

Sacred Landscape Project

Methil

Fig 1. John Blaeu, *Sherifdome of Fyfe* (1654).¹



Fig 2. Coat of Arms of Buckhaven, Methil and Innerleven.²



¹ 'John Blaeu, *Sherifdome of Fyfe*', *National Library of Scotland. Map Home*, Accessed 5 October, 2021, <https://maps.nls.uk/view/00000444>.

² 'Buckhaven and Methil', *Heraldry of the World*, Accessed 5 October, 2021, https://www.heraldry-wiki.com/heraldrywiki/index.php?title=Buckhaven_and_Methil.

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For the purposes of this report periods have been broken down as follows: 1. Early Medieval (500-1000). 2. High Medieval (1000-1300). 3. Late Medieval (1300-1560). 4. Reformation and Early Modern (1560-1800). 5. Late Modern (1800-2021).

Historical References are presented in the following format;

4 Dec 1516

Letters of safe conduct made with the consent of the Regent (James Hamilton, earl of Arran, regent for James V), for all people of both sexes of the kingdoms of England, Spain and the Isle of Man, of all ranks, coming to the kingdom of the Scots by land and sea, on foot or horse to the church of Candida Casa (Whithorn) in honour of St Ninian confessor on pilgrimage.³

³ Matthew Livingstone, eds, *Registrum Secreti Sigilli Regum Scotorum* (Edinburgh: HMGRH, 1908-1982), i, no. 2844.

St Ninian was the most popular Scottish saint in the later Middle Ages. As the safe conducts issued by James I and the regency council of James V quoted above show, pilgrims were travelling to his shrine from England, the Isle of Man and Spain in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Italicised text = translated or transcribed primary source information from Latin or Middle Scots. The original language is kept where translation or modern spelling is unnecessary
Standard text = Dr Tom Turpie's explanatory comments or added factual information

Bibliographic details for each reference can be found in the accompanying footnote

All photographs by T Turpie unless otherwise indicated

Abbreviations

ER- Stuart John et al, eds. *Exchequer Rolls of Scotland*, Edinburgh: Scottish Record Office, 1878-1908,
NSA- *New Statistical Account of Scotland* (Edinburgh and London, 1834-45)

OSA- *Statistical Account of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1791-9),

RMS- John M. Thomson et al eds, *Registrum Magni Sigilli Regum Scotorum* (Edinburgh: Scottish Record Office, 1882-1914),

TA- Thomas Dickson, ed, *Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland* (Edinburgh, Scottish Record Office, 1877-1916),

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Introduction

Methil is a port town on the north shore of the Forth between Largo and Wemyss Bay. When Buckhaven and Methil became a burgh in 1891, the new seal of the two contiguous settlements, with its Latin motto *Carbon Carbasque* (by coal and sail), marked their maritime heritage and connection to coal mining (see Fig 2.). The earliest settlement named Methil, which first enters the written record in the early 1200s, was located more than a mile inland. It was on the banks of the River Leven, where it can be seen on John Blaeu's map of 1654 (see Fig 2). This changed in the late seventeenth century, when investment in the harbour saw the focus of the settlement switch to the coast. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Methil was one of the most important ports for the export of coal in Scotland. This industry declined in the latter twentieth century, and has been replaced, to some extent with a focus on the development of green energy.

In the Middle Ages, Methil was a distinct parish, with the church located inland close to the site of the older settlement on the banks of the Leven. In the early seventeenth century, the parish was absorbed into the larger neighbouring parish of Wemyss, and the church fell out of ecclesiastical use, though the graveyard remained active into the nineteenth century. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries significant industrial development and concomitant growth of the population of the new coastal settlement of Methil, led to the establishment of a number of different churches in the town, including multiple Church of Scotland charges and Free Church, Evangelical and Roman Catholic congregations, two seaman's missions and a number of other Gospel and Spiritual foundations. Of the more than a dozen churches, missions and chapels constructed in Methil in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, six (2 Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic, Baptist and 2 Gospel or Spiritualist) congregations remain active today.

Religious sites and the landscape of Methil

Rather than a local landscape being directly shaped by its sacred past, the religious history of Methil has tended to be that of faith groups reacting to the changing patterns of settlement and population in the local area that have resulted from fluctuations in the region's major industries and employers, coal mining and fisheries. This has meant that Methil's sacred history has been a fluid one, with places of worship falling in and out of use as population and settlement patterns

change over time. The stimulus for the earliest settlement at Methilhill was probably access to freshwater fishing and the local agricultural hinterland. The settlement was served by its own church from at least the high Middle Ages, until the parish was absorbed into that of neighbouring Wemyss. The shift in the focus of the settlement to the coast in the modern era, and the growing population, then saw a response by Presbyterian, Roman Catholic and various Evangelical organisations to provide meeting places to serve the community. This proliferation of meeting places has had a major impact on the townscape of Methil. There has been a consistent turn over and recycling of places of worship as newer structures were required to house the growing population in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and more recently as a fall in population combined with falling church attendance to make some places of worship redundant. This process began with the abandonment of Methilhill Church c.1600, and its continued use as burial ground. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw newly constructed places of worship (such as Methil West and Old St Agatha's), quickly superseded and then abandoned and demolished when new churches designed to accommodate larger congregations were opened. Whether the current relatively healthy provision of 6 active places of worship (2 Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic, Baptist and 2 Gospel or Spiritualist) can be sustained against the backdrop of falling attendance and the financial pressures on organisations like the Church of Scotland, particularly as transport links make unions between congregations a more viable process, remains to be seen. It is likely in future that there will be further consolidations of congregations, with pressure for the conversion of any places of worship made redundant to residential property, particularly those that are located in prime central locations.

1. High (1000-1300) and Late Medieval Christianity (1300-1560)

Sites of Interest

Methil Hill Parish Church

Introduction/Nature of the Site

The name Methil may mean ‘middle church’, which Taylor and Markus have suggested refers to the position of the parish between those of Markinch and Wemyss.⁴ The parish and settlement first enter written records in the early thirteenth century, although archaeological evidence suggests that there may have been a settlement there long before that time.⁵ At that time Methil (spelt Methilkil or Methilhill) was located inland, on the banks of the River Leven, where it can be seen on John Blaeu’s map of 1654 (see Fig 2). There were two main landowners in the parish in the Middle Ages, the bishops of St Andrews (who were also the patrons of the parish church), and local family headed in the early 1200s by man called John son of Michael (or Murdoch) of Methil. He made a number of grants from his estate of Methil in the early 1200s. By 1386 the estate was in the hands of John of Wemyss and Reres, who may have been a descendant of John.⁶

I. Methil Hill Parish Church

Fig 3. Methil Hill Church Yard (R Fawcett 2012).⁷



The parish church of Methil was located on the south bank of the River Leven about a mile and a half from its mouth. It is first recorded in 1207 and 1218 when it was noted that it was unappropriated and under the patronage of the bishops of St Andrews. The majority of Scottish parish churches were gifted by the crown and local noblemen to monasteries or other religious institution. The institution would ‘appropriate’ a proportion of the tithe revenues of the church, in return for providing a priest and maintaining the building. As Methil was ‘unappropriated’, the tithes paid by the parishioners were used to pay for the priest (who was selected by the bishops) and the fabric of the building, rather than being redirected to another religious institution. It was re-dedicated by David de Bernham, bishop of St Andrews in 1245, and in 1275 it was again recorded as an independent parsonage, paying 8 shillings to a Papal collector raising money

⁴ Simon Taylor & Gilbert Markus, *The Place-Names of Fife. Volume One. West Fife between Leven and Forth* (Donington, 2006), p. 583.

⁵ W. H Bliss, ed, *Calendar of entries in the Papal registers relating to Great Britain and Ireland; Papal letters*, (London, 1893), (CPL), i, 30.

⁶ Mary Cameron, *Methil History and Trail* (East Wemyss, 1986), pp. 2-4.

⁷ Richard Fawcett, ‘Methil- Architecture’, *Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches*, Accessed 5 October, 2021, <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=158770>.

for the crusades.⁸ In the later Middle Ages a series of ‘rectors’ of the church were recorded. These men, also known as perpetual vicars, are likely to have been absentee priests, delegating the actual day to day cure of souls to deputies such as William Doury, who in 1494 was paid £4 per annum to serve *the cure*. The tithes of Methil (valued at £40 per annum at the Reformation) were used by the bishops of St Andrews to fund students who studied abroad (as Stephen Bigli did in 1394), or to provide a salary for priests who served in the cathedral chapter at St Andrews (like Robert Pantyre in 1490).⁹

Remains of the church could still be seen as late as the 1840s, and Richard Fawcett has suggested that it was located on *a platform at the north-west end of the modern graveyard*, with a burial enclosure and obelisk marking what was the east end of the church.¹⁰

21 December 1207

*Pope Innocent III, in accordance with the letters of Pope Alexander [takes the bishop and church of St Andrews into his protection, and, establishes all their possessions, including] in Fife: Kilrymont (FIF), with the whole shire, Dairsie (FIF), Auchtermoonzie (FIF), the island of Loch Leven, Monimail (FIF), Tarvit (FIF), Muircambus (FIF), **Methil (FIF)**, Kilconquhar (FIF), Muckhart (PER), Pitgober (CLA), with the lands of the churches of Strathceihten’ (i.e., Stradighty Martin, now Strathmartine, ANG), Rescobie (ANG), ‘Cas’ (possible Collace, PER), ‘Dulbrudot’ (perhaps Dalbog, ANG), Rossie (PER), ‘Losse’, and near Perth, Luncarty (PER), in ‘Mareth’ (Mounth) – ‘Bukkan’ (Buchan), Monymusk (ABD), Culsalmond (ABD), Ellon (ABD), with the lands of their churches and all their appurtenances; in Lothian: Kirkliston (WLO), Ecclesmachan (WLO), ‘Keldeleth’ (Kinleith, now Currie, MLO), Ratho (MLO), Lasswade (MLO), Wedale (Stow, MLO), Clerkington (ELO), Tynninghame (ELO), Broxmouth (ELO); possessions and rents in cain and conveth for the bishop’s income, with their privileges.¹¹*

19 December 1218

*Pope Honorius III takes the bishop and church of St Andrews into his protection, and, following the example of Alexander and Innocent, his predecessors, establishes all their possessions, including: in Fife, Kilrymont (FIF) with the whole shire, Dairsie (FIF), Auchtermoonzie (FIF), the island of Loch Leven with its belonging, Monimail (FIF), Tarvit (FIF), Muircambus (FIF), **Methil (FIF)**, Kilconquhar (FIF), Muckhart (PER), Pitgober (CLA), with the lands of the churches of Stradighty Martin (now Strathmartine, ANG), Rescobie (ANG), ‘Cas’ (possible Collace, PER), ‘Dulbrudot’ (perhaps Dalbog, ANG), Rossie (PER), ‘Losse’, and near Perth, Luncarty (PER); in Mounth – Buchan, Monymusk (ABD), Culsalmond (ABD), Ellon (ABD), with the lands of their churches and all their appurtenances; in Lothian, Kirkliston (WLO), Ecclesmachan (WLO), Kinleith (now Currie, MLO), Ratho (MLO), Lasswade (MLO), Wedale*

⁸ Alan O. Anderson, ed, *Early Sources of Scottish History* (London, 1922), ii, 525, A. I. Dunlop, ed, ‘Bagimond’s Roll: Statement of the Tenths of the Kingdom of Scotland’, *Miscellany of the Scottish History Society*, vi (1939), 39.

⁹ John Kirk, ed, *The Books of Assumption of the Thirds of Benefices* (Oxford, 1995), 82.

¹⁰ Fawcett, ‘Methil- Architecture’,

¹¹ *CPL*, i, 30.

(*Stow, MLO*), *Clerkington (ELO)*, *Tynninghame (ELO)*, with its belongings, *Broxmouth (ELO)*. In addition, he establishes the possessions and rents in cain and conveth applied to the bishop's table. He indulges that the bishop may recover any possessions unlawfully alienated; and permits him to appoint the prior of the church, as his predecessors have done, and to correct his excesses; with inhibition to everyone to injure the said church.¹²

1245 (18 March) *Pontifical Offices of St Andrews*

These are the churches that bishop David [of Birnam] has dedicated : —...

*The church of Methil (spelt Methkal), on 18 March.*¹³

1394-1408 Stephan Bigli (student at university of Paris) holds the church, dispensed for being too young in 1394 when he succeeded Stephen de Methil, moves to Forgrund in 1408, replaced by John de London.¹⁴

1415 John de Balbryny (rector of Auldcathy) obtains the church in an exchange with John de Ponfret.¹⁵

1450 George Young collated to the vicarage, supplicates for the revocation of an annual pension paid to David Sibbald from the fruits.¹⁶

1450 George Young (perpetual vicar of Methil), has a perpetual chaplaincy without cure in the parish church of St Andrews (£4, not specified where).¹⁷

1480 (10 June) reference to the late George Young who had given 5 marks to the altar of St James in the parish church of St Andrews.¹⁸

1490 chaplaincy at the altar of St Bartholomew in the parish church of St Andrews, founded by Robert Pantre, vicar of Methil. Value £10.¹⁹

1492 William de Monte Alto (MA) becomes rector of Methil on resignation at the curia of Robert Keith (£16 value), 20 marks (about £4) assigned as pension to William Douri, priest who serves the cure.²⁰

¹² *CPL*, i, 61.

¹³ Anderson, ed, *Early Sources of Scottish History*, ii, 525.

¹⁴ W.H. Bliss, ed, *Calendar of entries in the Papal registers relating to Great Britain and Ireland; Papal Petitions* (London, 1893), (*CPP*), 594, 618, & 627, F. McGurk, ed, *Calendar of Papal letters to Scotland of Benedict XIII of Avignon* (Edinburgh, Scottish History Society, 1976.), (*CPL, Ben*), 10-11.

¹⁵ *CPL, Ben*, 312.

¹⁶ J. Kirk, R.J. Tanner and A.I. Dunlop, eds, *Calendar of Scottish Supplications to Rome 1447-71* (Edinburgh, 1997), (*CSSR*, v), v, no. 317.

¹⁷ *CSSR*, v, no. 317.

¹⁸ St Andrews University Library, Burgh Charters and Miscellaneous Writs, B65/23/88c.

¹⁹ W. E. K Rankin, *The Parish Church of the Holy Trinity St Andrews* (Edinburgh, 1955), pp. 92.

²⁰ *CPL*, xv, no. 950.

2. Reformation and Early Modern Period (1560-1800)

Sites of Interest

Methil Hill Parish Church

Introduction/Nature of the Site

The early modern era was a period of considerable development for Methil. In 1572 the lands had been formed into a burgh of barony, with the archbishop of St Andrews as the superior, and there is evidence for considerable coal mining in Methil and East Wemyss.²¹ There were further expansions of coal and salt production, the latter stimulated by access to the fossil fuel, in the early seventeenth century. By the middle of that century the main focus of Methil had shifted to the coast where in 1660s a stone harbour was built by David, 2nd earl of Wemyss. The port was linked to coal mines at Denbeath and further in land, and in 1785 a waggonway was built to transport coal from mines around Kirkland to the harbour. The easy access to coal stimulated the town's other main activity, salt panning. In the early 1600s the parish of Methil was absorbed into that of neighbouring Wemyss, and the church was abandoned for ecclesiastical use. Thereafter the population travelled to the church at Easter Wemyss, and it would be the nineteenth century before the people of Methil had their own places of worship.

I. Methil Hill Parish Church

Fig 4. Seventeenth to Nineteenth Century memorials in Methil Hill Cemetery (Bess Rhodes, 2021)



The archbishops of St Andrews gifted the patronage of the church of Methil to the Wemyss family in 1571, and the parish itself was annexed to Wemyss sometime between 1614 and 1638.²² No reason is given for this in the surviving records, but it may have been that a drop in population in the former inland settlement meant that it no longer made sense to have a separate charge at Methil. The Wemyss family, who were patrons of the church of Easter Wemyss, may also have

been keen to pay for only one building. The church was abandoned at this point, but some remains could still be seen as late as 1838, and an excavation in the 1920s found the foundations of a large structure.²³ The graveyard remained in use even after the church was abandoned, and contains headstones from the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It remains in use today.

The 'kirklands' of Methil were mentioned in 1661

²¹ John M. Thomson et al eds, *Registrum Magni Sigilli Regum Scotorum* (Edinburgh: Scottish Record Office, 1882-1914), (*RMS*), vii. No 1026.

²² Taylor & Markus, *The Place-Names of Fife*, p. 583.

²³ 'Methil Mill Church', *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 5 October, 2021, <http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/1519/name/Methil+Mill+Church+Wemyss+Fife>.

1 Jan 1661

*Our sovereign lord, with advice and consent of his estates of parliament, ratifies and approves the charter made and granted by his majesty under his highness's great seal of this kingdom, to his majesty's right trusty cousin and councillor David, earl of Wemyss, lord Elcho..... of all and whole the lands of Methil and barony thereof with the corn and waulk mills of the same, together with the mill-lands, sequels and astricted multures pertaining thereto; of the lands of Methilhill and Pirnie, with annexes, connexes, parts, pendicles and whole pertinents of the same, with coals and coalheughs of the foresaid lands of Methil, Methilhill and Pirnie, and of the mains of Methil, called the kirklands of Methil, and of all and whole the barony thereof...*²⁴

1710 Sibbald

*Two miles to the east of this, is Methill, a village with salt pans belonging to the Earl of Weems ; here the pre- sent Earl's grandfather, Earl David, built an harbour, where ships do load with coal and salt. Here was a parsonage that is now suppressed.*²⁵

Rev George Grib, 1793

*There was once a parsonage and vicarage at Methil, the patronage of which was disposed by Archbishop Hamilton to Sir John Wemyss of Wemyss who died in 1571 ...*²⁶

Rev John Maclachan, 1838

*'The remains of two Popish chapels, the one at Methil-Mill and the other a little beyond Wester Wemyss*²⁷

II. St Mary's By the Sea, East Wemyss

Fig 5. St Mary's By the Sea (Fawcett).²⁸



The parish church of Wemyss was first recorded c.1230 when it was granted by John of Methil, to the Hospital of Soutra.²⁹ From a dispute between the Provost and the Laird of Wemyss in the 1520s we know that considerable alterations to the church seem to have taken place in 1527-1528.³⁰ The records note that the church was being built or repaired by Sir Patrick Jackson, the chaplain of the Chapel of Our Lady in West Wemyss. There is no direct account of the arrival of the

²⁴ *The Records of the Parliaments of Scotland to 1707*, K.M. Brown et al eds (St Andrews, 2007-2021), 1661/1/192. Date accessed: 27 September 2021.

²⁵ Robert Sibbald, *The history, ancient and modern, of the sheriffdoms of Fife and Kinross, with the description of both, and of the firths of Forth and Tay, and the islands in them ... with an account of the natural products of the land and waters* (Cupar, 2nd edition, 1803, original 1710), p. 328.

²⁶ *Statistical Account of Scotland*, (1793), (OSA), xvi, 527.

²⁷ *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, (1838), (NSA), ix, 393.

²⁸ Richard Fawcett, 'Wemyss, Architecture', *Corpus of Scottish Medieval Parish Churches*, Accessed 31 October, 2021, <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/corpusofscottishchurches/site.php?id=158932>.

²⁹ David Laing, ed, *Charters of the Hospital of Soltre, of Trinity College, Edinburgh, and other collegiate churches in Mid-Lothian* (Bannatyne Club, Edinburgh, 1861), no. 14.

³⁰ William Fraser, *Memorials of the family of Wemyss of Wemyss* (Edinburgh, 1988), i, 111-113 & ii, 274-278.

Reformation in Wemyss, but the church seems to have been relatively easily adapted to the new, preaching based, form of worship that dominated after 1560. After Methil was absorbed into the parish of Wemyss in the early 1600s considerable alterations were made to the building, which was now located at the centre of the expanded parish. In the 1640s the earl of Wemyss constructed a family mausoleum outside the church, which would become known as the Wemyss Aisle. This led to an extension of the building eastward, with the burial place connected to the earl's private loft in the church by a stair. Two further aisles were added to the church in later 1600s, and what Fawcett describes as a *square birdcage bellcote* was added to the west gable.³¹ There was further work in 1792, and the minister George Grib was pleased to describe it as a *well-lighted, warm and decent place of worship*.

1636 (8 Sept) *visitation of the church by the Pres of Kirkcaldy found the minister (Patrick Mearns) to be competent, while the earl of Wemyss and lord Elcho were ordered to arrange the 300 marks pa for the new schoolmaster.*³²

1644 (21 Aug) the earl of Wemyss agrees to build a place for burial outside the kirk of Wemyss.³³

1658 (26 Sept) the kirk session considering the condition of the kirk yard dykes which are altogether ruinous. The session orders a collection for the repair.³⁴

1659 (12 June) *it was the mind of the session to strike through a window besouth the little kirk door that leads to the pulpit for making greater light in the church.*³⁵

1682 (6 May) the minister and session order a collection to be made for the repair of the church.³⁶

1688 Margaret, Dowager Countess of Wemyss requests in her will that she be buried *In our isle at the church of Wemyss.*³⁷

Rev George Grib, 1793

*The church is an old gothic building in the form of a cross; there are evident marks of considerable additions to it; but no date that can fix its age.... It was repaired and much improved in 1792, and is now a well-lighted, warm and decent place of worship. The church and manse are in the thriving village of Easter Wemyss, the most central part of the parish.*³⁸

³¹ Fawcett, 'Wemyss, Architecture'.

³² NRS Presbytery of Kirkcaldy, Minutes, 1630-1653, CH2/224/1, fols. 191-192.

³³ NRS Presbytery of Kirkcaldy, Minutes, 1630-1653, CH2/224/1, fol. 464.

³⁴ NRS Wemyss Kirk Session, 1655-1668, CH2/365/2, fol. 100.

³⁵ NRS Wemyss Kirk Session, 1655-1668, CH2/365/2, fol. 141.

³⁶ NRS Wemyss Kirk Session, 1668-1701, CH2/365/3, fol. 134.

³⁷ Fraser, *Memorials of the family of Wemyss of Wemyss*, ii, 258.

³⁸ *OSA* (1793), xvi, 526.

3. Late Modern (1800-2021).

Sites of Interest

Methil West Church
Scottish Coastal Mission
Methil Free Church and earlier Salt Girnle
German Seaman's Mission
St Agatha's Roman Catholic Church
Methil Parish Church
Methil and Denbeath Parish Church
Methil Evangelical Church
Flying Angel Military Chapel
Methil Tin Kirk (spiritualist), demolished 1970s
Gospel Hall
Central Gospel Mission Revival Centre

Introduction/Nature of the Site

By the middle of the nineteenth century, coal mining in Methil's hinterland, and local salt production had largely ceased. In 1857 M Barbieri described it as *the shrivelled-up skeleton of a once important place*. However, shortly after this time two pits were opened at Muiredge and Kincardie Brae, and the population of Methil rose from around 500 in 1851 to more than 12,000 a century later as the town became one of Scotland's main industrial ports.³⁹ In the nineteenth century a Church of Scotland mission (1838), Free Church (1890) and a Coastal Mission (1892) were established in the town, before the growing population in the early twentieth century was served by a German Seaman's Mission (1900), Roman Catholic Church (1903), two full Church of Scotland parishes (1924 and 1931), an Evangelical Church (1936) and several other Gospel and Spiritualist missions. Alexander Smith, the author of the Third Statistical Account in 1951, noted the presence of a *Gospel Hall*, *Central Gospel Mission* and *the Methil Town Mission*, as well as the Coastal Mission, four Church of Scotland congregations (one of which was the former Free Church) and Evangelical and Roman Catholic churches. With the decline of coal mining after World War II, the population of the town has dropped to around 10,000 (2016). Combined with a decline in church attendance (more than 50% of the population of Wemyss, Buckhaven and Methil was recorded as having No Religion in the 2011 census.⁴⁰), and denominational mergers, this has led to a number church closures in Methil. Currently six (2 Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic, Baptist and 2 Gospel or Spiritualist) congregations are active.

1857 M Barbieri

METHIL. — *A small sea-port village. It is an ancient and decayed place. It was erected into a free burgh-of-barony in 1662. It has a better harbour on the Forth than any in the*

³⁹ Cameron, *Methil*, pp. 21-26.

⁴⁰ 'Buckhaven, Methil, Methilhill; Religion', Identity, *Scotland's Census*, Accessed 5 October, 2021, <https://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/webapi/jsf/tableView/tableView.xhtml>. In 2011 5,753 belonged to the Church of Scotland, 1,064 to the Roman Catholic Church and 561 to other Christian denominations.

*neighbourhood. Population 530. Many of its houses are in ruins, and its trade nearly gone. It seems to be the shrivelled-up skeleton of a once important place.*⁴¹

1862 Westwood

*Methil a decayed-looking village with little trade, although it has a fine harbour, and once was a place of some note in the coal trade.*⁴²

1894 Geddie

*Methil is the neighbour of Buckhaven to the east. Prosperity has come to it from time to time like a tidal wave, and left it again stranded high and dry. But yesterday it was a deserted and tumbledown village, living on the memory of the days before its upsetting neighbour Leven had been heard of, when it was a busy and thriving place, with salt-pans and windmills and a shipping trade. To-day it is again at the top of the flow. It is the chief port of shipment of the Fife coal-field. Large steamers come into its capacious docks and load under the great coal shoots ; acres of ground are covered with rail- way sidings and stores ; and houses sprout up like mushrooms.*⁴³

1952 Smith

*Methil-hill also has its church, and various sects have meeting-places throughout the villages, served with enthusiasm by voluntary lay preachers, but there is no Roman Catholic place of Worship. It would be wrong to describe the people of the parish as fervent church goers, but each of the churches has its band of devoted workers, and their combined influence is still considerable.*⁴⁴

*There are now seven Presbyterian congregations in Buckhaven and Methil, all but one of them (a United Free Church), being now Church of Scotland. But only two, Methil West, and St Michael's Buckhaven- are descended from pre-union Established Church. Perhaps it is because the parish church of Wemyss was at some distance from the present burgh, it is dissenting bodies that have the longest history therein.....*⁴⁵

In addition to the above, there are in the burgh two Baptist congregations and a mission of the Episcopal Church in Scotland; the Roman Catholic community has at Cross roads a church.....The Scottish Coast Mission began work in Methil just after the formation of the burgh, and has done valuable work with seaman ever since. It opened the present Seaman's bethel in 1904. During the recent war, another mission, known as the 'Flying Angel', began work in the port, and it has done much, not least for visiting seaman....Other religious bodies include the Gospel Hall, the Central Gospel Mission, the Methil Town Mission, and in Buckhaven, a detachment of the Salvation Army.....

⁴¹ M. Barbieri, *A Descriptive and historical gazetteer of the counties of Fife, Kinross and Clackmannan* (Edinburgh, 1857), p. 324.

⁴² *Westwood's parochial directory for the Counties of Fife and Kinross* (Cupar, 1862), pp. 214-215.

⁴³ John Geddie, *The Fringes of Fife* (Edinburgh, 1894), p. 115.

⁴⁴ Alexander Smith, *The Third Statistical Account of Scotland. Fife* (Edinburgh, 1952), p. 549.

⁴⁵ Smith, *The Third Statistical Account of Scotland*, p. 565.

*The influence of churches in the burgh is often profound; how widespread is more debatable. Roughly one quarter of the adults in the town would seem to be communicants on the rolls of several Presbyterian Churches...*⁴⁶

I. Methil West Church

Until 1838 Methil was part of the parish of Wemyss and the congregation attended the church in Easter Wemyss. Following an increase in the population in the early nineteenth century a *quod sacra* parish was established in Methil and a church was built in the High Street with room for 800 and at a cost of £1030.⁴⁷ The key difference between *quod sacra* and normal parish was that such churches were not obliged to provide burial services for the congregation and therefore rarely had cemeteries attached to them. Following the Great Disruption of 1843, the church appears to have been shut, but was operational again by 1876 when it was granted Chapel of Ease status, and with that promotion, the obligation to provide burial services. When a larger parish church was built in Methil in 1922-24 (now known as Wellesley Parish Church of Scotland) the West Church fell out of use. For some years it was used as a practice hall for the Wellesley Colliery band, and later as a storehouse until it was finally demolished in 1981.⁴⁸

Rev John Maclachan, 1838

*I have also to record, that on the 6th of June last, the foundation stone of the church, in connection with the Establishment was laid in the village of Methil, the expense of which is to be £1030.....This new erection is to contain upward of 800 sittings, and will accommodate the inhabitants of Methil, Kirkland, Methil-Hill, Links of Buckhaven, and those of Innerleven.....the whole including a population of 1700.*⁴⁹

1840 Leighton

*At Methill, a chapel has been erected in connection with the church of Scotland; and a portion of the parish, and of the neighbouring parish of Markinch, have been formed into a quod sacra parish, of which the Rev. John Wilson is minister.*⁵⁰

1857 M Barbieri

*The Church of Ease at Methil has been shut up since 1849; there is a Free Church; and a U.P. ch. at Buckhaven.*⁵¹

⁴⁶ Smith, *The Third Statistical Account of Scotland*, p. 566.

⁴⁷ *Quod Sacra* refers to a purely ecclesiastical parish, one that does not have any civil or local government functions. Until the late nineteenth century Church of Scotland parishes were often responsible for collecting records of births, deaths and marriages and other functions now undertaken by local government.

⁴⁸ 'Methil West Church', *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 5 October, 2021, <http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/10471/name/Methil+West+Church+Wemyss+Fife>, Cameron, *Methil*, p. 81.

⁴⁹ NSA, ix, 403

⁵⁰ John M. Leighton, *History of the County of Fife: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time* (Glasgow, 1840), iii, p. 170.

⁵¹ Barbieri, *A Descriptive and historical gazetteer of the counties of Fife*, p. 322.

II. Scottish Coastal Mission

Fig 6. Scottish Coast Mission, Methil (SCHR).⁵²



The Scottish Coastal Mission, founded in 1850, was a Protestant organisation dedicated to ministering to sailors and maritime communities. By 1861 they employed 10 missionaries and had 29 stations along the east coast of Scotland. They began services in Methil in 1892, and opened the building known as the ‘Seaman's Bethel’ on Dock Street in 1904 at a cost of £8000. It was still active in 1952, but has since closed and been demolished.

1952 Smith

*The Scottish Coast Mission began work in Methil just after the formation of the burgh, and has done valuable work with seaman ever since. It opened the present Seaman's Bethel in 1904.*⁵³

III. Methil Free Church

Following the Great Disruption in 1843, a quod sacra Free Church parish was set up in Methil, before a full mission was established in 1852. The mission initially met at the Salt Girdel, a storehouse which had been constructed in 1665 by David, 2nd earl of Wemyss.⁵⁴ In 1882 a full congregation was formed in Methil, and in 1890 a new church was constructed at the corner of Fisher Street and High Street at a cost of £700. It received a major extension in 1902-03 which cost a further £800, to house a congregation which numbered 200 in 1895 and 213 in 1905.⁵⁵ In 1929 the congregation re-joined the Church of Scotland, changing its name to Methil East in the process.⁵⁶ In 1942 there was a union between Methil East and the newly constructed Innerleven East Parish Church, and the congregation moved to the new church.⁵⁷ The former Free Church was used as a workshop by a local taxi firm for some time, before it was demolished in 1978. No trace now remains.

The Salt Girdel

1903 Reverend Peter McAnish

⁵² ‘Scottish Coast Mission’, *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 5 October, 2021, <http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/10470/image/13146/name/Scottish+Coast+Mission+Wemyss+Fife>.

⁵³ Smith, *The Third Statistical Account of Scotland*, p. 566.

⁵⁴ ‘The Salt Girdel’, *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 5 October, 2021, <http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/10506/name/The+Salt+Girdel+Wemyss+Fife>.

⁵⁵ Cameron, *Methil*, pp. 34-35.

⁵⁶ William Ewing, *Annals of the Free Church of Scotland, 1843-1900* (Edinburgh, 1914), ii, p. 147.

⁵⁷ ‘Methil Free Church’, *Imperial War Museums*, Accessed 5 October, 2021, <https://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/85086>.

*its floor shrewn with sawdust; it had beautiful chandeliers; its pulpit was covered with blue cloth; fastened with brass nails, and there were two rows of seats with backs.*⁵⁸

IV. German Seaman's Mission

Fig 7. German Seaman's Mission (Vintage Lundin Links and Largo).⁵⁹



As a result of the large numbers of German sailors visiting Methil annually in the late nineteenth century a missionary from the German Church in Edinburgh (located in Leith) began to make periodical visits to the town. In 1898 the heads of that church decided to send a permanent missionary and

they opened a church on Durie Street in 1900. The mission was suspended during World War I, and in the 1920s and 1930s the pastor was Gunner Belfrage, a Swedish masseur who also opened a tea garden in Lundin Links.⁶⁰ The mission was permanently closed at the outbreak of World War II, and is now a private house.⁶¹

21 April 1900 St Andrews Citizen

*Dedication of the German Seaman's Mission. The new hall erected for the Seaman's Mission is built on a central site, granted by Mr R G Wemyss at a nominal fee, by means of subscription by friends. On the ground floor is a reading room..... for the sailors, while the upper floor is devoted solely to the use of the missionary. The building was gaily decked out on Monday and the interior was crowded at the opening...it was attended by Herr Voss, the esteemed local missionary.*⁶²

⁵⁸ Cited in Cameron, *Methil*, pp. 34-35.

⁵⁹ 'Belfrage's Tea Gardens', *Vintage Lundin Links and Largo*, Accessed 9 October, 2021, <https://lundinlinks.weebly.com/blog/belfrages-tea-gardens>

⁶⁰ 'Belfrage's Tea Gardens'.

⁶¹ Cameron, *Methil*, p. 37.

⁶² Cited in Belfrage's Tea Gardens'.

V. Old and New St Agatha's Roman Catholic Church

Fig 8. St Agatha's Roman Catholic Church, Methil (Bess Rhodes)



Nearly four centuries after the Protestant Reformation, a Roman Catholic congregation returned to Methil with the opening of a church in 1903. Located on Methil Brae and called St Agatha's, the congregation had expanded to such an extent that in the early 1920s the decision was taken to build a new church on a site nearby. Designed by Reginald Fairlie, who was also responsible for Methil Parish Church (1924-25), the foundation stone was laid by Bishop Graham

Grey of Edinburgh, and it was opened in 1923. Old St Agatha's was demolished and the site is now home to a nursery. Fairlie was influenced by medieval church architecture, and reputedly used the plans of the medieval parish church of Methilhill (excavated in the early 1920s) in his designs for both St Agatha's and Methil Parish Church on Wellesley Road, although this is perhaps more obvious in the latter.⁶³ Gifford describes it as *Thrifty Romanesque in brick and concrete blockwork*.⁶⁴ Inside can be found some distinctive stained glass by the artist John Blyth, including the Lady Chapel with Holy Family and Nativity scenes, triptych style scenes in the north west transept depicting Mary with Jesus flanked by angels, and saints. The nave has images of saints Ninian, Patrick, Columba, Mungo, Cuthbert, Magnus, David, John Ogilvie, Andrew, Agatha and Margaret, and Peter appearing to St Agatha.⁶⁵ A hall was added to the church in the 1960s and it remains an active church.

VI. Methil Parish Church

Fig 9. Wellesley Parish Church, Methil (Bess Rhodes)



In the early 1920s the steady growth of the population of Methil led the Church of Scotland to construct a new parish church in Methil to supersede the West Church built in 1838. Land was gifted by the Wemyss family on Wellesley Road and the commission was given to Reginald Fairlie, who was also responsible for St Agatha's Roman Catholic Church completed in 1923. It was built in 1924-25 at an estimated cost of £24,000.⁶⁶ Fairlie was influenced by medieval church architecture, and reputedly used the plans of the medieval parish church of Methilhill (excavated in the early 1920s) in his designs for both St Agatha's and Methil Parish Church on Wellesley Road, although this influence is perhaps more obvious in the latter. The design includes nave,

⁶³ Cameron, *Methil*, p. 36.

⁶⁴ John Gifford, *The Buildings of Scotland, Fife*, (London, 1988), p. 106.

⁶⁵ 'St Agatha's Roman Catholic Church', *Historic Environment Scotland*, Accessed 9 October, 2021, <http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/LB46079>.

⁶⁶ 'Wellesley Road, Methil Parish Church', *Historic Environment Scotland*, Accessed 9 October, 2021, <http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/LB22712>.

transepts and a choir separated from the body of the church by an organ screen and a cloister and chapter house.⁶⁷ This blend of features of monastic and secular medieval churches is described by Gifford as *simple Romanesque*.⁶⁸ In 2012 there was a union between the church and that of Innerleven East, and since the merger it is now known as Wellesley Parish Church of Scotland.⁶⁹

VII. Methil and Denbeath Parish Church

Fig 10. Methil and Denbeath Parish Church (Bess Rhodes)



In 1931, some 300 years after the closure of the parish church in Methilhill, a new Church of Scotland parish church was constructed on Chemiss Road, close to the site of the medieval church. As with the new Methil Parish Church on Wellesley Road, the opening of the new church was necessitated by the growing population of Methil, in particular the mining districts inland from the port. Originally known as Methilhill Parish Church, it was

constructed in 1931 in a style described by Gifford as *Cheap gothic*.⁷⁰ As hall was added in the 1960s and there was a major repair in 2007, by which time, following a union with the Denbeath Parish Church, it had been renamed Methil and Denbeath Parish Church.⁷¹ It remains in use today.

⁶⁷ Cameron, *Methil*, pp. 34-35.

⁶⁸ Gifford, *The Buildings of Scotland*, 106.

⁶⁹ 'Methil Parish Church', *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 9 October, 2021, <http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/4639/name/Methil+Parish+Church+Wemyss+Fife>.

⁷⁰ Gifford, *The Buildings of Scotland*, p. 106.

⁷¹ 'Methil and Denbeath Parish Church', *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 9 October, 2021, <http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/7776/name/Methil+and+Denbeath+Parish+Church+Wemyss+Fife>.

VIII. Methil Evangelical Church

Fig 11. Methil Evangelical Church (Bess Rhodes)



Methil Evangelical Church was built in 1936, and was described by Alexander Smith in 1952 as the Methil Town Mission.⁷² The church on Bowling Green Street is now part of the Leven Baptist Church group, and services are shared between the sites in Methil and Leven.⁷³

IX. Flying Angel Military Chapel (1940)

Shortly after the start of World War II a small chapel was built in Methil Docks to cater to the dock personnel and those involved in war production at the site. The chapel was demolished at the end of the war and its exact location is unknown.⁷⁴

X. Methil Tin Kirk

In 1952 Alexander Smith listed a number what he described as *Other religious bodies* in Methil, including a *Gospel Hall*, *the Central Gospel Mission* and *the Methil Town Mission*.⁷⁵ One of these was the Spiritualist Church, located on Methil Brae. It was closed by the 1970s the building was sold. It was demolished soon after and is now the site of a private house.⁷⁶

XI. Gospel Hall

In 1952 Alexander Smith listed a number what he described as *Other religious bodies* in Methil, including a *Gospel Hall*, *the Central Gospel Mission* and *the Methil Town Mission*.⁷⁷ The Gospel Hall was found on Wellesley Road. It is unclear when it fell out of use, but the building was later used as a warehouse and is now empty. A new Gospel congregation can be found in the High Street of Lower Methil. Known as Innerleven Gospel Hall, they are a small group not affiliated to any other church, who meet on a Sunday and Tuesday.⁷⁸

⁷² Smith, *The Third Statistical Account of Scotland*, p. 566, 'Methil Evangelical Church', *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 9 October 2021,

<http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/4102/name/Methil+Evangelical+Church+Wemyss+Fife>.

⁷³ 'Bowling Green Street, Methil', *Leven Baptist Church*, Accessed 9 October, 2021,

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⁷⁴ 'Flying Angel Military Chapel', *Places of Worship in Scotland*, Accessed 9 October, 2021,

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⁷⁵ Smith, *The Third Statistical Account of Scotland*, p. 566.

⁷⁶ 'Spiritualist Church', *Places of Worship*, Accessed 11 October, 2021,

<http://www.scottishchurches.org.uk/sites/site/id/10468/name/Spiritualist+Church+Wemyss+Fife>.

⁷⁷ Smith, *The Third Statistical Account of Scotland*, p. 566.

⁷⁸ 'Who are we?', *Innerleven Gospel Hall*, Accessed 11 October, 2021,

http://innerlevengospelhall.org.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2:whoarewe&catid=1:gospelhall&Itemid=11.

XII. Central Gospel Mission Revival Centre

In 1952 Alexander Smith listed a number what he described as *Other religious bodies* in Methil, including a *Gospel Hall, the Central Gospel Mission* and *the Methil Town Mission*.⁷⁹ It is unclear where that organisation met, but a group with the same name have a premises on Herriot Crescent. They meet on Sunday and Monday, and host a choir and children and youth clubs.⁸⁰

Epilogue. The Sacred Landscape of Methil in the Twenty-First Century

Of the more than a dozen churches, missions and chapels constructed in Methil in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, six (2 Church of Scotland, Roman Catholic, Baptist and 2 Gospel or Spiritualist) congregations remain active today. The loss of churches and congregations has been a steady process resulting from a combination of mergers between congregations and denominations, Methil's decline as a port town, and the general trend in a fall in church attendance seen across Scotland after World War II. The 1838 Church of Scotland building on the High Street (1981) and Old St Agatha's Roman Catholic Church (1920s) were superseded by new buildings and were eventually demolished. The merger between two Church of Scotland congregations in 1942, led to the abandonment and eventual demolition of the former Free Church (1978). The outbreak of World War II and the decline in the number of sailors visiting Methil made the German and Coastal Missions superfluous, while the congregations of other independent evangelical churches have fluctuated over time, to the extent that it remains difficult to trace the history, and interconnections, of many of these organisations.

⁷⁹ Smith, *The Third Statistical Account of Scotland*, p. 566.

⁸⁰ 'Central Gospel Mission Revival Centre', *Facebook*, Accessed 11 October, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/CentralGospelMissionRevivalCentre/community/>.

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