
The Parishes of East Stirlingshire During the Feudal Period

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Today only a few of the ecclesiastical parishes of East Stirlingshire retain the same geographical bounds as those which were laid down at the time of their formation. Indeed one parish no longer exists. This tends to promote a degree of confusion for those researching both local history and genealogy and, it is hoped, the following will go some way to clarify the development of the parishes in the Falkirk area from their innovation until the end of the eighteenth century.

Administrative divisions known as “shires”, which are not to be confused with the later sheriffdoms, existed in Scotland from an early period and survived into the twelfth century. It has been suggested that the early ecclesiastical Scottish parish may have comprised the same geographical extent as these early shires.¹ The same source also proposes an association between these early shires and the territorial domain of thanes. In the local situation there is material which would tend to support that view. This takes the form of a charter by David I, with a later confirmation by Malcolm IV, in favour of Cambuskenneth Abbey in which the king made a gift of the tiends from his pleas from Stirling, Stirlingshire and Callendar.² From this it may be inferred that Callendar was a district administered separately from Stirlingshire. That it was formerly a thanedom is well documented.³ It has been further suggested that the extent of the thanedom of Callendar was the tract of land lying between the rivers Avon and Carron and this sits well with the bounds of the early [parish of Falkirk](#). Prior to the seventeenth century, Falkirk parish certainly took in the land between the two rivers, comprising as it did all of what are now the parishes of [Bonnybridge](#), [Denny](#), Falkirk, [Grangemouth](#), [Muiravonside](#) and [Polmont](#), along with their later *quod sacra* parishes, as well as a substantial part of what is now [Slamannan parish](#). Over and above the relationship between thanage and parish it should be mentioned that a co-relation between the bounds of parishes and those of secular estates has been previously suggested.⁴



Old Kirk of Airth



Bothkennar Kirk

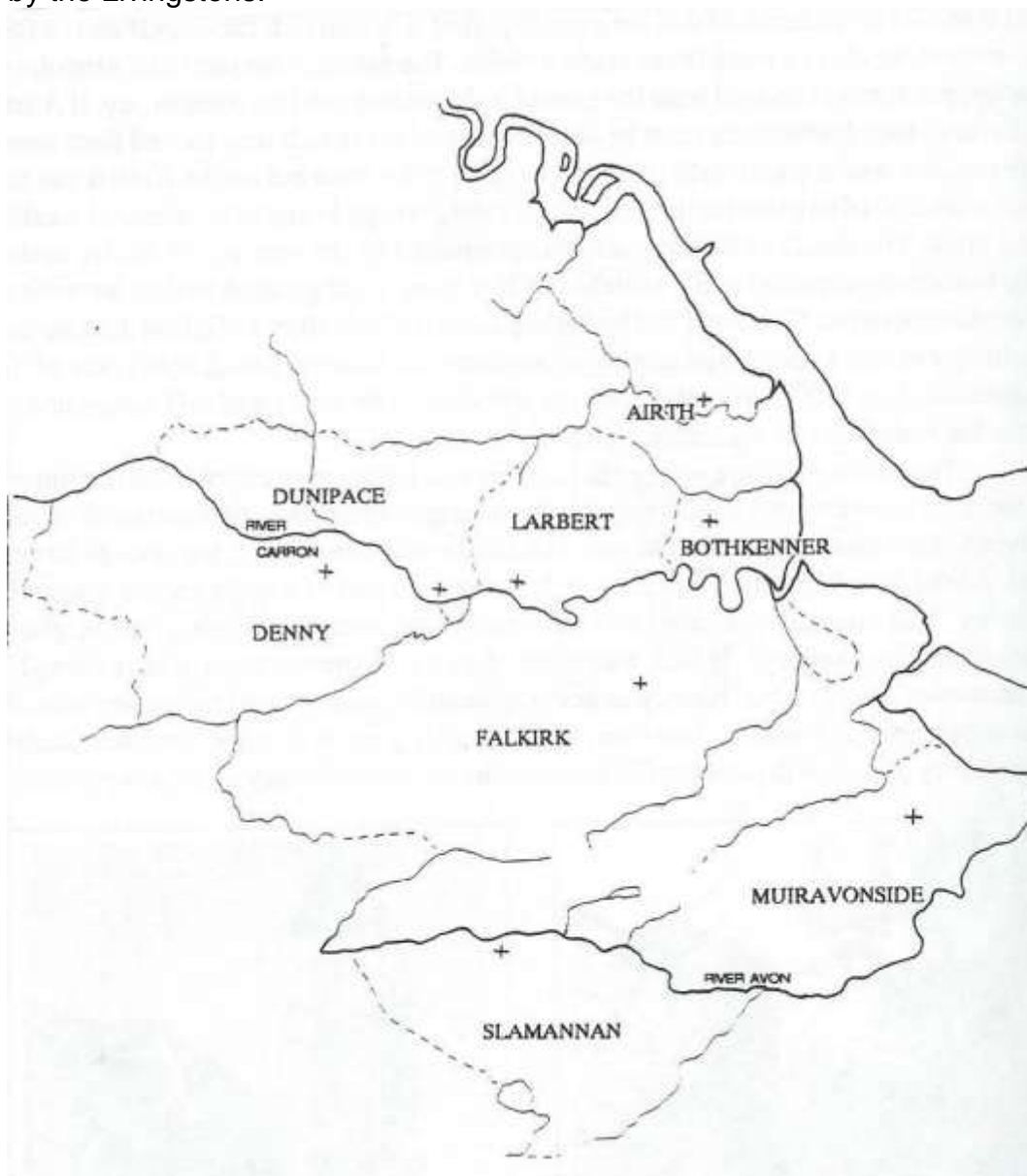
Apart from Falkirk, three other early parishes existed in the area: [Airth](#), [Bothkennar](#) and Slamannan. The [Church of Airth](#) was gifted to Holyrood Abbey in the twelfth century and we may presume that the parish dates from at least that time. Relatively small as a rural parish by any standards compared with Falkirk it was tiny, but it should be understood that the greater part of it lies on rich carselands and so the revenue to the church would have made it viable. The extent of the parish of Airth does not appear to have changed from the time of its formation until the present day. If Airth was small then Bothkennar must be described as miniscule. It may indeed have been the smallest feudal parish in Scotland. It too lay on the carse but unlike Airth it had no waste land; all of its extent embraced rich alluvial flood plain and so its potential wealth was great.

The tiends of Bothkennar were possessed by the nunnery of Eccles in the pre-Reformation period and it was believed that these were granted to that institution sometime between 1250 and 1265 by Bishop David of St. Andrews.⁵ Bothkennar parish no longer exists: a substantial portion was annexed to Polmont parish at the time of its creation and, in 1900, yet another part was absorbed by the new parish of Grangemouth with the remainder being transferred to Falkirk parish.



The Parishes of East Stirlingshire in the 12th Century

The parish of Slamannan, or St. Lawrence as it was often called in earlier times, is the most southerly of the local parishes. In its original form only that part south of the River Avon formed the parish. The part which lies north of that water, the lands of Easter and Wester Jaw, [Elrig](#) and Croftandy, only came to be part of it in the early eighteenth century. This annexation caused much dissension between the people of the original parish and the annexes. It took a number of years before harmony was achieved.⁶ Slamannan, in its original form, was geographically detached from the greater part of the area under discussion. However, a substantial part of it came into the feudal superiority of the [Livingstons of Callendar](#) in the sixteenth century and it was probably as a consequence that it came to be part of Stirlingshire; properly it would seem to lie with West Lothian. Part of the lands of Slamannan parish lay within the superiority of several Airth baronies, it would seem, from the ancient barony of Airth held, prior to the Wars of Independence, by Gilbert Malherbe. These barons at one time had a proportional share of the advowson of Slamannan church but eventually this benefit came to be held in entirety by the Livingstons.



The Parishes in the 16th Century

Two further parishes were created prior to the Reformation: [Dunipace](#) and [Larbert](#). Dunipace was formerly a dependent chapel of St. Ninians, or Kirkton as it was known. The chapel was gifted along with that of Kirkton to the abbey of Cambuskenneth in 1140 x 58 by Robert, Bishop of St. Andrews. In 1163 Pope Alexander II confirmed the chapel of the castle of Dunipace to Dunfermline Abbey, thereby provoking a dispute between the two institutions, which continued until a decision was reached in favour of Cambuskenneth.⁷ It should be noted that the rival chapel would not have been the later one attached to [Dunipace House](#), the graveyard of which can still be seen, for at the time of these events "Dunipace" was used of the estate which is today known as [Herbertshire](#). The chapel of Dunipace, which was dedicated to [St. Alexander](#), remained a dependency of St. Ninians but had received a parochial status by 1426.⁸ The chapel lands or "Kirklands of St Alexander" were feued by Cambuskenneth a branch of the family of Livingston of Callander in 1495.⁹ It was the property which eventually became the nucleus of the barony of Dunipace-Livingstone and it was nearby the manor-house of that estate that the later chapel, which was to serve as the parish church, was erected.

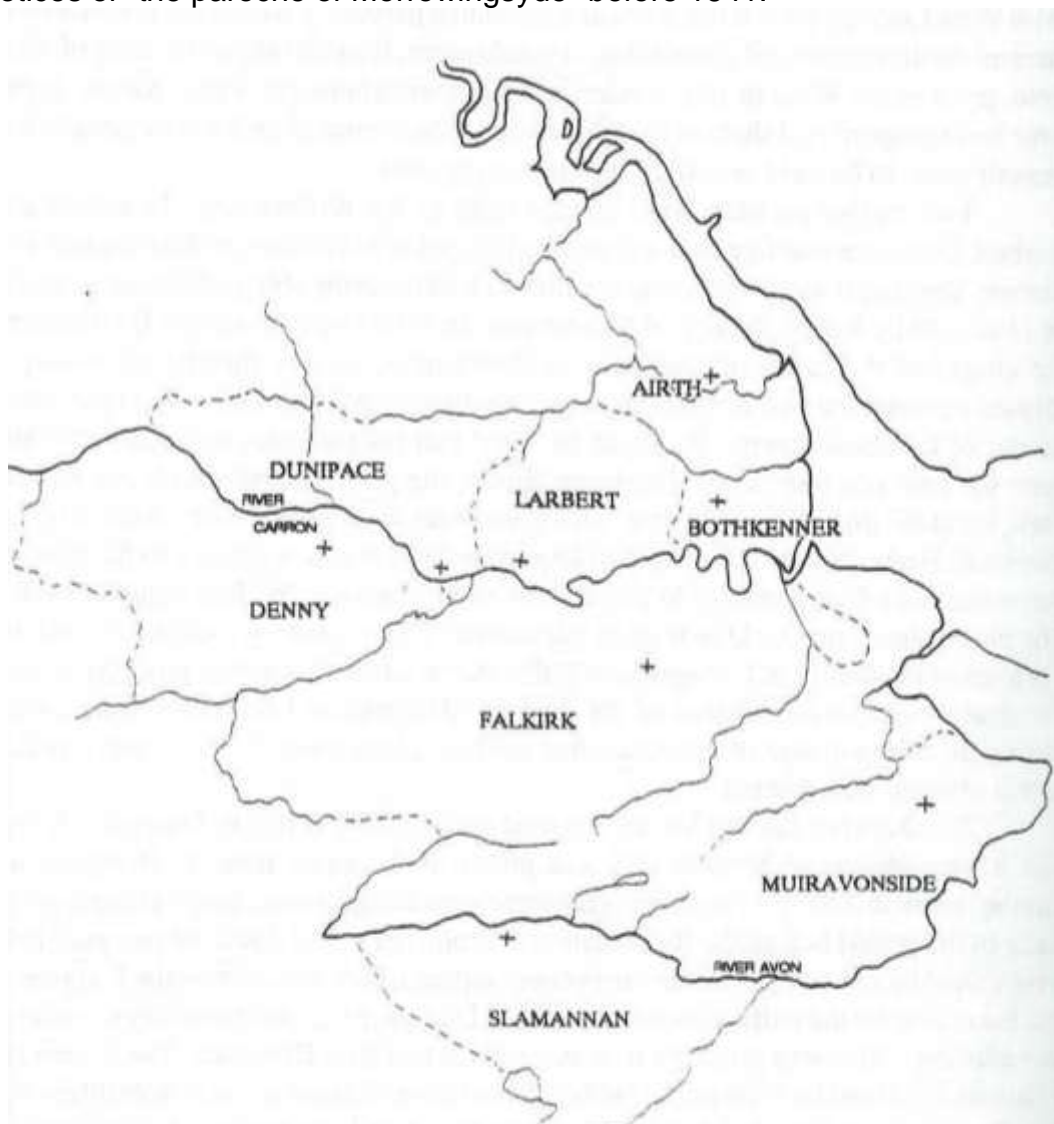
The chapel of Larbert has an identical early history to that of Dunipace. It too was a dependency of Kirkton and was gifted at the same time as Dunipace to Cambuskenneth Abbey. When the parish was created is unknown, but it certainly took place in the period before the Reformation.¹⁰ From 1617 to 1962 the two parishes were united before being disjoined to become separate parishes once again. It appears that the reason for the unification of Larbert and Dunipace was their inability to sustain two ministers. This was probably true more of Larbert than Dunipace. The former is relatively small and had few major heritors from whom the cost of the charge might be met. Dunipace, on the other hand, had a large extent and one heritor of significance as well as several others of comparative means. As far as can be ascertained, the two parishes have not changed in extent from the time of their creation. One point of interest here is that while the bounds of the parishes are largely drawn by natural features there is a distinct possibility that the march which separates the two, which appears on modern maps to be no more than an arbitrary line, may have been the Roman road leading northwards from the fort at [Camelon](#).

A summary of the state of affairs at the time of the Reformation took place finds the district divided into the parishes of Airth, Bothkennar, Dunipace and Larbert, all lying to the north of the River Carron, Slamannan parish south of the River Avon, with the massive parish of Falkirk lying between the two waters. It was to be in the following century that significant changes began. The first of these came in 1641 when a supplication was made to parliament by

"The commissioneris of the General Assemblie and the Maister Alexander Callender minister at Dennie 'to' establish the said kirke of Dennie as ane kirke separate and dismembrit from the parsonage of Falkirke To enjoy all priviledges liberties and emoluments whatsoever competent to ane parochie kirke in tymecoming"

Parliament acceded to this request and empowered the disjunction.¹¹ The new parish contained most of the land lying between Bonny Water and the River Carron and encompassed two great estates: South Herbertshire and Temple-Denny. The former had anciently been part of Herbertshire proper while the latter had been a dependent barony of the Knights Hospitaller but, by the time of the erection of the new parish, the superiority of

the Earl of Wigton. Following on from this, the presbytery of Linlithgow made the decision to disjoin Muiravonside from Falkirk and to erect it into a separate and independent parish. This was done with the consent of James Livingston, Earl of Callendar and he, along with Mr. John Bruce, then minister of Muiravonside, presented a supplication to that effect to Parliament. It was recognised that the heritable rights of Livingston would be prejudiced by the action and so Parliament decreed that, while the tiends of the parish should be used wholly for the purpose of sustaining the kirk of Muiravonside, the patronage should be retained by the Livingstons.¹² The parish of Muiravonside comprised a number of baronies, all but one of which were connected historically with the barony of [Haining](#) or Manuel, the odd one out being the [estate of Muiravonside](#), which was by no means the largest of these properties. It is something of a paradox, therefore, that the parish took that name. Worth noting is the fact that the area which became the parish had been served by a minister for "60 years bygone" and it seems to have been operating to all intents and purposes as a parish prior to the formal disjunction as evidenced by more than a few notices of "the parochie of Morrowingsyde" before 1641.



The Parishes in the 17th Century

The last disjunction to take place in the feudal period was the creation of Polmont parish. Several abortive attempts were made to accomplish this before it finally came to fruition. This was in December 1725 with the first meeting of the heritors of the parish

taking place in January of 1726.¹³ In essence the new parish took in those lands which had formed, prior to the reformation, the barony of Abbotskerse. However, included within the bounds were the lands of Inch which, although they lay to the south of the River Carron, belonged to the parish of Bothkennar. Formerly these lands had been enclosed by a vast meander of the river, the neck of which had been cut through, either by erosion or engineering, at some earlier period.¹⁴ On the south the lands of Elrig and Croftandy, both pertaining to Abbotskerse, were annexed to Slamannan. It should be pointed out that both these latter places, which lay contiguous with each other, were at the southern extremity of Abbotskerse and lay much closer to Slamannan than Polmont. Of greater significance is the fact that they supported a sparse population, returned rents, relative to the remainder of the barony, which were very small and, therefore, the associated tiends would have been negligible.



The Parishes in the 18th Century

The last creation took place ten years after the first Jacobite rising and only twenty years before the second. The risings were the beginning of the end of the feudal system and only a few years later the powers of baronial jurisdiction were severely curbed. It was too the period which saw both the introduction of agricultural improvement and, only a little later, the Industrial Revolution. Each of these had a profound effect upon the local population, the most marked being a meteoric expansion in its numbers which ultimately

resulted in the subdivision of most of the parishes discussed above and, in one instance, Bothkennar, of suppression.

As was stated above, a correlation between the shape of the feudal parishes and secular land divisions has been previously noted. This is particularly true in the local context. However, a few minor aberrations beg explanation. It will be seen from the accompanying maps that for the greater part both sets of divisions conform to the topography of the land, using natural features as bounds. Nevertheless, in the north-east corner of Muiravonside parish, a small portion which would seem to lie within it is, in fact, within Polmont parish. This parcel was formerly the lands of Clerkston, a pendicle of Abbotskerse and it might be inferred that these lands may have been a private donation from an early owner of the barony of Manuel to Holyrood Abbey, to which Abbotskerse belonged. Turning to the parishes of Airth and Bothkennar, it is obvious that the natural boundary between these should have been the Pow Burn rather than the Muirdyke Burn. Indeed, a number of charters show that the land which lies between the two water-courses between the Forth and the Longdyke was part of the Lordship of Bothkennar. Equally evident, however, is that some at least of these lands were in the possession of the ancient barony of Airth from an early period and so it would seem that where the powerful influence of lordship pertained, this took precedence over other factors. A further aberration is found just to the south of Dunipace bridge, where a part of Dunipace parish intrudes across the River Carron into Denny parish. While there has been movement of the river in this area, the immediate topography would rule this out as the cause of the detached portion. What is evident is that the lands lying south of the river were in the possession of the barony of Dunipace-Livingston. With the exception of Clerkston, for which no evidence has been recovered, each of these can be shown to be associated with secular powers in the parish to which they were attached and this would seem to confirm the original premise that the structure of the parishes was determined politically rather than demographically throughout the feudal period.



The Old Parish Church of Falkirk

Notes

- 1 Duncan, A.A.M., *Scotland: the Making of the Kingdom*, p.76
- 2 Barrow, G.W.S, *Regesta Regum Scottorum i*, p. 40
- 3 Reid, J. [The Thanes of Callendar in Calatria 3, 1992](#)
- 4 Grant, A., *Scotland 1306-1469, Independence and Nationhood*, p.65
- 5 Cowan, I.B., *The Parishes of Mediaeval Scotland*
- 6 Murray, G.I., *The Records of Falkirk Parish*, ii, p.104 ff
- 7 Cowan, I.B., *The Parishes of Mediaeval Scotland*
- 8 *ibid.*
- 9 Scottish Records Office, GD 1/529/6
- 10 Scott, I., *The History of Larbert Parish Church*
- 11 Acts of the Scottish Parliament V, no. 224, 1641
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 Murray, G.I., *The Records of Falkirk Parish*, ii, p.108
- 14 Bailey, G.B., [Along and Across the River Carron in Calatria 2](#)