

## KINNEIL KIRK

Geoff B Bailey

Kinneil and its church have long been associated with early Christianity in Scotland. The life of the early 6<sup>th</sup> century missionary St Serf was written down in the medieval period when it is said that the



saint stood at Kinneil on the south side of the Forth and looked across its broad waters. He threw his staff across the estuary and founded an abbey where it landed at Culross. Presumably Kinneil was chosen because it already had a Celtic church. The bounds of what might well be such a Celtic monastery can be seen on an aerial photograph that shows a wide circular ditch enclosing an area on the promontory on the west side of the Gil Burn opposite to Kinneil House. Such monastic ditches are known as *vallum monasterii* in Latin and denoted the symbolic boundary of the religious precinct.

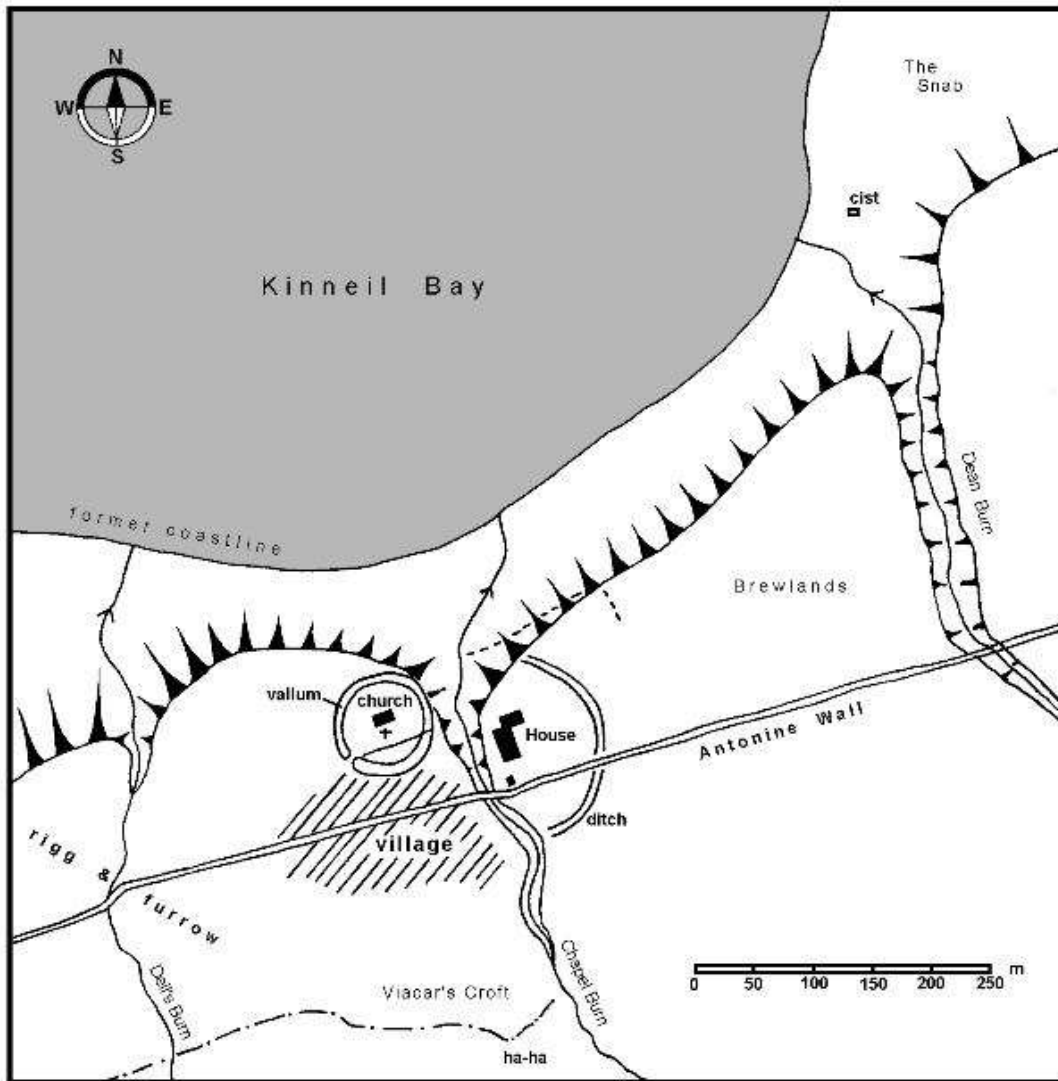
**Illus 1: Aerial photograph of Kinneil looking east. Kinneil House is in the centre and below it the curving ditch can be seen as a dark band surrounding the church. The Ditch of the Antonine Wall runs straight across the field in line with the south side of Kinneil House.**

Kinneil is also mentioned by the ecclesiastical historian Bede in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century. Referring to the Antonine Wall he says:

*“Of this work, there erected, that is, of a rampart of extraordinary breadth and height, there are evident remains to be seen at this day. It begins at about two miles distance from the monastery of Abercurning on the west, at a place called in the Pictish language Paenfahel, but in the English tongue Penneltun.”*

As a place name Kinneil is unique because we have the English, Pictish and Gaelic names – all of which mean the same thing, namely “the head of the Wall.” It was probably for this reason that Bede fixed upon it as the place where the Wall began – and because there were no other prominent settlements or churches in the area that could be referred to (the town of Bo’ness only emerged in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century). To fix the spot more definitely for those unfamiliar with the area he also mentions Abercorn. Although within the Anglian kingdom of Bernicia it was the seat of the Pictish bishopric and therefore well known to his readers. It is in fact 10km from Kinneil.

# Kinneil Kirk



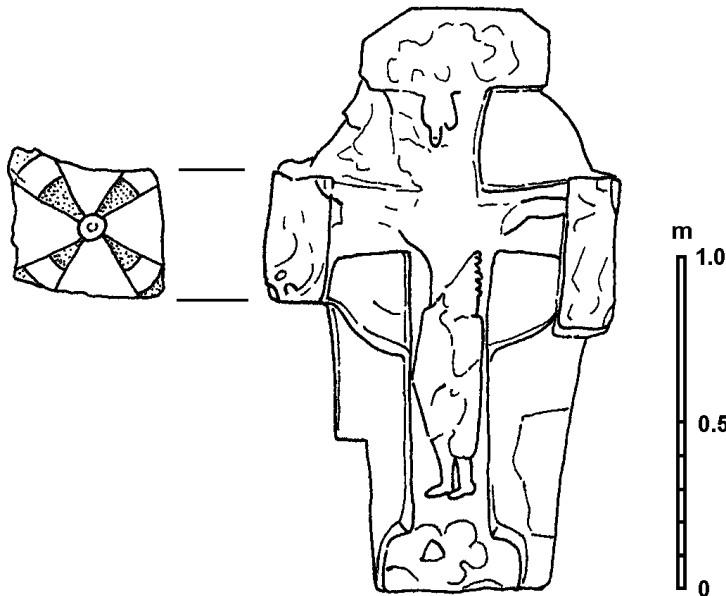
**Illus 2: Location map showing some of the nearby historic features.**

The shores of the Forth were lapped by incoming ideas and it is interesting to note that most of the early Christian place names are to be found within a relatively short distance of its coast. The estuary was a communications highway, as well as a source of fresh protein. The shore at this time lay close to the foot of the bluff that rises steeply to the church at Kinneil. Here large quantities of oyster shells have been found (appropriately named as the Deil's Kitchen) – a relatively stable food supply. Indeed radiocarbon dates show that these oysters had been exploited since the Mesolithic around 5,000BC.

As the Gil Burn (also known as the Church Burn) debouches from the deep gorge onto this coastline it formed part of a shallow bay that even as late as the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century was seen as an important “creek” or harbour. The east side of the bay was closed by a small promontory known as the Snab and at its foot a long cist burial was found in 1946. Such burials are usually Christian, dating to the 7<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries. It was probably the presence of this harbour, a natural refuge from the winds that sweep down the Forth, that led to the foundation of the church at Kinneil. The slightly later churches at Carriden to the east and Airth to the north-west are similarly located. In each case the church stands on high ground, providing landmarks for passing ships. The elevated positions also provided additional security against raiders.

## Kinneil Kirk

---



The very first church building on the site would have been of wood. It may have been the floor of this building that was seen in 1951 when archaeological excavations were conducted in the south-east corner of the 12<sup>th</sup> century chancel – it lay 0.5m below the later stone floor. Those excavations also made the extraordinary discovery of a massive stone rood or crucifix, 1.76m tall, which can be dated stylistically to the mid 11<sup>th</sup> century. The back of this large block is rough, but the outer ends of the cross are carved with Maltese crosses suggesting that it must have been freestanding, but close to a wall.

**Illus 3: Scale drawing of the Kinneil rood stone.**

The carving on the rood stone is of loose Norman composition heavily influenced by art from the south of England and northern France. It is likely that a small portable altar crucifix of wood, metal or ivory, was brought to Kinneil and copied on the spot in this cruder material. Despite its size the sculpted stone was most probably placed on a small stepped plinth outside the church – the extra height giving the crucifixion scene more power and the setting resembling that of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Celtic Cross at neighbouring Carriden. At some later date the bottom left-hand corner of the stone has been cut away to draft in a chock stone as additional support.



**Illus 4: The rood stone being wheeled on a trolley from the church to Kinneil House for safekeeping, c1960. Courtesy of Falkirk Museum.**

## Kinneil Kirk

---



**Illus 5: Reconstruction drawing of the rood stone as it may have appeared.**

Although the overall appearance of the worn and mutilated stone is crude, the remaining carvings show that it was well executed and if it had been painted its effect would have been little short of stunning. The ribs of Christ can be clearly seen as can the long loincloth. Unfortunately the upper torso and head were cut away when the rood stone was no longer required. Above the head the Manus Dei (Hand of God), two fingers extended, seems to emerge from a cloud. Below Christ's feet are some unclear features that may represent the skulls of Golgotha. The arms of the cross expand outwards only

slightly and end in raised cross terminals. Traces of carving occur on the terminal blocks and we might envisage more Christian symbols here, such as an eagle or fish, or even the four Evangelists.

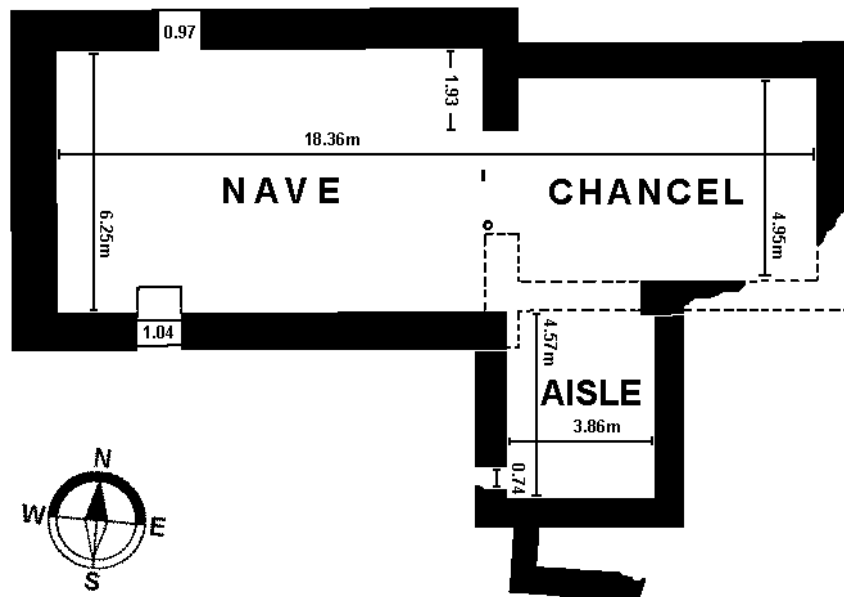
Around the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century the church was rebuilt in stone. Churches were almost the first stone buildings to be seen in Central Scotland since the departure of the Romans a thousand years earlier. That at Carriden, which is of a similar date, used stone robbed from the Roman bathhouse there. At Kinneil the foundations of the Roman Wall could have been dug up, but stone was easily won from the exposed rock outcrop in the adjacent valley. The west gable was the most substantial piece of masonry and took much of the weight of the roof. Wooden scaffolding was erected to either side of the foundation of this wall and as it was built up it helped to support the structure as the lime mortar cured. Limestone from a mile to the west would have been burnt on site to provide the mortar. Poles connecting both sides of the scaffolding together were merely built over as the wall increased in height. When finally the scaffolding was dismantled the poles were extracted and the ends of the holes blocked with small stones. Subsequently these stones have fallen out, revealing the "putlug" holes to view.

# Kinneil Kirk



**Illus 6 & 7: The surviving Church bell which was displayed at the 1911 Scottish Exhibition of National History, Art and Industry in Glasgow. It is now in Kinneil Museum.**

The west gable survives remarkably intact because it was retained as a sea mark for ships entering Bo'ness Harbour. It is surmounted by a corbelled double belfry. One of the last bells to be housed there is now on display in Kinneil Museum on loan from Bo'ness Old Parish Church (the successor of Kinneil Church). It is 0.6m in diameter and has an inscription cast in Lombardic capitals "+EN:KATERINA:VOCOR:UT:PER:ME:VIRGINIS:ALME." (Behold! I am called Katherine as by me of the Loving Virgin...). This is incomplete as the remainder would have appeared on the other bell, but it is enough to show that the church was dedicated to St Catherine.



**Illus 8: Plan of the remains of Kinneil Church.**

## Kinneil Kirk

---



**Illus 9: The remaining west gable.**

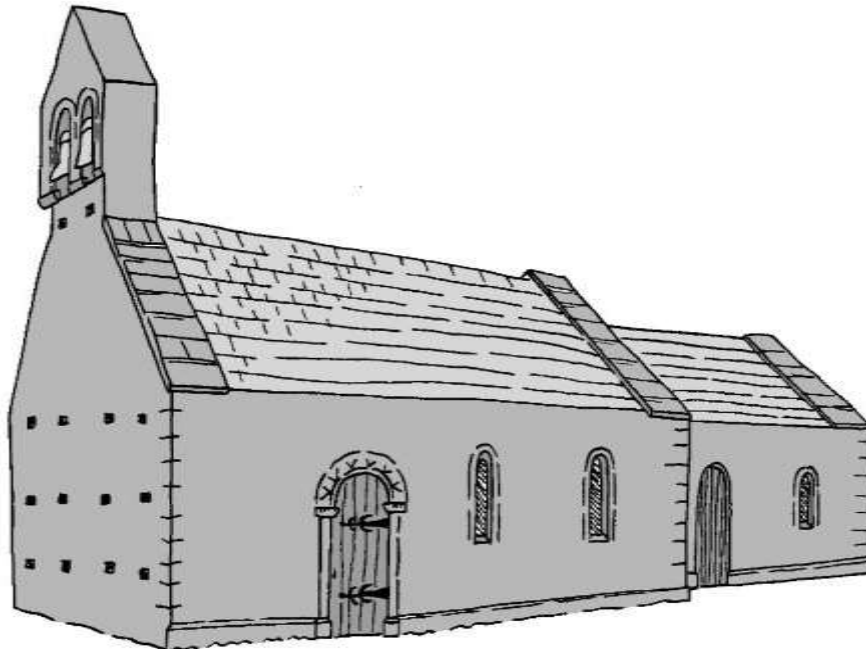
Extending eastwards from this gable was the nave of the church, which measured 10.34m long internally and 6.25m wide. Its eastern gable was pierced by a large Romanesque arch opening into

# Kinneil Kirk

---

the chancel, which extended another 7.21m beyond. The chancel was narrower than the nave, measuring only 4.95m across. It was in the chancel where the altar stood and access to this part of the church was reserved to the privileged few. A wooden screen across the archway hid it from full view. The chancel was of one build with the nave and would have been lower in height than it. The whole lay on an axis of 252 degrees.

The inside of the church would have been relatively dark lending mystery to the worship, with only small narrow lancet windows. The main door was towards the west end of the south wall and was 1.04m wide. A stone with an attached column base shows that the door surround was not plain and the chamfered plinth course running around the whole exterior highlights the quality of the masons' work. There may have been a second door in the south wall of the chancel for the priest. The roofing material of this 12<sup>th</sup> century building is not known – it was neither tile nor slate, but may have been either thatch or stone slabs.



**Illus 10: Reconstruction drawing of the church in the late 12<sup>th</sup> century.**

To the south of the church, in what is now an open field, a small community had grown up. Medieval villages were relatively small and the houses were made of timber, wattle and daub, earth and turf. A local tradition states that the main road through the village followed the line of the Antonine Wall. This would certainly be appropriate as over the centuries since its abandonment the Roman Wall had become the main arterial route across the waist of Scotland connecting Edinburgh with Glasgow. Settlements had grown up along its route at Carriden, Kinneil, Falkirk, Bonnybridge, Kirkintilloch and Cadder. With the Church Burn on the east and the Deil's Burn of the west the village was well and truly trapped between God and the Devil. At Kinneil the laird erected a fortified house on the opposite side of the Gil Burn, incorporating the natural ravine into its defences. His dwelling would have been of timber, of a better quality than his vassals, and would have included a great hall nearby. The main road veered off the line of the Wall as it approached the Gil Burn in order to skirt the

# Kinneil Kirk

---

enclosures of the big house. This meant that it crossed the valley where it was slightest and here the road could still be seen in the Meadows as a “hollow way” until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (it appears as a dark line on the aerial photograph). This juxtaposition of ecclesiastical power, secular power and agricultural muscle – represented by the church, ‘castle’ and village – was common.

It was the feudal laird of Kinneil, Herbertus, Camerarius or chamberlain to the King of Scots (an important government official) who had the stone church built. During the reign of King David, 1124–1153, many churches were erected in Scotland, forming the backbone of the parish system. New monasteries were also founded to continental orders of monks and the king’s favourite was based at Holyrood Abbey. It is therefore not surprising to find a charter made in the reign of Malcolm IV sometime between 1153 and 1165 in which Herbertus gives the church to that religious house. It reads:

“Herbertus, Chamberlain of the King of Scots, to the sons of the Catholic Church everywhere, greeting.

Be it known unto you that I have granted, and by my charter have confirmed, to the Church of the Holy Rood in Edinburgh, and to the Canons serving God there,

The Church of Kinneil, with all its dues in tithes, lands, wood and plain, pasture and meadow, in perpetual alms,

With consent and advice of my sons Stephen and William.

I wish therefore that the aforementioned Canons should possess the aforementioned Church as freely and quietly as they freely and quietly possess any other church in all Lothian...

At Kinneil.”

William, the nephew of Herbertus, was named as “clericus” or priest. A confirmation by Richard, Bishop of St Andrews, 1163-1198, mentions the tithes of mills and salt pans among the pertinents – essentially a tax on these profitable ventures in the vicinity that went to the Church. This money was meant to pay for the upkeep of the fabric of the building and the maintenance of a priest. The Abbey, as was the custom, installed a vicar at a lower salary to serve the community and pocketed the remainder. The church was in the diocese of St Andrews and the deanery of Linlithgow and around 1176 was rated at 25 merks. The vicarage was rated at 10 merks in a taxation of the diocese on 1251; at which time Falkirk was rated at 20 and Airth at 10 merks.



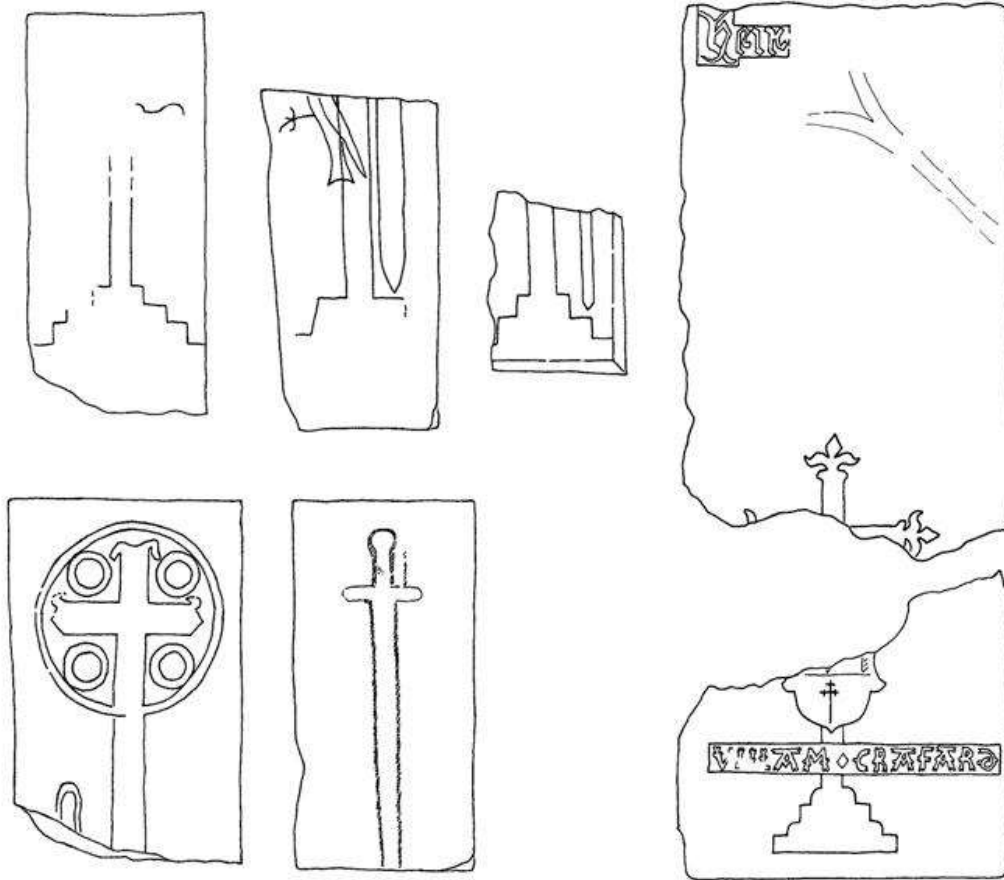
**Illus 11: Silver long cross penny of Alexander III (1280-6) found at the site of Kinneil village.**

In 1323 King Robert the Bruce granted the barony of Kinneil to “his beloved and faithful soldier, Walter Fitzgilbert.” Walter was the ancestor of the Dukes of Hamilton who owned Kinneil until 1922. Their principal seat was at Hamilton and they seem to have resided only occasionally at Kinneil. They were buried at their main possession and no elaborate tombs or burial aisles were built for them at the church in Kinneil. There is however, a rich series of 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century gravestones depicting Calvary and Wheel crosses, swords of temporal justice, and souls depicted as birds. Apart from a

single stone at Airth, also illustrating a sword, there are no other grave markers of this date in the Falkirk district.

## Kinneil Kirk

---



**Illus 12: The early gravestones, now kept in Kinneil House (except that on the top left, which was recorded in 2014).**

Kinneil church had been well endowed and throughout the 15th century clerics appealed to the Pope to be appointed to its charge. The value of the parish is stated as £20 or £40, and compares well with Falkirk at £50. In 1512 John Stirling granted £10 sterling from his lands of Easter Crackey to a chaplain for saying masses for his soul at one of the altars of Kinneil Church. The location of this side altar is not known. It may have stood to one side of the main altar in the chancel, or it is just possible that a side chapel had been erected on the south side of the chancel to hold it. This would be a common development, which, had there been a subsequent addition of a second chapel on the north side, would have produced the traditional cruciform plan.

The church was first and foremost a parish church and a glebe was attached to it for the use of the minister. The infield part was the "Vicar's Croft" that lay to the south of the village, where the modern coniferous woodland begins. The outfield lay on the moor and here the farm was known as Chapelton. By the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century the power of the abbeys had waned and in the absence of the Hamilton family the church would have been the focus of social activities in the village. Being an agricultural community the harvest festivals would have been particularly important.

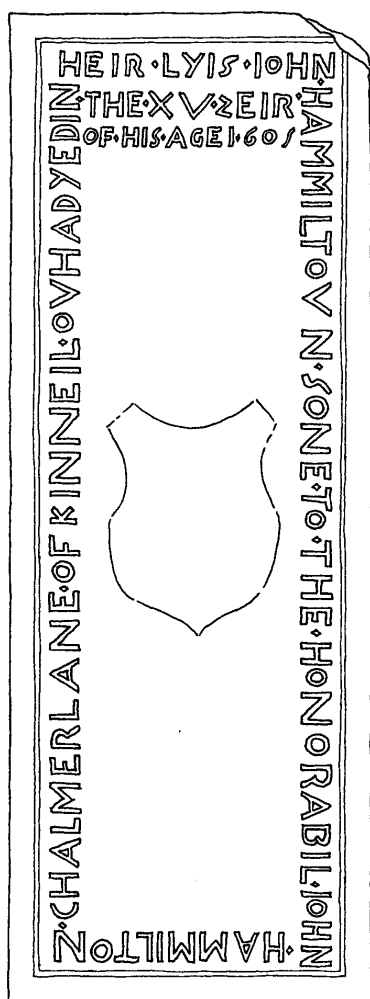
In 1588 the first post-Reformation minister was appointed. Thomas Peblis replaced William Powrie who had only been there for a year.

## Kinneil Kirk

---

### The known ministers of Kinneil Parish Church

1562	John Johnston (vicar & reader)	1567
1571	Peter Hamilton (reader)	1585
1585	William Powrie	1586
1588	Thomas Peblis	1618
1618	John Peblis	Mar 1625
1625	Richard Dickson	May 1648
Aug 1649	William Wishart	1660 imprisoned



It would have been at this time that an additional door was inserted into the north wall of the nave, almost opposite to the original one. Now too the south chapel would have been rebuilt as an aisle to take the increased number of the congregation attending divine worship. It was of two storeys, the upper reached by an external staircase on the south. This must have meant increasing the height of the old chancel and reroofing it with thin sandstone slabs. The upper floor of the aisle provided privileged access to the ceremonies and was paid for by the more prosperous tradesmen – the merchants and seamen. In 1640 John Hammiltone was paid £1 for “keeping of ye sailors loft at Kinneil.” It was probably now that the 11<sup>th</sup> century roodstone was taken down as a monument of idolatry and incorporated into the foundation of the new loft. It was not, however, used lengthwise but was placed at right angles as a sign of distaste.

**Illus 13: The gravestone of John Hamilton. It reads: HEIR LYIS JOHN HAMILTOVN SONE TO THE HONORABIL JOHN CHALMERLANE OF KINNEIL OVHA DYED IN THE XV ZEIR OF HIS AGE 1605.**

The loosening of the grip of the Catholic Church on the minds of the people led to uncertainty and extremism. Religion and superstition went hand in hand. The 17<sup>th</sup> century was replete with the trials of witches, several of which occurred at Carriden and Bo’ness. One of the earliest connections in the area concerned Janet Anderson from Stirling. In her confessions of charming (1617-21) she admitted “that ane tailyour in the Falkirk, callit Sandie Wear, came to hir with ane sark of ane

bairne of the Chalmerlane of Kinneil, and desyrit the sark mycht be charmit.” It is said that she refused to place a charm on the shirt saying that the child would be dead before he got home. This evidently was the case and contributed to the belief in her powers of prediction. Could this be the John Hamilton recorded on a gravestone of 1605 in the churchyard at Kinneil?

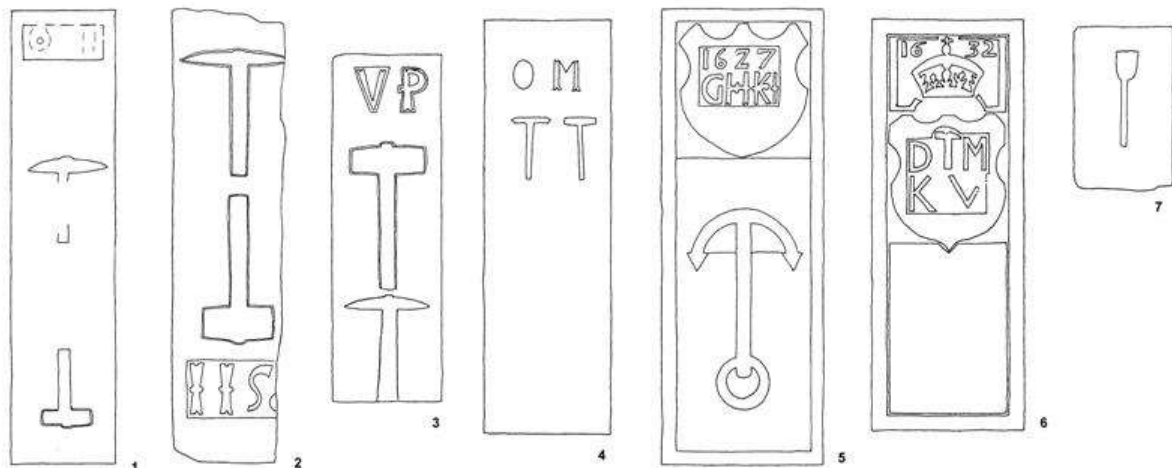
# Kinneil Kirk

---



**Illus 14: Reconstruction drawing of Kinneil Church c1650.**

It was not only the church that was undergoing reform. Society too was changing. A complex monetary economy was emerging with trade and new technology at its heart. The old creek at Kinneil was found to be inadequate as its shallow waters were reclaimed and turned into valuable land. Larger ships demanded deeper water and over the last decades of that century a small pier at a promontory or “ness” further to the east was added to and improved to become a busy port. This was, of course, the port of Borrowstounness, abbreviated in common usage to Bo’ness. Many tradesmen moved to be near this place of business – carpenters, blacksmiths, tinsmiths, sailmakers, blockmakers, rope manufacturers, stevedores, warehousemen, merchants, sailors, pilots, coal trimmers, smugglers, vintners – all had an interest in the sea. Their presence in turn attracted people in service related trades such as bakers, butchers, brewers, cobblers, tailors and so on.



**Illus 15: Early 17<sup>th</sup> century gravestones at Kinneil. 1-4 colliers; 5 is a skipper; 6 coppersmith; 7 maltster or salter.**

By the 1630s this new community was a bustling centre of activity and its inhabitants sought to bring more order to life there. In 1634 the Bo’ness Sea Box Society was formed as a mutual insurance scheme providing grants to the bereaved families of sailors, sickness benefit and pensions to its members. In 1638 another major step came when a church was built on the main coastal road at the southern end of the new town. The inhabitants of Bo’ness erected it at their own expense, having first

## Kinneil Kirk

---

consulted with the presbytery. The building was long and narrow, with a single storey - "man height" - the windows were arched. The mason received 1200 merks of the total cost of £2,750. Much of this money was provided by the Sea Box Society who had a loft and stair leading thereto for the accommodation of the "skipperis and marineris". As these people paid their tithes towards the salary of the minister of Kinneil parish, Richard Dickson, did service in both churches.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century was a tumultuous time for the church in Scotland with the promoters of Presbyterianism and episcopacy gaining influence turn-about. Resistance was strong on all sides and the Covenanters reflected the stubborn nature of the conflict as people were driven to seek freedom of worship. Descent and schisms were everywhere. Richard Dickson was imprisoned in Dumbarton Castle for his beliefs at the time of his appointment to Kinneil by Duchess Anna Hamilton in 1625. The king gave permission for his release and the Bishop of St Andrews directed him "not to exercise his gifts elsewhere than at the Kirk of Kinneil." Bo'ness was in the parish and was allowed.



**Illus 16: The communion cups for Kinneil. One of them is inscribed "This cup pertaineth to the Church of Kinneil 1660." Both have an Edinburgh hallmark, the initials of Edward Cleghorne, their maker, and the deacon's punch mark of Andro Burrel.**

Dickson died in 1648 at the age of 72. The townsfolk of Bo'ness had over the previous ten years raised a fund to pay for a minister of their own. In November 1648 John Waughe was ordained to the charge of the church at

Bo'ness and the following year a supplication was made to the Scottish Parliament "to have the Kirk of Borrowstounness made a kirk by itself, and that the same be divided from ye kirk of Kinneil." This was granted and a small parish was allocated to the new church. On 22 August 1649 William Wishart was inducted as minister of the now separate church at Kinneil.

1649 was also the year in which the English Civil War came to an end and Charles I was executed. The Scottish Parliament promptly proclaimed Charles II as king – but only after he had signed the National Covenant – and the following year Cromwell invaded Scotland and routed the Covenanting army at Dunbar. Division now arose in the Church of Scotland and the ministers of Kinneil and Bo'ness found themselves on opposing sides. John Waughe supported the exiled king and in 1654 was temporarily imprisoned for naming Charles II in his prayers. William Wishart joined a dissenting presbytery, recognising God and not Parliament as the ultimate authority. With the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 episcopacy was returned and covenanting ministers like Wishart found themselves outside of the law. On 18 September 1660 he was arrested on the order of the Committee of Estates. For over a year Kinneil church was without a practising minister and it seems that roles were reversed with the minister of Bo'ness often officiating there. It was December 1661 before Wishart was released, but it was clear to the Presbytery that he would not be able to return to his ministry. It was arranged for Rev John Moubray, minister of Strathbrock Church near Uphall, to preach at the vacant church. However feelings were high and as he approached Kinneil Church on horseback a group of 25 women surrounded his horse and prevented his further progress. The women of this district can be pretty fierce and in the ensuing fracas the bridle of his horse was broken. Five of the women were subsequently fined and one of them was made to stand for two days in the joughs – an iron collar or handcuff attached by a short chain to the door of the church.

## Kinneil Kirk

---

That same year the Privy Council heard a complaint from William Crauford, portioner of Kinneil, that nine local men and a woman had “entered the said kirk in a violent and tumultuarie maner under silence and cloud of night, being armed with swords, staffs, axes, and such lyke weapons, resolving to have the lyfe of any person that should offer to resist them, and most violentlie and unwarrantable with axes and other instruments of purpose prepared, destroyed and cutted the said dask all in pieces.” The “dask” in question was the long-held family seat of William Crawford (whose ancestor of the same name appears on one of the early gravestones). This was not just criminal damage but a deliberate act of desecration. In their absence the Lords of the Privy Council ordered them to be “put to the horn and escheated” (declared outlaws and their goods confiscated).

Both of these incidents reflect the fractured nature of society brought about by the imposition of church theology and the resulting breakdown in law and order. Wishart left the established church and was joined by many of his previous congregation in open-air field assemblies called conventicles. In doing so he was risking everything, for to preach in the open could incur the penalty of death as well as the confiscation of property. On 1 November 1662 he and over 400 fellow ministers were banished from their churches and manses.

Seven years later, In December 1669, Duke William and Duchess Anne of Hamilton obtained an Act of the Scots Parliament suppressing the kirk and parish of Kinneil and declaring the kirk of the seaport to be the kirk of the united parish to be known as Borrowstounness. The old stipend of Kinneil was appropriated to the minster of the united parish. A manse and glebe were to be provided by the Duke and Duchess at the new town and the old kirk, manse and glebe were incorporated into the policies of Kinneil House. That no communion tokens are known to have been issued by Kinneil Church suggests that the Holy Sacrament had not been conducted there for some time.

A local tradition states that the minister preached a farewell sermon. Laying his hands on the Bible he said, “The proud mansion on the other side of the burn will bow three times to the old church before it is all down.” He added that the first man who tried to demolish the church would not die a natural death. This sounds like the belligerent overtones of William Wishart.

The suppression of the church at Kinneil was one of the last acts in the removal of the village that had stood there from at least the medieval period. Most of its population had moved to Bo’ness, encouraged by the Dukes. This provided the Hamilton family with an opportunity to landscape the grounds of the House or Palace of Kinneil, enhancing its visual amenity and privacy. It was 1691 before the last of the village buildings was finally cleared away and the Meadows created, bounded to the south by a ha-ha. The ‘policy’ became a ‘pleasure ground’ with a “gallop” for the Duke to exercise his horses and a summerhouse providing extensive views along the Forth.

Probably mindful of the minster’s curse the church building was retained, perhaps used as a private chapel. The reuse of gravestones to pave the floor suggests that it was now that this occurred. It still had seats in it in November 1745. In that month a troop of government dragoons posted at Kinneil used the Meadows to pasture their horses, several of which were stolen by local people. In an effort to keep warm the dragoons broke up some of the pews and burnt them. The fire got out of control and in the ensuing conflagration the church was destroyed. Evidence of this fire can still be seen on the inside of the west gable where the stone has turned pink with the intense heat.

Despite the union the inhabitants of the old Barony of Kinneil and those of the new town remained distinct. Plots in the burial ground at the church in Bo’ness had already been allocated and so the Kinneil people were designated new ground to the south up a rather steep hill. They also had their own wooden collecting ladle. Money placed in that ladle served to maintain the poor of the barony and not the town.

## Kinneil Kirk

---



**Illus 17: Wooden collection ladle inscribed “KL” used in Bo’ness Church for the people of Kinneil. Money was placed in the open end and then the collector tipped the ladle up so that it slid into the covered box meaning that no one knew how much each person had contributed.**

An effort to demolish the walls of the church apparently resulted in the death of the man employed when he was hit by falling masonry. The curse, reputedly, had come true. However, the west gable was left standing. It acted as a sea mark for ships on the Forth. It acted as a folly or picturesque ruin and thus became a feature of the designed landscape. It acted as a link between the Dukes of Hamilton and their heritage. It also acted to counter the second part of the prophecy and the House is still there to be visited!

The church fell into decay and was covered in rank vegetation when, around 1895, the Duke of Hamilton had it partially cleared. In 1898 the minister of Bo’ness received permission from the Hamilton family to conduct divine service in the ruins of the old church. This was repeated periodically and when, in 1923, Bo’ness Town Council acquired the estate it became an annual event. In 1951 the Falkirk Archaeological Society, led by the curator of Falkirk Museum, Doreen Hunter, excavated the site and the Council put it on display as a tourist attraction. Natural decay and vandalism in the following decades took its toll and in 2014 work by Falkirk Museum as part of the Inner Forth Landscape Initiative brought it back to life so that it could once again take its place in the community.



**Illus 18: Volunteers recording reused gravestones in the floor of the church in 2014 as part of the Inner Forth landscape Initiative.**