

Chapter 75

St Cyrus - Autumn 1968 – Spring 1969

My ordination as an Elder of the Church of Scotland, presided over by the Reverend Norman McLean before the congregation in attendance that day, took place in Garvock/St. Cyrus Church in September, 1968, and was immediately followed by my unanimous appointment by the Kirk Session to the position of Session Clerk. This role made me responsible for most external correspondence with Church Headquarters at 121 George Street, Edinburgh, as well as with other parties involved in the sacred and pastoral aspects of our local church work. I was duty bound to record for posterity all Minutes of Kirk Session meetings in a large, impressive leather-bound book, and, in particular, all marriages and christenings conducted in our church, as well as the attendance records of church members at Communion services.

Ours was a *quod omnia* parish where the Kirk Session mainly controlled sacred and pastoral aspects, while a Congregational Board managed social and business aspects [*in our case, particularly, fabric maintenance/improvement of both the church and church hall*] However, for statutory liaison reasons, I, like the Minister, also became ex-officio members of the Congregational Board. This Board comprised elected ordinary church members. Thus it meant that I had two formal church meetings to attend each month, at fortnightly intervals.

I was also quickly co-opted on to the St. Cyrus Playing Field Association Committee who controlled all matters relating to the putting green, tennis courts, swings, pavilion and grass areas within the three or so acres of play-park up Ecclesgreig Road just to the west of the main road through the village. This of course delighted me, as it was not only in my area of expertise, but was also a great opportunity for me to get to know the village people involved in the provision of important outdoor social and recreation activities for all ages.

Meantime at the schoolhouse, after our baby Robert Kerr was born at the end of October, I arranged for a twice-a-week home-help, Mrs Hutcheon, to lighten Olive's burden of the cleaning of our large house as she tended to two under-fives; while Mrs Harrison, the school cleaner, willingly acted as 'baby-sitter' for us on the few occasions we managed to get out together socially in our first winter up North.

Kerr's church christening in November was a happy family occasion at the schoolhouse with many of our close relatives making the long journey to be there. Olive's sister Helen having 'carried' Evan in the traditional Scottish role of 'God-Mother' in 1964 at St. Ninian's Old Parish Church, Stirling, it fell to my sister Elizabeth to 'carry' Kerr at St. Cyrus. This meant that we had a houseful for a few days then – Elizabeth, her husband Cameron, and their Cunningham children, Ewen (8), Rhona

(6), Niall (4) and Scott (1) - luckily the huge room upstairs had already been furnished as 'The Playroom' ... and that 'contained' Evan and his mobile cousins' play very satisfactorily.

On a lighter note, well before these religious celebrations, I must recount one event concerning Kerr's birth. Olive was in the Charleton Nursing Home a few miles away near Montrose awaiting the arrival of number two child, and I visited her after school later in the day of her being transported there. Nothing doing the 'bump' was still visible under the bedclothes ... chat ... chat ... off home ... another night of waiting. Next day, I repeated my afternoon visiting journey ...and ... the 'bump' was still visible under the bedclothes! "Och! No signs of action," I sighed? At which point, Olive reached below the bedclothes and removed a bulky shopping bag from where it had been lying on her tummy, and smilingly said, "The staff are waiting to take you to see our wee lad in the nursery next-door." I was so surprised that I (*it being quite normal for the penny to drop slowly for me*) nearly said, "Is it a boy or a girl?" But I choked-off my question in time, and hurried through to see the wee mite lying peacefully ... a mere half-hour or so old! Wonderful! ... clever, patient lassie again Olive had been.

November, 1968



Come Spring, 1969

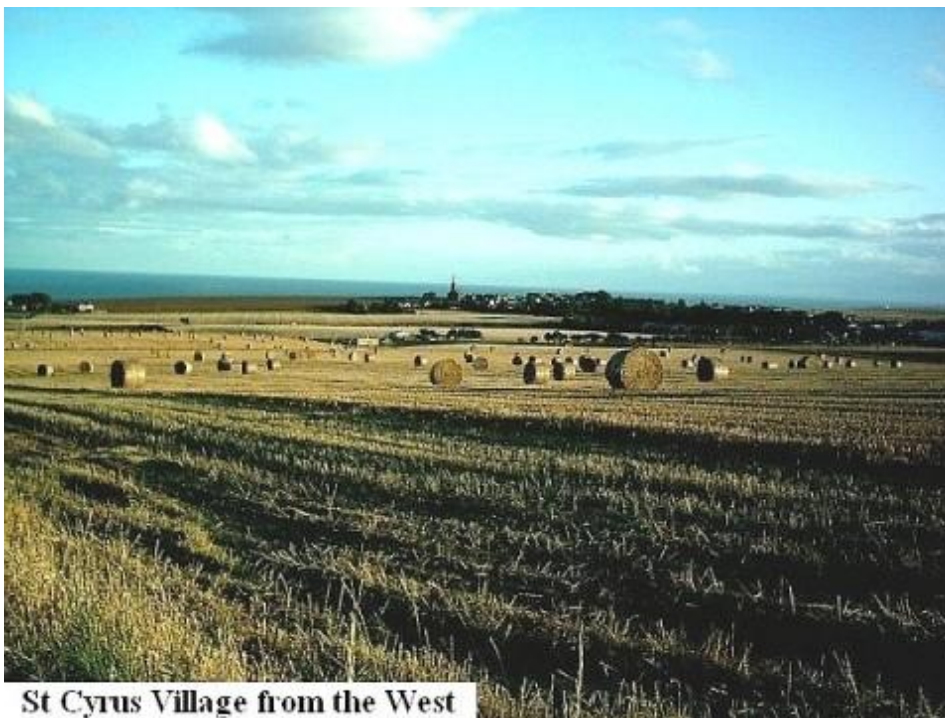


Come December, 1968, and I had my first taste of organising School Christmas parties in our wee General Purpose/Dining Hall. It was no problem really, as I had my father's 'recipes' for such events clearly in my memory from the 1940s at Banknock and Cambusbarron. And these worked a treat as Mrs Dickson, despite her arthritic fingers, was able enough on the piano for the country dances we had been rehearsing to my mum's tape-recordings of these, and for the various musical games I knew would be new to my pupils, as well as old favourites like 'The Farmer's In His Den' etc. With food and drink provided by the kitchen staff as well as parents, all went really well ... and a Santa (*from the Kirk Session*) sent everyone home happy with a package from the North Pole!

Meantime, I had discovered that most of my class just loved to sing ... 'Singing Together' at 11am on BBC School-Radio each Monday was always much enjoyed as was my idea of doing a pantomime the coming summer for school funds. I had sent away to Paxton's of London for the music

and libretto of a version of ‘Snow-White and The Seven Dwarfs’ and, with the help again of my mum’s tape-recording of the music, we had, towards the end of my first term, been practising the choruses therein. The quality of my pupils’ singing was promising, as well as the tunes quickly becoming such ‘hits’ that I often heard them being sung or whistled in the playground. But, there was a long way to go although in my innocence as a novice pantomime producer, I did not realise that then soloists to find acting to encourage ... stage props to improvise costumes to be made etc. etc.

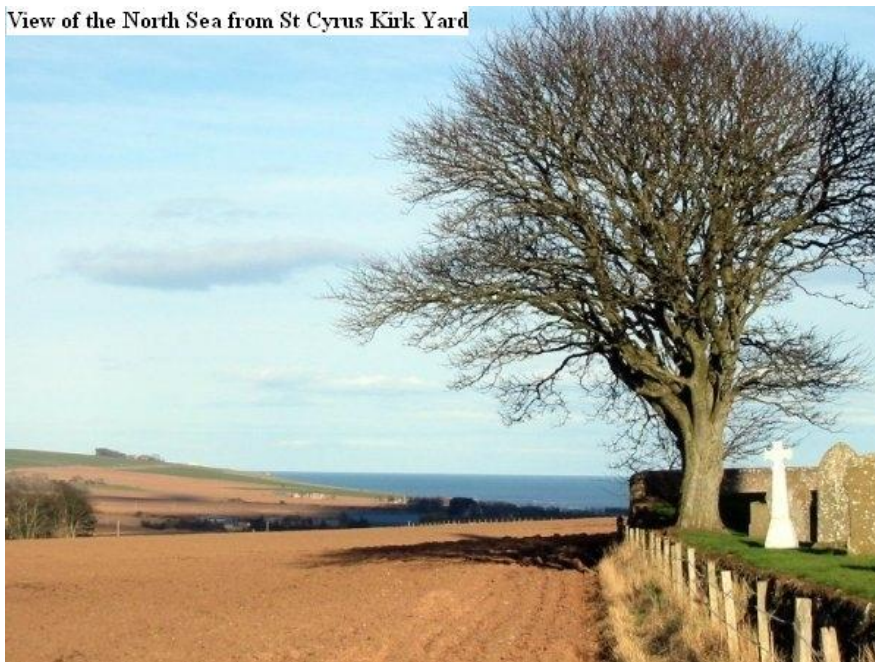
To give more understanding, not only of the charming nature of St. Cyrus where I was privileged to serve as dominie for two and a half years from 1968, but also the depth of its historical and geographical features, I will contextualise our stay even more fully now, pictorially and textually, thus,



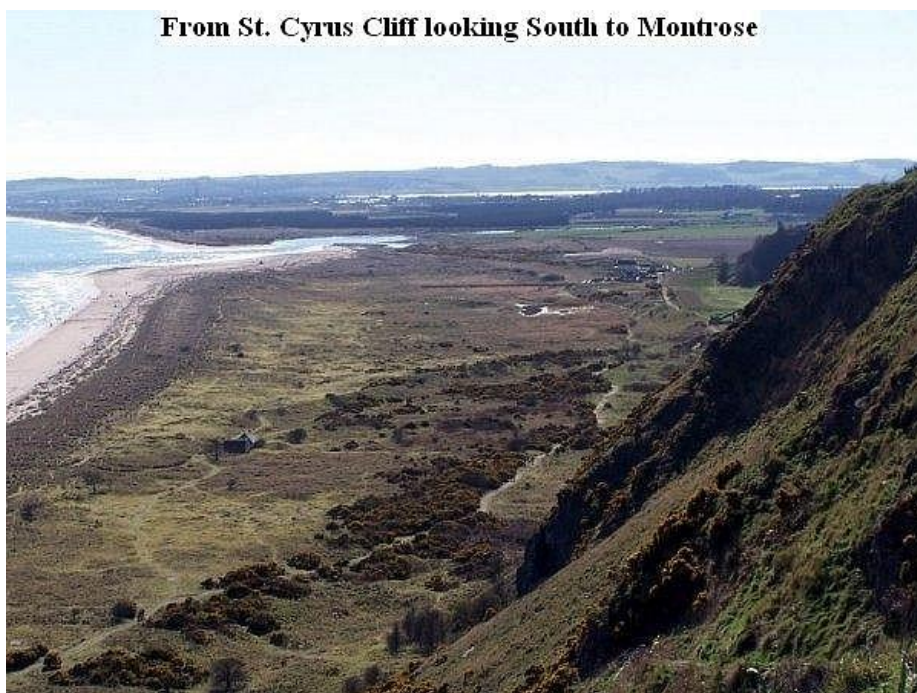
The Main Coastal Road through the village in the 1930s almost unchanged in 1968
The 1968 Church Hall that was formerly the United Free Kirk.



View of the North Sea from St Cyrus Kirk Yard



From St. Cyrus Cliff looking South to Montrose



Absorbing the history and geography of the locality was something I had to tackle, and did so partially on foot, but also by studying maps and texts like this



St Cyrus Parish in 1832 with signs of village habitation indicated

St Cyrus, formerly Ecclesgreig, a parish, with a village of the same name, is in the extreme S of the county of Kincardine. It is bounded NE by the parish of Benholm, SE by the North Sea, S W by Forfarshire, and NW by the parishes of Marykirk and Garvoek. Along the sea-coast the boundary is natural, as it is also at the S corner and along the SW, it follows for 4 miles partly the present and partly the old course of the river North Esk. For 2 7/8 miles on the NW side it follows the course of the stream running along the Den of Canterland, and elsewhere it is artificial. The shape of the parish is a rectangle with irregular sides, the greatest length, from NE to SW, being 5 ¼ miles; and the average width, north-westward from the sea-coast, 2 ½ miles. The area is 8718.608 acres, of which 390.561 are foreshore and 78.698 water. The surface lies on the slope from the hill of Garvoek to the sea, and is broken up into a series of undulations running from NE to SW, attaining 486 feet at the Hill of Morphie, and 600 near Maryland in the NW corner of the parish. Almost the whole of the surface is under cultivation or woodland. The soil is everywhere a good sound loam, strong in some parts and light in others, but very fertile. It lies on a subsoil of decomposed red sandstone or volcanic rock, varying from clay to gravel. The underlying rocks are Old Red Sandstone - which is quarried at Lauriston - or inter-bedded volcanic strata, which at Den of Finella and elsewhere contain very fine agates and other minerals. In the Den of Canterland fish remains are found in the shales constituting the upper fish bed of the Old Red Sandstone of Forfar and Kincardine. There are also, at several places, bands of limestone which are not now worked, though former quarrying operations in connection with them led, at the Ecoruer of the sea-coast, to rather disastrous results. 'On the Kincardineshire coast,' says Sir Charles Lyell, 'an illustration was afforded, at the close of the last century, of the effect of promontories in protecting a line of low shore. The village of Mathers, 2 miles S of Johnshaven, was built on an ancient shingle beach, protected by a projecting ledge of limestone rock. This was quarried for lime to such an extent that the sea broke through, and in 1795 carried away the whole village in one night, and penetrated 150 yards inland, where it has maintained its ground ever since, the new village having been built farther inland on the new shore;' and this new hamlet had to be protected by a stone bulwark. In the SW the drainage is carried off by the North Esk and the burns of Canterland, Morphie, Dannies Den, and Commieston, which flow into it. To the E of the village is the small burn of Woodston, and in the NE end of the parish are the burns of Lauriston and Denfinella, all flowing directly to the sea. The Esk and all the other streams flow through deep and romantic dells, the gorges of Lauriston and Denfinella being particularly fine and well-wooded. On the North Esk is a pool known as the Ponage or Pontage Pool, which was the abode of a water-kelpie. Folk-lore has it that on one occasion the monster having appeared as a horse, was caught and bridled presumably with a witch bridle - and kept in captivity for a considerable time, during which he was employed in drawing stones to Morphie for a castle that was then being erected, but of which only the site now

remains. A servant having, however, incautiously removed the bridle to allow him to get some food, the kelpie immediately vanished through the wall laughing with joy, and calling out

'Sair back and sair bancs.

Carrying the laird o' morphie's stanes.

The laird o' Morphie canna thrive

As lang's the kelpie is alive.'

a rhyme which he used often afterwards to repeat as he showed himself in the pool, a circumstance that has been turned to advantage in the local poem of John o' Arnha.

The coast is mostly low and sandy, though at several points there are rocky promontories. From the centre of the coast-line south-westward to the mouth of the North Esk there is a stretch of sand-hills, bounded on the NW by an old line of cliff, in some places from 150 to 200 feet high, but gradually becoming lower as it approaches the North Esk. The view from this across towards the Red Head and away beyond by the Isle of May towards the Firth of Forth is very fine. In 1858 a cave of considerable size, with many bones and heaps of edible shells lying along the floor, was discovered in these cliffs about half a mile from the North Esk, but was shortly afterwards rendered inaccessible by a fall of rock at the mouth. Near the river, in the stackyard of the farm of Stone of Morphie, is a solitary standing-stone, but nothing is known as to its history. It is traditionally connected with the Danes, and said to have been erected to mark the grave of one of their leaders - Camus - who was killed here, and whose memory is also preserved in the name of the neighbouring farm of Commieston, while the Danes themselves give name to Dannies (Dane's) Den. Several stone coffins have been found in the neighbourhood, but defeated armies have seldom time to bury their dead in stone coffins, much less erect memorial stones. Amid the sand-hills, near the centre of the base of the line of inland cliff already described, is the small parish burying-ground known as the Nether Kirkyard. It was probably the site of the old Culdee church from which the parish derives its name, Ecclesgreig being 'the church of Grig.' This Grig or Giric or Curig, whom Chalmers describes as Mormaer of the tract of country between the Dee and Spey, but who in reality was associated in the government of the kingdom of Scone with Eocha, who was the grandson of Kenneth mac Alpin, reigned from 878 to 889. As guardian to a king whose succession was disputed, and who was a Briton of Strathclyde, he seems to have tried to win over the clergy of the Scottish Church by freeing them from all secular exactions and services. In the Pictish Chronicle his name appears as Ciricius, and as he seems to have been named after St Cyr or Ciricus, a martyr of Tarsus, the church was dedicated in honour of that saint, and hence the name St Cyrus. The church of 'Saint Ciricus of Eglesgirg' was given to the priory of St Andrews by Bishop Richard (1163-77), and the grant was confirmed by King William the Lyon. The adjacent estate is still called Kirkside, and the old name is preserved in connection with Ecclesgreig House, the former name of which was Mount Cyrus. The church remained that of the parish till 1632, when a new one was erected on the site of the present building. A dependent chapel dedicated to St Laurence was at Chapelfield, ½ mile N of Lauriston House. At the point of Milton Ness, 1 ¼ mile E of the village, are the remains of an old castle called the Kaim of Mathers, said to have been built by Barclay of Mathers as a place of refuge from the vengeance of the law, by which he was threatened for his share in the slaughter of Sir John Melville. In October 1715 a band of Jacobites from Farnell and Kinnaird placed an Episcopal clergyman in possession of the church and refused the minister admission, nor did he preach again till the 5th February 1716, when 'the rebels having all passed by this church,' he 'repossess himself of his pulpit; but on this and the two following Sundays he had but a small congregation, the people not being able to leave their houses for fear of finding them plundered before their return by the Swiss and Dutch soldiers who were in the neighbourhood.'

One matter I had to learn about quite quickly concerned weddings in the kirk where I was the new Session Clerk!

A 200-year-old 'Dowry Brides' wedding tradition unique to a Scots village is carried on at the church in St Cyrus where it has been home to a bizarre ritual which sees brides-to-be having their height measured before the wedding ceremony. Every year a dowry is split between the tallest, shortest, oldest and youngest brides married at the church. However, church elders confess the peculiar ceremony is in danger of dying out as more and more modern couples forego traditional church weddings. However, to be eligible for the dowry, the newlyweds must come from the parish.

Apart from all this, and a new baby in the house over the back-end months, the relative mildness, apart from when a snell nor-easter blew up, allowed me to make valiant rather than skilled attempts to tame the overgrown parts of the schoolhouse garden. The many grassed areas were in recess of course, but the raspberry plot was a mess of old stalks and new which were buried in weeds and tangles of broken wire where canes had once gained support. I did not enjoy this chore, beside which, weeding the extensive loose pebbled driveway was almost a joy until 'dishalagie' weed was spotted making its insidious presence felt from adjacent flower borders. 'Auld Peam' from next door gave me little comfort when he looked over the back-dyke to see what I was trying to do "Fair enough son, said he, but if ye leave e'en a wee bittie of thase devils' roots, ye'll never git rid o't." Unfortunately he was right ... so that battle, a losing one, went on for all the years of our stay!

One part of school-life that I really dreaded was the continuing [out-dated] existence on the curriculum, for the last hour of the school day on two afternoons each week, of Gardening for my boys, while my girls went to Sewing. And, jokingly or in earnest, I did not know which in my 'new-boy days', Mrs Dickson told me that the Kitchen Staff expected a good crop of vegetables from the School Plot! Thus in autumn, and in early days of Spring, and for all the summer term, I would pray for bad weather on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons so that indoor Handwork lessons could be substituted. What made matters worse, apart from my not having a clue about vegetable gardening, was the fact that my 10 and 11 year-old lads were not really strong enough to wield spades adequately until an initial tilth had been obtained. So the dominie literally had to do all the basic spade work himself I was not a happy chappy!

However, music lessons as ever, and singing in particular by my boisterous, but biddable P6s and 7s, continued to give us all great pleasure, and especially the chorus work for the summer pantomime in prospect. And then after the usual Art and Craft sessions for Christmas decorations etc., we were able to do some preliminary crafting of stage props and costumes for 'Snow-White' too. Meantime, the 3 Rs and its subsequent Homework, got daily treatment in ability groups like doses of medicine which children were expected to swallow, if seldom to enjoy ... even when they could see that I appeared to be enjoying getting them to improve their vocabulary, spelling, multiplication tables etc. Ironically there was never a shortage of borrowers of books from the County supplied Children's Library selection on a Friday afternoon despite the popularity of TV in most village homes.