbyterian Church since its foundation in 1661.



Victorian Stained Glass Window

The improvements and expansions at the Church on the Hill have been carried out with love and faith over the years, resulting in a church complex far removed from the humble meeting houses that have graced the site over the years. But, despite many changes, Ballywillan Presbyterian Church still fulfils its original and primary purpose as a House of God.

End.

Our thanks to Hugh for this excellent contribution to our Heritage Newsletters.
21st November 2020