

Article 8: The story of the Lumphanan Font

by Ann Raeburn

This is the story of a very large granite rock, weighing about 15cwt (760 kilos), beautifully shaped like a bowl. It has a strong connection with Lumphanan parish; you might say it is a Lumphanan heirloom! Read of its travels and its next destination. This is our font's story.



Perhaps it dated back to the time of St Finan himself, a monk from Ireland who trained at Iona. As he converted communities, including Lumphanan's, he would have held baptisms outdoors. If so, the font could date from approximately 640AD. Missionary monks usually travelled in pairs, building small mud and wattle huts as our first churches, no spire, fixed seats or stained glass windows. St Finan later became the Bishop of Lindisfarne on the Northumberland coast.

In 1793 the font was mentioned in the Statistical Account for Lumphanan written by local minister, The Rev. William Shand. He described this antiquity sitting somewhere in the manse garden - Why? Might it have suffered from 'out with the old, in with the new' syndrome, when old fonts were thrown out in favour of a smart new style in the 18th and 19th centuries?

The Victorians were certainly guilty of such vandalism; many ancient fonts ending up as water troughs on farms throughout the country. One beautiful Norman font was turned upside down to become a mounting block!

In 1820 The Rev William Shand's daughter, Margaret, married Harry Lamond of Pitmurchie, just west of Torphins. Did Margaret wish to take some memento from home? It was decided that the font would join her. That would certainly have needed some heavy weightlifting men and a horse and cart to carry it to Pitmurchie.

Many years later, The Rev William, his daughter Margaret and son-in-law Harry would be buried by the old St Finan's Church. Visit the graveyard to see their flat gravestone just outside the church door.



Enter into our story The Rev. Francie Donald, much loved minister of Lumphanan from 1913 -1954. Francie was told about the ancient font which once had sat at his church. He became keen to return it to its rightful place. Sadly, Francie Donald had no idea of the whereabouts of the font; it had long since disappeared from Pitmurchie. One evening Francie discussed the matter with farmer John Forbes of Auchlossan as they sat by the fireside 'newsing'. John Forbes enjoyed a challenge. He vowed that "If the font was to be found, he would find it!"

After several false trails John came upon a splendid round watering trough at Stranduff farm on Kincardine O'Neil estate. He had found the font!



Negotiations began with the owner of Kincardine estate, Mrs Mary Pickering. All was stalled by Mrs Pickering's sudden death. However, her daughter and heir (Mrs Bradford, grandmother of the present laird Edward Bradford), kindly returned the font to St Finan's. Horse, cart and strong men required once again!

When St Finan's Church amalgamated with the Stothert Memorial Church, Francie Donald had the font moved to sit outside the Stothert. The last service to be held in St Finan's was in 1980.

Our ancient font has baptised generations of Lumphanan parish folk. It has served time watering nowt (cattle). It will now move again this time to the centre of Lumphanan village. The Stothert Church is being sold.

The font is another player in the story of Lumphanan and its part in the history of Scotland, stretching back to an Irish Missionary who became a Saint and a Bishop.



Footnotes:

Statistical Accounts of 1793 and 1845. All church ministers throughout Scotland were given the task of writing an account of their parish. Such men represented the most reliable sources of credible local knowledge. The descriptions they wrote were snapshots of the antiquities, geology and climate of their areas. They recorded the life of the parish inhabitants, housing, the manner of farming and a rollcall of birds and wildlife. Statistical Accounts are an excellent source of social history of the time, free to read or download online. <https://stataccscot.ed.ac.uk/static/statacc/dist/parish/Aberdeen/Lumphanan>

John Forbes of Auchlossan: John's younger son, Ian, became a Detective Superintendent in the Metropolitan Police, solving many crimes, including the horrific Cannock Chase murders in 1968. Ian was eventually appointed Commander of the Met. "Quite a chip from the Old Block, his father" said Rev Francie Donald.

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