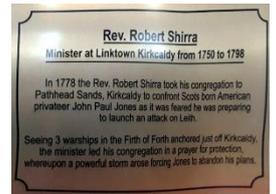


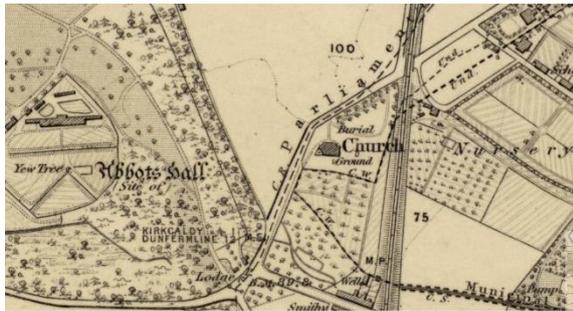


## The Story of the Reverend Robert Shirra



Robert Shirra and his “close encounter” with John Paul Jones is the stuff of legend with the tale being known far beyond Kirkcaldy’s boundaries. Shirra was a significant figure in the town during his close to fifty year ministry and deserves attention to more than just his famous prayer.

To understand the reasons why he came to minister in Kirkcaldy we have to journey back almost three hundred



years. The year 1737 is a good starting point as the secession of that year from Abbotshall Church is fundamental to our story.

Kirkcaldy at the time had a population which was close to three thousand. The town had not as yet been bolstered by incorporating Gallatown, Sinclairtown, Linktown and Pathhead into its boundaries. This only came to pass in 1876.

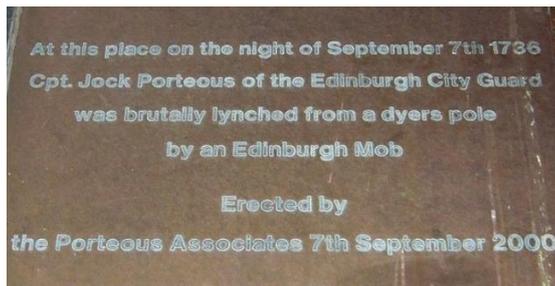
Linen weaving was the main employment and, due to restrictions placed on Scottish trade at the time of the Union with England, the harbour was in decline. The previous year (1736) had seen the Porteous Riots in Edinburgh. An excise man had been attacked and robbed near Pittenween. Taxation had been increased at the time of the Union which made excise men extremely unpopular. Many therefore

sympathised with the three men who were arrested – Andrew Wilson, William Hall and George Robertson. They were tried, convicted and sentenced to death. Hall had his sentence commuted to transportation, but the other two were to hang in the Grassmarket in Edinburgh. On the Sunday before the hanging the condemned men were taken to St Giles Cathedral to pray.

Wilson, who was exceptionally strong, attacked the “sodgers – gripping two in his haunds and ain in his teeth”. Robertson escaped, being helped by the crowd, and made his way to the Netherlands. Wilson was hanged on the 14<sup>th</sup> April but not before the watching mob became very agitated. The Captain of the Guard (John Porteous) had his men fire volleys in the air but they managed to hit people in the surrounding tenement windows. This outraged the mob and Porteous then ordered his men to fire into the crowd. Six people were killed. Porteous was arrested, pardoned and arrested again. He was being held in the Tollbooth when a mob overpowered the guards. Porteous was lynched from a “dyer’s pole” being beaten and strung up three times before he died. There was naturally very little public sympathy for his demise.

John Porteous, Captain of the City Guard of Edinburgh, over-reacted to riots causing death of 6 rioters. Arrested for murder and found guilty, he was eventually dragged from his cell and lynched by the mob, dying just before midnight on 7 September 1736.





There is a memorial plate in Edinburgh's Grassmarket where Porteous died. As an unconnected and irrelevant aside, the good captain did not enjoy much luck

when his name came before the public. Not only was he hanged, but 12 years earlier he had been involved in the first golf match to be reported in a newspaper. The contest was between two early exponents of the game – John Porteous and the Honourable Alexander Elphinstone. The match attracted much interest and a large crowd attended which included both the Duke of Hamilton and the Earl of Morton. Both players were said to have exhibited great skill, but it was Elphinstone who carried off the 20 guinea prize – worth around £2500 today.

The Porteous episode created unrest in the Capital and also in the Kirkcaldy area as Wilson was a Pathhead man. His body



had been returned over the Forth and buried in Pathhead Feuer's Graveyard, which had been a gift in 1684 by John Watson of Path

House. A memorial marks the grave and the inscription reads - "Erected by public subscription to mark the grave of Andrew Wilson whose name associated with the genius of Sir W Scott and the Porteous Mob has obtained a distinguished place in

the Scottish story. He was a native of this town and was executed at Edinburgh 1736". The Scott connection comes from Sir Walter's novel, "The Heart of Midlothian," where he used the Porteous Riots as the backdrop.

Allied to this, the Jacobite cause was still active and we are only a short number of years away from the second Jacobite rising culminating at Culloden. Indeed Rob Roy McGregor himself had only died in 1734. Kirkcaldy people, who were either at the beginning or moving towards the end of their careers, included William Adam together with his three sons - Robert, James and John. Adam Smith was a schoolboy at this time and had not yet met David Hume, the towering genius of the Scottish Enlightenment.

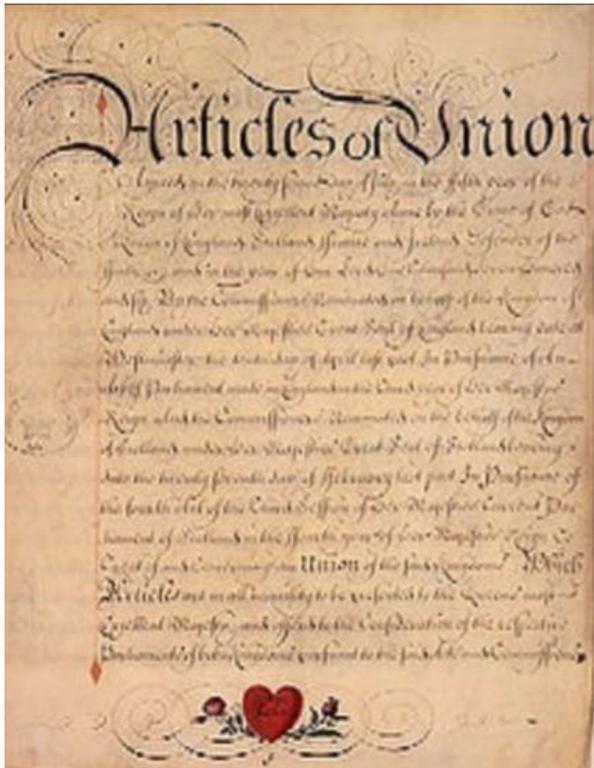


George II was on the throne and in 1743 became the last British Monarch to lead his troops into battle. He is also the last sovereign to be born outside of the United Kingdom.

So, these were turbulent times in Scotland and that depiction can also be applied to her churches. The Scottish Reformation had been followed by almost a century of alternation between an Episcopalian and a Presbyterian National Church.

The Episcopal Church was led by bishops who were each in charge of a diocese (a group of churches in a geographical

area). Decision making was in the hands of these bishops and, by definition, was quite remote from the congregations. The Presbyterian Church however had its decision making in the hands of its General Assembly. Therefore, representatives of each parish were in theory part of the



decision making structure. Following the “glorious revolution” of 1688-89 the battle for supremacy was won by the Presbyterians.

Becoming the dominant force did not stop arguments within the National Church. A major bone of contention was patronage which, although abolished by the *Act of Union* in 1707, had been restored in 1711. Fully covered in *Object*

17, the basic situation was that congregations had no “Right of Call” in the selection of their ministers. Instead, the Crown or local patrons of each church could appoint a minister irrespective of the congregation’s wishes. The purpose and thrust behind the passing of this Act was to allow nobles and other patrons to, once again, reclaim control over the Church of Scotland’s parish churches. After the execution of Charles I in 1649 congregations had been able to choose their own ministers. However, after the restoration of Charles II, an act of 1662 restored patronage.

In addition to that, all ministers appointed since 1649 had to secure a patron. Around 25% of the clergy refused to do so and were then deprived of their living. It was these ministers who went on to form the backbone of the Covenanter movement. The 'Glorious Revolution' had once again seen patronage abolished, only for it to be resurrected in 1712.

Thus not only had congregations lost their 'Right to Call' but the crown. Instead, if the patron of a church neglected or declined to present a minister to fill a vacancy within six months the decision fell to a mixture of local landowners and elders. The wishes of the congregation therefore, once again, being of no importance or relevance. This led to impassioned protests by many congregations and their ministers. The strength of feeling is perhaps best summed up by these words:-

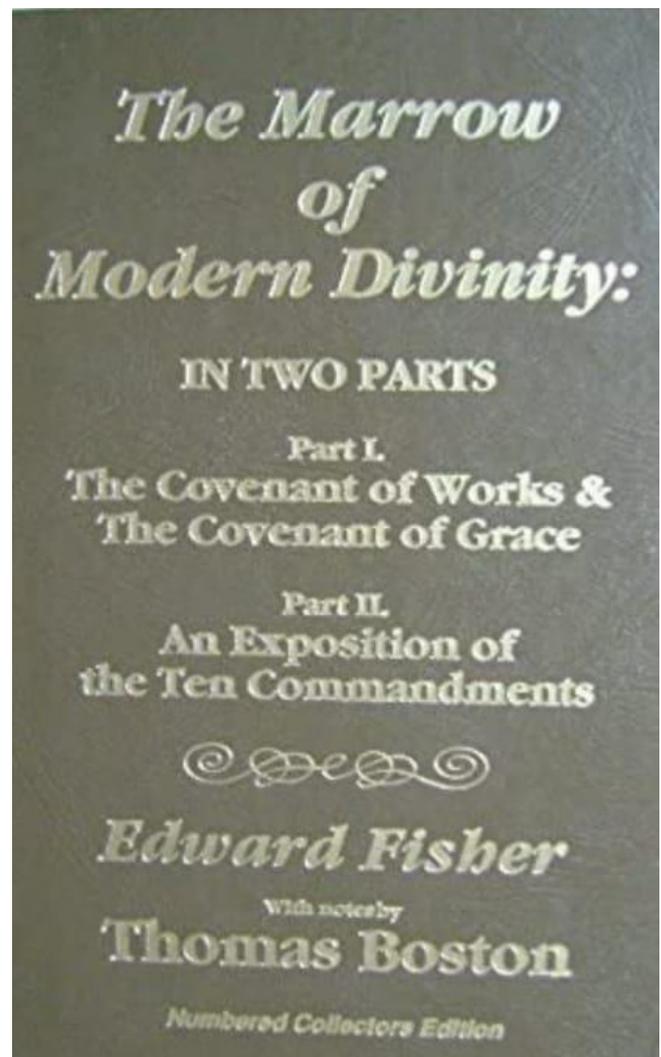
*I can find no warrant from the word of God to confer the spiritual privileges of his House upon the rich beyond the poor; whereas by this Act the man with the gold ring and gay clothing is preferred unto the man with the vile raiment and poor attire. (Ebenezer Erskine).*

The Church of Scotland felt aggrieved by the restoration and annually protested that it was against the terms of the Treaty of the Union. Although congregations could object to the choice, it could only be on the grounds of suitability and not acceptability. Attempts were made to tighten up on the experience and qualifications a minister required in an

attempt to ensure only suitable candidates were proposed. Patrons learned not to promote those whose suitability could be questioned, but the Church itself had another dimension to contend with. This was the fact that, if they rejected a patron's candidate, they could be held liable for damages – a possibility which had to be taken into consideration when arriving at a decision.

This unrest was 'cranked up a notch' by a 1645 document which had first seen the light of day in England. This was the "Marrow of Modern Divinity" with the work being credited to one Edward Fisher. It appears that very little is known about the author but what had been an obscure publication came into the hands of a Church of Scotland Minister – the Rev. Thomas Boston in the early 1700s. He was so impressed by the content and arguments that

he brought it to the attention of other ministers and as a result it was re-published in 1719. Without wishing to get into the realm of theological debate, the book was based on a dialogue between a '*nomian*' – who believes Christianity is



a set of rules which must be obeyed and an '*antinomian*' – the belief here being that it is in order to sin, as God will forgive.

These two standpoints were well apart with *nomian* (lawful) being almost a performance based approach to salvation. Do certain things, avoid others and you will gain favour with God as a good Christian.

*Antinomian* can be described as 'against the law' and, as mentioned above, was much more liberal and permissive. Salvation was always at hand, irrespective of past behavior.

The *Marrow* seemingly offered a gospel which could dilute these extreme viewpoints into a middle road. Boston and his followers preached and believed in its message. Boston in time became the most frequently published author of the



**Thomas Boston**

18<sup>th</sup> century, however, the *Marrow* was set on a collision course with the *nomian* faction in the General Assembly.

Its doctrine was vehemently opposed by the majority in the General Assembly, led by James Haddow, the Professor of Divinity and Principal of St. Mary's College at the University of St. Andrews. His stance was that sinning was unacceptable in any

shape or form, with the sovereignty of God and the authority

of the scriptures being a fundamental requirement of the church's adherents. In simple terms, the 'Marrow' was denounced as being *antinomian* and those who held to the doctrines of the '*Marrow*' were presumed unsound.

An appeal in support of the Marrow was lodged by twelve ministers including - Thomas Boston, Ralph Erskine and his brother Ebenezer (more on the latter two follows). The Assembly rejected the appeal and determined that no minister should recommend the book, and congregations be instructed against reading it.

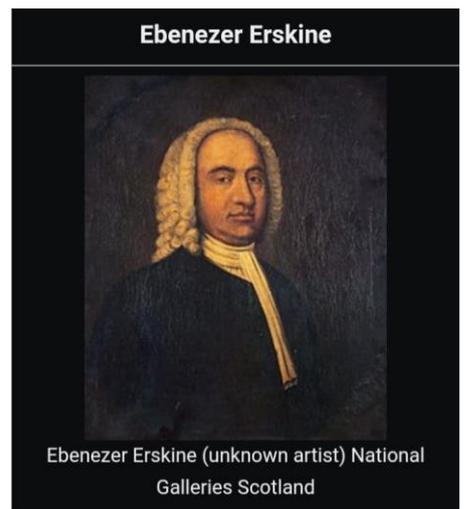
Naturally, that proclamation had the opposite effect. The twelve ministers were rebuked and it was decreed that anyone holding to the principles of the Marrow should be prevented from holding influential positions in the Church. The testing ground came in the shape of Kirkcaldy Parish Church.

Henry Dall, the minister of Kirkcaldy Parish Church, died in early 1728 after a 17 year ministry. Ebenezer Erskine, then minister at Portmoak (Kinross-shire), was selected by the congregation as his successor. The Assembly intervened and decreed that one holding, what they considered, unsound views could not be appointed to such an important charge. Instead, John Drysdale was appointed as successor but his ministry lasted only two months. Alexander Adam was then installed to the charge which he held until 1741. The result of the failure to secure the minister of their choice led to

many of the congregation forming themselves into Praying Societies outwith the regular Church Services.

Then, in 1732, fuel was added to the fire in the shape of an act being passed by the General Assembly, despite the disapproval of a large number of presbyteries. The Act decreed that heritors and elders could only nominate a minister for a vacancy if the church's patron had not made a nomination within 6 months of the vacancy occurring. Ebenezer Erskine, now parish minister of Stirling and Moderator of the Synod there, immediately asked that his dissent be recorded. To his absolute consternation he discovered that the ability to record dissent had been removed in 1730!

Later that same year, Ebenezer Erskine preached before the Synod of Perth and also criticised the restoration of the Patronage Act along with the passing of the recent Act as unconstitutional and unscriptural. Being rebuked by the Synod, and asked to recant, he appealed to the General Assembly.



To his chagrin, the Assembly suspended him and three other supporters - William Wilson, Alexander Moncrieff and James Fisher (Erskine's

son-in-law). In the December of that year, at a meeting at Gairneybridge near Kinross on the 6<sup>th</sup> December 1733, they constituted themselves into a new presbytery being joined by another four ministers including Ralph Erskine.

Gairneybridge was therefore important in that it was in a public house there that the first presbytery of the Secession Church was formed. William Wilson was appointed as Professor of Divinity. The



Secession Monument - Gairneybridge

meeting took place at this particular location, as earlier, protesters at nearby Kinross Church, had tried to bar the doors when a minister not to their liking was forced on them by the Church's governing body. It required soldiers to force the church doors open and allow the minister to enter.

Despite the General Assembly lifting the suspensions the following year – they were too late – the Secession Movement was underway and by 1745 the movement had grown to 45 congregations.

In 1883 an obelisk was placed on the Gairneybridge site in recognition of the 150th anniversary of the founding of the movement. The new Associate Presbytery was underway and despite all the difficulties it faced with disputes among factions such as over burghers, anti-burghers, auld lights and new lights, it prospered until 1847 when it amalgamated into

the *United Presbyterian Church*. It was able to contribute 384 of the 497 congregations at the time of the amalgamation.

## The Secession in Kirkcaldy

In many ways, in both Kirkcaldy and Scotland, the secession was a slow burner. This was in no small measure due to the huge difficulties the leaders faced in organising the movement throughout the country. However, the Praying Societies mentioned above were already a group sympathetic to the new movement. Therefore, we had those in the Praying Societies from 1728 now augmented by the 1733 secession. The next step on the 'Road to Shirra' came four years later.

In 1737, the Rev. Thomas Nairne, who had been minister of Abbotshall since 1710, took the step of intimating that he, his session and a significant part of his congregation, were leaving Abbotshall and would be adhering to the Associate Presbytery. Nairne had been sympathetic to Erskine's difficulties and this decision was perhaps not a major shock.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> October of that year his congregation was received into the new church. So, the position was that Kirkcaldy now had two groups of seceders – one from Abbotshall and the other from Kirkcaldy Parish Church. It was obvious that the solution and way forward had to be an amalgamation but this took a few years to pass before

becoming a reality. Although the Reverend Nairne had initially retained possession of his church and manse a new church had started to be built in 1740. This was just as well as in 1742 Mr. Nairne had the doors of his church and manse locked against him.

The new church was built on ground where the parishes of Kirkcaldy and Abbotshall meet – hence the choice of name.



The ground was described as a field with the building in the centre. This places the Church (known as

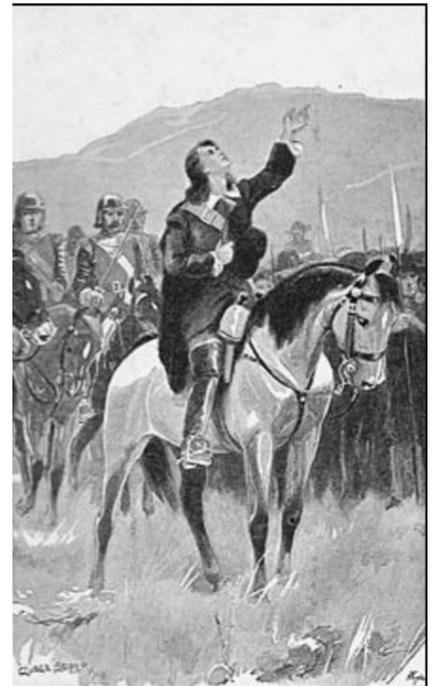
Linktown Associate Church) eastwards of the present building and maps of 1809 and 1820 show an oblong building which is taken to be the church. It included galleries and seating for 1000.

The union of the two groups was completed in 1742. Things however did not proceed peacefully and Mr. Nairne left within the year when another controversy arose. The Associate Presbytery had proposed that the Covenants should be renewed and brought up to date. Mr. Nairne was so vehemently opposed to this “submission to civil authority” that in time he withdrew from the presbytery and left his congregation without a minister.

Whilst initially remaining in Kirkcaldy to preach the gospel, this time very few of his congregation followed him.

However, those who did built a place of worship not far from his former charge.

Eventually, along with the Rev. John M'Millan, he became joint founder of what became known as the *Reformed Presbytery*. M'Millan is an interesting character who was the first minister of the *Cameronians* after the *Glorious Revolution* led to the deposition of James VII. Richard Cameron was the leader of this radical and militant Presbyterian group who were part of the wider Covenanter movement. They resisted attempts by the Stuart Monarchs to control the Church of Scotland through bishops. Supporters of Richard Cameron's teachings formed themselves into what were termed "Cameron Societies" or "United Societies" and for a long number of years M'Millan was their only minister as his former colleagues had all returned to the Church of Scotland fold after the 1690 revolution. Nairn and M'Millan joined together in 1743 to form their new church. So once again we see the connection of a Kirkcaldy minister with changes in the religious landscape.



Even here, Nairne courted controversy and he eventually returned to the Established Church having 'confessed' the error of his ways. However, Mr. Nairne in the 1931 centenary celebrations of Bethelfield was paid the compliment of

‘piloting the people through many difficult experiences in the formative years of Linktown Associate Church’ Without doubt he was an important figure having served as the Abbotshall minister for 27 years and a further three as the initial minister of Linktown.

Having suffered the blow of losing their minister, within no time another controversy played havoc within the Linktown congregation. This time it was the visitation of the “Burgess Oath” which was required to be taken to ensure adherence to “the true religion professed within this realm”. This serious situation rumbled on until 1747 when the succession church divided itself into two. On one side were the burghers who accepted the oath and the patronage that brought. The anti-burghers were opposed to any form of patronage. Just prior to the split, the congregation had ordained the Reverend Robert Wilson, but he was an anti-burgher. The Session of Linktown was anti-burgher, but the bulk of the congregation burgher. The split saw the anti-burghers leaving for a place of worship at the East Bridge and taking the new anti-burgher minister with them. The place of worship was in fact a barn and was their home for 15 years. Eventually, a church was built on the ground just behind Dunnikier House (now the Path Surgery) with the house itself becoming the manse. This church was sold in 1901 and demolished in 1967.

The Linktown church building was retained by the burghers but again, for a second time, they had no minister. This had to be a difficult period for them with the way-going of the minister coupled with the loss of many of the influential figures who made up the Session.

On the positive side it led directly to the calling of the Rev. Robert Shirra as their third minister.

Shirra was born in Stirling in 1724 to John Shirray and Jean Chrystie. He left school and took up a position as an apprentice tobacconist in a shop owned by a Baillie Allan. His parents were members of the congregation of Ebenezer Erskine and they had followed him 'out'. Tradition has it that an ancestor, one Henry Johnston, a Stirling blacksmith, was known as "The Shirra" (sheriff) in recognition of his standing in the town. It is claimed by family members that his successors took the nickname as their surname. (Dr. George S. Gibb).

It is not known if Shirra had always harboured the desire to preach but what is certain is that, as his apprenticeship progressed, he became more and more determined to preach the gospel. There were difficulties, mainly stemming from the cost of his education if he were to study divinity. There was also the potential issue of the cost of releasing him from the indentured apprenticeship. The story goes that when he aspired to preaching the gospels a family member poured water on his hopes with – "let every man abide in the

same calling wherein he was called” – in other words, stay as a tobacconist! Despite his desire to preach he still worked assiduously at his trade.

However, help and release came from an unexpected source. Baillie Allan, on seeing how earnest his apprentice was, offered to release him from his bond and also to meet the costs of his education. Shirra accepted the offer and spent two years in the study of Latin and Greek, two in philosophy and three in divinity. In May 1749 he was accepted into the ministry by the Presbytery of Glasgow.

It appears that from the outset he was viewed as a man of outstanding preaching ability. The Linktown Congregation wanted Shirra and was prepared to wait thirteen months for his acceptance. It is thought that Ralph Erskine, who was ministering in Dunfermline, recommended young Shirra to the congregation.



Ralph Erskine is another interesting figure who in his lifetime was synonymous with religion in Dunfermline. We find that he, along with Andrew Carnegie, are the only two individuals who have had a statue raised to them in the town, It is no surprise that Ebenezer and Ralph were not afraid to challenge on behalf of their religious beliefs when we look at their father –

Henry Erskine. Henry was also a minister and he refused to

sign the *1662 Act of Uniformity*. He and other ministers believed that it would require them to preach an Episcopalian form of religion. Over the years his beliefs and preaching saw



him imprisoned in Melrose, Jedburgh and Edinburgh. On top of that he was fined 5,000 merks, imprisoned on the Bass Rock and at one point banished from the Kingdom.

Ralph Erskine was appointed an assistant minister at Dunfermline Abbey in 1711 and became the Minister in 1717. Although he was present at Gairneybridge, it was not until 1737 that he left the Abbey and set up the Dunfermline Secession Church – firstly in a barn in Chapel Street, but by 1741 a church had been built at the junction of Queen Anne Street and Pilmuir Street. It is at this spot his statue stands. He was another strong and powerful voice in the new movement until his death in 1752. There seems little doubt that it was Ralph Erskine's voice and support which saw Robert Shirra installed in Kirkcaldy.



At one stage it appeared Shirra would become a colleague of Ebenezer Erskine in Stirling and time passed before he

reached a decision. He eventually determined to answer the Linktown call, being ordained on the 28<sup>th</sup> August 1750. Thus began a career lasting for almost 50 years in Kirkcaldy. It was probably with hindsight the correct decision as Ralph died in 1752 and Ebenezer in 1754. There is no telling where he would have ended up had he stayed in Stirling.

### His Ministry in Kirkcaldy



Records of the time tell us that Robert set about his ministry “devoting himself with the most zealous and laborious industry in the faithful discharge of his sacred duties”. By 1763, we find the Reverend Shirra having married, become a father and then a widower. He had married Katherine Spears the daughter of Robert Spears, a merchant from Dalkeith. The marriage was destined to be short lived. Following the birth of a son, on the 16<sup>th</sup> October 1755, his wife was seriously ill and sadly passed away on the 19<sup>th</sup> December 1755. She is buried in the graveyard of the Old Kirk in Kirkcaldy. Contemporary reports suggest Shirra was more concerned with the wellbeing of the child, who was named John Spears Shirra, as opposed to the health of his wife.

Research suggests that there was possibly an earlier child from the marriage named Rachel who died on the 7<sup>th</sup>

November 1753. Working from Old Church Registers is always fraught with difficulties, but we are reasonably confident that Rachel was indeed the first born and also the first to die.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> November 1763 he re-entered the marriage stakes – this time to Elizabeth, the daughter of a Mr. Dallas of North Merton, Stirling. This union produced a daughter on the 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1765, who was christened Catherine.

We again learn from Church records that he was considered a man of “scholarly attainments and attracted many by the robust character of his personality, his outspoken criticism of all hypocrisy and sham, and the strong evangelical flavour of his preaching. He was quaint and homely in his speech, direct and pawky in his illustrations”.

It has to be kept in mind that many of these observations were written many years after his death and few, if any, from personal experience of the man. There are certainly enough tales, observations and stories of Shirra, which have been handed down to give a flavour of his character, personality and sometimes wit.



With his church having no manse, Shirra built a house for himself in Glasswork Street. It was demolished to make way for the extension to the People’s Institute and was known as Shirra Ha’. At the

time, Dysart was more prosperous than Kirkcaldy. Dysart had weaving, wood yards, ship-building, extensive shops and open markets. It also had a considerable trade in coal via its harbour. It was even said that the *Lang Toon* was scarcely known other than for “dirt, sin, and Mr. Shirra’s fine linen”. Strange to relate, the Church had a house for the Beadle within its grounds but not one for its minister.



Having examined the religious tensions which led to the founding of his church, and also at the journey which brought him to Kirkcaldy, the time has come to look at his personality and the traits which marked him out as both a character and an eccentric.

There is probably no better location to use as a starting point than to look at a book which was published in January 1850, placing its publication as 47 years after the subject’s death.

The title was – *“The Remains of the Rev. Robert Shirra, Linktown, Kirkcaldy, with a memoir”*. The author was the Rev. John B. Johnston.

A press review of the work tells that the author had ministered in Stromness for a number of years and that he was still fondly remembered there. For this reason it was felt that this volume, his first published work, would create some interest within the area. “Although it was accepted

that Shirra was not a well known figure in the Highlands, his name is equally a household word in the greater part of the Lowlands – especially as a humourist”.

We are told that “he belonged to a class which is almost extinct – a class of queer eccentric clergymen, faithful in the discharge of their duties, distinguished for their clear statement of truth and competence in eloquent forcible vocal appeal, but devotedly attached to their joke and sometimes giving vent to it under not very appropriate circumstances.

Four names were mentioned of men who comfortably fitted inside this bracket – Rowland Hill, Mr Thom of Govan, Mr Cormie of Penicuik and Mr Robertson of Kilmarnock. The author bemoaned the fact that there were only a handful of such men left and that while some “aspiring deep thinkers could produce strength of delivery allied to inflated wording – but the pleasant wit, in conjunction with genuine godliness and sound sensible preaching of a Hill or Shirra is scarcely to be found”.

Rowland Hill was a famous English preacher who was known as an enthusiastic evangelical and an influential advocate of smallpox vaccination. On his death in 1833 he was initially buried below his pulpit.

“Mr Johnston’s memoir in sketching the history and character of one of the oddest members of an odd class is decidedly interesting”. Mr Johnston was praised for sparing

no trouble in overcoming the difficulties involved in uncovering details of a man who had been dead for nearly 50 years. “His industry had led to the resultant work being lucid in arrangement, chaste in composition, and altogether very creditable to his taste and talents. The anecdotes included are illustrative of Mr Shirra’s eccentricities and are among the best that we have heard of him and his judgement of the worthy old man’s character which has been more than a little misunderstood are correct.

The volume contains, besides the memoir, some sermons by Mr Shirra and an excellent series of religious conversations between him and the Rev. Thomas Lister of Dundee when the latter was on his death bed. “These place Mr. Shirra’s piety and abilities in a very favourable light. They exhibit eloquent expression as well as thoughts which are by no means mediocre and, while occasionally marked by eccentricity, those who knew the old man’s character will not consider this as a blemish”.

The review which due to “lack of space” did not contain any of the sermons etc did make mention a portrait of Mr Shirra which was contained at the beginning of the volume. “The engraving as a work of art is worthy of great praise and the good man looks exactly as we have often heard him described – a stately, corpulent, triple-chinned “Oily Man of God\*”, with an eye indicating true kindness of heart dashed

together with a little cynicism (\*not sure how much of a compliment this is?)

Altogether, we think that Mr Johnston has made a very respectable debut on the stage of letters and we trust that it will not be very long before he presents himself again”.

To add colour to the narrative a number of cups and plates with which Shirra would have been familiar with are shown below.



## Tales and Stories Relating to Mr Shirra

We have included a range of anecdotes and stories attributed to the Reverend Shirra. These cover a wide range and are intended to demonstrate his wit, his piety, his personality and his capacity to deliver a caustic comment. Although an element of his humour is included – in truth it does not always travel well ever the course of almost 300 years. The hope is that these provide flavour to augment the context in Johnston’s publication.

1. One story in particular concerns a visit to his son in Dalkeith. He had to walk past the town jail where a military guard was stationed. An English Regiment was on duty this day and the officer saw Reverend Shirra approach. Given Shirra was walking smartly in his full clerical costume, cocked hat in hand, and “displaying a powdered wig of no small dimensions”, the officer thought that a Lord Bishop was heading towards Dalkeith Palace to visit the Duke of Buccleuch! He promptly turned out the guard and had them present arms. We are told the minister “graciously received the honour”.



2. He was visiting a house in the West Bow in Edinburgh when a prisoner was led past the window. He was on his way from the Tolbooth prison to the place of execution in the Grassmarket. After watching this sad procession pass by, he said to those in the room, “Pair chiel, I think we should pray for him “and kneeling down he offered up an earnest and impressive petition in the wretched man’s behalf”.

3. One Sunday a gentleman, who was very neatly attired, was late for the Church service. On arriving, he walked slowly down the aisle appearing to be in no hurry to find a seat. On observing this, Rev Shirra exclaimed “O, man, will ye no sit

doon and we'll see your new breeks when the Kirk is done?" Some accounts suggest that the victim of the barb was dressed in full military uniform.

4. His fame was such that people travelled distances to hear him preach. A Burntisland Baillie and his wife often walked into Kirkcaldy to listen to Shirra. On one occasion the Baillie fell asleep, only to be woken by the sharp rebuke "staund up Baillie Scott and that'll pit the sleepin' aff ye".

5. Position provided no defence from his rebukes. One day he was walking in the Raith Estate when he was approached by the Laird. The Laird was not as liberal with access to the amenities of the grounds as his successors came to be. On seeing the Rev. Shirra, he called into question what he was doing trespassing on his land? Shirra drew himself up to his full height and measured the Laird from head to foot with his eye. He then responded with "pair man, every dug has its day. In the course of time, my estate will be twice the size o' yours". On discovering who Shirra was, the Laird sent notice to him that he could walk in the grounds when and as often as he pleased.

There is what must be an apocryphal story often appended to this particular tale.

Some reports suggest, that instead of parting, the Laird had taken Shirra into his home for food and refreshments.

The rumour mill suggested that by the time the good minister arrived home - he was rather the worse for wear. The Session heard about this and sent two of their number to visit the Laird to investigate and report. A Presbyterian minister showing the effects of alcohol could not be countenanced.

The suggested outcome is that they also ended up the worse for drink, thanks to the Laird's hospitality and, they were taken by cart to outside the church - where they were dumped unceremoniously on the road. From what is known of Colonel Ferguson and the Rev. Shirra - this tale stretches the imagination to far beyond breaking point.

6. His eccentric qualities and his unfailing support of King and Country were shown by his celebration of the acquittal of Lord George Gordon. Gordon, another eccentric, but a powerful orator and propagandist, had set up the Protestant Association to try and have the "*Papist Act of 1778*" repealed. The Act was intended to reduce discrimination against British Catholics and allow them to join the British Army. This was all viewed as a dangerous threat by the Protestant Association. The Government was fighting the American War of Independence plus other continental wars and the resources were stretched. Adding to the army by recruiting Catholics was seen as a way of assisting manpower. Between the 2<sup>nd</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> June 1780, the Gordon Riots took place in London. More than 50,000 people

were involved, initially to deliver a petition to repeal the act. However, things turned very nasty with Roman Catholic chapels being burnt, houses looted, Newgate



Prison and the Bank of England all being attacked. On the 7<sup>th</sup> June the Riot Act was read and troops called onto the streets to disperse the rioters. They were to fire at any group numbering more than four who refused to disperse. In the mayhem 285 were killed, 200 wounded, and 450 arrests made. Of those arrested, 20/30 were tried for High Treason and executed. Gordon himself was arrested and imprisoned in the tower. On the 19<sup>th</sup> December 1780, he was visited by the Methodist preacher, John Wesley. Gordon was tried for High Treason but a robust defence by Lord Erskine saw a not guilty verdict on the basis of “no treasonable intent”. When the news of the verdict reached Kirkcaldy, Mr. Shirra illuminated his windows in celebration.

7. When speaking on the ‘works of the devil’ and of the “Devil being a murderer from the beginning” he proclaimed that – “if I take away the ‘D’ – I am left with evil, if I take away the ‘e’ I am left with vile – if I take away the ‘v’ I am left with ill, so that our worst enemy is the ill, vile and evil Devil.

Take any view and every view of the word Devil and there is nothing in it bar odiousness, abhorrence and detestation! Our first and worst foe is infernal”.

8. In 1792 when trade was flourishing and money abounded in the pockets of young tradesmen, and possibly with his powers on the wane, he prayed publicly that the “Lord, gi’e the weavers o’ Pathhead less wages, or mair wit to guide them”.

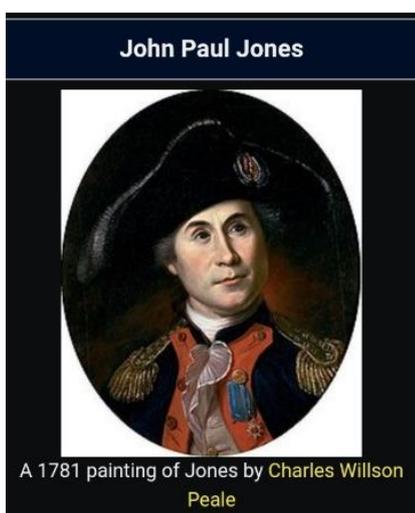
9. At Kinghorn on a Fast-day Shirra was preaching in the Burgher tent. It was the normal practice of the boatman whose turn it was to set sail for Leith to walk the town from end to end, bawling “The boat aho! to Leith aho!”.

Shirra spotted some boatmen and passengers bustling down towards the harbour together with the skipper, “Lang Tam Gallawa””. Shirra stopped short in his sermon and addressed the party with energy peculiar to only him – “Boatmen aho!” which prompted them to stop. “You cry “Boat aho!” – We cry “salvation aho!” and “Heaven aho!” You sail aneath skipper Gallawa’ here, we sail aneath Christ! We ha’e Christ for oor skipper, the Holy Spirit for oor pilot, an’ God himself at the helm!

Your boat, let me tell you, is a bit o’ fir tree frae Norawa: let me tell you – the keel o’ oor boat was laid in Bethlehem, built in Judea, rigged in Jerusalem and launched on Mount Calvary! We ha’e the Cross of Christ for a helm, a cedar of Lebanon for a mast and the redemption of mankind for

freight. Your voyage, under your earthly skipper, short as it is, may end in shipwreck and disaster; but oor voyage lang as it may be, wi' Christ for our skipper, will end in everlasting joy and glory unspeakable! Slip awa' noo for time and tide will fur nae man bide, but min' what I've said t'ye – dinna swear nor tak' the name o' the Lord in vain as ye are wont to do, an' I'll pray fur ye. (Familiar Illustrations of Scottish Characters)

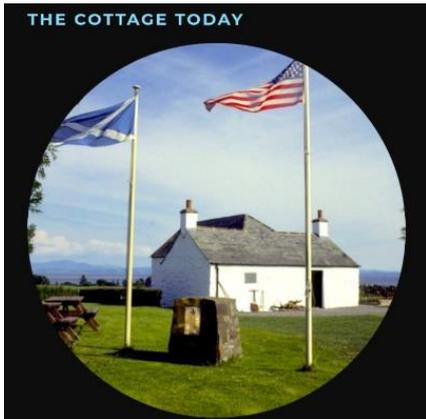
10. On a warm Summer's day, Shirra spotted a young man asleep in the gallery. He called to the people in the vicinity to waken the man up as he wished to ensure he was still alive :- "If he falls down dead, as young men often did in the time o' St. Paul, he will be dead for me - I am not able like the Lord to bring him back to life"! He will get all the rest he needs in Heaven, but there is none in Hell.



## John Paul Jones

This is probably, no almost certainly, the most famous and best known incident in the life of Robert Shirra. It has spread his fame far and wide. There are three versions of what happened and we can examine each.

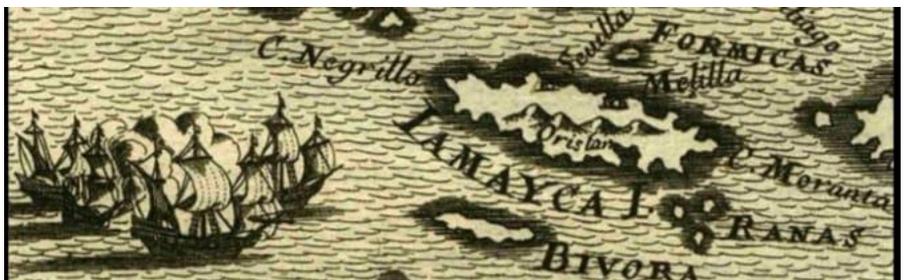
So, just who was this John Paul Jones whose appearance in the Firth of Forth made a 'theological superstar' of a local minister?



Jones was born in 1747, the son of a gardener who worked and lived on the Arbigland Estate on the Solway Coast. He was born John Paul and added the Jones in later life. He began his career at sea aged 13 as a ship's boy on the *Friendship*. The ship plied its trade between Whitehaven, the West Indies and Virginia, to where his brother William had already emigrated.

At the age of 17 he became third mate on the *King George* which was one of two Whitehaven ships built for the slave trade. Two years later Jones became first mate on the *Friends of Kingston*, another ship involved in that same trade.

However, having made a considerable personal fortune – he turned his back on dealing in human



cargo, later referring to it as 'abominable'. He then commanded several merchantmen.

He was involved in a number of controversial incidents which included the 'murder' of a crew member. It appears that he had the sailor flogged and that the punishment was so unnecessarily cruel that the man later died of his injuries. Jones was arrested and held in Kirkcudbright jail but was

released on bail. The man had been no ordinary sailor, but an adventurer who was connected to a notable Scottish family.

This timeous 'release' prompted his fleeing Scotland and he took command of two London registered ships for an 18 month period. However, he then killed a mutinous member of his crew with a sword and fled to Virginia. It was here that he added Jones to his name, and joined the 'Continental Navy' at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. This was the name given to the fledgling American Navy involved in the conflict. He became one of the first and best known naval commanders in the new service.

He made two voyages/raids back to his homeland during the war. In 1778, commanding *The Ranger*, he returned to Whitehaven, which he knew well, and attempted to set fire to a number of ships in the harbour. He followed this up by attempting to kidnap the Earl of Selkirk from his home in Kirkcudbright. When the crew found the Earl was not at home they ransacked the house carrying off the silver plate. However, Jones must have had a twinge of conscience as he bought the plate back himself and returned it to the Earl at the end of the conflict. The incidents certainly spread fear amongst the local population that the enemy could seemingly land on their shores with impunity.

The following year he returned to British waters in command of the 42 gun *Bonhomme Richard*. This was a



Figure 1: Painting of the *Bonhomme Richard* by artist Geoff Hunt. The painting depicts *Bonhomme Richard*, commanded by Continental Navy Captain John Paul Jones, probably just before her famous duel with the British warship *HMS Serapis*, commanded by Royal Navy Captain Richard Pearson, off Flamborough Head, England, on 23 September 1779. [Click on photograph for larger image. You see another](#)

French built ship which had originally been named the *Duc de Duras*. It had been loaned to America by Louis XVI to help in the conflict with Britain. Having sailed around the Western and Northern Isles, he headed for the Firth of Forth with the intention of sacking Leith unless he was paid a huge ransom. He had learned that the towns along the shores of the Forth were unarmed – their guns having been removed in the aftermath of Culloden. He anchored just to the east of Inchkeith – ready to attack Leith in the morning but he did not count on the prowess of the Reverend Robert Shirra in prayer!

The first version is probably the best known. This is where the Rev. Shirra carried an armchair to the beach and made his way through the assembled agitated masses. He then sat in the chair and prayed that, unless God listened to him and sent a strong westerly wind to drive the vessels out of the Forth, he would sit there and be drowned. Memoirs written in the 1850s are adamant that this version is clumsy and offensive to Mr. Shirra's character and absolutely false. It is claimed they were "made, cited and believed, by those who did not know Mr. Shirra".



The second version is placed on the morning that John Paul Jones was attempting to raid Leith sailing from his overnight

anchorage just east of Inchkeith. Mr. Shirra went to the shore of Kirkcaldy and knelt on the sands. In the midst of a great multitude of fear stricken inhabitants, he poured out an earnest prayer for deliverance. The wind had been from the west and during the prayer it became more violent and Jones had to abandon his threatened attack on Leith, eventually the wind driving him out of the Forth. This version “although more in accord with Mr. Shirra’s character” is no better authenticated than the first version.

The third version is said to be “from unquestionable authority and deprived of much of the air of romance which story-tellers have cast around it”. It tells that on the morning after Jones had anchored off Inchkeith, Mr. Shirra had gone to the house of one of his congregation who lived on the shore. He enquired, “What vessels are these that were beating up the Firth?” The answer given was that they were American privateers. On hearing this, Mr. Shirra looked up to heaven and said, “Lord, if they are enemies, put thou a hook in their nose and a bridle in their jaws and take them back to whaur they came from”. In going along the shore some time afterwards Mr. Shirra said to a friend “the Lord with his wind could easily blaw them out of the Firth”. The result is well known “the wind being contrary and increasing to a gale the pirate found it impracticable to achieve his intentions. No one rejoiced more heartily than Mr. Shirra who was attached to his Country and King”.

This third account appears to come from the pen of a later minister the Reverend I.E. Marwick. The account is contained in his book "Bethelfield United Presbyterian Church – History of the Congregation". The book was published in Kirkcaldy in 1887. Again, we have the problem that the account was written/published a century after the event. On the positive side, given he was the minister of Bethelfield, it is highly likely he would have access to official/unofficial records. What is without doubt is that Jones was anchored overnight just east of Inchkeith and, shortly after he set sail for Leith, the wind became much more violent and Jones had to abandon both his plan and the Firth for good. What is seemingly without question is that, irrespective of the accuracy of the accounts, Shirra probably did raise a 'prayer' and the outcome was "such a remarkable interposition that the prevalent belief which existed before in the efficiency of this good man's prayers was much strengthened. The immediate effect of it was to spread his fame for piety far and wide".

So, no Pathhead sands, and it appears the prayer has been extended and embroidered over the intervening years certainly adding to the fame of Mr. Shirra.

There is an interesting anecdote, relating to the aftermath of the event, in the *Edinburgh Courant* of February 1859. This mentions the death of a Pathhead widow, a Mrs Reekie, the previous week. It recounts the days following the departure

of Jones – never to return! However, if Kirkcaldy was paralysed with fear, Pathhead was not. A day and night watch had been set up in Ravenscraig Castle with the young men arming themselves with muskets and blunderbusses, in case the ‘pirate’ should return.



Mrs. Reekie had been the last of the young lassies who had kept the fires stoked and the men fed during the period of the watch. The report divulges how she often referred to the incident and “described minutely the appearance of Mr Shirra when engaged in praying on the beach for the wind that drove the vessels of the dreaded Paul down the Forth”.

Charmingly, the article describes her as “28 years single, 44 years married, and 28 years a widow. It appears that she was in the habit of saying that she had enjoyed three lifetimes. Her family were 9 children, 65 grandchildren, 116 great grandchildren and 3 great grandchildren – 193 in all.”

As we progress these objects the team has become accustomed to how threads transfer from one story to another, although not in such close proximity. We find that this month’s object has a tie-in with that of last month - and not just once but twice!

While researching last month’s story, in relation to a book on Marjorie Fleming, we came upon an unconnected advert for

pamphlets being produced by John C. Orr, a bookseller in Cupar.

These were for a series of articles by M.F. Conolly of Anstruther which eventually were combined into book form. This particular advert covered articles 51 – 55 and there in article 51 was the Rev. Shirra! We could not help but notice that the Earl of Rosslyn was featured in number 52 with Adam Smith in 53. Mary Somerville found a place in the 54<sup>th</sup> pamphlet – one of very few women who managed to be included.

The book, which was published in 1866 and extended to 492 pages, rejoices in the title of *“The Biographical Dictionary of the Eminent Men of Fife, of Past and Present Times, Natives of the County, or connected with it by Property, Residence, Office, Marriage or Likewise.*

Also in the same story we made mention of *Caer Caledon* a pageant held in 1911 in Ravenscraig Park. The event which was written and produced by Lachlan MacBean was a celebration of the centenary of St Peter’s Episcopal Church. Over 400 children took part in what was a series of ten sketches covering the history of Kirkcaldy from 500AD up until 1818. The accounts of the event show it was colourful, dramatic and well attended. There was a suggestion it should be reprised as part of the town’s celebration of the *Festival of Britain* in 1951. This did not materialise but

perhaps all/part of it could be “brought to life” to celebrate Adam Smith’s tercentenary – he certainly featured.

Last month mention was made of *section IX* which focused on Sir Walter Scott and ‘Pet’ Marjorie. Our research for this article shows that section VIII which was entitled *Constellation* features Adam Smith, Robert Adam, Robert Shirra, a Gypsy Queen, Gypsy Girls, and townsmen/women. In all 26 children took part. A synopsis of the sketch is shown here which featured a gypsies’ dance. Again it reflects that Shirra was considered worthy of inclusion in the company of two of the town’s most venerable sons.

A sad little article was noted in the *Fifeshire Advertiser* of the 9th February 1918. The part of Rev. Shirra had been played by 14 year old Alfred Adamson. His brother Robert, along with sisters Lizzie and Nellie, had also been involved. The article in question confirmed the death of Alfred, whose address was given as 118 Dunnikier Road, in the sinking of S.S. Aragon on the 30th December 1917.

#### Episode VIII. A Constellation, AD 1778

This fantastical episode celebrates various historical figures that have a close association with Kirkcaldy, including the architect Robert Adam and the philosopher Adam Smith—both born in the town—and the locally famous secessionist clergyman Robert Shirra. The drama is set in 1778 when the sea adventurer John Paul Jones had returned to British waters from France. The pageant opens with townspeople in a state of excited anxiety, having spotted Jones's ship in the Firth of Forth: Jones is referred to as 'a Yankee pirate'. Adam Smith turns up and states that that they should have no fear for 'the wealth of nations is conserved by mutual confidence and open trading'. He advises they call for the provost and the town clerk but is told that the provost is locked up in his own home by half the council and that the other half have confined the clerk to the town hall. Robert Adam enters and remarks that the Lairds of Dunnikier and Raith had divided them in King William's time into Whigs and Tories. He further says that they should let Jones blow up the shorefront to make way for better architecture; the townspeople are indignant at this. The Rev. Shirra comes on the scene; one woman remarks that some of the town's weavers have sympathy with Jones, and at this Shirra condemns them, saying he will go to the shore to assess this situation. As he leaves, a band of gypsy girls move forward from the back of the scene and perform a dance; the people join in, but Smith sits reading a book until the gypsy queen approaches him. She tells him that she stole him as a baby and took him to Leslie; Smith asks why she did not keep him, and she replies that she foresaw he would become a famous man. The townspeople suddenly return, calling out that the Rev. Shirra had prayed for a storm that had rid them of Jones. The song 'Famous Men' was sung.

A little research suggests the sinking was another seemingly avoidable catastrophe so prevalent during World War I. The *Aragon* was a Royal Mail Steamship which prior to the war had plied her trade between Southampton and South America.

She had been converted into a troop ship and was carrying 2,700 men when she was torpedoed off Alexandria. Her escort *H.M.S. Attack* picked up a number of survivors before she too was torpedoed, by the same submarine, with more loss of life.

It would appear that a trawler (flying the international flag - Follow Me) had almost guided *Aragon* into the mouth of the port, when the Captain of the *Attack* advised "Do not take orders from a trawler and to return to open sea". On her return to anchor off shore she was torpedoed. Young Alfred was one of 810 dead. It was said that the Captain of the *Aragon's* final words were that he would have the Captain of the *Attack* court martialed.

## The Final Years

Sadly, Mr. Shirra's eccentricity grew with the years and there is no doubt that his faculties were diminishing. "Frequently, in his own Church, the more careless portion of his audience was amused and the more pious portion was pained by his stopping in the middle of his public prayers to reprove

individuals who had entered the church after the services had begun. Other evidence, still more convincing that Mr Shirra's mental powers began to be impaired about the period, might be adduced, but it is scarcely of a kind that can with propriety be submitted to the public".

In 1798 attempts were twice made to appoint an associate minister to help but they were thwarted. However, Mr. Shirra himself made the decision to retire on the basis of ill health and returned to Stirling, the town of his birth.

His home, Argyll Lodgings, was close to the castle and the final story tells us that a garrison was leaving after their tour of duty and that Mr. Shirra was in an armchair at his door



Argyll's Lodging

watching them march away. As they passed Mr. Shirra cried "God bless; God Bless". The officer was so taken by the comments that he stopped his men and had them fire a Royal salute to this "loyal old man". Some versions suggest that the officer had his men present and slope arms as a tribute to Shirra – no shots being fired. Possibly just as well given the experience of Captain Porteous! Shirra died from pneumonia on the 12<sup>th</sup> September 1803.

*The Stirling Observer* of the 24<sup>th</sup> June 1880 carried an article from a series looking at monuments and gravestones in their Old Churchyard. Mention is made of a four sided pillar paying tribute to and remembering the minister and his wife. On one panel is an inscription dedicated to Shirra and indicating that it was 'erected by his son-in-law, Thomas Aitcheson – Minister of the gospel in Leith'.

A second panel is dedicated to the memory of Elizabeth Dallas, the second wife of the Rev. Shirra. She had passed away on the 17<sup>th</sup> August 1799 aged 56 according to the inscription.

There is a third inscription of some length in Latin on another face. As yet and possibly never – no attempt has been made by us to translate its meaning!

**A monumental pillar bears this inscription :—**

A pillar  
sacred to the memory  
of the Reverend  
**ROBERT SHIRRA**, Minister  
of the Gospel in Kirkcaldy,  
who died on 12th September, 1804,  
aged 80 years,  
in the 54th year of his ministry.

As a pastor  
he was eminent,  
faithful and zealous ;  
as a husband,  
attentive and affectionate ;  
as a parent,  
full of kindness and compassion ;  
as a Christian,  
distinguished  
by cheerfulness and benevolence.

In ministerial usefulness  
he was excelled by none  
in his age.

His prayers were wonderfully  
answered ;  
his writings  
afford proofs of ability,  
labour and diligence.

His last words were,  
" Now my soul  
enter thou into the joy of the Lord."

Erected  
by the  
Reverend **THOMAS AITCHESON**,  
his son-in-law,  
minister of the Gospel  
in Leith.

On another side of the pillar is inscribed :—

Sacred  
to the Memory of  
**ELIZABETH DALLAS**,  
wife of the  
Rev. Mr. **ROBERT SHIRRA**,  
who died  
on the 15th August, 1799,  
in the 56th year of her age.

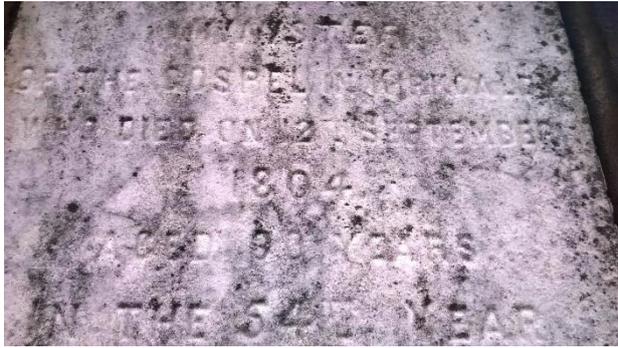
" Blessed are the dead who die  
in the Lord."

As a true Christian  
Mrs **SHIRRA**  
lived and died,  
Meekness, friendship,  
piety,  
adorned the whole of her conduct.

" Awake and sing,  
ye that dwell in dust."

**A third inscription on the pillar, as follows :—**

Parce cineribus  
Pastoris Hujus Venerabiles  
Qui Varias passus Fortiter, tui  
in culpat, vixit Deo 2, inservive  
isque ad senectutem non otiose per actam  
Licet infirmitatibus Gravata  
Paucis mensibus morte abreptes  
In Christo exaltans  
Transmigravit ad vitam meliore  
Gener ejus Pastor Ecclesie  
Secum Unico Filia  
In Memoriam  
Dignissimo parentis  
Saxum Hoc  
Posuerunt.  
1812.



The strange thing is that as Mrs Shirra was the first to pass away – would Shirra himself not have erected the monument? It seems that the answer must be that the

memorial was only put in place on Shirra's death and, at the same time, the retrospective inscription in relation to his wife was carried out. The three inscriptions are shown and the sharp eyed might just notice an error relating to the Reverend's death. We are assuming that the error is typographical and not on the stone itself! The latest research suggests that the stone itself carries the incorrect year of death, showing 1804. It most certainly appears that 1803 is the correct year of Shirra's death – research continues.

The initial query has been solved by some further research. We were able to ascertain that Catherine Shirra had married the Rev. Thomas Aitchison in Leith in 1808. The memorial pillar must date from after 1808, as Aitchison was not the son-in-law until that date. The Latin inscription carries a date of 1812 and this may well be the date of erection.

Aitchison himself died on the 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1826 at



the age of 63. He died at his home in Smith's Place, Leith Walk, Edinburgh, in the 38<sup>th</sup> year of his ministry.

*The Fife Free Press of Saturday, 4 July 1908*, recounts that a life-sized portrait in oil of the late Rev. Robert Shirra has just been presented to Bethelfield congregation by Mr John Rough Jnr, one of its most respected members. The article related that it was 158 years since Shirra had been ordained to the pastorate. "He was an able scholar and one of the most popular preachers of his day. The late Dr Brown Johnston, assistant to the Rev. James Law, successor to Mr Shirra, wrote and published his biography, copies of which are still to be found in the hands of some of the oldest members of the church.

Dr Johnston, in his memoir, represents Mr Shirra to have been a man of remarkably fine presence, strong and healthy, majestic in his walk and inclining to corpulency. Johnston had been told by a person who remembered Shirra that "He was a braw man, Mr Shirra, and he had a bonny fair face. Mony a time hae I seen him gone along the street wi' his cane and his big wig. I dare say he was six feet high. I dinna ken if there's a man like him noo in a' Kirkcaldy"

The portrait presented by Mr Rough fully confirms the impression left upon the mind in reading Dr Johnston's description of the personal appearance of Mr Shirra".

The congregation, we are sure, will appreciate very much the gift and prize having in their possession the portrait of one of the earliest and most popular preachers of the church.”

An interesting item appeared in the *Fifeshire Advertiser* of the 22nd August 1908. It briefly reported that Dr. George Shirra Gibb, of Boon Farm near Lauder, had made a gift to the town of Stirling. The gift in question was a Trinity Bible which had once been in the possession of the Reverend Robert Shirra of Kirkcaldy. The bible was given to Stirling as, "Shirra had been a native of the town".

While understandable that Stirling was selected as the recipient of the gift - it is a pity that Kirkcaldy was not its final destination!



Never being ones to leave a thread alone, a little research was done on Dr. Gibb. It transpires that Dr Gibb. had been the tenant farmer at Boon near Lauder for 50 years. Eventually Dr Gibb had to give up the tenancy due to his advancing years. This he did in 1922 - passing away in an Edinburgh Nursing home in 1924.

He was a Dr. of Medicine as well as a farmer and was highly respected in both the medical profession and the agricultural

industry. An interesting snippet was that shortly after Gibb took over Boon a gala day was held. A day's ploughing was offered by neighbouring farmers and 96 pairs of horses turned up from near and far. In the course of the day 106 acres of stubble land were turned over.

We have to thank this gentleman for an explanation as to where the Gibb in his name sprang from. This, along with the earlier explanation of where the surname *Shirra* came into the family were gleaned from a the report of a testimonial dinner held for him in Newton St. Boswells on his retiral from working the land.

The *Southern Reporter* of the 28th April 1923 carried a report of the dinner and Dr. Gibb's speech of acceptance and thanks. In talking about his family background he made mention of his grandfather - The Reverend Robert Shirra of Yetholm. This gentleman was the nephew of Kirkcaldy's Robert Shirra.

It transpires that Mary Gibb, the daughter of an Aberdeen cooper, had two suitors. One was the Rev Shirra with the other being George Symmers, a wealthy merchant. She chose Shirra, but the couple remained friends with Symmers. On his death he left his estate to Mary's children, on condition that they adopted the name Gibb as their surnames - which they did. James Shirra became James Shirra Gibb and George [who already had Gibb as a middle name) now rejoiced in the name of George Gibb Shirra Gibb!



Dr Gibb had been born in 1847 and when he was 11 he went with his father to their new inherited property of Cults House in Aberdeen. From

there he received his education before taking a medical degree at university. From 1872 he combined farming with medicine, almost to the point of his death. The final point of interest which was derived from the report was that Dr. Gibb had in his possession a portrait of Kirkcaldy's Shirra.

Robert Shirra's Church has gone and even its name has gone. The current church in Bethelfield Place was opened in 1831. The Reverend James Law succeeded Shirra in 1799 and his ministry continued until 1849. It was during his period in office that the North Gallery of the Old Kirk fell in 1828 killing 29 people. This led to the decision to build the present Bethelfield/Linktown church which has/had seating for 1200. The cost was estimated at between £4000/5000.

Further evidence of the Rev. Shirra's longevity in church lore is demonstrated by an article in the *Fifeshire Advertiser* of the 28th September 1913.

The Reverend William Paxton, Minister of Gilfillan Memorial Church Dundee, had embarked on a range of

brochures entitled "Representative Men of Christ". His third publication was 'The Humourist: Robert Shirra'.

So, even 100 years after his death he merited an early feature in the series. The article felt that the publication would be of interest in the district as the "Rev. Robert Shirra was a famous preacher, who laboured in Kirkcaldy for half a century".

The article considered - "The eccentricities, humour and devotion of Shirra are brought out in an able and interesting manner in this splendid little brochure, which costs 1d and should be read by all".

Perhaps no better a tribute can be paid to Shirra's period in Kirkcaldy than the Bethelfield centenary quotation – "for fully half a century the broad Scot's voice of the Reverend Robert Shirra, fearless and outspoken ambassador of Christ, had echoed within these walls".

A nice touch in relation to the centenary celebration was that a service was taken by the Rev. Edward T. Vernon of St. George's Church, Glasgow, the great-nephew of Robert Shirra.

Shirra has been recognised in his adopted town by having a street named after him – "Reverend Shirra Street". This appears to be the highest and mandatory



accolade Kirkcaldy can/will offer, unless you are Adam Smith. Sadly, due to a mix-up between the Council and the builders, the original street sign became famous throughout the land as having errors in two of only three words. Bad enough to have the title spelt “Reverand” but to have “Shirra” also spelt with only one “r” is astonishing.

We hope that readers will concur with the view that although famous for his prayer – there was a lot more to the man and he deserves his place in the Town’s history.

Perhaps a small portion of the millions being spent on upgrading the Promenade and Esplanade could be utilised on an information board being situated overlooking the scene of his triumph – recounting the incident which made him famous?

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In closing we show below the prayer which with the passage of time has doubtless been embroidered by artistic licence, Just what part of it was actually uttered on the day is supposition. What can be said with certainty is that these are the words used in the video which is shown in the tiny cottage where John Paul Jones was born. The late Walter Carr, a fine Scottish character actor, played the Reverend Shirra. It is a wonderful vocal performance with superb animated delivery. We had hoped to trace a link, but to no avail. It is worth a visit just to see Carr in action.

*'Noo, Deer Laird, dinna ye think it a shame for ye to send this vile pireet to rob oor folk o' Kircawdy; for ye ken they're 'puir enow a'ready, and, and hae naething to spare.*

*As the wun blaws, he'll be here the noo,' and wha kens what he may do? Muckle's the mischief he has dune a'ready. Ony packet gear they hae gathered thegither he will gang wi' the heal o't; and burn their hooses, tak' their vary claes and tirl them to the sark; and waes me! wha kens but the bluidy villain micht tak their lives!*

*The puir weemen are maist frightened oot o' their wuts, and the bairns skirling after them. I canna thol't! I hae been lang a faithful servant to ye, Laird, but - gin ye dinna turn the wun aboot, and blaw the scoundrel oot o' the gate, I'll nay stir a fit, but wull just sit until the tide drowns me.*

*Sae tak' ye're wull', . . . Laird if they are Thine enemies, pit Thou a hook in their nose and a bridle in their jaws, and tak them back to whaur they came from.'*