

Fourtowns Presbyterian Church

By Griffith Wylie

A glance at a map of the British Isles will show the proximity of Scotland to the North coast of Ireland. In the 17th and 18th centuries it would have been much easier for someone to travel by boat across the North Channel from County Antrim than to undertake a journey by land to Dublin. Scotland is the home of Presbyterianism and it is not surprising that the Presbyterian faith soon spread across the narrow sea to the North of Ireland. In the early days, budding Irish congregations had many difficulties to face and overcome — the opposition of the Established church, the Penal laws and an acute shortage of ministers. In the book “Scottish Conveners and Irish Confederates” by David Stevenson, there is a reference to the latter problem it quotes from a document where a Scottish agent was prepared to supply the Irish churches with “two ministers at 6/8 a peece or £9 a year”.

The penal laws made the practice of the Presbyterian Religion a criminal offence and congregations were forced to worship in secrecy. While we can not be certain as to exactly when a congregation was first formed in the Fourtowns area, there is a strong tradition that during the 18th century services were held in secrecy in “Dinsmore’s field” and in a quarry where the present-day church now stands. It was customary for the congregation to stand with their backs to the minister during prayers in order to keep a look-out for approaching yeomanry. The harshness of the Penal laws inevitably led to great resentment and it is no wonder that the United Irishmen in the North of Ireland were largely drawn from the Presbyterian community. The following account by Colin J. Robb concerning a member of the Fourtowns congregation appeared in the “Newry Reporter”. Entitled “The Fourtowns Insurgent”, it tells the story of John Shanks.

“John Shanks, while a shop-boy in Newry, joined the ranks of the United Irishmen and having returned to his home on the borders of Down and Armagh, east of Poyntzpass, formed a company of volunteers known as “The Fourtowns Boys” whose pikes were forged by Kerr, the local blacksmith.

“The Welsh fencibles who were very prominent in the district, raided the Fourtowns in October 1797 and burned many houses, irrespective of the political views

of the inhabitants.

“Shanks, it would appear, was taken prisoner when his hiding place — a turf stack — was set on fire by the Fencibles. He was taken prisoner but on the way to Newry he escaped and eventually made his way to Baltimore in America where he waited until things had cooled down. When he returned in 1807, he found employment with William Dinsmore of Loughadrian, a linen weaver on a large scale, in those days. He married a young woman called Ringland in 1810 and was buried in the Rock Meeting House Green on his death in 1825.”

Tradition has it that when the Fencibles with Shanks as a prisoner stopped at the Sheepbridge Inn, it was there that Shanks escaped. He was hunted across country but managed to avoid detection by lying in a bog and breathing through a reed. Tradition has it that from the hunt for Shanks, the custom of a Boxing Day hunt from the Sheepbridge Inn came into being — a custom that is still continued to this day although its origin is long forgotten.

The first official record of a congregation in the Fourtowns dates from 1810 with the Secession Presbytery of County Down.

The first church, erected in a quarry (hence the local name “The Rock Meeting House”) which was the property of Percival Meade, who had shown some sympathy for the congregation, was a plain building with an earthen floor and thatched roof. Seating consisted of simple forms. While it was a small church, in the eyes of one local farmer, it appeared much larger than was necessary and he is reputed to have said that if the church didn’t prove a success it would “make a good barn”.

Later, around 1830, major renovations were carried out, including the slating of the roof, the installation of pews with doors, and a centre aisle.

The first minister was a licentiate named David Norwood who subsequently went to the United States where he became minister in 1826 in Mahoning, Mount Jackson and Slippery Rock — from ‘The Rock’ to ‘Slippery Rock’!

The first ordained minister in the Fourtowns Church was Thomas Heron. An old session book of the congregation at Rathfriland records that an elder was

appointed to attend an ordination at Fourtowns on September 21st, 1813 which was most probably that of Thomas Heron, for on June 17th, 1814 it is recorded that he received the Royal Bounty grant which amounted to £40 IR or £36-18-6 British (nothing changes!) which was the sum to which a minister or a third class congregation in respect of the bounty was entitled. He died on October 25th 1816 as a result of a fall from his horse.

He was followed by Alexander Bryson who was ordained minister of the congregation on December 23rd 1817, remaining minister until 1855. The following is the "call" sent by the elders of the Fourtowns Church in 1817 to Alexander Bryson.

"We the undersigned members of the congregation of the Fourtowns taking into our serious consideration our deplorable circumstances by reason of a want of a fixed Pastor to break the bread of life amongst us and being assured by good information as well as our own experience of the literature, piety and other ministerial qualifications bestowed by the great head of the Church on you, Mr. Bryson, Probationer, do call and invite you to come over and help us, as we do hereby invite call and entreat you to take the charge and oversight of our families and we hereby promise you all due submission in the Lord; together with a suitable and competent subsistence in testimony of all which we hereunto subscribe our name at our Meeting House this 11th day of May 1817. William Thomson, Samuel Thompson, Andrew Thompson, George Sterit, Foster Bingham, John Geddis, John E. Wilson, Samuel Massie, James Ballaf, Nath. Macbrean, William Waddel, David Caven, William Carswell, Andrew Mc??, Andrew English, David Geddis, John McCormick, David Caven, Saml. Ferguson, James Arnold, Samuel Gladdis.

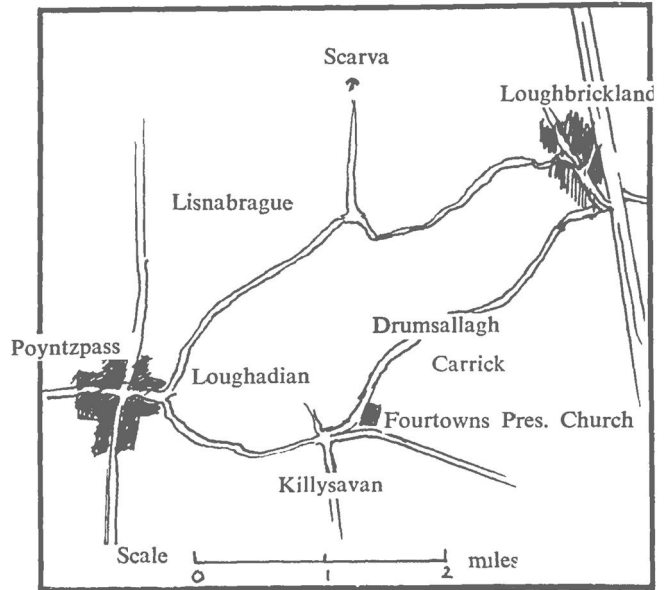
On the occasion of his ordination, he chose for his text "Therefore I came unto you without gainsaying, as soon as I was sent for. I ask therefore for what intent ye have sent for me." (Acts X:29).

During his pastorate, in 1832, the congregation consisted of "546 souls". In 1833 the congregation became a "second class" congregation which enabled it's minister to receive a bounty of £50 Irish (£46-3-1 British). It was during his ministry in 1840 that the church became connected with the general assembly which was formed by the union of the Synod of Ulster with the Secession Synod.

In 1847 there were 110 families in the congregation. The stipend paid Mr. Bryson that year was £25-1⁰

He was a fine classical scholar and in addition to his ministerial duties, prepared young men for university. He died on April 25th, 1855, aged 69, and is buried in the graveyard adjoining the church.

An unusual difficulty confronting the congregations at this time was the number of "mixed" marriages. In a State of Religion Report, it refers to the large number of "Presbyterian girls marrying Protestants!" The population trends over the years in the Fourtowns area make interesting reading — influenced by Famine and emigration.



Townland	1841	1851	1861	1926
Killysavan	406	296	277	78
Carrick	503	316	94	27
Lisnabrague	272	204	196	67
Drumsallagh	503	316	294	111
Loughadian	553	393	277	124

The Reverend Alexander Bryson was succeeded in June 1855 by his son Doctor John Bryson, a graduated of St. Andrews University. He remained minister until 1898, so that between them, father and son had ministered to the Fourtowns congregation for 81 years. At Doctor Bryson's installation, among those present was his close friend Doctor Cook who frequently invited him to preach in May Street Presbyterian Church, Belfast. He retired from active service 1898 but remained as senior minister and died on 22nd September 1902 aged 80. His monument is inscribed

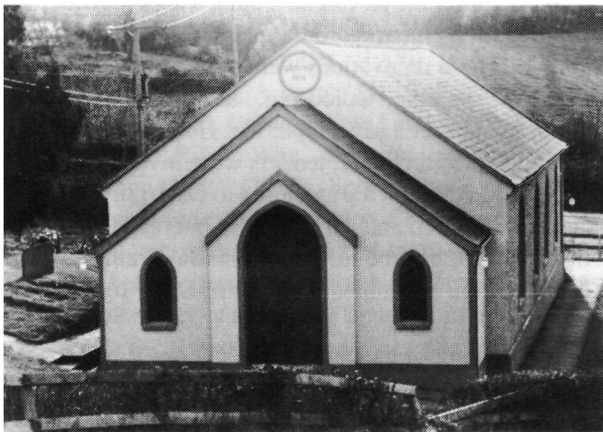
with the words "Here lyeth the remains of Rev. John Bryson. For 47 years the faithful minister of Fourtowns congregation."

Dr. Bryson was the author of a number of books including "The Presbyterian, the Prelate and the People", "The Three Marys" and "The Pulpit Orator" which were favourably received at the time. One of Dr. Bryson's brothers was George whose sons John and James established the firm Spence, Bryson and Co.

Community relations in the area at that time appear to have been good with many acts of good neighbourliness, as the following will of Tarens Flanagan shows:—

"Killysavan, January 14th 1860.

"I, Tarens Flanagan of the townland of Killysavan, Parish of Donoughmore, County of Down, of sound mind and judgment do a bequeath my soul to God, my body to the earth to be intared in a Christian burial ground.



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"As my last will and Testament I bequeath to Mary McKay, my daughter now in America, the sum of £25 and also to Saley Flanagan, now in America the sum of £15 and to Patrick Flanagan, also in America, the sum of £10. Also Hugh Flanagan near Banbridge the sum of £5. If I require any of this money before my death I wish it to be taken equally of every sum but the £5. The loom that is here, and the bed to my niece Rose Collins, the loom for her son and the rest of the furniture to my niece Jean Flanagan. I request William Wylie and James to be my executors. Witness my hand. Tarence O'Flanigan. Witness John Higgins."

It is interesting to note that four members of the family had emigrated, three to America and one to Scotland. There is no one of the name in the area now

but a hill overlooking Fourtowns Church is known as "Flannigan's Hill".

One way in which the good community relations were encouraged was when neighbours met on social occasions such as at a wake. The following bill from the establishment of Mrs. Agnews Mann, spirit grocer, Poyntzpass, dated 1891, shows the extent of one such wake in the Fourtowns areas.

3 quarts of whiskey	13-6
3¼ lbs cheese	2-2
1 bottle of wine	2-6
and later 1 gallon whiskey	18-0
1 lb butter	1-2
	<hr/>
	£1-17-4

A story is told about another wake where the neighbours enjoyed good hospitality for the customary three days. When the minister arrived for the funeral he was met at the door by a relative of the deceased who said that it had been decided by the neighbours to postpone the funeral for another day as there was plenty of "food and drink" left. When the minister objected to this he was told "Sure he's ating nothing!" The minister, on leaving, retorted that they were "worse than the Red Indians"!

During Dr. Bryson's time as minister he lived for a time in a house on the Omeath Road outside Newry. On one occasion, while conducting a wedding ceremony in the Fourtowns, he discovered that he had left the register in his home. At that time apparently, weddings had to take place before 2 p.m. Dr. Bryson instructed the congregation to on no account look at their watches while he set out for Newry in his pony and trap. In due course he returned with the register and the ceremony was completed to the satisfaction of all concerned.

In 1899 Rev. W. H. Sloane became Minister and remained in the position until 1907 when he ws called to Harryville, Ballymena.

For the next three years the congregation had no pastor, the neighbouring ministers officiating at services. At this period the congregation and Banbridge presbytery seemed to disagree over the vesting of the manse property with the result that the congregation "Prayed the General Assembly "in 1909" to be transferred to the Presbytery of Newry." The request was granted and the congregation transferred to Newry Presbytery in 1909.

The manse property which was at the centre of the disagreement was formerly the residence and farm of D. M. Hawthorn. The following extract from the minute book from the committee meeting on 27th February 1901:—

“Present were Rev. W. H. Sloane, Messrs. James Warwick, Robert W. Shannon, F. B. Small, John Copeland, Richard Hudson, James Jenkins, George Bingham and James A. Wylie...”



Interior of Church

“Mr. James Warwick proposed that the house and that portion of the farm property of the late D. M. Hawthorn, situated in the townlands of Ballymacarattymore and Carrickdrummond comprising 29 acres, 1 rood, should be bought as a manse and congregational property. Mr. Robert W. Shannon seconded. Messrs. Copeland and Hudson supported the motion which was passed unanimously.”

The committee's resolution was later put to the whole congregation on March 4th, 1901.

“Mr. Warwick, taking the chair, explained that the object of the meeting was to know the mind of the congregation with regard to the purchasing of White Hill (the residence of the late D. M. Hawthorn).”

The members unanimously agreed that the property should be purchased and James A. Warwick and Robert Bryson were appointed to attend the sale and purchase it on behalf of the Fourtowns congregation for the sum of £600.” This they duly did.

During the period 1907-1910 when the congregation had no minister, there was considerable pressure on them to unite with a neighbouring congregation. This was successfully resisted and leave was given to proceed with the settlement of a minister.



The Pulpit

In April, 1910 William Pearse Young, B.A., was chosen by the congregation and ordained as minister. A native of Milford, Co. Donegal, he remained until 1917.

Shortly after the Reverend Young's appointment the congregation embarked on a major renovation of the church. These renovations were to include “flooring, windows, seating, colouring, heating and a new porch,” and later a new pulpit. Mr. Hobart of Dromore was appointed architect, tenders were invited and Mr. McKinny, Portadown was chosen to carry out the work at a cost of £510 and cartage. It is interesting to note that “the seats and cement window frames were brought from Portadown to Poyntzpass by lighter, on the canal.”

The lighting of the church was to consist of “three bracket lamps each side, two for the pulpit and 1 hanging lamp.” It was also decided to purchase new gates and railings and Messrs. Small and Bryson purchased gates and pillars in Belfast for £14 (while the committee sold the old gates to Mr. Johnson for £1!) The gates were erected by Ringland Miskimmons and remain one of the most interesting features of the church.

The reopening services took place on August 2nd, 1914, and although it was no doubt a joyful occasion, it must have been, to some extent, overshadowed by the outbreak of World War One the day before. A report in “*The Newry Reporter*” of August 6th, 1914 gives the following account:

“The Fourtowns church, which during the past spring has become, under the hands of workmen, practically a new building, was reopened for Divine Service on Sunday last, with special services by Rev. W. J. Macauley, D.D., ex-Moderator of the General Assembly. A peculiar interest attaches to the event in

view of the fact that the congregation has recently attained the centenary of its existence. . . .

"The weather was favourable and large and interested audiences filled the house at both diets of worship.

Dr. Macauley took as his subject in the morning: "The growth of religion in the Soul" and in the evening he dealt with "The love of Christ"

". . . . An interesting ceremony took place at the close of the morning service, when Dr. Macauley presented to the congregation a beautiful memorial window erected to the memory of Rev. Alexander Bryson and Rev. Dr. Bryson two of their former ministers, the gift of the children and friends of the two men."

With the purchase of the manse and farm and the renovation of the Church, it is clear that the small congregation subscribed very generously. However it was still necessary to supplement their donations by various fund raising activities. The variety of these activities included "a soiree" (March 7th, 1900) "Limelight Entertainment," (December, 1900), "A Book of Quotations," (1912), A Bazaar (1910) Cinematograph Entertainer (1915), Lantern View Lecture (1916), Lecture on the River Wye, Auction at Manse, An "Autograph Quilt" (1904), Sports Day (1919) Guest Tea, Jumble Sale and Quotation Calendar etc.

The Quotation Book, produced in 1912, priced 6d, consisted of a collection of individuals' favourite quotations which they paid to have included in the book — some represent issues of the day, as this one, from a Mr. J. Jenkins, Clay, Banbridge, shows:

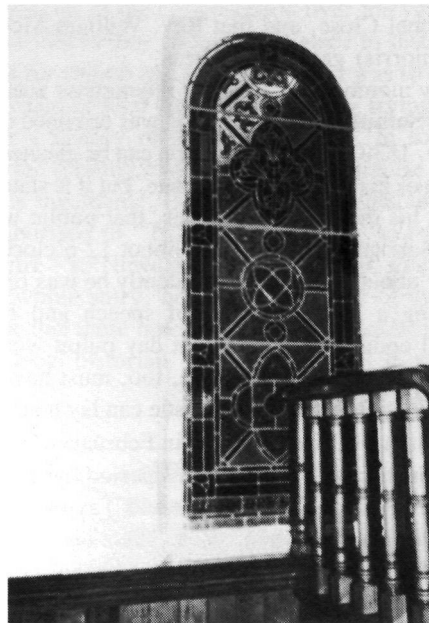
"Should women sit in Parliament,
A thing unprecedented,
A great part of the nation then
Would be miss represented."

Others are simply humorous, such as "The husbands of the talkative have a great reward hereafter," while the majority are of a religious nature.

In September, 1917, Rev. Young left Fourtowns, having been called to Galway. He was replaced in February, 1918 by Reverend T. W. Coskery. When Reverend Coskery died in April, 1921 he was not replaced and for the next six years, the duties of minister were fulfilled by a student, William Copes, and Reverend Joseph Gaston, a retired minister. Eventually the Union Commission insisted that Fourtowns unite with Poyntzpass and this union took place in June, 1927.

Little is known about the Poyntzpass congregation before 1835. According to an article written in 1936 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the erection of the Poyntzpass Presbyterian Church:—

". . . . Unfortunately, the first Minute Book of the congregation recording details concerning the inception of the cause has been lost. However, from old documents and files it has been ascertained that in 1836 a number of people in this district consulted together on the advisability of "erecting" a Presbyterian Church and having a regular supply of preachers of their own faith. On the 5th May, 1835, certain of them presented their case before the Newry Presbytery to investigate the situation.



Bryson memorial window

On hearing this deputation's report, the Presbytery instructed Rev. James Black (First Drumbanagher) to negotiate with Mr. John Bennett as to the possibility of getting the use of the market house to preach in. They also enjoined two or three persons to make a list of the people in Poyntzpass and district who were favourable to the intended erection.

Rev. James Black was accordingly appointed as the supply on the first Sabbath of July, 1835, the beginning of regularly organised services in this district. In October of the same year, Messrs. Robert Shanks, Thomas Crothers and Henry Hamilton, of Poyntzpass, appeared as a commission before the Presbytery, asking that they should be erected into an organised con-

gregation. The matter was postponed for a time, but the place and regular supply of ordinances was continued.

On Tuesday, 2nd February, 1836, at a meeting of Newry Presbytery in Rathfriland, the request of the people was granted, and they became duly recognised as a Presbyterian congregation. This it was in 1836 that the congregation was founded, though not till the year 1837 was the foundation stone of the church building laid. The commission appearing for the people at Rathfriland were Messrs. James Whigham, William McKeag, Samuel Shanks, Thomas Crothers and Robert Shanks.

From the files of the "*Newry Telegraph*" it is learnt that on 6th June, 1837, the foundation stone was laid by Colonel Close, and that Rev. William McGowan (Mountnorris) gave the address.

A few months later a call to Poyntzpass was issued to **Rev. Samuel Priestly**, and he was ordained on 23rd January, 1838. Little information can be gleaned about the man or his ministry at this date, but it is stated concerning his duties as a preacher, that public worship on the Sabbath was to begin "about 12 o'clock" and to end "about 3 o'clock." Evidently he was regarded as having a wonderful gift of speech and fund of physical endurance the present day pulpit would not care to face up to. The people, too, must have had a stock of patience our age of bustle can lay no claim to.

Rev. Samuel Priestly retired in February, 1863, and died in September, 1871. At this period the Kirk Session were Joseph Davis and David Taylor.

On 1st March, 1864, Rev. Thomas Irvine, of Strangford, was installed in Poyntzpass in succession to Mr. Priestly. His ministry lasted for 28 years and he died in 1894. In the year 1869 the Members of Ses-

sion were Messrs. S. Shanks, Wm. Moody, James Taylor, Matthew McComb, Andrew Alexander and Dr. Davis (Clerk).

In 1889 the following elders were ordained:— Messrs. William Griffith, James Bell, Thomas McComb and William Calvert.

The third minister of the congregation was Rev. S. J. Lyons, who was ordained minister of Poyntzpass and Scarva by Banbridge Presbytery on 4th January, 1893, under whose care it was placed by the Union Committee. Mr. Lyons only exercised his ministry for one year, having received a call to Millisle.

In the year 1894, Rev. D. J. Gordon was called from the congregation of Shercock and installed as minister of Poyntzpass and Scarva on 12th April of that year. He died on 3rd November, 1923, having minister faithfully here for 29 years.

From 1923 till 1927 the united congregations were regularly supplied with ordinances, chiefly by Rev. Mr. Copes and Rev. Joseph Gaston (who also supplied Fourtowns).

The union between Poyntzpass and Scarva was dissolved in 1927, and this congregation was **restored to the Newry Presbytery and united to Fourtowns.**

The first minister of the united congregations was the Reverend David McCausland who was installed on June 12th, 1927. Reverend McCausland became a very popular figure in the locality. A keen sportsman and musician, he took an active interest in the youth of the congregation. During his term in office, the Poyntzpass congregation celebrated its centenary. On the occasion, a moving address was given by the Very Reverend A. F. Moody, former Moderator of the General Assembly.

"A hundred years ago God led our fathers to build a house dedicated to His Worship in this place. Four generations have met within these hallowed walls. It is associated with all that is dearest and most sacred in life. Here you and your children were baptised in the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and solemnly dedicated to Him. Here young people have pledged their love and honour with God as registrar of their vows. Here for a hundred years your fathers and you have gathered at the Father's table and reverently remembered the Lord's death. . . . in the sacred plot around these walls you committed to God the dear dust of your beloved dead. . . ."

In 1952 Reverend McCausland retired. On the occasion of his death, the following tribute was paid to him by the congregation:—



Gates, which cost £14 erected in 1914 by Ringland Miskimmons

“We, the members of Session and Committee, wish to express our sincere and deep sense of loss at the passing of our beloved senior Minister. Mr. McCausland was installed in May 1927 and for 26 years was the faithful and well loved Minister of this congregation. He came to us at a critical period in the history of our Church. The union with Poyntzpass had just been consummated, and many of us at that time thought the union was doomed to failure, Mr. McCausland in his own inimitable way and with great tact and the exercise in cementing the strong bonds of friendship which so happily exist between our two congregations today.

“He was an excellent preacher, a faithful pastor, and a genuine friend — a living example of the Master whom he tried to serve. He was beloved by every single member of our congregation and we thank God for every remembrance of him.

“We extend our deepest sympathy in their sad bereavement to the members of his family who have lost a father whom we know was dearly loved by each one of them.”

In 1953, the Reverend R. A. Boyd was installed. He was another popular minister, keen sportsman and skilled angler. He remained until 1966, being then called to Ballyeaston, County Antrim. He was followed in 1967 by the Reverend James Tolland who was

minister in Fourtowns and Poyntzpass until 1971, being succeeded later that year by Reverend D. E. K. Mock. Reverend Mock, who served with distinction in the R.A.F. during World War Two, was a member of the Queen’s Flight and a founder member of the “Red Arrows” display team. A keen member of our historical society, he was appointed to Greystones, County Wicklow, in 1974, being succeeded after a gap of four years by Reverend William Beggs in April, 1978. A former teacher, during his 10 year term as minister he became much-loved by the congregation and the news of his retirement in September, 1988 was received with genuine regret.

In compiling these notes I have been impressed by the dedication of the congregation over the years and by the sacrifices they undoubtedly made to sustain and build up the church and congregation. I was struck too by the value of well kept minutes when trying to put together a history of the congregation. In some instances the spelling may not have been precise but the record is invaluable. (On one occasion the secretary was authorised to “Hire a ‘charrabang’ to transport the ‘quire’ to Newcastle”). I am aware that this is not the whole story, nor indeed the end of the story and hope that these notes will prove of interest to some other “local historian” a hundred years from now.



Fourtowns Manse