

St Mary's and the slate quarrymen

During the Harvest Festival in St. Mary's on 3 October, a new slate painting donated by Peter Joynson will be dedicated in memory of the slate quarrymen of Aberfoyle. We are delighted that the artist Monica Revie can join us on this special occasion. But why is this picture so special for St. Mary's? The following is taken from an article by Peter Joynson published in a previous newsletter, but worth repeating to remind us of the dedication of these men and the origins of our church.

In 1765 a narrow bed of clay slate was discovered in Aberfoyle entering the parish just behind Couligarten and leaving it at Brig of Turk.

The Kirk Minister of the time declared that '*slate of grand quality is wrought wherever there is a demand for it*'. Whilst his knowledge of minerals may have been without fault, his command of Gaelic was non-existent, with the result that the local populace complained to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland that '*they could not have a Minister who spoke to them in an unknown tongue*' and he was duly sacked.

However, the Minister was right about the good quality of Aberfoyle slates. They were heavier than the Welsh variety, strong and durable with a range of blue, purple and green colours. The green slates were only available at the Aberfoyle and Luss quarries and were consequently much in demand.

Over the years the production increased and by 1800, 80 tons of slate were wrought per annum. Demand continued to soar and in about 1850 families and workers were recruited from Ballachulish and the Western Isles to work in the quarry. In 1900 the quarry was the third largest in Scotland producing 1.4 million slates. A quarry village was built complete, with church and school, catering for approximately eighty people. The village was adjacent to what is now called the Trossachs Road, but only one house remains today.

Almost all the quarry workers who had come down from the North and West were devout Episcopalians. Although there was a church within the quarry village it was considered to be too small and the quarrymen decided to build another one in Aberfoyle. An approach was made to the Duke of Montrose for a suitable site and he gave them a piece of land near Lime Craig just above the east end of the village.

Work on the new church was started in 1892, the quarrymen giving their labour free of charge and working in their spare time. The building stone for the church was acquired at very little cost, due to an entrepreneurial builder named Hugh Kennedy from Ayrshire who made a bargain with the railway company to bring in stone from Ailsa Craig free of charge, in order to test the weight capacity of the company's new railway line being extended across Gartmore Moss.

It is likely that additional assistance came from local people, and we know that Richard Joynson (great uncle of Peter) gave £500 towards the project. His family thereafter call the Church, 'Uncle Richard's Kirk'.

The work was completed in 1893 and the church named St. Mary's, with the Reverend Henry Lawrence Williamson the first priest in charge.

How was slate mined and transported?

To extract slate the rock ace was bored by air compressors and blasted by gunpowder. Work was carried out in squads of four, two at the quarry face selecting the slate and two further down dressing them. There were two sizes of slate: full size – 14" x 18" and under size 10" x 5". Initially the slates were

taken from the face by horse and cart and conveyed to the Port of Mentieth where they were loaded onto a boat. Thereafter they were taken down the Goodie River and then the Forth to Stirling, and put on a train.

When the Strathendrick railway was extended from Buchlyvie to Aberfoyle in 1885, the transport of slates became much easier. To get the slates to the station yard, a form of tramway was constructed. Trucks full of slates were drawn by horse power from the quarry to a point well above the wood behind the school from whence a double track ran down a very steep decline to the school house. Here the laden trucks were attached to an endless wire and the weight of the descending trucks drew up the empty ones on the other line. Just behind the school house another horse was waiting to draw the full trucks to the railway yard along the tramway which, after crossing the main road by the police station, ran alongside the main road. The tramway remained in use until 1931 when the new Trossachs Road was opened and allowed transport lorries to reach the quarry face.