

Rev. John Campbell of Carsphairn, and the church's central communion table

John Campbell graduated from St Andrews University with an MA in 1761, and shortly after he became schoolmaster in Dalry. In March 1772 he began trials towards the ministry, which finished when he preached his 'popular' sermon before the Presbytery of Kirkcudbright at Crossmichael Church on 3rd June 1772. That same day he was licensed as a preacher of the gospel. He was presented to Carsphairn Church by George III as patron of the church on 3rd July 1772. On 26th November 1772 the Presbytery sustained the Call to Mr Campbell at a meeting in Carsphairn Kirk and assigned him further tasks and lectures to give as part of the required further trials. Completing these satisfactorily, he was ordained minister of Carsphairn on 25th March 1773.

He became minister at an important time in the history of Carsphairn Church. His predecessor William Boyd had never been accepted by the vast majority of the parishioners. Towards the end of his sixteen year ministry the church was requiring urgent repairs, which were made in 1769-70. Then in July 1770 a meeting of Presbytery took place at Carsphairn Church to receive quotes for providing fixed seating in the church. Plans were presented for communion tables to be erected up the centre of the church, pews to be constructed, and a new pulpit, minister's seat, elder's seat and reader's desk to be provided at the front of the church. This work had not taken place when Mr Boyd died on 3rd February 1772.

But early in John Campbell's ministry there was a fresh energy and enthusiasm to fulfil these plans and celebrate communion in the church for the first time in over sixteen years. The church accounts from 1772 to 1782 have been preserved and they provide invaluable evidence on how these plans were implemented. We find that table linen was purchased at the end of August 1775 and at the end of October a local woman was paid 6d for washing the table linen. The church income shows that a communion season was marked at Carsphairn for the first time for many years, with a fast day on Thursday 31st August, a preparation day on Saturday 2nd September, then on Sunday the day of the sacrament, and finally a thanksgiving day on the Monday. There would have been services on all these days, and it was normal practice for church services in neighbouring parishes to be cancelled on that weekend so that ministers and their congregations could attend the special Communion gathering. Carsphairn would have been a busy place that weekend! It is clear from the church accounts that a small outdoor tent was constructed from which ministers could preach to the gathered crowd from a small platform. When it came to celebrating communion there were no doubt many sittings in the church itself to accommodate the large number of people. September 3rd 1775 was the day the church's historic central communion table was first used.

From the accounts we can see that Communion was celebrated three further times during John Campbell's ministry – 15th December 1776, 27th July 1777 and 18th July 1779. Sadly he died on 28th May 1780 after only seven years as minister of Carsphairn. He had married a Dalry girl, Margaret Hair, and had three children – Quintin, born 1st Dec 1773 soon after he moved to Carsphairn, and Thomas (or Ivie), and Agnes.

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