

ANN HILL RESEARCH

Interview with John Davidson
38 Woodburn Terrace, Edinburgh

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I called on Mr and Mrs Davidson on my way back from St Andrews. He was born on 31.12.1904, educated at Kirkpatrick Fleming, Lockerbie, Dumfries Academy and Edinburgh University, graduated in science and taught variously in Borgue (where he met his wife), Durrisdeer, Lasswade and elsewhere, before becoming a headmaster. Grace Carson had mentioned him as being probably the best informed of the clan about the family and parish history. The interview lasted two hours. I thought he was willing to go on longer, but I was afraid he was tiring and had to get back to Dumfries, so I thought it best to stop. This was in some ways unfortunate, for his information was unusually good. Several times he mentioned, correctly, things that I had previously known only from newspapers, including things that he was too young to have had direct experience of. Furthermore, he was precise and careful. Altogether it was rather like one historian talking to another.

~~Several things were mentioned but not to be recorded. I put these in double brackets.~~

School

Of Blackie Brown he knew only that he'd been schoolmaster. He thought his father had given him a stone axe which they ploughed up. Miss Graham, infants, was a delightful person - who took 2 classes at once. Christie occasionally signed himself 'Lieutenant Christie', having been a soldier, almost certainly in the Boer War. Christie - heavy drinker - had unique way of getting pupils through the qualifying exam. Pupils were spaced out, good beside bad, and the candidates told that if the weaker brethren failed it would be the fault of the others! He used to take them out regularly to fight mock battles, which the Allies always won (This was in World War 1).

The inspector, Major Holm, had also fought in the Boer War, and was known to the Buccleughs, which, John Davidson surmised, was how he got the post - which included Dumfriesshire and the Stewartry. He set the qualifying exams.

After Kirkpatrick Fleming John Davidson went to Lockerbie. In his second year the headmaster (Mr Malcolm) spoke to him. Not to worry, but he shouldn't be there because they didn't have any record that he'd passed the exam. So John Davidson went to see Mr Christie. Apparently John Davidson had been too young when the exam was sat, so although he'd passed, he'd not been given a certificate. On the spot Mr Christie

wrote out that he'd passed it on the day after his birthday - the 1st of January. Mr Davidson reckons he must be the only person who's passed an exam on New Years' Day.

Lockerbie's hours, he said were 9.10 to 4.10 (someone else said 9.30). Like Miss Moffat he'd to go Dumfries Academy for a year to get a bursary. His two older brothers had gone first to Annan (3 years) then Dumfries. Like her, he thought it was ridiculous. Perhaps, he said, it was to try to centralise higher education in Dumfries for economic reasons. At Lockerbie he remembered Annie Hill. He remarked that Mr Hill drew up the plans for the 1938 new building at Dumfries Academy.

At school with him was Walker Johnstone, so called because he was the first person baptised by Mr Walker.

Church

He went to Chapelknowe. He wondered whether there might be a reason for so many farmers being United Free, in that the Buccleuchs were established church, so if you weren't established you were more likely to rent from estates like Springkell and Mossknow. Their neighbours, Dunlop, in Newhope went to the United Free Church at Hoddam, probably passing about 3 nearer churches en route. The Dunlops had been tenants of the Bell Irvings.

He listed the families who went to Chapelknowe. The Davidsons and most went by pony and trap, but the Dunlops went to Hoddam in a Digby. The Davidson family had a pew in the parish church, but used it only for occasional evening service. They also paid teinds, and one thing he liked about Mr Walker was that he always gave him 3d back (I wonder if the teinds were so many shillings and 3d?).

He thought it probable that Chapelknowe United Free Church had been given by Springkell on a 99 year lease. He also thought that Bob Davidson of Wicketthorn (whose wife was a Farish) went there. The minister, Mr Eaglesham, was very gentle and pleasant.

Sport and Entertainment

Local farmers carted the Solway turf for the old bowling green (see Annandale Observer). Then there was a long gap before tennis started (later he referred to it as Lamont's place). Before that they played tennis at Mossknow (~~I think this was one of the 'unprintable' stories. A few of them used to play at Mossknow, including one who drove there by car. Mrs Graham asked who it was who had the car, and shortly after, the~~

tennis there was stopped.

By and large the Grahams emerge well from the interview. He was in Fergus Graham's scout troop - probably formed about 3/4 years before John Davidson joined. It was one of the earliest troops, run in fact jointly with Mrs Graham. Fergus Graham was the joint County Commissioner, Dumfries being divided east and west. He remembered watching the salmon fishers when they camped at Powfoot. Sometimes they went out with them, and got keeping the flounders. The local group was very small, so Fergus got the Springkell scouts, in whom he took an interest, to join with them. A lot of them cycled to Mossknow, where they met on Saturday afternoons, although he thought that in his brother George's time they met in the evenings. Fergus Graham formed a scouts football team. He had quite a sense of humour, with an ear for the right phrase, and wrote for Blackwoods. John Davidson remembered reading Blackwoods' and not realising who was the writer (W F Graham) till the name Timpanheck appeared - a name that appealed to Fergus. John Davidson understood he had a book published which sold well in the USA. (His ~~book was published in the USA and sold well~~ for his ~~book was published in the USA and sold well~~ ~~book was published in the USA and sold well~~)). Fergus Graham was very helpful, but they kept a bit apart.

The tennis at the Bowling Club may have started when he was at Dumfries Academy.

He had only vague memories of the Mossknow Flower Show - wondered if it ended with the war. During the war there was more than one sale of work - at least one including clay pigeon shooting - but the big show was Eaglesfield.

They used to shoot - anything - from a tender age (but they'd no game license). In these days there were a lot of tramps, who had each their routine stops - some

each had

would sleep at Hayfield, some Newhope. One day a 'wrong' tramp appeared asking shelter at Newhope. Why? asked Uncle Jim - surely your Hayfield? Yes but there were 3 boys with guns at Hayfield who'd scared him off. Uncle Jim told Mr Davidson, father, who banned the guns for a few weeks.

Economic

Mr Fraser had visited his father before he took Beltenmont Mill. He'd raise his tile hat to any motorist going past, and may have been in debt, for one day he was talking to Mr Davidson when a car passed, hat raised as usual, car stopped, and the following ensued. Car driver - obviously knowing Fraser - 'What are you doing here!' 'I've just come to visit my friend here to try to borrow some money, but he says the bottom's fallen out of the pig trade'. Presumably this was someone Fraser owed money to. He mentioned Fraser's walking sticks.

He thought Wallace had one of the first cars, a little two seater. John Mackie, Calvertsholm had an Arrol Johnston. After World War 1 there was a great rush of car buying around the Canonbie, Half Morton area from smallholders who'd enough cows to benefit from the war. A lot of T4s.

Peat was used at the smiddy to put rims on the cart wheels - a peat castle was built over the wheel and set alight.

Farming

Sorting out the Mackies. Charlie in Redhouse, John Mackie father and son in Calvertsholm and Hillhead.

When Hillhead first came up for sale Andrew Davidson wanted to bid for it, but it would be viable only if he could continue to rent the Holm fields which Mossknow retained. Andrew got John, who knew Fergus through the scouts, to approach Fergus Graham, who readily agreed. But in the end the Elliots (Williamsfield) outbid Andrew. That was after Jim Mackie had abandoned it (and abandoned farming?).

Mr Davidson knew more than anyone I've previously spoken to about the water supply dispute. He said that Sir Jabez Edward had not been seen as the traditional sort of caring laird, and was not really popular. When the water came, he wouldn't take it into his estate, maintaining that each farm had an adequate supply on its own land. The farms had their own small gravitational supplies.

Hayfield had originally 3 different water sources. A

well outside the back door; a well in the garden; and a spring about 50 yards from the cottage. The last was by far the best quality, the only one really fit for drinking, but had no pump - you had to draw by bucket. The others had pumps and were especially poor in summer. They also had a water butt to collect roof water, used only for horses. He remarked on the importance of the burn to provide water for cattle.

They had their own threshing mill, but if you wanted a good job it was best to get a travelling mill - for example oats for selling, not for your own use. The Raeburn flowed via the pond and a sluice to their mill in pipes about 1 1/2 feet diameter, 200 yards, and then back to the burn. They had an overshot mill wheel. They used Beltenmont Mill for meal. You could buy with or without 'mooter', ~~[but they reckoned it was best to give mooter, for the mill would take it anyway ((This was not intended as a criticism of the miller's honesty, but it looks that way, so maybe miss out?))].~~ The only grain was oats.

The boulders for the road to DunsKellyrig came from their farm, possibly from where the 'Standing Stone' was. His father claimed that there were originally two farms, Hayberry and Standing Stone, and that the standing stone had been in Burnside Field. This knowledge would be folklore, his father having come from Staffler, on the Springfield-Chapelknowe road. In one of the fields there's a huge granite boulder, which John Davidson had thought could relate to the standing stone, but his father had said otherwise.

When ploughing they had brought up several stone axes. Some used to lie for years on the Newhope window sill. He went to show me one, but he couldn't find it.

If it still exists we should get hold of the Day Book which was kept by his father and gives an account of his father's agricultural doings over many years. He thought it would still be kept by Colin, in Hayfield. He once read it and used material from it for a talk to Moffat Burns Club - this being when he lived at Tweedsmuir. Menzion farm had just then been cleared of sheep - Cheviots (unusual for the area), and he found that his father bought Menzion sheep at 15/- or so per head. The cheviots were for fattening. They would have their own Suffolk or Leicester crosses.

His father was not a dairy man, but left that to his sons.

Eventually Jim got Hillhead when Elliots left.

At the top of Hayfield 4 farms met - Howgillside, Raeburnhead, Hillhead and DunsKellyrigg, which was nicknamed Sodrig. And 4 estates - Springkell, Mossknow, Cove and Raeburnhead. The Gass family were not dour (in response to a question about the court case). 9 of them, none married. He didn't know them well, but his mother's mother was a Gass, and they'd always found them good neighbours, regarded them as nice people. He had read somewhere that it was a Gass who killed Maxwell who was resting against his horse after the battle commemorated by the Merkland Cross - allegedly in revenge for Maxwell killing a Gass.

The Gasses were thought to be rich.

Who were farming pioneers? His father probably had the first self-binder in the parish, a Hornsby. He thinks he may have some notes about it. It was purchased at a Highland Show, but it broke down, Bairds couldn't mend it and someone had to come by train from the works in - he thought - East Anglia. By the time it was mended the fine weather had broken and they had their worst ever harvest. But it remained in use after that for many years. He didn't remember any other.

If you go up the road which goes off just before Hayfield, by the cottage, at Whiteside Field, you are on the highest point on the Mossknow old estate, and they used to find bits of pitch and tar from Fergus Graham's coming of age bonfire.

2 fields from Newhope were added to Hayfield by Fergus Graham.

He thought he remembered 1 single load of peat on what they called the 'Featstack' but it was usually coal.

The Mackies of Redhouse were very nice. John was there till shortly after the war. Charlie died of TB as young lad. Annie and Molly both nice, Annie more stable.

Of Fergus Graham see above. He never drove a car - she did. He never looked very strong. He did not know Fergus' sisters, but he thought Agnes Davidson had helped one to recuperate.

When Hillhead came up for sale the Gasses wouldn't say whether they wanted it and then they were furious when

they didn't get it - but it was their own fault. I think he said that then (the first time) no Davidsons bid, because they were related to Gass.