

Recollections of Donald Cameron, written approximately 1948.

In giving a detailed account of what Blackwater District and, more especially, the Blacklunans area, was like some fifty years ago or more, from what it is like today, I may say it was not so easy, or comfortable, to approach it as it is today. I may mention it is only between sixty or seventy years ago since the Bridge of Drumfork was built. The only way of getting from the main road to the east side of the river was by two fords. The first was down almost at the Easter Bleaton march, served by a road that went down what we term, the White Brig Brae. It went down just where they pen the sheep at the Mount Blair Show. This ford served the Drumfork, Leyhillock and Tradeshall, and the road to Drumfork burial ground.

The second ford was at the Milton Farm. It came so far on the present road, but then struck through Glenkilry Park, where you take the turn to the Bridge, and came up by the front of the Old Mill, and continued its present route to Cray. At the time I mention, you had no less than some twelve or fifteen gates to open and shut before you arrived at Cray. You had at least six or seven before you arrived at the Westerton, and it was a public road, at that. It would scarcely do in these times. We could be quite safe from what are called 'road-ups' now.

Then again, let us look at the inhabitants that were in the district long ago. We need not go far south, but confine ourselves to our own district. I may first mention that the church of Persie was originally up very near to the march of Dalrulzion. The founds, or I may say, the 'leroch', can be seen yet on the south side of the road and, if it had not been for McKenzie Shaw and, I believe, Mr Thorneycroft, it would have been metal road before now. This is perfectly authentic as I have heard the late Charles McKenzie of Borelands state that his father, or grandfather, I don't mind which, used to lead Farquharson of Invercauld's pony when he visited the church there. Of course, Invercauld would be one of the principal visitors as, long ago, that estate stretched far south. Persie, Bridge of Cally and, even Marlee hotels, all used to be termed Invercauld Arms. I may be stretching rather far from what this is for, but I thought it had a certain interest.

However, I shall now come nearer home. I might start at the Blackwater Hall but, to enumerate all the houses that have completely disappeared from there upwards, would fill volumes of a fair-size book. To give you some idea, I may say that where the Blackwater Hall is, there used to be two families – a blacksmith and a meal miller. The blacksmith seemed to be a very prolific chap, as he had no less than thirty of a family. There was also a meal mill on the Corb burn, about a mile above Blackwater. Not much use for these nowadays – changed days indeed.

Let me now hop over to Bleaton. There at the top of the agricultural ground, a small distance from Drumfork march, can be seen, to this day, the lerochs or what once was a weaver's row of about twenty to twenty-five houses, also a small hall where the minister of Alyth had to pit in an appearance and conduct a service once a month. Then, at Drumfork, we had a school, just on the site of the present house. The schoolmaster was a 'Domini' Ferguson, grandfather of the present Simon Ferguson of the Corb and, I think, an uncle of the late Charles McKenzie of Borland.

At the Drumfork school, which my father attended, there would be about an average of one hundred scholars. That was before the days of free education, when every scholar had to be paid for by fee. Also, to provide fire, each scholar had to carry a peat to school. From the amount of scholars, we may surmise the domini would have a certain surplus to himself. That may make you wonder where they all came from. I don't suppose the fees would be very high, as we know that the

domini used to go out after school hours and work conduiting drains, at which I believe he was an adept. There were very few tiles used in those days.

Then we also had the school here, which was the Established church school. I forgot to mention that the Drumfork school was Free Church. Sometimes, the scholars used to clash, but the Free Church, being the larger, they generally had the best of it.

As I have already said, it would take volumes to enumerate the houses in this locality that, within a few years, have been demolished. I might just draw your attention to the amount of 'lerochs' in the district, to say nothing of those that have been carted away. Just take a look round by the top of Dunay, you will see a few there that was once known as Tradeshall. Then, at Drumore, where there is now no trace of what was termed 'The Hill Hows', where the McIntyres were born, latterly the McIntyres of Haugh Mill, Blairgowrie.

Then, as regards storms, the seasons seem to have entirely changed. We never have the snow that visited us about the '80's. It was quite a common occurrence for the roads to be blocked for a matter of six to eight weeks, and sometimes, in Glenshee, for more. The Cairnwell had often to be cut about the first of July to let the Braemar coach start. There was one year, about the '80's, I don't exactly mind the one now, we got a very severe storm from the north east. There was a wreath below Glenkilry Lodge which was about sixteen feet deep. There was a cottage above the church of Cray on the Forter Road that was occupied by one 'Penshy' Brown. He got that name from being an old army pensioner. Well, his cottage was completely snowed over and, as he told it himself, he did not see the light of day for more than a week. He just opened the door and filled his kettle with snow. The first time he knew there was life outside was when a rabbit fell down the 'lum'. It had been running about and, when passing the chimney, it missed its footing and fell down. The remark was passed, 'you would be alright for a change of diet'. 'Oh, no', he said, 'it was only skin and bone, more needing meat than me and, when I give it some tea leaves and meal mixed, it ate them up quite greedily and remained with me until the fresh came'. Of course, that was Penshy's story, believe it if you like. Penshy did not always stick to the truth if there was a good story at stake.

He was something like another old batchelor in Glenshee was termed a 'bit of a wag', and a good tale of his might be mentioned. People in the Glen never travelled far in those days so Old Rob, as his name was, had been missed for a few days and, when he did cast up, he was asked where he had been. 'Oh, I was away for a holiday' 'And where was ye?' 'Oh, I took a dander the length of Land's End'. 'What did you see there, Rob?' 'Nothing much different from what you see here, but there was a big dyke yonder and I thought I would have a keek o'wer, and what did I see, but a great cairn of Auld Moons'. I don't know if he was believed at that time, but it would hardly go down now.

You may think, when we had such storms, about the mail. It was not so long ago we just had a travelling post, who started from the Spittal and walked to the Bridge of Cally one day, and back the next. Peter Reid did that for twenty-one years. After Peter retired, he was followed by two others for a short period. Of course, there were not so many letters in those days, and no parcel post, but when the parcel post started, a new arrangement had to be made. There was started the mail gig from the Spittal, and one from Bridge of Cally. They met and changed over at Blacklunans. That continued for a few years, until the present arrangement came into vogue. You see, everything is more, as it were, up to date now.

In the olden days, when we had such storms and no telephone connections, if any person happened to turn badly, it was some consideration to get a doctor. If the roads happened to be blocked, you just had to set off on foot to Blairgowrie, probably to find on arrival that the doctor and his gig were

away about Dunkeld district but he would be told, and would be as soon as possible. He might find his way in time for the funeral. But the older generation were always armed for that. They always had a private doctor of their own – viz, a good supply of John Barleycorn, which was generally stowed away below the bed or some hidy corner out of temptations way.

We, like many other districts, cannot, as far as I can remember, recall any ghost stories but there is one that is worth relating. It affected an old schoolmaster and it is quite common history now. I may as well mention his name. He was a Mr McGregor of Folda School, and he would not cross the Balloch Road under any circumstances, even although offered an escort. At Cray Manse, where he was often a visitor, he came by Blacklunans and over by Drumore. The origin of the story is this – the Caterins had made a raid on the cattle in the upper part of Glenisla. They were followed and overtaken about Glentilt and a furious battle ensued. The cattle were rescued and, amongst the killed was the chief who, by the way, had very long hair, which they tied to the tail of the Forter bull. When crossing the burn at Alt-Duick, a short distance beyond Cray march, the head of the chief was lost in the burn. If McGregor ever saw the Chief looking for his head, I don't know. At least, he never said but there must have been something.

When speaking of the Caterins, I may mention that the Camba Rhudsa, who was forever a terror of the Caterins, lived a small distance west of the Spittal Church. There were three crofts there before you reached the Shenival, just opposite Dalmunzie House, and the Camba lived in the mid one. They were East, West and Mid Cuthills.

I am getting out of my district but, in passing, I may mention that, when the Spittal Church was built, the larger half of the congregation was beyond it. At the battle of the Cairnwell, there were no less than sixteen widows left in Glenbeg, named McKenzie. The present and only house, above the Spittal, is Rhidorach, and that was once a public house. The rings can be seen in the walls yet where they used to tether their horses.

When speaking of pubs, it may interest some to know that the present Glenkilry (not properly recorded) the 'Cooper' Ferguson, and great grandmother of Mrs Lamond, late of Runavey.

I'm afraid your patience will be exhausted so I will draw up. Only lots more could be told about the old residents were we to go over the ground in detail. We were not just exactly law-abiders - smuggling was carried on pretty extensively in the district, and some had to suffer for it. The marks of some of the old stills may be seen yet.

In conclusion, it might give some idea of the number of inhabitants at one time, when I mention the number of meal mills that were kept going. There was one in Glenbeg, one at Dalmunzie, one at the Spittal – that small bridge beside Dalmunzie Lodge before you cross the big bridge was the lead to it – one at Inveriddrie, one at the Milton, one at Dalrulzion and one at the Corb Burn above Blackhall. Seven in all that I know of, none now.

There were five blacksmiths' shops. Now only one, once a week.

Dan Cameron, 1948.