

# WHO WERE THE KILWINNING MONKS?

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Who were the monks, how many of them were there, and what happened to them in the massive disruption which is generally believed to have been occasioned by the events of the Scottish Reformation?

These are questions of perennial interest to students in any area where the local history has been dominated by one of the fifty or so Abbeys and Priors of the Scottish Medieval Church. They are important questions, for the personnel of the Church were themselves part of the social framework, and our main interest today is to examine the effects of the religious Reformation on the contemporary social scene.

The principal evidence about the personnel of the religious houses lies in the signatories to Charters granted by the Abbots with the consent of their convents. While a single charter is never conclusive proof of the number of monks at a particular date – for not necessarily all the members of the convent signed – the examination of a series of charters may be relied upon to give the names of all the monks over a period. Corroborative evidence is sometimes available: e.g. at Kilwinning, nineteen names can be deduced from a charter dated 1532, and seventeen on another signed in 1539, while a document of intermediate date, 1536, details a specific “nyntene portiouns”, salaries allotted to the monks from the monastic revenue.

Over the course of the first half of the 16th century, the names were as follows: **Simon Aysdell, James Brown, Thomas Brown, Malcolm Colquhon, John Culper** (the last to enter in about 1549), **David Crayk, Robert Curry,**

**William Daly, James Dalgles** (appears in only one document and Thomas Brown signs for him), **Gilbert Dawsons, John Deyne (2), John Docheon, Robert Edward, Laurence Elder, John Gaw, Patrick Flescher, John Hamilton** (later Abbot of Paisley and Archbishop of St. Andrews), **Robert Hamilton, William Hamilton (2), Rankyn Hart, John Hawick, Alexander Henderson, Henry Kelso, William Kirkpatrick, David Leslie, Walter Lister, Thomas Maling, James Mechell** (the last to survive, dying about 1592), **George Morisone, John Quhyte, George Ramsay, Archibald Rankynson, Alexander Scott, Adam Spark, Alan Steyne, Karol Stule, Alan Wilson, William Wright, James Teynder and David Wynset.**

In making a precise statistical analysis however, a number of problems present themselves. Two individuals of the same name can lead to confusion, as do two William Hamiltons and two John Deynes who were members of the Kilwinning convent in the 1530s and 40s. Also, two documents signed on the same day can present different numbers for the community: e.g. on the 15th July 1532, sixteen monks including James Brown assented to a charter, while on the same day, another list of signatories does not include James Brown, but does include another three names. The number of monks then present might therefore be deduced as nineteen, and not sixteen as indicated by the first document, or eighteen by the second. The shortness of a monk's stay in the Abbey might also mean him escaping notice in the series of signatures.

Thus in 1525, King James was writing to the Vatican recommending Abbot Shaw of Paisley to the Bishopric of

Moray, and in the same letter the pope was asked to appoint as his successor in Paisley, John Hamilton, “monk of Kilwinning”, an illegitimate son of the Earl of Arran.

Abbot Hamilton’s term at Paisley and his rise to become Archbishop of St Andrews and the foremost leader of the counter-Reformation is well known, but his term at Kilwinning is unrecorded otherwise. Other monks of a short stay may have gone completely unnoticed.

How are these problems to be overcome? What is needed is a card index system of the first and last dates of signing of each individual monk, but if a document in between is not signed by him, he must be added to determine the size of the community. Any new document cannot diminish a lifespan but only increase it. Printed sources have to be checked against the original where possible and if a year by year account is being drawn up, dates of documents should be corrected to the Gregorian calendar.

What of the activities of the monks of Kilwinning and the strong traditional association with the Masonic craft? The Abbey was a house of Tironensians, a “reformed” branch of the greater Benedictines, which took its name from Tiron (now Thiron-Gardais), a village in Normandy. Here in 1109, St Bernard of Tiron established a monastery for a community of the religious who, like him, sought spiritual grace in greater austerity than they believed could be provided by the Benedictine constitution as interpreted by other houses. He encouraged his converts to their secular occupation as far as was consistent with their obligatory monastic vows.

Because of this original dispensation, some later writers have wrongly inferred that the Tironensian order was composed of craftsmen and artisans; this is to over-emphasise an interesting aspect of its constitution.

Nevertheless, despite the complete loss of the Abbey Records, a tradition of craftsmanship, which continued into late medieval times, can be shown to have existed among the Kilwinning monks. In 1535, an unnamed “monk of Kilwinning” bound the service books for the Kirk of Ayr, and the following year, Thomas Brown, a monk of Kilwinning, made the town’s organ. Yet another Kilwinning monk, perhaps a young colleague trained by Thomas, was paid £13 6/8d in 1551 for mending the organ. Wood and stone to keep the mill in good repair were to be supplied by the monks to the grantees of a lease on the Abbey corn mill in 1511, and the monks were quarrying stone and effecting repairs to the Abbey buildings in 1558 and 1559.

A tradition of learning and scholarship also persisted among the Kilwinning monks. Thus we find that, in the General Congregation of the University of Glasgow, held in the chapter house of the Friars Preachers or Dominicans in 1451, there were incorporated members – the Abbot of Kilwinning, William Boyd; Sir John Spark and Sir Robert Quhyte, monks of Kilwinning. Later matriculation lists include other Kilwinning monks, one of whom, Karol Stule incorporated in 1519, was the author of a printed book entitled *Compasio Beate Marie*. According to the historian Dempster, mathematical and musical studies were also given some attention in the monastery, and a number of treatises

produced. One of the monks, **John Docheon**, appeared with the Abbot and Sub Prior in an appeal before the Lords of Council and Session in 1543, and was also favoured as a signatory to various notarial contracts drawn up in the Abbey, so he may have had some legal training. Though they did occasionally serve outside the monastery for permitted purposes, the monks were “enclosed”, so there was probably less contact with the local people than might be supposed, at least in the early period.

But as the name lists suggest, the monks were not strangers to the district. Many came from local families, perhaps close to half of them from Kilwinning and the adjoining parishes. Family traditions of having a son enter the monastery persisted, and over a relatively short period of fifty years, two members each of the family of Culper, Quhyt (White), Dean and Brown, and three of the Hamilton family not including the last Abbot, Gavin Hamilton, whose term of office saw the events of the Scottish Reformation.

The religious troubles were in fact much occasioned by abuses in ecclesiastical appointments. In theory, the Abbot of a monastery was elected by his fellow monks. In practice, from the second half of the fifteenth century at least, the capitular election of the abbot was a solemn farce, the formal ratification of a choice made by the King and confirmed by the pope. Abbot William Bunche, 1494-1513, was perhaps the last true Abbot of Kilwinning.

An occasional guest at the Abbey in Abbot William's time was King James IV whose reign, 1488-1513, witnessed a great extension of the practice of granting Bishopricks

“in commendam” to the King’s kinsmen, legitimate or illegitimate, or to the officers of state in lieu of direct payment for their services. It was a system which did much to blacken the reputation of religious life, and it is to the credit of the Kilwinning monks that they openly defied the first attempt to introduce it to their own house. In 1512, King James was writing to the pope to the effect that Abbot William had promised to resign, and that Master John Forman, precentor of Glasgow Cathedral, was the royal nominee. Forman was a comparatively minor clergyman of dubious moral standing, but he was also a nephew of Andrew Forman, a leading churchman and diplomat who was on friendly terms with the King. Certain apostolic bulls were eventually produced, and it may be presumed that the documents were genuine. This is more than can be said about the resignation of Abbot William, as the method of inducting Master Forman was about to show.

Shortly after Palm Sunday 1512, the Earls of Angus and Glencairn, with a force of about sixty armed men barged into the Abbey, the doors having already been barred by the monks and representatives of John Forman denied entry. The Abbot refused to have any discussion with Glencairn, was grabbed by the armed men and dragged to the main door where he was forced to open it to Forman’s representatives. The importance of having the door opened by the Abbot in person, so that he could be said to have admitted the supplanter, is perhaps typical of medieval legislation, the same legislation which was later to militate against the excesses of the Reformers.

The affair of 1512 – calling into question the purpose of a monastery and of monastic revenues – was the beginning of the end for the monks of Kilwinning. Their purpose was not, contrary to what one might expect, the preaching of the Gospel and the administration of the Sacraments to the people. The sixteen parish churches appropriated to the Abbey, including the nave of the Abbey itself which was by now acting as the monastic parish church of Kilwinning, were served not by monks but by secular priests, vicars appointed and paid by the Abbot.

The chief function of the monastic community was the due performance of the Opus Dei, the Divine Office, which began about three o'clock in the morning with the recital of Nocturnes, the first of the seven canonical hours, and ended with Compline which was sung as darkness fell. To the monks at the beginning of the sixteenth century, it must have seemed that the massive towers and the way of life within them would endure forever. They must have thought that, like in the poem of the drowsy porter of their sister Abbey at Lindores, “the Bells o’ the Abbey are aye gotten rung”, but the great Abbey was hastening to its fall.

The series of Commendator Abbots who followed John Forman had little regard for the original purpose of Richard de Morville’s pious foundation. It simply existed as a legal corporation and a source of wealth. However, the practice of feuing and leasing monastic lands introduced by the Commendators still required the chapter of monks to sign and assent to each feu charter or lease. Hence, even in the increasingly hostile religious atmosphere, there was an



interest – perhaps a degree of self-interest – in local families continuing to send recruits to the monastery.

The statistical evidence at Kilwinning suggests that the numbers were surprisingly well maintained right up to the 1540s, but recruitment seems to have suddenly declined, and finally ceased in the period 1545-55, by which time many of the “communal” aspects of monastic life had disappeared. The monks now lived in their own personal chambers and yards, and some even had their own servants. At all events, the Commendator, as elsewhere, was not keen to allow fresh admissions, for the fewer inmates, the less the allowance that fell to be paid to them. The days of the Abbey – despite what might happen on the religious front – were now numbered in the lifespan of the remaining monks.

There were only eight monks in the Abbey in January 1560: John Culper, James Mitchell, James Brown, Robert Curry, Alan Steyn, John Deyne, Alexander Henderson (who later appears as an exhorter or lay preacher in the Reformed Church), and William Kirkpatrick who, by Spring 1562, had become the first Protestant Minister of Kilwinning. What is interesting about the latter two is that it is not simply that they conformed, but that they continued for a decade or two to sign charters as monks of Kilwinning, and indeed were still occasionally described as such.

Alexander Henderson who first signed charters in 1544 became reader at Ardrossan in 1567, then at Stewarton in 1572, and became Minister at Kilmaurs in 1574. Even as late as 1588, after at least twenty years service to the Reformed Church, he was still explicitly called a “monk of

Kilwinning". To his student son David, who was to follow him into the Ministry at Kilmaurs, he made over his monk's portion of £33 6/8d, a generous annual salary by the standards of the time.

An even more striking example of personal continuity was provided by William Kirkpatrick who entered the Kilwinning community between 1539 and 1544, and who signed the last pre-Reformation charter on 10th June 1559. As stated, he was "Minister of Kilwinning" in spring 1564, and probably not long after this, he married Alison Campbell, daughter of James Campbell of Stevenston. In 1567, the Abbot and chapter made over what is apparently his monk's portion as a pension worth twenty bolls of victual, twelve stones of cheese, and £20 in silver to him and his wife and their heirs. The following year, the minister and his wife feued the chamber in which they lived, probably in addition to William's own monastic living quarters. In his Will, he made careful arrangements for his family, and his son William was to benefit from the sale of his books and the money set aside for his education:

"I leve the rest pt of my gudis and geir to be delt equalie amangis my thrie bairnis except an fedder furnist bed qlk I leve to alesoun campbell my spous".

He was not alone in conforming, for the men in charge of the neighbouring parishes of Dalry, Irvine and Stevenston had all previously been clerics. A telling instance of how difficult it was for people to take in how fundamentally things had changed can be seen when his

widow, petitioning for tax exemption on her pension, describes herself as “widow of William Kirkpatrick, minister of Kilwinning and ane of the monks thereof”.

In conclusion, and to answer the original question “What happened to them?”, perhaps it is sufficient to say that the monks were not harried out, but retired as it were, and lived the remainder of their lives in their familiar surroundings, until they had all passed on.

As there was now no longer anyone to pay for repairs, or press for their upkeep, or protect them from thrifty townfolk intent on getting good building materials free of charge, the abbey, as elsewhere, became a great quarry out of which much of the later town was built.

Also published by Kilwinning Heritage:

- *Questions and Answers About Kilwinning Past and Present.*
- *Questions and Answers about the Montgomerie family and the 1839 Eglinton Tournament.*
- *A Self-Guide Tour of Kilwinning Abbey.*

Other books of local content, some published by Kilwinning Heritage, are available from Kilwinning's Abbey Tower Heritage Centre. We particularly recommend '*The Abbey of Kilwinning*' and '*History of the Ancient Society of Kilwinning Archers*' by Jim Kennedy, '*The Kilwinning Community Archaeology Project 2010-2011*' by Thomas Rees, and '*The Abbey Green*' by Helen Matthews and Jeni Park. Out-of-print and rare books are available for free download from our website.

The Heritage Centre is open at the Easter weekend and then mid-May to mid-September, Friday-Sunday 1-3pm. Please check the website or Facebook page for dates. Entry is free.

Built in 1816 on the ruins of the town's 12th century Abbey, on display is some of the fascinating history of the Abbey and aspects of daily life in Kilwinning.

Guided access for visitors to the top of the tower is up 143 steps. Volunteers from Kilwinning Heritage staff the Centre on behalf of North Ayrshire Council.

The Tower is also the venue for the oldest archery competition in the world. On the first Saturday in June, archers from the Ancient Society of Kilwinning Archers gather to try to shoot the papingo (a wooden pigeon) sited at the top of the tower.

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