

Lost Chapels of the Diocese: —Tillemorgan

The history of the Scottish Episcopal Church forms part of the social history of Scotland itself. The instance of the building of St Thomas Episcopal church at Tillemorgan is a typical example of a rural, scattered, community getting together to provide a church for the neighbourhood. The surrounding countryside representing deepest Aberdeenshire in the mid 1840s, was mainly agricultural, apart from the large slate quarry which had been developed to the north of Fisherford; Huntly and Turriff being the nearest big towns. The congregation was first gathered as a mission at Bogfountain in 1848 by David Wilson, the Dean of Aberdeen (1849-1865), Incumbent at Woodside of Fyvie, with the help of Revd James Smith of St Margaret's Fergie, a High Churchman, follower of the Oxford Movement; and the Revd Charles Grant of Meiklefolla. This new venture was situated in the parish of Culsalmond at a point almost equidistant from the churches of St George's Meiklefolla; All Saints' Woodhead of Fyvie; and St Margaret's Fergie, the nearest being more than six miles distant. Several Episcopal church families had long been established in the parish and as a consequence, there had been a growing desire for the formation of a new congregation for some years and the services of the Church near enough to be attended, not only by one or two members of a family, as had formerly been the extent of their privileges, but by old and young alike.



The derelict St Thomas Episcopal, Church, Fisherford in the parish of Culsalmond closed 1960

The proposal was first formally made to Bishop William Skinner, at his visitation in 1847 and a liberal response from the Scottish Episcopal Church Society financed the build. During the Sunday afternoons of the summer of 1848, Divine service was celebrated in a barn and the children publicly catechised by the three neighbouring Clergy in turn. Attendances by congregations varying from forty to seventy included some Presbyterians and others not belonging to the Church.

A plain but church-like building was erected in 1850 designed by Dean Wilson, capable of seating about 110 worshippers, but suitable for enlargement, should circumstances obtain. Many doubts were entertained of its feasibility and success —hence the dedication to St Thomas [the Doubter]; but with the new impetus, all such fears had vanished, and not only were almost all the seats in the Church let, but a very flourishing school had for some time been in operation in connection with it. Henceforth The Church was known as 'Thomas the Apostle'

The project had received a lot of goodwill from all quarters. A proprietor was no sooner solicited, than he makes offer of an excellent site, and gave it over in perpetuity to the Church. Another friend is discovered who guarantees £25 a year to go to make up a salary for a clergyman [when a clergyman's salary was less than £75 annually]. A 28 year old clergyman is found who not only leads the congregation but takes a special interest in the education of youth and resuscitates a school, That young priest, Revd Robert Walker, who after 10 years Incumbency, was translated to Lerwick and



The Burial Ground and ornamental gates [all the pictures of the Church come with permission from the Scottish Church Heritage Research]

laboured in that charge for 35 years! Walker was followed by another celebrated Episcopal historian, James Gammack, but that story is for another day.

Mr Alexander Cruickshank, farmer, Newton, on behalf of the Managers and Mr Alexander Bartlet, farmer at Greystone, handed over instruments of donations and gifts at the Consecration service on 16th October 1851 which may have included the silver chalice, also dated 1851, pictured. However, the mechanisation of the farming industry emptied the cottars and houses whilst the population drifted into the nearest towns in search of work. This caused St Thomas' to be closed twice. After 1913, just before the onslaught of the First World War, a clergyman could not be found to minister to the dwindling congregation and the cumulative effects of the two world wars effectively temporarily closed the church. After the cessation of hostilities, a outpouring of good intentions re-opened the church in 1947 and services were carried out using a supply of priests from neighbouring charges. The Church finally closed in 1960 and has been in a state of dereliction ever since. Soon after the church hall was sold the Rectory and Church were sold in 1975; and thereafter Aberdeenshire Council were made responsible for the upkeep of the burial ground which lies gently sleeping; nestling in its rural hamlet, a memorial to the many young and old alike who populated the countryside in times past. In 1998 it was listed on the 'At-Risk Register' and in 2010 an initiative was started by the forebears of Alexander Cruickshank, Mr & Mrs Ian Cruickshank and family, to have the building listed by Historic Scotland and its status preserved for posterity, its place in history assured for all time to come,



The Tillymorgan Chalice, hallmarked silver made by William Jameson of Aberdeen stands about 14 cms high. The picture below shows the dedication to St Thomas on the base. The Chalice and its paten, hallmarked London, are now deposited in the Diocesan Collection,



The Tillymorgan Chalice can be seen in an Exhibition of Aberdeen Silver at Aberdeen Art Gallery 3 Nov 2012- 3 Mar 2013

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