



A
Celebration
of
North-East
Characters

Contents

1	BATTLE OF ARDENDRAUGHT - MALCOM II VS PRINCE CANUTE OF THE DANES	Page 1
2	BLIN' MAY'S GRAVE - CAIRNBULG HARBOUR	Page 3
3	CLIFTON HOUSE - THE CASE OF THE EDINBURGH DOCTOR	Page 5
4	EENOO THE INUIT'S VISIT TO ABERDEEN	Page 7
5	FRANCIS HAY - EARL OF ERROLL AND THE SPANISH BLANKS CONSPIRACY	Page 9
6	JAMES MCBEY - THE FARMER'S SON FROM NEWBURGH	Page 11
7	JAMIE FLEEMAN - THE LAIRD OF UDNYS FEEL	Page 12
8	JOCK YOUNG'S LOUP - POTARCH, DEESIDE	Page 14
9	PERCY FORBES-LEITH OF FYVIE CASTLE AND THE TIFFANY WINDOW MEMORIAL	Page 16
10	PATRICK BYRES OF TONLEY, JACOBITE REBEL AND ACCESSORY TO MURDER	Page 18
11	PHILIP KENNEDY - SMUGGLER AND FOLK HERO	Page 20
12	REV JOHN SKINNER - AUTHOR OF TULLOCHGORUM	Page 22
13	SCOTT SKINNER AND THE REAL LIFE LASS O' BON ACCORD	Page 24
14	THE REAL MACBETH AND HIS TRAGIC END AT LUMPHANAN	Page 26
15	THE BATTLE OF HARLAW - HIGHLAND VS LOWLAND OR A PRIVATE WAR?	Page 28
16	A BATTLE TO THE DEATH - THOMAS GORDON VS THE ABBOT OF GRANGE	Page 30
17	DONALD DINNIE - FAMOUS STRONG MAN	Page 32
18	FISHER SUPERSTITIONS OF ABERDEENSHIRE	Page 34
19	WILLIAM MCCOMBIE - CATTLE BREEDER, ABERDEEN ANGUS	Page 37
20	GEORGE BEATTIE POET - TRAGIC SUICIDE OR MURDER VICTIM?	Page 39
21	JOHN DUNCAN - BOTANIST AKA JOHNNY MEEN	Page 41

BATTLE OF ARDENDRAUGHT

MALCOLM II vs PRINCE CANUTE OF THE DANES

‘Cuir críoch na Dane!’ screamed Malcolm II’s warriors as they prepared to attack the Scandinavian forces of Sweyn, King of Denmark in 1012AD. Many scholars have argued that ‘Croij Dane!’ a phonetic rendering of the Scots Gaelic, which literally translates as ‘Die Dane!’ is the origin of the name Cruden Bay. The Bay of Ardendraught, the reputed site of this conflict already had a Norse name, meaning Old Dane’s Road. Malcolm II, King of Alba, son of Kenneth II (the same assassinated by Lady Finella), ruled a much smaller Scotland than we know today, stretching only as far as Moray in the north and Midlothian in the south. He had already attempted to secure control over the Western and Northern Isles by marrying his youngest daughter to Sigurd, Earl of Orkney. Her sisters were married to the Abbot of Dunkeld and Mormaer of Moray, which further increased the king’s influence. But the Danes were a nuisance, and Malcolm’s men were spoiling for a fight. Sweyn sent his second son, Canute, later the famed King of England, with an army, intent on Scottish invasion.



Site of the Battle of Ardendraught

Malcolm wisely engaged in guerrilla tactics, harassing the Danish army, much to his men’s annoyance. Eventually these angry Celts bore down their leader’s resistance and had a decisive showdown with the seventeen-year-old Dane and his forces. According to Smith’s A New History of Aberdeenshire, the “hottest part of the conflict is supposed to have been on the plain skirting the bay and along the valley, about half a mile in breadth”, where stands the golf course laid out by Great North of Scotland Railway five years before the great railway hotel was built in 1899.

BATTLE OF ARDENDRAUGHT
MALCOLM II vs PRINCE CANUTE OF THE DANES

The battle was a bloody one; the Scots were the victors, but their dead almost equalled those of the Danes. Malcolm and Canute agreed a truce, the terms of which included the total withdrawal of Danish forces from Scotland, and the founding of a chapel near the battlefield to commemorate the dead of both sides. Thus St. Olaf's Chapel came into being. Historians argue that as the patron saint of Norway was not even canonised until 1164, the dedication must have come much later. A granite font was installed in the chapel, and it is this relic which would prove the last link to the ancient battle.

Malcolm II likely agreed to the chapel as a form of atonement for the death of so many. Devout Catholic he might have been, but that did not stop him having his nephew assassinated to ensure the succession of his grandson, Duncan, setting up later conflict with younger grandson, Macbeth.

The font, restored by local priests, James Pratt and Stewart Forbes, now stands in the sanctuary of St James the Lesser, Cruden Bay's Episcopal Church. It is a huge hollowed-out stone, clearly the work of more primitive masonry, but is still used in baptismal services, a symbol of cleansing, as the prayers of the early priests would have been for Cruden's Dark Age battlefield.

BLIN' MAY'S GRAVE CAIRNBULG HARBOUR

Near the 'Monkey Pole' (formerly part of the rocket apparatus for the coastguard) there is a 'muckle stane' which my mother remembers as a child being warned by her cousin not to jump on because it was 'some wifie's grave'. Indeed, at one time, according to Johnny May of Inverallochy, the stone bore the name 'May', but due to the kindness of two women in Cairnbulg, there is now a cast-iron marker which tells May's story.

Her name was Marjory Mowat, but was known as 'Blin' Mah'ee', or Blind May. Her death during the cholera epidemic which struck the village in 1849 is tragic enough, but the fact her remains lie under the grassy dunes not far from the harbour, tells us something about the awful nature of the disease. Johnny again takes up the story, 'before Belger had a cemetery folk were buried at St Combs kirkyard. The toon folk wouldn't let her be carried through the villages with the fear of... getting unwell, so she was buried here.' According to her simple memorial, Blin' May was between 86 and 89 years old when she died.

Characterised by sickness, diarrhoea and profuse sweating, cholera first appeared in Britain in 1831; careless officials in Sunderland allowed a Baltic ship to dock and the epidemic resulted in 52,000 deaths across the country. This particular outbreak began in 1848. Information from the minutes of Fraserburgh's Police Commission reveals that in October 1849, 'householders be warned under the pains of the law, not to receive into their houses individuals from the infected district.' Cairnbulg fishermen returning from Montrose were the carriers. They arrived on 30th September with the body of their crewmate who had already succumbed. The father of another crew member was infected as he helped them unload. His family died within days. A report by health inspectors observed that the next victim had attended one of their funerals.



Blin' May's Gravestone, Cairnbulg

BLIN' MAY'S GRAVE
CAIRNBULG HARBOUR

The cholera swept like wildfire through both Inverallochy and Cairnbulg, taking fifty lives. Inspector Grieve attributed the rapid progress to primitive sanitary conditions: 'Water in stagnant pools. Dunghills near doors, consisting of fish refuse with seaweed and dirty water from the houses.' Grieve noted too that the disease had passed between the villages via the Stripey, the stream which flowed down a shallow gully dividing the main street. The water had been infected by contaminated clothes being washed therein.

So why was May Mowat treated thus? The real issue was the fact that St Combs kirkyard was in the neighbouring parish of Lonmay; the residents managed to persuade Peterhead's Sheriff Substitute to issue an interdict banning any burials there unless carried out by the parish gravedigger, precluding any of May's relatives from doing so. Rather than risk infection by waiting, the Belger emergency committee decided to inter the body in that lonely spot near the harbour, likely causing unspeakable grief to her surviving daughters. Blin' May's grave thus represents an act of fearful haste at a time of crisis, yet it ensured she would never be forgotten by succeeding generations.

CLIFTON HOUSE

THE CASE OF THE EDINBURGH DOCTOR

A young Edinburgh medical student with an alcoholic father from a poor Scots-Irish family is given the chance of a lifetime when a fellow medic poses the question "Would you care to start next week for a whaling cruise? You'll be surgeon, two pound ten a month and three shillings a ton oil money." After being assured that his friend was offering him a job he could not take up himself, and would happily loan him his Arctic kit, Arthur Conan Doyle found his life "deflected into a new channel".



Clifton House, Peterhead

Indeed, it was the man who would become world-famous as the creator of Sherlock Holmes and an adherent of Spiritualism, who turned up in Peterhead to seek out Captain John Gray of the town's famous whaling family to be ship's surgeon on *The Hope* in 1880. John Gray lived at Clifton House in Queen Street; he had amassed a fortune with his three whalers, *Hope*, *Queen* and *Mazinthien*, and was equally successful when he and brother David invested in the *Eclipse II* which took a staggering haul of 15 whales and 13,000 seals in 1871.

Conan Doyle met Gray at the end of his whaling career, but the 50-year-old Blue Tooner was more than an intellectual match for the youngster. The pair would discuss literature and even resort to parodying contemporary poetry. The rest of the crew adopted him happily, especially after being challenged by steward, Jack Lamb to a boxing bout. Conan Doyle punched him deftly and Lamb was impressed, declaring "He's the best surgeon we've had! He's blackened my e'e." The medic was adept at hunting, but not so steady on the Arctic ice. The whalers nicknamed him 'The Great Northern Diver' after he twice fell into the freezing water but survived.

It was not all fun on the voyage, as Conan Doyle discovered, holding the body of whaler Andrew Milne as he died of an infected intestine. The wild, beautiful landscapes punctuated with the bloody work of slaughter inspired the fledgling writer in many of his future stories, such as *The Captain of the Pole Star* and the Holmes' tale *The Adventure of Black Peter*. His newly found skills as a whale and seal hunter impressed John Gray who offered him a berth on his next trip as harpooner. Conan Doyle declined. The latter returned to Edinburgh and completed his studies.

The Gray family knew that whaling's heydays were long gone. Youngest brother, Alexander shipped out to Canada to join the Hudson Bay Company and elder sibling, David took his ship *Windward*, Peterhead's last whaler, out on a final trip in 1893 before retiring to his house on the Links, now part of the Cottage Hospital. John Gray never saw that final voyage, having died the previous year. Forty winters at sea dealing with the Arctic climate had taken their toll. Captain Gray 'crossed the bar' in the same year as the first volume of Sherlock Holmes stories was published in London.

EENOO THE INUIT'S VISIT TO ABERDEEN 1839

The visit of Inuit guide, Eenooloopik to Aberdeen in 1839 was something of a cause célèbre in the Granite City. His experiences were recorded by Laurencekirk medical doctor, Alexander MacDonald, who would later die as a member of Sir John Franklin's ill-fated expedition to find the Northwest Passage.

Eenoo, or "Bobbie" was a guest of Peterhead whaler, Captain William Penny, who had been in Baffin Island, Eenoo's home. Though ten years Penny's junior, Eenoo made an excellent guide for the Scots whaler, having an intimate knowledge of the area from his youth. Eenoo jumped at the opportunity to visit Scotland and accompanied Penny on the Neptune.

The Neptune first dropped anchor in Scotland at Thurso, Caithness. Eenoo was disappointed to be prevented from seeing inside the Castle of Mey which had greatly intrigued him. Dr MacDonald records the Inuit's puzzlement at seeing local sheep and ponies, imagining they were wild and able to be hunted. MacDonald and Penny did their utmost to ensure Eenoo was versed in the niceties of Georgian society, teaching him to read and write, and of course, gain more English vocabulary.

On arrival in Aberdeen some days later, Eenoo was overwhelmed by visitors wanting to see this curiosity. As a result, he was stricken with a severe chest infection, and moved to lodgings in the city. It would appear that the Scottish climate did not agree with the young man, as every time he tried to get up, his health would fail again.

After about three weeks, Eenoo was finally able to leave his sickbed and promptly gave an exhibition of his kayaking skills on the Dee. He wore his native furs, but by this time had become so enamoured of western clothing, that he did not want to be seen in his rustic garb. By this time, Eenoo could write his own language, and had some grasp of English. MacDonald described him as having had a 'revolution' in his habits, being fastidious to a fault in his dress, eating and cleanliness. Eenoo had a great facility for mimicry, allowing him to fit in easily with British society.



Eenooloopik the Inuit

Eenoo continued to be plagued by chest complaints and Penny realised that the visit would have to be curtailed as Eenoo's continued presence in Aberdeen was proving a danger to his health. Penny also remembered the piteous wails of the Inuit's mother as he had left Baffin Island, thus by the Spring of 1840, Eenoo was heading home on Penny's other ship, the Bon Accord.

Eenoo continued to help the whalers find suitable fishing grounds and berths, but never again did he leave his native land. He married a fellow Inuit, Coonook, whose father was so impressed by Eenoo's knowledge gained from his visit to Scotland, that he was quite willing to break her betrothal to another.

Eenoo's story so inspired Deeside gin-distiller, Lost Loch Spirits, that they named their first product after him. Thus, one young man's story was bound up with some of the North-East's most fascinating characters.

FRANCIS HAY

EARL OF ERROLL AND THE SPANISH BLANKS CONSPIRACY

Slains Castle, a spectacular ruin perched on a jagged coastline, is locally associated with Bram Stoker's horror tale *Dracula*. But there was another Slains, of which only crumbling fragments remain in a remote hamlet to the south of Cruden Bay.



The Ruins at Oldcastle

Oldcastle, now a picturesque former fishing village, is dominated by this remnant of the fortress given in 1308 as a gift to Sir Gilbert Hay, Earl of Errol, by Robert the Bruce to recognise the latter's loyalty. Almost three centuries later, Slains would be blasted to smithereens by gunpowder purchased by James VI, as a punishment to the ninth earl, Francis Hay, for a treasonable act. What terrible crime had this nobleman committed to merit such royal vengeance?

Hay, like his friends the Gordons, was a Catholic, and wished to restore their country and monarchy to its former religion. After the execution of Mary, Queen of Scots, all attention was focused on her young son, James Stuart by both Catholic and Protestant factions; but the teenage king who would later be called "the wisest fool in Christendom" demonstrated his political savvy even then.

FRANCIS HAY
EARL OF ERROLL AND THE SPANISH BLANKS CONSPIRACY

Despite trying to remain on good terms with both sides, things became extremely complicated for King James in 1592. George Kerr, a Scots priest, was arrested aboard a ship bound for Spain, having in his possession certain “blanks” signed by three prominent Catholic nobles, including Francis Hay, kindly addressing Philip II, the Spanish monarch. The empty letters were thought to contain messages written in “invisible ink” outlining a plot to invade Britain. Kerr confessed that one letter was from James VI himself, discussing how Spain could help the Scots monarch gain the English throne from Protestant Elizabeth I.

This left James in a quandary. The Church leaders demanded that the named earls be tried in court, and even the English queen’s ambassadors wanted the men imprisoned for treason. So, James demanded that Hay, Gordon and co-conspirator, William Douglas, come before him and explain themselves, which they refused to do and went into hiding. James’ forces, led by the Earl of Argyll, suffered ignominious defeat by the smaller Catholic army at the Battle of Glenlivet in 1594. Hay, fearing the king’s wrath, fled to Europe, but returned in secret in 1597, claiming he had embraced Protestantism, in order to gain a pardon, which was readily given.

The destruction of Old Slains says more about the young king’s shrewd actions than it does about Hay’s loyalty. Was this a demonstration to Elizabeth I of his commitment to a Protestant succession, now she knew the Tudor line was at an end? Or was it to convince the churchmen that James was not involved in a Jesuit plot involving the Pope and Philip of Spain? Whatever the case, Francis Hay built his new home out of sight of the old one.

JAMES MCBEY

THE FARMER'S SON FROM NEWBURGH

The tall, handsome, broad-shouldered farmer's son from Newburgh had come so far from the blacksmith's shop where he was born. Now he stood near one of his own oil paintings displayed in London's Royal Academy, watching a visitor, a small man who looked uncomfortable in a suit, studying it intently.

James McBey, who had been an official artist in the Great War, was now living in a sumptuous house in London once owned by the author, John Gallsworthy. Feeling he recognised the scruffy character before him, he approached the man and to McBey's surprise, it was the very subject of the painting, T.E. Lawrence, the hero of the Egyptian campaigns. Lawrence, who had inspired the Arabs and helped them win back their traditional lands, did not court celebrity, just as McBey hardly spoke of his art. Looking out of place in civilian clothes, Lawrence said sadly 'Yes, Mr McBey, our last meeting was in rather different circumstances.'

James McBey, born out of wedlock to Annie Gillespie and James McBey of Mains of Foveran, had experienced a terribly inhibited childhood. His mother, suffering the onset of blindness, seemed to resent him and did all she could to prevent him making friends. He loved his grandmother, the blacksmith's wife, the first of the family to see his fledging drawings, but Annie hated any show of affection leaving her son constantly disappointed. James' only joy at school had been geography, when he discovered a facility for drawing maps, from which came his ability to sketch landscapes and people. At fourteen he began work in the North of Scotland Bank, a career he did not relish, but living in Aberdeen allowed him access to the Central Library where James devoured every art book he could. He taught himself printmaking and was soon spending all his spare time making etchings. Indeed, his first attempt to be taken seriously by the art world was by sending two works to the Royal Scottish Academy, which accepted for exhibition a print of Old Torry, in 1905. Twelve years later, James McBey would be in the desert with General Allenby and the Egypt Expeditionary Force, recording the struggle against the Turks, Germany's allies in World War I.

McBey's war material was a return to those early days of sketching quickly, creating what later critics would call "a comprehensive and honest record" of the conflict. Prof. Mario Minichiello, former war artist in 21st century Afghanistan, believes the simplicity of the images 'renders the figures the subject of detailed scrutiny, and... I believe gives him his uniqueness as an artist.'

JAMIE FLEEMAN

THE LAIRD OF UDNY'S FEEL

James Fleming, better known as Jamie Fleeman, the 'Laird o' Udney's Feel', could be described as the last professional court jester in Scotland. Born in 1713 near Longside, he is described thus by local historian, James Pratt, 'His countenance, indescribably or even painfully striking, wore that expression which at once betrays the absence of sound judgement. His head large and round — his hair ... rendered by constant exposure to the weather, a dingy fox-colour, and not sleek, but standing on end, as if poor Jamie had been frightened out of his wits — indicated that his foolishness was not assumed but real.' Yet it was Jamie's razor-sharp wit which endeared him to many, including his first employer, Alexander Guthrie of Ludquharn, who gave him a glowing reference when he moved to John, the Laird of Udney's household.

Jamie had many noble friends, including the Countess of Erroll, an avowed Jacobite, who often employed him to carry messages to fellow supporters of the Stuart cause. Yet it was the Udnys to whom he demonstrated greatest loyalty. The Udnys had been in the area since David II granted a charter confirming their lands to ancestor, Ronald of Uldney in the 14th century. John Udney purchased Knockhall Castle from Lord John Sinclair in 1633. Udney Castle, the family seat, was at this time in the possession of William Seaton who had married Lord Udney's daughter and heiress, Helen.



Jamie Fleeman's Memorial, Longside Kirkyard

In 1734, Jamie Fleeman was in his bedroom at Knockhall, practising his chanter when one of the family dogs came in and pulled at his shirt. Being a great lover of canines, he opened the door, presuming it wanted to go outside, but his keen senses smelt smoke, and Jamie quickly discovered the castle to be on fire. He raised the alarm with the laird's gardener, a good friend of his, then dashed to the charter room where the family's important documents were kept in a huge iron chest. The latter, which normally took three men to lift, was hefted up and out of the window by Jamie, thus saving the contents. The laird's 'Feel' raced outside and skipped about, delighted with his achievement. Yet he was also rejoicing for another reason, his old nemesis,

JAMIE FLEEMAN
THE LAIRD OF UDNYS FEEL

the Udnys' housekeeper, was still a-bed and unaware she was in danger of her life. The gardener pleaded with Jamie to rouse her, which he eventually did, declaring to the cantankerous old lady, 'Lucky, lucky, rise or ye'll get het hurdies or lang!' For his pains, Jamie received a life pension of sixpence and a peck of meal per week. The fool was not perhaps as foolish as observers actually believed. Jamie's deathbed plea, 'dinna bury me like a beast' in 1778 was answered by a Christian burial in Longside Kirkyard where his memorial remains today.

JOCK YOUNG'S LOUP

POTARCH, DEESIDE

Rich travellers on Deeside in the later decades of the 17th century often ran the risk of highway robbery. There was no more celebrated a gang than the sons of James 'Caird' Young. The eldest, Peter, built a fearsome reputation as the Houdini of his day, able to escape any prison in the country. His youngest brother, John or Jock Young, although perhaps not as skilled in prison-breaking, certainly shared Peter's bravado. Jock had been imprisoned at Aboyne and was being taken to Aberdeen for trial on a charge of illegal whisky distilling. He broke free of his guards near Potarch and dashed down to the riverbank. Very likely he and his brothers had fished in the Dee for salmon, caring nothing for licences or landowners, thus Jock would have known where the rocks in the river formed a crossing, albeit with a large gap in-between.



Potarch Bridge

In those days the only way for the ordinary public to cross the Dee was by ferry, the Telford-designed bridge not being constructed until 1813. There was a legendary kelpie or water-horse which often terrorised the ferryman and his customers by leaping onto the boat after dark and threatening to drown them all. Jock had no fear of such entities, especially in daylight. He careered down into the shallows, perhaps with his wrists still manacled, and made the jump to the rocks at the far side, leaving his pursuers screaming their threats after him.

Yet was this the same Jock Young, who years later, after his celebrated brother

JOCK YOUNG'S LOUP POTARCH, DEESIDE

had finally been brought to justice and hanged at Aberdeen, quailed before the face of civic executioner, Robbie Welsh? Jock's gang, which included some of his cousins, were hiding out at Chapel of Garioch when a furious row began. Jock stabbed his cousin Hugh Graham several times until he was lying dead at Jock's feet. Horrified at having killed his kinsman, he fled. The murder was reported, and Jock soon arrested, tried and sentenced to death.

He was to be hanged on 11 December 1801 on the gallows in Castlegate, an attempt by his allies to free him having failed. Jock walked onto the scaffold, wrists bound behind him, accompanied by a local priest who had sat up with him the night before the execution. He saw Welsh, grinning like a skull, holding the white shroud to dress him for his death. Whether it was the executioner's malicious smile, or the thought that his body would be sent for dissection afterwards, Jock exclaimed 'I dinna like tae hae that creature Robbie Welsh's hands about me!' The kindly priest intervened and lifted the shroud over Jock's head.

Yet it is for his extraordinary jump at Potarch that he is remembered; the half-submerged line of rocks is still known as 'Jock Young's Loup'.

PERCY FORBES-LEITH OF FYVIE CASTLE & THE TIFFANY WINDOW MEMORIAL



Tiffany Window at Fyvie Parish Church

A bereaved mother watches Irish glassmaker, Frederick Wilson creating a heavenly vision of Archangel Michael at the factory of Louis Comfort Tiffany in New York. She weeps as it reminds her of her soldier son, Percy, who has died of typhoid fever during the Boer conflict in South Africa. She expresses the desire to have Wilson's finished product shipped back to Scotland and installed in the family church at Fyvie. Her friends know how much employment her husband has provided in America through his steelworks, now Illinois Steel Company, thus they buy her the glass out of appreciation.

Alexander Forbes-Leith, Percy's father, a former Navy lieutenant, had acquired Fyvie in 1889 using his industrial fortune. Yet, as the grandson of Sandy Leith-Hay, one-time Lord of Leith Hall, Rhynie, Alexander was buying back a bit of local heritage. He and his American wife, Marie Louise January had three children, yet only their son and elder daughter, Ethel-Louise survived. Percy was his mother's baby, the last of the three, born in 1881, thus it is no surprise that she was devastated when he succumbed to illness.

Whether she drew comfort from the fact that as a 2nd Lieutenant in the 1st Royal Dragoons, 19-year-old Percy had not been killed as a result of enemy action, we cannot tell. What did give Mrs Forbes-Leith cause for concern was the realisation that Fyvie's Parish Church would have to be extended to cater for the beautiful new Tiffany window in Percy's memory. Money, however, was no object, thus in 1902 Alexander Forbes-Leith commissioned a brand-new granite chancel and a family prayer loft for the kirk which itself was under a century old. The site itself, however, had been a place of worship dedicated to St Peter since the late 12th century.

Once finished, the fabulous window was finally revealed to the locals who could not fail to be impressed by the huge winged Archangel in medieval armour, carrying a sword and a lance. Some might have wondered at the St George's flag hanging behind Michael, yet as he was regarded as the patron of knights during the Middle Ages, it must be interpreted as the Crusaders' banner, not the English emblem. Michael stands atop the wheels of Time, representing the victory over Satan and the fallen angels before God created the world. The window is made of prism glass, allowing the colours to subtly change depending on the light behind them. Wilson remained in the US till his death, aiding Louis Tiffany in developing a foundation to support artistic talent, leaving in 1923 to set up his own studio in Los Angeles. The only other Scottish church to have a Tiffany window is St Cuthbert's, Edinburgh, which was installed in 1903, also to commemorate a Boer War soldier.

Visitors to Fyvie should contact the minister or church session clerk to view the window, or attend a Sunday service.

PATRICK BYRES OF TONLEY, JACOBITE REBEL & ACCESSORY TO MURDER

'My father what? Had a duel? He's in his seventies! Silly man!' so might antiquarian, James Byres of Tonley have exclaimed when he was brought word about the unseemly quarrel occasioned by Byres Snr. Patrick Byres was an Irish Jacobite, born in Dublin, 1713. In 1741 he married Janet Moir of Stonewood and became a Burgess of Guild in Aberdeen, yet his political leanings and hot Celtic temper seem to have constantly landed Patrick in trouble.

His first problem was his involvement in the Forty-Five Rebellion, fighting on Bonnie Prince Charlie's side as Major Byres in Stonewood's regiment. Escaping Culloden, Patrick's ally, Gordon of Cluny hid him in his castle until he and his family escaped to France. He managed to hang on to Tonley by the clever suggestion that his English name was Peter, thus he was not Patrick Byres the rebel.



Bridge of Alford

While his youngest sons, William and John developed military careers in the Navy and Royal Engineers respectively and second son, Robert took up merchant interests in Prussia, the eldest, James, became something of a tour guide. He embraced antiquarian studies in Rome and became the go-to ex-pat for visiting Scots gentlefolk on their 'grand tours' of Europe. Meanwhile, his father returned to Tonley, Mrs Byres hoping her husband's adventures were over. But, due to Janet's nephew, James Abernethy of Mayen, Patrick was to be the centre of unwanted attention once more in 1763. A traditional ballad is dedicated to the incident in which John Leith of Leith Hall, Rhynie was murdered by Abernethy after an argument in the New Inn, Aberdeen.

PATRICK BYRES OF TONLEY, JACOBITE REBEL
& ACCESSORY TO MURDER

It was the Martinmass or winter term when debts were settled; according to the ballad 'four and twenty gentlemen sat birling at the wine'. As is often the case 'fan drink's in, wit's oot', and the laird of Mayen cast up an old grudge to John Leith. The latter gave him as good as he got, whereupon Abernethy left. Patrick Byres would later reveal that his nephew had gone to fetch pistols in order to settle the matter with a duel to which Leith had agreed. A few of them had talked long into the night without the weapons leaving the table, yet soon after shots shattered the early morning peace of the Castlegate and Leith's servant found him bleeding to death in the street.

James Abernethy had fled on a horse provided by his uncle, never to return. Many believed Patrick had egged James on, providing both weapon and escape route, but he denied it. The Leiths never forgot. The spat at Bridge of Alford decades later was with Alexander Leith of Glenkindie, over the siting of a new road. Patrick's friends calmed the pensioner down and sent him home to Tonley and likely to a reprimand from his son James.



Tonley - House of Patrick Byres, near Tough, Alford

PHILIP KENNEDY

SMUGGLER AND FOLK HERO - COLLIESTON

'God send us men like Kennedy, who for true manhood bled', runs a line in a poem lamenting the death of Philip Kennedy, farmer and smuggler in the parish of Slains near Collieston.

The whole Aberdeenshire coastline was a magnet for the illicit movement of goods following the Act of Union in 1707 as the duty on intoxicating liquor was hiked up to finance England's debts. It was believed by authorities that 10,000 gallons of spirits were landed illegally every month here. The hamlet of Oldcastle was so notorious a site for burying smuggled goods that once during a dance at a nearby farm, the ground gave way beneath the crowd, casting the unfortunate dancers in amongst hidden barrels of French and Dutch contraband.



Cransdale Head near Collieston

Almost a century later, in Kennedy's day, the situation had not changed. Collieston area abounded in caves, all on the edge of nearby farms, such as Clochtow and East Bridgend, close neighbours of Kennedys at Ward of Slains. On the night in question, 19th December 1798, Philip and his brother John, both strapping lads, waited in the dark at Cransdale Head just outside Collieston. Well-acquainted with the precariousness of their position, the Kennedy brothers carried stout wooden staffs weighted with lead. Twentieth century robbers would carry a smaller version called a 'cosh'; Philip and John were not going to mess about if disturbed.

PHILIP KENNEDY
SMUGGLER AND FOLK HERO - COLLIESTON

The cargo, 16 'ankers' or 160 gallons of Holland gin, was brought ashore by the crew of a Dutch lugger. The brothers and a few of their farm servants would transport the barrels up to the ward and conceal it until their buyer came to call. However, someone in the party had 'shopped' the Kennedys, as a few minutes later they were met by three excisemen, armed with cutlasses. The 'gaugers' as they were known clearly expected the men's arrival. A fight ensued and Philip Kennedy's servants scattered like worried sheep, leaving only him and John who was in danger of being overpowered by one exciseman named Anderson. Philip tripped up the latter's colleagues and held them down with his considerable strength.

Anderson, having already struck John down with his sword, demanded that Philip release his colleagues. Philip refused. Anderson swung the cutlass, bringing the curved blade down on what the poet described as 'the loftiest head... in all broad Buchan's land', leaving a wide-open wound. The official panicked and ran. The bleeding farmer hauled himself to his feet and staggered off to fetch aid for his brother. A mile further on, Philip crashed through the door of Kirkton farmhouse and collapsed on a wooden settle or 'deas'. As his neighbours attempted to bind his head, he gasped with his last breath 'if a' had been as true as I, I'd nae be dying now!'



Phillip Kennedy's Gravestone

REV JOHN SKINNER AUTHOR OF TULLOCHGORUM



Reverend John Skinner's Gravestone, Longside Churchyard

Scots churchmen throughout history seem to have been endowed with great literary ability, and Rev. John Skinner, born in Birse, but better known as the Episcopal minister of Longside, was no exception. He could write in Scots, English and Latin with equal skill. Yet the verses for which Skinner was remembered were those of *The Reel of Tullochgorum*, which no less than Robert Burns described as 'the best Scots sang I ever saw'.

Rev. Skinner, though brought up in a Presbyterian household, joined the Episcopal Church in the late 1730s. This was no small decision, as it cost him his schoolmaster's job. He had to move to Shetland securing the post of private tutor to the Sinclair family. Happily, it was also where John met his wife, Grissel Hunter. By the time their first son was born in 1742, the Skinners had returned to the mainland and John had been ordained at Longside. These were dangerous times, however, as government troops attacked all Episcopal churches and manses, believing the whole denomination to be on the side of Bonnie Prince Charlie. Skinner himself was no enemy of the Protestant Hanoverian monarchy, yet this meant nothing to rapacious soldiers intent on destruction. In July 1746, following Culloden, a local informer brought the Redcoats to Longside; it was said she was seen exulting as Skinner's church was razed to the ground.

REV JOHN SKINNER
AUTHOR OF TULLOCHGORUM

With no church, the minister preached from the manse to small groups of his congregation sitting in different rooms or standing in the garden, all to evade the legal restrictions against Episcopal services. In 1753, again due to this particular female informer, Rev. Skinner found himself imprisoned for six months at Old Aberdeen. It is little surprise considering he wrote scurrilous verses against his persecutor, describing her as a 'shrine-destroying Jezebel', after the Pagan queen of Israel. In 1760 things began to improve; George III was far more tolerant of the Scottish Episcopalians, leaving Skinner to continue his ministry in peace.

Tullochgorum, which contains the lines 'Let Whig and Tory all agree', represents John Skinner's amazing capacity for tolerance, but also his wit against the proud and foolish. The composition originated after a hot debate at the house of his friend, Mrs Montgomery in Ellon, who, exasperated with her guests, begged Skinner to write words to what was a popular fiddle tune. She is immortalised in the opening stanza 'Come gie's a sang, Montgomery cried/ And lay your disputes all aside.' Skinner makes clear his distaste for those who would be 'oppression's tool' and declares 'May envy gnaw his rotten soul/ And discontent devour him.' He lived to see his church freed from persecution, yet experienced the sorrow of outliving his beloved Grissel, who died aged 80. 86-year-old John died peacefully on June 16, 1807 in Aberdeen, surrounded by his family.

SCOTT SKINNER & THE REAL LIFE LASS O'BON ACCORD

The gravestone of James Scott Skinner, the 'Strathspey King', is an impressive sight in pale silver granite, standing near the Great Southern Road gate of Allanvale Cemetery, Ferryhill. As well as a bronze bust of the fiddler and dance teacher, engraved on the stone are the first few bars of Skinner's tune 'The Bonnie Lass o' Bon Accord'. The lass herself was a real person whom Skinner met at a party.

James Scott Skinner was born near Banchory in 1843; his father William had been a fiddler for country dances. By age 8, James became accompanist to local fiddler, Peter Milne. One night the dance went on so long that James fell asleep on his cello, but somehow continued playing.



Fetteresso Cemetery, Wilhelmina Bell's final resting place

After one of his regular country dance classes in the North Silver Street hall (now Milne's Auctioneers) Skinner was invited to a friend's house on Union Terrace. There he noticed a very pretty serving maid who looked as if she had been destined for better things. Everyone, including the servants, joined in dancing to Skinner's fiddle music, and he declared the maid 'a splendid tripper of the light-fantastic toe'. She introduced herself as Wilhelmina Bell, explaining that her father, the farmer of Cockley, Maryculter, had once played bass for Skinner's late father. Stunned, he asked her why she was working as a maid. 'Mina' tearfully replied that her father had been bankrupted after standing guarantor for a friend's debts and lost the farm. 'Never ye mind, lassie,' Skinner said, 'I'll mak a tune that'll keep ye in mind when we're baith deid!'

SCOTT SKINNER
& THE REAL LIFE LASS O'BON ACCORD

Skinner duly wrote the tune and showed to his friend, photographer, Alexander Dinnie, who remarked there was “something great” in the tune. By an incredible coincidence, Mina just happened to cross the road nearby and Skinner pointed her out as the ‘bonnie lass that the tune’s about’. Dinnie exclaimed, ‘I’ve got it, ca it The Bonnie Lass o Bon Accord!’ and thus began the song’s fame.

Skinner’s lovely tribute to the poverty-stricken Mina was never forgotten. In 1927, she was an honoured guest at Skinner’s funeral when his headstone was unveiled by Sir Harry Lauder. Eleven years later, the ‘Bonnie Lass’ herself passed away aged 72 and was buried in Fetteresso kirkyard. Her headstone facing Clayfolds Farm, Newtonhill, where she was born in 1866.

The inscription records Mina’s connection with the Strathspey King and his famous tune. The stone was erected by her nephew, Doug Bell, son of her brother David. Doug had found the story in some correspondence of Dinnie’s and was delighted to discover the connection between the famous tune and his aunt. Journalist James Lees would later share the story in the Leopard magazine, formerly Aberdeenshire’s best source of local tales and legends. Now Skinner, Mina, her brother and nephew Doug lie under the sod, but just as the Strathspey King predicted, the tune still lives on to this day and often makes a popular addition to many a local ceilidh band’s repertoire.



Mina Bell's Gravestone, Fetteresso Kirkyard

THE REAL MACBETH & HIS TRAGIC END AT LUMPHANAN



Macbeth Cairn, Lumphanan

The king's terrified servants wrap his decapitated body in their cloaks and carry it up the hill to a sacred site above Lumphanan. They hastily bury Macbeth, intending to return after nightfall to transport the royal corpse to its final resting place on the holy island of Iona.

In 1057 the real Macbeth was killed because he stood in the way of Malcolm Canmore, son of the previous king, Duncan, claiming the throne of Alba. Duncan was hardly the meek, elderly king of the play, but rather a vicious bully who killed off his royal competition, i.e. Macbeth's father and his cousin. Macbeth, however, according to Irish/Gaelic sources, was 'fair, yellow-haired and tall', who was secure enough in his seventeen-year reign to make a pilgrimage to Rome in 1050, where he 'scattered money like seed to the poor'. Far from being a usurper, Macbeth and his wife, Gruoch, were descendants of the previous kings of Alba, Malcolm II and Kenneth III.

THE REAL MACBETH & HIS TRAGIC END AT LUMPHANAN

The 'Scottish Play' with which we are all familiar, is in fact a total reversal of the truth, written to please James VI who had recently become James I of a new United Kingdom. Shakespeare appealed to James' obsession with witchcraft and the supernatural, weaving a romantic origin for the Stuarts in Banquo whom the witches prophesy 'Thou wilt get kings, though thou be none.' The play proved one of the most popular of Shakespeare's 'histories' despite it being mostly pro-Stuart fiction. So why did the Bard get it so wrong? His main historical source, Raphael Holinshed, was relying on misleading accounts of Macbeth written over centuries as Celtic Alba evolved into Anglo-Norman Scotland. The real tragedy is that these accounts were written by Scottish chroniclers from a time when the Stuart dynasty was in the ascendancy.

Three centuries after Macbeth's reign, John of Fordun's *Scotichronicon* describes Duncan's death in battle as murder and invents the character of Macduff as a former friend of Macbeth. Andrew of Wyntoun, writing forty years later, weaves a vile fairytale, introducing the witches, Macduff's charm as 'the knight who was never born' and describes Macbeth as a 'son of the Devil.' Hector Boece, principal of Kings College, Aberdeen, writing in the 1500s, further adds the characters of Banquo, Lady Macbeth and states that Macbeth kills Macduff's family. Thus, the lie was complete!

Macbeth's reign ended in a bloody skirmish outside Lumphanan, when Malcolm slew him in hand-to-hand combat and cut off his head as a trophy. The queen placed her son, Lulach on the throne, only for him also to be murdered by Malcolm Canmore, who finally secured the kingdom in 1058. The 'cairn' which served as Macbeth's temporary tomb was excavated in 1855 and is likely to have been a prehistoric cist burial. No bones remain today. The cairn is on private land, but a quick polite enquiry to the farmhouse below Perkhill usually ensures visitors can cross the fields to pay their respects.

THE BATTLE OF HARLAW

HIGHLAND V LOWLAND OR A PRIVATE WAR?

A knight wears plate armour, chainmail and a helmet; the classic image we all associate with medieval warfare, yet this particular representation is featured on a grave slab in the ruins of Kinkell Church by the Ury's banks. This was Gilbert de Greenlaw as he was in life, riding into battle at Harlaw in 1411 never to return home alive. He was a cavalryman fighting for the Earl of Mar, the same Alexander Stewart who in the previous decade had seized his title by forced marriage to Countess Isabel Douglas. Mar was now a respected nobleman, keeping the peace in the Eastern Highlands, fighting in the king's name in Europe, lauded by chronicler Andrew Wyntoun as "honest, able and elegant in person and behaviour." Perhaps his new wife had calmed him down, or else he had now done all he needed to secure his position as a legitimate knight, despite his ignominious beginnings. Yet Mar went into battle against his cousin by marriage, Donald MacDonald, Lord of the Isles over the Earldom of Ross.



Harlaw Monument

The latter was strategically important; it gave the Gaelic ruler a way into mainland Scotland, but equally gave the Lowland scoundrel control of the Highlands.

The whole situation turned on the crook-backed thirteen-year-old Countess of Ross, Euphemia Leslie. Her late father's sister, Marion, was MacDonald's wife, but she was Mar's cousin through her mother, giving the two families a reason to fight. The Duke of Albany, Mar's uncle, had been trying to force the little girl to resign her title to his son, while she became a nun. Her disability meant she was not marriageable material.

THE BATTLE OF HARLAW

HIGHLAND V LOWLAND OR A PRIVATE WAR?

By 1410, MacDonald gathered his fellow Gaels, a force numbering approximately 6,000, and descended on Dingwall and Inverness, leaving a trail of destruction in their wake. Word came to Mar that his Highland cousin intended to burn Aberdeen, thus at his Christmas dinner in Kildrummy, he gathered his most powerful friends, including Provost James Davidson of Aberdeen and Bishop Greenlaw, the uncle of Sir Gilbert. Mar promised he would defend the city from these Highland savages. Thus, it was on July 23rd 1411, the Lowland army camped right below their enemies on farmland outside Inverurie between the farmtouns of Harlaw and Balhalgardy, planning to attack MacDonald's men at dawn.

The dubby fields witnessed a slaughter like no other; many Lowland noblemen including Davidson and Greenlaw lost their lives for a conflict that ended with no obvious winner. Sir Gilbert had a coffin and a church burial, probably held by his sorrowing kinsman, the bishop, yet most of the ordinary soldiers were simply buried on the battlefield. Centuries later, farmers would uncover mass graves indicating the level of casualties. Ultimately MacDonald's descendants would inherit Ross, making Harlaw the most dreadful waste of life over a family squabble.

A BATTLE TO THE DEATH

THOMAS GORDON VS THE ABBOT OF GRANGE



Thomas Gordon's Gravestone, Ruthven

Thomas Gordon of Ruthven, better known as 'Tam o' Riven' made a fearsome sight arrayed in armour and saddled on his grey charger. His cause was the disputed ownership of Balloch Hill which stood at the boundary between his lands and the Barony of Grange which belonged to the Church. Tam turns and vows to his knights, 'Unless they yield these bounds to me, this day some broken heads must be!' Tam parleys with his rival, the Abbot of Grange, who states that Balloch had been granted by King William the Lion to Kinloss Abbey, centuries before, but they decide to settle the matter in typical 14th century fashion, with a sword duel. Thus continues the ballad penned in 1849 by Banffshire author, John Alexander Cameron, which details the fatal combat between Abbot John and Tam o' Riven. Both lose their lives and the Gordons pursue the remaining monks to seek revenge for their kinsman's death.

Thomas Gordon was a real laird, born in the early 1400s; 'Daach, Sauchen and Keithock Mill/ Oh Tam o' Riven owned Balveny, Cults and Auchindroyne an' many more', runs Cameron's ballad, detailing Thomas' estate. He was the son of Elizabeth Cruickshank and Sir John Gordon of Strathbogie who died in 1394, the latter's grandfather having been granted his estate by no less than Robert the Bruce. Thomas and his brother John (or Tam and Jock) are regarded as the progenitors of the old line of Gordons in this area. Thus, it is no surprise that such a powerful gentleman would take up arms against a local churchman to ensure his borders were not encroached upon. However, it is more likely the 'battle' was administrative rather than involving a display of force.

A BATTLE TO THE DEATH
THOMAS GORDON VS THE ABBOT OF GRANGE

All that remains of this legendary battle are the Monk's Cairn on Balloch Hill, and the effigy of Thomas in Ruthven's ruined kirkyard.

Thomas Gordon's descendants went on to build Auchanachie House in 1594, just along the road from Ruthven. The manor stands today, refurbished and clad in traditional 16th century pink render, still a family home. The name Auchanachie, which translates from Gaelic as 'the Merchant's Field', was to become associated with further bloodshed two centuries later, when a brutal murder occurred on the estate at the croft of Upper Auchanachie. The tenant, George Milne, and his daughter were hacked to death by an anonymous axeman who tried to cover up his crime by razing the house to the ground. Although never proven, the reputed killer was the same Andrew Hosack who ended up on Johnny Milne's gallows in Aberdeen's Castlegate in 1810. This was the reason behind the riot which saw Hosack's corpse end up in the hands of the anatomists, the due punishment for a murderer, despite the fact the court records show Hosack was executed for theft.

DONALD DINNIE FAMOUS STRONG MAN

Potarch Bridge over the Dee was built in 1813 by tough, hardy masons, and it would be a mason called Robert Dinnie, and his famous son, Donald, who would lift two massive granite boulders used as anchors for the bridge's scaffolding and christen them The Dinnie Stones. Lifting the stones, which weigh 22.75 and 30 stone respectively, is now a worldwide challenge to strongmen and women. Donald held the record for lifting both stones with ease — and carrying them the width of the bridge, a distance of approximately 17 feet — for over a hundred years.

Donald Dinnie and his father came from a long line of barrel-chested, lofty stonemasons who originated in Deeside. Donald was born in 1837 at Balnacraig, near Aboyne, the third of ten children. By this time, his father had a very successful building trade and had been known for his sporting exploits. Robert had brain as well as brawn, but a long-standing feud between him and the local schoolmaster meant that he gave up any notion of following an academic life.



The Dinnie Stanes at Potarch Bridge

DONALD DINNIE FAMOUS STRONG MAN

Even by the age of ten, Donald's sporting prowess began to shine; he would race the Deeside coach between Potarch and Kincardine O'Neil, a distance of two miles, and could keep up with it the whole way! Five years later, on leaving school, Donald won a wrestling prize, which marked the start of his career in athletics, from which he profited financially and developed a reputation for strength and agility. By 1867, Donald settled on making athletics his main career. In that year he won nine first place medals at the very first Aboyne Highland Games. No shrinking violet, Donald had been describing himself as the Scottish Heavyweight Champion since 1856, yet not without good reason! His records included throwing the heavy hammer 81ft 6in, throwing the heavy stone 35ft 5 in, throwing the light stone 45ft 7in, and clearing just over 5ft in the high jump.

Donald was a huge man, just clear of 6ft in height, 15st in weight, chest of 48in and biceps of 15in. He was the archetypal strongman, which appealed to the Americans, as he was invited to tour various Caledonian Clubs from 1870, beginning in New York. Dinnie could command crowds of 25,000, and by the end of the decade could earn \$700 a day!

He toured the world, defeating wrestling champions in New Zealand and South Africa. Married twice, Donald kept on competing well into his seventies. He prevailed on the Aboyne Highland Games committee to institute special events for 'veterans' like himself (i.e. over sixty!). Four years before his death at his home in Kensington, Donald competed in London at a health and strength show. He was 75 years old when he died, and it was 1972 before his record of carrying the Dinnie Stones was broken by Jack Shanks of Belfast, who weighed a 'mere' 11 stone.

The nearby Potarch Hotel is a beautiful venue from which to visit the Stones, as they sit by the bridge, waiting for their annual challengers.

FISHER SUPERSTITIONS OF ABERDEENSHIRE

Scottish fisherfolk have much in common with their seafaring brethren across the world, being employed in one of the most dangerous environments outside military service next to mining. Despite the challenges of climate concerns, shifting fish stocks, and a world now disconnected from the sea and land, fishermen, whose family lines stretch back hundreds of years, will tell you there is nothing like the call of the sea, or 'salt in the blood' as some describe it. Even those who left the industry in the mid-gos due to being forced to scrap their vessels through the pressure of EU fishing quotas, found themselves back at sea a decade later, unable to stay away.

Fishing, by its precarious nature has always involved risk, and it is human nature to mitigate that risk by employing rituals, habits, traditions and even prayer. The very act of going down to the boat in the morning was fraught with difficulty due to the number of taboo creatures and people that must be avoided, such as 'certain women', cats, pigs, ministers, priests, and rabbits. These could all cause bad luck, which could manifest as a poor catch, technical problems, or far worse.

In the North-East particularly, there were a number of elderly females suspected of being witches, who had to either be avoided or placated. Some were simply 'peer craiturs' who didn't have the best hygiene, like one Katesy Mammie of Peterhead, whose evil eye was often believed to be the cause of engine trouble on fishing boats. Liddel's Meg of Torry, near Aberdeen, was another 'witch' that fisher children were told to avoid.

The so-called unlucky creatures were usually land animals that were associated with witches, and thus had to be referred to by their taboo name, e.g. rabbit was mappie, hare was lippy lugs, pigs were curly-tails, cats were wee beasties. It was said pigs could smell the wind and affect its direction, thus could not be allowed anywhere near a fishing boat. One smart crew member upset his skipper so much with even a drawing of a porker stuck up in the wheelhouse, that he refused to go to sea.

Men of the church were also a danger, as the 'new' religion of Christianity was thought to be an offence to the Pagan gods of the sea. So 'the mannie wi the roon collar' or 'the man wi the black coat' was to be avoided at all costs. The church was 'the bell hoose', when described as a landmark.

FISHER SUPERSTITIONS OF ABERDEENSHIRE

Rituals to overturn a bad luck symbol included touching 'cold iron'; there is the tale of a minister making a sermon of the Gadarene swine, and his nervous fisher parishioners frantically looked for nails in the pews to rub for fear it would affect their catch as they left 'at the back o Sunday' (working on a Sunday was forbidden, hence the often mad scramble to leave for the fishing grounds at midnight into Monday, which still occurred in Peterhead and Fraserburgh until the end of the 1980s).



Portknockie Harbour

A sure-fire tradition to protect the crew from supernatural trouble was the 'saining' or purifying of the boat by smoke or fire. Fishermen in the 20th century even admitted to carrying out this ancient ritual with its roots in Celtic times. Andrew Strachan, late of Peterhead, remembered getting a bucket full of old rags dipped in diesel which were then set on fire and carried around the boat, smoking out every corner. Though he did not believe that it made a difference, his superstitious uncle was convinced that the smoke would drive out evil spirits sent by witches.

There were many other taboos, such as opening packets or tins upside down, or leaving the hatches open aboard. Gavin Thain, a contemporary fisherman from Peterhead, recalls how his father would throw any tin opened this way out of the window, such was his concern for bad luck. Woe betide someone asked a fisherman the size of his catch! The answer would usually come back

FISHER SUPERSTITIONS OF ABERDEENSHIRE

'Oh, nae bad,' as fishers were secretive and competitive, hiding their favourite patches for herring and white fish from their neighbours.

Peterhead fisherman poet, Peter Buchan, who shares his name with a local 19th century folklorist, wrote many verses and short stories detailing the peculiar character of the Aberdeenshire fisherman, which can still be accessed today in local libraries. The coastal strip has a vast number of fishing-related museums and heritage centres from Banff right down to St Cyrus, including, Fraserburgh, Peterhead, Aberdeen's Maritime Museum, Stonehaven, Gourdon and Johnshaven which are open in the spring and summer months.



Fishermen at Peterhead

The harbours at Fraserburgh and Peterhead are an impressive sight containing both white fish and pelagic boats, the latter being huge trawlers capable of catching and processing their product before they even reach home. Local fish and chip shops all along the East Coast down as far as Fife advertise the boats which supply their wares, often winning prizes for their fish suppers. Visitors are advised to queue early for this takeaway repast, as they are very popular in summer.

The BBC made stars of our local fishers with television programmes such as *Trawlermen* and *Fish Town*, which are available on DVD, demonstrating the age-old fight with the fickle sea to draw her harvest for the benefit of fish lovers everywhere.

WILLIAM MCCOMBIE

CATTLE BREEDER, ABERDEEN ANGUS

Approaching Alford from the east, the visitor is immediately struck by the life-size sculpture of a black bull. He was modelled on 'Jeremy Eric of Bridgefoot', a real Aberdeen Angus bull, by sculptor David Annand in 2001 to celebrate the local home of this world-famous cattle breed.

Beloved of stockmen as far afield as Argentina, Australia and Canada, the Aberdeen Angus was brought to the consciousness of Victorian farmers by one William McCombie of Tillyfour, Tough, near Alford. McCombie's father had been a cattle-breeder, inspiring this university graduate to pass on an academic career and continue the family business, renting his father's farm from the 1820s.



St Cyrus

The first farmer to breed these 'polled' or hornless cattle was Hugh Watson of Keillor, Forfarshire; his breeding cow, 'Old Grannie' produced 29 calves and lived to the age of 35. The number one bull in the breed book, 'Old Jock' was Grannie's first calf.

McCombie saw how he could improve on the Angus, working on producing fatter, stalwart cattle which could cope with the colder, damper climate of Aberdeenshire, instead of wasting time transporting them to England to be fattened. Their family had been at Tillyfour since 1714, so he knew the land's capabilities inside out. McCombie bred the Angus 'doddies' with the Aberdeen 'hummlies', both nicknames meaning hornless beasts, ultimately producing the Aberdeen Angus.

WILLIAM MCCOMBIE
CATTLE BREEDER, ABERDEEN ANGUS

McCombie was the first Scottish exhibitor at Birmingham's prestigious cattle show. He also wowed the European farmers at the Paris Exposition of 1878. The Aberdeen Angus herd of Tillyfour would win over 500 prizes. The farmer's favourite prize bull, Black Prince, won the Prince Albert Cup of 1866 for the best animal, prompting Queen Victoria herself to invite McCombie and his beast to visit Windsor. Prince Albert, being much interested in agricultural improvement himself, was equally keen to meet this bovine champion. The royal couple made a return visit to Tillyfour in 1867.



Tillyfour Farm Sign

The same year, McCombie would publish *Cattle and Cattle Breeders*, detailing his developmental breed work. The following year, McCombie entered parliament as the first tenant farmer to do so, campaigning hard for the interests of his fellow farmers as Liberal MP for West Aberdeenshire. McCombie himself died in 1880, Tillyfour being sold on to the Beggs, who founded Lochnagar Distillery. Today, the McCombie name is still involved with Aberdeen Angus, William's descendant, Charlie, farmer at Auchincrieve near Huntly has both Angus and Charolais herds, the former being the grandchildren of Black Prince and others from the Tillyfour herd.

William McCombie's grave can be visited today at Tough Kirkyard, near Tillyfour. Agricultural journalist, Eddie Gillanders published a history of the breed from McCombie's herd in 2017, updating the 1958 history. The then president of the Aberdeen Angus Society, Alex Sanger, remarked, 'The skill of generations of breeders throughout the world has taken the Aberdeen-Angus breed to heights never imagined.' Remember McCombie the next time you tuck into a steak!

GEORGE BEATTIE POET TRAGIC SUICIDE OR MURDER VICTIM?

George Beattie, born in the humble Whitehill Croft on the Kirkside Estate, St Cyrus, was a likeable fellow. He was the son of William Beattie and Elizabeth Scott and went on to train as a solicitor in Montrose.

Beattie had dabbled in poetry from his youth; at the age of 14, had written *The Murder'd Minstrel*, in the style of an old Scots ballad, about a poor troubadour who upsets a lady in her fine house. The lady orders her soldiers to kill him, but later finds herself haunted by his ghost. In 1815, Beattie wrote "John o' Arnha", a comic epic inspired by local worthy, John Findlay, known for his boorish personality and his empty boasts. Beattie was, by this time, a successful, popular man with a great wit and literary talent.



William McCombie's Gravestone, Tough Kirkyard

But, in 1821, Beattie's 35th year, he met the woman who was to be his downfall. The journey from happy-go-lucky poet to deeply depressed and suicidal wreck, was a mere two and a half years. The lady's name was Miss Gibson; she was 23, tall, pale-skinned, with light brown hair and hazel eyes. Her parents, Robert and Isabelle, lived at Stone of Morphie. Miss Gibson, having the distinctly male forename of William, lead Beattie a merry dance.

GEORGE BEATTIE POET
TRAGIC SUICIDE OR MURDER VICTIM?

By 1822, she was requesting his company at every opportunity, even having private trysts at the empty House of Kinnaber, which her father owned. Soon George was head over heels in love and, as far as he was concerned, destined to marry the coquettish maiden.

In 1823, the rival attraction of a huge inheritance from Miss Gibson's maternal uncle, William Mitchell, a slave owner in the West Indies, threatened to tear their relationship apart. Within a year, Miss Gibson was demanding Beattie break their engagement, accusing him of neglecting her and being too enamoured of her promised fortune. She started being seen with a William Smart, who turned out to be a gold-digger, hell-bent on getting Miss Gibson's money. Beattie was devastated, sinking into the deepest depression. Ultimately, he decided he could not live without Miss Gibson. He was found dead by his own hand in the Auld Nether Kirkyard on 30 September 1823.

When Miss Gibson married Smart, she soon realised her mistake. She would die 16 years later, utterly neglected by her husband and tormented by George's ghost, in an eerie parallel of the murdered minstrel and the haughty lady.

Beattie left his property to his brother David and sister Catherine. His talent was largely forgotten due to his death by suicide, but fast forward 190 years to Arbroath native, Barry Graham, who painstakingly researched the story of George Beattie's ill-fated affair. He published George's final papers, casting Beattie as the melancholy hero destroyed by the greed of others. Beattie's grave has a large marble monument in the old kirkyard of Montrose, his works are freely available and demonstrate his genius with words, cut short by a faithless female. Barry Graham is keen to publicise Beattie's story, reminding people of this poet, lost in time.

JOHN DUNCAN

BOTANIST AKA JOHNNY MEEN

Johnny Meen (Johnny Moon), the man who thought Burns 'a filthy loon' was himself of humble origins. His real name was John Duncan, born in Stonehaven in 1794, illegitimate son of weaver John Duncan, and Ann Caird, both of Drumlithie, Kincardineshire. John's education in both weaving and nature began at his mother's knee. Ann wove stockings to support them, being a single mother, so could ill-afford to send John to school. He wandered the fields looking at plants and puzzling over their origins. At the age of ten, John collected rushes to make candle wicks which he sold to help his mother.

His whole life would be punctuated by unfortunate choices; the first, that of master when he wished to learn his father's trade. Charles Pirie was a bully and a crook, but Mrs Pirie took pity on the boy and taught him to read from her hidden library. After her early death, the villagers of Drumlithie continued to aid his education.

By age 20, John returned to his mother's house and earned his keep by weaving. The frugality which would shape his character allowed him to save the princely sum of one pound, which he used to buy a copy of Culpeper's Herbal, the 18th-century study in the medicinal properties of plants. This served to expand John's growing interest in botany, herbalism and astronomy.

He made a disastrous marriage to Margaret Wise, already the mother of an illegitimate child. She could not remain faithful to John, despite their having two daughters together. John fled her clutches, living his life in a sort of penance thereafter, working around the Vale of Alford as a weaver and farmhand, spending a period of each year serving in the Aberdeen Militia force until Margaret finally died and left him alone.



John Duncan's Gravestone, Alford Cemetery

JOHN DUNCAN
BOTANIST AKA JOHNNY MEEN

During this sojourn, John made the acquaintance of Charles Black, a gardener. Black taught him the basics of plant classification as laid down by Swede, Carl Linnaeus. Using the work of Kings College botany professor, George Dickie, the pair roamed the county, identifying plants.

John settled at Droughsburn, Alford. He was widely respected, but kept himself very private, living in a hayloft, his books and botany papers his only possessions, apart from two suits and two tall hats “of quality”. Local children liked to tease him at his botanical labours, which often involved him crawling along the ground to peer through his short-sighted eyes for samples. The name “Johnny Meen” came from being seen in the evening, staring up at the moon. John continued to educate himself, being an active member of the Auchleven Mutual Improvement Class, 1850–52, giving talks on botany, astronomy, weaving, and gardening.

Sadly, by his retirement he was practically destitute, his daughters long having lost touch with their father. John’s only indulgence had been his purchase of books. His supporters encouraged him to apply for parish aid, which he did, ever so reluctantly.

Suffering from heart disease, John knew he was not long for the world, so helped by his botanical friends, he labelled all his samples and catalogued his notes and books. He presented them to Marischal College in 1880 and used the rest of the kind donations from his supporters to fund prizes for nature studies by local children.

He died the following year, requesting a ‘decent funeral’ and his grave to be marked with a volcanic boulder. A polished black granite obelisk was also erected in his memory by public subscription, which stands today in Alford Cemetery. The Strathspey King, James Scott Skinner would later memorialise him in a fiddle tune, The Alford Weaver.

ELPHINSTONE  INSTITUTE
studying culture in context



The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development: **Europe investing in rural areas**

visitscotland.com/storiesofaberdeenshire