## THE PRESBYTERY OF AYR 1581 - 1981

## In the Beginning ...

At the General Assembly of October 1580, a committee was appointed to "devyse a Platt of Presbyteries and Constitutions thereof as best appeirit be thair judgement". This draft plan or platt was submitted for discussion at the next Assembly held in Glasgow on 20 April 1581. There, it was resolved that "a beginning be had of the presbytereis instantlie in the places after following, to be exemplars to the rest which may be established hereafter, viz. Edinburgh, Sanct Andrewes, Dundie, Perth, Stirline, Glasgow, Air, Irwing, Hadinton, Dumbar, Chirnside, Linlithquo, Dunfermline. To some of thir presbytereis were assigned twelve, to some sixteene, to some twentie, to some four and twentie kirks, as the brethren departed to joyne them thought meetest, till better advice be had".

The execution of this task was entrusted to certain small groups of Assembly members and we find the Presbytery of Stirling, for example, established only four months later on the 8 August 1581. Its minutes, the earliest surviving of any Presbytery, record "the namis of the ministers and elders presentlie convenit quha acceptit upone thame offeice and plaice in the in the said presbytery be solem promeis in the presence of god thair hands beand haldin up promesing faithfullie to exerceis thair officis therein conform to the word of god unto the end of thair lywis as it sall plais god to minister unto thame the giftis of his holie spirit".

The brethern commissioned to erect the Presbyteries of Ayr and Irvine were "Mr.Johne Porterfeild, M r. Johne Young and Johne Makcorne". Their work took longer than that at Stirling. On 1 7 October 1581, in Edinburgh, again "Becaus presbytereis were not as yitt fullie established everie where, the Assemblie nominated some brethrein for everie countrie respective to travell diligentlie in erections of presbyteries betwixt and the nixt Assemblie".

In the list of areas lacking presbyteries, there still appeared "Kile, Carict and Cunninghame", but as far as we can judge from the absence of the names from later lists (e.g. at the next Assembly in April 1582) this further commission seems to have met with success. No exact date is known for the erection of the Presbytery of Ayr (whose area comprised Kyle and Carrick, the ancient divisions of the County of Ayrshire.) The extant minutes of the Presbytery begin on 20 April, 1642.

From 1560, the Church was governed by three Courts - the t general Assembly, the Synods, and the Kirk Sessions. At different times, Ifs ;hops, appointed by the Crown, presided over the Synods and wieldp(I .1(Ithority within their dioceses. In addition, during the first two decades of tile licformed Church, 'superintendents' were appointed "to plant and untet Kit kes, to set, order and appoint Ministers to the Countries that shall be appointed to their care where none are now." John Knox, also in his Book of Discipline, described the roving commissions of these officials: " After they have remained in their chiefe towne three or foure moneths at most, they shall bee compelled (unless by sicknesse they be retained) to re-enter in visitation, In which they shall not only preach, but also examine the life, diligence and behaviour of the Ministers, as also the order of the kirkes, the manners of the people. They must further consider how the poore be provided, how the youth be instructed; They must admonish where admonition needeth and dresse such things as by good counsell they be able to appease. And finally they must note such crimes as be heynous, that by the censure of the Kirk the same may be corrected".

In 1565, John Row, Minister of Perth, was thus commissioned by the General Assembly " to visit the Kirks and Schools of Kyle, Carrick and Cunninghame, and to remove or suspend ministers or readers as he found them offensive or incapable".

The introduction of presbyteries in 1581 removed the need for superintendents and created a four-tier system of Church government, which was to develop and grow but still retain its essential pattern up to the present day. The four Courts of the Church were now

(a) the Kirk Session. This body consisted of the minister, who presided over the weekly meeting, and the elders and deacons. Initially elders were elected on an annual basis but from 1592 the appointment was for life. The responsibilities of the kirk session included the administration of parish affairs, the keeping of the roll of baptised persons in full communion, the care for the poor, the provision of testimonials for those moving to another parish, and the supervision of the discipline of all those within the bounds of the parish. In this latter, the session cooperated closely in the towns with the magistrates (some of whom would be elders) and in the country areas with the heritors or landowners (some of whom might also be elders).

- (b) the Presbytery. This Court was composed of ministers, doctors (assistant ministers) and elders, the elders being chosen out of each Kirk Session in the area. Elders were encouraged to attend the monthly Presbytery meetings, especially when the business was important. Ministers on the other hand were under obligation to attend at all times. In 1586 the General Assembly indicated the functions of Presbyteries:
  - "1 ......to give diligent labours in the bounds committed to their charge, that the kirks be keeped in good order; to inquire diligentlie of naughtie and ungodlie persons, and travell to bring them in the way again, by admonitioun, or threatening of God's judgements, or by correctioun.
  - 2.......to take heed that the Word of God be purelie preached within their bounds, the sacraments rightlie ministered, the discipline mainteaned, and the ecclesiastical! goods uncorruptlie distributed.
  - 3.....to caus the ordinances made by the assembleis, provincial!, nationall and generall, to be keeped and putt in execution.
  - 4......to make constitutions .... for decent order of the particular kirk where they governe, providing that they alter no rules, made by the Provinciall or General) Assembleis, and that they make provincial! assembleis foresaid privile of the rules that they sail make, and to abolish constitutions tending to the hurt of the same.
  - 5......to excommunicat the obstinat, formal processe being led, and due intervalls of tyme being observed".
- (c) the Synod. This 'Provincial Assembly' brought together usually in April and October of each year all the members of Presbyteries within a wider area. Although in 1582 the General Assembly indicated the Synod's "power to conveine so oft as occasion sail requyre to advyse, intreat, conclude and make ordinances in such things as concern the weill of the Kirk, and thair charge in doctrine and discipline, with libertie to appoint tymes and places for that effect," they gradually diminished in importance despite a brief revival in the 1 7th century Restoration period. A Synod's main functions were to supervise the work and records of the Presbyteries within its bounds and to act as a Court of Appeal in cases referred from Presbytery.
- (d) the General Assembly. The Supreme Court met annually, sometimes more frequently. At times it was dispensed with altogether by the Crown. From the 1 560's it consisted "of representatives of the same three estates of the realm which at that time formed a Scottish parliament barons, burgesses and clergy. Lords and barons attended these assemblies in considerable numbers, but as individuals and not because they were elders of the kirk or representatives of congregations or other ecclesiastical organs: burgh commisioners attended, appointed not by any ecclesiastical body but by the town councils; and the clerical element consisted of the superintendents along with a selected number of ministers". Much later came the present arrangement of ministers and elders elected as commissioned representatives 'byall the Presbyteries' in the Church. Its main functions were to deal with all appeals from Synods or Presbyteries, e.g. in cases involving doctrine, wor ship or the censure of a minister, to consider proposals for change in laws or practices of the Church and in general "to attend to all mat will, affecting the efficiency of the Church and the religious and spir Owl I uiidition of the nation".

In 1592, Parliament at long last, and for the first Irmo, approved a presbyterian system — but it was not until 1690 and the coming of William of Orange that Presbyterianism triumphed. In the century that lay between, the work of Presbytery was carried on against a background of changing social and economic curcumstances and of not infrequent conflict between Crown and Kirk, between nations and, even at a local level, among the noble families of Ayrshire. It is not, however, within the compass of this book to explore that background. Others have described it in its fascinating detail. Suffice to say, the records of the Presbytery of Ayr add weight to the claim that, throughout, the Presbyteries were the most important single element in the ordinary administration and discipline of the Church. W. R. Foster, writing of the Restoration period, sums up thus: "To the average members of a kirk, the visitation of the presbytery was the chief visible sign of an ecclesiastical power and authority above that of the local parish. Both they and their ministers were judged by the authority of this presbytery. While it could technically be claimed that presbyteries were acting as agents of the bishop, since they met only on his approbation, this subordination would hardly be obvious to the average parishioner. He saw the members of the presbytery ride into town on the day appointed—the presbytery administered rebukes or noted its approval. For such laymen the presbytery was an important, integral part of their church life, while the bishop must have seemed to many a distant and somewhat irrelevant figure".