

Hollywood Priory Hamilton / in ruins



Origins, Dissolution and Burning

Among North Down's most interesting ecclesiastical remains are those of the old Priory in Hollywood. The site is one of considerable antiquity and there has been a religious establishment here possibly from as far back as the 7th century. The ruins as they stand are essentially of an early 13th-century church with a 15th-century addition to the west end. In the later Middle Ages this was a friary church of the Third Order of Franciscans. This was dissolved in the 16th century. In 1572 Hollywood was one of a number of churches burned by Brian O'Neill to stop them from being occupied by the forces of the Crown. A 1570s map (probably drawn for Sir Thomas Smith's colony of 1572 - 1575) shows a church building called "Holy Wood".

The Ulster-Scots restore the Priory

In the early 17th century Hollywood came into the possession of James Hamilton, Lord Clondeboy. The site of the pre-Reformation church continued in use in the seventeenth century. The Royal Visitation of 1622 noted that the church had been partly repaired. The four roundheaded windows in the south wall would appear to have been rebuilt at this time. In 1615 the first Protestant minister was appointed to Hollywood. Robert Cunningham had previously been the chaplain to the Duke of Buccleuch's regiment, but in the autumn of 1615 he came to North Down to begin a new ministerial career there. Cunningham was Presbyterian in outlook and this was tolerated during Robert Echlin's time as Bishop of Down. Most of his congregation were settlers from Scotland and it was said that he was 'a faithful pastor over the flock to whom he was appointed overseer'.

Revivals in 1625 and 1630s

He was involved in the Sixmilewater Revival in the mid 1620s along with a number of other Presbyterian ministers in east Ulster, including his near neighbour Robert Blair of

Bangor. John Livingston, the minister of Killinchy, wrote that Cunningham was ‘the one man to my discerning, of all that ever I saw, who resembled most the meekness of Jesus Christ in all his carriage, and was so far revered by all, even the most wicked, that he was oft troubled with that Scripture “Woe to you when all men speak well of you”’.

Livingston was himself to occasionally preach in Holywood. In the early 1630s there is a report of a service when ‘a more plentiful effusion of the Spirit attended a sermon of his at a communion in Holywood in Ireland, where about a thousand were brought home to Christ...’

Letters of Samuel Rutherford

On account of his Presbyterian views Cunningham was deposed by the Church of Ireland hierarchy in 1634. He then became involved in the scheme to sail to America and start a new life there on Eagle Wing in September 1636.

However, he did not go. The failed voyage is discussed in a letter from the famous Samuel Rutherford to Cunningham on 4 August 1636, which is included in Rutherford’s worldfamous published ‘Letters’ (letter 63). Cunningham’s death is recorded in Rutherford’s letter 110, to David Dickson of Irvine.



Death and memorial in Scotland

Fearing for his freedom if he remained in Ireland, Cunningham moved to Irvine on the west coast of Scotland where he died on 29th March 1637, remembering on his



death bed to pray for his former parishioners in Holywood.

His good friend Robert Blair composed an epitaph in Latin for his tombstone. The inscription on a more modern ledger stone in the churchyard at Irvine reads:

Erected Anno Dom 1824 to the memory of The Rev Robert Cunningham

Sometime Minister of the Gospel at Holywood in Ireland, who for his faithfulness to the cause of CHRIST, was expelled from his charge by the Bishops and died in exile at Irvine on the 27th of March 1637 He was eminently distinguished for meekness and patience and zeal in his ministry

Solemn League and Covenant

In 1644 Presbyterian services were once again heard in Holywood. In April of that year the Solemn League and Covenant was brought to the town to be signed by the local populace. A copy of this Covenant is in the collection of the Ulster Museum. It reads:

At Holliwood the 8th Apryll, 1644, and upon ye ninth herof lykweyes after sermon delyvered by Mr William Adair upon both these days the Covenant of religion was explained and thereafter sworne, subscribed, and seald w't marks by a number of ye inhabitants of ye Kingdom of Irland

There are 67 signatures on this document, including: Mr William Adair (the minister who preached), Master Charles Hall (probably the parish minister at the time), John Wright, Thomas Reid, Thomas Bailie, Alexander Waddell, John McCormick, John Waugh, John Scott, John McBride, James Fairlie, Thomas Russel, John Pentland, Alexander Gillespie, John Martin, James Webster and John McClelland (possibly of Newtownards, the principal of Sir Hugh Montgomery's 'great school' and part-time minister, and who was on Eagle Wing)

In 1657 the church was in good repair, but in 1679 it was described as ruinosa. Some time after this it was repaired and was in use as the Church of Ireland parish church until 1844 when a new church was built in Holywood.

- Just across the road from Holywood Priory is Thornbank Manse – this was the home of the Rev. Henry Henderson (1820 – 1879) who wrote a column entitled "Ulster Scot's Letters to his Friends at Home and Abroad" in the Belfast Weekly News under the pseudonym "Ulster Scot", from 1869 – 1879. When he died, his son William carried on the column as "Ulster Scot junr".