

Parish of Kirkmichael

(Presbytery of Dunkeld, County of Perth, Synod of Perth and Stirling)

By the Rev. Mr Allan Stewart

Name and Situation

This parish derives its name, like some others in Scotland, from the church having been dedicated to St. Michael. It is bounded by the parishes of Logierait and Mouline on the West; of Braemar and Crathy on the North; of Glenisla and Alyth on the East; and Blairgowrie, Kinloch, Cluny, and Caputh, on the South. It comprehends the greater part of Strathardle, the whole of Glenshee, and a district lying at the lower extremity of that glen, on the West side of the river, called Black-water, which gives name to the country through which it passes. Strathardle is about 10 miles long, and from 1 to 2 miles broad, and includes part of the parishes of Mouline, Kirkmichael, Blairgowrie, Bendochy, and Kinloch. Glenshee is about 7 miles long, and less than a mile broad. At the head of this glen are two smaller ones, narrow, and about 3 miles long. The district bordering on the Black-water, is of a form nearly circular, measuring somewhat more than 2 miles in diameter. Though this parish is pretty extensive, there is no part of it detached. Its figure does not vary much from a parallelogram, being 17 miles long from North to South; and from 6 to 7 miles broad.

Etymologies.—According to tradition, Strathardle was anciently called in Gaelic, *Strath na muice brice*; *the strath of the spotted wild sow*; which name it is said to have retained till the time of the Danish invasions, when, in a battle fought between the Danes and the Caledonians, at the head of the country, a chief, named Ard-fhuil, *high or noble blood*, was killed, whose grave is shown at this day. From him the country got the name of Strath Ard-fhuil, *Strathardle*. In tracing the origin of the name of Glenshee, the following conjecture is offered. It appears to have been the practice among the Druids, to hold assizes in the most convenient part of the country, to decide differences and administer justice. The persons who exercised this office were called *Sith-dhaoine*, or *Sithichean*, *peacemakers*. A round hill, at the head of the glen, called *Sith-dhun*, *the hill of peace*, may have been one of the places for holding these courts of justice; and hence the whole glen may have got its name. Another conjecture is that *Sith-dhun* may have been the place of concluding and ratifying a peace, between two contending tribes or clans.

Hills, Lochs, etc.—A hill at the head of Glenshee, called *Beinn-Ghulbhuinn*, is distinguished by having been the scene of a hunting which proved fatal to Diarmid, one of the Fingalian heroes. Here are shown the den of the wild boar that was hunted, a spring called *Tobar nam Fiann*, *the Fountain of the Fingalians*; a small lake, called *Loch an Tuirc*, *the boar's loch*; also Diarmid's grave, where he was buried by his comrades. The highest hill in the country is *Mount Blair*, which divided this parish from Glenisla. The only lochs of note are *Loch Sheshernich*, and *Loch nan eun*, situated pretty high among the hills. These abound in excellent trout. There are one or two medicinal springs, which are believed to be of an antiscorbutic quality.

Climate, Soil, Crop.—The country being more elevated than Athole, on the one hand, and Marr on the other, and being in general open and unsheltered, the climate is colder

than in either of these districts, and more exposed to the severity of a cold or stormy season. During nine months of the year, frosts are frequent, and sometimes fatal to the fruits of the earth. In 1791 and 1792, the crops suffered extremely from severe frosts, in the beginning of Autumn. The air, however, is pure and favourable to health and longevity. It is not uncommon to see men pursuing their ordinary occupations at 80 or 90 years of age. Within these few years, a woman died in the parish upwards of 100 years old. Chronical distempers are rare. The small pox has been often fatal. Inoculation, though not unknown, is far from being generally practised.

The soil on the banks of the Ardle, is thin and dry, having a sandy bottom, and yields in general light crops. In the higher grounds, it is wet and spongy, unfriendly to vegetation, except in dry, warm seasons, when it yields a pretty good crop. The same description applies to the soil of Glenshee, and of the Black-water district.

The produce of the ground is seldom sufficient to supply the inhabitants. The culture of potatoes is of the greatest utility, as it is commonly the most productive crop. The kinds of grain generally sown are Cheshire bear, the common white oats, and a kind called Barley oats. Flax, and pease, also, are grown, but in no great quantities, as the soil or climate is unfavourable to them. Field turnips have been lately introduced, and answer well, of which the tenants appear to be sensible. Some grass feeds have been sown; but as the season for vegetation is short, the farmer can seldom cut down more than one full grown crop of grass. Sheep being allowed to pasture at large in the fields all the time the corns are off the ground, is a circumstance very unfavourable to the culture of sown grass, which has not as yet been remedied. Oats are sown in April; potatoes are planted; lint-feed and bear, with grass-seeds, sown in May; turnips in June. Harvest seldom begins sooner than September. It is commonly the middle or about the end of October, and sometimes the middle of November, before it is all gathered in. The greater part of the parish is better adapted for pasturage than for tillage; and some of the proprietors are accordingly laying several of their farms under sheep.

Population, Rental, etc.—In 1755, the number of souls was rated at 2689. The population of the parish has decreased much within these 20 years, and continuing to decrease, on account of considerable tracts of land being converted into sheep farms, and the inhabitants forced to migrate to other countries. The number of souls in the parish is about 2200. The number of males is to that of females, as 44 is to 50. The average of yearly births for the last 8 years, is 50, and of marriages 15. No register has been kept of the burials. Many who do not reside in the parish, have their burial places within it; and many who do, bury elsewhere. The valued rent of the parish is 4102l. 13s. 4d. Scots. The real rent may amount nearly to 3000l. Sterling. The rent of lands varies according to the quality of the soil and the circumstances of the farm. Lands that have the privilege of a good hill pasture annexed to them, pay from 20 to 45 shillings Sterling of rent *per acre* of arable. Lands that want this privileges if not inclosed, pay from 12 to 16 shillings *per acre*: if inclosed, about 20 shillings.

State of Property.—There are 12 proprietors who do not reside in the parish; 24 smaller proprietors, most of whom reside in it constantly, and farm a part of their own property; and 6 other smaller proprietors, called portioners, from their possessing but small portions of land, which they farm entirely themselves. The number of farmers in the parish is 226. Of these, 19 are heritors. A plough-gate, or, as it is called here, a plough of land, contains only from 7 to 8 acres of arable land, exclusive of hill pasture. There are about 200 of such plough-gates in tillage, and above 40 wholly in pasturage. About a plough-gate of cultivated land there are often two tenants or families, who possess the hill pasture belonging to the farm in common, but have each their respective shares of the arable land, and infield pasture, distinct. The ploughs are generally drawn by four small horses yoked abreast. Where the ground is level and tractable, and the farmer in easy circumstances, the plough is often drawn by three, or sometimes two horses. Many of the tenants subset small

portions of their possessions, such as a garden, or perhaps a small croft to cottagers, or cottars, as they are called. Some of these are handy-craftsmen, who subsist by their trade; others are common labourers; who hire themselves out for day's wages in the country. The number of tradesmen is as follows: 10 square wrights; 4 wheel wrights; 5 smiths; 4 shoemakers; 14 shop-keepers; 14 taylors; 40 weavers, including apprentices. Some of these have other occupations besides their trade.

Wages.—The wages are regulated according to the nature of the work, and the time of the year in which it is performed. A day-labourer, from the beginning of March till harvest, gets 8d. *per* day, besides victuals; a hay or corn cutter 1s.; a taylor 6d.; a lint-dresser 8d.; a wright 1s. Women hired for spinning, get 2d. or 3d., according to their merit. Men servants, engaged for a year, get about 6l.; and women from 2l. 10s. to 3l. Sterling.

Live Stock.—Most of the tenants depend on the sale of cattle, for the payment of their rents. The number of sheep is about 9000. More than a third of these are of the black and white faced kind, somewhat large in the body, and rough in the wool. The rest are of the common Scotch kind, smaller in size than the former, but very hardy. A few of the Cheviot breed have lately been introduced. The black cattle are of the small Highland kind. They feed remarkably well, and when properly fed on grass, they prove excellent beef. Few of them, when fed, exceed in weight 20 stoness of beef. Their number is about 2000. Few horses are kept, except what are barely sufficient for cultivating the ground. They are computed at about 800. There are also some parcels of swine, and a few goats.

Fairs.—There are three annual fairs held within the parish; one at Kirkmichael, called the Michaelmas market, and two at the Spittal of Glenshee. The former is of long standing. It probably took its rise from the concourse of people who assembled on the day sacred to St. Michael, at a place consecrated to his memory and worship. From coming together, for the purposes of devotion, they learned to continue together, for the sake of transacting secular affairs, till, by degree, this last object became the chief reason, and at length the only reason of their assembling. Michaelmas came to be a term for settling accompts, and other money transactions, over all Scotland. Half a century ago, this fair was one of the principal cattle markets in the kingdom, and continued three or four days, or rather a week together. Of late years, it has been much less crowded. There is a weekly market held at Kirkmichael on Fridays, whither the people of the neighbourhood repair, to sell what yarn they may have spun during the week, and to buy their weekly supplies of tobacco, snuff, lamp oil, and other groceries. Shoemakers from Athole, dispose of a great many shoes also, at this market. It has been remarked, and perhaps with too much reason, that this market gives encouragement to idleness, and imprudent, not to say immoral indulgences, by furnishing a pretence for frequent visits to the village. Appointments for paying trifling debts, are commonly made at this market. The creditor and the debtor meet. They adjourn to the public house. After each has drunk his pot, the debtor finds he is not able to pay his debt. He craves a week's delay. The creditor easily agrees to so short a term. The appointment is renewed, and the same scene repeated, perhaps many times, before the debt is paid. Thus both *time* and *money* are needlessly spent, and a habit of idleness and of tipping contracted.

Fuel, etc.—The fuel generally used is peat and turf. Lime stone is plenty, and used for manure in different parts of the parish; but less than would otherwise be the case, from the expence of procuring peat to burn it. No marle has been found, except lately in one place. It is reserved by the proprietor for his own use. There are 7 licenced retailers of spirituous liquors. No licenced distillers.

Roads.—The military road from Coupar-Angus to Fort George, passes along the Black Water and through Glenshee. It is kept in repair chiefly by the statute labours of

the country. A country road along the course of the Ardle is kept in pretty good repair, in the same manner.

Ecclesiastical State, Poor, etc.—The Church was built in 1792. It is finished in a respectable style, and sufficiently large and commodious for the district of the country in which it stands. It cost about 370*l.* Sterling, exclusive of carriage, of lime, timber, etc. In Glenshee is a chapel, where divine service is performed by the minister of the parish, once in four or five weeks. The glebe consists of four acres of arable land, of indifferent soil, and a steep bank for pasture. The stipend is 1000 merks Scots, or 55*l.* 11*s.* 1½*d.* Sterling. James Farquharson of Invercauld, Esq., is patron. The funds for supporting the poor, consist of a capital of 170*l.* Sterling, under the management of the kirk-session, the weekly collections made at church and occasional fines. The annual amount of the contributions is at an average 12*l.* Sterling. The number of poor who receive regular supplies from the funds, is 14. It is to be regretted that the funds are too small to supply the necessities of the poor, without allowing such as are able to go about to beg. Such as confine themselves within the bounds of the parish receive occasional supplies from the funds.

Schools.—In the parochial school are taught English, Latin, writing, and arithmetic. The schoolmaster's salary is 200 merks Scots. There is one charity school in Glenshee, endowed with a yearly salary by the Society in Scotland for promoting Christian Knowledge. A particular times of the year, especially in winter, some persons voluntarily assume the office of schoolmasters in the remoter parts of the parish, and teach reading of English and writing.

Language.—The prevailing language in the parish is the Gaelic. A dialect of the ancient Scotch, also, is understood and currently spoken, These two, by a barbarous intermixture, mutually corrupt each other. All the names of places are Gaelic.

Aniquities and Curiosities.—In the middle of a pretty extensive and elevated heathy moor, stands a large heap of stones, or cairn, 90 yards in circumference, and about 25 feet in height. The stones of which it is composed are of various sizes, but none of them, as far as they are visible, large; and appear to have been thrown together without order. They are in a good measure covered with moss, and in some parts overgrown with weeds. This circumstance argues the great antiquity of the cairn; for the circumjacent ground being covered with heath, and of a firm mould, a long time must have elapsed, before so much earth or dust could have been collected by the wind, and lodged among the stones, as to form soil for the nourishment of plants. Round this cairn are scattered, at different distances, a great number of smaller cairns. They are generally found in groups of eight or ten together. They are all covered more or less with moss or heath. About a furlong to the westward of the great cairn are the vestiges, quite distinct, of two concentric circular fences of stone, the outer circle being about 50 feet, and the inner 32 feet in diameter. There are also the vestiges of six, perhaps more, single circular inclosures of stone, from 32 to 36 feet in diameter, lying at different distances in the neighbourhood of the cairn. Two parallel stone fences extend from the east side of the cairn, nearly in a straight line, to the southward, upwards of 100 yards. These fences are bounded at both extremities by small cairns, and seem to form an avenue or approach to the great cairn of 32 feet in breadth. There can be little doubt that all these are reliques of Druidism; that the great cairn is one of those at which they celebrated their solemn festivals in the beginning of summer and the beginning of winter, when they offered sacrifices, administered justice, etc., and that the circles and lesser cairns, must have been the scenes of some other religious rites, of which the memory and knowledge are now lost. Similar cairns are to be seen in the neighbouring parishes, and in different parts of the Highlands; but this parish has to boast of a more uncommon and remarkable monument of Druidical superstition.

About a mile N.E. from the above-mentioned great cairn, on a flat-topped eminence, surrounded at some distance with rocky hills of considerable height, and steep ascent, stands one of those rocking stones which the Druids are said to have employed as a kind of ordeal for detecting guilt in doubtful cases. This stone is placed on the plain surface of a rock level with the ground. Its shape is quadrangular approaching to the figure of a rhombus, of which the greater diagonal is 7 feet, and the lesser 5 feet. Its mean thickness is about $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet. Its solid contents will therefore be about 51,075 cubical feet. As it is of very hard and solid whinstone, its weight, reckoning the cubical foot at 8 stones 3 pounds, may be reckoned to be 418 stone 5 pounds or within 30 pounds of 3 tons. It touches the rock on which it rests only in one line, which is in the same place with the lesser diagonal, and its lower surface is convex toward the extremities of the greater diagonal. By pressing down either of the extreme corners, and withdrawing the pressure, alternately, a rocking motion is produced, which may be increased so much that the distance between their lowest depression and highest elevation is a full foot. When the pressure is wholly withdrawn, the stone will continue to rock, till it has made 26 or more vibrations from one side to the other, before it settles in its natural horizontal position. Both the lower side of the stone, and the surface of the rock on which it rests, appear to be worn and roughened by mutual friction. There is every reason to suppose, from the form and relative situation of the surrounding grounds, that this stone must have been placed in its present position by the labour of men. It will hardly be thought, therefore, an extravagant degree of credulity, to refer its origin to the same period with those other tribunals of a familiar construction, mentioned by writers who have treated of the customs of the ancient Celts. This opinion is however the more confirmed, from finding, in the neighbourhood of this stone, a considerable number of other Druidical relics. On the north side of the stone, at the distance of 60 yards, on a small eminence, are two concentric circles, similar to that already described, and a single circle adjoining to them on the east side. Beyond this, at 37 yards distance, on another small eminence, is another pair of concentric circles, with a single one adjoining to them on the east side. Beyond these, at 45 yards distance, is a third pair of concentric circles, with their adjacent circle on the east side. Farther on to the north east, at a distance of 90 yards, is a single circle, and beside it on the west side, two rectangular enclosures of 37 feet by 12; also a cairn 23 or 24 yards in circumference, and about 12 feet high in the centre. Several small cairns are scattered in the neighbourhood: 120 yards west from the rocking stone is a pair of concentric circles, with a small single circle beside them of 7 feet in diameter. All the pairs of concentric circles are of the same dimensions, the inner one being about 32 feet, and the outer one about 45 or 46 feet in diameter; and all of them have a breach or door-way four or five feet wide on the south side. The single circles are, in general, from 32 to 36 feet in diameter, and have no breach. The vestiges of all those structures are perfectly distinct, and many of the stones still retain the erect posture in which all of them had probably been placed at first. Cairns and circles similar to those described are to be seen in other hills of this parish, particularly between Strathardle and Glenderby. The elevated situation and cold exposure in which these ruins ly, have preserved them from being ever disturbed by the plough, which has effaced, and probably destroyed ruins of the same kind in other places. There are likewise several tall erect stones, called here in Gaelic, *Crom-leaca*, or *Clach-shleuchda*, *stones of worship*. Some of these are 5 and some 6 feet above the ground, and may be sunk a considerable way under the surface, from their remaining so long in the same position; for a superstitious regard is paid them by the people, none venturing to remove them, though some of them are situated in the middle of cornfields.

Manners and Customs.—The people are humane and hospitable to strangers, of a spirit somewhat independent, but averse from a military life. The greatest fault in their general character is, that they are too much disposed to litigation, for which they are noted by

their neighbours. Three sheriff-officers, and a constable, residing within the parish, find abundance of employment. They are rather inclined also to be jealous of each other, and seem at times more anxious to repel encroachments, than to improve their own possessions. The younger part of the people are showy in their dress, but frugal in their diet. Shooting matches, and rural balls, are frequent at the holy season. Football is a common amusement with the school boys, who also preserve the custom of cock-fighting on Shrove Tuesday. All the people are of the established religion, except one or two families of papists of Glenshee.

Disadvantages.—The parish is divided from all the neighbouring districts by hills, most of them several miles broad. It is separated from the market towns, and from the Stormonth, (whence it is supplied with meal and corn and other necessary articles) by a hill, though not high, of a very steep ascent on both sides. This proves a great bar in the way of carriage. The intercourse of the people with each other, is in some measure difficult and dangerous; as over the rapid river which runs through Strathardle, there is no proper bridge from one end of it to the other. There was formerly a bridge of three arches at the village of Kirkmichael; but two of the arches fell about 40 years ago, and have never since been re-built; and the only substitute for these arches is long planks laid across the river, supported by the remaining pillars of the old bridge.

A kind of bar, called a keith, laid across the river at Blairgowrie, by those who are concerned in the salmon fishery there, effectually prevents the salmon from coming up the rivers of Ardle and Shee. This is a grievance which the people think themselves justly entitled to complain of.

The tenants in different parts of the parish still perform some services to their landlords, such as a day's work in hay time and harvest, or at fuel.

Few of the tenants enjoy leases of their farms. Holding their small possessions by a short and uncertain tenure, they are kept continually in a state of abject dependance on their landlords. It must be manifest to every observer, that the situation in which the peasantry are thus retained, has a strong tendency to repress the exertions of industry; to extinguish the ardour of patriotism, that attachment to his native soil, which glows spontaneously with such warmth in the breast of a Highlander; to quench the spirit of freedom and independence and

“Freeze the genial current of the soul.”

Is it that the landlords are apprehensive of deriving no benefit to themselves from granting leases; or of their tenants not having money or skill, or industry, for making improvements? Or, is it, that the tenants are unwilling to bind themselves for a number of years, to modes of cultivation, with which they are little acquainted? Or is it, that men, on whom wealth and power have conferred one kind of superiority, find, in the exercise of that superiority, and in receiving that servile dependence of their inferiors, a gratification which they cannot be persuaded to relinquish?