

ABERDEEN UNITARIANS
A CHURCH OF THE OPEN MIND



'Thou sweet flowing Dee...'

CALENDAR
MARCH 2020

TERRACE VIEW

The photo on our front cover is of the River Dee flowing peacefully behind some branches at early Sunset quite recently. I am fortunate to live fairly close to the River Dee and enjoy walking beside it and appreciating its beauty at different times of the year. It has been called the 'Silver Dee' and its source is the Wells of Dee Spring on the side of Braeriach, the third highest mountain in Britain. The upper Dee flows through beautiful hillside scenery and along its banks are lovely woods of birch, fir and pine. It flows for nearly ninety miles to its mouth in Aberdeen.

We often focus on elements of the natural world at our services and our most recent service explored the immeasurable benefits that trees bring us. We mentioned the physical benefits (oxygen, wood, a source of food, to name a few). Environmentally we know that trees help capture carbon, produce rainfall and help reduce flooding. However, we also looked at the emotional and spiritual benefits of trees including growing scientific evidence that walking near trees can reduce stress, depression and anxiety.

The old Celtic blessings which often link peace to elements of the earth now seem very valid and deeply meaningful. I came across a lovely ancient Celtic prayer for peace and sleep:

“May the peace of the tallest mountain and the peace of the smallest stone be your peace.

May the stillness of the stars watch over you.

May the everlasting music of the wave lull you to rest.”

It seems to me that the natural world around us gives us life, stability, peace and joy on the one hand but also provides us with great challenges at times. It is sad to see the families and businesses having to cope with yet more flooding in parts of the UK during the past two storms. Water damage is very hard to overcome and the power of water as a destructive force cannot be underestimated.

Each of our planet's vital elements – earth, air, water and fire give us all that we need to live and yet can destroy life in certain circumstances.

So much in life seems to have two sides to it, there is rarely just one way of looking at things. This can lead to confusion so we can be helped by embracing the wholeness of all forms of life: a river can flow peacefully and be powerful; a tree can be both deeply rooted and yet its branches can blow and fall in the wind, this flexibility helping it to survive.

In our spiritual lives, in order to grow, we can work towards accepting ourselves wholly as we are. We can learn to love both the side we show to the world and the parts of ourselves we would rather keep hidden.

We can be inspired by the river to 'go with the flow' and we can emulate the trees who stay rooted whilst bending with change and remaining open.

I will finish with words of blessing by Geoffrey R. Usher:

“We acknowledge our human limitations as we stand in awe before the boundless beauty of nature, and we give thanks that so often we receive more than we deserve, we are given much more than we give.

Help us, O God, to be always conscious of your generosity to us, and conscious of our obligation in turn to share the abundance with those of our neighbours who have less.

May we understand that we do not possess the earth or its riches, but are for a brief time able to enjoy the treasure which has been passed to us and which we hold in trust for those generations who will come after us. As we learn to be grateful for the many blessings we share may we also learn to share our blessings.”

Caroline Cormack

TAKE NOTE: MARCH 2020

Sun 1st	11.00 – 12.00	MORNING SERVICE WITH JUDITH MCCULLOUGH
Mon 2 nd	7.30 – 9.30	Bon Accord Scrabble Club (Inkson Room)
Wed 4th	10.00 – 12.00 14.00 – 16.00 19.00	TERRACE COMMUNITY CAFÉ WOMEN'S LEAGUE – MARGIE MELLIS “A CREW THAT TIME FORGOT” Unfurl – Journeys with Sound
Sat 7th	10.00 – 12.00	TERRACE COMMUNITY CAFÉ WITH JOHN AND LYN
Sun 8th	11.00 – 12.00	MORNING SERVICE WITH REV PETER FAIRBROTHER
Mon 9 th	7.30 - 9.30.	Bon Accord Scrabble Club (Inkson Room)
Tues 10th	10.30 – 12.30	NOTEWORTHY SINGING GROUP
Wed 11th	10.00 – 12.00	TERRACE COMMUNITY CAFÉ
Sat 14th	10.00 – 12.00	TERRACE COMMUNITY CAFÉ WITH JEAN AND DOT
Sun 15th	11.00 – 12.00	MORNING SERVICE WITH RORY CASTLE JONES, COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER, UK UNITARIANS FOLLOWED BY CONGREGATIONAL LUNCH
Mon 16 th	7.30 - 9.30.	Bon Accord Scrabble Club (Inkson Room)
Wed 18th	10.00 – 12.00	TERRACE COMMUNITY CAFE
Sat 21st	10.00 – 12.00 14.00 – 16.00	TERRACE COMMUNITY CAFÉ WITH SUE AND MOIRA Family History Society
Sun 22nd	11.00 – 12.00 12.30 – 3.00	MORNING SERVICE WITH REV CAROLINE CORMACK COMMITTEE MEETING
Mon 23 rd	7.30 - 9.30.	Bon Accord Scrabble Club (Inkson Room)
Tues 24th	10.30 – 12.30	NOTEWORTHY SINGING GROUP
Wed 25th	10.00 – 12.00 12.00 – 14.00	TERRACE COMMUNITY CAFE KNIT, STITCH AND CHAT
Sat 28th	10.00 – 12.00	TERRACE COMMUNITY CAFÉ WITH ANITA AND BILL
Sun 29th	11.00 – 12.00	MORNING SERVICE WITH SUE GOOD

MARCH FOLK

Welcome: Noel McCullough

Collection: Kathleen Bruce

SUNDAY TEAS

1st
8th
15th
22nd
29th

JUDITH AND NOEL
JOHN
KATHLEEN AND KATHLEEN
SUE AND JESS
ANITA

PASTORAL GREETINGS

We send heartfelt greetings to all our Members and Friends who are unwell or unable to regularly join us for any reason at this time.

You are still very much in our thoughts and we really appreciate your ongoing support for us.

Rev Caroline is very happy to take a phone call or come to anyone who would like a home visit.

PLEASE JUST PHONE CAROLINE ON 01224 865799.

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REFLECTIVE SERVICES

Caroline will be holding an evening Reflective Service on Friday 27th March from 6 to 7pm.

The theme is Hope.

It is an opportunity for a quieter gathering with readings, music, meditation and some discussion on the story of Pandora's Box and how this relates to hope in our lives.

Everyone is very welcome.

MEDITATION

There will be no meditation sessions in March

WOMEN'S LEAGUE

The meeting on **Wednesday 4th March** will provide an opportunity to meet with local author Margie Mellis and hear the fascinating story of the SS Rubislaw, a ship that was stuck in Hamburg at the outset of the First World War. "A Crew that Time Forgot" is the title of her popular book on the subject.

Thanks to all who visited the Sales Table at the Terrace Café on 15th February. The League raised the sum of £196.10 for the current project, Smile Train.

The League Benevolent Fund Secretary has notified us of the death of Marie Eastman. Mrs Eastman was the widow of Rev. Glyn Eastman, who was our Minister between 1990 and 1993.

NOTEWORTHY SINGING GROUP

The March meetings will be on the 10th and 24th at 10.30.

The group is open to everyone, members and non-members alike. There is no audition so if you would just like to sing, come along, you'll be made very welcome. So far, we have tackled Christmas music and folk songs and at present we are embarked on "I love a piano", so there is something for everyone.

KNIT, STITCH AND CHAT

The group continues under the guidance of Jess McCulloch on the last Wednesday of the month. All are made very welcome, so please bring along your particular craft work to show to the group.

The next meeting will take place at 12.00 on March 25th.

LOOKING FORWARD



Fairtrade Fortnight will be held from February 24th to

March 8th this year. Aberdeen's most faithful Fairtrade catering ambassadors have always been Books and Beans in Belmont Street and they are currently under new management. They have decided that all their soft drinks will be Fairtrade, to match their hot beverages. Here is the range – I am looking forward to trying Gingerella. Why not give them a try during the Fortnight?

Incidentally, the new guy at the helm is John Wigglesworth, whose mother was the founder of the Third World Centre, the much-missed Fair Trade shop in the Kirk of St Nicholas. We look forward to continuing news of great things from Books and Beans.

LOOKING BACK



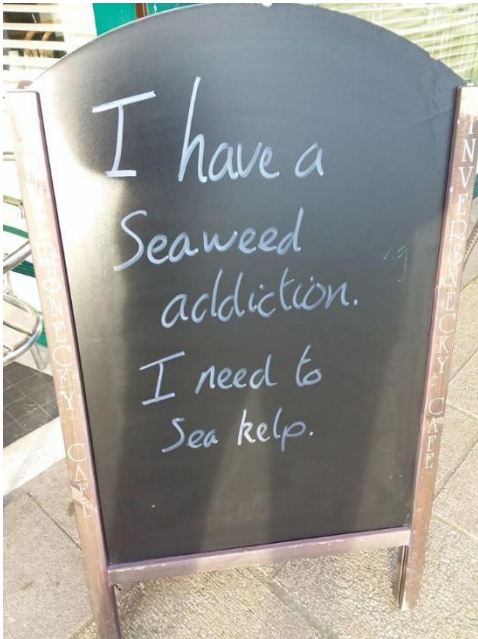
Four doughty members of the Felix Walking Group (plus the photographer, of course) were all that could be persuaded to brave the elements for a walk in early February. Here they are, preparing to capture the castle, New Slains Castle, that is, at Cruden Bay.

I hope their choice of hostelry for the meal afterwards had a rather less forbidding aspect and provided warmth and comfort. At least the weather looks to have been fine.

The Group aims to walk monthly, weather permitting, and it is always a friendly occasion. All are welcome.

RAISING A SMILE

Two this month from our favourite local punster at the Inversnecky Café. He's indefatigable (and I'm sure he could make a great pun out of that). Follow the seasons at the Inversnecky



I don't know where this little cartoon on the left came from, but I like the cat's ability to get himself in on the act. If that's a begging bowl, I hope he got what he wanted.

And, finally, one of those internet stories that arrive out of the blue, this time from Canada. I think it is quite old, but judging by the reaction it gets when I tell it at Acclamations' concerts, the old ones are still the best. It must strike a chord. To all dour North Easterners everywhere, this story is dedicated.

That was Zen, This is Meow

As a Bagpiper, I play many gigs. Recently I was asked by a funeral director to play at a graveside service for a homeless man. He had no family or friends, so the service was to be at a pauper's cemetery in the Nova Scotia back country.

As I was not familiar with the backwoods, I got lost and, being a typical man, I didn't stop for directions.

I finally arrived an hour late and saw the funeral guy had evidently gone and the hearse was nowhere in sight. There were only the diggers left and they were eating lunch. I felt badly and apologized to the men for being late. I went to the side of the grave and looked down and the vault lid was already in place. I didn't know what else to do, so I started to play.

The workers put down their lunches and began to gather around. I played out my heart and soul for this man with no family and friends. I played like I've never played before for this homeless man. And as I played "Amazing Grace", the workers began to weep. They wept, I wept, we all wept together. When I finished, I packed up my bagpipes and started for my car. Though my head was hung low, my heart was full.

As I opened the door to my car, I heard one of the workers say, "Well, I never seen nothing like that before in twenty years of putting in septic tanks."

ROBERT BURNS AS HE WAS FOR ME, IS NOW AND EVER SHALL BE.

Dr. John Robinson

Oh, how I wished, when about to sit my school English exams, there would be a question asking for a critical review of Robert Burns' poem, *'The Auld Farmer's New Year Morning Salutation to his Auld Mare, Maggie'*, for in those days I felt I knew a lot about horses. Kate and Jessie were the female equivalents of Maggie in the farm's team of horses that, from over 20 years before I was born, tilled the soil, harvested the crops and provided the power to bring the family to Sunday worship. They were regarded as one of us, part of the family. They had earned their part-time retirement and fully deserved their New Year greeting with its accompanied extra portion of feed. I could relate to the visual images described in the poem and the emotions of gratitude and affection that accompanied them.

Growing up on a farm I also felt I knew a lot about mice but it was not with the same degree of affection as described by Burns in his, *'To a Mouse'* poem. To me mice were destructive little beasts that invaded the corn or oat stacks before threshing and the barns that the grain was stored in after threshing. Old Maggie and her like were farming assets whereas mice and their rodent friends were hindrances; they were enemies to be combated and I am sure old Maggie was of the same view when she detected, from the odour and texture of her oat-based feed, that the scampering little beasts had beaten her to it.

Of course, the *'Auld Maggie'* poem was probably not regarded as being sufficiently intellectual to challenge our ability to critically analyse it. I suspect however Burns', *'To a Mouse'*, poem was and that is why it was often chosen by examiners.

It is an excellent example of Burns' unique ability to use his unintentional wrecking of the mouse's winter home to credit the mouse with demonstrating how foresight planning by both animals and humans can be in vain, as captured in these famous words, *'The best-laid schemes o'mice an' man gang aft agley, an' lea'e us nought but grief an' pain, for promised joy'*.

But an even more powerful example of his literary genius is seen in these words of apology to the mouse for destroying her winter home; the home that she worked so hard to build, *'I'm truly sorry man's dominion has broken nature's social union'*. Presumably the use of the word 'dominion' came from Burns' knowledge of scripture and God's giving to humankind dominion over the earth and every living thing. One even gets the impression that Burns felt this was an unwise delegation of Divine power and, 'custodian of' rather than 'dominion over' would have been more appropriate.



In an article in *'The ultimate Guide to Robert Burns'* published last year, Dundee's Jim Crumley who is considered currently to be Britain's top nature writer, attributes the awakening of Scotland's environmental conscience to this reference by Burns of his breaking of Nature's Social Union.

Burns started writing the poem in the evening of the day in November 1785 that he and his farm servant, John Blane, ploughed up the mouse's winter nest and, unable to sleep as a result of seeing Blane running after the mouse to kill it with his pattle (spade), Burns finished the writing of the poem during the early morning hours. It was almost a century later that another Scot, John Muir, the internationally-renowned conservationist, born 60 years after Burns death, was inspired by Burns' concept of *'Nature's Social Union'* to illustrate the interconnectedness of nature and humanity thus: *'When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe'*.

The moving description by Burns of his act of compassion resulting from him preventing Blane killing the mouse by asking him, *'what ill the poor mouse had ever done to him'*, did not involve the emotive language now being generated by Extinction Rebellion; neither did the description by John Muir of the interconnectedness of nature and humanity. Their observations of nature provided their vision for its harmony. At this point I should add that I now catch the occasional field mouse that finds its way into our attic from the nearby harvest fields each autumn in a humane trap and release it into

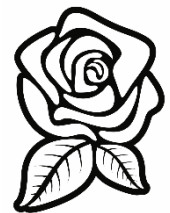
the forest in the Craibstone Estate. It is a Burns-induced action to make me more at one with nature; a little bit of the Burns 'that was' that, for me, 'now is'.

And that releasing of my humanely-trapped mice in amongst the fallen leaves of the forest trees provides the cue to stop me going from horse to mouse to louse in Burns poems, but instead to consider his poems on plants as The United Nations General Assembly has proclaimed this year as the International Year of Plant Health. In highlighting the importance of plant health the Food and Agriculture Organisation which is part of the United Nations, estimates '*that up to 40% of global food crops worth 20 billion dollars in trade of agricultural products are lost each year to plant pests and diseases. Reducing the loss is an international undertaking that requires the collaboration of all countries*'. The aim, this year, of the United Nations is '*to raise national, regional and global awareness of plant health and its effects on food security, poverty eradication and environmental protection*'.



For me at school the most notable Burns' poem on a specific plant was '*To a Daisy*', for which the shortened version in our school poetry book had to be committed to memory. It, like in '*To a mouse*', was another victim of that essential farming activity, ploughing. And like the field mouse, its fragile life form that had to withstand, at 'its humble birth', the cold biting North wind, won not only Burns admiration for its resilience and beauty but also his remorse on having to crush it into the soil.

Many of Burns' plant poems involved the likening of the beauty of his many lovers to the beauty of specific plants. In this regard his best known poem, albeit directed in general to his lovers, is probably '*My Love is like a Red Red Rose*'. For named lovers he viewed Polly Stewart as *sweeter than any flower that blooms in May*. The primrose's pearls of morning dew are likened to '*The sweets of love that are washed with tears*', a reference no doubt to the tears of his numerous broken-hearted lovers. And in '*The Rosebud*', he draws parallels between its features and those of young Jenny. In his poem, '*Nith I Did Wander*', he sees the child-like simplicity of Phillis in the daisy, with her *charm exceeding the heart of the gay flowers in the arbour, her breath the breath of the woodbine and its dew-drop of diamond, her eye*. Such was the effect of Miss Fontenelle's beauty on him he had to resort to the whole of nature to express his admiration. '*Sweet, wild and enchanting elf, not to thee but thanks to nature, thou are acting but thyself*'.



And in his poem, '*My Bonnie Bell*', while enjoying the contrasting beauty of the four seasons, he still adored his '*never ranging, still unchanging, Bonnie Bell*'. But so often the fading beauty of flowers, like his love faded too and joy turned into depression.

During my childhood I could not appreciate Burns' concern and genuine remorse at ploughing a daisy into the ground. For me and the rest of the farming community daisies were weeds; they took up valuable growing space and hindered the growth of the highly nutritious improved grasses required for the production of milk and meat. In the absence, at that time, of selective weed killers, the ploughing up of grassland every few years was, like when Burns lived, still the only way to control weeds and rejuvenate pastures. Weeds, rodents, lovers and broken romances, indeed even unbroken romances, were examples of what was referred to in farming families as 'heart scalds'. They caused worry and anxiety.

Fast forward 250 years to the present and the thinking and views of Burns expressed in '*To a daisy*' and '*To a Mouse*' have renewed relevance. The 'what was' for Burns 'is now'. The Agricultural Bill to replace the European Common Agricultural Policy is now being discussed in Westminster. Instead of rewarding farmers for the production of food the Bill is directed to the provision of payments to protect land, water and air, support plant and animal wildlife, maintain landscapes, boost animal welfare and health and tackle climate change. Thus the 'what was' for Burns 'is now' and, as a result of climate change due to global warming, looking increasingly likely to 'ever shall be', if we are to avoid the 'world without end' scenario in the orthodox Christian liturgy used in glorifying God.

On the issue of climate change the main political parties competed for votes in the recent general election by pledging to plant large land areas with trees in order to reduce atmospheric

concentrations of carbon dioxide. The Conservatives pledged to plant 30 million trees per year between 2020 and 2025 equivalent 50 thousand hectares; Labour 300 million in total by 2025, a billion by 2030 and 2 billion by 2040; the Liberal Democrats, 60 million per year, equivalent to 40 thousand hectares annually and the Green Party 70 million each year between 2020 and 2030. In their zero net carbon emissions report the Committee on Climate Change estimate a need to increase the current woodland cover from 13 to at least 17% to achieve zero emissions by 2050 whereas Friends of Earth want a doubling of the current cover of 13% by 2045.

These pledges prompted me to investigate what Robert Burns had to say about trees. My starting point was his paraphrasing of what is known in the King James Version of the bible as 'Blessed is the Man', and in Burns' version as 'First Psalm'. Following his paraphrasing of the biblical description of the 'God-pleasing' man in the first two verses, this is Burns' verse 3: *'That man shall flourish like the trees, which by the streamlets grow; the fruitful top is spread on high, and firm the roots below.'* In his *'To a Daisy'* Burns sympathises with the daisy's ability to appear cheerful in its harsh environment and contrasts its life with that of its 'flaunting' garden flower compatriots that require protection and shelter of their surrounding woods, in order to survive. And in his mourning the death of his Highland Mary he recalls the prominence of the trees around the banks and braes of her passing, *'Green be your woods, and fair your flowers', how sweetly bloomed the gay, green birk (birch), and how rich the hawthorn blossom. It was there, as he put it, death's untimely frost 'nipt his Highland Mary-flower sae early'*.

In *'I love my Jean'*, we read; *there's wild woods grow, and rivers row, and many a hill between, but day and night my fancy's flight is ever wi my Jean.*

The first verse of *'The Posie'* is an admission by Burns that *love ventures in where wisdom once has been; but he will down yon river rove, among the woods so green, and a' to pu' a posie to my ain dear May'*.



The important habitat provided by the woods for nesting birds is also acknowledged by Burns when he refers to *the linnet that soon shall see her tender brood, the pride, the pleasure o' the wood, among the fresh green leaves bedew'd, awauk the early morning.'*

But it is probably in *'The Humble Petition of Brauar Water'* that we witness Burns' fervour for trees best expressed.

'Let lofty firs, and ashes cool, my lowly banks o'erspread, and view deep bending in the pool, their shadow's wat'ry bed: Let fragrant birks (birch), in woodbines drest, my craggy cliffs adorn; and for the little songster's nest, the close embow'ring thorn.'

A few years ago when I attended the service of celebration for the Rev Andrew Hill's Ministry in St Mark's Unitarian Church in Edinburgh, I became aware of his frequent references, in his church services, to the symbolic role of trees in his religious faith. It left me to wonder if this had been influenced by Burns' 'First Psalm' poem linking the human attributes of humility, awe, happiness and freedom from guilt to trees. In a quick scan of the Andrew Hill hymns in our Purple Hymn Book this is the only reference to trees that I found; *'Within the garden home of earth, there grows a gracious tree, whose healing leaves the nations calm and set their subjects free'*.

But as readers of *The Inquirer* will have noted in the recent pre-Christmas issue, under the title *'And so let Us Pray'*, Andrew Hill lists the human attributes that, from the fruits of Christmas, he regards as trees of the spirit that we should nurture. They are trees of patience, kindness and generosity, trees of faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, a tree of love, a tree of joy, a tree of peace, a tree of kindness, a tree of faithfulness, a tree of gentleness and a tree of self-control. His prayer ends with the supplication, *'Trees of the spirit, this Christmas, may you be our Christmas trees'*.

Although trees are not an index heading in our Green Hymn Book, there are 15 hymns listed in the 'tree index' in our Purple Hymn book. These examples provide a flavour of how they can influence our philosophy, faith and hopes for planet earth.

'Earth was given as a garden, cradle of humanity, tree of life and tree of knowledge, placed for our discovery'.

'God of grass of beech and oak tree'.

'In the spring I saw the Easter tree'.

'Instead of the thorn tree, the fir tree shall grow'

And in this hymn that has become quite a favourite here in Aberdeen, *'Everybody turn and spin-- let your body learn to bend, and like a willow in the wind, let it be a dance.'*

'Spirit of earth, root, stone and tree'

'When the song of life is ringing through the green fields and the wood'

And finally the role of trees in sustaining our environment,

'Your rainforests nurture the world that we share'

As a pioneer of reverence for all forms of life, Burns was more than 200 years ahead of the current Extinction Rebellion in his philosophy. He understood every aspect of nature and the importance of maintaining nature's social union. It is the eternal nature of his thinking expressed with precision in his poems that reminded me of my Roman Catholic primary school exposure to religion and prompted me to give this address the title, 'Robert Burns, as he was for me, is now, and ever shall be'.

VOLUNTEERS

As a small congregation we are always on the look-out for volunteers to help with events, particularly cafes, during the year.

If you feel you could give us 2-3 hours of your valuable time on any particular Saturday for a café or other event, we would be very keen to hear from you. Talk to anyone from the committee and your offer will be gratefully received. You would be assisting a regular volunteer so would not be expected to work on your own.

THIS APPEAL IS OPEN TO MEMBERS AND FRIENDS OF THE CHURCH

If you have any other questions about our church please don't hesitate to ask a member.

Current Committee Members / Trustees for 2019/2020 are:

As Statutory Office Bearers –

John Robinson (Chairman) Alan Prosser (Treasurer) Bill Good (Secretary)

As Members –

Kathleen Bruce, Sue Good, Jess McCulloch, Judith McCullough, Kathleen McGregor, Dot Prosser, Anita Stephen, Rhona Stewart.

CHURCH HISTORY

If you want to know a bit more of the history of the church in Aberdeen since the first services were held in 1833, there is information available in booklets in the Inkson Room and a potted history of the church is available on our web site. Past secretary Bill Stephen is also a source of much historical information.

**THE CONGREGATION OF ABERDEEN UNITARIAN CHURCH
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THE UK GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

WEB-SITE: www.unitarian.org.uk

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THE SCOTTISH UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION (SUA):

An Association of the Scottish Unitarian Congregations set up in 1813

WEB-SITE: <http://www.sua.org.uk/>

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THE INQUIRER:

The oldest Non-conformist journal still published in Britain, the Inquirer, published every fortnight, is for honest inquiry into matters of faith.

WEB-SITE: www.inquirer.org.uk

TWITTER: https://twitter.com/the__inquirer

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**THE CHURCH IS A SCOTTISH CHARITABLE INCORPORATED ORGANISATION (REG: SCIO 05218)
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