

Paisley Abbey



Abbey Herald

October 2026

The beginning of October brings our annual celebration of Harvest Thanksgiving in church. But, what do we *really* know about the work of farmers and crofters and the incredible difficulties and hardships they face?

Farming is vital to Scotland. As well as producing food, farmers and crofters manage three quarters of Scotland's land. Common sense would suggest that we need to ensure we maintain a vibrant and successful agricultural sector that looks after our environment and which will, in turn, undergird our food supply well into the future.

Yet, according to an article published by the Scottish Environment Link called '*Farm for Scotland's Future*' it would seem that all is far from well within our farming communities. Surprisingly, when Climate Change is forcing every aspect of our living to make urgent changes in order to lower our emissions and work towards a net zero government target, farming is Scotland's second biggest source of climate emissions after transport. It is also a major cause of biodiversity loss. In short, our current farm funding system does very little to protect and promote nature or the help with the effects of the climate. Despite ongoing advocacy, essential changes to government support and funding for farming, to better help and encourage farmers and crofters to produce food in harmony with nature and the climate, has yet to materialise. According to the Scottish Government, the necessary help being sought by farmers, will '*evolve over time*'. Surely, the farming community deserves the support of us all if it is ever to succeed in developing and incentivising sustainable farming as they continue to face huge challenges simply to survive.

Sadly, it is tempting for a population with no experience of food shortages; and which takes sufficiency and predictability of supplies for granted, to have little concern for the people who produce our food. As a result, the challenges faced day and daily by our farmers simply to exist, usually go unnoticed and unheeded. A serious indictment upon our society.

Life is sacred. Food is sacred. The gifts of the earth are a constant miracle. And so it is right we give thanks for the earth's provision, traditionally, at harvest. It's a time to remember that life is fragile; and its abundance precarious, dependent on the hard graft of our farmers and crofters each year preparing and planting, sowing and nurturing, then hoping that weather conditions will prove favourable in order for a harvest to be eventually gathered and processed.

Though most of us live in an urban environment quite different from that of country dwellers, we should not lose sight of the huge difficulties and challenges being experienced on our country's farms and crofts. It is through their efforts and hardships that our bellies are filled. Maybe, given the complexities being faced throughout the farming industry and the poverty that threatens to overshadow farms and crofts alike, the traditional celebration of harvest is no longer adequate. Do we not all have an obligation to better understand the effects and consequences of our constant drive for cheap food ? And given the climate challenges facing the world, perhaps we need to think longer and harder than we presently do about how we celebrate Creation itself ?

Jim Gibson

Interim Minister at the Abbey.



A historic service was held in the Abbey on September 20th when Paisley's ancestral connections with the United States of America was commemorated. As Dr Davidson, our depute Clerk, has previously recorded in recent editions of the *Herald*, Paisley was the ancestral home of two Presidents of the United States, Woodrow Wilson and Ronald Reagan. However, on the occasion of the 250th Anniversary of the Signing of the American Declaration of Independence, it was one of the signatories, the Revd John Witherspoon, who was the principal of our service. Witherspoon was minister of the Laigh Kirk in Paisley before falling out of favour with his congregation.

A brilliant scholar, he and his family emigrated to New Jersey in 1768, where he was appointed President of the College of New Jersey, later to become Princeton University. Driven by his belief in his Divine Calling, with the ground swell in the Thirteen States already begun in earnest against what were judged unfair taxes imposed by Britain, Witherspoon quickly used his position of influence to become elected to membership of the influential Continental Congress, the body which managed the Revolutionary War and was eventually to transition the Colonies into a sovereign nation. He died, aged 71 years, in 1794.

At the service, we were delighted to host the American Consul-General, Kathryn Porter and the First Minister of Scotland, John Swinney MSP who were paying their first visit to the Abbey. The Lord Lieutenant of Renfrewshire, Colonel Peter McCarthy also graced the occasion. Renfrewshire Council was represented by the Depute Provost Cathy McEwen. Paisley Members of Parliament and Members of the Scottish Parliament also attended.

Immediately following the close of the service, the Minister escorted our principal guests to the Witherspoon Memorial in the north aisle where the Consul-General unveiled a plaque to mark the occasion and our principal guests signed the Abbey's Visitors Book. Thereafter, cake was cut by both Consul-General and the First Minister to the congregation's delight; before refreshments for all were served in the north transept.



Revd Dr Jim Gibson with First Minister of Scotland, John Swinney and the American Consul-General, Kathryn Porter



Photographs by Stewart McDougall

ELDER DUTY TEAMS

October	Marion Sommerville's Team
November	Fiona Small's Team
December	John Kitson's Team

PARISH REGISTER

Memorial Service

16 September Sandy Hannah

Weddings

12 September Charlotte Coutillard & Gavin Thompson

26 September Kirstinann Craig & Andrew Wyllie

CHRISTIAN AID

Paisley St George's Church are hosting an afternoon with the Revd Lorna Hood and Revd Hazel Shaw in conversation with Christian Aid partners from South Sudan.

Take this opportunity to hear about the life transforming work of Christian Aid in the youngest country in the world. Learn about the role of the Churches in the peace process and the hope that is alive.

Wednesday 21 October at 2pm in St George's with Revd Tut Nugouth (Presbyterian Church of South Sudan) and James Wani from Christian Aid South Sudan.

Refreshments will be served.

RENFREWSHIRE FOODBANK

Over the last five years, the number of emergency food parcels provided to people in crisis by the Trussel Trust has increased by 73% and last year Renfrewshire Foodbank distributed 5595 food parcels to our local community.

Renfrewshire Foodbank is part of the Trussel Trust's UK-wide network of food banks, they provide food and practical support to help people in crisis, including offering advice and signposting people to other services, like debt advice that can help them break free from poverty.

The Abbey collects food for the Foodbank on the last Sunday of each month. The October collection will be on Sunday 25th. You will see trolleys in the Cloisters. The congregation is very generous with their donations of non-perishable goods and money which can be gift-aided. (a form can be provided) If you do not currently contribute, perhaps you could note the date in your diary each month and bring along a few items from the shortages list which is printed in the Intimations in the Order of Service.

The staff at the Foodbank are always really grateful to receive our donations. Every little helps. Thank you.



ALLOVUS

A new session of activity for our twice monthly group *ALLOVUS* has commenced to a great start with nearly 100% of the membership attending the first two sessions. The group is open to people of ALL ages, whether members of the Abbey or not. Everyone is welcome to come along to the Place of Paisley on the first and third Wednesdays of the month at 1.30pm. Following the '*Activity of the Day*' refreshments are served and the meeting closes around 3.30 pm. The room where we meet is accessible for those with mobility difficulty (please forewarn the Abbey Office).

We meet again on:

Wednesday, October 7th. 'Some Verses' with Ian Nimmo-White.

Wednesday, October 14th. 'Staying Safe!'

Wednesday, November 4th 'Caring for Our Veterans'.



PAISLEY, PAISLEY ABBEY, AND AMERICA

America has now outgrown the state of infancy: her strength and commerce make large advances to manhood; and science in all its branches has not only blossomed, but even ripened on the soil.

Thomas Paine

(writing in "The Pennsylvania Magazine,"

January 24th 1775)

Scottish emigration to North America was continuous from the 17th to the 20th centuries. Many of the early migrants in the 17th and 18th centuries were banished for their religious and political beliefs – dissenters, Covenanters, and Jacobites amongst them. Increasingly, the individuals and families who made up the hundreds of thousands of Scots seeking a new life in America before independence were motivated by personal aspiration. They sought to escape the economic hardships of their beleaguered existence and share in the opportunities for land ownership, self-sufficiency and commerce that America promised.

Within Scotland, changing agricultural practices and land usage forced tenants out of their homes in search of work and a means of subsistence. Many came to towns such as Paisley where a cottage weaving industry had become established. The consequent population explosion in Paisley was unparalleled. A small town of about 2,000 inhabitants in 1700 grew in scarcely more than a century to a bustling centre of industry with a population of nearly 60,000. Increasing mechanisation was associated with the opening of new mills and factories associated with the textile trade and culminating in Paisley becoming the centre of the world's thread manufacture. That led to economic challenges of its own, however, characterised by overcrowding, health and social deprivation, poverty and squalor.

In parallel with socioeconomic factors, a people whose history had for long been imbued with a strong desire for freedom of political and

religious expression had in many cases become disaffected in both regards. There were growing calls for change and reforms that would afford a greater say for all and mitigation of the extreme inequalities of these times. As the political reform movement grew, so did the town of Paisley's reputation for radical thinking.

Within the national church, the system of Patronage whereby new ministers were presented to congregations without reference to popular choice, became increasingly contentious. From the middle of the eighteenth century, the cracks that would eventually lead to a complete schism in the Church of Scotland were beginning to widen. Dissenting churchgoers began to meet as congregations and, as their number grew, formed independent national church bodies and presbyteries outwith the Established Church.

All these factors - social, economic, political, and religious – fed the motivation to emigrate and seek out the implicit possibilities of a new beginning across the Atlantic.

John Witherspoon (1723-1794) was a "manse bairn," born the eldest son of the minister of Yester in East Lothian. On his mother's side he claimed to be descended from John Knox. After studying at Edinburgh University, he was in 1743 licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Haddington and ordained to Beith in 1745 where he served as minister until 1757 when he began his eleven-year ministry at the Laigh Kirk of Paisley.

When Witherspoon arrived in Paisley, he already had a growing reputation as the leading voice in the Evangelical or "Popular" party of the Church of Scotland. He found himself at odds with the then dominant force of the Church's Moderate party, pitted against the might of its leader and his contemporary, William Robertson. Robertson - minister, historian, and principal - was a leading figure in the Scottish Enlightenment, and a formidable opponent, given his wide-ranging intellectual pursuits and his powers of persuasive oratory.

Witherspoon was “pious, learned, grave, and judicious,” laying the foundations for what became his party’s enduring pre-eminence in the Church. As the embodiment of the growing unrest and disaffection in his faction, he strove for reform but was rarely a match for Robertson in the debates of the General Assembly.

However worthy in principle, Witherspoon’s ideas of religion and discipline were at odds with the more liberal and enlightened spirit of these times. His counter-cultural attempt to establish his moral authority by openly accusing some of his parishioners, first of prophane and blasphemous conduct, then of adultery, embroiled him in a bitter fourteen-year long legal battle that his stubborn intransigence did nothing to curtail. Besieged and frustrated by such a combination of misadventures and failures, his initial resolve to stand his ground resolutely yielded in the face of a pressing invitation to move to America and assume the presidency of the College of New Jersey (later to be Princeton University).

Whatever sense of mortification might have accompanied Witherspoon when he left Paisley and embarked for America in 1768 seems to have been dissipated on his transatlantic voyage. It was therefore with renewed vigour that he took up his new appointment, quickly consolidating the administration and strengthening the pedagogical methodology at Princeton. His personal influence as an inspirational tutor and lecturer proved foundational to the fledgeling country once it gained its independence. During his tenure as President, Princeton produced thirty-nine representatives, twenty-one senators, twelve state governors, a vice president, and a president, James Madison. Madison is regarded by many as the “Father of the Constitution,” though much of the thought imbued in the drafting of the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights containing its first ten amendments, can be traced to the teachings of Witherspoon.

If others considered it to be by chance that he had arrived amidst the growing call for independence of the American colonies, Witherspoon himself saw it as both providential and opportune. He promptly embraced the cause with enthusiasm and almost immediately assumed prominence as an influential figure at the Philadelphian epicentre of the developing American Revolution. He went on to serve in the New Jersey provincial and state legislatures as well as the Continental and Confederation Congresses throughout the Revolution, and in the New Jersey Convention that ratified the Federal Constitution in 1787. According to one of his biographers: "By any fair measure [Witherspoon] deserves to be classed among the founders of [the American] republic. By signing the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation and by ratifying the Constitution, he had a direct hand in passing three of the four Organic Laws of the United States, and the two most celebrated founding documents - the Declaration and Constitution." (*Morrison*).

Although sometimes described as a "Forgotten Founding Father," John Witherspoon's contribution to the realisation and establishment of the newly independent country was manifestly seminal, mediated through education, political philosophy, and constitutional rationale. Moreover, in Britain, the perceived influence of Witherspoon and other Reformed Presbyterian Ministers caused the American Revolution to be branded a "Presbyterian War." Perhaps Witherspoon's overriding motivation was above all the realisation of an independent national Presbyterian church in America. How fulfilling it must have been for him when, in 1789, he formally convened the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, serving as its first Moderator.

Two American Presidents were able to trace their ancestry to Paisley: these were Thomas Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924), the 28th President of the United States, and Ronald Wilson Reagan (1911-2004), the 40th President of the United States.

President Woodrow Wilson's forebears on his mother's side can be traced back to the time of the Reformation in Scotland. His 6th great-grandfather, Patrick, was a priest in the pre-Reformation Roman Catholic church in Eaglesham, Renfrewshire, who converted to the reformed religion, and records show that he was a reader in the post-Reformation church in 1574. His family had lived in Eaglesham since at least the beginning of the 16th century. Early spellings of the name vary but over time, "Wodrow" became the usual spelling. President Wilson's maternal Grandfather, Thomas, was born in Paisley. He added an additional "o" to his surname around 1820 after he had moved to Carlisle to work as minister of one of the city's congregational churches. Apparently, he made the change because natives of the city mispronounced his name in its original spelling.

President Wilson had a number of other clerical ancestors. His 3rd great-grandfather, James, (1637-1707) was Professor of Divinity at Glasgow University. James's youngest son, Robert (1679-1734), was the 2nd great-grandfather of the President, and was licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Paisley in 1703 before being ordained as minister to the parish of Eastwood. Robert is remembered as a historian of the Covenanters and as a collector of information on the history and personal ministry of the Church. The now defunct "Wodrow Society," which was established in Robert's name in 1841, was a society "for the publication of the works of the fathers and early writers of the Reformed Church of Scotland."

President Wilson's great-grandfather, John Wodrow (1765-1837) was both born and married in Paisley, and was an elder in St George's (Laigh) Kirk. He was the father of Thomas Woodrow (1793-1877), the maternal grandfather of Woodrow Wilson from whom the President took his name and who had been for a time minister of the congregational church in Carlisle before emigrating with his family to Canada in 1836. Finding the Canadian climate intolerable, he moved again in the 1840s to Columbus, Ohio, in the United States. Thomas's daughter, Janet Woodrow (1830-1888), the President's mother, had

been born in Carlisle and married Joseph Ruggles Wilson (1822-1903) at Ohio in 1849. They moved to Staunton, Virginia, where President Wilson was born in 1856.

President Ronald Reagan's Paisley forebears can be traced back to his 2nd great-grandparents, Claud Wilson (1792-1870) and Peggy Downie (1781-1887) who were married at Castlehead Church in Paisley in 1807. Claud's father, also name Claud Wilson (1772-1855) lived his whole life in Paisley. He and his son were weavers. His wife Margaret "Peggy" Downie had been born in Edinburgh. Peggy's father, David Downie (1736-1816), President Reagan's 3rd great-grandfather, was a watchmaker and goldsmith in Edinburgh but had become increasingly involved in the radical political movement of his time. In 1794, he and his associate, Robert Watt, plotted to occupy various public buildings in Edinburgh, seize the Castle, and demand of the King the dismissal of government and Parliament, the instigation of a democratic constitution, and a withdrawal from the war in France.

The hairbrained plot was discovered and foiled. Downie and Watt were arrested and found guilty of high treason, (the first trial of its kind since 1709) for which they were sentenced to be hung, drawn and quartered. However, the severity of the sentence caused such shock that, three days before they were due to be executed, reprieves were granted and the sentences reduced. Watt was seen as the main instigator and was hanged. Downie was imprisoned for a year and thereafter deported to Augusta, Georgia, USA, where he died in 1816.

Claud Wilson and Peggy Downie emigrated to Clyde, Illinois, in the United States with their children. Their son, John P. Wilson (1812-1883), President Reagan's great-grandfather, had been born in Paisley but went with his parents to Illinois where he married in 1841. His son Thomas (1844-1909) was born in Clyde Township, Whiteside, Illinois, married there in 1866, and had a daughter, Nellie Clyde Wilson (1883-1962). Nellie married Jack Reagan in 1904, and they went on to be

President Reagan's parents in 1911, by which time they were living in Tampico, Illinois.

Despite Wilson being his mother's maiden name and his own middle name, it is claimed that President Reagan was unaware of its origin when, in 1991, he received an unsolicited invitation from Gordon Kirkwood, the minister of Castlehead Church in Paisley, to visit the building where his great-great grandparents had been married in 1807. Much to the surprise of the unwitting congregation, Reagan and his wife Nancy duly visited and attended Sunday worship at the church later that year.

David C Davidson

**PAISLEY ABBEY MUSIC SOCIETY
CHOIR FUNDRAISER
Saturday 28 November 4 pm – 6 pm
Place of Paisley**

*Come and support Paisley Abbey Music Society as they hold their
Autumn Fundraiser for the Abbey Choir.*

*Share some good conversation with friends, meet other
supporters and enjoy a glass of bubbly and a canape or three and
be entertained by Choir members.*

Tickets £20 available from Priscila Routley

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

HARVEST LUNCH

Sunday 4 October at 12.30 pm

lunch in the Place of Paisley after the Harvest service.

Everyone is welcome.

Tickets £10 will be on sale after the Sunday service.

LONDON CONCERTANTE

A Night at the Opera

Friday 9 October at 7.30 pm

Tickets available from candlelightconcerts.co.uk

LUNCHTIME CONCERT

Programme of Traditional Fiddle Music)

Douglas Lawrence (Violin), Maureen Rutherford (Piano)

Saturday 17 October at 12.30 pm

Admission is £10 payable at the door

UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST OF SCOTLAND SERVICE

Sunday 25 October at 11 am

A celebration of Education for All.

Guest speaker: Magnus Linklater CBE.

novelist, journalist and commentator.

Service open to all.

PAISLEY ABBEY MUSIC SOCIETY

CHOIR FUNDRAISER

Saturday 28 November 4 pm - 6 pm

fizz and canapes with music provided by Choir members.

Tickets £20 per person on sale from Priscilla Routley

or the Abbey office on 0141 889 7654.

OUTREACH EVENT

Sunday 29 November

Befriending Committee

Scots' Themed lunch in aid of the homeless

(More details to follow)

IDENTICAL VOWELS COMPETITION

As the Minister was even busier than usual after the Morning Service on 13th September, his wife, Doreen kindly agreed to make the draw. Imagine therefore her embarrassment when the first name to be drawn was – yes – Doreen Gibson!

Despite her best attempts to re-draw, the Voice of the People (i.e. the Cloister Café clientele) insisted – and rightly so - that she SHOULD be declared the winner. So this I do with pleasure, undisputably Doreen Gibson is the Winner.

However, to save her blushes and for the first time in the history of these little competitions I have made an “executive decision” that we will have Joint Winners on this occasion.

Thus, the Joint Winners are – Doreen herself and our own Professor John Croft . Both John and Doreen are thoroughly deserving of this accolade and warmest congratulations go to them.

Indeed, congratulations also go to the other 32 all-correct entries and many thanks go too to everyone who participated in this competition particularly to all who helped to distribute it. Without you it would be a pointless exercise.

Thank you all and again congratulations to John and Doreen.

SGC

ANSWERS TO IDENTICAL VOWELS COMPETITION

- | | | |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. BANAL | 13. RIGID | 25. QUEUE |
| 2. SALAD | 14. KIWIS | |
| 3. MADAM | 15. LIMIT | |
| 4. FATAL | 16. DONOR | |
| 5. CABAL | 17. ROBOT | |
| 6. LEVEL | 18. MORON | |
| 7. FEVER | 19. COLON | |
| 8. TENET | 20. ROTOR | |
| 9. BERET | 21. TUTUS | |
| 10. REBEL | 22. MUCUS | |
| 11. VIGIL | 23. YUZUS | |
| 12. TIMID | 24. ZULUS | |

MUSIC FOR OCTOBER

4 October	Harvest Thanksgiving	
11 am	Morning Service	
Jubilate Deo		<i>Howells (Collegium Regale)</i>
Anthem	Sing joyfully	<i>Byrd</i>
11 October	Trinity 19	
11 am	Morning Service	
Te Deum		<i>Howells (Collegium Regale)</i>
Anthem	And I saw a new heaven	<i>Bainton</i>
4 pm	Choral Evensong	
Responses		<i>Leighton</i>
Canticles		<i>Howells (Gloucester Service)</i>
Anthem	Lobet den Herrn alle heiden BWV 230	<i>J S Bach</i>
18 October	Trinity 20	
11 am	Morning Service	
Benedictus		<i>Stanford in C</i>
Anthem	Behold O God, our Defender	<i>Howells</i>
25 October	Trinity 21	
11 am	Choral Communion	
Communion Setting		<i>Lennox Berkeley Missa Brevis</i>
Anthem	Teach me, O Lord	<i>Byrd</i>
1 November	All Saints' Day	
11 am	Morning Service	
Introit	O quam gloriosum	<i>Vittoria</i>
Te Deum		<i>Elgar</i>
Anthem	Bring us, O Lord God	<i>Harris</i>

ABBEY CONTACTS

Minister:	Revd. Jim Gibson
Director of Music:	Dr. George McPhee
Church Manager:	Linda Barrett
Church Secretary:	Karen Kerr
Session Clerk:	Marion Sommerville
Depute Session Clerk:	Dr David Davidson
Treasurer:	Stewart McDougall
Abbey Herald:	Karen Kerr

The Abbey office can be contacted on 0141 889 7654
or by email at info@paisleyabbey.org.uk

*The Abbey, shop & café are normally open
Monday to Saturday from 10 am - 4 pm with last entry at 3.30 pm
Tuesday, Thursday & Saturday tours are normally at 2 pm.
Please check the website for up to date information.*

*Abbey website - www.paisleyabbey.org.uk
Facebook - @paisleyabbey
Instagram - @paisleyabbeyofficial
X (formerly Twitter) - @paisley_abbey*

