Meldrum & Bourtie
Parish Church of Scotland

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The Life of Nechtan/Nathallan

Dedication of Embroideries service

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A few years ago, a group began to meet to do some embroidery together. We have made a couple of pulpit falls for the church and various small projects to help us learn techniques, but we needed a proper project. One that would allow us to increase our skills and work on something worthwhile that would glorify God with the work of our hands . Since I came to Meldrum I have been aware that there was a local saint called Nathallan. His name is remembered in place names and in a half-remembered legend. I have long wanted to know more about this saint but could not find him in the Saints of Scotland book . Any kind of research into the early history of Scotland is fraught with difficulties but not to an old archaeologist, I have connections . My friend Graham, who is an early mediaeval specialist, found him in the Aberdeen Breviary the oldest printed book in Scotland. From the new translation by Alan McQuarrie, and from the local legend I have put together this story that is celebrated in our embroideries . As with all stories from the deep past not all the details are secure and it is impossible to validate some of the claims made but it is certain that Nathallan was a real person though it turns out that Nathallan was not his real name but a Latinised form of a Pictish name. There is also the possibility that there were several people whose life stories were condensed into Nechtans and that some of the hagiography which surround him was added for the edification of

the worshippers rather than as actual history. When Nechtan's story was written there was no discipline of history as we know it now.

However accurate or inaccurate our story may be, like all the stories of the saints of the past there are lessons in it and something to celebrate. We had found our subject. I worked on designing the panels and produced samples . The work was going to cost more in materials than anything else we had done so I could not fund it myself but Elaine Buck wanted to be involved in this project and she stepped in to pay for the materials and we were ready to begin.

Today we are ready to dedicate the work of our hands, to thank Elaine for funding it and the church for hanging it and the people whose hands and hearts connected to embroider it.

According to the Aberdeen Breviary, the story begins in the early 600s at Tullich, near Ballater where a boy called Nechtan was born beside the Dee. However, there is a Mains of Tullich just up the road off the A947 just after Norvite and that is just as likely a place in my opinion. He was born to a noble family but made his life's study the word of God and the contemplation of the Divine. In order to keep his soul pure from the temptations of an easy, rich, life as an academic land owner, Nechtan became a farmer.

Not a gentleman farmer, but the hands dirty, hay in your hat and nicky tams kind of farmer.

Alice Donald embroidered the first panel of the happy farmer surveying his growing crops.

His crops flourished. He was good at farming, but a terrible famine came to the land and Nechtan gave away his seed corn to stop his family and neighbours from starving to death. When Spring came he had nothing to sow in his parks but sand. From the sand he sowed across the land every kind of corn grew and multiplied until there was a huge harvest waiting in the park.

In Meldrum the story is slightly different. Nechtan's crops survived a blight that killed everyone elses around and so he could feed his family and neighbours.

Nechtan's crops eventually died too and he realised how he had become arrogant and proud of his agricultural skills and that he felt that God had abandoned him and so lost his faith as well as his crops.

Winnie Reid embroidered the panel of the lost crops and the sorrowful saint amongst them and we are so grateful that we have this piece of Winnie's work.

The Aberdeen Breviary story is slightly different. Nechtan gathered a large number of his neighbors to bring in the miraculous harvest but a whirlwind and a huge storm kept the reapers from the field. Nechtan shouted at them in anger and shouted at God for sending the storm. The reapers and Neighbours began to murmour against God and lose their faith in his goodness.

Nechtan realised his folly and in repentance shackled his leg with a padlock and set off for Rome to do penance by visiting the shrines of peter and Paul.

In Meldrum the story is that he shackled his arm rather than leg but in both stories, he threw the key to the padlock into a river before leaving on his pilgrimage. He set off for Rome.

Jacquie Howard embroidered our remorseful saint with his arm padlocked, saying goodbye to the view over the Garioch and ready to leave on his pilgrimage.

In order to get to Rome, Nechtan would have had to walk all the way to somewhere he could take a ship to the Mediterranean, perhaps Aberdeen, perhaps a lot further. He would have sailed in a single, square -sailed vessel all the way down through the Bay of Biscay and around into the Mediterranean and all the way up to Rome, either that or he would have sailed to the Netherlands and walked for a very long way indeed, so I think it more likely that he sailed.

Lorna Reid embroidered the Voyage and she had no sample to follow. She designed this from a pencil drawing I made and sampled ways of representing waves and water.

In Rome Nechtan went to visit the holy shrines and prayed to be forgiven for his lack of faith. The Aberdeen Breviary and the Meldrum story now mingle again. In Rome the saint encountered a fish for his tea. In the Breviary he is sold the fish by a poor boy. In our embroidery he is in the market buying the fish. When the fish was cut open the key that Nechtan threw in the river fell into his hand. Taking this as a sign of God's forgiveness Nechtan opened the lock and walked free of his penance in joy. The Pope, on hearing the story, sent for Nechtan and made him a bishop, much against Nechtan's will.

Ellie Ingram embroidered the panel of Nechtan in the Roman market. She added an enterprising cat climbing up the stall and stabilized her columns with a clever use of emery boards.

We wanted to represent the flowering of faith in the saint's life once more and thinking of the symbolism of trees in the Christian faith and in the story of Nechtan we settle on the image of a flowering cherry tree.

It also seemed a good place to add a little thank you to Elaine by putting in a Roe deer buck.

Sheila Simpson embroidered this panel and went to great lengths to find the right colours and tones for the deer as well as the blossom.

Nechtan came home and founded three church communities at Tullich, Cowie near Stonehaven, and here at Bethelnie.

There are records of Nechtan as the abbot of a monastery called Nir, which was thought to be Deer but now is thought to be more likely Fetternear which is close to Kemnay. In the Celtic Church abbots held more power than Bishops and the church was more often located in a monastic settlement than in any great Cathedral power centre. So, we have assumed that the first church at Bethelnie was such a monastic centre which would have had its own High Cross and would have been a centre of education and sanctuary for the whole area.

I was developing a new way of embroidering Celtic knotwork, so I decided to use it to embroider the High Cross.

Meanwhile Ellie had volunteered to do a second embroidery and the view of the Monastery itself is her work.

The Aberdeen Breviary records January 8th as Nechtan's Day and the date of his death in the year 679. In Meldrum his death has a story attached to it which is rooted in the past but still grows into our present.

Rumours of a terrible plague came to Nechtan at Bethelnie and he set out on a pilgrimage of prayer around the whole area. On his knees he prayed that this whole community should be spared from the plague. His prayers left a Pale of Protection where he passed and no one here died of plague.

However, the exhausted saint collapsed underneath the Parcock Tree and died.

Since this embroidery was done on a rather difficult surface of a beautiful silk velvet to represent the sky, I took it on. After all, if the designer orders something difficult they had better be willing to do the work themselves. I didn't want to show him actually dead so here he is in his last moments, supported by the tree while the pale of prayer he threw around the parish is represented by the gold ribbon flowing out.

The Parcock Tree embroidery By Rev Alison Jaffrey.

The Aberdeen Breviary records that his body was buried at Tullich where he was born but in Meldrum, Nechtan/ Nathallan is remembered by the continuing presence of a Parcock Tree. Most of you know that the present tree can be found just off the by-pass. It has a bench under it and a spring nearby and is a place of peace overlooking the present village which replace Bethelnie as the main centre of population in the area. There is a plaque recording the story of the saint's death and it is a good place to pray for this community.

Our saint was a faithful farmer and a hopeful sower of the seed of the Gospel. We can aspire to continue his tasks and keep our faith no matter how it is challenged by circumstance and to give our lives to the service of God in this place.

These embroideries we now give to the congregation of Meldrum and Bourtie in thanksgiving for the life of Nechtan and in the hope that remembering his life will help us to hold to our faith through the trials of life we faith.

Let us pray

Holy Lord God

We thank you for the lives of the saints who inspire us for the things they did in your strength and all that they taught those willing to listen most of all we thank you for Nechtan whose love for the Lord Jesus Christ took him on his journey through life all the way to Rome and back, whose humility was his shield against the world and whose faith flowered again in this parish may ours flower too and bring much glory to your name we dedicate these embroideries in this your house to you in memory of Nechtan may the work of our hands inspire the thoughts and prayers of others in the years to come this we pray in the holy name of Jesus Christ

Nechtan's Lord and ours

Amen.

The ladies of our embroidery group busy on their next project.

Bringing together a wonderful display of knitted poppies donated by others in the congregation to mark the 100 year anniversary of the end of the First World War on Remembrance Day.