

THE LITTLE DUNKELD BELL



The Little Dunkeld Bell flanked by modern day bells.

The Parish of Dunkeld is the proud owner of a 9th century Celtic bell which, because it is irreplaceable is kept in the bank for safety. It is possibly one of two cast for Malcolm III, Canmore, at the time the relics of St Columba were brought to Dunkeld, the geographical centre of his newly enlarged kingdom. Over 1000 years old and ringing sweetly.

Looking down on the bell from the top it is clearly not a regular quadrangle which enables it to sound three notes: e, f# and g, covering a minor third. Two of the sides sound the same note. While bells are also found in Wales (7) and Ireland (75) only the Scottish bells have this characteristic of multiple notes and it gives rise to the conjecture that the three notes represent the Trinity. The different notes are best heard when rung outdoors and in an experiment, this bell was heard in Forneth, 5 miles away.

It is not certain what the bell would have been used for and a number of possibilities exist. It could have been used at different times of the service – for example the high point of consecration in the Mass. It could have been used to accompany plainsong or chant or maybe, very practically, to summon people to church. There are also, accounts of such bells being used in healings (sick people could drink from the up-turned bell) and it may well have been used for exorcism, banishing or warning.

With a prominent Cathedral in the area people may wonder why such a relic is linked to Little Dunkeld Kirk and not Dunkeld Cathedral. The answer to this may lie in the time when Rome re-asserted authority over the Celtic Church in places like Scotland. The Cathedral was the centre of the new Roman form of church and therefore relics of the former Celtic church were not welcome.

Although this article began by saying the Parish is the proud owner of the bell that is not the whole story. The old Scots word ‘Dewar’ is given to the person who is custodian of an important artefact or the hereditary guardian of a holy relic, in particular early Christian bells. This responsibility was originally passed down through families but now falls to the current minister, Rev. Fraser Penny (*pictured right*).

There are several interesting legends connected to the bells. One ancient story tells of robbers who stole the bell and headed off into the hills with their plunder. When they stopped for a rest they placed the bell on a rock which promptly melded itself to the rock and would not move until they turned to face Dunkeld once more with the intention to return it. No wonder the present Dewar of the bell was told not to worry about looking after it as the bell looks after the Dewar!

So marvel at this ancient and wonderful musical instrument.

