

MUIRKIRK REMINISCENCES

Reprinted from the "Muirkirk Advertiser"

By JAMES TAYLOR

A print-out of the "Cumnock News" of about 1901 has been very thoughtfully handed to us by a friend. It contains some reminiscences of the late Mr Hugh Anderson of Greenockdyke. It will doubtless be news to the younger school, while to the older fraternity it will be no less interesting. The contribution is entitled "A Muirkirk Nonagenarian," is dated February, 22, 1901, and proceeds:

In the year 1809, the anniversary of the Battle of Corunna, when Sir John Moore beat the French in the Peninsular Campaign, and where he gallantly lost his life, the anniversary of the death of the great composer, Haydn, and the birth-year of yet another, Mendelssohn, Mr Hugh Anderson first saw the light of day on the 16th June of that memorable year, in the farmhouse of Greenockdyke, in which he still resides, and where for a long period of years he has successfully carried on business as a farmer. Mr Anderson, who has been confined to the house, is most hale and hearty, and he gives his recollections of the Parish in a clear, distinct, and succinct manner.

In the beginning of the last century the houses in Muirkirk were scattered here and there, in fact from Blackwood, the wright's, property to the Black Bull, there were no buildings at all. Then there was the famous hostelry, "The Cross Keys," situated on the Glasgow Road, and in those early days there were hardly any houses on the Glasgow Road at all. The "Black Bottle" was situated on the opposite side of the Kirkgreen from where it is at present, and it was in this old Inn that Burns is said to have stayed when on his visit to Muirkirk to see his old friend, the bauld "Lapraik." The description shows that the houses were mostly scattered throughout the Parish—a great contrast to what we see now. In those early days tar kilns were successfully wrought a little above Springhill, and the mines then going were the "Big Pit," pits behind Midhouse Row, and the old Auldhouseburn workings—a striking contrast to the large number of pits now dotted throughout the neighbourhood. Mr Anderson can remember Mr McCall, who was a Postmaster in Muirkirk in these early days, who was grandfather of the late

Miss McCall, who was Postmistress of Muirkirk for so many years, and at that time letters from Cumnock cost 7½d each.

There were no banks in the neighbourhood then, and people who had banking business to do mostly journeyed to Cumnock, which was then considered a most important centre.

The Parish Church was also built, and Mr Anderson has a perfectly clear remembrance of the then Minister, the Rev. Alex. Brown, who was ordained in 1814. Ironworks School and the Parochial School, as they were then termed, were also in a state of existence, but not nearly so elaborate as they are at present. All the business was done chiefly by carriers, there being no railways. Mr Robert Latta was carrier from Cumnock to Edinburgh, and Mr W. Ronald acted in the same capacity between Muirkirk and Glasgow.

Mr Anderson remembers the story told by his grandmother of her seeing the Highlanders, under Bonnie Prince Charles Edward, passing through Auchinleck on their retreat from England at the time of the '45 Jacobite rebellion, and many of the Highlanders were very lame. His grandmother died at the age 96. He also remembers having received the tidings of the Battle of Waterloo, in 1815, when he was little over six years old, and the medium through which the information came was the "Ayr Advertiser" many days after the battle was fought. He still reads this periodical weekly.

Mr Anderson also remembers when the first railway train made its appearance in Muirkirk. There was a large turnout of spectators to witness the novel event, and the most of the people looked on with something like dread and awe. The year 1827 saw a great failure in the farm crops, with the result that he had to pay for a load of meal, consisting of about twenty stones, the exorbitant price of £ 6s.

In his lifetime Mr Anderson has seen many great snowstorms and floods. One of the worst floods was that which took place when a large waterspout broke on the Dipple, sweeping away all the hay, corn, and other crops in the meadows, so that afterwards the crops were quite useless. After the storm had spent itself, Mr Anderson went out and gathered 45 dozen trout lying in the meadows, and not one was picked up less than eight inches in length.

Mr Anderson also had the pleasure of meeting the famous Tibbie Pagan one day when he was at Springhill. Tibbie was coming from the Blue Tower, and Mr Pearson of Springhill, was going to have a joke out of her when she was passing, but he came off second best. Mr Anderson's description of Tibbie is very pointed. He says of her—"She was an old body, just had on her wearin' claes, and was not what one would call a braw woman. She

drank a good deal, and was a bit lame, and it was a pity of anyone who came into her clutches, for she had an awful tongue."

In Mr Anderson's early days there were only the Douglas-to-Cumnock, the Glasgow, and the Sanquhar roads in existence. All the roads on the Greenock Water have been built in his time. In fact, the first stone fence, which is situated between Middlefield and Burnfoot, was built by him, and it is in splendid condition yet. The wire fences came out later, and Mr Anderson was the first to introduce them in this district.

In those days there were no custodians of the law. Mr Falconer, who resided at Kameshill House, and who was Manager of Messrs William Baird & Co., Ltd., was responsible for having bye-laws framed and had them published throughout the Parish. One of these curious bye-laws was that if any man be seen fighting at the "works side of the water" he would be instantly dismissed, but if he went to the "other side of the water" he could fight as much as he desired. Mr Anderson relates many interesting anecdotes relating to these laws.

Again, the parochial relief was then dispensed by the Minister and Elders of the established Church, so that must have been before the old Parochial Board system had been introduced, which is also now defunct, in the fact that our Parish Councils now look ably into these matters. There are at present only three farms in the Parish in which the families have remained tenants in Mr Anderson's time, viz.: Anderson (Greenockdyke); Gemmell (Garpel); and McKerrow (Spireslack). Mr Anderson has seen five sovereigns on the throne, viz.: George III., George IV., William IV., Queen Victoria, and King Edward VII.

In appearance he is very venerable looking, with long flowing locks, giving him quite the appearance of a leader amongst breeders of the noted black-faced, a line of business he has been long connected with, and his sterling judgment in it has been anxiously sought after by many of the younger generation.

Mr Anderson remembers the time when the country was great excited over the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, and earlier, when the Radical riots took place, and when Hardy, of Strathaven, was hanged in Glasgow, and the Yeomen had to be called out. He remembers the great rejoicings that took place at the coronation of Queen Victoria in 1837, and many notable events which are known as matters of history to the younger generation, and which show what rapid progress has been made during the reign of the Queen. He is one of a family of nine, three of whom lived to be over ninety, and all the rest are over eighty, except two. It need hardly be mentioned that Mr Hugh Anderson was the father of Mr James Anderson of Greenockdyke and Nether Wellwood.