

# *St Columba's*

August/September 2020



# ST COLUMBA'S CHURCH OF SCOTLAND

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## Sundays

Please join us for worship at 11 am. The crèche is open from 10.30 am for babies and children up to four years. It can be found in the lower hall. Older children are invited to join the Sunday school classes appropriate to their age. They leave the service with their teachers following the children's talk. For teenagers, the senior study group leave with their teachers following the Bible readings.

After the service, we warmly welcome everyone to the congregational lunch in the lower hall.

The two-course lunch costs £3.50 and there is no need to book.



## Dear Readers,

The August edition of the magazine usually carries a report from the General Assembly that's a kaleidoscopic summary of Assembly business, events, old friends and chance meetings. This year Susan Pym reports on a unique Installation of our new Moderator and on the way in which the Church of Scotland is managing to remain vital and viable during the time of pandemic.

Far from the bustle of Edinburgh Jim Blackwood reflects on some of the benefits of having more time on his hands, finding excitement and solace in new discoveries and old habitats, and beekeeper Kate Macnish writes about the honeybee – her own 'girls' and our association with the sacred honeybee which goes back 100 million years. Requiring a vehicle for honey, David Natzler's search for the perfect oatcake leads him (should we be surprised?) to the story of the Widow of Sarepta.

Whether you read it on the Church website or in a good old fashioned hard copy we hope you enjoy this issue.

With best wishes for the rest of the summer,

## Contents

### Regulars

Vestry letter	3
Sermon	8/9
Baptisms, marriages, deaths	14
Prayers	16

### Features

Not the General Assembly	4/5
The Caledonian Lecture	6
Sustenance in Scotland and Sarepta	7
They can't cancel the spring	10/11
Sacred honeybees	12/13

Copy for future editions should be sent to us at the Church Office, preferably by e-mail

## The Editorial Team

**Cover photo:** *'Doon the watter'*  
by Jim Blackwood

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# VESTRY LETTER



August/September 2020

Dear Friends,

In a few deceptively simple lines the American poet, the late Mary Oliver, describes the act of reviving an existing arrangement of flowers ("Freshen the Flowers, She Said"), renewing with clean water, removing the tattered, then giving a final bounce to let the flowers take their own choice of position. The poem finishes:

*It took, to do this, perhaps fifteen minutes.  
Fifteen minutes of music with nothing playing.*

Recently, I sent the poem to members of the Flower Guild, thinking it might raise a smile in lock down days. Some lovely reflections were returned, from those who regularly prepare the sanctuary flowers: "It made me have thoughts of calm, quiet moments in the Sanctuary and pottering around having a go at doing an arrangement. I can't wait until we can start up again." The poem "...exactly catches the feeling of time out from the real world, to be found in the unnecessary yet purposeful and absorbing act of 'doing flowers'." "Friday mornings in the Sanctuary

with, sometimes, someone playing the organ, sometimes just the quietness." "Such a fantastic line – *Fifteen minutes of music with nothing playing!*" All point towards a previous Flower Guild wisdom – "*Every stem, a prayer.*"

The Flower Guild reflections convey both a sense of what is currently lost, due to the building's pandemic closure, and an appreciation of what has been. What hopefully will be re-established, proving that absence does make the heart grow fonder.

At time of writing, the Kirk Session is deliberating how much, and when, to reopen the building. It seems unlikely that we will open the building for hall hire before September. While that is sensible, but disappointing, it will allow time to put in place safeguards for our staff, and time to undertake the update of the building's fire alarm system and complete an Accessibility Audit – two significant and vital undertakings.

For worship, my hope is that we will be able to both innovate and maintain. I would like to offer an Early Service (09.30-10.00am) to which those who are able and safe to attend can come. With worshippers present, the early service would require to be short in length and without singing. If/when that starts, we would continue with the 11am *live stream* Morning Service. The 11am service would continue unattended. If this plan proves possible, it represents a modest, maintainable re-opening of the building, while permitting the continuance of the live stream service that allows far-flung and unable-to-travel members of the congregation to remain in our community of prayer. Once decisions are confirmed, we will try to communicate them as swiftly and widely as possible.

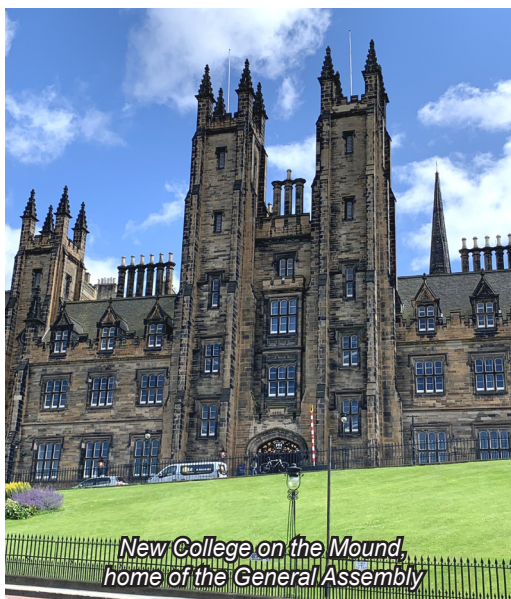
In the last week of term I was sent a message by a school teacher, giving her thoughts to the children about to embark on holiday. She had filmed a coastal walk which she took with her dog. She explained it was the first time she had been able to make that walk since the beginning of lock down. Her delight in being able to revisit familiar pathways led to her final words to young listeners. "*Have a great holiday; stay safe and count your blessings. Count them – a minimum of three a day!*" So, homework for the holidays is set – Count your blessings! And in the words of a Flower Guild member "...look forward to the time when we are back in action in Pont Street."

Angus MacLeod

# Virtual reality

Susan Pym on our national Church in time of pandemic

"As people of faith we also have responsibilities to each other and the wider community whom we seek to serve. Accordingly, in line with Government and Church guidance, we are suspending all public worship with immediate effect." Those words written by Revd Angus MacLeod to the congregation must have shaken many a soul. How could the Church survive at a time of lockdown? Well we now know the answer and that is with imagination, vision, prayer and the swift learning of some new technical skills, the Church can and is continuing to serve her people.



*New College on the Mound,  
home of the General Assembly*

Angus and the local tech team were not the only ones to adapt quickly to the changes brought about by the Coronavirus. At national level the Church of Scotland was having to move fast to adapt to virtual meetings and online worship. I serve as Vice Convener of the Assembly Business Committee so it was with dismay that we realised the Installation of the Moderator, which takes place on the first day of the General Assembly, was either not going to happen at all or take place virtually. Indeed there could be no General Assembly in May.

In normal times at the General Assembly, with the Lord High Commissioner watching on, the out-going Moderator invites the Commissioners to confirm the approval of the nomination of the incoming Moderator and with a resounding tapping of feet he or she is brought into the Assembly Hall. Not this year. In 2020 Revd Dr Martin Fair discovered he was in uncharted territory. For the first time in 300 years he was to be

installed as Moderator at a socially distanced ceremony on 16th May with thousands watching online but in a hall echoing with the past voices of Commissioners and dignitaries. Only Dr Fair, the out-going Moderator Rt Revd Colin Sinclair and their wives were present alongside the Principal Clerk and the Procurator. The technical crew were a distance away.

The Procurator, Laura Dunlop said afterwards that, having attended fifteen installations, this was the one she would remember most

vividly as, yes, it was different but also poignant and very moving. Very Revd Colin Sinclair in his address to the new Moderator said: "The whole Church welcomes you and blesses you and believes you will be a blessing. We commit to pray for you in this unique and extraordinary time we are living through and for the forthcoming year. God bless you in the year ahead. There is no map to guide you but Jesus will be your guide. You are in safe hands."

(I was happy to be able to play a very small part in the ceremony by doing the "voice over" for the video

introduction which set the scene for the live streaming of the Installation of the Moderator. On the day of recording it from home I discovered that every room in my house had creaky radiators or traffic noises outside and even my next door neighbour decided this was the day to take up wood sculpture carving in his garden. So I sat on the floor of my son's bedroom with a duvet over my head and recorded the voice over into my phone. The wonders of technology!)

Heart and Soul is a joyful day for the



*Installation of the new Moderator in a near empty Assembly Hall*



# Virtual reality

Continued



## *A Heart and Soul 'In Conversation' session*

Church of Scotland when we take over Princes Street Gardens on the Sunday of General Assembly week. It brings together many church organisations, councils, committees and congregations with musical performances and a wonderful open-air closing Worship. Clearly this could not happen in 2020 but the Heart and Soul team created an afternoon of online entertainment which, happily for me, included three "In Conversation" sessions which I curated. Subjects were varied, from the state of health and social care in Scotland to fossil fuel divestment. Our own Angus MacLeod chaired an important conversation on being a chaplain in hospitals and prisons during Covid 19. Nobody could ever be prepared for that.

Throughout the months of lockdown the Assembly Business Committee was aware that certain pieces of church business needed to progress and could not wait until a General Assembly in May 2021. A virtual Commission of Assembly was called in early May to consider business deemed urgent but uncontroversial. It was in the end all agreed by email; the appointment of Revd Dr Martin Fair as Moderator of the General Assembly for 2020/21,

as well as agreeing appointments to certain committees and trusts. Marking the first steps towards reducing the number of Scottish Presbyteries to around 12, three new large Presbyteries were approved - the Presbytery of Fife, of Aberdeen and Shetland and the Presbytery of Clyde.

In July a Commission of Assembly met in videoconference to agree the temporary amendments to Church law which would apply until the next General Assembly – as public worship had stopped, newly qualified ministers had been unable to seek their first parish, and no minister could pursue a Calling to another church. The new protocols allow Kirk Sessions and committees to meet

remotely and for the preaching of a sole nominee to take place by live stream or recorded worship. This was the first time a Commission of Assembly, a gathering of about ten per cent of the 2019 General Assembly, has been held remotely. The Moderator, Principal Clerk, the Clerks, procurator and the Convener of Legal Questions were present in the Assembly Hall in Edinburgh and yours truly had dispensation to travel from London to attend as Vice Convener. There might not have been the usual 800 Commissioners in the hall but it was still a big moment for me to sit at the "Top Table", a long way since my first General Assembly over ten years ago.

So Church business must continue online for the time being (we all prefer Zoom but use Microsoft Teams for most meetings). Now we are preparing for the next huge step, the holding of a virtual General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in early October this year. The Assembly Trustees will report on financial matters and there will be proposals from the two new Forums which were created last year. The church doors may just be starting to open tentatively but the Church of Scotland is most definitely open for business.



# Jane Haining: a life of love and courage

The Caledonian Lecture at St Columba's,  
in association with Scots in London and the Hungarian Embassy

Born in June 1887 at Lochhead Farm near Dunscore, in deepest Galloway, Jane Haining was a popular girl who excelled at school and won a scholarship to Dumfries Academy. She then attended the commercial college at Glasgow's Athenaeum and was employed for ten years as a secretary at J&P Coates in Paisley, where she was very highly regarded. Having been brought up in a deeply religious family, Jane found comfort and friendship at Queen's Park West Church, Glasgow and enjoyed an active social life. However, she was attracted to service for the church.



*Jane Haining*

In 1932 she saw an advert in *Life and Work* for Matron of the Church of Scotland Mission School in Budapest, among whose pupils were Jewish girls. Jane nurtured them and protected them from the growing sinister Nazi influence and in return she was well loved and respected. She also took them on expeditions to Lake Balaton where the school had a summer house and enjoyed carefree days swimming and boating.

When war was declared in 1939, Jane returned to Budapest from a holiday in Cornwall and despite entreaties to leave she remained with her girls. After the Nazis invaded Hungary in March 1944, she was ordered to leave the school in Budapest where she worked and return to Scotland. But the 47-year-old refused, saying: "If these children need me in the days of sunshine, how much more do they need me in the days of darkness?"

Jane persisted in her determination to keep the girls safe, hiding them in the school and foraging for food which was in short supply. She was eventually betrayed by the son of the Hungarian cook at the mission, whom she had caught stealing some of the precious food. Shortly after, Jane was arrested by the Gestapo. As she left, she assured her girls that she would be back by lunchtime. It was not to be. She was accused of harbouring Jewish girls and listening to the BBC World Service, which she freely admitted. After some time in a Budapest jail, she was transferred to Auschwitz, where she died on 17 July 1944.



*Mary Miller*

The Caledonian Lecture 2020 is scheduled to be given by Mary Miller at St Columba's Church, Pont Street on 7 October. Mary is the author of the biography, "Jane Haining - A Life of Love and Courage". The Caledonian Lecture was founded ten years ago to commemorate Scots who had lived and worked abroad, making a significant contribution to their country of adoption while retaining their Scottish values. Some are lesser known today and Jane is better recognised in Hungary than in Scotland. To bring these remarkable people into our ken is the *raison d'être* of the Lecture.



*Swimming at Lake Balaton*



# Sustenance in Scotland and Sarepta

by David Natzler

Nothing could surely be more quintessentially Scottish than an oatcake. One of the lasting pleasures of travel around Scotland is to discover locally produced alternatives to the handful of big commercial brands of oatcakes available in the supermarkets both sides of the border. It is now many years ago that we were in Stromness and coincided with the morning break of the staff of Stockan's Oatcakes. We saw the stacks of trays containing hundreds of those perfectly formed quarters or farls. For many years we relied on Stockan's provided by the local East Dulwich cheese shop in cardboard boxes, and on one working visit to Dounreay I had to pick up a box from the wholesale warehouse at Wick Airport Industrial Estate.

We have now moved on, and Hilary sends off more or less monthly for fresh supplies from Donald's of Portsoy. A dozen packets of bliss arrive rapidly if sometimes a bit crumbled, bubble-wrapped and ready for cheese or honey or marmite, and as a highlight accompanied by soup.

A few years ago in the Royal Museum in Brussels I saw a lovely piece of 12th century Mosan enamel work showing a woman clad in white holding two sticks in front of her, with the text SAREPTA around her. I admit to having been mystified: was this a Roman minor deity unknown to me, or a virtue or perhaps a Sibyl? Some of you will perhaps know the answer, either because you did well in scripture knowledge at Sunday school or because you have sung Mendelssohn's oratorio *Elijah*.

The woman shown is the widow of Sarepta, whose story is at I Kings 17. After the brook Cherith had dried up

in the prevailing drought, the Lord told Elijah to go to Sarepta of Sidon – also known as Zarephath – where a widow had been commanded to sustain him. Elijah finds a woman gathering sticks outside the gates of the city and asks first for water and then for a morsel of bread. The widow replies that she has no cake but a handful of meal in a barrel and a little oil in a cruse, and that she is gathering two sticks for a fire so that she can make something for herself and her son and then die. Elijah

a nice example in the Victoria and Albert Museum on an altar cross, and another one in the British Museum. I find myself now eagerly looking for the widow of Sarepta on museum visits.

But where is Sarepta where they made these oatcakes? That turned out to be another mystery. As late as the middle ages it was mentioned as one of the principal centres of the northern Levant, alongside Tyre and Sidon and Beirut and Byblos. Then it vanishes. From Dr Google and then the Institute of Archaeology at University College London I have learned that it was about 10 kilometres south of Sidon on the coast of Lebanon and was subject to major excavations 40 years ago by an American professor from the University of Pennsylvania. Nothing apparently remains but a few mounds by the sea. We drove north from Tyre to Sidon when visiting our daughter in Lebanon a couple of years ago, but that was before I had caught up with the widow, and I missed the chance to pay homage to her and Elijah and her son.

I like to think that oatcake lovers can sympathise with the need to make something out of some meal and water and perhaps a little oil and even a pinch of salt. There are dozens of locally produced and marketed oatcakes around Scotland. I have tried to stimulate Taste of Scotland to set up an oatcake trail, perhaps combined with cheese. The search is not always simple: on our visit to Aberfeldy this year I was disappointed to discover that Aberfeldy Oatcakes are made in Kirkcaldy.

If ever I get round to making oatcakes my brand will be The Widow of Sarepta.



reassures her that the supplies will last until the rains return and indeed "she, and he, and her house did eat many days".

Mendelssohn wrote a duet for Elijah and the widow, as she reproaches him for the death of her son and begs for help: *Was hast du an mir getan, du Mann Gottes?* Elijah revives her son and tells her she should love the Lord with her whole heart.

Illustration of the story was taken up in early medieval times on the rather flimsy basis that the widow, often shown in white widow's robes, gathering her two sticks, was presaging the crucifixion. There is

**Sermon preached at St Columba's P  
On Sunday 7 June 2020, Trinity**

*When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have established; what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? [Yet you have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour.] Psalm 8:3-5*

In the face of ocean depths or the vastness of space; in the face of life's trivialities or tragedies, and the brevity of our days; *What are human beings that God is mindful of us?*

God, why do you take a second look at us? (The Message)

In a week of images highlighting racial inequality – the disproportionate impact of Corona Virus on BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) communities, to the unlawful killing of George Floyd, an African American, during a police arrest in Minneapolis – it is not easy to own the Psalmist's affirmation: *God, you have crowned us with glory and honour*. Where, like the Psalmist of old, might you find both the handiwork of heaven, the moon and the stars, yet something earthbound too? Something glorious and honourable - *humanity crowned*. Can I suggest, a desert island; more specifically, this week's *Desert Island Discs*.

I am sure you know the beautifully simple formula of the long-running radio show. Guests are invited to choose and talk about their eight desert island discs, along with one book and one luxury. Over the decades: pens and paper, coffee, tea, photo albums, musical instruments, telescopes. Theatre director Marianne Elliott requested a bath with three taps: hot and cold water and wine!

This week, *Desert Island Discs* featured the music that has sustained or come to be meaningful to ordinary folk, during lockdown. There was a wonderful range. Village in Dorset, 1pm: 'The hills are alive with the sound of music', followed by a request from fellow villagers, leading to daily, impromptu dancing. Head teacher, missing the buzz and chatter of the school day, most of all the sound of the children singing: his choice:

Mary Poppins' 'Let's go fly a kite' – *"It reminds me of time when we were all together as a school community and the passion, enthusiasm and optimism of the children."*

Not surprisingly, there was music from hospital. The man who was given ten minutes to phone his family before he was placed on a ventilator, recognising the likelihood that he might not live, bestowing the request to listen to folk singer, Sandy Denny, 'Who knows where the time goes?' Later, the same man, paying tribute to the care he had received and describing how medical staff applauded him when he was finally discharged.

And the neurologist, on night shift, overtaken by a piano piece by Greig entitled 'Homesickness': *"We are all homesick for the world where we saw each other face to face and we touched. As a human species we need to touch; we are a tactile species."* He described the music as: *"Unassuming, tiny, delicate but very insistent. Like life, insisting on itself. A window or a call from a world beyond Covid. After that, love will be waiting."* For that key worker, the music was a reminder that such a time will come again and we shouldn't despair.

Time and time again, what comes through these musical choices and their accompanying stories is the desire for, and discovery of, *connection*. And connection is at the heart of Trinity Sunday. For connection is at the heart of God as we, albeit falteringly, describe God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I was given this week, the intriguing comment that if we take the Trinity seriously, we have to say: *"In the beginning was the Relationship"* (echo of John's Gospel opening "In the beginning was the Word"). ["The Divine Dance: the Trinity and your transformation" Richard Rohr and Mike Morrell] *"In the beginning was the Relationship"*. God is relationship, intimacy, connection, and communion. Think baptism of Jesus – the interplay of things.



## Front Street by Revd Angus MacLeod Sunday and St Columba's Day

When God the Son is baptised, God the Spirit descends in the form of a dove, and God the Father parts the heavens to speak delight and affirmation.

If Three is the deepest nature of the One; if relating and relationship is at the heart of God – where does that leave us, as disciples/ students of the Trinity? And before we dismiss it all as something dreamt up in an obscure or irrelevant theological think tank – remember, the Trinity was forged and articulated by Christians in the ordeal of experience; facing questions, challenges and persecution; trying to make sense of the life they had chosen (or been chosen by). *“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you”* (1 Corinthians 13:13) is what got them through the furnace of the day and the night terror. Connection and faith; faith in connection.

As Desert Island Discs reaffirmed the importance of music, and this week's headlines played out, I was reminded of an earlier documentary about music and the Civil Rights movement. (Soul Music): *“Music played a major role in the Civil rights movement. Without music, the Civil Rights movement would have been like a bird without wings... Music created a sense of solidarity; it unified people, it inspired us to sit in. We sang, even in gaol. When in doubt pray and sing.”*

One eye witness described a Civil Rights gathering (1963, Danville, Alabama) being surrounded by police, ready to break up the meeting in violent fashion. Fearful, the protestors began to sing 'Amazing Grace' and marched through the parting police ranks. The law enforcers were described as *uncomfortable*, because that was a song sung in white churches. *“We made it back to church that night.”*

*Desert Island Discs* began with the description of hospital staff discovering that at the end of routine staff meetings, with all their attendant

pressures, singing together gave them purpose and energy – returning to the wards with a smile. Most particularly, they discovered that singing 'Amazing Grace' stunned them: *“I can't really explain what happened but we sang it absolutely beautifully; people really connected with that song. Did we just do that? They described it as a “Song about healing: Ultimately, it is a song of transformation, striving to do the right/best thing.”*

This week I received a message from a college friend in Chicago who for many years worked with excluded school children in that city: *“What a hard time - but I am hopeful that all of this unrest will finally light the fire of change.”* Dr Martin Luther King, accepting the Nobel Peace prize in 1964: *“I refuse to accept despair as a final response to the ambiguities of history; I refuse to accept the idea that man is mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life, unable to influence the unfolding events that surround him.”* A window or a call from a world beyond present sorrow and present anger, where love will be waiting and *all lives* matter, crowned and honoured. For in the beginning, and in the end – relationship – the heart of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen

# They can't cancel the spring

Jim Blackwood on unexpected pleasures of lockdown limitations

A fishmonger, a poet, a lost Goldilocks... What has lockdown brought your way? An elder of St Columba's told me that her daily lockdown exercise walk has taken her to an excellent fishmonger which is now a weekly treat. She knew of it before but parking there is a trial and it had seemed too far to walk to. Extra time to read has led me to the poetry of Walt Whitman whom I'd never read before, and to learn that he was inspired by Rabbinic Burns no less. And I was thrilled on a lockdown exercise walk to discover the locally rare Goldilocks Buttercup, a wildflower not recorded where I found it since 1956.

"Do remember they can't cancel the spring." So said artist David Hockney about lockdown. He was shielding in Normandy, and making his art, inspired by daffodils and apple blossom. We've each of us been experiencing lockdown in our own personal ways. For many it has understandably been and continues to be a trying, stressful time. Hockney, known for his optimism, is attempting to assuage our worries. Your English teacher would have given you an extra mark for recognising his use of metonymy, a part for a whole. "You can't cancel spring", and spring represents all the seasons, time, life, existence... Hockney is putting lockdown into perspective. He does it in a way that amuses, so capturing our attention.

Without depreciating the challenges that lockdown presents, it does also afford benefits. Another St Columba's elder told me that she is "in the company of Alain de Botton", the philosopher, enjoying the calmness of lockdown days which is conducive to a clearer mind for reading and research. De Botton quotes the 17th French philosopher, Blaise Pascal: "The sole cause of man's unhappiness

is that he cannot stay quietly in his room." Pascal's counterintuitive idea challenges our belief that we must always go to new places to have inspiring and valuable experiences. Lockdown has obliged us to spend more time sitting on the sofa. This has opened up the opportunity for more reading, talking, listening; more thinking, praying, meditating. We can get to know ourselves and the richness of our immediate surroundings.

Somehow lockdown's permission to go on a daily exercise walk has seemed like a special privilege, a daily diversion to make the most of. My own immediate surroundings in lockdown are the village where I grew up, Lochwinnoch in Renfrewshire. Draw an imaginary line on the map between Paisley and Largs; Lochwinnoch is roughly in the middle, just a wee bit south of that line to be precise, on the east side of the Ayrshire border. Lockdown daily walks have given me the time to do what De Botton advises, to get to know the richness of my immediate surroundings. Each of us naturally

focuses on our own interests as we walk. For some it's architecture, or people watching, or fancy cars. For me it's nature and especially wild plants. I'm a botany geek. My friend John's late mother used to reminisce that as she wheeled him in his pram along Acton High Street he'd stare in wonderment at buses. (There's no accounting for taste!) As she turned into a quieter street he'd strain his infant head to keep those big red London buses in view. When he could no longer see any he'd caterwaul until a toy bus was placed in the pram. He's now in his sixties and still interested in buses.

During my lockdown walks I've been revisiting my childhood haunts, and enjoying the natural history. My infant eyes were not mesmerised by buses but by wildflowers and birds and fleeting glimpses of bank voles and roe deer. Lockdown gives me daily permission to explore the countryside in boyish wonder. It's all the sweeter for having lived in London for over thirty years. We're blessed here with lochs and burns, woods and meadows, fens and carr, moorland and rocky river valley, all walkable from the village. Indeed the loch is only a three minute stroll from the house. I confess I usually stretched Nicola's initial arbitrary "one hour" of outdoor exercise to about two and a half hours. Each day I choose a different destination, usually a different habitat with a botanical objective. They're all by my sofa, so to speak; they're all in my immediate lockdown surroundings.

One day my objective was Alternate-leaved Golden Saxifrage. There's plenty of Opposite-leaved Golden Saxifrage locally but I was after the rarer cousin. I told you: I'm a botany geek. I decided to go down "the Low Road", where I'd seen it over thirty years ago, about twenty minutes walk away. Like so many places, that's a local name you won't find on any map. The Low Road is a path



*Heath spotted orchid*



# They can't cancel the spring

continued

through the ancient woodland by the River Calder. The river flows down to your left, and the ferny wood rises steeply up on your right. It takes you past the Falls, which can be a benevolent trickle or a raging torrent depending on recent rainfall. That day the Falls were something in between. You could smell the Wild Garlic and the first Orange-tip butterflies were on the wing. Blackcaps were singing, and violets and celandines peppered the woodland floor. Alternate-leaved Golden Saxifrage is fussy. It likes wet flushes and woodland springs which are not too acidic, and must be untainted by pollution, especially chemical run-off from farmers' fields. The fresh acid green flowers of Opposite-leaved Golden Saxifrage were everywhere but there was not a single Alternate-leaved to be found. I'm sure it's still skulking there somewhere.

I walked down to the river's edge to a rocky outcrop. Still no elusive saxifrage but an odd looking buttercup caught my eye. At first I thought it was just a Meadow Buttercup growing strangely in a less than usual habitat, affected by semi shade, the wetness of the river, the dryness of its rocky neuk, an inhospitable spot to germinate. But no, it was different. There were distinctive frilly bracts. I checked in my field-guide and sure enough it was Goldilocks. Bingo! Never mind Alternate-leaved Golden Saxifrage. There's always next year for that!

At home I consulted the geeky tome that is *The Flora of Renfrewshire* and discovered that Goldilocks Buttercup had not been recorded at this site since 1956. A lifetime ago! I was thrilled. I'm still glowing in a buttercuppy way. I emailed the vice county botanical recorder who confirmed its local rarity, growing only in small populations in a few Renfrewshire cleughs. A cleugh? A new Scots word to me,



taught to me by this Yorkshire born botanist. A cleugh is a rocky river ravine. I throw it into sentences now whenever I can. It's my lockdown learned word.

Moschatel (known here as Toonhall-clock), Yellow Waterlilies and Trailing St John's Wort, a species-rich boggy field near Howwood with masses of Heath Spotted and Greater Butterfly Orchids, Giant Bellflowers and Hare's-Tail Cottongrass ... and now that lockdown allows wanderings further afield the botany of Doon the Watter on the Ayrshire coast. The calmness and freer time of lockdown literally blossoms and feeds the soul. Walt Whitman wrote:

"I loafe and invite my soul,  
I lean and loafe at my ease ....  
observing a spear of summer  
grass".



Castle Sempole Loch with yellow water lilies,  
Lochwinnoch on the far side

# The honeybee and the Church

Elder and beekeeper Kate Macnish celebrates the sacred honeybee

There are over 278 different species of bee in the UK, including *Apis Mellifera* – the European honeybee – which is unique among all bees, wasps and hornets in that it is the only one that does not hibernate.

Honeybees store honey and pollen to feed the colony throughout the year and will store as much as they can to keep the queen and her over-wintering workers going through winter; they will forage on mild winter days to seek out fresh pollen in particular, as this is their protein source. Stored pollen loses its nutritional value over time. They store far more honey than they need, so humans have sought to remove their surplus for our own uses and needs.

I have been a beekeeper for nearly 10 years and am still very much a beginner: every time you learn something about honeybees, you realise how much more there is to know. Humans have walked this earth for less than 100,000 years, while bees were flying 100 million years ago and have been found trapped in amber (fossilised tree resin) from that time. Our association with bees stretches back into the mist of time.

The honeybee is admired for its industry, its societal structure, its relationship with flowers and its ability to produce honey and wax; but it was the honeybee's perceived connection with the heavens that once elevated it to sacred status. Aristaeus was the mythical Greek patron god of beekeeping. He was the son of Apollo (considered the first beekeeper) and Cyrene, a water-nymph and huntress, who was raised by bees and fed on honey. Aristotle wrote copious texts on honeybees that are still referred to today; Ancient Egyptians were master beekeepers and worshipped the honeybee. The Romans used ancient Greek and Phoenician beekeeping knowledge for their largescale production of honey and wax, one of their most famous beekeepers being Pliny the Elder.

Honey and wax were traded for millennia across the known world, along ancient trade routes such as the Silk Road, through Samarkand to the Far East, and back through Europe to Scandinavia and Britain. The quantities were vast and highly valuable.

The first hint in the Bible of the importance of bees to the tribes of Israel is in Genesis Ch35, v8: "Now, Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died and was buried under the oak below Bethel." – "Deborah" is from the Hebrew, meaning "bee". Biblical references to bees and honey abound, but it is from the story of manna falling from heaven that we can understand how people originally linked the honeybee to the heavens: it was widely believed that honey and wax were dropped from heaven daily by God (or the gods), for bees to gather to take back to their colonies – that honey was converted from nectar and that bees produced wax themselves were not understood until about the 18th Century.

A medieval book published in 1672 says that "the bees honour the Holy Host in divers ways, by lifting it from the earth and carrying it to their hives as it were in procession." Presumably this gave rise to a long-held tradition of leaving communion wafers in hives!

Our ancestors were mystified by bees producing such an amazing product with so many uses - it was worth risking life and limb to collect honey because of its medicinal, nutritional and apparently magical properties, and it was a tradeable commodity. At a time when magic, spirituality and healing were inextricably linked, honey could be used in many ways and was able to keep its efficacy indefinitely – when archaeologists opened ancient Egyptian tombs, honey tributes left for the Departed's onward journey were still edible – I don't know who volunteered to taste it!

All communities would once have had a 'healer', usually the beekeeper. Beekeepers had good knowledge of plants and would study their bees' foraging activity. They would prepare medicines, potions and poultices etc for ailing and injured villagers, and some would have achieved fame, bringing people from far and wide to their community to find cures or cast spells.

The Celts believed bees brought good luck and carried secret knowledge, being a symbol of great wisdom. In the western isles of Scotland, bees were thought to represent the ancient knowledge of the druid, hence the expression: "Ask the wild bee for what the druid knew." Bees were revered for their role in the metaphysical, messengers between us and the Otherworld. Highlanders claimed that when sleeping, one's soul would transform into a bee and leave the body. Stories of "bee-souls" are found around Northern Europe – the word "hamfarir" in Old Norse means the wandering soul of someone asleep. The Rev Alexander Macgregor wrote of a superstition in Ross-shire that the soul did not leave the body until after burial. In Perthshire they believed the same, and that when the soul left the body it did so in the form of "a little creature like a bee". In Scottish witch trials there are references to bee-souls.

As Christianity spread, healing became one of the Church's greatest missions. Monasteries developed the first hospitals, drawing in pilgrims and the sick as rumour of healing and sanctuary spread. We know that people travelled widely around our islands in ancient days celebrating festivals such as the Solstice; knowledge, skills, tales of healing and miraculous cures would have circulated along the travellers', traders' and pilgrims' routes. Traditions, legends, myths and folklore grew and in some places persist from these times. In many Celtic traditions folk believed



# The honeybee and the Church

continued

drinking mead (an alcoholic drink made from fermented honey) would bring them immortality.

One tradition continues in some parts: "Telling the Bees" when someone dies, especially if it is the beekeeper themselves, and sometimes a black cloth is draped over the hive. I'm not sure what effect this was supposed to have on the bees, but when my mother died, I did wander up to my beehives and tell my bees – I tend to talk to 'the girls' all the time when at the hives so it didn't feel as if I was doing anything weird at the time.

There is also a Scottish tradition that brides should have bees brought to their wedding. If the bees cannot be brought to the church, the bride is supposed to take a piece of wedding cake to the bees. Bees don't eat wedding cake, but Aristotle did note that beekeepers would feed bees ripe figs when short of stores; we feed our bees with sugar fondant in winter and sugar syrup at times during the rest of the year when nectar is in short supply.

We, in the so-called First World, have tended to ignore the fact that we are dependent on pollinators, especially the honeybee. But in the Third World, and even in some societies we would recognise as 'First World', 'ethnomedicine' is practised widely – potions and herbalism are often mingled with the calling on of spiritual powers. If modern pharmaceutical products are not available or too expensive, when people are entirely reliant on the land and weather, traditional medicine and a strong faith are all they have.

We live in an age of scientific discovery; we go to a doctor or pharmacist for remedies for our ailments. Since the availability of antibiotics in the 1940s, we have

'put away childish things', including traditional medicines; but now, when antibiotics are failing to kill superbugs, research is looking back at the knowledge that our forefathers depended on and trusted. The medicinal properties of honey, beeswax, propolis and bee venom are exciting enormous interest. Anecdotal reports that beekeepers, for example, rarely get arthritis has given rise to research



on the efficacy of bee venom – Alexander the Great and Henry VIII are among those recorded as being treated with bee venom for joint pain. In some European countries bee venom therapy (BVT) is not uncommon today. Raw honey has been confirmed to have antibacterial, antifungal, antiseptic and antiviral properties; it contains essential vitamins and minerals, and can offer additional pain relief. In their days of power, monastic communities took on beekeeping on an industrial scale. With the dissolution of the monasteries, so much medicinal knowledge was lost in the ensuing destruction. In

1160 at Soutra in the Borders (on the A68) a great medieval complex was founded by Augustinian monks. Large enough for 300-400 people, the complex had a church, monastery and the largest hospital in Scotland at the time. Archaeologists have revealed some of the remedies used by the monks; some discoveries are changing experts' ideas of medieval medicine: powerful painkillers mixed

from hemlock, henbane and opium poppy; herbs to treat parasites, diarrhoea and internal bleeding; watercress to treat scurvy; appetite suppressants (for surviving crop failure); medieval texts suggest ergot fungus and juniper berry seeds were used to induce labour or abortion, so was midwifery being practised on the site? Most potions would probably have had honey mixed in, being nutritious, sweet and easy to eat; it is a high energy food source quickly absorbed into the bloodstream, providing calories and energy for elderly people, invalids with little appetite and for children.

So next time you see a honeybee working a flower, take a moment to reflect on how much our predecessors relied on them, and also consider how much we still depend on our pollinators.

There is still so much to learn about these amazing insects. They are fascinating to watch and to work with, and I am awestruck by their ability to outwit and out-manoeuvre us mere humans as we try and 'manage' our hives. I am also grateful for their honey and wax which contain so much goodness – and perhaps I am, in a way, grateful for the occasional sting in the hope that it might offset any risk of arthritis!

If you have any bee-related questions, do let me know and I will do my best to answer.

# Baptisms • Marriages • Deaths

## DEATHS

*"Blessed are they that die in the Lord"*

12 July

**Hugh MacDonald** Kent ME7

## 100<sup>th</sup> Birthday Celebration



*Ian and Coco MacLeod*

Many Happy Returns to Mrs Coco MacLeod, on her 100th birthday on 28th August 2020!

Coco and her husband, Ian, attended St Columba's regularly during the 1950s and 1960s, together with their daughter, Andrea. They played their full part in the life of St Columba's.

Ian was an Elder and Andrea attended Sunday School. Coco was known for her twice-yearly congregational lunches, flower arranging, participation in the Women's Guild, and her hospitality to many international visitors to St Columba's, particularly those from Africa and the West Indies. She also gave many hours of voluntary service to the church's social action outreach to the elderly, isolated and infirm, as well as projects supporting disadvantaged youth and immigrant populations in London. Coco was Honorary Treasurer of The Friends of St Columba's, and is now a Vice President.

The MacLeods lived in Sanderstead, Surrey, then Dulwich, but had to re-locate in 1970 because of work commitments in Belgium, before retiring to Worthing.

Sadly, Ian passed away in early November 2018. Andrea now lives in the USA with her family.

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# SCHOOL'S OUT



CAPTAIN  
FANTASTIC!  
I liked the bit  
where he stuck  
the wand up  
his nose!  
he is very funny.  
Zachary



# *Prayer*

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me.  
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;  
you discern my thoughts from far away.  
You search out my path and my lying down,  
and are acquainted with all my ways.  
Even before a word is on my tongue,  
O Lord, you know it completely.  
You hem me in, behind and before,  
and lay your hand upon me.*

*Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?*

*If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.*

*If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast.*

*(Psalm 139: 1-5, 7-10)*

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