

# A BICENTENARY OCCASION

A stone slab, affixed above the west door of the church, bears the following inscription:

**Dedicated to the Holy Trinity  
Rushen Church 1775**

The date, 1775, is that of an extension and major reconstruction of an earlier building and **not**, as is sometimes assumed, the year of origin of the church. Nevertheless, the years which have elapsed since that date have seen profound changes in church and parish and provide an obvious occasion for a brief review of the church's history.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF THE PARISH

By about the middle of the 12th century, or a little later, when the Celtic monastic system was waning, the parishes as we now know them came into being. One of the several keeills in each district - perhaps the most central to the then population spread - was selected to be, or to be the site of, the parish church. Here in Rushen, that honour fell to the keeill which had served the district known as Edremoy ("between the two marshes") and upon its site was raised the first parish church of Rushen. No record exists to tell us what that church was like, but its existence is vouched for by an ancient document, compiled at Rushen Abbey,

in which is recounted the slaying of the Manx King Reginald II, in the year 1249, in a meadow near to "the church of the Holy Trinity in Rushen".

Here we may pause for a moment to consider the dedication to the Holy Trinity, despite the fact that the church is popularly and officially known as Kirk Christ. This dual dedication, as it were, is shared by several churches in the British Isles, among them Christ Church, Oxford, Christ Church in Dublin, and of course Kirk Christ Lezayre in our own Island.

Each of these parish churches had a resident priest, the nomination to the 'living' being in the hands of the landowner, whose nominee was known as the 'rector'. From an early date in parish history, however, wealthy persons made over their rights to neighbouring monasteries, which by that time had become Benedictine or Cistercian; the abbot of the monastery would then appoint a 'vicar' to function in his stead. Here in Rushen, a Norse chieftain transferred his right of nomination to the abbot of Rushen Abbey at Ballasalla, who continued to appoint vicars until the Dissolution of the monasteries in 1540 abrogated that right, which then devolved upon the Lord of the Isle, and ultimately upon the Crown.

## THE EARLIEST YEARS

The Christian Faith may have been brought to these parts, presumably from Ireland, late in the 5th century. From traces which remain here in Rushen, as in other parts of the Isle of Man, we know that the churches of the time -"keeills" as they are known to the Manx people, were tiny sod-built cells in which the missionary priest-monks held service while the congregation, if there was one, knelt outside. In the course of time these little cells were replaced by more permanent structures, stone-built or at any rate stone-faced, and of these there are visible remains in several parts of our Island, though none unfortunately in Rushen.

But if the churches have disappeared, they have left clear evidence of their whereabouts in the shape of slab-lined graves which are revealed from time to time in the course of farming or building operations. These early graves were occasionally marked by upright stones bearing a simple cross, like one found on Ballaglonney, near the path to Fleshwick Bay. A stone of a very different type was found in 1773 on the Calf of Man; here, at a remote keeill some time in the 8th century, a Celtic monk had carved a representation of the Crucifixion scene for the adornment of his altar. This precious relic, now in the Manx Museum, is one of the outstanding treasures of Celtic Art and is paralleled only by Irish illuminated manuscripts of the period.

It is clear from the foregoing, that the conception of one church, central to and serving a considerable area like a parish, had not yet arisen and it was, in fact, several centuries before the idea of a "parish church", with a resident priest, was developed. Prior to that time, however, a new factor had entered the Christian scene in the arrival of the invading pagan Norsemen. These people soon became aligned to the usages and faith of the Celts, and when they laid their dead in the old keeill burial grounds they raised over them crosses carved with Nordic designs. Of these, our great standing cross at Four Roads is one, though a sadly defaced, example; it dates from about A.D. 940, and originally stood in the keeill burial-ground of Ballaqueeney. It was in the days of the Norsemen, too, that our Manx parishes first began to take shape.

### **STRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHURCH**

Little or nothing is known about the appearance of our parish church during the later Middle Ages, though it may be safely assumed that it was never more than a simple rectangular building, with no claim to architectural merit.

The earliest sketch we have is one made for Bishop Wilson, early in the 18th century; this view, looking towards the South West angle of the church, shows it as a completely plain oblong structure, with four narrow round-headed windows on the visible

South side and a small bell-cote on the Western gable. As no door appears in the sketch, it must have been on the North side of the Church. Bishop Wilson's successor, Bishop Mark Hildesley (1755-1772) had recorded great deterioration in the fabric of the church, and shortly before his death a competent jury of carpenters and builders presented a report which stated that rebuilding was urgently necessary, not only on account of the ruinous and dangerous state of the building but also on account of its inadequate size, holding as it did only about two-thirds of the congregation.

### **A NEW ERA DAWNS, 1775**

As a result of this report upon the condition of the fabric, Bishop Richmond issued, on 8th December, 1774, a licence to proceed with the required work. Thereupon, a vestry meeting, held in May, 1775, decided that the church should be extended to 64 ft. in length and 22 ft. in breadth, these appearing to be internal measurements.

(PLAN.--From this point onwards, the Plan, should be consulted, embodying as it does all the major changes referred to. The plan was produced in 1958, at time when the external walls of the church, stripped of the rendering which had covered their for many years. revealed long-hidden features. It had been hoped to

leave the walls in this state, but the ingress of damp called for re-rendering, and the evidence is again hidden.)

Briefly, the 1775 work progressed on these lines:

a) the W. gable was removed and about 20 ft., including two new window-openings, added to the length of the church prior to the rebuilding of the new West gable and bell-cote; a West door and porch were inserted, but the old North door was not at first walled up;

b) the old roof was removed and the side-walls raised throughout their length, before a new roof was placed in position;

c) a gallery was erected, occupying the whole of the new West extension, access to it being afforded by an outside stairway and a doorway high in the North wall. To give light in the gallery, dormer windows were inserted, at eaves level, in North and South walls. The completion of the 1775 alterations was marked by the erection, above the West door, of the inscribed stone panel to which reference was made in the opening paragraph.

Within a few years of this major work, certainly prior to 1790, a further extension was made, this time at the East end of the church, adding 18 ft. to the length (see Plan). In this new extension, round-headed windows, corresponding in shape and size with those already in the side-walls of the church, were inserted at the junction of the older and newer walls. Some years later, however, these new windows were replaced by doorways, that in the North wall to give access to the "Vicarage Pew".

This change, of course, resulted in a loss of light in the chancel, so, following a vestry resolution in 1839, new windows were put in to the eastward of the former positions, and at the same time, the doorway on the N. side of the chancel was built up; perhaps for reasons of economy, the blocking was carried out in brickwork, an unsightly piece of workmanship which only saw the light of day again when, in 1958, the rendering was removed !

The polygonal apse, which now forms such an attractive feature at the eastern end of the church, was added in 1872, along with its associated stained-glass windows. Since that date, the general structural appearance of the church has not changed, but a complete renewal of the roof, both timbers and slating, was found to be necessary in 1935.

Internally, changes taking place over the years have kept pace with those in the main body of the fabric. Until the middle years of the 19th century, the traditional arrangement of the old Manx parish churches (now to be seen only at old Kirk Braddan) was adhered to. A great three-decker pulpit stood half-way down the South side of the nave, facing an equally imposing four-poster "squire's pew" on the North side, while the congregation occupied high-backed box-pews. At the same time, too, the singing was led by a trio of 'cello, flute and clarinet, but by 1864 this had given place to a small organ.

Renovations of the furnishings in 1868-9 involved the removal of the old "three-decker" and its replacement-in the chancel-by the present pulpit and prayer-desk. In addition, the Gawne family pew was removed and resited on the South side of the chancel. Again, some years later, the box-pews in the nave were replaced by the existing pitch-pine seating. Finally, the present organ was installed in the West gallery in 1904.

Over the centuries, our church has never lacked generous supporters and donors, and many of the foregoing works have been met by individual gifts. To list them here would unduly swell this brief record ; many are already listed in former "parish booklets" of this sort, and all are recorded in the Wardens' Minute Book kept along with other archives in the Vicarage.

### **THE DAUGHTER CHURCHES**

Centuries ago, Kirk Christ Rushen was built to serve a mainly agricultural community and stood not far from its centre, but social changes -the growth of the tourist industry among them, have seen new population centres grow at Port Erin and at Port St. Mary, centres which the parish church has been eager to serve As a result, daughter-churches have grown up - St. Catherine's at Port Erin in 1880, St. Mary's at Port St. Mary in 1884, and not forgetting St. Peter's at Cregneash in 1878, and they all look to the old parish church as children to their mother.

*Foot Note to the 1975 booklet*

In this year of grace, 1975, while we give thanks for the past 200 years of our history, we look forward to our future with faith, and re-echo words spoken by a much-loved former Vicar when he said, "We have a goodly heritage - may we be worthy inheritors."





