

DIRNANEAN.

I am a fourth generation South African, now living in the United States. I am 77 years old.

My Mother was a great niece of Catherine Balfour through her mother, Dorothy Chubb

In 1963 I was doing my retail training at Bentalls Ltd, Kingston-on-Thames, when I received an invitation from Francis and Catherine Balfour to spend Hogmanay with them. They had been to visit us in Cape Town a few years earlier.

I eagerly accepted.

I caught the overnight Inverness train from London and at about 4am in the morning got off at Pitlochry. My instructions were to report to the Station Master who handed me the keys to a Land Rover and pointed me in the direction of Blairgowrie.

I set off in deep snow (never having done so before) and navigated between the sticks on the side of the road.

On arrival at Dirnanean I was met by Francis's butler Rho, who unpacked my suitcase and suggested I get an hour sleep before breakfast. I had never experienced a personal butler before, who laid out my clothing for the day and told me all the customs of the house.

Afternoon tea was served at 4pm with scones, clotted cream and strawberry jam !! Dinner was at 7pm sharp. Dress was suits (Francis was in his highland kilt etc).

I became friends with the gamekeeper, Steedman, who wore a poacher's jacket with deep pockets on each side. In these pockets he had a ferret in each. He explained to me "You put the ferret down the rabbit hole and "there is one bloody big fight and out comes the rabbit" The rabbit will go in a big circle round the hills before disappearing down the original hole."

Francis' pride and joy was driving his enormous American Army surplus Mack truck, complete with U.S. army cap and cigar. The truck was filled with stone and had a truly gigantic snow plow on the front. My job was to pump a large lever in the cab that raised the plow 3 or 4 inches. Francis enjoyed clearing the snow off the roads around Dirnanean and local resident's cottages so that they could get out.

He also had a low U.S army surplus tracked vehicle which belched black smoke and this he used in order to get up on the hills behind the house where the stalkers located the stag. These were then hung in one of the buildings behind the house and were collected by giant trucks that came from Germany to buy the venison.

Francis built a long art gallery which was attached to the house. He had a unique collection of about 15 African wild life paintings by David Shephard. These were all of a large size. One in particular I recall was of an elephant bursting through the thorn bushes with a stormy African sky behind. Francis would loan these paintings to charities to copy for Christmas cards. A few years later I learnt that due to an electrical fault the gallery burned down and all the paintings were sadly lost.

Hogmanay was a new experience for me. Francis insisted I accompany him as he went "First Footing" all his tenants and estate employees. We would go into someone's house where there was a rip roaring party on the go. Francis had to first foot everyone and this had to be reciprocated. He also included anyone he met walking on the side of the road. By 11pm I had had so much neat whiskey that I had to decline any further first footing.

Another experience was the Perth Ball.

There were a large number of Scots, all in their regalia – and me in a London suit ! The young generation had a separate ball room.

As I had participated regularly in Highland dancing in Cape Town, I knew most of the reels. Thus I was amazed that the young Scots didn't know their own dances and I was asked to walk them through.

Afterwards the Balfours put me on the train in Perth to return to London following a memorable stay at Dirnanean.