

History, religion and community in North East Fife

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Introduction and Aims

The small parish of Kingsbarns, a few miles down the coast from St Andrews, possesses four hundred years of history. That history is excellently preserved in the kirk session minutes - records of the weekly meetings of the church court. These sources offer exceptional insight into the lives of those 'in the pew.'¹ Additionally, the foundation of the parish in 1631 forces our focus away from debates over the success or failure of the Scottish Reformation of 1560.² Instead the parish is well situated to make a significant contribution to wider historiographical debates about the lived experience of early modern Scots.

The aim of this research project was to use these sources to understand early modern Scottish society on the local level. This meant an in-depth study of primary source material, like kirk session

minutes and parliamentary records. However, the content in these sources cannot be taken as gospel. They are mediated versions of events that occurred in the past, so must be read with a critical eye. A large part of the research included understanding how these sources have led to different analyses of early modern Scottish society by historians.

The research led me to understand different aspects of that society between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries by critically analysing the available sources. The church in Kingsbarns acted as an intermediary between local and national trends. It enforced discipline on the local level, and collected money for diverse charitable causes. These helped to reinforce a Protestant, national identity among early modern Scots.



James Gordon, *Fifae Vicecomitatus, The Sheriffdom of Fife, 1654*. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.



John Henry Lorimer, *The Ordination of Elders in a Scottish Kirk*, oil on canvas, 1891.

Methods and methodological challenges

The primary evidence in my research came from the kirk session. This was the church court, which oversaw moral standards and welfare in the parish. It was headed by the minister, 'Moderator *ex officio*.'³ The rest of the session was made up of a collection of elders, selected from the local community and expected to have some significant connection to the parish.⁴ The elders of Kingsbarns were probably farmers from the surrounding countryside, and, later, merchants connected to North Sea trade. The session met weekly to address issues discovered by the elders when they visited their quarters, and these meetings were recorded by a clerk.

I used this set of primary sources to infer information about the daily lives of the laity in early modern Scotland. By examining the types of offences punished or welfare distributed recorded by the session, the historian can understand demographic trends, social relations, and moral benchmarks as perceived by past actors. This use of the session minutes aligns with the historical anthropology of Margot Todd, who recognised the potential of the sources to

understand early modern society.⁵ The methodology gives agency to the laity themselves, and helps us understand their motivations more clearly.

However, there were some challenges associated with this methodology. It was important to remember that the session clerks mediated and altered the words of the laity to fit their own understanding of society. The members of the session were subjective players, and had their own turns of phrase which can be distorted over time. When reading the sources, I had to be aware of this narrow perspective that drove their creation.

At the same time, it was also important to recognise the implicit canonisation of primary material through printing and digitisation. Central records were prioritised over local ones by past actors. For example, the acts of the General Assembly of the Scottish kirk were all online, while kirk minutes exist only in manuscript form. I had to understand that my analysis was to be shaped by the conscious decisions of historians before me.

Kingsbarns the parish

Foundation Kingsbarns was created from the parish of Crail in 1631.⁶ This was part of a broader phenomenon initiated by 1581 act of parliament abolishing a plurality of kirks in one parish.⁷ Parishes of this kind were usually large enough to make it difficult for parishioners to come to church and hear the minister. The parish of Crail, which proceeded Kingsbarns, suffered from this issue. The village is three miles from the church in Crail, and 'verie evill way, especiallie in winter.'⁸ Visitations indicate that the Church and laity were equally concerned with easy access to the church, such as its importance in early modern local society.

Discipline Sabbath breaking was a common offence brought to the session. In coastal parishes, this often meant the sin of working on a Sunday, usually on the salt pans. In March 1643, the overseer of the Kingsbarns salt pans was brought to the Presbytery by the minister, accused of resting his pans 'from sixe on the Sabboth morning till sixe on Monday morning.'⁹ Masters would break the sabbath by proxy by appearing in church while sending their servants to work.¹⁰ In small Kingsbarns, sinners would be known to the elders. The guilty would be stationed on the stool of repentance during the Sunday sermon, in an act of public humiliation.¹¹

Charity The session administered welfare, and the parishes formed a web of ministers to most effectively do this. The laity would be part of a wider picture, with the church as the intermediary. Locally, Kingsbarns people provided monetary aid after a fire in Cupar in October 1669.¹² They would be made aware of national events through charitable contributions; they raised money for the rebel army in Ireland in 1643.¹³ Internationally, the people of Kingsbarns helped towards the thousand Scots marks ransom of Fifers Alexander Lathrishe and David Kirkaldie, held in captivity on a Spanish galley in 1633.¹⁴



J. Valentine & Sons, *The Church, Kingsbarns*, c. 1934. Image Courtesy of the University of St Andrews Library, ID JV-A-207-A.

Summary

- Studying Kingsbarns parish helps the historian reframe their understanding of early modern Scottish society because of its chronology and sources
- The methods used by the historian can greatly impact their conclusions; the kirk session minutes have great potential but must be read critically and carefully
- My research follows Margo Todd's historical anthropology method, using the kirk session minutes as a window to the past
- Ultimately, the benefits we can gain from using kirk session minutes to understand topics like social relations and moral understandings outweigh the drawbacks of their biases
- In Kingsbarns:
 - The laity had their own agency and pursued the salvation - they were not wholly directed by the Church
 - The disciplinary records in Kingsbarns reveal it to be a vibrant trading port in an important area
 - Discipline also helped to foster a shared responsibility for salvation, with parishioners being made aware of sins committed by others
 - Local welfare actions ensured the Kingsbarns parishioners were aware of regional, national, and international trends and events outside of Fife; this also furthered awareness of shared commitment and responsibility to the Church
- All these factors meant the laity built a Protestant, national identity on a local scale, which was replicated across Scotland in similar parishes

References

- ¹ Margo Todd, *The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland* (London, 2002), pp. 7-8.
- ² Hew Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae: the succession of ministers in the Church of Scotland from the Reformation*, Vol. 5 (Edinburgh, 1925), p. 215.
- ³ Acts: 1704 - Overtures concerning discipline and method in ecclesiastical judicatories, II, 1' in *Acts*, pp. 337-381, BHO, <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/church-scotland-records/acts/1638-1842/pp337-381>>, [accessed 22/08/2020].
- ⁴ 'Acts: 1704, II, 2', in *Acts*, pp. 337-381, BHO, <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/church-scotland-records/acts/1638-1842/pp337-381>>, [accessed 22/08/2020].
- ⁵ Todd, *Culture of Protestantism*.
- ⁶ Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticae*, p. 215.
- ⁷ K. M. Brown et al (eds.), *The Records of the Parliaments of Scotland to 1707* (St Andrews, 2007-2020), 1581/10/21.
- ⁸ *Ecclesiastical Records: Selections from the minutes of the Presbyteries of St. Andrews and Cupar, M.DC.XLI. - M.DC.XCVIII* (Edinburgh, 1837), p. 52.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ¹⁰ 'Acts: 1643, Sess. 11, August 14, 1643,' in *Acts*, pp. 73-96, BHO, <<https://www.british-history.ac.uk/church-scotland-records/acts/1638-1842/pp73-96>> [accessed 22/08/2020].
- ¹¹ John Di Folco, 'Discipline and Welfare in the Mid-Seventeenth Century Scots Parish', *RSCHS*, 19 (1977), pp. 169-183, p. 174-5.
- ¹² *Ecclesiastical Records: Selections from the minutes of the Synod of Fife, M.DC.XI. - M.DC.LXXXVII* (Edinburgh, 1837), p. 186.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.