

Kirk Session Minutes – parish of Walls, Orkney.

What's a kirk session?

It is made up of: the minister (moderator or chair of the session), the elders and a session clerk (the chief elder) in a Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Sometimes there was no session clerk, only a clerk who kept minutes. There might be a Clerk PT – clerk “pro tempore”, in other words, just for that meeting

What was its role?

The session is the lowest court of the church and historically dealt with parish matters, spiritual, moral and social, as well as the general running of the church. The session would take to task the immoral, particularly unmarried mothers, those guilty of breaking the Sabbath or infrequently attending church. Punishments ranged from rebuke, loss of church privileges (membership and admission to Communion) to public repentance in front of the congregation. Until the Poor Law (Scotland) Act of 1845, it was also a key agent in poor relief.

More serious cases, serial fornicators for example, would be referred to Presbytery (Cairston Presbytery in the case of Walls), the next level up. The highest court of the Church of Scotland is the General Assembly which meets annually but until the 1990s there was also Synod, the court between presbytery and the General Assembly.

The value of Kirk Session minutes

Kirk session minutes give space to the ordinary people who may feature in no other record beyond a few censuses and possibly a baptism, marriage or burial register. The mention may be brief, to record someone as a new communicant, for example. In other instances, kirk session minutes can provide the vital missing link, naming the name of the father of an illegitimate child, for example. Where there is no extant death record, a date for the person's removal from the communicant role due to death may be found.

The Walls minutes

The Walls minutes focus chiefly on sexual immorality, with a few cases of Sabbath breaking, drunkenness and poor relief. It is noticeable that the fathers of illegitimate children often had an easier time, with no recorded rebuke at all in some cases. Once paternity had been established or the sin acknowledged, in the case of a couple who were now married, the individuals were generally rebuked or “solemnly exhorted to conduct themselves with propriety” and then restored to church privileges, that is to communicant membership of the church. In the case of illegitimate children, a primary concern was their maintenance lest they become a burden on the parish. Once the father admitted responsibility, that risk was greatly lessened. Unlike some other parishes, I have found no record of fines for those charged with fornication or ante-nuptial fornication.

In a few instances, individuals were summoned to appear before session because of a “fama clamosa” or “fama”, literally a ‘noisy rumour’, a story or allegation with serious foundation well beyond parish tittle tattle.

The frequency of meetings varies over time, declining towards the 1860s, and there are occasional indications that some meetings were not recorded at all.