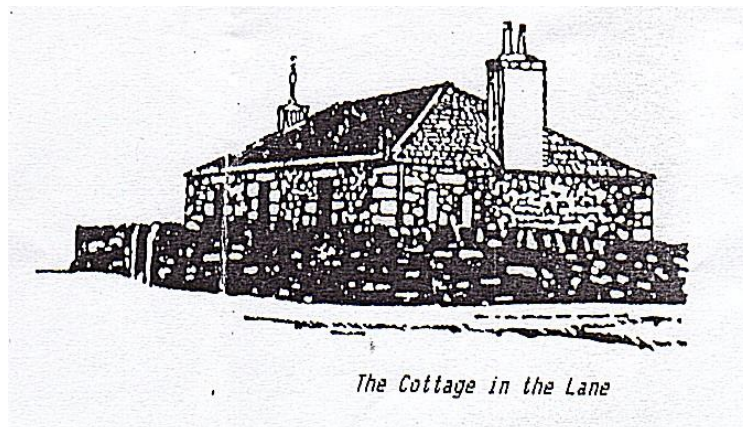




A Brief history
of
Ruthrieston West
Church of Scotland
Broomhill Road, Aberdeen

Researched & compiled by Bill Currie



RUTHRIESTON WEST PARISH CHURCH

It is difficult to imagine today that just off busy South Anderson Drive on a slight rise of ground between Ruthrieston Road and Ruthrieston Circle there once stood a stronghold of the first Earl of Mar. This "motte and bailey" - a structure of earth and timber - was one of several residences of RUADRI the powerful Mormaer of Mar, who held sway over the lands between the Dee and Don. There is mention in the "Book of Deer" (circa 1131-32) of a charter drawn up in Aberdeen of lands gifted to the Church of St. Drostan, two of the witnesses being Noctan, Bishop of Aberdeen, and Ruadri, but whether those were the lands now known as Ruthrieston is uncertain, but what is certain is that during the time of Robert the Bruce (1309) one of the missing charters was that of Ruthrieston.

Doubtless round the "motte and bailey" scrambled the low-walled, heather-thatched dwellings of the peasantry, the small community in time coming to be known as Ruadri's toun, then Ruddrieston and now Ruthrieston. Their living must have been a scant one, depending mostly on the fishings of the Dee, because the land to the north was totally un-arable, being known up until about 200 years ago as the "Foul Moor" stony, boggy land where nothing grew but "furz and broom and hodder".

With the completion of the Bridge of Dee in 1527 the only road to the south passed through Ruthrieston and gradually along its way small cot-towns appeared. Margaret Place, onetime home of the lax fishers, might well be the remnant of one of these; also Pitmuxton, now called Pitstruan, nothing of which remains save the plaque on Pitstruan Recreation Ground marking the site of the castellated mansion demolished in 1903.

In course of time the "Foul Moor" gradually became enclosed for cultivation and parts were feued for building - Broomhill, Forbesfield, Ashley and Thorngrove, the latter property being once owned by a Mr. Jackson who ran the first motor car in Aberdeen and whose house was the first to be lit by the "new electric". When Holburn Street was opened in 1811, less pretentious dwellings appeared and it is interesting to note that there are still cottages in the area well over 100 years old.

It was to one of these, 'Walnut Cottage', that there came to reside in 1854 the Rev. Mungo Fairly Parker. So distressed was he, however, by the godlessness which prevailed, especially among the young, that he considered it his duty to meet the wants of the district, there being no Church between Banchory-Devenick and Holburn Junction. He accordingly approached several families in the neighbourhood for support in setting up a Sunday Evening School and in this venture he was successful in renting a room for the purpose in a building long since demolished. The furniture was meagre in the extreme, lighting being provided by ld. candles fixed in wall brackets and two single ones on the plain deal table, which acted as a book board. In order to raise funds for the continuance of this work Mr Parker decided to preach a sermon periodically, but so impressed were the increasing numbers of those who came to hear that it became obvious additional accommodation would be required. In this respect he was also fortunate, being able to rent a small cottage in the lane leading from the Bridge of Dee road to Ruthrieston railway station.

Of the many changes which have occurred over the years in the Church of Ruthrieston West, none can be more significant than the disappearance of the small cottage

Although our Church actually had its beginning in a house situated in the Hardgate near the Fords of Dee - and itself long since demolished - it was the small cottage which gave it some degree of permanence though at that time it was no more than a mission station.

It was due to the successful preaching of the Rev. Mungo Fairly Parker, one of many ministers who came out at the Disruption in 1843 and who came to live in Ruthrieston, that the accommodation was deemed insufficient for the purpose and endeavours were made to obtain something more commodious.

At this time the small cottage referred to became vacant, and through the efforts of David McHardy of Cranford and several others this was obtained for a nominal rent. When the partition walls were removed it was capable of seating 140.

Lighting at first was provided by candles in a suspender with four arms hung from the ceiling and when the door opened during a north-easterly wind the grease was not infrequently blown on to the heads of those beneath. Mr Parker hung his hat on a nail behind the pulpit which was about 18 inches high, and his service invariably opened with the Psalm "How lovely is thy dwelling-place". In those days the congregation stood for prayers and sat for singing, and it is said that Mr Parker never used a hymn or a paraphrase. He was a loyal subject. Every Sabbath a special invocation was made 'for our good and gracious Sovereign Lady, Queen Victoria, Queen of Great Britain and Ireland and the colonies thereto belonging'. Many were the occasions on a summer evening when hearers sat on the wall outside to listen to his sermons which were so full of lucid thought. Needless to say it was not unknown for some of those inside to be overcome by the heat, requiring them to be brought forward to rest their heads on the book board. More than one, however, dropped off to sleep and had to be prodded into wakefulness when the snoring became too loud. It is recorded that one August evening as the light began to fade, Mr Parker announced the Psalm at the end of the service and indicated to the Precentor to read the lines that the congregation might more easily follow. Rising from his seat on the coal-box at the right-hand side of the pulpit the latter was heard to complain that he had difficulty in seeing, whereupon Mr Parker called on Walter the beadle to light a candle as Mr Catto was incapable of seeing. The highly offended Precentor retorted rather loudly "Ah'm nae incapable, ah jist canna see".

The little building was put to other uses; for about the year 1857 a day school was formed, the cost of which was borne entirely by Mr Parker. This was the forerunner of Ruthrieston Public School and later Broomhill School. Ruthrieston South Church also used the building for worship before the building of the 'Iron Kirkie' in Holburn Street, and up until a few years ago it was a private dwelling.

Now it is gone. There is no-one left who can recall it as a place of worship and the last tangible link of our Church with its beginning is severed.

Happily the Spirit lives on to remind us that no matter when and where we meet for devotions we can open our hearts in praise "How lovely is thy dwelling-place".

In 1858, on a plot of ground north of the Mission Station, for that is what it really was, a lath-and-plaster building was erected to seat 300 and served admirably for close on 18 years. During this time, however, Mr Parker died, probably from a heart attack as a result of having trudged through deep snow to Banchory-Devenick to officiate at the burial of one of his hearers. He himself was buried in Nellfield Cemetery on April 3rd, 1867. From that time onwards the future of the Mission Station was uncertain, but so determined were the residents of the district for its continuance that they sought the support of people like Principal Lumsden of the Free Church College and in whom they found a worthy champion. It was his influence in the Presbytery which resulted in an interim Session being appointed in December 1868 and the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper being dispensed in April of the following year. The Assembly in 1871 having sanctioned the Congregation as a settled charge enabled them to call on the Rev. Robert Semple, then assisting at East Kilbride, to preach at Ruthrieston, after which he was unanimously adopted as their Minister and he was inducted in 1872.

By this time the nature of the lath-and-plaster building was unable to withstand further the rigours of the elements and extensive repairs were deemed necessary. Having obtained some degree of spiritual security it was decided to build a new Church on a piece of ground overlooking the railway station. This was duly opened in 1876 by Dr Walter Smith, when the collection for that day and the Sunday following was £245.

That Mr Semple's ministry was a long and happy one there can be no doubt. In this he was

ably assisted by people like Alex Forbes, Headmaster of Ruthrieston School, and Baillie McHardy of Cranford whose father assisted Mr Parker in establishing the Mission Station. Baillie McHardy gave generously both of his time and talents. He was Sunday School Superintendent for 40 years; kept the Praise Class flourishing for 20 years and in turn was Congregational Treasurer and Session Clerk. The grounds of Cranford were often given over to garden parties for the young because he was, as he himself once put it “always mindful of the little ones of the congregation”.

Towards the end of the century a new and bigger Church was planned to accommodate the rapidly increasing population of the district, the foundation stone for this being laid on Saturday, 16th June 1900. It is interesting to note that a cavity in this contains the names of the Minister, Office bearers, Sunday School teachers, members of the congregation, newspapers and photographs of the day. The opening ceremony took place on Wednesday, 4th September 1901. With the passing of the original members over to the majority and the First World War, we now enter the living memory of some of our congregation.

That the Church is the spiritual centre of a community is amply proved by the very existence of Ruthrieston West, the Church which had its beginning in that small candle-lit room. What better testimony to this fact can be given than the quotation from David McHardy's notes when he wrote in 1888; “I cannot close without stating my firm faith in the future of the Church, that He who hath led us till now and helped us in our many difficulties will never leave us if we still be constant to Him”.

There seems to be little reason to doubt these words.

MINISTERS OF RUTHRIESTON WEST CHURCH

Rev. Robert Semple	-	1872-1918
Rev. A.D. Taylor	-	1918-1944
Rev. James Napier	-	1944-1962
Rev. Henry Shepherd	-	1962-1972
Rev. W. Crawford Anderson	-	1972-1980
Rev, James L.K. Wood	-	1981-1995
Rev. Sean Swindells	-	1996-2007
Rev. Dr. Benjamin D.W. Byun	-	2008-