

Token that tells us so much about church life in the past

by Jim A Johnston

GEORGE HENDERSON was born and brought up at "Morven", Bettyhill, but, returning after half a lifetime in the Army and then in London, found that his late father's house contained one or two surprises – including objects he had not noticed as a boy. One of these was a small, silvery, coin-like object, the like of which he had never seen before.

Neither would the vast majority of people in present-day Scotland – but in previous generations, from the days of John Calvin in the mid-16th century until the early part of the 20th century, such objects would have been well known and highly prized throughout the nation in virtually every denomination of the many Presbyterian churches. For the object is a Communion token without which it was, for many centuries, impossible to participate in the sacrament of Communion in any reformed church.

The particular token which George discovered is of local origin, having been issued to those who could prove themselves to be among the truly faithful in the Farr congregation of the United Free Church of Scotland, a new church formed across Scotland in 1900 by the amalgamation of the remnant of the original Free Church of Scotland (those left behind by the departure of the Free Presbyterians in 1892) and the United Presbyterian Church.

While the Catholic Church, then and now, held Communion on a very frequent basis, Communion in Scottish Presbyterian churches was a relatively rare event, occurring perhaps two or three times per year and occupying a central part in the system of discipline which most churches then exercised over the members of their congregations. Then, in the weeks leading up to Communion, the kirk elders, and sometimes the minister, would visit their parishioners and put to each adult individual an agreed series of questions, often probing their knowledge of the Shorter Catechism (a digest of the essential principles of Christianity) but also sometimes exploring their moral character with particular regard to traits such as drunkenness and "sins of the flesh". Those who passed the test were given a token and, on presenting that token at the church door on the day of Holy Communion, would be permit-



George Henderson with the 1907 United Free Church of Scotland Communion token found while clearing out the family home.

ted to sit at "the tables" usually in the church, but sometimes outside, and receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

Older tokens were often made, fairly roughly, by local blacksmiths or other craftsmen using base metals and sturdy dies but, long before George's example was struck, these items were being professionally produced to a high standard of manufacture. This one, for the year 1907, appears to be made from a fairly soft alloy such as pewter, although an example from Tongue, of similar date, was the first to be made from the then ultra-modern metal, aluminium.

Ironically, as this token was being issued inviting the faithful to the tables, a power struggle was going on within the recently formed United Free Church which led, in Bettyhill, to their minister being evicted from his manse, the congregation being

evicted from the church and the construction of a brand new church, now known as the High Church of Scotland and which has just celebrated its centenary year. However, George's ancestor, whoever he or she was, was probably really glad to be in possession of that small oval when walking down the road to church on Communion Sabbath.

In earlier centuries, especially during the half-century of religious persecution in Scotland ending in 1688, when the Covenanters were being fined, jailed, tortured, exiled (some, according to the oral history of my family, to Shetland) and even killed, possession of a token could mean the difference between life and death as objects such of these were used as a means of identification among those willing to endure the most extreme hardship for their faith.

For those who would like to know

more about Communion tokens, including those used abroad by the Huguenots and others, the classic text was published in 1999 by the late Lester Burzinski – entitled *Communion Tokens of the World*, a copy of which is currently available in the USA at a mere \$220!

Apparently there is a brisk, but very specialised, trade in Communion tokens with older ones, particularly from times of conflict, fetching a good price. More modern ones – and some were still in use as recently as 1938, at Fairmilehead near Edinburgh – tend to come on the market for just a few pounds.

Value, of course, is a different matter and this one – which George intends to donate to Strathnaver Museum – offers a little window through which we may catch a small glimpse of the past and an opportunity to look back and reflect on what is revealed.