



# Skene Heritage Society Newsletter

Scottish Registered Charity No: SC 033439

## January 2012 - Issue 21

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### Davina Millar

At the beginning of World War II Davina Millar lived in Aberdeen with her mother, father and sisters. The talk of possible bombing of cities panicked her mother who thought they would be safer living in the country. So Davina moved with her mother and sisters to Westhill, her father staying on in lodgings in Aberdeen because he worked at Mugiemoor Paper Mill and wouldn't be able to get to his work from Westhill. Davina's mother rented Souterhill Farmhouse from a Mr Glenesk who lived in a small two bedroom cottage just behind the farm. Davina remembers him as a quiet, gentle man, unmarried who rarely had visitors. She doesn't think he was a farmer but they hardly ever saw him. Davina and her sisters played in the fields and flattened the crops but he never said anything. Davina went to Westhill School, the old school at the roundabout. There was only one teacher who taught everyone. In winter they all stood round the fire for their lessons, there was a great big guard round the fire. Davina was bullied at Westhill School, probably because she came from the town, and her mother went up to the school to complain.

It was quite a walk from Souterhill to the school, especially in winter. Davina's mother received a letter from the Council threatening legal action if she didn't send her to school, but it was because of the

difficulty getting to school that Davina was absent, the snow sometimes being above her head. The roads weren't cleared properly as they are today.

She remembers one particular Wednesday when the snow was falling heavily, "*blin drift*" as we say in the North East. She set off at eight o'clock with her piece bag and a flask with a hot drink. She walked and walked but couldn't get far because of the snow, her wellington boots going into the snow which came over them, she was only ten or eleven at the time. On the road down from Souterhill there was a big house, unoccupied and used only as a summer house. Davina went in there and ate her lunch and had a hot drink. With the snow still falling heavily it was impossible to continue to school so she returned home. She was so cold that she couldn't open the door of the farmhouse and she had to kick the door to get her mother to come and open it. The severity of the winter conditions is why it sticks in her memory after all these years. She wasn't sent to school for a few days after that.

She remembers that the farm wasn't really a working farm but there were shepherds and a lot of sheep. In Spring if any of the mothers died they took the lambs in to their kitchen, which had a flagstone floor, and they fed the lambs with a bottle with teats, a great experience for a *toon quine*.

They were quite isolated up at Souterhill, no phones. They did have a wireless and sometimes listened to the news. It was battery operated and her mother had to take these big batteries by bike to get them re-charged so they rationed their use of the radio. When Davina caught scarlet fever she had to cycle four miles

to Woodend Hospital and from there was taken to the City Hospital in Aberdeen.

Mr Glenesk asked her mother to take in two Norwegian sea captains - Captains Stoltz and Sorensen. They lodged in a wooden extension to the farmhouse, doing their own cooking and washing. They had binoculars and may have been involved in some military work. It was possible to see the Russian convoy boats from Souterhill. Davina's mother had a piano and someone else played the violin and they had musical evenings with the Norwegians.

She remembers the little corner shop at Berriedale, like a Mace that sold everything. Her older sister, three and a half years older, went to the big school at Skene, walking across the fields. Her sister also went to nearby farms for milk and eggs until her mother eventually got her own hens. There was a bonnie wee girl at Westhill called Violet, aged eight, who died of meningitis. The teacher had all the children standing in the playground, heads bowed as the coffin went past.

She also remembers a Dutch pig farmer called Christofferson, somewhere near the school.

I can confirm some of Davina's memories. Alexander Simpson Glenesk was indeed the owner of the farmhouse and the farm and cottage at Souterhill, recorded in the 1940 and 1945 Valuation Rolls. In 1940 he is listed as a farmer, occupying both buildings but by 1945/46 Peter Alexander of Westhill Farm was the tenant of the land. Mr Glenesk no longer lived there and the farm and cottage was vacant. The farmhouse was occupied by James Thomson, retired, and Elizabeth Lynch, widow.

Bill Leslie remembers that his father did some work for Mr Glenesk who may have owned other properties. He also remembers Mr Christofferson but says he

was Danish not Dutch. He farmed opposite Berriedale where the Kinghorns had their croft. He built his rucks square instead of the round ones we are used to, because that is how they did it in Denmark. His descendants are still in the North East and run lorries from the Peterhead / Fraserburgh area.

Davina Miller only spent a year or so in Westhill, spending her eleventh birthday there. Her memories show that it made quite an impression on her, probably because the life was so different from what she had been used to.

*Jim Fiddes in conversation with  
Davina Scott (Millar)*

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### **William Taylor of Southbank**



William Taylor was Registrar and Session Clerk of Skene for over 20 years. These are his memories of his life including winters a hundred years before Davina's.

*"My father was an old and trustworthy servant of Sir Robert Burnett of Leys, Crathes Castle, from whom he afterwards leased a small farm in the parish of Banchory-Ternan. Soon after his removal to this place I was born, on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of June 1816. It was the year after Waterloo and was long remembered as the year of the "Snowie Hairst." A great snowstorm came on before any of the crop was cut.*

*For several months it lay below the snow, and it was the beginning of the next year ere it was all got in. I remember my mother telling me how she would give me the breast, put me in the cradle leaving my sister to rock, and go out and shear some of the corn that was not below snow. Then she would bring it home and thaw it at the fire, and my father would thresh it with the flail in order to keep the house in meal.*

*I distinctly remember the great snowstorm of the year '23, though I do not remember the exact time of year. At any rate all the cattle were by that time in the house. There was a day called "the drifty Friday" on which the snow-wreaths drifted as high as the roofs of the houses, and holes had to be cut into the doors of the outhouses before the cattle and horses could be fed. Crows fell from the trees for want of food. The next important point in my life was the year 1826. Nothing grew on thin land and a lot of the fields were never attempted to be cut. The cattle were just driven onto them to pick up anything they could find. The failure of the crop was due to excessive drought, and a great many of the farmers were ruined. I was now working on the farm, and I remember going to the Hill of Fare, where we cut heather and "shore rashes," where they could be got, to give to the starving cattle. The horses lived chiefly on beat whins. (The whin affords excellent fodder especially when young, or when its thorns are artificially bruised, the apparatus for doing which may still be seen near some farm steadings). Many of the larger farmers who had hoarded up a lot of old hay and straw for a number of years, made huge profits, while the poor could scarcely get meat (food). A grain dealer in Banchory had a considerable store of corn, which he kept with the intention of sending it south where a larger profit could be obtained. But before he could get it removed the people, many of whom by this time were in danger of starvation, mobbed his premises, and threatened to pull down*

*the buildings until he consented to sell the corn at a reasonable price.*

*I now come to the great flood which took place in August 1829 (famous forever after as the "Muckle Spate" - JF), when the greater part of the cultivated land was covered with water. In the low-lying fields it stood a foot above the ears of the corn. Many bridges were washed down, and in a great many fields the grain was terribly destroyed. A great deal of the crop was left uncut and there was a great cry about sandy meal, especially among farm-servants. There was a moss on our farm which was all covered with water except some hillocks on which the hares took refuge. We had a big Newfoundland dog whom I sent at them. He swam in and brought out seven hares in less than an hour.*

*The next important event was the passing of the Reform Bill in 1832. At this time nearly all the people in Banchory were Whigs. Sir Thomas Burnett, the oldest son of Sir Robert, contested the County of Kincardineshire against Lord Arbuthnott, the Tory candidate, and gained the seat. A cousin and I climbed up on the wall of an old shop across the road from the inn where the votes were taken, and got a fine view of the mob on the road. When any of the Tories came to vote the mob closed on them before they got into the inn, spat on them and "jobbed them with preens" (pins). Mr Innes of Raemoir was very kind to his tenants and the mob was not as hard on him as on some of the others. As Sir Robert was on his way to vote for his son the mob went down to New Banchory, unyoked the horses from the carriage, and pulled him up to the village to record his vote. During this interlude the Tories took the chance, and got away without being further molested. An old man, a near relation of my mother's, was at this time tenant of the farm of Catterloch, on the Raemoir Estate. He was well known to be a strong Tory, but a day or two after*

the election Mr Innes called on him, anxious to know if he had really voted for the Tory candidate. "I voted for the man with the white hat," stoutly affirmed Old Cattrum. Mr Innes was satisfied. Lord Arbuthnot always wore a white hat. But the worst of it was that during the election time Sir Thomas Burnett was doing the same, and Cattrum took the risk of Mr Innes not knowing this, as he never attended any of the Whig meetings. Old Cattrum was a shrewd man, and did not wish to quarrel with the laird; but, as a matter of fact, he had been won over partly by the specious arguments of the other side and partly to save his skin! The mob carried him shoulder high in an armchair to give his vote. Of this I was an eye-witness. It was considered a great triumph to get him to vote on the side of the Whigs.

I remember a great snowstorm in the year '38. Snow fell for several days, it was quite calm and there was no drifting but snow lay four foot deep. There was no frost on the ground when the snow commenced to fall, so that the turnips were quite fresh below - we just had to dig them out and carry them home for the cattle in sacks. It was very stiff work walking with a load in such a depth of snow. At last a tremendous frost set in, and the surface of the snow became so hard that even horses and carts did not sink. I remember going to the mill for meal on the top of the snow, but when the thaw came the snow disappeared with almost incredible quickness owing, I suppose, to the freshness of the ground below.

Then came the Disruption year '43. My companion joined the Free Church, as did also all the teachers in Lady Burnett's school, which was left quite empty. I stuck to the Established Church, and strongly supported the action of the Moderates. I had to superintend the Sunday School at Coy in the morning, went to church in the forenoon and from there to Crathes for dinner, as it was too

far to go home. In the afternoon I went back to the village and taught in Lady Burnett's school during the summer of '43 until a minister was found. Some of the parents, when they joined the Free Church, removed their children from the Coy school, but when Mr Reid (first Free Church minister of Banchory) came round he ordered them back again, saying they would get no ill from Mr Taylor. I was well acquainted with Mr. Reid as he was helper to Mr Anderson in the Established Church the year before the Disruption.

I carried on the school at Coy till I left the parish at Whitsunday 1846, when I took a farm at Kintore (the farm of Thainstone). When leaving Banchory I was presented by scholars and parents with a valuable silver snuff box in recognition of my work among them. I assisted occasionally in the Sunday school at Kintore, and for five years was an elder, being one year elected ruling elder and representative of the kirk-session to the courts of the Church. I then removed to the farm of Southbank in the parish of Skene, where I joined the eldership of the parish church, so that I have been nearly 40 years an elder in the Church of Scotland. On October 1<sup>st</sup> 1877 I was unanimously appointed registrar for the parish of Skene by the Parochial Board, and also session clerk and treasurer by the kirk-session. I was also elected by the ratepayers of Skene a member of the first School Board, but was obliged to resign on account of ill health. I have now been registrar and session clerk for nearly twenty years, but on account of ill-health and old age I will be obliged to resign both offices. I have not been able to go to church for several months and cannot expect to be long in this world.

This appeared in the *Aberdeen Journal* in May 1898. By the time he wrote it down in January the previous year William Taylor was mainly confined to bed and he apologised for the scratchy handwriting as he wrote it in bed without

a table. However, clearly his mind and memory were not impaired as he recalled events from his youth. Mr Taylor's brother, Dr Taylor, was minister at Leochel-Cushnie and for some time the librarian at King's College. William was a staunch Conservative and a strong supporter of the controversial minister, William Philip, in the various disputes which divided the parish in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (this is dealt with in detail in my forthcoming book). However, at his funeral service Rev Robert Robertson, Philip's assistant and successor, said that he was widely respected in the parish and that Robertson himself *"had to lament the loss of one who, ever since he had come among them, had been to him as a father, to whose good sense and experience he had been indebted oftener than he could tell."*

William Taylor is buried in Skene Kirkyard along with one son, Thomas McCombie, who died the year after him aged 27, his widow Helen Smith who died in 1905 aged 67, another son James who was a teacher and lecturer at the Church of Scotland Training College in Aberdeen and who died in 1920 aged 46, and a daughter Helen who died in 1935 aged 73.

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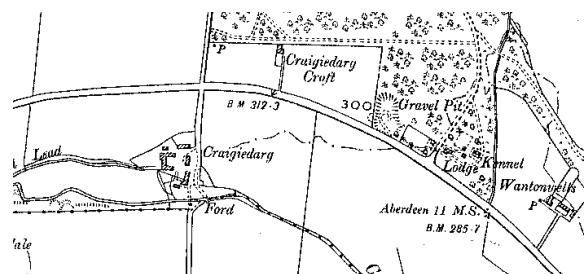
### Some items from the Census

The Censuses in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century are a mine of information for historians and family historians. As well as recording the settled population of the villages and farms they also recorded people who were travelling through the parish. Here are a couple of examples.

At Broomhill, Lyne of Skene, in the 1841 Census John Gordon, a travelling merchant (or pedlar?), was spending the night in the farmer's barn and was recorded by the census enumerator. In the field at Broomhill three drovers were

spending the night and they were also recorded in the Census.

Travelling folk are not new to this area and the 1891 census records a couple of families of travellers in the quarry hole at Red Craig, Craigiedarg. Head of the family was Thomas Townsley, aged 40, a horse dealer / hawker born in England. Along with his wife and children were Esther Townsley aged 79, and his nephew John and his family. Some of the children were born in England, some are given as Aberdeenshire. However the census enumerator comments that he cannot in any way depend on the information given by them.



Craigiedarg in 1900. Presumably the gravel pit shown on the map is the quarry hole where the travellers camped.

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### Wellcroft

Wellcroft, later renamed Wellgrove, belonged to the Abernethy family in the late 19<sup>th</sup>, early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Edith Eliza Abernethy succeeded her father, the redoubtable James Fowler Abernethy, pillar of the community and of the Westhill Congregational Church. Miss Abernethy died in 1990 at the age of 92. Before their time it had been a small stabling inn, there were still chains for horses in the outbuildings in recent times. Before the Abernethys it was kept by an old woman called Jinse. She was said to be very dirty and one day was asked for some of her ale. She couldn't find a strainer so she just took off her mutch cap and used that. The ale was brewed from hops which Mary McMurtrie records as still growing in the garden many years later. The house had an earthen floor when the Abernethys took it over and in clearing

out the earth they found the goat's tether. It had been kept in the house.

Eventually Wellgrove was bought by the builder Stewart Milne. It gave its name to one of the first streets he built in Westhill and is still the location of his company, though in a much larger building.

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### Auchinclech and the Cloch More



The *Cloch More* (big stone) is a huge boulder in the North East corner of the parish. It is situated in a field across the road from Concraig, and a house nearby takes its name from the stone. The Ordnance Survey Name Book of 1864 says that a small hamlet or clachan used to stand near it. Dean of Guild documents from 1788 refer to *Cloch More* as a pendicle ie a separate holding or farm attached to a larger one, and this again suggests that there was a fermtoun there at that time.

The stone may also be the origin of the name Auchinclech (the field of the stone). Some writers suggest that Auchinclech took its name from the stone circle which stood between the farms of Auchinclech and South Auchinclech (the latter formerly called Newton of Auchinclech). Certainly the farm of Auchinclech is nearer to the stone circle. However I still think the *Cloch More* is a more likely source for the name. Auchinclech was the original name of the whole estate, later split into Concraig and Auchinclech. It belonged originally to the Earl Marischal and his son, the Earl of Kintore. At the time of the Poll Tax Book in 1696 there were only three fermtouns on the whole

estate - Auchinclech, Boddomfawld (Boddemford or Bothomfauld), and Brissock with its mill (later called Birsack). If there was indeed a fermtoun or clachan at the *Cloch More* then it may have been this Auchinclech which would certainly have taken its name from the stone. Later, in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the estate split into two estates - Concraig and Auchinclech, and as far as I can see Concraig was a newly created name, I have found no trace of it before the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. So the original fermtoun of Auchinclech could have been sited near the stone.

Strangely the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2nd OS maps show two adjacent stones and this is also confirmed by the RCAHMS when the site was visited by the OS in 1961. Today there is only one stone so it may have been removed since then, presumably by blasting or drilling. If so someone in the area might remember this happening.

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### Come and join Skene Heritage Society

The main objective of the group is to gather together an archive of local history materials for the benefit of local residents. The recording of oral history is an important feature of this, as well as the collecting of photographs, newspaper articles, maps and other archive materials. Scanning facilities are available, to enable us to copy any material for our archive.



Website: [www.skeneheritage.org](http://www.skeneheritage.org)

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