

“A WEE KEEK BACK”

BY

JIM CAMPBELL



"CENTRAL AND WEST FIFE LOCAL HISTORY PRESERVATION"
("The Present Preserving the Past for the Future")

24 St Ronan's Gardens – Crosshill – KY5 8BL – 01592-860051
campbell_james@sky.com

Hi,

My hobby is researching the Local History of Central and West Fife and I have come across a great deal of interesting facts concerning the Area during my research – facts that I would like to share with you.

With respect, I thought that the reader might find this following article to be of some interest:-

THE DUNFERMLINE JOURNAL SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 1875.

MINERS HOUSES IN FIFE AND CLACKMANNAN

Part (2)

Dunfermline has a proud history. Its venerable Abbey and Royal ruins might form a tempting theme for one whose commission, more elastic than my own, permitted him to go back to the days of the Bruce. Thirty or forty years however, are all that my historic tether may include, and even this finger length of time I can only deal with a sentence. Within that comparatively brief period Fifeshire has undergone a remarkable transformation by the development of the Railways, and the opening up of the coal pits. Bleak moorlands of that early time are now populous mining villages, to which extensions are almost continually being made, and the modest hamlets of forty years ago have assumed all the bustle and importance of modern burghs, with ale-houses, and churches, and police stations.

In my last letter, I enumerated the villages which I had overtaken during two days driving in Fifeshire, and now proceed to refer to them in the order then indicated, this happening also to be the order in which they were visited. It is perhaps necessary to say that Baldrige Row, to

which I first proceed, is not set down in my list of places. Baldrige Row is connected with Wellwood Colliery, but I rather think that it enjoys no other local patronage or alliance. It is within 20 minutes walk of Dunfermline Cross, but nobody cares to confess it belongs to Dunfermline. It is indeed a most unsavoury place and is only saved from discreditable rivalry with some other Rows I have seen by the proprietor bestowing a little more care upon the houses, which must be somewhere about a hundred years old. A trench has been formed behind the Rows, which keep the interior a trifle drier than it would otherwise be, and ashes laid in the front, terminating in a tile drain, serve to make the doors tidier than one might expect to find them. The interior of some of the houses, however, is enough to make the boldest hold his breath for a time, the people themselves being more to blame for this than the Landlord, although he is not altogether guiltless. Baldrige Row, to state the case frankly, is one of many similar places which should be improved off the face of the earth. In the first house we are introduced to an old woman of fourscore, living in a single apartment which is low in the damp-stained ceiling, badly lighted, and altogether miserable. In her young days she worked in the pits, and is now permitted to sit rent free. Similar places further along the Row bring a rent of 8d a week, and two apartments 4s 6d a month. In the second house, the rain finds its way through the roof above one of the beds, and on a recent wet Saturday the tenant removed her bedding, the "Tick" and the sheets being both wet. Outside the houses there are no conveniences of any kind. The Dunfermline water supply is available at Baldrige Row

Milesmark, a village at a short distance, affords a pleasing contrast to the hamlet we have just left. It consists of The School Row, The Cottage Row, and The Castle, which are also furnished with Dunfermline water. In the School Row there are seven, and in the Cottage Row six houses. They are uniform in style and internal arrangement – large rooms and kitchens, with lofty ceilings, lumpy stone floors, and ample window space on both sides. The rent for such houses is 7s 6d a month. They are very well furnished, several of the rooms having tester beds with Damask curtains, engravings on the walls, and on the tables family Bibles and other books, showing that the people do not belong to the lower class of miners. The Castle is a two-storeyed building, tenanted by the humbler class. At one end of the block, containing some two and twenty houses, is an old ruin which has been made a depository for refuse, and proves a nuisance to the neighbouring tenants. An ashpit has been set down at the opposite end of the houses, from which it is well removed, and its contents are regularly removed. The two flats of the Castle are both reached from the front entrance, two houses on the ground floor being entered at the foot of the inner staircase leading to the upper storey, where there are two tenants. Single apartments with small bed closets are rented at 5s a month. In one of these lives a family of ten, including three grown-up daughters, who are employed at a factory in Dunfermline.

Parknuek, another small mining village, consists of three Rows of one-storey houses. Mrs Greer, who owns a colliery near at hand, is the proprietress of one of the Rows. These are very damp houses, but as the tenants are not called upon to pay rent, they cannot with any grace insist upon repairs being executed. In the second Row, forming a continuation of Mrs Greer's, are 17 houses belonging to the Wellwood Colliery, in much the same condition as those already noticed.

The village of Wellwood, which we next reach, is larger than any we have visited in Fife.

Taking the first Row of stone houses, only occupied in the last three months, we find they are large rooms and kitchens with wooden floors in both apartments. They were well raised from the ground, and appear to be excellent houses. There are no ashpits for the Row. Engine Row, which stands opposite, is of quite a different description. The houses are very old, and 5s 8d a month is charged for two apartments, rent having been exacted for the first time a few weeks ago. The proprietor is endeavouring to repair them, now that the free list is suspended, but little progress has yet been made, and in the meantime his tenantry are in unveiled rebellion. There is a great deal of damp in Engine Row. "What is your floor like?" I said to an elderly woman who was detailing her grievances. "Deil a floor I hae" she said "It's naething but earth, and I hae cloots laid doon and every dagon't thing to keep it dry". I saw the floor, and "every dagon't thing" seemed to be little better than nothing for her purpose. Single apartments at Engine Row are rented at 4s a month. The road in front of the houses was simply a mud hole on the day of my visit. "Palace Row", another of the glories of Wellwood, has been so called, I presume, because it is the very antipodes of what the name suggests. The houses entering from the Main Street are good enough, but those on the lower level at the other side are dark, dirty places and, as may be inferred from their situation, are very damp. For two apartments, a rent of 5s a month is charged. In the "Store Row" I went into some houses of peculiarly narrow construction, one of them having a space of a foot and a half between a small trunk in front of the room bed and the opposite wall. Six of a family reside here, the rent being 3s 4d a month. A woman living in this Row told me that going from home on one occasion from Friday till Monday, she found on her return that water had lodged in her house to a depth of several inches to the detriment of an eight day clock, which she holds in great regard. The "North Square" consists of 23 very good room and kitchen houses, the rent, only recently imposed, being 7s 6d a month.

The pits of Townhill are worked by Mr Stevenson, the lands belonging to the town of Dunfermline. Townhill is a large village, and I believe the morale of the place has been greatly improved under Mr Stevenson's rule. That, however, does not come within the scope of my inquiry. So far as its houses are concerned, Townhill does not stand very high. There are a number of excellent Rows in the village, and quite as many of which it is impossible to speak in terms of approval. Take the Back Row, which first invited out attention as we enter the village. The houses are old and decidedly inferior, with stone floors and damp beds and walls – single apartments are being rented at 3s a month. One of the women told me she had not been a month in Townhill when she found one of her mattresses was rotten with damp. At the end of this Row, which seems to be the worst in the village, are a few houses about three years old, yet even these are not of a high class. The tenants have only the four walls in which to stow away their belongings, "Presses" being apparently regarded as modern superfluities. Ashes and all refuse are laid out in front of the doors, but as they are regularly taken away there is little ground for complaint on this score. In the centre of Townhill we come upon five houses, the property of the miners who occupy them. There may be more of this class, but if so I was unable to discover them. They are good room and kitchen houses, two of stone and the others of brick, they are finished in a superior style. One of the brick houses was built by Mr Stevenson, and purchased from him about six months ago for £150. It was the wife of the proprietor with whom I spoke on the subject, and she was not sure of the exact sum paid. This cost is inclusive of about fifty yards of garden ground at the back. In "Loch Row", the houses are above the level of the roadway, notwithstanding which some of them are not quite free from damp, and the tenants say that they are "sair bothered wi' reek". In front are a capital pavement and drain. The people give Mr Stevenson credit for keeping the roads tidy, but I saw at least one huge ashpit overflowing with filth, set down within a dozen feet or so from the back windows of dwelling houses. The most conspicuous

Rows in Townhill are three painted outside in vermilion, and belonging to the Muircockhall Coal Company. Although the exterior is rather garish, these are among the best houses in Townhill. They are single apartments and rooms and kitchens, the rent for the double ends being 8s 6d a month. Attached to each of the Rows are ashpits, and closets, and coal cellars.

Kingseat, which we afterwards reach, is connected with the Halbeath Coal Company – Messrs Wallace and Henderson. It is a large village which has sprung into existence within the last few years. The houses on the line of the Main Road are owned by private proprietors, but all the others, I was informed, belong to the Company. I only went into two or three, as they are all built on the same principle, and are apparently very good dwellings, although liable to the objection that they are destitute of all needed conveniences. There are no ashpits or closets over the village, as far as I could learn – certainly there are none connected with the Row I visited, and the back ground is very nasty. Good rooms and kitchens here are rented at 6s 8d a month. The water for the village is got from a field near at hand. It is surface water and becomes dirty in rainy weather.

Halbeath, belonging to the Coal Company of that name, is a scrambling village, chiefly built on a hill-side. It is continued down in the valley, and on the opposite slope claims recognition with a few straggling tenements. The best way to deal with the houses at Halbeath would doubtless be to pull them down from roof to basement, but in the meantime it must be admitted that the Company are doing what they can to make them decently habitable, and show how much might be done in such places as Dandy Row and the Red Toon to improve the dwellings of the poor. Wooden floors have been put in some of the frailest, and in other respects the houses have been altered to the better. There is still much damp in many of them, and this will continue to be the case until a thorough system of drainage is carried out.

Crossgates is a large village of old houses tenanted by miners in the employment of the Halbeath, Fordell, and Netherbeath Coal Companies, and is situated in the Parishes of Dunfermline and Dalgetty. This division of responsibility has an unfortunate effect, each proprietor and Parish leaving it to the other to inaugurate much needed improvements. The houses, so far as I saw them, and I was in a good many, are low in the ceilings, badly lighted, and have earthened floors scooped out into what may almost be called mud holes. Coals are kept below the bed, ashes thrown where they must be offensive and open drains within a foot of the doors in one of the Rows lie chocked up and smelling.

Fordell, which is next reached, was represented to me as a model village, belonging to Mr Henderson, of the Fordell Coal Company. Simple candour, however, compels me to say that it is nothing of the kind. It is true that there is one very fine Row of houses which we reach through long kitchen gardens and neatly arranged flower pots. These are room and kitchens entered from the opposite sides of the passage, which is ventilated by doors in front and rear. They are large and well finished houses, the rents being 6s 8d a month. Mr Henderson, I am told, stimulates a love for flowers by offering prizes in summer for the best kept gardens, and I have no doubt the result of the competition thus created an abundance of colours and fragrances; but as there are no outhouses of any kind, the chances are that the odours in warm weather will be unpleasantly mingled. Right opposite this Row is an old range leased by Mr Henderson from the Carron Company. The first house we enter is tenanted by a young man who is confined to bed, his leg having been broken in the pit. It is a “House and a Half”, as it is called, or a kitchen with a stone floor and damp walls, and a room barely seven feet broad, for which a rent of 6d a month is paid. Single apartments along the Row are 5s a month.

They are all well kept, but very damp. Elsewhere is the "Square", in which the houses are quite bad as any we have seen. Scarlet fever has entered one family.

Donibristle, belonging to the Donibristle Coal Company, consists of three old Rows and one new Row. In the first house which I entered in the first Row, I found three children in bed, recovering from scarlet fever. This disease has been specially rife in the opposite Row of new houses, three children having died since the beginning of the year, and others were down with fever on the day of my visit. No grown-up people have been seized, the eldest victim being a boy of nine years, who died. The houses in this Row are all good rooms and kitchens, rented at 7s 8d a month. In one of them a family live – father, and mother, three grown-up sons, four daughters, and a boy. The ground at the back is untidy, the only outhouses being pig-styes and hen coops.

Moss-Road, near Cowdenbeath, is built on moss, which extends for miles around. The houses are comparatively new, rooms and kitchens being 7s 8d a month. Outside are coal cellars for each tenant, and ashpits and closets, the cleanliness which is looked after by a man; the water for Moss-Road comes from a going pit, led into pump wells placed near the ashpits and closets. One sample which I tasted showed slight impurity. The people complain bitterly about the water, and have a fixed belief, in which I do not share, that it is polluted by the neighbouring ashpits.

Cowdenbeath is such a large village that I cannot pretend minutely to describe the houses which chiefly belong to the Cowdenbeath and Lochgelly Coal Companies. A number of them are very old, and the sanitary arrangements of the defective character which is generally applicable to all the Fife villages I have visited. There are also several brick Rows of modern date, and a range of two-storey stone buildings, as yet only partially occupied, belonging to the Cowdenbeath Company, which for internal convenience and the completeness of the arrangements outside, are far and away the best in the whole Country side. On the ground floor, entered from a common highway, the rooms and kitchens (rented at 9s 4d a month) are still damp in the walls, but otherwise are all that could be desired. The walls, as I observed from tenements in the block still in the course of erection, are not lathed, and there is thus the danger of a tendency to permanent dampness. The upper floor is reached by an outside stair at the back of the houses, which are of one and two rooms and kitchen, being quite as roomy as those below. Coal cellars are provided for each tenant, wash houses for every four families, and closets in sufficient number. These are grouped together in one outside building, ventilated from the roof.

The village of Lumphinnans belongs to the Colliery of that name, and consists of continuous Rows of houses, partly of brick and partly of stone, many of which are damp in the back wall, the ground behind being undrained. Piggeries are the only outhouses. Refuse is laid in the Main Road and removed every week. The water supply is objectionable. In winter it is got from a field, and in summer it is carried away from Cowdenbeath, or taken out of any hole where it may be found.

Lochgelly, the last place where I visited in Fife, is a large town with a mixed population. Walking through it, we come on the outskirts to a mining settlement in connection with the Lochgelly Company, and consisting of new brick Rows and old stone houses, either owned or leased by the Company. The former are rooms and kitchens, with wash houses and other conveniences. They are very good houses, and being well raised from the ground, promise to be dry and comfortable when they have been occupied for some time. The old stone houses

are much complained off in regards damp, and would be greatly the better for immediate repair. Water is got from a general pump, but is scarce during dry summers. There are a number of private wells in the village, and I was told that two summers ago the miners' wives had to pay for every "rake" they got.