

Annual Conference : 31 March – 4 April 1980
Strathmore, The Heartland of the Scottish Kingdom

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It was in torrential rain on the last day of March that conference members made their several ways to the warm and welcoming haven of Chalmers Hall, where we found a very small group of residents and an enthusiastic band of locals. It is much to be regretted that the numbers were so small and also that so few of the speakers were resident, thus depriving us of the opportunity for more informal discussions at meal-times and in the evenings. Perhaps a more exotic and inaccessible venue is a necessary prerequisite for the assembling of a large resident group. On the other hand, it was probably the comparative nearness of Dundee to so many universities and colleges that made it possible for the organisers to entice so many experts to address the conference.

Secure in the knowledge that we were all equipped with wellingtons and waterproofs, we drew the curtains on the rain-washed streets and settled down for our first session on Strathmore in the earliest periods. Christopher Dingwall dealt with the evolution of the landscape and took us on a breathless tour through 600 million years or so. He showed us some fascinating maps and some beautiful slides but our conference might have been better served by rather less of Strathmore under ice or water and a rather more detailed discussion of Strathmore as it is today and as it probably was in the time of the Picts and the Vikings. It was quite a relief when the pace slowed for the next two lectures. D.B. Taylor gave us a survey of the Iron Age in Strathmore and Professor A. Robertson a lecture on the Romans in Strathmore. Both these authoritative talks were lavishly illustrated with slides of sites excavated by the speakers, sites that we were going to visit, sites that there would not be time to see, excavated sites that have since been covered up, and sites only visible as crop marks on aerial photographs.

We awoke on All Fools' Day to fine weather and the most

perfectly planned conference day that I have ever experienced. The Zealands obviously felt that we all needed to be put right about the Picts and they did this by devoting the day to three lectures and a related excursion, all concerned with the Picts. Before we set out on the excursion, Dr. Graham Ritchie talked about Pictish Art and Sculpture, explaining the classification of the Pictish stones into Class I, erratic boulders incised with symbols on one side, Class II, dressed slabs with an interlaced cross carved in relief on one side and symbols, also in relief, on the other, and Class III, crosses without symbols. The occurrence on one and the same Class II stone of Pictish symbols and decoration very reminiscent of Northumbrian stone sculpture was a great revelation to at least one member of conference and I am sure that we shall all remember that bull with the mean bullish look in his eye. Dr. Ritchie's talk was followed by Dr. Anthony Jackson's discussion of Pictish symbolism from an ethnographic point of view. He treated us to a clear survey of earlier attempts at interpretation and then advanced his own views on this very difficult question. With our appetites whetted for more information about the elusive Picts, we were bundled into a bus and driven off to Meikle, where the presence of the large number of slabs now to be seen in the Museum there suggests that Meikle must once have been an important Pictish site with a continuing tradition of carving cross-slabs. It was most illuminating for us to have the stones explained by Grahame Ritchie and Anthony Jackson. Later we went to see the stones at Aberlemno and drove past the site of the battle of Nechtansmere. An article in a number of *The Scots Magazine* which circulated in the bus prompted a lively discussion as to the number of drams necessary to provoke a vision of the Pictish warriors searching for their dead. In case we should tire of unadulterated Picts, we were led up the very early vitrified hill-fort at Finavon. The view from the top was ample compensation for the puffing and panting with which the less athletic members of conference struggled up the ramparts. Our Pictish day was rounded off after dinner by Dr. Anna Ritchie's presentation of the surviving evidence about the Picts themselves. The chairman's concluding remark to the effect that now we all had the Picts taped was perhaps over-optimistic but for me at least the

Picts will never again be shrouded in quite such an impenetrable veil as that which has concealed them from me hitherto.

The Wednesday of our full-day excursion dawned bright and fair. The excursion took us far afield and to sites which ranged in time from the Iron Age to the post-medieval period. We climbed the White Catterthun with its stone ramparts and from there looked across at the Brown Catterthun with its concentric earthen ramparts. We visited the ruined priory at Restenneth, which has surviving fabric from a period that I have learned not to call pre-Conquest. The priory showed a clear affiliation to the early stone churches of Northumbria. At Brechin we visited the twelfth-century cathedral and the adjacent Round Tower, that is two centuries older than the cathedral and clearly reflects the influence of the Celtic church. We were allowed into the impressive abbey ruins at Arbroath, in spite of the fact that we had temporarily lost our leader and our permit to enter. Many of us will no doubt be re-reading *The Antiquary* after this visit to 'Fairport'. Some of us found an idyllic spot to eat our packed lunches, the walled garden at Edzell castle, but we were soon politely ejected from there and had to beat a hasty retreat to the bus. We did not have time to stop as we drove homewards through the port of Montrose, with its tradition of trade with the Baltic ports, but with all the appropriateness that we were beginning to expect from our organisers, the evening lecture by Professor S.G.E. Lythe was devoted to Economic Relations between N.E. Scotland and the Baltic, 1500–1650. As Professor Lythe quoted statistics of ships from various Scottish ports paying the Sound Toll to enter the Baltic, we thought back to the sunlit streets of Montrose, Arbroath and Dundee that afternoon.

Thursday was another bright sunny day and could even be warm. The programme was rather more varied than on earlier days and a valiant effort was obviously being made to cater for the northern inclinations of conference members. We began with a lecture by David Adams, who took us on a conducted tour at lightning speed through the Kingdom of the Scots under the Impact of Scandinavia. David had wisely provided us with

handouts showing genealogies of the MacAlpin kings, the kings of Dublin and York, the Mormaers of Moray and other influential families. By clinging to these, we were all able to arrive at the finishing-post more or less in step. Then we were whisked off on yet another marathon tour, this time under the guidance of Bruce Walker. With the aid of a splendid collection of slides, he explained the types of building materials and the methods of construction that had been used in non-monumental building in Strathmore through the ages. It seems that practically any material could and was used for building and it was refreshing to find such devotion expended upon the kind of buildings that our own forefathers might actually have lived in rather than upon monumental structures built for their regal, noble or ecclesiastical oppressors.

Thursday afternoon's excursion did not go quite according to plan. First of all, as a bonus, Bruce Walker took us to see two of the villages about which he had been talking and we strolled along the village street at Rait, wagging our heads knowledgeably as we recognised features demonstrated in the morning's lecture. Time was passing, however, and we had still not begun upon the planned excursion, so we made our way quickly to Forteviot. Here David Adams attempted to lead an expedition to find the site of Kenneth MacAlpin's palace (or was it his grave?) but most of us mutinied and sat of the village green to eat our lunch. The faithful few, however, found the site we were looking for and, when our hunger was stilled, we all dutifully traipsed across a field to see it, even though warned in advance that there wasn't anything to see. From Forteviot we drove to Scone, which unfortunately was closed, and then on to Cluny. Some of us climbed the mound there, whose exact nature was hotly debated, while others looked in the church and its outbuildings. The weather was glorious and it was here that the second mutiny of the day occurred. No one would return to the bus. Instead, Ian Fraser, who had joined us for the day, told us something about the place-names of the region, to the joy of this place-name maniac, who was beginning to suffer withdrawal symptoms. Finally we were all herded onto the bus again and driven past Dunsinane — the last of the sites on

the day's programme that we were not to see. After dinner, Barbara Crawford talked to us about Scotland and Scandinavia in the later Middle Ages. This is a period for which sources of information are few and scattered but Dr. Crawford gave us an elegant demonstration of just how much information can be squeezed out of the surviving sources and she introduced us to an enigmatic Englishman, Welland of Stikelawe (probably Stickley in Northumberland), who made a career for himself at both the Scottish and the Norwegian courts.

The traditional ceilidh was enlivened by the presence of two local groups, three fiddlers and an accordeon-player from a larger group, who normally played for Scottish dancing, and an extremely versatile folk-group. These local entertainers treated us to a wide variety of songs and music and some of the bolder conference members were also persuaded to perform. We were given tastes of local poetry of varying degrees of excellence and, perhaps to compensate for the absence of several of the society's best singers, there was more dancing than usual. All the dancers were enthusiastic but some were not very experienced and it didn't help matters that some participants in the Duke of Perth's Reel thought they were supposed to be dancing Strip the Willow. The musicians were apparently accustomed to playing at marathon dance competitions and the dancers could occasionally be seen to be visibly weakening at the knees but they all stuck it out to the bitter end, determined that it should never go down in history that the Strathmore conference had been forced to capitulate to a Scottish waltz.

A new departure in the programme was a session held on the final morning. There was some discussion as to whether or not this practice should be continued but everyone was agreed that it had been a good idea to secure the services of the morning's two lecturers. Dr. Duncan Shaw gave us an extremely useful bibliographic introduction to the study of Scots in Prussia and Alex Muir spoke about Eighteenth-Century Flax Mills in Angus, some of which we had seen on our excursions.

Members of conference owe a debt of gratitude to the

Society for once again arranging a most enjoyable conference and in particular to Gillian and Adrian Zealand for planning a programme that was just about as well integrated as could be imagined. It was obvious that much thought had gone into its planning and much hard work into its realisation. It is a pity that more Society members did not attend the conference in Dundee to enjoy the sights of Strathmore and the comforts of Chalmers Hall, and to listen to the quite exceptionally rewarding programme of lectures which the Zealands had arranged for our benefit.