

Battle of Crochdane

Nearly a thousand years ago. It's a long time but in the summer of 1012 there was great killing in Cruden. The Vikings had established a settlement on Hacklaw, the hill closest to the beach. King Sweyn Haraldsson of Denmark sent his 17 year old son Canute to reinforce the settlement and, if possible, to defeat the Scots army. Canute did not succeed. King Malcolm II of Scotland brought his army to Cruden and the battle began. It was fought on the flatlands below Hacklaw, where the golf course now is, but as the day went on the fighting spread inland and relics of the battle have been found over a four mile swathe of countryside. The date on which the battle was fought is not known, only the year. It would though have been in summer. The fighting season was fitted in between the sowing of the crops and the bringing home of the harvest. The prayers for the dead and the remembrance of the battle takes place in Saint James's Church, Cruden Bay on the Sunday closest to Saint Olaf's Day.

A Church built on the battlefield was dedicated in honour of Olaf - as was the previous church on the site on which Saint James's is built. The result of the battle was that the Vikings left the north-east of Scotland and Prince Canute went on to carve out a kingdom in England. When his father King Sweyn died in 1014 he became King of England and, following the death of his older brother in 1018, also of Denmark, Canute added the Kingdom of Norway to his Empire on July 29th, 1030, when he defeated Olaf, King of Norway, at the Battle of Stiklestad in Norway. Olaf died in the battle and soon afterwards was canonized as a saint. He became the patron saint of Norway and the church on the battlefield of Cruden was later dedicated in his name. Malcolm continued to rule Scotland until his death in 1034, although Canute exacted revenge for the defeat at Cruden by forcing his submission and homage following a Viking invasion of Fife in 1031.

Canute died in 1035, aged 40. His empire died with him. Two sons separately became kings of England and Denmark while the son of King Olaf became king of Norway. That was about the time that the Church on the battlefield at Cruden, which had been built on the orders of Malcolm and Canute, was dedicated to Saint Olaf.

The font is all that remains today - in Saint James's Church and still used for the Parish baptisms. There are close links between Scotland and Denmark. Even a thousand years ago the two nations were both Christian lands and the font, the symbol of new life in Jesus, was a sign of this. Centuries later that font became a symbol of another hope. The Episcopalian Church of Cruden had been destroyed following the Jacobite defeat at Culloden in 1746. The font among the sand dunes at the Whinnyfold end of the beach, was the focus of an open-air meeting place for the congregation. Later the font was taken by Pr Pratt, the first rector of the present Saint James's, to the Rectory garden in Cruden Bay and it came into Saint James's in 1966. It is a marvellous piece of history, both of Scotland and of Denmark, and above all a testimony to the faith of those on both sides who fought that day across the sand and whins of Cruden.

Written by Gerald Stranrear-Mull