

## St Olaf and Cruden Parish



*Icon of St Olaf by Adrian Hart (used with permission) <https://www.aidanharticons.com/>*

In this paper I attempt to describe the association of St Olaf with the Parish of Cruden. I will not give an account of the life of St Olaf, who is the patron saint of Norway and Denmark as well as the Parish of Cruden, nor will I discuss the historicity of the Battle of Crochdane which modern historians of early mediaeval Scotland are inclined to question.

What is certain is that there is a strong tradition in folk memory, going back hundreds of years that a battle was fought here and that a church was build at an early period, dedicated to St Olaf. This is an unusual dedication, since St Olaf was a Scandinavian saint and the Viking invaders of Scotland at that time would be seen as an enemy force. Scots would not be likely to dedicate a church to such a saint unless there was a very good reason, such as if the church was a memorial to both Scots and Danes who died in the battle.

I have tried to set the St Olaf tradition in the context of several other places in Scotland where there are holy wells and fairs associated with saints.

I have discussed the following areas:

1. Was there one church or two build at an early period in Port Erroll?
2. The Danish Stone in the Cruden kirkyard
3. St Olaf's Well
4. St Olaf's Fair

I have chosen to use the spelling, “Olaf” unless in direct quotations when alternative spellings are used: “Olave”, “Olaus”, “Olavus”

### **One church or two at Port Erroll?**

Tradition says that the first church in Cruden Parish was built to commemorate and provide a burial place for those who died at the Battle of Crochdane in 1012 between the invading Danish forces led by Cnut and the Scots army under King Malcolm II.

Those who have written about the battle and the building of the church follow the account of Hector Boece (1465–1536) in his *Historia Gentis Scotorum* (History of the Scottish People) and its 16<sup>th</sup> century translation into Scots by John Bellenden

*King Malcolme, havand his realm in sicker peace, thocht nathing sa gud as to keip the promes maid to Danis; and, thairfore, he biggit ane kirk at Buchquhane, dedicat in honour of Olavus, patron of Norroway and Denmark to be ane memoriall, that sindry noblis of Danis wer sumtime buryit in the said kirk..... The kirk that was biggit to this effect, as oftymes occurris in thay partis, was ourcassin be violent blast of sandis. Nochtwithstanding, ane Kirk was biggit efter, with mair magnificence, in ane othir place, mair granand (landward)*



*Cruden Bay Golf Course. This mound on the 17th fairway of the golf course is reputed to be an old burial site from the battle.*

The fighting was not confined to the dunes but Pratt believes it extended some four miles inland along the banks of the Water of Cruden from the Bay of Cruden, to the



“Den of Ardendraught” in the north east corner of the parish of Ellon (Pratt, Buchan Observer). I think Pratt, who is the source for many of the others who have written about the battle, has mistaken the name “Den of Ardendraught”. I am not able to find such a place on maps. I think he means The “Den of Auldmaling” which I visited during my researches for the Bridges of Cruden Country. This is the source of the Water of Cruden and is in the correct place, to the west of A952, near Dudwick. (<http://blog.couttsweb.co.uk/?p=205> )



*The Den of Auldmaling*

Boece believed that the original church was built on the site of the battle, among the sand dunes on what is now Cruden Bay Golf Course. Later this was buried by blowing sand and a new church was built further from the shore. (between # the south bank of the Water of Cruden and the present Aulton Road)

Alexander Cock writing in the Old Statistical Account in 1793 followed Boece and believed there had been two churches. Pratt (1858) agreed and wrote that no vestige of this Chapel (the original church on the dunes) is to be seen. Referring to the “second” replacement church he wrote: “The site, however, is still plainly discernible. It stood on a knoll, on the South bank of the water, about a hundred and fifty yards westward of the new Bridge and within fifty yards of the stream. As late as 1837, a portion of the east end and the foundation stones of the other walls, remained, when the whole was demolished and carried away as material for making a road.”





*Likely site of the original St Olaf's Church in Port Erroll*



*Artist's impression by Jim Macdonald of what the Church of St Olaf may have looked like.*

Pratt reports that Major-General Moore oversaw some excavation of graves and of the remains of the church in 1857 and 1858. He found many bones and at least two different floors of the church which had been covered by lairs of sand.

All I know of the Major-General is that he carried out this amateur archaeology while staying (on holiday?) at New Slains Castle. I have found perhaps three Major-General Moores of the right period. (I was astounded to see how many Generals there were in the British army at the time!) There is a George Moore who had retired from the Bombay Regiment of the Indian Army. W Yorke Moore was presented with a silver salver and a cigar box in the shape of a mortar by the officers in the 54<sup>th</sup> Regiment. He had been the colonel of the regiment at one time. Then a W G Moore was elected as a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society in 1857.

Pratt laments the fact that the development of agriculture had led to much of the battlefield and the graves being put “under the plough”. So there is nothing now to see on the ground.

Further bones were found in 1894 when workmen were digging a deep trench in connection with the new water supply for Port Erroll. They also found the foundations of the church during the excavation. A full account is given in the Buchan Observer (17 July 1894). The reservoir can still be seen which confirms this knoll above the Water of Cruden as the site of the old church.



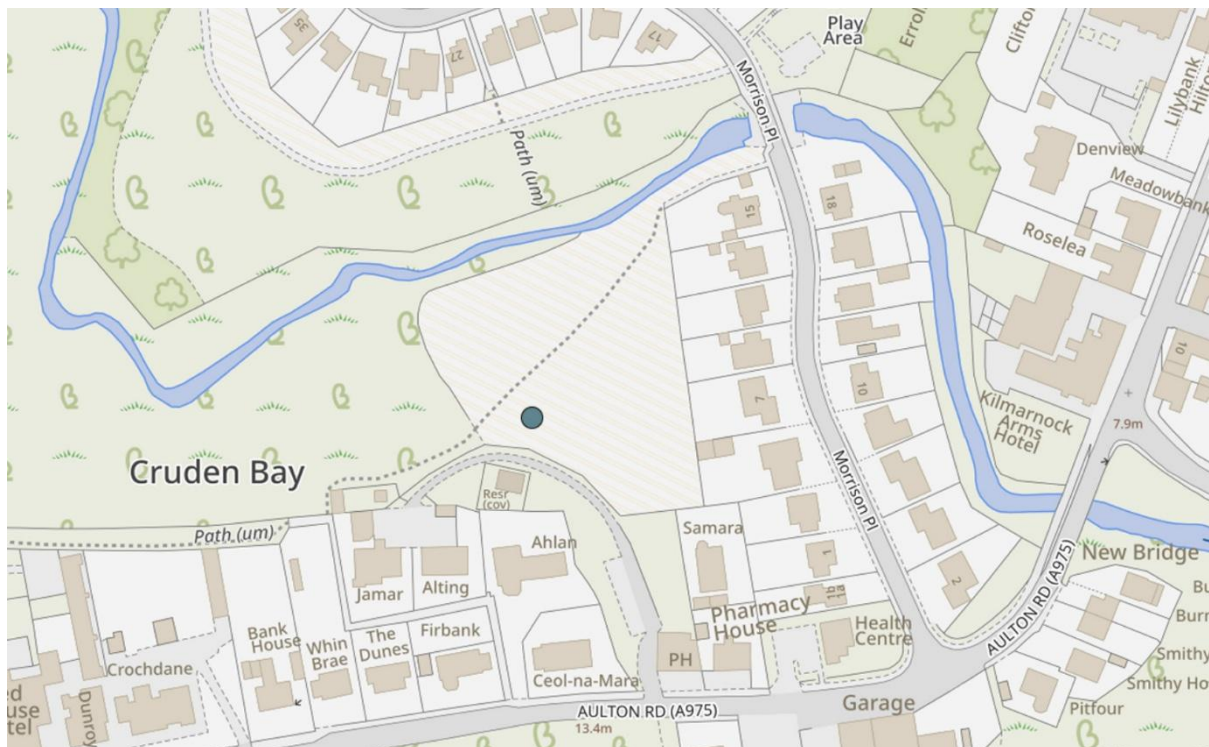
*The water reservoir is still visible. This helps locate the position of the church*

Pratt was the main informant for the for the representatives of the Ordnance Survey who gathered information on place names for inclusion in the maps. Normally place names have an entry of one or two lines. Pratt inundated them with information. The entries for the church in Port Erroll and the battle run to eight pages!

The information was entered in the 1868 six-inch Ordnance Survey map which shows the battle site on the dunes and the St Olaf Church where Pratt described it



The Canmore website publishes a modern map and locates the church in the same place, adjacent to the old water reservoir.



The blue spot marks the likely location of the church



1868 six-inch Ordnance Survey map

Adam Mackay published his account of the history of the parish in his book *Cruden and its Ministers* (1912). He repeats much of what Cock and Pratt had said, but was less confident on the historicity of Boece's account of the battle and the two churches. This is echoed by F C Eeles in a paper published in 1913 in the

Proceeding of the Scottish Antiquarian Society. He writes that he had discussed matters with Mackay and believed that there is really no evidence for a “First” church on the dunes. Those who proposed it were following Boece who is now generally believed to be unreliable on some matters of history.

Eeles believed that the first (and only) church with the burials from the battle was not on the dunes but was the ruin which Pratt described beside the Water of Cruden, which Moore excavated, along with graves surrounding it and which the workmen found in 1894 while working on the Port Erroll water supply. He believed that this was built sometime in the later 11<sup>th</sup> century and dedicated to St Olaf in commemoration of those who had perished in the battle. It could not have been immediately after the battle because of the chronology of St Olaf. He was only a boy of seventeen in 1012, and he was not martyred until 1030.

Moore’s discovery of the layer of sand would confirm the story of this church being over-blown as happened to the village and church at Forvie down the coast.

None of the earlier writers had any knowledge of when this old church was abandoned and the congregation moved to the location of the present church. A presbytery visit in 1623 noted the poor state of repair of the church:

*The kirk yird dykes war down, the kirk ruinynous, the kirk windois nather broded nor glasses.* (Mair, quoted by Mackay 1912)

Eeles believes that this indicates that the church was not a “new” build at the time of the Reformation, but must have been there for some considerable time to allow it to fall into a ruinous condition. He suggests that the move from Port Erroll would fit with a time in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century when there was much new church building and renovation in Scotland. He believes that the stone font unearthed from the manse garden at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is dated from that period (12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> century). The old bell has a date of 1519. If Eeles chronology is correct, then there would have been no need for the bell and the font to be moved from Port Erroll but would have been placed in the “new” church.



*A floral display in the old stone font*





*St Mary's Chapel, Rattray*

An example of 13<sup>th</sup> century church building is the Chapel of St Mary at Rattray. It is interesting that the old Burgh of Rattray also suffered with shifting sand dunes which led to its eventual abandonment.

Eeles believes that this ruinous church which the Presbytery found in 1623 was the one that had to be rebuilt in 1776 with stone quarried from the Grey Stone of Ardendaught and the subsequent additions in 1834.



## Danish Stone



Pratt says that the “large blue marble matrix of a Netherlandish brass” which lies in the churchyard of the present church was brought from the old church ‘about a hundred years ago’.” This would date the move to the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century. Cock also refers to the stone but makes no mention of its removal from the old church to the new. He writes that the stone is said to have been sent over by the Danish King to be laid on the tomb of his officers. Pratt goes further and locates its original place as over a tomb beside the old church where the Crown Prince of Denmark was allegedly laid, having been killed in the battle. In the information which Pratt provided to the Ordnance Survey (P131) he goes even further:

The Stone was removed by order of the Danish Consul, who was ordered by his government to inspect the grave and report on the state of its keeping. He finding that the grave was allowed to be despoiled had the Stone carried by a party of men and laid in the parish Churchyard, and the yearly grant paid by the Danish government, for the good keeping of the Grave, was withdrawn

The stone bears no inscription but there are grooves and holes which look as if they were mounting points for a copper (brass) plate with some inscription.

Since Eeles believes that the old church was abandoned in the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century, he is of the opinion that the Danish Stone may always have been in the present kirkyard. He asserts that the stone itself is no older than the 14<sup>th</sup> century. However if the grave marked by this stone was indeed that of a casualty of the battle, he most likely would have been buried in Port Erroll beside the church dedicated to St Olaf where many graves had been found. If Pratt is correct and the stone was provided



by the Danish King, this could have happened much later than the battle and Eeles 14<sup>th</sup> century date could still fit.

## St Olaf's Well



Pratt (Page 40) describes in his flowery language the St Olaf's Well:

There is a well dedicated to St. Olaus, the patron saint of the parish. It is a copious spring of pure water, bubbling up in ever-varying jets from a bottom of sand. It was formerly of sufficient importance to invite the pilgrimages of the devotee. And here we have Thomas the Rhymer; but, unlike his usual vaticinations \*, his prophecy, in this instance, seems to imply some peculiar immunities to the locality, with reference to the sanctity of this well :—

*St Olave's well, low by the sea,  
Where pest nor plague shall ever be.*

[\* Vaticination: an act of prophesying or a prophesy]

This is just one of countless well dedicated to saints around Scotland, many of which have reputed healing properties.

I recall hearing locals in the village of Rosehearty advising a young couple whose new baby was not thriving to abandon the tap water which may have been contaminated by old lead pipes and use water from St Drostan's Well at Aberdour



beach which they went on to do. I went with them to fill up their flagon. The baby thrived.

Then there is a story about another St Drostan's well near the village of Edzell in Angus.

Andrew Jervise tells a story about the well in his book, *The Land of the Lindsays* (1853). He says that it was once a fine spring of water but it was drained off at the beginning of the 19th century. Nothing now remains to mark the spot, but its location is marked on the old maps.

Like many of these sacred springs, St Drostan's Well is said to have brought many miraculous cures from all sorts of diseases.

Jervise reports:

"The Aesculapian craft (He is referring to the Greek God of medicine and means those who practiced healing arts) felt their craft was so much endangered that a few of the hardiest of them went to poison the fount; but the neighbours, hearing of their intention, fell upon them with sticks and stones and killing the whole of them had their carcasses buried around the well!"

Jervise gives no indication of the date of the incident or his source of information. I expect it was just one of the stories that the farming people of his day would tell.

### **Thomas the Rhymer**

Sir Thomas de Ercildoun (1220 – 1298) better known as Thomas the Rhymer or True Thomas, was a Scottish laird, poet and reputed prophet from Earlston in Berwickshire (then called Erceldoune).

There are many stories told about him including that he was taken by the Queen of the Fairies into the Fairy Kingdom where he stayed for seven years.

He is reputed to have predicted events in Scottish history like the death of King Alexander III of Scotland who fell from his horse in a storm among rocks near Kinghorn in Fife.

*On the morrow, afore noon, shall blow the greatest wind that ever was heard before in Scotland.*

Predicting the union of the Crowns in 1603 when the son of Mary Queen of Scots, James VI, succeeded Queen Elizabeth I to the throne of England.

*Who shal rule the ile of Bretaine  
From the North to the South sey?  
A French wife shal beare the Son,  
Shall rule all Bretaine to the sey,  
that of the Bruces blood shall come  
As neere as the nint degree.*

Then there is the Weeping Stones Curse which he uttered on a visit to Fyvie Castle/

*Fyvie, Fyvie thou'se never thrive,  
lang's there's in thee stanes three :  
There's ane intill the highest tower,  
There's ane intill the ladye's bower,  
There's ane aneath the water-yett,  
And thir three stanes ye'se never get.*

On a happier note it is thought that this poem foretells the victory at Bannockburn

*The first of blessings I shall thee show,  
Is by a burn, that's call'd of bread;  
Where Saxon men shall tine the bow,  
And find their arrows lack the head.*

*"Beside that brigg, out ower that burn,  
Where the water bickereth bright and sheen,  
Shall many a fallen courser spurn,  
And knights shall die in battle keen.*

### **St Olaf's Day**

St Olaf's Day is celebrated on 29 July, the day of the death of the King Martyr. However Pratt (Page 366) states that in Scotland it was celebrated on 31 March. He gives no indication of the source of this information.

The Aberdeen Breviary (1282) contains a collect for St Olaf's Day.

*Omnipotens sempiterne Deus, clemenciam tuam suppliciter exoramus ut sicut  
beatum Olauum martyrem mira providencia regem in terris constitui  
catholicum et predicatorem eximium ita apud tuam miseicordiam in celis pro  
nobis facias perpetuum intercessorum. Per Dominum nostrum.*

Almighty and everlasting God,  
we pray for your mercy, that as the blessed martyr Olaf, by your wonderful  
providence, was made a catholic king on earth and an excellent preacher, so  
in your mercy in heaven you may make perpetual intercessors for us.  
Through our Lord.

### **St Olaf's Fair**

The Fasti reports that a Fair for St Olaf was held in Cruden Parish. I expect this information was derived from Pratt who states that the fair was held on the second Tuesday in April. (P43) though in an earlier article in 1857 he says it was at the end of March. Might this be related to the celebration of St Olaf's Day at the end of March?

Pratt reports in a paper presented to the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland that the fair was still being held in 1857.



There were fairs held all over Scotland, some able to be traced back to mediaeval times. Here are just two examples which may give a flavour of what St Olaf's fair in Cruden may have been like.

In Banffshire, Peter Fair is held near Buckie. The old Rathven Church was originally dedicated to St Peter and the fair adopted the name. Now it is simply a Fun Fair but it originally was held in mediaeval times adjacent to the church. Goods would be bought and sold as well as entertainments of all sorts held. The first reference to Peter Fair is in church records from 1686 but its origins stretch much further back.

Better documented and of national importance was Taranty (Trinity) Fair held on the town muir outside Brechin on the first Wednesday after the second Tuesday in June. Brechin Cathedral was dedicated to the Holy Trinity – hence the name, which locals pronounced Taranty. It was an important fair for dealing in cattle, sheep and horses with sellers and buyers travelling great distances to attend. There would be “chapmen”, pedlars who would bring a great variety of goods and of course it was a feeing market for agricultural workers. In its heyday in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century agricultural workers and towns people from all over Angus and the Mearns would attend. Later as with most of these fairs it developed into only a funfair. Many of these old fairs were established by royal charter and there are records showing that Brechin's markets stretch back to the reign of William the Lion (1165-1214) and even earlier. A charter of William's confirms a grant to the Bishop and Culdees of the church of Brechin, giving the right to hold a Sunday market

Turriff had a variety of fairs and markets including the one named for the saint to whom the Church was dedicated, St Congan. The fair is sometimes called St Cowan's Fair. I am not sure how this relates to the two major feeing markets held in May and November before the Term Days of Whitsun and Martimas. The Turra Market is celebrated in the song The Barnyards of Delgaty.

As I gaed up tae Turra Market,  
Turra Market for tae fee  
I met in wi' a wealthy fairmer  
By the Barnyards o' Delgaty.



*Turriff feeing Fair, 1890. (Photo: Peter Cooke Collection) (School of Scottish Studies Archives & Library) (ref. Peter\_Cooke\_Red\_box 8\_126).*

Mediaeval fairs were usually held adjacent to the church, but might move to more convenient locations. This certainly happened with Peter Fair which is documented in at least three different fields in the parish. If Eeles is right about the date of the move from the old church to the present location as being in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it is likely that St Olaf's fair was held in a field adjacent to the church. Mair's account of the 30-year problem the Presbytery of Ellon had with Cruden's delinquent minister, David Rattray, gives a hint of where the fair was held. Rattray was accused that "on market day in Cuden he turned the manse into a public house." (P129)

The Cruden Fair was probably nothing on the scale of the Taranty Fair, but would have seen local farmers buying and selling stock, chapmen and locals selling a variety of goods and probably different sorts of entertainments eating, drinking games etc. I am not aware that it was a feeing market but some employment transactions may have taken place. The date of the Olaf's Fair in early April was not at the right time (Term Days) for feeing to take place. Locals would head for Maud or Ellon if they were looking for a fee.

The fairs were also a happy hunting ground for recruiting for the army especially if agricultural work was hard to find.

### **Twa Recruitin' Sergeants**

Twa recruiting sergeants came frae the Black Watch

Tae markets and fairs, some recruits for tae catch.

But a' that they 'listed was forty and twa:

Enlist my bonnie laddie an' come awa.

Chorus:

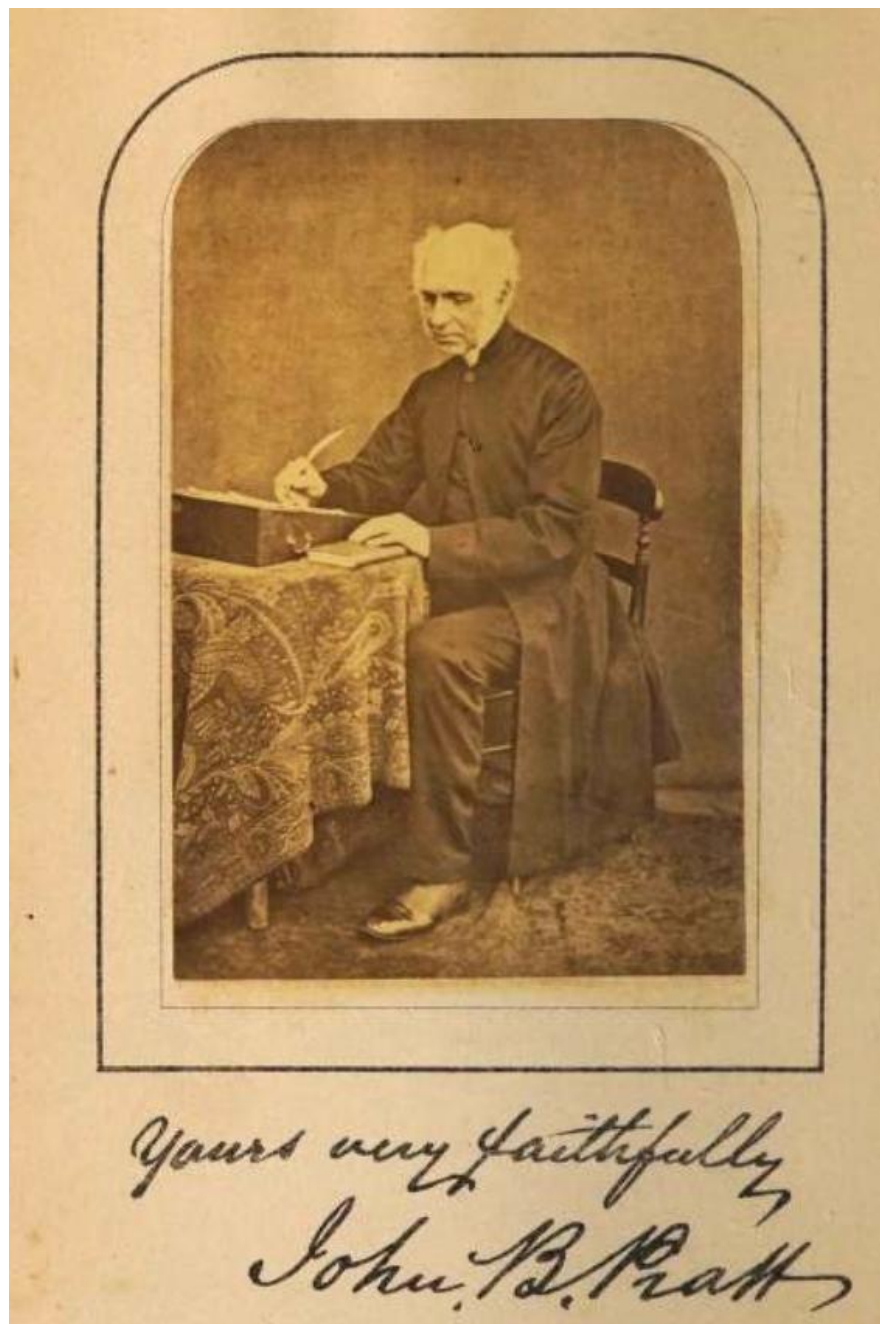


And it's over the mountain and over the Main,  
Through Gibralter, to France and Spain.  
Pit a feather tae your bonnet, and a kilt aboon your knee,  
Enlist my bonnie laddie and come awa with me.

Gavin Greig collected this song in 1908 and included it in the Greig-Duncan Folk Song Collection.

I wonder if naval recruitment by impressment took place among the seafarers in the Buchan community?

## People referred to



**John Burnett Pratt** was born at Cairnbanno, New Deer in 1799, graduated MA from Aberdeen University before serving congregations in Stuartfield and New Deer in the Scottish Episcopal Church. The main part of his ministry however was at the congregation of St James in Cruden Bay. In 1865, the University of Aberdeen conferred upon him the degree of LL.D. He died on the 20th of March 1869, in his seventy-first year, having filled the office of pastor of St James's at Cruden for the long period of forty-four years.

He is best known as the author of *Buchan* which ran to four editions two published after his death.



**Francis Carolus Eeles OBE** (1876 –1954), was an English liturgical scholar and ecclesiastical historian. He wrote articles about church bells and historic church buildings, including Cruden.





**Hector Boece** (1465-1536) was a historian and humanist, author of an important Latin history of Scotland. Born in Dundee he studied at St Andrews and Paris. In 1500 he was invited by James IV to establish a University at Aberdeen with Bishop William Elphinstone. He was the first principal of the University of Aberdeen.

**John Bellenden** At the request of James V he translated Hector Boece's *Historia Gentis Scotorum* into Scots, Bellenden's work is called *Hystory and Croniklis of Scotland*/

**Thomas Mair** of Kinmuck, Ellon carefully examined the records of the Ppresbytery of Ellon from 1597-1688 and in 1894-1896 published *Narratives and Extracts from the Records of the Presbytery of Ellon*.

**Adam Mackay.** Minister at Cruden from 1905-1915, He moved to Queen's Park, Glasgow in 1915, then to Huntly in 1924. He researched and wrote extensively on local history.

*Distinguished Sons of Cruden by Adam Mackay 1922*

*Cruden and its Ministers 1912*

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25 February 2025