

The North British Society and St. Matthew's Church

Each year St. Matthew's has an annual Kirken of the Tartan Service, which involves many of the officers and members of Halifax's North British Society (also known as The Scots). There is an historical connection between St. Matthew's – the oldest Protestant Dissenting congregation in Canada – and The North British Society – the oldest Scottish Heritage society in the Commonwealth of Nations, outside the United Kingdom.

The North British Society was founded in 1768, by a small Halifax group of Scottish settlers who would have been members of this congregation. The Society was originally organized to give practical help to needy Scots arriving in this pioneering community. As conditions improved, its program gradually became more social, and for centuries it has celebrated Scottish culture in its splendid Festival of St. Andrews each November, its celebration of the Memory of the Immortal Bard in January and the annual Halifax Highland Games in July.

Its historic name, The North British Society, needs some explanation. In 1707, the parliaments of England and Scotland were united into one and the two former kingdoms became known as Great Britain. Late in the 1700s, a distinctively positive and optimistic vision of Scotland was evolved by a remarkable period of Scottish intellectual activity known as the Scottish Enlightenment. The Enlightenment's vision applied not to Scotland alone, but to the new creation that both Scotland and England had become – Great Britain. It was with an ardent belief in the future of a vital British culture that, in referring to Scotland, the designation "North Britain" came into acceptable usage.

It was midway in the most active decades of the Scottish Enlightenment, in 1768, that our local society was founded, which proudly called itself The North British Society. In recent years the Society officially changed its name by adding the descriptive words "The Scots" to make it abundantly clear to today's world just who it is.

For its first almost 100 years, the society worshiped regularly in Mathers Meeting House, the original wooden church that was the forerunner of St. Matthew's today. For the last almost 150 years, the Society has worshiped regularly in this building.

This historic relationship was made even more obvious when in 1983 the Society presented its proud, historic, retired banner to this congregation for safe keeping. The banner had been made in Scotland and arrived in Halifax just in time for the Society's St. Andrew's Night celebrations in 1895. Since its presentation in 1983, this congregation has gratefully and proudly displayed it in the prominent northeast corner of this historic sanctuary in recognition of the close, almost two-and-one-half-centuries'-old relationship between the two bodies.

Adapted for presentation as an Historic Sketch on July 10, 2005 from a paper prepared by Donald F. Maclean, Historian of the North British Society.