

A photograph of Tranent Parish Church, a stone building with a prominent square tower featuring crenellations. The church is surrounded by a well-maintained graveyard with numerous gravestones of various shapes and sizes. A large tree with green leaves frames the top and sides of the image, and a pink flowering tree is visible in the middle ground. The sky is clear and blue.

# Tranent Parish Church

A brief history of this place of worship



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ORIGINS AND SITUATION.....	1
CATHOLIC AND REFORMED .....	2
TRACES OF THE OLD BUILDING .....	3
THE NEW BUILDING OF 1799 .....	5
CHANGES.....	6
PAYING FOR THE CHURCH.....	7
FURTHER ADAPTATIONS.....	8
THE MUSIC .....	8
COMMUNION .....	9
THE MUCH-ALTERED CHURCH OF 1954.....	11
STAINED GLASS WINDOWS.....	13
OTHER FURNISHINGS.....	14
21ST CENTURY CHANGES.....	16
THE SETTING AND ASSOCIATED BUILDINGS .....	19
THE CHURCHYARD .....	20
BURIAL VAULTS.....	21
CARVED MEMORIALS .....	21
THE TABLE TOMBS.....	22
THE MURALS.....	23
SOME EARLIER MONUMENTS.....	24
CHURCHYARD RECORDS .....	24
THE REFORMED CHURCH IN TRANENT .....	25
MINISTRY AT TRANENT .....	26
ANECDOTES AND EVENTS .....	27
ABOUT THIS BOOKLET.....	29



# Tranent Parish Church

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## Origins and Situation

Tranent Parish Church represents over a thousand years of continuous worship on or near its present site, exactly how long is not known. Legend has a chapel being founded here by missionary monks in the 8th century, associated with the work established at Lindisfarne by St Cuthbert. It was supposedly dedicated to St Martin of Tours. This is, however, only legend, without any known proof.

The first written reference that we know of dates from 1145 when Thorald son of Swan, the then local landowner, granted revenues known as benefices to the Augustinian Canons Regular of Holyrood Abbey. In his grant Thorald mentioned previous grants by his predecessors, and so presumably a church had been in existence for some time by then. The Augustinians had been introduced to Holyrood the previous year by King David I, and this was part of his provision for their upkeep. They received the compulsory fuedal dues that were owed to the church, and in return they provided a priest to say mass. The fuedal system was then a new thing in Scotland, the ecclesiastical component of which was the Parish system of territorial responsibility. Tranent's contribution to Holyrood Abbey was specifically to provide clothing.

There exist descriptions in various canonical records of a parish chapel of St Peter on a rocky outcrop overlooking a coal bearing ravine at "Travernent". This is almost certainly the Heugh, which is where the primary settlement at Tranent occurred. The site of the chapel was very likely the site we now know, and though it is unfortunately placed for modern day purposes it was not so at its inception. It was convenient for the original settlement along the Heugh, and also for the later village and burgh which was built on the higher ground to the east, consisting essentially of what is now Church Street and Fowler Street. Furthermore, it was within 3 miles or so of the outermost limits of the first demarcated parish it was called to serve. In the days of walking, 3 miles was a reasonable distance. (The original parish consisted of a strip of land stretching from Elphinstone to the shores of the Forth, embracing what is now Prestonpans and Port Seton, and some land that is now in the parishes of Pencaitland and Gladsmuir.) The churchyard layout with a gateway (now built up) at the northwest corner, in addition to the main entrance at the south east, indicates a long held intention to serve the wider landward area as well as the settlement itself.

## **Catholic and Reformed**

The church in Tranent was originally part of the whole western Church that gave allegiance to Rome. The first vicar of Tranent whose name is recorded was one John in 1222. Throughout the Middle Ages the Canons of Holyrood had the right to the parsonage of Tranent but a later Lord of the manor called DeQuincey gave much of the parish lands, and tithes to the rival Cistercian order at Newbattle.

Following the Reformation and the defeat of the Queen Regent, Mary of Guise, by the Protestant Lords of Congregation, St Peters became a Protestant Church. The last Roman Catholic priest, Stephen Moffat, demitted in favour of the first minister, Thomas Cranstoun, in 1562. It was then, like the whole Church of Scotland, 'Reformed'. Sometimes that meant Presbyterian (governed by courts - another name for committees) and sometimes Episcopal (governed by bishops). Which one was largely dependent on the comparative strengths of rival parties, and the ability of the king to impose his will. After 1688 and the final demise of the Stuarts, who liked Episcopacy that offered them firmer control over the church, the Church of Scotland including Tranent, became finally Presbyterian.

## **The Original Building**

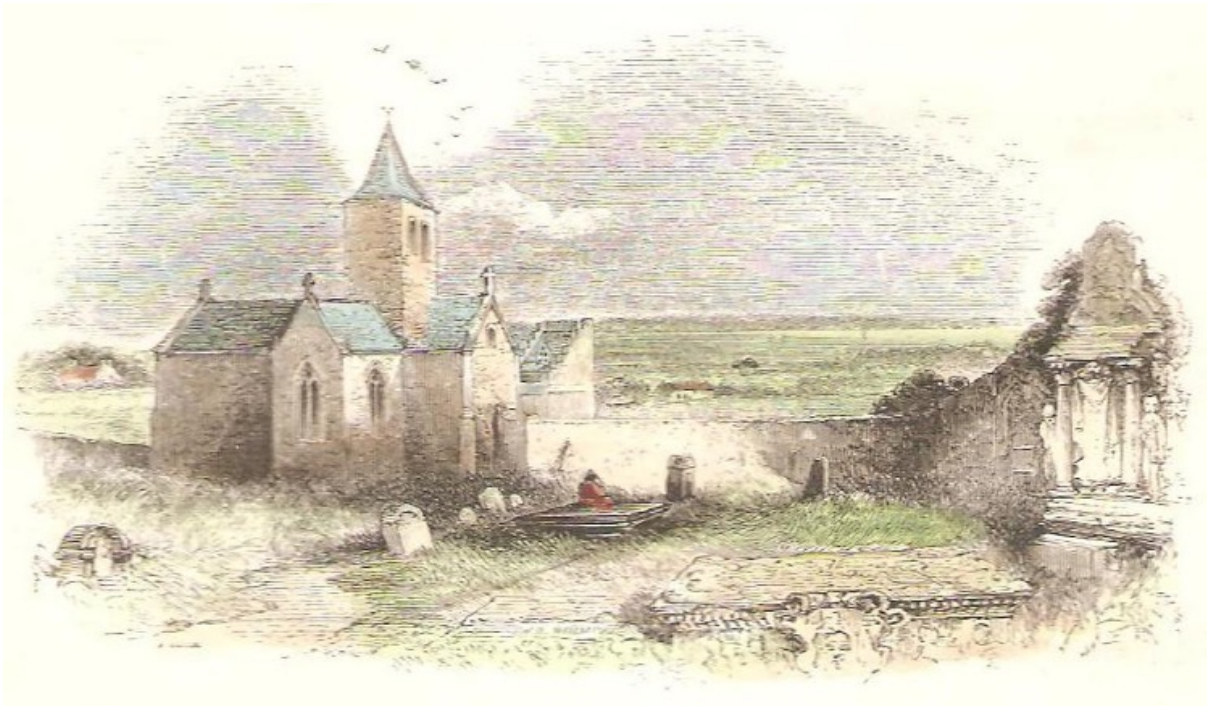
There are two stories regarding the construction of the first church on the site. One claims that the stones used came from the Heugh, being prized from the rocky outcrops or cast up by the primitive grubbing for coal. The other story claims that the stones came from the shoreline at Cockenzie, being transported by rolling and passing them along a human chain to get them up the hill.

That first Church building was variously altered and extended during its history. In its latter days it was described as having a long narrow nave and choir - seemingly as long as the present building, but a lot narrower - and with aisles attached to north and south, connected to the central nave "by arches of different form and size". Rising above the centre was a square tower supported on arches.

In 1544 the church was razed, like much of the village, by English raiders led by the Earl of Hertford, an act he repeated in 1547 following his crushing victory at the Battle of Pinkie. (By then he was Duke of Somerset.) In these raids the building was looted of anything that could be carried away, including the bells. Thereafter the church stood roofless for years, and it was to remain dilapidated for some time, certainly into the 1600's. That may be part of the reason that the worshipping congregation was very small. It was reported in 1589 as about 80, sometimes rising to 100, even though the number of communicants was 2,000.

Exactly when the building was refurbished and extended is not known. The First Statistical Account of Scotland written in 1794 describes the parish church as, "resembling three oblong buildings placed sideways the middle being considerably longer at each end a square tower rises from the centre of the whole supported by two cross arches." It added that the church had a stone vaulted roof and with few windows was "dark and dismal".

A Victorian impression of the building is reproduced below, though the accuracy of the drawing may be open to question since it shows a cruciform shape that does not seem to match the contemporary descriptions nor the fragments of the building that remain.



*The Old Church of Tranent*

### **Traces of the Old Building**

A few parts of the original building remain. There are traces of the old stonework along the ground line on the South wall, recognisable by the projection beyond the newer wall above. They probably marked the outer wall of the South Aisle. Near the eastern corner a former doorway has been blocked up by a flat stone, now devoid of any inscription, which we are told was originally the memorial to a controversial character the Rev Robert Balcanquhal who died in 1664.

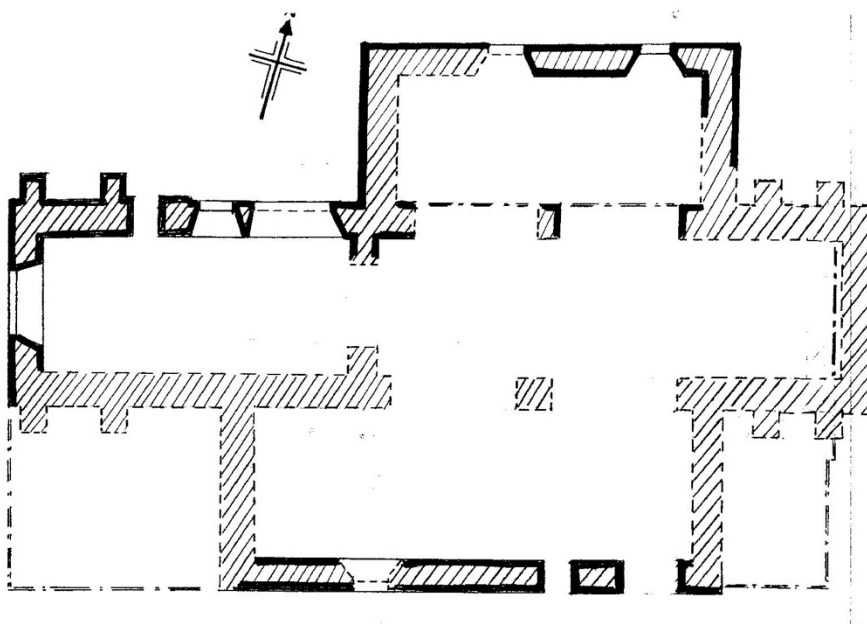
Also in that wall are the stone dressings of a smaller door opening, 'the Priests Door, giving access near to the chancel area of the sanctuary. Opinion is that the style of what remains dates this part as late 15th Century. The high altar of earlier days would almost certainly have been there at the east end, roughly where the present tower now stands. In post Reformation times a pulpit would have been introduced. The 'Priest's door' then reputedly led DOWN four steps into the pulpit. The original floor was lower still. It was probably the stone slabbed floor which became the crypt or basement of the later building. It is still there under a mountain of rubble and is about two metres below the current main floor level.

On the west gable of the present structure is a large arched window, now built up. The level of the sill is marginally below the floor level of the newer church. It seems too new to have been part of the earliest layout but may have been part of one of the extensions that elongated the nave.

At the north-west corner there are two stone buttresses which were part of the older central structure. (Similar buttresses originally ran along both main walls and would have been necessary to support the great pressure exerted by the heavy stone slabbed roof.) Visible outside and inside the present boiler house, which is the only part of the basement level accessible, there are arches of what seem to have been two windows looking north. The present boiler house doorway is vaulted and has stone dressings and may originally have been a door into the church whose floor was some steps below the churchyard even at that point where the ground level is lowest. The reason for the local thickening of the wall there is not now obvious.

At the north-east corner part of the walling of the burial vault also dates from the earlier time and is thought to be part of the North Aisle. It includes a built-up window opening with part of some stone tracery surviving. Though the tracery may not have originally belonged in the opening, the window itself was probably one of the "small windows" referred to in the Statistical Account. The remains of a further window is further to the west, now marking the point where the wall to the vault is thinned down. Within the vault itself, on the north wall of the present church at ground level there is a chamfered stone that may have been one of the side stones of one of the internal arches mentioned in the old Statistical Account.

The tentative sketch following, based on the limited fragmentary remains, gives some idea of how the layout may relate to the position of the present building, though it must be born in mind that the original building itself was much altered and some of the remaining features may not have been in use at the same time.

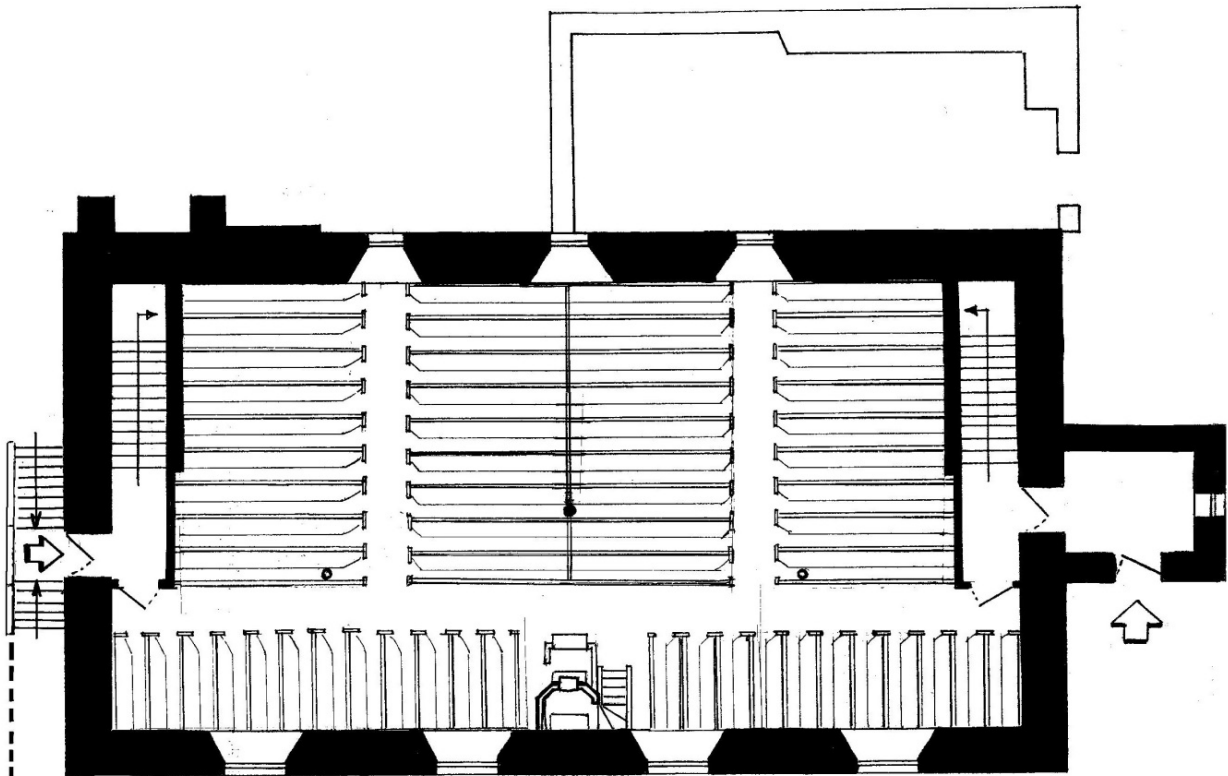


*Possible Layout of Church - prior to 1799 (Darker lines show the known remains, shaded areas the possible walling, and the dot-dash line the outline of the present building.)*

One thing that is plain is that either by an intentional decision to add another layer of soil, or the accumulation of spoil from centuries of burials in the church yard, the church itself came to have its floor well below the adjoining ground. A look at the massive retaining wall that marks the northern boundary of the churchyard shows the un-natural level that the site eventually reached. A sunken floor and poor daylight could quite understandably have produced the cheerless conditions reported.

## The New Building of 1799

The dark and dismal conditions may have been one of the reasons why the decision was taken to replace the church with a newer, larger building. The very limited space, damp conditions when it rained, and unsatisfactory layout were others. From 1786 onwards several petitions to the Kirk Session were made requesting bigger and better accommodation. The last in 1796 stated that the petitioners believed that in the church their lives were in immediate danger! Whatever the reason it was determined to enter the 19th century in new premises. Work on the new structure was started around 1799 and was complete by 1800. There was an almost total rebuild. As indicated previously, some of the sub structure and foundation was almost all that was retained. The new building was larger than the old and some of the churchyard and burial plots nearest to it were subsumed by the new structure. The new floor level was significantly higher than the old which then formed the basement or crypt.



*The New Church of 1799 - Ground Floor Layout  
(Note: The pulpit arrangement is only a guess.)*

The design showed many typical features of its era, built for a preaching rather than a sacramental focus. It was a basic rectangular shape, and lined up roughly east-west, with a substantial bell tower at the east end. The structure we see today with its stone walls and sloping slated roof is for the most part original, apart from a few additions (which will be described later). Two entry doors were provided for the congregation. One was at the western end near the south corner, and the other was on the south face of the tower. Each led into an entrance lobby and from there into the main body of the church at ground level. They also gave access to staircases leading to the gallery. The large arched window openings on the south wall are original, but there were also smaller rectangular windows on the other three sides serving both ground and first floors. Two at first floor on the East gable are still there, serving no current purpose.

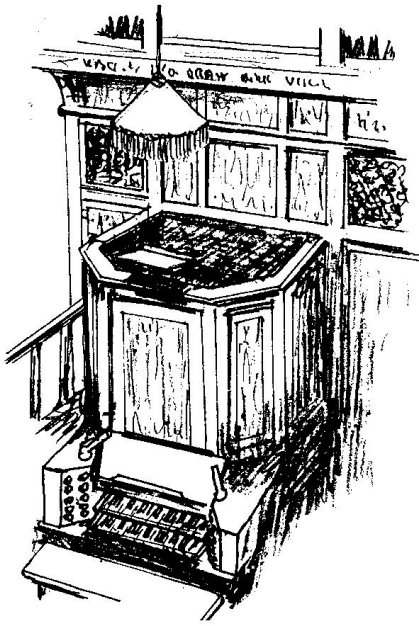
A door off the gallery led to the tower and further stairs that gave access to the bell. The first bell was one cast in Holland in 1587, bearing the inscription 'George, Lord Seton'. It may originally have come from Seton Chapel. The present bell is a later replacement of the original having been cast by C & G Mears at London in 1856. Holes in the various floors above allowed the bell rope to be pulled from within the ground floor of the tower.

### **Changes**

The internal layout remained generally as it was built, and those who knew the building in the 1950's would have a fair idea of how it looked originally. However, there were three significant modifications. The first was the position of the west door. It seems that the original door was placed in the gable and was reached by a double set of steps. Traces of this arrangement are still visible on the stonework. The layout would have been pretty draughty as the prevailing west wind would have swept straight in. The door position was subsequently moved to the south face, probably resulting in a slight loss of space within the sanctuary.

The second change was the addition of a minister's vestry tucked in at the north side of the tower. It was built in a greyish stone, quite distinct from the orange-tinted rough sandstone of the main structure. An old stone mason says it came from a quarry at Winton. The stone dressings round the previously mentioned new west door are of similar material. The two operations may have been part of one planned improvement.

The third major difference was that in the original layout there was no organ. As will be seen in the projected layout on page 6, the pulpit was in the middle of the south wall. The original probably included a precentor's desk from which he could lead the singing.



*The Pulpit and Organ of 1908*

The earlier pulpit was, however, taken out to accommodate the organ a century later and advertised for sale in the 'Scotsman' in 1908. Pews were, arranged round the other three walls with passageways leading back for access. The gallery layout was also three-sided, but with stepped floor and access coming from the back. It was supported on Cast Iron pillars and substantial wooden beams. The church had to be able to seat a certain fraction of the parish's adult population. Hence the provision to seat nearly 900 people. (It must have been pretty tight if they all came on the same day!) There was no toilet, and as recently as 1912 the heritors refused a Kirk Session request to provide one.

### **Paying for the Church**

The cost of building the church as well as its upkeep (and the payment of the Church minister) was not met by the congregation. It was all paid for by the tiend system whereby local landowners held their ground only on condition that they paid a share of the costs for the upkeep of certain local services, including the established religion. Like the Feu Duty that they paid (ultimately) to the king this was not an optional thing. If they did not pay they lost their land with no compensation. Originally it had been a tenth of the produce, but it eventually was systematised so that each of those liable had to pay cash amounts that were theoretically calculated, rather than an actual fraction of their output. They paid different amounts according to the extent of their property. The local householders and landowners paying this levy to the parish were known as 'heritors'.

The money brought in mainly went on poor-relief and the parochial school (that is the old 'penny-school' which is the last building on the left heading down Church Street for the A1), but the church benefited also. Because they paid for the upkeep of the church Heritors were entitled to their own pew in church. In 1841 it was noted that only 20 out of the 888 seats in the church were free, the rest were allocated to heritors who used them personally and allocated others to their workers. Farm workers would then find themselves sitting in church beside those they worked with, and their bosses. It very much a Patriarchal set up.

## **Further Adaptations**

During the following decades a few changes were made to the amenity of the building. By 1840 the minister reported that the church had been 'considerably enlivened by the decorating arts'. He also said that it had been made more comfortable by the installation of a heating system. The system was fired by coal, but it was only in the late 1920s that modifications were made and the boiler was moved to the level of the basement, into what we know as the boiler house. (Where the 'heating apparatus' was previously located we have not yet been able to discover.) Heating pipes ran under some of the pews. The vestry had a small coal fire eventually replaced by electricity in 1935. At some time, probably in the earlier 1800s, Gas lighting was introduced. Interestingly it was Prestonpans Gas Company who gave the supply and only later, in 1904, did the church change over to the Tranent supplier.

Electric lighting was installed in 1930 at a cost of £142.16.0d. The matter had been discussed for years but there had been a lack of agreement with the heritors. The proposal also clashed with a very important change in the way that Parish Churches were financed. In 1929 the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church of Scotland united to become the Church of Scotland as we now know it. One of the results was that the heritors had to meet their current repair obligations, pay over the equivalent of ten years Teind to the church, and thereafter they were free of all obligations. The Church then had to keep up its own property. The electrification could not be done until the repairs were all settled. Interestingly the Church Hall, which had been the sole responsibility of the congregation since it was built, got its electric lighting in 1926.

(Another consequence of the national church union of 1929 was that Tranent Parish Church became 'Tranent Old Parish Church' because the union declared all churches in the new combined arrangement to be 'Parish Churches'. At that time there were two other congregations in the town - St Andrews on the Haddington Road, a former Free Church, and the Wishart further up Church Street, a former United Presbyterian congregation. The 'Old' addition identified which parish church it was. The Old Parish building became simply 'Tranent Parish Church' once more when various unions brought all of the Church of Scotland congregations together again in 1980.)

## **The Music**

Singing was led in earlier days by a precenter, who gave the note at the right pitch, and led the psalms which were the only singing then practiced in the Scottish Church. Such congregational singing was an innovation brought in by the Reformers. Previously singing was only part of the liturgy in bigger churches that had a choir. Paraphrases were added in 1781 after a struggle, but attempts to add Wesley's hymns were resisted. Some time during the late 1800s a harmonium was introduced, along with a choir to lead the congregation, both of which indicated a wider change in the pattern of music. Anthems were brought in, some sung by everyone not just the choir, and eventually hymn books of the kind familiar today.

Such hymn singing had become popular through the great evangelistic campaigns of people like D L Moody and C F Alexander. The first Church of Scotland hymn book came out in 1898, designed with the expectation that the praise would be sung with accompaniment.

The posture of singing also changed and the Kirk Session decided to adopt the now fashionable pattern of standing to sing, and sitting to pray. Previously the opposite had been the case.

But fashion also called for a better organ. A fund was set up and ran for several years. At the end of 1907 a collection from the congregation brought the total fund up to £186.0.1d, and with that financial start the Kirk Session set out to get specifications and expert advice regarding a pipe organ. Eventually they settled for an instrument by the Edinburgh firm of Messrs Scobell & Co, and the it was ready by March 1909, at a total cost of well over £200. The bellows were driven by an 'aquatic engine' operated by the water pressure from the mains supply, or at least they were supposed to be. By April the Session was asking "what was amiss with the power?" A new, bigger engine was installed a few months later, and with minor exceptions the organ ran fine thereafter, though the Session minutes suggest that they went through a lot of organists! The organ got an electric motor in 1931. Installation of the instrument resulted in some modification to the church.

## Communion

As indicated previously the pulpit was replaced and a few years later the front two pews were removed to give more space for the elders at the Communion services. In fact some side pews may have been removed earlier to accommodate the previous harmonium: The new organ had taken up a bit more room, but also the pattern of the Communion Service had changed.

In earlier days members would have been given a communion token which indicated that they were in good standing with the church, and thus allowed to share in the service. Each token bore a number so that they knew which 'table' to come forward and join. During the service communicants would have been called forward by number to receive the elements. All of the 'number 1's, then the 'number 2's, and so on. They would sit round a long table - probably even a trestle table covered in a white cloth - stretched along the front pew with other seats arranged round. The presiding minister sat in the centre and simply passed the elements along by hand - out to the ends, and back along the opposite side.

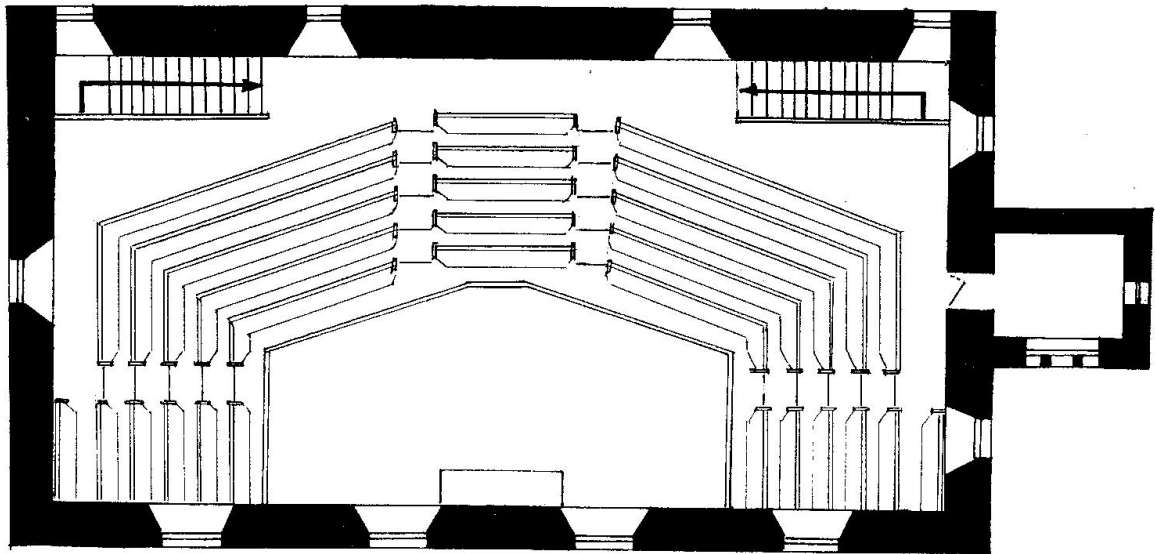
Tranent had about 200 tokens, numbered 1 to 4, and so would have had about 50 people to a 'table'.

*Tranent Parish Church  
Communion Tokens of 1861*

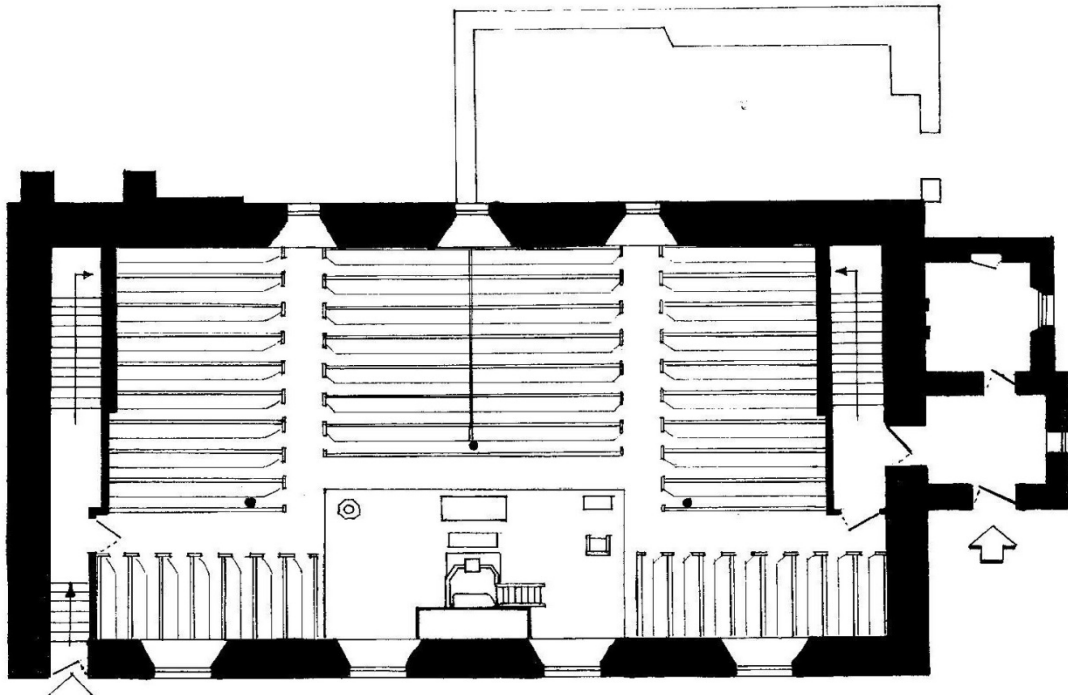


The new communion arrangement of serving members in the pews was not actually Presbyterian at all, but had originated in the Congregational churches in England. It was termed 'sitting about the table', as against 'around the table'. It required a formal communion table, and space round it for the elders who now became the servers. (The 'newness' of this idea is reflected in the fact that even now there is nothing in the church regulations that specially require the elders to serve at communion.) Other new communion practices were on the way, but the Session was not much taken with the idea of individual Communion glasses and the practice of using common cups stayed a while yet.

To accommodate these various changes the layout finally was more or less as shown in the sketches on the following page.



*First floor gallery  
(The layout is not correct in detail  
We have no photographs.)*

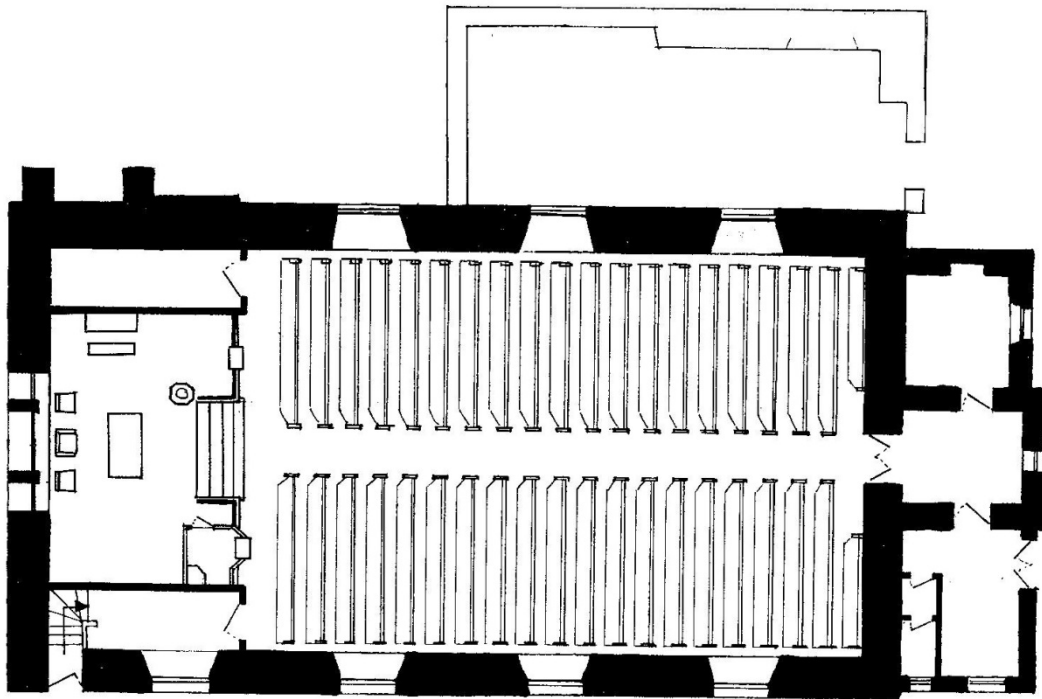


*The church prior to 1953 - Ground Floor*

### **The Much-Altered Church of 1954**

The next big change came with a large modernisation programme in the 1950's. Ideas for major renovation had been afoot prior to the war, but with the national emergency nothing could be done. A Church Restoration Fund was launched in 1947, with an initial transfer of £1000 from the Congregational Fabric Fund. The following year a gift of stock, valued at £1250, was made by Mr J S Wilson. Over the next six years the fund steadily increased. Substantial sums were raised by the Women's Guild but the bulk of the contributions were collected from the congregation. Increasing costs meant that the start to the work could not be made until 1953 by which time a total of £6,880 had been gathered.

Messers Leslie, Graham, Thomson and Associates of Edinburgh were appointed as Architects, and their design is what is seen today, though budget restraints meant that the new floor and repositioning the organ were not included in the initial phase of the work. These items were in fact done and eventually paid for by further contributions from the congregation and a few large donations. Dr Jessie Wilson gave a donation of £2,000, and the Baird Trust contributed £500. The eventual total cost of the work including new pews and choir seats was £10,805. Much of the rubble from the extensive alterations was deposited in what remained of the former basement area under the floor. While the work was going on the congregation met in the Town Hall.



*The New Layout of 1954*

The new layout is what is seen today with all the pews facing west to a chancel area that incorporates the pulpit, reading desk, organ, communion table and choir seats. The layout was designed to hold just over 400 people, slightly reduced now because of recent minor alteration. Newly decorated, the worship area is much as it was 45 years ago. Externally the big changes were the addition of the entrance vestibule at the south east corner, the removal of the large lantern ventilator from the main roof, and the insertion of three arched windows on the north face, matching the existing ones on the south.

The refinements that were later made have not detracted from the original picture. Most have been quite unobtrusive. The present suspended lighting fittings were added in 1964, replacing the original units sunk into the arched ceiling. They were largely paid for by the Misses Jessie and Margaret Wilson. The heating system using (smelly) gas-fired radiators was replaced the same year with an electrically heated piped water system. The boiler of that installation subsequently suffered a breakdown and was replaced by a Gas-fired unit in 1996.

The age of electronics arrived. A voice amplification system was donated in 1985 by Mrs Phoebe Hogg, who also gave one of the stained-glass windows mentioned later. The system was subsequently enhanced by a radio microphone, and an induction loop system for the benefit of those who use hearing aids.

However, among all that was new in 1954 there was some intentional carry-over of the old. Built into the outer wall of the entrance vestibule to the left of the door is a stone plaque bearing the arms of John Fawside, a local Laird whose picturesque castle has recently been restored, and who was buried in the churchyard in 1616. He was murdered in one of the notorious incidents of the era. Prior to 1953 the plaque was incorporated in the north wall of the 1799 structure.

### **Stained Glass Windows**

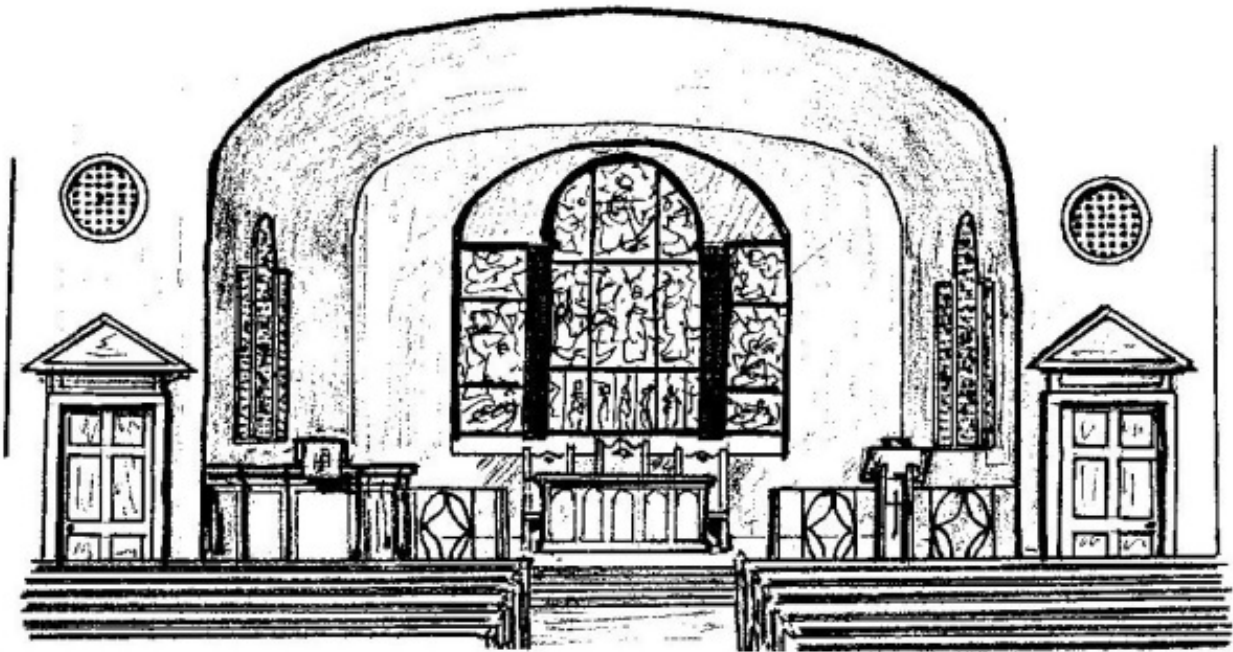
The building contains several stained-glass windows, all of which are products of the last half century and were designed for the new layout.

The chancel has a large triple window dedicated to the memory of James R Wilson. The central panel features Christ in Glory, the four Gospel writers, and figures from the book of Revelation, as well as the Scottish Saints: Cuthbert, Columba, Ninian, Kentigern and Queen Margaret. The side windows are tributes to Coal mining and Agriculture, the two activities to which Tranent owed its existence. It incorporates external floodlights which give a striking effect in the dark. It was dedicated in 1954 as part of the major church renovation. The designer was Margaret Chilton.

The central window on the south wall shows the Holy Family at Bethlehem, illustrating the Annunciation, coupled with a design of Jesus with Martha and Mary on the theme of simple devotion. It was designed by William Wilson, and dedicated in 1966 to the memory of Margaret Wilson, wife of the James Wilson mentioned above.

The opposite window on the north wall shows the story of St Christopher. Designed by Christopher Shaw it was a gift from Phoebe Hogg in memory of her husband Charles Hogg, a man with local origins, and was dedicated in 1986.

The most recent addition was the Rev A Miller memorial window on the south wall nearest the pulpit. This was paid for by subscription from many friends who wished to commemorate the life and service of a former minister of the congregation. Designed by Sax Shaw of Edinburgh Art College it was dedicated in 1989. The small stained-glass window in the inner entrance at the tower was given in memory of Mrs Bullock, mother of another former minister.



*The Chancel Area*

### **Other Furnishings**

The praise boards, baptismal font and communion table were all part of the former Old Parish Church furniture and were variously gifted in the earlier years of the 20th Century. The pews were new for the renovated design. (The foremost of the new pews was removed a few years ago.) The original pipe organ was relocated during the 1950s refurbishment in the new chancel. Until recently it was playable, just, but a burst water pipe and the boiler failure of 1996 put it finally out of operation. The Allen electronic organ now used was installed before that, in 1983, at a cost of £9,950.

The cross-stitched cushions in the pews are a recent addition to the building and are the product of a big cooperative effort. Materials were paid for variously by the congregation, the Guild, and individuals. The carpet wool was given free by an anonymous donor, and the actual stitching was the work of over 50 members and friends of the congregation. As you will notice they are all versions of a number of basic designs with the colour combinations a matter of individual choice. Work began in late 1996 and the first cushions were introduced into the church at the start of 1998. The complete project will involve almost six million cross-stitches.



The communion cups used by the congregation are also noteworthy, though they are not kept permanently in the church. In 1603 the Scottish King James VI also became King of England. He wished the Scottish Church to conform more closely to English Practice, and an act of the Scottish Parliament was passed requiring that within two years of the legislation all Scottish Churches should obtain suitable communion vessels. The act generated a business boom among Scottish silversmiths. All kinds of items were pressed into service, among them the

two cups presented by the Third Earl of Winton to the Tranent Church in 1618. Being patron, he was probably obliged to act. The cups were made of gilt silver by George Crawford of Edinburgh. They stand 32cm high and are engraved 'Tranent Kirk'. Their design is essentially secular, decorated round the stem by standard cast figures, and was typical of their age. The cups were used in the church for about 100 years.

Either in 1715 when the Fifth Earl of Winton rose to support the Old Pretender, or in 1745 after the battle of Prestonpans, the cups were removed into the care of another branch of the Seton family at Touch in Stirlingshire. Some would no doubt have called the action theft, for there was no hurry to return them. They remained in that family until 1930 when Sir Douglas Seton Stewart of Touch, Bart. gave them to the Scottish Episcopal Bishop Reid of Edinburgh. They were preserved in the Cathedral, but as they were clearly engraved with their place of origin, the cathedral authorities made arrangements for their return, and this duly took place in December 1945.

## 21st Century Changes

The starting point was in 2007 when the Congregational Board reviewed the suitability of the Manse in Church Street. This had been an issue for some time but became more immediate with the impending retirement of Rev Hogg, as well as a more stringent inspection regime for church properties. The Manse was, all agreed, an imposing sight, an impressive and historic building, and conveniently situated. It did however require substantial modernisation, if it was to pass inspection and it was difficult and costly to heat properly. Also, the large garden needed considerable work to maintain. It was apparent that if Tranent Parish Church were to be successful in calling a Minister this would have to be resolved.

A special meeting in May 2007 weighed up a number of options but finally decided to sell both Manse and Stable Block and use the funds to obtain a modern replacement manse.

A special team was given the task of overseeing the sale. Their sterling work meant that at the start of 2008 all the planning consents and other administrative work necessary were completed and the Manse was now open for viewing by interested parties. As early as April several offers had been made and agreement was reached to accept the most favourable one. The Manse and Stable Block had been advertised separately but were bought as one by a builder and property developer who planned to develop them both for his family use. With the sale pending, another team began the search for a replacement. At this time the Dequincy Court development in the Windygoul area to the South was progressing. The firm Charles Church was carrying out this project. A house was identified, at 1 Tollhouse Gardens, which met Church of Scotland specifications (in fact it was actually described as a “manse-style” house by Charles Church). This was very providential; terms were agreed readily and with the sale of the Old Manse formally concluded on 17th October the brand-new Manse was ready for occupancy that same month.

The new Manse also welcomed as its first resident a new Minister. The Rev Tom Hogg had retired in 2007 after over 20 year’s stewardship. In September 2008 the Rev Jan Gillies had been inducted to succeed him. She had previously served as Tranent’s locum Minister.

The old Manse had been sold at a very propitious time in the property market. A surplus of over £200,000 was left after all the costs of the purchase had been met. A once in a generation chance now arose to adapt our buildings to be more welcoming and better suited towards our outreach. For years before we had envisaged creating a gathering area at the back where everyone could socialise, and a good friendly atmosphere would grow. It had always been the dream that the children in the J-Club (Sunday School) could have a specific place to meet on Sundays as up until then they had the inconvenience and disruption of having to be ferried up to the Hall when they left during the latter part of the service for their time together.

In May 2009 it was decided to grasp the opportunity and to proceed with redesigning the Church. Architects Tod & Taylor were commissioned to draw up a feasibility plan.

In October 2009 the Board formally agreed a plan drafted by them. They also took the even bolder step of resolving to remove the pews and replace them with chairs. The redesign also allowed for a small kitchen in the gathering area, a disabled access toilet and a lift up to the proposed upper gallery.

The last two were very important given our commitment to the church being open to all including those with disabilities. The Rev Gillies was a keen supporter of this venture and played a major role in encouraging all involved to take this leap forward as well as promoting it to the Congregation as a whole.

The Architects Tod & Taylor, having done a good job with the feasibility study, were also engaged to draw up the plans. The task of liaising with them fell to the Property Committee and over the following months they worked together as plans were drafted then honed as changes were made. Tranent Parish Church was fortunate that its property convenor, Mr David Menzies, was not only very experienced but also a Civil Engineer to trade. His leadership and professional expertise were instrumental in guiding the scheme to fruition.

Before work could start approval had to be sought from various bodies such as the Church of Scotland General Trustees, their advisers on artistic matters (CARTA) and the local Presbytery. Such was the “paperwork” (and e-mails by now) that most of 2010 was taken up with this. The Congregation had also expressed qualms about some of the changes so some amendments were made to the plans to address their concerns. Most notably this included the retention of a row of pews to the back of the sanctuary (main body) area for those who might find the chairs unsuitable. Towards the close of the year though, we were finally in a position to invite tenders.

In January 2011 the Board agreed to accept a tender from Gordon Guthrie Contractors. This included not only the alterations to the interior and the provision of 200 chairs but the installation of an Audio-Visual system. The building work began on 14th February 2011. During the construction the Congregation met to worship in the Church Hall.

The pews which were removed were welcomed by the GROW project (Greyfriars Recycling of Wood). This project, run by Greyfriars Kirk in Edinburgh is aimed at teaching woodworking skills and it had a special commission to make new furniture for the Moderator and for the General Assembly, all to be solid oak. However, panic was beginning to set in and much prayer was being said at Greyfriars Kirk because they had run out of oak! Our solid oak pews were just what was needed and have gone to make tables, lecterns etc. for the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. The cross in the upper room of the church came from the same source. A few of the cushions described remain in the church but most are now in Athelstaneford Parish Church. The Work was completed, and the refurbished church came into use in June 2011.



*The view from the new upper room.  
The screen for the digital projector can be seen at the right hand side.*



*From the front of the church, you can see the glass partition and behind it the gathering area and small kitchen. Above that you can see the windows of the upper room.*

## The Setting and Associated Buildings

The church itself is part of Tranent's Conservation Area and is listed as a class 'B' building of Architectural and Historic interest.

The neighbouring former manse, which is also part of the Conservation Area, is basically a late 18th century structure but incorporates an earlier building as well as later Victorian extensions. It had been the official residence of the minister for at least 250 years, and probably much longer. Its place in history was achieved in 1745 when the wounded and dying from the Battle of Prestonpans, fought within yards of the north wall of the church yard, were tended there. Col James Gardner, a senior Hanovarian Commander, died in the upstairs bedroom. He was a close friend of Philip Doddridge the famous hymn writer. (The local 'embroidered' version of the story says that some of Prince Charles' officers meanwhile celebrated their victory in the kitchen, unaware of who was upstairs.) Gardner was buried in the Church Yard, but his grave was one of those swallowed up by the Church extension in 1799. His marble memorial disappeared, and the exact location of his re-interment is not known. It is supposedly near the new west door, the re-positioning of which may have caused the loss of the stone. (See page 31).

The manse stable block, a mid-19th Century erection, is likewise 'B' listed, along with its associated walls and gateway. The block includes provision for a cow and pigeons, as well as horses and carriage. Grazing was available across the Heugh to the west where the church glebe consists of about 7 acres of ground. (It is still church property and is now part of the Edinburgh Green Belt.) In days past the local minister would have had his own fresh milk supply, and as the manse garden itself contains an acre of ground which at one time included a gardener's cottage, he would also have enjoyed fresh vegetables as well.

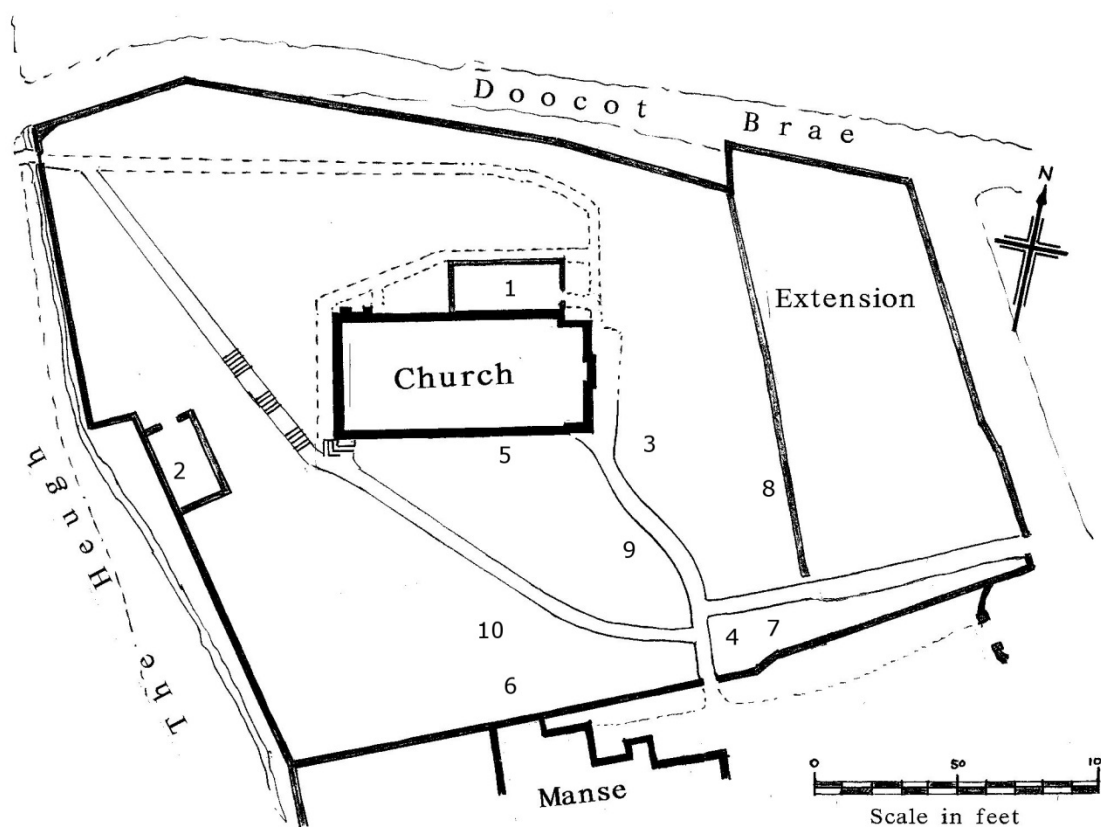


*The Manse Stable Block*

## The Churchyard

The Churchyard is a public burial ground and is now owned by the local Council. It was probably the local burial ground for 800 years, though the section to the east, of lower level and separated by a wall, is obviously of much more recent date. It had not been 'levelled upwards' through centuries of use. Memorials in that section include none of the pre-Victorian stones. It was only in 1905 that the churchyard was closed, and the new cemetery opened a few hundred yards to the east. The reason for the closure was obviously that the ground was full. In 1905 the Kirk Session received a complaint that "a body could not be buried owing to sufficient depth not being got". Some of the latter burials were extremely shallow, and human bones still surface from time to time.

Tranent churchyard has a particularly rich selection of memorials, which date from about 1650. Such churchyard stones are a feature of post-Reformation times. Prior to the Reformation important people would have been interred inside the church under the floor, ideally near to the high altar. Memorials to such people would have been inside the building. Lesser folk would have been buried outside with no permanent marker.



*Tranent Churchyard*

*(The numbers give locations of memorials mentioned in the text)*

For theological and public-health reasons the Reformed church prohibited burials inside the building. This brought about two features that can be seen at Tranent. The first was the creation of burial vaults, and the second was the erection of elaborate stones outside.

## **Burial Vaults**

If the old habit of burying inside could not continue the rich and famous did the next best thing. They erected burial vaults stuck on the side of the building, or sometimes took over a redundant part of the old structure, as appears to have happened on the north face of the church<sup>(1)</sup> It was variously altered to suit its new purpose, and this particular one was used by the Cadell family who for a long time owned much of the land of Tranent and Cockenzie. They were instrumental in founding the Carron Ironworks which enriched them. One of those resting there is Col Cadell who played an inglorious part in the massacre of Tranent citizens during the anti-militia riots in 1797.

Later the vault ownership was transferred to the Polson family - more famous to an older generation because of their well-publicised brand of cornflour! (The present memorials to former ministers of the Parish Church now found on its walls were moved there during the 1950s refurbishment on a 'temporary' basis but have found no other resting place.) The Cadells built a new detached vault in 1871 at the west end of the graveyard, at the lower level beside the Heugh. <sup>(2)</sup>

## **Carved Memorials**

Carved memorials, more or less ornate, that had been a feature inside pre-Reformation churches were now erected outside. They have not always weathered too well, but then the art form had been developed for an inside situation, and the increasing air pollution of the last two centuries have played havoc with all kinds of stonework.

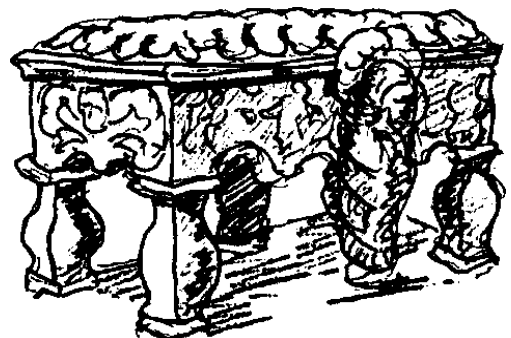
The earlier stones, dating from the late 17th and 18th Centuries, are recognisable by the coarse, gritty material from which they were made, and by the depth and skill of their carving. They bore symbols of a world that lived nearer to death than we do today. The skull and cross bones on the memorials had nothing to do with pirates but pointed to an acknowledgement that death would say the last word to all. The repeated picture of an hourglass (an enlarged egg-timer) acknowledged that time in this life was running out, and the wings that appear on one such carving said further that it was running out fast. The occasional dancing skeletons and herald angels were the counter-blast of something more. They speak of a resurrection, and the Christian hope of life beyond death. The various winged cherubs indicated something of the same eternal security.

Another general feature of that era of gravestones was the inclusion of tools that pointed to the occupation in life that the deceased had followed. A careful look will find butchers cleavers, blacksmith's tongs, masons squares, and the like. Farmer's gravestones sometimes included scenes from agriculture, and baker's show loaves of bread. Noticeably absent are comparable items for coal miners. The explanation is simple. They were a lower class of society, kept in semi-slavery until 1715. They had no money, nor did they have the status for such luxuries as fancy gravestones. (The stones from the later periods are noticeably plainer. They are largely of finer stones, and plain text, and lack any real distinctiveness of local style.)

One particularly elaborate stone <sup>(3)</sup> was reputedly designed by a Tranent man, William Wallace, King's Master Mason, or by William Ayton who followed on from him in the building of George Heriots Hospital (now School) in Edinburgh.

### The Table Tombs

Perhaps the most impressive monument on the site is the massive 6-legged Seton tomb.<sup>(4)</sup> Elegantly proportioned and heavily ornamented it is one of the finest of its kind. Of particular note is the tableau of figures carved on the apron representing the successive stages of farming. Cherubs sow and harvest the corn under the shining sun. A full-sized bust of the Earl of Winton is placed centrally on the south side. The corresponding portrait from the north side is missing, or to be more particular it is not here. Its whereabouts is well known. At some time past it was taken and built into the ornament capping the garden gate of a house just 50 yard up Church Street on the other side of the road. The earliest inscription, no longer legible relates to William Seton and is dated 1706 which was likely the date of its erection.



*The Seton Table Tomb*



*The Scott Table Tomb*

The other standing table tomb<sup>(5)</sup> was literally 'dug up' in the early years of this century. The various pieces were re-erected near the spot where they were found, and again present a most impressive monument. The Scott family are commemorated here, though there are those who think that this is another Seton memorial. Again, the carving is lively and interesting with many of the typical symbols portrayed in profusion.

Other ornate tabletops are distributed round the churchyard. Their legs, however, have walked! Some have turned up in the manse garden and the broken remains of others can be identified among the various 'tidyings' of the graveyard itself.

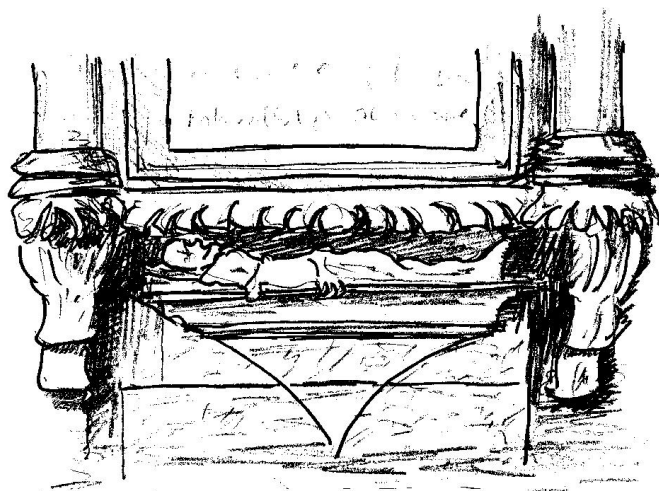
### The Murals

The murals built onto the boundary walls are again a distinct class of monuments, and date from the early 1700s. Their general pattern is distinctly heraldic with supporting pillars and side figures or animals, and the whole topped with emblazoned shields of the minor gentry. The enclosed plaques are in many cases somewhat eroded. Photographs from the early nineteen hundreds serve to emphasise the rate at which they are degenerating.

The oldest mural is reckoned to be the one adjoining the manse <sup>(6)</sup> and dates from about 1700. The marble inset of 1827 is a later insertion.

The Valiance monument <sup>(7)</sup> dates from 1723, and includes among those named one William Cumberland Valiance, born in 1746 - a commentary on who was the hero of then if not now. The Valiances were major landowners and four of the family were Lairds (fuedal superiors) in Tranent.

The Seton monument <sup>(8)</sup> is more recent, 1766. The structure is now somewhat dilapidated, but it still retains one of its most striking features intact, a shrouded skeleton with a bony hand outstretched to grasp the bier.



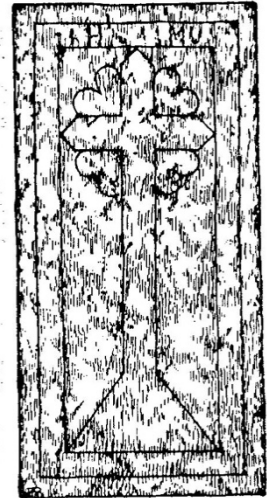
*Details of the Seton Mural, showing the skeleton*

## Some Earlier Monuments

The earliest memorial stones do not belong by rights in the churchyard at all. They are flat stones that were once part of the paving INSIDE the church, marking the burial place of churchmen prior to the Reformation. They belong to the late 15th or early 16th Century. At some subsequent date they were deposited outside, possibly in the major re-build of 1799.

What is presumably the oldest stone identifiable in the churchyard is the one illustrated here.<sup>(9)</sup> The writing which once graced its margins was already un-readable in the earliest records that we have. Presumably it marked the grave of one of the vicars of Tranent. It has been suggested that the rather crude shallow workmanship means it dates from the later part of the pre-Reformation period.

We can put a name to another churchman commemorated by a similar stone.<sup>(10)</sup> It was the monument to Alexander Crawford who was vicar at Tranent and died about 1490. Though the carving on the stone is discernible, with a characteristic cross mounted on a stepped base (known as a calvary), some of the details recorded a century ago are not now easy to see. They included a chalice, presumably indicating his holy office, and a shield bearing the armorial design of the Crawford family, and the initials "A\*C"



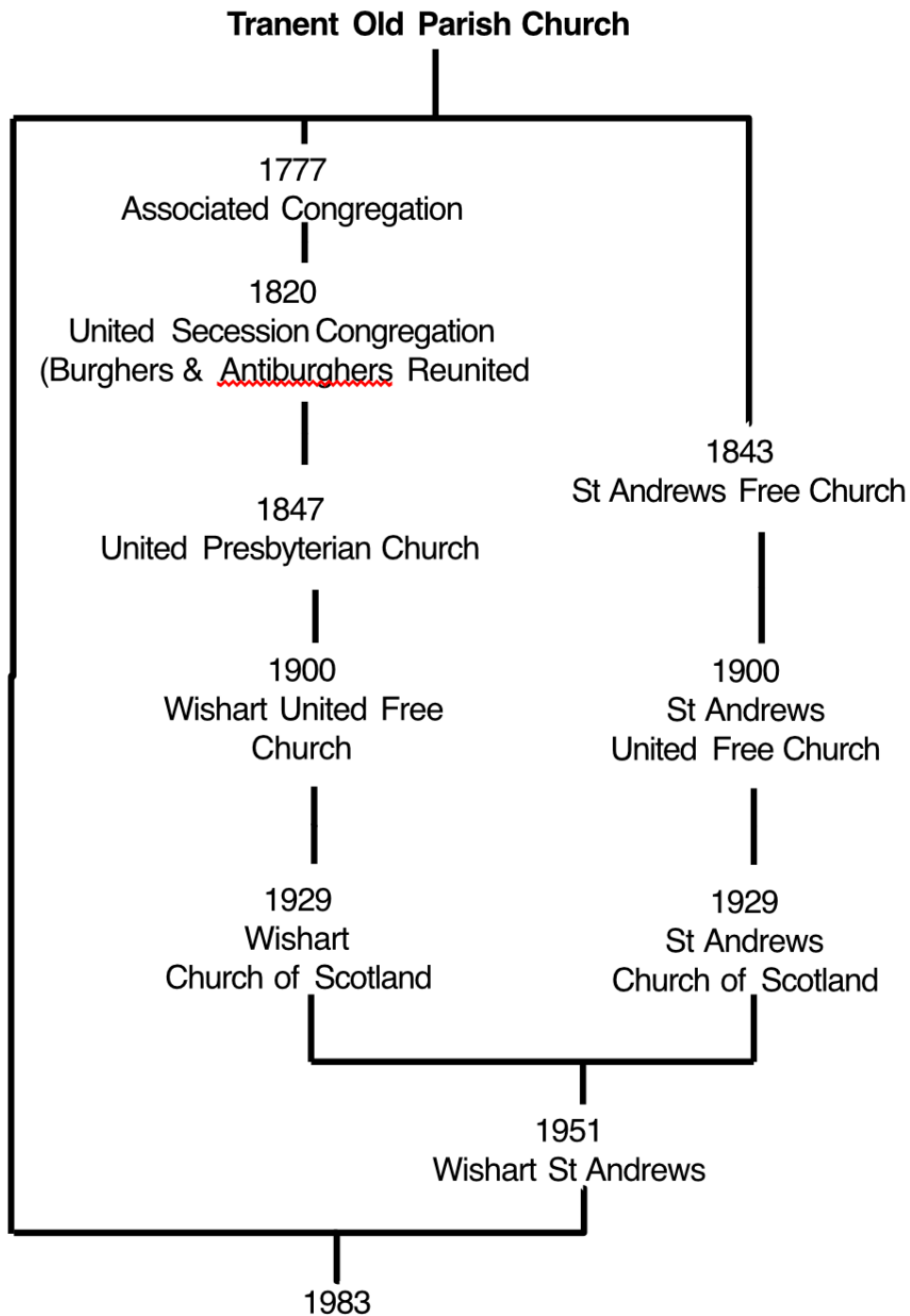
## Churchyard Records

Though we understand that some churchyard records were held by the local Town Council prior to the re-organisation of Local Government in 1973, we know of no records that still exist locally. Some documents are held in Edinburgh by the Public Records Office.

## The Reformed Church in Tranent

How did we get from the Old Parish Church of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and earlier to the Tranent Parish Church of today?

This diagram may help.



## Ministry at Tranent

We have been very lucky in Tranent to have a variety of rich, varied and at some points controversial ministries across our 3 contributing congregations, their own histories are detailed elsewhere but here is a snapshot of the Men and Women who have led us in worship and faith for over 460 years.

<b>Pre 1561– 24 May 1929 Tranent Parish Church</b>		<b>Tranent United Presbyterian Church which became Tranent Wishart Parish Church in 1929</b>	
1561-1562	Rev John Sharp	1779–1820	Rev Robert Sheriff
1562-1568	Rev Thomas Cranston	1822–1884	Rev William Parlane
1568-1597	Rev Alexander Forrester	1882–1894	Rev Alexander Brotherstone
1598-1602	Rev James Gibson	1894–1908	Rev John D Fleming
1602-1617	Rev Robert Wallace	1908–1913	Rev Andrew McLachlan
1618-1651	Rev Robert Balconquel (1st Ministry)	1910–1919	Rev George R Robertson
1651-1658	Rev Walter Balconquel	1920–1924	Rev William L Lloyd
1658-1662	Rev Thomas Kirkcaldie	1925 – 1937	Rev Peter Allison
1663-1666	Rev Robert Balconquel (2nd Ministry)	<b>Tranent Free Church which became Tranent St Andrews Parish Church in 1929</b>	
1666-1671	Rev Andrew Barclay	1888 –1920	Rev Hugh Williamson
1672-1675	Rev William Meldrum	1920 - 1922	Rev James Thomson
1676-1681	Rev James Craig	1923 - 1937	Rev Robert Erskine
1683-1689	Rev James Gartshore	<b>Tranent Wishart St Andrews Parish Church 3 Jan 1937 – 27 April 1980</b>	
1701-1739	Rev John Mutter	1937-1959	Rev James M Clyde
1740-1783	Rev Charles Cunningham	1960-1968	Rev James A Hall
1783-1801	Rev Hugh Cunningham	1968-1977	Rev Robert Brough
1802-1805	Rev Andrew Brown	<b>Tranent Old Parish Church 24 May 1929 – 27 April 1980</b>	
1806-1850	Rev John Henderson	1929 - 1942	Rev Andrew Hewat
1850-1851	Rev Robert Stewart	1942 - 1953	Rev Dr James Bullock
1852-1912	Rev Dr William Caesar	1953 - 1980	Rev Alexander Miller
1912-1929	Rev Andrew Hewat		

<b>Tranent Parish Church 27 April 1980 – Present*</b>	
1980 - 1985	Rev Alexander Miller
1986 - 2007	Rev Thomas Hogg
2008 - 2014	Rev Janet Gillies
2014 - 2020	Rev Erica Wishart
2021 –	Rev Katherine Taylor

*\* December 2025*

## Anecdotes and Events

*Needless to say a building of such long standing has witnessed some events in its time, and there are stories relating to it that have been handed down over the years. Some no doubt are more story than history, but all add character to the site. For your interest here are some of them.*

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In January 1431 a priest of the local diocese, Patrick Hogg, was returning home from Haddington. He came across his father John Hogg fighting with John Peebles. Later Patrick Hogg intercepted John Peebles leaving a house in Tranent and set about him with a sword. Peebles died and Patrick Hogg was deemed guilty of manslaughter and had to pay compensation to the family. Though the incident did not quite happen in the church or churchyard it happened by a church man and illustrated just how stormy things could be.

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The late 1600's were again troubled times in Scotland, and its church. Tranent was without a minister for several years, and when in 1694 a member of Haddington Presbytery went to preach at Tranent he found "great disturbance and a rabble throwing stones at those assembled to hear him." The pulpit was occupied by another preacher and so he had to conduct both of the services in the churchyard. By that standard dropping a pandrop during the sermon is no great disturbance!

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Some years later the induction, in 1740, of the Rev Charles Cunningham to be the minister of Tranent was reputed to be the most bitter settlement in the whole of Scotland. A man by the name of Porteous had been the assistant to the previous minister, and the local congregation wanted him to become the parish minister. However, the system in those days was for the patron of the parish to choose a suitable person and present him to local heritors and Presbytery for their agreement. Since the hitherto patron the Earl of Winton had been deprived of his position as a result of the 1715 rebellion, the patronage had reverted to the crown. King George II presented Mr Cunningham as the new minister in June 1739. Despite local objection, the General Assembly made the appointment the following May.

That was the 'official' story, but before Mr Cunningham could formally take up his position the proper process had to take place. To become the parish minister and thus qualify for his income he had to conduct worship in the parish church. To prevent this the locals nailed the door shut and gathered as a human barrier round the doorway. The military were called out to escort the gentleman to his church, and according to one story a window was removed, and the minister was 'posted' in. By that unorthodox manner the new minister was 'installed' in his living. Happy, to say the animosity of the crowd was more against the system than the man. He ministered there for the next 53 years and died in office at 92!

On 21st September 1745 the Battle of Prestonpans (or the Battle of Gladsmuir if you were on the Stewart side) was fought just over the boundary wall of the church to the north. Prince Charles' highlanders made their approach to the battlefield down through Tranent, and it is said that the government cannons of General Cope fired on them while they were in the churchyard. There seems to have been no great damage, but that is given as the explanation for small cannon balls that were later dug up in the manse garden.

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The graveyard was supposedly the site of one of the last activities of the 'Resurrectionists' or 'body-snatchers' in the early 1800's. That was the name given to those who stole recently buried corpses to sell to the medical school in Edinburgh for dissection by the students. According to the tale a funeral had taken place in Tranent, and the body was suitably laid to rest in the graveyard. With the dark came two men complete with shovels and a horse and cart to transport their prize away. They proceeded to uncover the coffin. However, their horse, it seems sneezed and gave the men such a fright that they fled in terror leaving the job half done. If we speculate that all such raids were not so unsuccessful, one wonders how many people who found their last resting place in Tranent churchyard moved on rather quickly!

## About This Booklet

*This project grew out of being asked questions. Every year visitors from further afield come here to see where their ancestors were married or buried, and inevitably ask about the building and its origins. Similarly, many local people have asked about the church as part of their interest in 'Old Tranent'. We know of no place where that information has been brought together, and so we have made an attempt to do just that. We hope that it satisfies at least some of the curiosity regarding what is past.*

*We acknowledge with thanks the assistance of those who have searched their photo albums and their memories to give us what we wanted. Generous help has been given from several quarters; however we are very aware that what we have is still incomplete. Any corrections or additional information that you can provide will be gratefully received by the compilers.*

*Further information about the active church can be found on the church website:*

[www.tranentparishchurch.co.uk](http://www.tranentparishchurch.co.uk)

*Online services can be viewed by searching for Tranent Parish Church on YouTube*

*<https://www.youtube.com/@tranentparishchurchofscot17386/videos>*

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