

PRIMITIVE SCOTTISH BELLS.

“Notes on the Buidhean or Bell of Strowan, and other primitive Ecclesiastical Bells of Scotland, by Dr Daniel Wilson, Sec.” This communication was chiefly designed to confute the idea advocated by the late Dr Samuel Hibbert, in vol. iv. of the *Archæologia Scotica*, as well as by other British antiquaries, that the curious relic of this class found at Kilmichael-Glassry, Argyllshire, and now in the Society’s Museum, is of Scandinavian origin. In illustration of the paper, several ancient Scottish hand-bells were exhibited; and among them the Buidhean or bell of Strowan, a curious example of this primitive class of ecclesiastical relics, which continued in use in the parish of Strowan, Blair-Athol, until replaced a few years since by a new bell given in exchange for it by its present possessor, J. P. M’Inroy, Esq., of Lude, through whose kindness it was forwarded for exhibition to the Society. It is an iron bell, coated with bronze, of the common primitive form, and with a looped handle at top, as is usually the case with similar early ecclesiastical implements. It measures 7 by $5\frac{3}{4}$ inches at the mouth, and 11 inches high, exclusive of the handle. From its great age it is worn into holes in the sides, though still capable of eliciting

its old unmusical *clogarnach*. A letter from the Rev. A. R. Irvine of Blair-Athol, detailed a number of curious illustrations of the high virtues long ascribed to this ancient relic. The Church of Strowan appears to have been dedicated to St Fillan, though the name would rather suggest St Rowen or St Ronan as the original patron saint; the name, however is thought to be of a much older origin, and has been derived from *Struthain*, the streams, or head waters, the district being so called from the confluence of the Garry and Erochty there. Near the old church a well still bears the name of the former favourite Celtic saint, the water of which was supposed to be a specific in certain ailments, and especially in cases of insanity. The old church contained a small statue of St Fillan; and, in years of great drought, the immersion of this in the well was believed to be an infallible mode of bringing rain. The Buidhean or bell enjoyed a share of the reverence paid to the saintly image, and was supposed to be under the particular protection of the patron saint of the place. The intimate relations believed to subsist between them is shewn from the nature of the visitation by which the sacrilegious destruction of the image was avenged. This statue is affirmed to have been preserved, and to have retained all its ancient virtues till nearly the close of the seventeenth century, when Mr Hamilton, the incumbent of the parish, broke it in pieces, and threw the fragments into the river Garry, as the most effectual means of abating the superstition of his parishioners. The traditions of the district, however, affirm that the reverend iconoclast paid dearly for his rashness, for his eldest son soon after became insane, and died a maniac!

Various curious popular legends, setting forth the miraculous interventions by which the removal of the bell from the district of the saint had been averted, are still narrated in the parish, though all faith in its efficacy would seem to have now disappeared, and no evil consequences have been traced to its present temporary absence from Strowan. A native of the district of Rannoch, as Mr Irvine relates, on one occasion stole the bell, and carried it off homeward, with the view of transferring to Rannoch the special privileges so long enjoyed by the original keepers of the bell. On the top of the Hill of Bohenpichs he laid the bell on a stone, while he drew breath after his flight; but, on proceeding to renew his journey, the gifted bell remained transfixed to the stone, and defied all his strength to move it! Alarmed at so obvious a token of the displeasure of the saint, the affrighted pilferer resolved on its restoration, and he had no sooner turned his face northward in the direction of Strowan, then he found the bell again detach itself from the stone, and yield to the hand of its penitent bearer, by whom it was replaced in its proper sanctuary. In this respect, however, the bell of Killin, dedicated to the same favourite saint,

must bear the palm, as it formed an undoubted canon of popular belief in the latter parish, that, if stolen, it would extricate itself out of the thief's hands, and return home ringing all the way !

After referring to the famous bell of St Kentigern, which figures on the Glasgow seals, some of which were exhibited, and to the Ronnel bell of Birnie, described and figured in the "Morayshire Floods"¹ of Sir Thomas Dick Lauder, Dr Wilson described the curious relic found in the churchyard of the parish of Kingoldrum, Forfarshire, and presented to the Society by the Rev. J. O. Haldane, minister of the parish. This ancient bell was dug up in 1843, and contained, in addition to its detached tongue, a bronze chalice, and a glass bowl—the latter imperfect. The bell is of the usual square form, made of sheet iron, which appears to have been coated with bronze, though little of this now remains. It measures 8 by 7 inches at the mouth, and 9½ inches high, exclusive of the handle. Unfortunately the value of the discovery was not appreciated, and both the chalice and bowl, it is feared, are now lost. Various notices tend to shew the great antiquity of Kingoldrum as a Christian site; and in Mr Chalmers of Aldbar's valuable work on the sculptured stones of Forfar and Angus,² some of the remarkable sculptures, specially illustrated by him, are figured from this site, having been found built up in the walls of the old church, on its demolition in 1840: the relics of some more ancient structure, even than that which was given to Arbroath Abbey by William the Lion in 1211.

In addition to these, various other examples of the like curious bells were referred to, either as still existing, or of which authentic notices are preserved, forming in all sixteen or seventeen of this peculiar class of relics, which have now been traced out as belonging to Scotland, a number disclosed unexpectedly in so short a time, as to leave little doubt of the probability of additions being yet made to the list. It may further the researches in this hitherto unexplored department of Scottish ecclesiastical relics to furnish a complete list of those already noted, viz. :—The bell of St Kentigern, figured on the Glasgow seals;³ the bells of St Kessogius and St Lolanus, both included among the feudal investitures of the earldom of Perth; the bell of St Barry, at Kilberry Castle, Argyllshire; the holy bell of St Rowen, Monievaird;⁴ the bell of St Meddan, noted in the Airlie Papers; the *Ronecht*, or bell of St Ternan, in the Aberdeen Breviary; the

¹ Morayshire Floods, p. 166.

² Sculptured Monuments of Angus, Plate XX., Nos. 1, 2, 4.

³ Regist. Episc. Glasgu., Plate V., No. 3.

⁴ *Vide* Archæol. Scotica, vol. ii. p. 75, for an account of this ancient Scottish Hand-Bell, still preserved by the Dewars of Strowan, communicated to the Society by the Minister of the parish in 1784.

Ronnel Bell of Birnie ;—this bell is of bronze, of the usual primitive shape, and rivetted at the sides. It measures about 18 inches high, and at the mouth 6 by 4 inches. It is said to have been brought from Rome by the first bishop of Moray ;¹—the bell of St Fillan, Killin, Perthshire ; the *Buidhean*, or bell of St Fillan, Strowan, Blair-Athol ; the Perthshire bell, in the collection of the late C. K. Sharpe, Esq. ; the bell of St Kennach, Isle of Inniskenneth ;² the *Skellach*, or bell of Kingoldrum ; the Kilmichael-Glassry bell and shrine ; the Kelso bell, found in a bog in the neighbourhood, and now preserved in the Local Museum of that town ; the inscribed bell of Guthrie ; and to these may be added the bell of St Columba, at Iona, repeatedly referred to in the Life of the saint ; and also a small one of the usual primitive form and construction, procured by Dr J. A. Smith, from the collection of the late Henry Courtoy, for many years keeper of the Chapel-Royal of Holyrood.³

In concluding, Dr Wilson remarked, that, although the subject embraced no very large nor important field of research ; yet the labour would not, perhaps, be thought altogether thrown away which tended to dissipate an error in relation to native relics, apparently regarded at one time throughout the whole of Scotland and Ireland, as well as Wales, with a degree of veneration attached to no other class of ecclesiastical implements in common use ; and which, moreover, have retained their hold on popular superstition down nearly to our own day, in defiance alike of the zeal of Reformers, and the discipline of Presbyterian kirk-sessions ; while in Ireland their estimation is even now scarcely diminished among the lower classes of the people. He conceived few errors adopted by British Antiquaries to be more pregnant with mischievous effects on future investigations than those which ascribe a foreign origin to our native relics, as is the case in the “ Observations on the Ancient Bell and Chain discovered in the Parish of Kilmichael-Glassrie,” printed in the Society’s Transactions,⁴ where the author concludes that these bells “ have a date referable to the period when Christianity was first taught by command of Olave Tryggvason, and

¹ Morayshire Floods, p. 166.

² For more detailed accounts of some of these bells, *vide* “ Prehistoric Annals of Scotland,” pp. 654–664. The *Ronecht* of St Ternan, and the *Ronnel* of Birnie, are probably both named from their supposed musical sound, Gaelic : *Rannach*, a songster. The *Buidhean* of Strowan is perhaps named from *Buidheann*, a body of people, in allusion to its use to summon the congregation.

³ The bell of St Blane is still preserved at Dunblane : it is a small hand-bell, probably of much more recent date than most of those previously referred to, and is marked : St ✠ B. It was customary up to a very recent period to ring it in front of all funeral processions in the parish.

⁴ Archæol. Scotica, vol. iv., p. 119.

were introduced into this country by some of the Norwegian Missionaries." At the date of that communication no other similar relic appears to have been known to Scottish Antiquaries; but a very little research has sufficed to bring to light so many, pertaining for the most part to the earliest sites of native Christian settlements, long prior to the era of Scandinavian invasion, that these most probably form, after all, but a small portion of those of which traces may yet be found, now that attention has been called to the subject.

January 12, 1852.

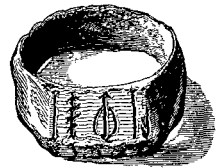
Rev. WILLIAM STEVENSON, D.D., Vice-President,
in the Chair.

The following Gentleman was elected a Fellow:—

DAVID BAKERS BLACK, Esq., Town-Clerk of Brechin.

The Donations laid on the Table included a MARBLE HEAD OF TRAJAN, life size, and executed in a good style of art though greatly mutilated. Professor T. S. TRAILL, M.D., by whom it was presented to the Society, brought it from Cartama, in the plain of Malaga, Spain, where he found it in use as a bowl or put-stone.

WM. WARING HAY NEWTON, Esq., presented an ancient Jewelled Finger-Ring of pure gold, but extremely rude in its workmanship, found on the Priory Land, near St Andrews; and also the large Bronze Finger-Ring figured here, inscribed in Anglo-Saxon Runes. In adding these interesting relics to the Museum he observed that he had been deterred from exhibiting the latter on a former occasion, owing to apprehensions of the usual claims under the law of Treasure Trove; but now that the Society's Collections have become national property he was gratified to learn that the Officers of the Exchequer will no longer interfere



with its possessions, and he gladly availed himself of this assurance to deposit both of these Scottish relics in the Museum.