

Cromarty East Church Newsletter

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Edited by Caroline Vawdrey



A church of many Colours

Well, so much for the theory that churches were plain, perhaps slightly gloomy places of worship. The growing evidence of colour in the East Church gives many points to ponder. Excitingly, red background paintwork and the beginnings of a curve around the lettering on the front of the North Loft front, were recently discovered during the exploratory delicate removal of the upper layers of varnish to study the best way to restore the panels.

celestial colours

We've also been learning more about the history of wall paint within the church. The earliest colour detected is the ethereal sounding 'celestial blue', sadly now more of a Scottish sky grey, although hints of what appears to be the original soft sky blue can be detected. Paint expert Tom Hillocks was only able to find this colour on the original east-west aisle, and so this is likely to be pre-1740, when the north aisle was added. At this time the church would have had much smaller windows and a lower ceiling.

It looks as though the church was painted yellow ochre after the last major building work on the church in 1798/99, and paint scrapes from the windows and architrave suggest that the woodwork was Georgian grey. At this time the roof was raised, the two large windows on the south wall put in, the three porches added and internal loft stairs installed. All the other church windows were probably replaced at this time.

There are records of the washing and distemping of ceilings in 1893, which may have been when the red ochre was applied throughout. This is the thickest paint layer, and so looks to have been used for the longest period of time. The layer of varnish on the woodwork above the Georgian grey is dark brown, and this may well have been applied in association with the red ochre in 1893. The most recent historic record is for two coats of walpamur applied in 1928.

the great paint debate

So how does this help to decide which colour we should repaint the church today? After many detailed discussions, and much hunting for clues of colour around the church, it was agreed that it would be appropriate to choose a scheme that had been used in the church in its current T-shaped form. This could be either the pink or the yellow ochre paint scheme.

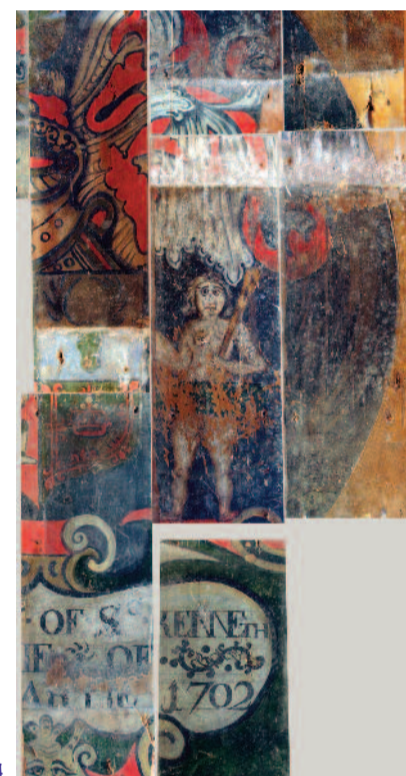
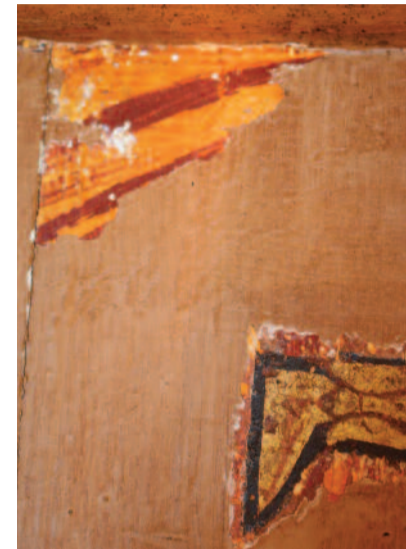
All the details that can be gleaned from the historical records and the observations made at the church during conservation work are now being brought together before a final decision is made.

what about outside?

No evidence of paint colour has been found on the outside walls, so the limewash will be of a natural off white, which will allow the style of the building to shine through, and will link it to the landscape that surrounds it.



Hidden under a pew in the west loft there is there is the green and gold lettering, covered over when the loft was extended in 1758 by Cromarty merchant William Forsyth.



The two most spectacular pieces of painted fittings from the church are the amorial panels of Sir Kenneth and Lady Mackenzie from 1702, and the Mackenzie painted pew panels re-used in the North Loft in 1740.

Summer visits to the church

During the summer the churchyard will be open to visitors, who'll be free to observe the work on the church from safely outside the Herras fence.

But to look inside, you'll need to go on one of the church tours organised by community and education workers, Caroline Vawdrey and David Alston. These will be advertised in the church notice board, and by poster in the windows of The Emporium and the Cromarty Post Office (both good places for a visit too!)

David Alston will also be leading kirkyard tours at 7.00pm on Wednesday evenings throughout August, giving you the chance to find out more about the lives of those buried there, and bringing you up-to-date on the work at the church.

In between tour dates you can visit the Cromarty Courthouse Museum to find out about why the work at the church is happening and what new things have been discovered. The museum is free this year and also has superb new exhibitions on emigration from the Cromarty Fishertown from the 1890s to 1920s and on Living in Cromarty. The Courthouse Museum is open Sunday to Thursday from 11.00 am to 4.00pm until September 27.



Meet ...



Andy Newcombe & the Laing Traditional Masonry team

Perhaps it is his early mountain bike training that helps, but Andy always seems to keep a cool head no matter how many elements of the East Church contract he is handling that day. And it is an approach that seems to pervade the Laing's team, which has been working with impressive skill and efficiency since they started on site in October 2008.

Andy has worked on some impressive building projects, from St Magnus Cathedral on Orkney, to Banff Hospital and Craigevar Castle since he joined the company for a short term Christmas job 8 years ago. As Andy says, "It is never knowing what type of building and new challenges we're going to meet next that keeps the work exciting. Just recently we've been carving 23 stone cannons for Craigevar Castle, and we were each able to carve our own one; it was incredibly satisfying work and good to be leaving something for posterity"

Keeping traditional skills alive for the future is vitally important to director of the company Steven Laing. There are 6 trainees working at the East Church, and Laings have recently taken on a Cromarty apprentice to work with the company.

Stay up-to date with all the work at the church on the worksite pages of the East Church website.



The Easdale quandary

The East Church roof work is a major task, with all the slates coming off, sarking replaced as required, impermeable roofing felt being replaced with permeable and the slates being put back on again.

But it isn't quite as simple as that. The Easdale slates that formed most of the roofing are renowned for their porosity - hence the exuberant moss growth - and so most of them aren't fit for re-use. What's more, the quarry doesn't exist anymore, and so the only Easdale slates available are reclaimed one - already part way through their lifespan.

Luckily reclaimed slates originating from Ballachulish Quarry have been tracked down and make a good replacement for the Easdale slates. It is sad to lose the old slates, but important to use the best possible materials to ensure that church remains watertight for many years.

Live volcanoes seen in Cromarty

There were gasps of surprise from the Cromarty Primary School children when they visited the East Church. They certainly hadn't been expecting to see a live volcano, or stones cracking apart and disintegrating before their eyes.

But

this is just what Laing Traditional Masonry Project Leader Andy Newcombe showed them... and all in the name of science! Because what he was describing and showing the children was the reaction of quicklime with water; and how that reaction was used to mix the quicklime with sand, making a lime mortar.



The children had last been in the church before work began, so its new warehouse type appearance came as something of a shock. They were reassured by Andy that everything would be returned to how it was before, and of course more than a little fascinated to hear about the burials that filled the main aisle beneath their feet.

Laing Traditional Masonry and the community and education workers David Alston and Caroline Vawdrey are very happy to show other school groups around - and that includes secondary pupils, who might want to learn more about construction skills.

So please do get in touch if you would like a visit. You can contact Caroline and David either by emailing info@eastchurchcromarty.co.uk or by phoning 01381 600243.

Kirkyard lives

A small bunch of local enthusiasts have been taking a look at the kirkyard, and discovering more about its links with life, as well as death, as they study the gravestone inscriptions and look through the church archives.

David Alston, one of the community and education officers, led a spring kirkyard tour. He talked about the lives of several of the people commemorated there, including coastguard officer Lt John Thomson, whose inscription records that he had served in the East India Company as fourth officer in their ship Kent 'when burnt in the Bay of Biscay on which occasion he was instrumental in saving many lives'.

This brief epitaph does not reveal the extent of his remarkable courage. On 1st March 1825 the Kent, bound for India with over 600 on board, caught fire in a force 10 gale. As the crew and passengers waited for almost certain death when the fire reached the ship's magazine, 19-year old Thomson sent a sailor to the masthead from where, against all odds, a ship was sighted. This came to the aid of the sinking Kent but the crew were faced with the almost impossible task of transferring 600 people from one vessel to another in mountainous seas.

Thomson was placed in command of a cutter which made seven crossings between the ships during the following nine hours, saving many but also witnessing harrowing scenes. Thomson did not leave the Kent until after midnight, driven away by flames erupting from the ship. Two hours later the magazine exploded and the ship sank.

However, in all, 547 were saved. John Thomson continued in the East India Company before joining the coastguard, serving in Wells, Peterhead and finally Cromarty, where he died in 1870 at the age of 64.

You can find more details about John Thomson, including the possible origin of the phrase 'Jock Tamson's bairns' on the news pages of the East Church website.



To keep up-to-date with what's happening at the East Church

- * Check out our website at www.eastchurchcromarty.co.uk
- * Look for updates on our noticeboard at the church gate
- * Contact the community and education officers -Caroline and David on 01381 600243 or by emailing info@eastchurchcromarty.co.uk

