

THE DEVIL'S STANE AND THE PRIEST OF KEMNAY

The Devil seemed to have a particular dislike for the churchmen of the North-East. Many are the tales of his attempts to frustrate their supplications against his evil ways, none more so than the priest of Kemnay.

Greystones Road, a relatively new street in Kemnay village, gives a little clue to the mysterious tale recorded in verse by Aberdeen poet and journalist, William Cadenhead. In 1871, the Royal Society of Edinburgh, however, dismissed the story as a legend which attempted to explain how a 250-ton granite boulder could appear in a field seven miles from stones of the same type. No such granite was to be found in Kemnay, but, the RSE members speculated, some 'natural agency', such as a glacier, could have brought the boulder to rest in the field near the old kirk.

Cadenhead sets the scene by describing the various 'spiritual champions' in the district, Culdee monks from Monymusk, Logie-Durno and the bishop of Fetternear, but none compare with Kemnay's priest for 'lifting the downcast heart, for helping the lowly poor'. The poet continues by saying:

On a' the bonnie banks o' Don
There wasnae ane haly man
Like him wha knelt in Kemnay kirk
At the shrine o' our Ladie Anne

Saint Anne was the mother of the Virgin Mary; Kemnay's present Episcopal Church is dedicated to her, yet it was the site of the present kirk where this devout priest was thought to have worshipped.

The Devil visits Bennachie - the latter described in terrible terms as in olden time 'ane o the ports o' the byrnand pit', that is, a gateway to hell, which spewed fire at night - and is sent into a flaming rage by the Kemnay priest's good deeds. Auld Hornie, Auld Cloven Hoddie, the Earl of Hell, he is known by various names in an attempt to lessen the terror of his infernal nature. He cannot bear to see the servants of his great Enemy, the Almighty God, prosper. From Bennachie's rocky heights, the Devil ranges back and forth, wondering how he can best rid himself of the priest.

THE DEVIL'S STANE AND THE PRIEST OF KEMNAY

The priest of Kemnay was indeed a devout servant of the church and his community. That day was feast of St Barnabas, fellow missionary of the Apostle Paul, and kinsman to gospel author, John Mark; mass was being held in the church. The priest sensed that evil was afoot and led the congregation's prayers. "With the aid of the blessed Anne and all the saints of heaven, may Satan be forever bound to his dark and fiery lair!" his voice carried across the sacred space as outside the sky darkened.

The organist began to play, and the choir sang the words of the liturgy, driving the Devil into a paroxysm of rage up on the hill. He cast around for a weapon, seeing only the bald grey rocks which surrounded the Mither Tap of Bennachie. But ah, he saw a vast granite boulder, striated with millennia of volcanic activity, sunk deep in the side of the hill. Grabbing the rock, he hoisted it above his head with supernatural strength and threw it with a curse towards the little church of Saint Anne.



Gray Stane, Kemnay

The sky had grown so dark now that the locals fled the church, leaving the priest on his own. He knelt before the altar and prayed all the more for deliverance from evil as the massive rock blotted out the sky above. Saint Anne and the angels heard his pleas and were roused to address the Devil's machinations. The heavenly spirits arrived just in time to divert the boulder in mid-air, so that it dropped harmlessly in the glebe lands. The people had witnessed the miraculous deliverance of their church and spiritual father, and while they had been blind to the presence of the angels, they had seen the boulder hover for a moment and change direction!

THE DEVIL'S STANE AND THE PRIEST OF KEMNAY

Never again would they fear the Devil, knowing their priest was favoured by heaven after this amazing incident. Thereafter, the boulder never moved, half-buried in the earth. It was named the Devil's Stane thereafter and no-one dared approach it.

Centuries later, when superstitious fears had abated, farmers worked the land around the boulder. When the granite quarries were opened on Paradise Hill, such rocks could be blasted apart by dynamite, and no-one paid any attention to this Ice Age survivor. The present-day village grew up around the quarries, one of which still operates today, though on a smaller scale.

In the 21st century, the Devil's Stane was entirely tamed, being surrounded by modern housing. The residents of Greystones Road today are probably unaware that no less than Satan himself was responsible for the boulder's presence, or at least, prefer to believe the Royal Society of Edinburgh's explanation that it arrived through glacial activity.



Gray Stane, Kemnay