

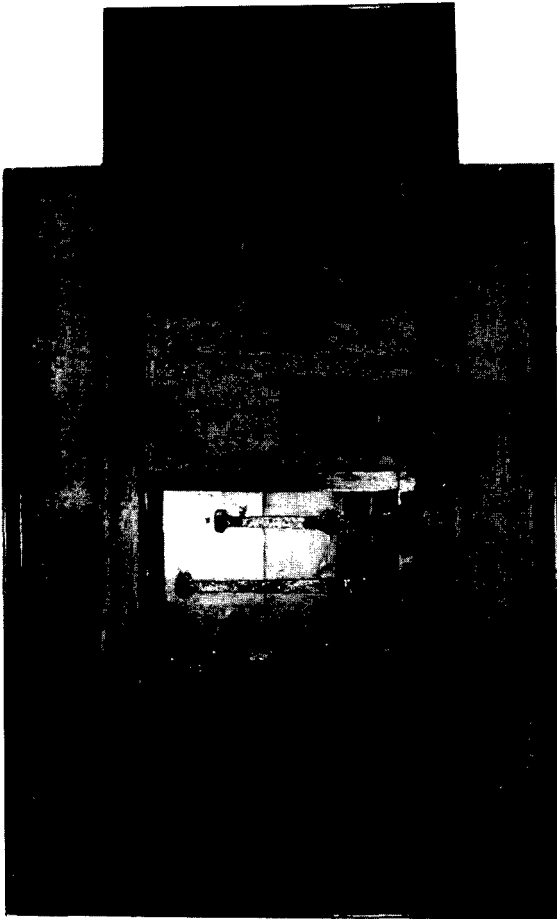
Sacrament House, Avoch

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The purpose of this note is to place on record a late medieval decorative aumbry or Sacrament House that has recently been identified in Easter Ross and to present the information as a supplement to the late Monsignor McRoberts's general survey of this subject (McRoberts 1965).

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Set in the vestry wall of Avoch Parish Church (NGR NH 701 552), a Gothic Revival building by Alexander Ross of Inverness, 1872, is a simple Sacrament House, hitherto virtually unrecorded, the stylistic details of which indicate a date of c 1500 (illus 1). The small ashlar aumbry is surrounded by a wide filleted roll and hollow moulded border, stepped at top centre to enclose a shallow, somewhat crudely carved chalice, the flat, slightly irregular surface of which



ILLUS 1 Avoch Sacrament House (Copyright: SDD/HB)

might be the result of defacement. Overall the Sacrament House measures 4 ft 2½ in high by 2 ft 7 in wide (1.27 m by 0.79 m), the aumbry being 1 ft 10 in by 1 ft 4 in by 1 ft 2 in deep (56 by 41 by 36 cm) with renewed wooden lining and a door with two different sets of hinges; there is a 'Thistle' plate on the back of the rim lock. A late 19th-century wooden beading surrounds the cupboard, masking the join where it is slotted into the wall.

The present church replaced that of 1670, itself a successor to the medieval building (*New Stat Acc*, xiv (1840), 390; *SDD Statutory List of Buildings of Historic or Architectural Interest*). Pullen and Brayshaw, in their brief history of the church in the Black Isle, state that in 1670 the church 'was rebuilt under Episcopal rule' and that the Sacrament House was retained from the 'ancient church', but give no indication of the source of this information (1927, 9).

In the Middle Ages Avoch Parish Church was one of those that had been appropriated by the Cistercian Abbey of Kinloss on the south side of the Moray Firth. Abbot Thomas Crystall is known to have repaired it during his incumbency at Kinloss (1504–28) (*Kinloss Recs* xlvi, xlix; Cowan 1981, 92), but whether these building activities included the provision of the Sacrament House at Avoch is not recorded. Another possible source might be Ormond Castle, which stood about a mile to the SW on Ormond Hill, beside the shores of the Moray Firth. Ormond, with Redcastle on the Beaully Firth was the principal centre of the Lordship of Ardmeneach, which had reverted to the Crown in 1455. James III created his second son, also James (born 1476), Marquis of Ormond at his baptism; he granted him the Lordship of Ardmeneach in 1481, and elevated him to the Dukedom of Ross in 1487. This same, Marquis of Ormond resigned his lands, except Ormond, in 1502, having become 'an ecclesiastic' (Douglas 1813, 416; *Origines Parochiales*, II, ii (1855), 542–4). The Sacrament House might well have been gifted to the church by the new duke and marquis, particularly as he obviously had religious leanings, or it could have found its way there indirectly having first been part of the furnishing of the castle chapel, dedicated to Our Lady. The period of royal association with Ormond and Avoch corresponds with dates of other known such ecclesiastical wall cupboards in Scotland, mostly with more sophisticated architectural decoration (McRoberts 1965, 56).

The only other recognized Sacrament House in Easter Ross is in the mainly 18th- and 19th-century Contin Parish Church (NH 456 557) which incorporates portions of its medieval predecessor. In the late 19th century a small Sacrament House with arch-pointed head was revealed at the east end of the north wall during the removal of the gallery. This is also surrounded by a wide, but splayed, filleted roll and hollow moulded border, has no door or lining, and a rubble interior. McRoberts ascribed the aumbry to c 1500. Overall measurements are 2 ft 9 in high by 2 ft 8 in wide by 1 ft 6 in deep (84 by 81 by 46 cm) (McRoberts 1965, 56).

These two Sacrament Houses at Avoch and Contin, together with that in St Ola's, Kirkwall, of c 1540, are the only examples so far recorded north of the Moray Firth, the majority of these decorative aumbries being in churches in the southern and eastern lowlands of Scotland.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Mr G P Stell for his considerable help with the preparation of this note, and to Mr D M Walker for reading the draft.

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