



Skene Heritage Society Newsletter

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John Anderson of Westhill

As many readers will know, John Anderson bought the adjoining estates of Blackhills and Wester Kinmundy in 1859. As detailed in my book on Skene he didn't like the names and took part of each to create the new name of Westhill (sometimes Westhills). He died in August 1879 and his obituary appeared in the *Aberdeen Journal* of 28th August. Anderson came from Strichen where he and his ancestors had been factors on the Strichen Estate for nearly 100 years. Anderson was also agent for the North of Scotland bank at Strichen as well as being factor for several other estates in that north east corner of Aberdeenshire, including Inverallochy and Techmuiry. The Strichen Estate belonged to the Frasers of Lovat, and from 1818-21 Aberdeen City Architect John Smith built Strichen House for Thomas Alexander Fraser, later Lord Lovat. This magnificent mansion is now quite ruinous. Around 1855 the Frasers sold Strichen to George Baird, one of the family who owned the Gartsherrie Iron Works at Coatbridge. At this point John Anderson resigned the factorship and subsequently moved to Westhill.

Anderson seems to have been well liked in Strichen, helping many people in the area, and he continued to be generous towards older residents of the area during the 19 years that he lived at Westhill. He was an MA of Marischal College and a licentiate in the Church of Scotland, though he doesn't seem to have been ordained.

Anderson was married to Jessie Farquhar, a daughter of the Rev. Alexander Farquhar, first minister of Pitsligo. Her sisters stayed with the couple at Strichen, helping him in his benevolent work. They seem to have also moved with the couple to Westhill. His wife's brother was Doctor Thomas Farquhar, then living at 16 Rubislaw Terrace in Aberdeen, who owned the small estate of Auchronie immediately to the north of Westhill. Dr. Farquhar inherited the Westhill estate from Anderson and became known as Dr. Farquhar of Westhill. At the time of John's death his cousin, Aberdeen's most famous and most controversial Lord Provost, Sir Alexander Anderson, was the only member of the family who still owned property in Strichen, his father having been minister there.

John Anderson was buried in Strichen, the local businesses all closing as the funeral procession passed through the town.

JF

Surgeon-Major Dr. Thomas Farquhar of Westhill

Doctor Farquhar had an interesting career. He was educated at Aberdeen Grammar School, and at Aberdeen and Edinburgh universities. He then served in the Honourable East India Company and rose to be a Surgeon-Major. He was present at the battles of Chillianwalla in 1849, and Guzerat or Gujarat the same year. In 1856 he was posted to Agra in the north west of India where he helped during a cholera outbreak. During the Indian Rebellion (or Mutiny) of 1857 Farquhar was among the 6000 British troops, civilians and servants blockaded in the fort at Agra. Sir John Lawrence, led the British troops who re-took Delhi during the Rebellion and in 1864 Lawrence was made Viceroy of India. He chose Farquhar as his body surgeon, a post Farquhar held until Lawrence's Viceroyalty

ended in 1869. Lawrence was subsequently made 1st Baron Lawrence.

On returning to Aberdeen Doctor Farquhar immersed himself in philanthropic work. In particular he was involved with the Aberdeen Female School of Industry, North Lodge, King Street, a role he took over from his brother, Robert Farquhar Spottiswood, soon after returning from India. Industrial Schools were philanthropic institutions aimed at the very poorest children. As well a basic education they aimed to give them some basic training in areas which might help them get employment when they left – for girls this would be things like cleaning, cooking etc. Children caught stealing or begging could often be “sentenced” to attend one of these schools. As often as not the schools would also have to feed the children. Farquhar personally went round trying to get poor children to attend the school. He raised money to build a drill hall adjacent to the school where he instituted a scheme of free breakfasts on a Sunday for the parents of the children, too poor to go to church. Between one and two hundred breakfasts were given out each week. His obituary tells of how Dr. Farquhar, early on cold Sunday mornings, *“could be seen visiting the lodging houses trying to persuade the poor creatures to come to the meal and service thus prepared for them.”* In this work he was aided by his sister and after both of them died Dr. Farquhar’s wife and daughter continued to help fund the meals. Dr. Farquhar and his wife also took a great interest in the work of the police board and, on account of his property at Auchronie, he was elected as a District Councillor for Kinellar parish on Aberdeenshire County Council. He was also a Justice of the Peace for Aberdeenshire. In the words of his obituary *“Dr. Farquhar was one of those who lived, not for himself, but for others, ever thought of their interests, not his own, and spent his energies and strength for the welfare of all around him. We may well mourn his loss, for we are not likely to soon meet his like again.”*

Dr. Farquhar died in 1891, his sister soon after. According to his obituary *“he lived*

latterly at Westhill, where he was greatly beloved by all the cottagers and tenants around.” However Dr. Farquhar kept on his house at Rubislaw Terrace in Aberdeen and seems to have moved between the two. In the 1881 Census there was just a coachman and cook at Westhill, along with a boarder described as a “colporteur”, probably some kind of book hawker, maybe even someone sent by Dr. Farquhar to distribute bibles to the heathens of Westhill!!.

Farquhar’s sister, Margaret, lived with the doctor and his wife, presumably in Aberdeen and Westhill, and Miss Farquhar is actually listed in the Valuation Roll as the proprietor of Westhill, though it seems certain that he actually owned it. He was succeeded as laird of Westhill and Auchronie by his son Rev. William Muir Farquhar, born in Lahore, India, who went on to become rector of Hanwell in Middlesex. Following his death in 1938 Westhill continued to be owned by his trustees and the Farquhar family until the beginning of the Westhill Garden Suburb in the early 1960s.

JF

William Swan Nicholl



This photograph is from the Hamiltons of Skene House photograph album dated 1886. It shows some of the Hamiltons and their guests, some of them obviously on a shooting expedition. Second from the right, sporting a fine beard, is their head gamekeeper, who also features in photographs of three other

boating/shooting scenes. The gamekeeper is William Swan Nicoll, known locally as "Old Nicoll", who was gamekeeper at the estate for over 50 years.

According to his great, great, grandson, Bill Nicoll, on the 18th November, 1903, Old Nicoll died while clearing rabbits on the estate, his assistant, a Mr. Murray, called over to him when he failed to fire his gun as the rabbits were flushed out. He found Old Nicoll slumped over a fence, both barrels cocked...apparently a heart attack. He was 71.

His obituary indicates that they got a wagon from next door at Castle Fraser to bring him home. His son, William Cables Nicoll was later the head keeper at Castle Fraser. He died in 1952 aged 93 and both of them, along with William senior's wife Betsy Cables, and a young son and grandson, are buried in Skene Kirkyard.

In 1979 Bill Nicoll travelled to Skene while living in the Netherlands and he met a Great Aunt who was still living at the time in the joiner's cottage at Castle Fraser (when turned over to the National Trust for Scotland the stipulation was that the family occupying any cottages could stay until their death, then the building was turned over to the Trust. She was the wife of Alfred (or Albert?) Nicoll, joiner at Castle Fraser. Bill's great grandfather, James 'aka Jimmy the Piper' Nicoll lived in Aberdeen. Bill is not sure if he stayed or emigrated but he does still have his parlor pipes. His son James, Bill's grandfather, emigrated to Boston as a young man in 1907. He was apprenticed as a joiner/carpenter in Aberdeen but ended up as a fireman and drove one of the last horse drawn firewagons in Boston.

The Hamiltons must have held Old Nicoll in great affection because in Bill's words *the photo below formerly hung over the fireplace in the Skene House library alongside similarly framed photos of Brig. General Hamilton and his only son, Captain Hamilton. I had found Skene House and met a Mr. Stewart, who at the time was the keeper at Skene House, primarily to maintain the*

grounds, and the 'new wing' was rented out to servicemen.



He recognized the small version of this photo which I had from my grandfather and informed me that the larger photo was still hung in the estate (the library was totally 'intact' at that time, beautiful leather desk, book shelves with leather bound books, coats of arms in ceiling... it opened to what I imagine was a great room for entertaining. Mr. Stewart kindly brought me into the closed-up estate then and showed me the photo over the fireplace mantel. (I'm told that it was not usual to have photographs of staff in the estate so apparently this indicated the esteem in which he was held by the Hamilton Family). We ascertained also that the photo was taken inside the courtyard at the door to the right which was apparently where game would be weighed, kept etc., by the keeper. There were also markings on the wall that seemed to be the height and weight of the children and perhaps the head and assistant keepers as well. Mr. Stewart put me in touch with Mrs. Farquharson who said to me, "the photo certainly means more to you and your family so tell Mr Stewart to let you have it", which indeed he did. Our family also has a carriage clock which is engraved as an

anniversary gift to my great great grandfather and his wife from the Hamiltons."

Bill Nicholl with his brother and their wives re-visited Skene House in September 2016.

From information supplied by William G. Nicoll, North Conway, New Hampshire, USA

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Broadstraik Inn



The Broadstraik still stands today, this is its immediate predecessor, tenanted in the last 20 or 30 years of the 19th Century by John Watson and then by his widow Lizzie or Eliza Watson, as detailed in my book on Skene. In April 1891 Eliza came close to losing the licence for the inn, something that would have made it very difficult for her to survive as innkeeper. At the half-yearly Aberdeenshire licensing court a petition against the renewal of Eliza's license was presented. The petition apparently contained 129 signatures, on the grounds that 1: it supplied no real want to the community, either on a weekday or on the Sabbath; 2 : because of annoyance caused to locals by the unseemly conduct of outsiders under cover of *bona fide* travellers – the song-singing and ball-playing and generally rude and boisterous behaviour of many of those outsiders being utterly opposed to the peaceful character of such a rural district; 3 : because the conduct of such visitors on cycles was offensive to inhabitants on their way to worship and a bad influence on the rising generation.

Eliza's representative stated that the inn had been built 92 years earlier, at the time that the road had been built (c.1799) and had been licensed as a hotel for all that time. As far as

he was aware there had never been any complaint made to the authorities about the inn and for more than 12 years Mrs Watson had kept one of the cleanest, tidiest places on the whole road. He then gives an interesting description of the Broadstraik at that time – the house contained eight rooms, five of them bedrooms. It had three stables with 13 stalls. It was the first licensed place on the whole Skene road, 7 ½ miles from Aberdeen, with a further 5 miles to the next place, Mrs Leith's at Waterton, Echt (now Dunecht), and six or seven miles to licensed premises to the north or south. He couldn't understand the objections and contended that - there must be a very active body of teetotallers in the district who set themselves up as the community. Last year they had succeeded in getting one licensee struck off and now seemed to be aiming at having no licensed premises at all in the district. Another suggestion he made was that one of the most active men in getting up the petition was a Mr. Gordon who had recently established a small shop selling non-intoxicants and tea and coffee and possibly thought that his business would benefit if the Broadstraik had to close.

Regarding the petition, Eliza's solicitor cast aspersions on the validity of many of the signatories. Of the 129 who signed, he said, 70 were female domestic servants (whose opinions presumably didn't count!), 59 were supposedly boys, the organisers alleged to have targeted them if their fathers refused to sign, and some were said to be forgeries. A counter petition in support of the license was signed by Mr. Philip, Skene minister; Justice of the Peace Mr. Forbes of Auchinclech; Peter Duguid McCombie of Easterskene House; and A. D. Coutts, factor of Skene House.

J. D. Mackie, solicitor for the objectors, dismissed the criticism of the petition. He claimed most of them were heads of families and that three landed proprietors, four ministers and the doctor had signed the petition. Their petition was mainly aimed at Sunday drinking. They were prepared to prove that disturbances and scenes of riot and disorder had taken place near the inn. On some Sundays as many as 12 vehicles had put

up at the stable, as well as a lot of bicycles, some of the bicyclists being under the influence of alcohol. Moreover men with their coats off had been seen putting the stone near the inn! The problem was Sundays when a great number of people came out, put up their horses and stayed all day. These people could not be called *bona fide* travellers, and the residenters objected that Aberdonians or others should come out and annoy them (maybe they were football fans!!).

Constable Birse stated that numbers of machines and vehicles containing young men and women, did drive from Aberdeen on Sundays, and returned in the evening singing songs. He had seen machines unyoked at Broadstraik, but he never witnessed any disturbance nor received any complaint from any of the residenters. His opinion was that the Broadstraik was as well conducted as any place of the kind.

In the end the Court did agree that there were annoyances on Sunday but they didn't want to take away the license from a widow and granted her a six day license. Incidentally the Court proceedings recorded a fair amount of laughter and applause during the proceedings!
JF

Displenish sale at the Straik

Some ten years or more after this Eliza Watson gave up the tenancy of the Broadstraik, she would have been in her early 70s by this time. These country inns were much more than just an inn. The innkeeper usually had some land that he/she farmed; they also provided transport for all kinds of occasions such as weddings. The late Adam Craigmile spoke about how his father as innkeeper of Broadstraik following Mrs Watson even hired out his horses to plough the minister's holding and others who didn't have their own team. He also operated a threshing mill. Eliza Watson, as well as running the inn, also farmed Broadstraik Farm and Wester Earlick farm. She gave up all three premises at Martinmas 1904 (since the sale was on the 15th November this was probably the old style Martinmas – the 11th

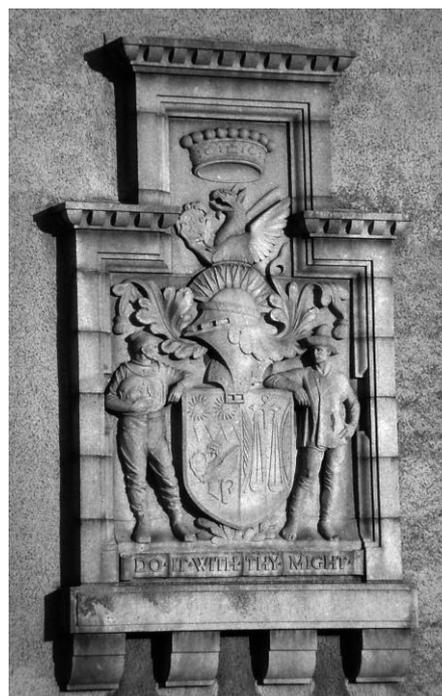
November rather than the 28th November fixed by statute in 1900). The subsequent displenish sale gives an indication of how a rural inn operated. As well as a few cows, calves and horses, and 7 acres of turnips (Swedes and yellow), 12 stacks of oat and barley straw there were the following machines – 1 brake to carry 14 people, almost new; 1 wagonette to carry 8; 1 wagonette with top to carry 6; 1'bus to carry 14; 1 dogcart; 1 spring-cart. The horse bus is a reminder that the Straik was a staging post for stagecoaches and later horse buses, this sale was just at the time when the horse bus was being replaced by a motorised bus (and we have a photograph of this last horse bus), so there might have been some difficulty in selling it given the new fangled form of transport.

The implements for sale included 9 box carts; single and double ploughs; a grubber, a reaper and a turnip harrow; 2 stone rollers, a turnip sower and a hay gatherer; and even a threshing mill which must surely have been rented out to other farmers.

JF

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Opening of Dunecht Hall and Estate Offices



Dunecht village hall and the estate offices for the Dunecht Estate were opened on October 13th, 1928, in front of a crowd of over 350. As was customary at the time several of the great and the good from the surrounding area headed the invited guests and sat on the platform. These included the Bishop of Aberdeen and Orkney; the Hon. Mrs. Erskine; Lady Sempill of Fintray and Craigievar; Col. Sir Arthur Grant and Lady Grant of Monymusk; General and Mrs Hamilton of Skene House; Captain and Mrs Guy Innes of Kirkville House, Skene; Miss Arbuthnott Leslie of Warthill; Mrs A.L.Douglas of Dunecht; and Mr. W. F. Low, Edinburgh. The ceremony was presided over by David Morris, the estate factor, who presented Lady Cowdray with a silver key with which to open the main door of the building. Of course by this time Lord Cowdray was already dead.

The granite for the building all came from the Craigenlow Quarry on the Dunecht Estate, the entrance porch to the hall being laid with fine-axed granite and its walls panelled with Scots fir also from the estate. The buildings were designed by the well known Aberdeen architect, Dr. William Kelly, who carried out a considerable amount of work on the estate during the Cowdray's years. The architectural style was said to be in the local vernacular, modelled on the old estate mansion of Housedale which still stands on the estate.

Of particular note is the panel with Cowdray's coat of arms on the outside wall of the estate offices (as above). This shows a diver and a Mexican peon (labourer), reflecting that much of Cowdray's wealth came from civilian engineering work on docks, harbours and tunnels as well as the Grand Canal in Mexico and the development of that country's oil industry. Above the demi-gryphon is the baron's coronet and at the bottom of the arms is Cowdray's motto "Do it with thy might". This panel was designed by the artist George Kruger Gray, modelled by a Mr. Clemens of London. It was carved in Aberdeen at John Fyfe's granite yard. An earlier version of this panel, in Kemnay granite, had been produced in 1913 by Garden & Co., of the Victoria Granite

Works in Aberdeen, and fixed to the gable of Dunecht House. This version was designed by the sculptor William S. Frith of London, who did a lot of architectural sculpting for Sir Aston Webb, a famous London architect (main façade of Buckingham Palace and the Victoria & Albert museum for example) who also did a lot of work for Cowdray at Dunecht including additions and alterations to Dunecht House. Much of this work was also done by Garden & Co.

John McLaren's book "Sixty years in an Aberdeen granite yard" contains a photograph which it says is James Philip, perhaps the greatest granite carver, carving the 1928 Cowdray arms. However the photograph comes from Aberdeen Art Gallery and their records give Thomas Pirie as the man in the photograph, Pirie being a local Dunecht man who did a considerable amount of the work on the stone work on the estate

JF

Sharing Memories

Send all contributions to:

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