

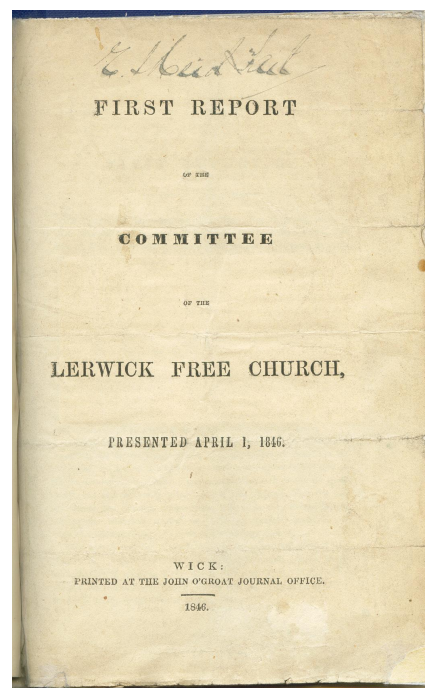
Free Church History

As early as 1839, non-conforming Presbyterian congregations were meeting in Lerwick, Scalloway and Mossbank (1842). At this time they were associated with the United Secession Church, which became the United Presbyterian Church in 1847 after its union with the Relief Church. Within the established Church of Scotland the 'disruption' of 1843 saw two fifths of its ministers and nearly as many of its members leaving to form the Free Church of Scotland, which considerably swelled the ranks of the dissenting churchesⁱ. The rift was largely the result of a disagreement concerning state control of the established church. On the 18th of May 1843 more than 450 ministers, led by Thomas Chalmers left the Church of Scotland General Assembly at the Church of St Andrew in Edinburgh's George Street, to form the Free Church of Scotland.ⁱⁱ



THE FIRST GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE FREE CHURCH OF SCOTLAND, SIGNING THE ACT OF SEPARATION AND DEED OF DEMISSION AT TANFIELD, EDINBURGH, MAY, 1843

Fourteen months following the disruption, the fledgling 'Lerwick Free Church' was formed and on the first Sunday of August 1844 its congregation held their inaugural gathering. The first report of the committee of the Lerwick Free Church (1846) (pictured left) is held in the library and clearly outlines the ecclesiastical and financial intentions of the young committee.ⁱⁱⁱ Believing itself to be the 'authentic' Church of Scotland liberated from the state, various challenges lay in store for the Free Church not least that of providing 'religious ordinances rivalling those of the 'residual' establishment'.^{iv} The congregations and various ministers however, overcame these early obstacles with prayerful stewardship and devout organisation. Writing in 1923 Thomas Manson commented that the Free Church in Lerwick, ever since its formation in the 1840s has 'been a living and active institution. It



has worked quietly and unostentatiously along the lines it set for itself.^v The 'Frees' and the United Presbyterians eventually united in 1900 to form the United Free Church and despite several Unions, splits and changes of building, the United Free Church in Lerwick remained very much a part of Lerwick's social fabric, with several leading town figures included in its membership throughout the years. A warm welcome was always extended to visitors at its



Lerwick Free Church communion plate and cup from 1850 (courtesy of Shetland Museum)



Lerwick Free Church plate and jug from 1850 (courtesy of Shetland Museum)

various meetings and events. The items pictured above right and left are some of a number of items donated to the Shetland Museum when the UF congregation in Lerwick was dissolved.

ⁱ Ronald G Cant 'Church Life in Shetland in the Nineteenth Century', in Barbara E Crawford (ed) *Essays in Shetland History* (Lerwick, Shetland Times 1984), p217.

ⁱⁱ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disruption_of_1843

ⁱⁱⁱ First Report of the Committee of the Lerwick Free Church Presented April 1st 1846. (John O'Groats Journal Office, Wick 1846) Reid Tait Collection (miscellaneous pamphlets) 17:15.

^{iv} Cant, R G (1984) p217.

^v Thomas Manson, *Lerwick During the last Half-Century 1867 – 1917* (Lerwick, Lerwick Community Council 1923) republished (1991), p286.