



Cullen, Deskford & Portknockie Heritage Group

Minutes of Meeting held in the Hall Church, Cullen, on Monday, 6th February, 2012, Commencing at 2pm

PRESENT: J Aitken; I Barclay; R Barclay; G Christie; H Clark; D Connoll; K Connoll; C Farquhar; A Green; M Green; A Henderson; H Hill; M Hunt; S Leel; S Liley; J Mair; M Mair; W Mair; W G Mair; Isobel Mair; A Maloney; M Maloney; Ann Mowat; K Mowat; M Mowat; T Mowat; W Mowat; A Pirie; C Pirie; H Stewart; I Sutherland; B Wood; B Woodham; D Woodham.

APOLOGIES: J Creese; J Findlay; R Findlay; A Hay; A Illingworth; J Illingworth; M Innes; Ashley Mowat; E Pirie; S Stewart; J Wood.

President Cy Pirie welcomed all attending, remarking how time passes so quickly, this being some 3 months since the Group heard David Fowler share his research on local bakers.

The President paid tribute to Willie Taylor who sadly died last month. Willie was one of the original members of the Group, and whilst the President did not know him personally he believed that all who knew him would testify to his wonderfully quiet demeanour and his zeal for all things heritage. It had always been the intention to record Willie's memories onto tape and thanks went to James Findlay and John Rennie for capturing a flavour of these memories when they filmed Willie late last year. Cy presented a couple of photographs of Willie Taylor and of earlier members of the Group. The Group then took a few moments of quiet contemplation to reflect on Willie's passing.

Fishermen's Hall, Portknockie. Member Steve Liley spoke of his research into the history and subsequent restoration of the Fisherman's Hall, Portknockie. There had been an early settlement at Portknockie with evidence of Iron Age and Pictish fortifications on the promontory above the harbour known as Green Castle. It is believed that the village we know today was founded in the late 17th century. Apparently it was in 1677 that the first houses built by a fisher family from Cullen. By 1749 the Earl of Findlater had set up the first school on the site of what is now the Seafield Hall which itself was built in 1911. The present school was opened in 1876, just ahead of the railway which arrived in 1886.

The villagers had long sought a harbour and they subscribed a considerable sum towards its cost (£4,000). Lady Seafield gave a contribution of £1,000, but it was only after repeated application to the Scottish Fishery Board that a grant of £6,500 was agreed such that the full cost of £10,500 was finally secured. Work started in 1888 before being formally opened by Lady Seafield in April 1890. At the height of the herring fishing boom about 100 sailing boats crowded its harbour, many of them being of the famous Zulu design. Between 1883 and 1905 some of these boats were being built in the village and, as late as 1929, it was still being used by up to 58 steam drifters.

Focusing on the Fishermen's Hall, it has a place in the village where the village numbering system starts although this in no way suggested that the building was one of the earliest built. However, it is believed that the Hall was constructed about 1820. Thanks to the work done by member Jim Illingworth it was discovered that Portknockie has had 3 separate numbering systems, a discovery that thankfully made sense of families apparently moving considerably and inexplicably within the village.

Up until 1919 the houses were known by their Seafield Estate plot number, however, for some unknown reason the plot numbers were changed around 1873. The earliest censuses of 1841 and 1851 did not use any number but numbers did appear from 1861 onwards. Street names, with all new house numbers, were eventually introduced in 1919. There is only one house in the village that still retains above the door one of its earlier numbers (No 43 Portknockie). Originally the Hall was No 5 Portknockie, changing in 1873 to number 9 and later, by chance, was to stay No 9, now of Patrol Place.

The building was first used as a coal store for the village, managed initially by the newly formed Society of Fishermen which came into existence in 1819 and at its inception received marked encouragement and substantial assistance from Lord Seafield who granted a free site for the coal store, and bore the cost of a causeway round it.

By a stroke of exceedingly good luck, only last year Arnold Pirie received a package of papers from a lady from Aberdeen who had found in an old chest of drawers, under the lining paper, a number of documents concerning the Coal Society – a remarkable discovery since the documents made clear the history of the building itself. It was noted that in 1819 the village consisted of a small collection of thatched cottages with a number of small boats drawn up on the natural creeks on their return from line fishing. The Hall was originally described as a long low building which was covered with a roof of thatch.

Long before steam vessels, the coal came in on chartered sloop-rigged craft. Coal was considered a local luxury at the time and so families considered themselves fortunate if they were a member of the Society. On arrival of the coal boat the Clerk of the Society instructed the carters of the district to attend the ship and when the required deliveries had been made to members, the surplus was taken to the coal store.

After 20 years the Society grew sufficiently to seek a room of their own where the members could meet and transact business. In 1842 the thatch roof was removed and the walls heightened, with an external stairway constructed against the south gable, and a slate roof added – it was at this time that it adopted the name of Fishermen's Hall. The Society also changed its name to the Fishermen's Coal Society. In 1902 large improvements were again undertaken. It was gutted out and relined with pitch pine and the roof was made a couple of feet higher still. The walls were decorated and a small kitchen provided.

Members of the Society paid 5/- annually for the first 20 years, and 2/6d for the second twenty, after which they were entitled to free membership. The principle benefits to members were coals at cost price, and the payment of £3 for funeral expenses at the death of either husband or wife - a sum thought sufficient for the purpose at that time. At the Society's AGM in January 1911 the issue of life-long membership was discussed. Bearing in mind free membership after 40 years of subscriptions it was noted that there were several long-livers among them – one had died recently who had been a member for 60 years. At that meeting Mr John Bruce, merchant, was elected president in succession to Mr David Slater, master joiner, who had held the office for the previous three years. The other office bearers were the Treasurer, the harbour master, Mr James Mair. and with Mr George G Wood, merchant and postmaster, as the Clerk. It was interesting to note that the clerk held his appointment for life or until, as it was bluntly expressed in the old book of Society laws, "he was found to be cheating"! Also at that AGM a committee was appointed to revise its laws, and imposed a smart fine on any member who failed to attend the AGM or who allowed himself a "swear word" during its sitting.

By the early 1930s it seemed that the coal society was winding down, and in the minutes of its meeting on 27th November 1931 it was decided to dissolve the Society, a decision made easier since many fishermen

had moved on to Portsoy, Banff and Macduff leaving debts behind. In February 1933 at a meeting of the town council led by then Provost Bruce, the Fishermen's Hall was gifted to Portknockie by G. G. Wood on behalf of the Fishermen's Coal Society. It was noted that Mr Wood had been the secretary since 1899, some 34 years! Mr Wood and Mr Slater, the previous Provost, had been appointed liquidators of the Society and at a previous meeting two thirds of the members had voted to gift the hall to the town subject to three conditions.

- That the hall would still be named The Fishermen's Hall.
- That if any Society members required the hall for meetings it would be let to them at a charge of 2/4d per night.
- That the Free-masons, who had a lease of the hall for ten years, would continue to rent it for £4.00 per annum.

The ground floor of the Hall was then used to store the council rubbish cart being originally pulled by horses. When mechanised pulling power was introduced by means of a tractor, the wheels were too wide to get through the doors and the masonry was cut crudely, sufficient to let the wheels pass. To the rear of the ground floor was a small store and toilet. Upstairs was the large public hall again with a WC, and also a kitchen. The Hall served for some time as the Town Hall and magistrate's court before these functions were moved to the Free Church Hall on Church Street. The upper storey continued to serve the community as a meeting hall for local Masons and for entertainment such as bingo, teas and dances through to the late 1970s.

Marriages also took place in the Hall, one such recorded was Alexander Slater's marriage to Margaret Goodbrand on 17th March 1859, they went on to have 3 sons and 6 daughters, and by their golden wedding they had some 41 grandchildren!

In July 1994, due to its poor state of repair, the Council eventually put the Hall up for sale, and it sat there deteriorating further until interest stirred in 2002 and it was sold. The renovation of the Hall had caused much frustration and hard work, far more than originally envisaged. The structural state of the walls, especially the south gable, was becoming perilous and needed slow and careful repair to restore its integrity. The building was now nearing completion. Steve remarked that his one real wish would have been to be able to sit and watch how the Hall was built in the first place, how they handled all that stone and timber, how many workers it needed and how long it took – sadly, it seemed the skills of 200 years ago were long lost in this technical, mechanised world.

A Train Ride along the Coast. Cy Pirie introduced a clip of film of the last train journey along the coast from Elgin to Banff. It was fascinating to see through the driver's window the sights and to hear the sounds of the journey, especially passing through Portknockie Station and coming across the Cullen Viaducts and into Cullen Station.

Cullen & Portknockie Photographs. Cy Pirie had set out around the Hall Church a large number of photographs and invited members to take a pencil and note on the pictures the names of people or where and when they were taken etc. In addition he presented on the screen a number of 'new' pictures that attracted considerable debate and recollection. It was intended that these more recently discovered images would be shown during the Group's Summer Exhibition to swap out those pictures that had been exhibited many times.

Date of Next Meeting. The next meeting would be held on Monday 5th March 2012, commencing at 2.00pm in the Hall Church. Arnold Pirie would present Cramond's walk along the Coast.

Steve Liley
Secretary

7 February 2012