

Report on interviews with Mrs J Brown, Wellridge, Newton Terrace,
Blairgowrie during November 1990

Mrs Brown was born at the "Invercauld Arms and Spittal Hotel" in 1917. As Janie Grant, she was the youngest daughter of Alex Grant and Kate Dewar Menzies Grant, who owned the Spittal Hotel, Glenshee from 1912 to 1946, when Alex Grant died. The hotel remained in the family until 1952. Later in the same year it was destroyed by fire. Subsequently, the present Spittal Hotel was constructed on the same site.

1st interview: transcribed from notes.

My father bought the hotel in 1912. Before this he had been the head porter in the Station Hotel in Perth. There were about sixteen letting bedrooms, accommodating up to thirty guests. The family lived in the attic rooms mostly.

Guests would often come for a month or more at a time. Many came from the South and there were many regulars, such as the Scotts from Dundee. The hotel offered free fishing on three lochs and two rivers and shooting over six hundred acres.

There was a public bar with a busy local trade – shepherds, farmers and foresters – as there were many more people in the Glen in these days.

There was no electricity in the hotel until 1952. Heating was by coal and paraffin heaters. The main rooms had paraffin lamps while the bedrooms were lit by candles. Cooking was done on large ranges and a six-burner paraffin stove. My father's sister, Johan Grant, did much of the cooking. The food was good Scottish fare; we had a farm to provide milk, eggs, potatoes, turnips, pork and beef. There was also brown trout, rabbit and game. We also bought in extra eggs which were pickled for the winter.

I would help on the farm. I enjoyed feeding the animals. We had working horses. The thing I didn't like was when my father and mother went to the bulls sales in Perth and I had to feed our bull.

My father would rise himself at 5am to put on the fires although we employed several girls to do the work. They usually came from the North East of Scotland which was where my father was born.

We did all our own laundry in a wash-house with sinks and coal-fired boilers. Ironing was by flat-irons heated on a stove.

The school I first attended was Glenshee School. It was two miles down the Glen from the Hotel.

Usually I walked there and back but in bad weather by father took me in the cart. I took sandwiches for lunch and we were given boiling water to make a drink. My sandwiches were usually meat and there was great competition to exchange with me as the other children would have jam. I was always pleased to have theirs for a change!

By the time I finished in Glenshee there was only one class and most of it was made up of two families –the Grewars and the Manns.

At first I had a very strict old teacher. If you were late in the morning, even if it wasn't your fault, she would make you stand outside for about an hour, however cold it was. The belt was used regularly. Later, my teacher was Mrs Richmond, who married the minister of Cray Church. She was strict too, but not as bad as the other.

I left Glenshee School when I was eleven, to go to Edinburgh to school, returning to the Glen when I was seventeen. Other pupils could stay at Glenshee School until they left at fourteen.

2nd Interview: transcribed from a tape.

I've been thinking about the Braemar Games as they used to be. It was a tremendous day up the Glen. There were literally hundreds of charabancs – not buses, in these days. They were open. We were busy at breakfast time. We got crowds for breakfast from about eight o'clock. Then, at night-time, when we were children, we went up the hill a little bit and sat down. We could see the long line of traffic coming, from the top of the hill, right down. There were many stuck on the hills, making great holdups. Sometimes we got above them, on a bit of high ground, and threw rowan berries into the charabancs! It was after midnight before all the traffic was past.

I can always remember, on one of these Braemar Days, a Police pipe band from Glasgow. They were all tall men, over six feet. Well, we had long corridors with bells, the kind that hang in a row and you ring from all the different rooms. These lads were back and forwards on these bells for about half an hour. They just about drove us mad. It was just devilment. They'd been up playing at Braemar all day and were full of high spirits!

We often saw the Royal Family, when they took the train to Perth and then travelled on to Balmoral by car. The present Queen and her little sister, Princess Margaret, used to stop in the Glen for a picnic. You always knew when a royal car was due. A policeman would appear and stand on the humpbacked bridge. I once had a seat in the royal car! One of the chauffeurs used to come in here – we knew him quite well – and one day he let us sit in the car.

I never went to the games myself, until about four years ago, we were always far too busy.

Have you ever heard of a “rats’ flitting”? My sister Grace’s mother in law, Mrs Ramsay, told me about this. She lived to be an old woman, well over ninety. When she got married, she lived at the Old Spittal. One winter’s night, she thought there were about 50 – 100 rats. They came right through the house, eating everything there was, taking everything with them. She told me about it herself.

Most of the people in the Glen had a barrel of salt herring for the dogs. Some people maybe ate them, but it was mostly for the dogs. You cooked them with potatoes, after steeping them in water for a while to get rid of some of the salt.

About November, we used to get in our supplies for the winter. Flour was bought in by the “boll”, a huge sackful. We also laid in coal – about twenty tons – and paraffin. There was a small shed which was just for paraffin, nothing else; maybe about eighty gallons. So really, we were seldom short of anything. Everyone in the Glen did the same. Not such big amounts, but enough to do them the winter.

We could be snowed-up for days or even weeks. We still had to go to school, though. Father would take us in the cart. We didn’t get off school and we still had to stand outside if we were late. People wouldn’t put up with it nowadays!

There was no skiing in the Glen then. We used to slide down the hills using shovels as sledges!

The schoolrooms were always warm, heated with open coal fires, guarded of course. We said prayers in the morning and then we’d be given our work according to age and ability. I can’t remember the older ones ever helping the younger ones. We used slates to begin with and you had to pay for your books.

In the thirties, a film crew came to make a picture featuring Glenshee. I remember the stars, Jane Welsh and Edward Sinclair, who stayed at the Hotel. It caused a lot of interest, but I never heard of the film “The Bells” ever being released. (NB This film was about an inn where a murder took place – it is considered “a lost film”)

At that time the road to Braemar over the Devil’s Elbow was just a little more than a track, with grass growing in the middle. I sometimes went by bike to Braemar, fifteen miles away.

In the winter, each farmer would keep a section of the road open with a horse-drawn snowplough. In 1947, Mr Frank Balfour of Kindrogan bought an American Army Surplus mechanical snowplough and put it to use in Glenshee and Strathardle. It was a very powerful machine, using a gallon of fuel per mile!

In these days, Glenshee Church had its own minister. There were far more people living in the Parish. It's a lovely little church, beside the hump-backed bridge and it's still in use today. On Hogmanay, the church bell would ring at midnight and we'd visit every house in the area, starting with the minister. When I was in my teens, he was a very fine man, called Mr Thomson.

One of the happiest things I remember about my childhood in Glenshee was the Sunday walk to the "Sweetie Shop". This was four miles down the Glen at Polgorm Cottage, where you could spend your pennies on home made sweets, tablet or lemonade. It was one of the high points in our week.