

## The Sanctuary

St Ringan's UF Church (the name 'Ringan' a variant of 'Ninian')<sup>i</sup> stood proudly at the forefront of Lerwick's late 19<sup>th</sup> Century advance to the west. Commanding a prominent position on the Hillhead St Ringan's is one of the few truly cruciform post-reformation churches in Shetland. Despite receiving little attention by Mike Finnie in *Shetland: an Illustrated Architectural Guide* (1990) where it is described thus 'a



rubbly cruciform kirk, whose gables rise up to a dumpy battlemented tower over the crossing'<sup>ii</sup> St Ringan's before and since has attracted more favourable commendation. Around the time of its opening, The Shetland News of 24<sup>th</sup> July 1886 described the building as 'a cruciform building of the early English order of architecture. The church is built of local stone with facings of Orkney freestone, the latter being used for doorways, windows, buttresses and parts for which dressed stone is needed'.<sup>iii</sup> The Shetland Times of the same date added its approval of the new church by adding that 'the United Presbyterian congregation is to be congratulated upon the acquisition of so beautiful a building and one so well adapted for purposes of worship and deserve the thanks of the community for having added another ornament to the town'.<sup>iv</sup> James W Irvine describes St Ringan's as 'beautiful'; Manson as 'handsome' and former UF minister the Rev J.



The Lancelot Window

A. M. McFie commented that St Ringan's was a 'lovely premises' and a 'wonderful building in which to worship'.<sup>v</sup> The Rev McFie goes on to speculate that Liverpool Cathedral inspired St Ringan's design. There is little evidence to support this, however it is interesting to note that according to T. A. Manson, the platform and pulpit of St Ringan's were erected from designs provided by a Liverpool architect, a Mr R G Sykes.<sup>vi</sup> Ann Halcrow sheds more light on the Liverpool connection by revealing that R Sykes was in fact the architect for the entire building, while local

firm Messrs Sinclair and Hardie undertook the building work.<sup>vii</sup> The Rev Willcock, the individual synonymous with the early UF Church was also born in Liverpool.<sup>viii</sup> Foreman for the building of St Ringan's was one Joseph Irvine of Stromfirth, Weisdale. He was a fairly prolific builder – with other undertakings including, Tingwall Manse, Voe Church, and Brevik Cottages. Interestingly, he was also a keen violinist and lay Wesleyan preacher.<sup>ix</sup>



The Rose Window

St Ringan's boasts two beautifully restored stained glass windows. Mr R P, Gilbertson in memory of his father, the late Thomas Gilbertson, Lerwick, gifted the lancet (South-facing) window to the church. It portrays the Lord's Supper as a mystical feast. Surrounded by elaborate tracery, various Christian monograms occupy the spaces above. The inscription reads 'To the Glory of God and in Memory of Thomas Gilbertson who

died 1868 and of Bessie Coutts who died 1871, their children dedicate this window 1886'. On the north gable of the building is the impressive rose window. In his *Shetland Life* no 258 April 2002 article, Dr Napier notes with surprise that no mention of this window is made in the *Shetland News* of 24<sup>th</sup> July 1886. Surrounding the central circle are eight 'petals' each containing an angel. The top angel appears to be playing the cymbals, the left and right angels the harp while the bottom angel plays the violin.

The remaining four are supportively looking toward the central circle within which the Virgin Mary and Christ Child are depicted. Perhaps more oddly still is the existence of such a window in a United Presbyterian Church as St Ringan's was then. In many respects both the design and content of the window would perhaps seem more at home in a church of the Anglican or even catholic persuasion. The rose has often been associated traditionally and pictorially with the Virgin Mary, who was sometimes referred to as the Mystic Rose. The central scene of the window is also interesting in the sense that the figure of Mary is seated on a golden throne, representing royalty and that the backdrop is a stellar sky-scape, representing the Heavens – the Virgin Mary is also known in Catholic circles as the 'Queen of Heaven'. It could therefore be considered unusual to find such symbolism in a United Presbyterian setting. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century however, there was a noteworthy 'gothic' or 'Victorian' revival in terms of architecture and stained glass window manufacture. Perhaps as a result of early 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism both the 'gothic' and 'neo-classical' styles of architecture enjoyed significant indulgence by architects such as Sir George Gilbert Scott (Glasgow University's present campus) and Alexander 'Greek' Thomson (Caledonia Road United Presbyterian Church, Gorbals, Glasgow) both committed Christians – the former catholic and the latter protestant. In a very broad sense then, it is possible for the casual observer to associate gothic

architecture with catholic and classical with protestant. These crude observations when applied to St Ringan's initially appear to render its design all the more unique. In some respects, it is a blend of several influences, from old English cruciform through Presbyterian functionality to the anomaly that is the rose window. Perhaps at the time of completion the casual observer may not have necessarily associated St Ringan's rose window with Catholicism as there were no catholic church



Inside St Ringan's looking toward the pulpit with pipe organ clearly visible. March 1997 (courtesy of Dr Ramsay Napier).

buildings in Shetland with which to compare notes – St Margaret's only being built in 1911. Then again even if there had been, there appears to have been a tendency in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century for church designs and designers to borrow from each other across the ecclesiastical spectrum. Even in Belfast for example – where catholic/protestant differences are arguably more strongly felt than most cities – one can still find incongruities such as Fitzroy Presbyterian Church, University Street. GotoBelfast.com describe it as following the ‘...Gothic Revival style that became popular throughout Ulster in the late 19th century’.<sup>x</sup> Built in 1872 – 74 (only a decade or so before St Ringan's), Fitzroy is further described as ‘an eclectic mix of gothic forms’.<sup>xi</sup> St Ringan's therefore simply reflects the architectural trends prevalent at the time of its construction and its rose window, seen from this



Inside St Ringan's looking up the aisle toward the pulpit. March 1997 (courtesy of Dr Ramsay Napier).

perspective can be appreciated for its beauty, rather than taken as some kind of ideological statement. It is one of only a few stained glass windows in Lerwick where the public can actually touch and examine the work up close. The Shetland Amenity Trust kindly assisted financially with the restoration of the windows and much of the work was done in Fair Isle by Patrick Ross-Smith who's ‘undoubted skills were shown up to their full when the sun lit up the lancet window while Mr Malcolmson spoke directly underneath’<sup>xii</sup> during the Library's opening ceremony. The priceless nature of the windows was reflected in the insurer's insistence that they be returned from Fair Isle on no less than two separate boat trips. The windows not only testify to the skill and craftsmanship of the original makers and restorer, but also – even on a typically dull Shetland day – they illuminate beautifully to provide a pleasing and entirely fitting backdrop for customers and staff alike.

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- <sup>i</sup> Hugh Marwick, *Celtic Place Names in Orkney* (Proc Soc Antiq Scot 1957) p265.
- <sup>ii</sup> Mike Finnie, *Shetland: An Illustrated Architectural Guide* (Edinburgh, Mainstream/RIAS, 1990) p28.
- <sup>iii</sup> *Shetland News* 24<sup>th</sup> July 1886.
- <sup>iv</sup> *Shetland Times* 24<sup>th</sup> July 1886.
- <sup>v</sup> Rev J A M McFie, 'News from the Shetlands' Rev David Beatty (ed) *Stedfast Magazine* (2002).
- <sup>vi</sup> Thomas Manson, *Lerwick During the last Half-Century 1867 – 1917* (Lerwick, Lerwick Community Council 1923) republished (1991) p285.
- <sup>vii</sup> Ann Halcrow, *CENTENERY: St Ringan's Church Lerwick, Shetland 1886 – 1986* (Lerwick, Shetland Litho 1986) p6.
- <sup>viii</sup> Margaret Stuart Robertson, *Sons and Daughters of Shetland* (Lerwick, Shetland Publishing Co 1991), p223.
- <sup>ix</sup> Robertson, M S (1991) p89.
- <sup>x</sup> <http://www.gotobelfast.com> (accessed 19/10/2006).
- <sup>xi</sup> <http://www.gotobelfast.com> (accessed 19/10/2006).
- <sup>xii</sup> *Shetland Times* Friday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2002