

**Peter McLean, Bonhill
Private, Seaforth Highlanders**



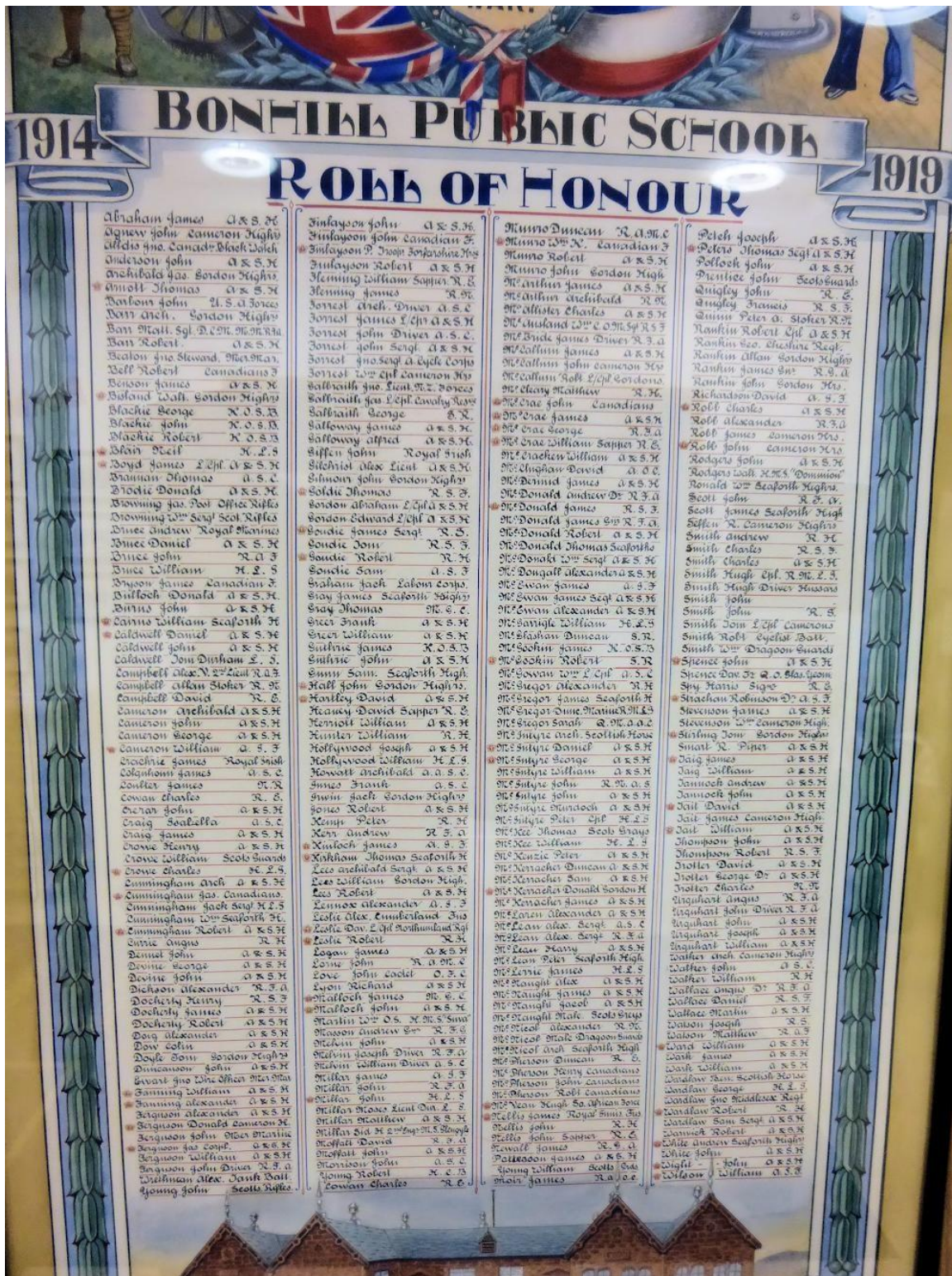
We're grateful to Catherine Cameron for providing this account of her father's service in the Seaforth Highlanders during WW1. There are a couple of interesting features of Peter McLean's story. Firstly that he was called up at all in 1918, because on the face of it he was doubly protected by the Conscription Act of 1916: 1) he was an engineer, albeit an apprentice one, and 2) he was employed in the shipbuilding industry in Denny's of Dumbarton. It is as good an indication as any of how high the British Expeditionary Force's losses were in 1918 that they ignored the exemption rules because of the desperate need for recruits to replace losses. In fact British losses in 1918 were the highest of any year in the war – about 1 million casualties.

The second notable aspect of Peter's life is that apart from a short period immediately after he left school when he worked at Argyll Motor Works and the year or so he spent in the Army, he only ever worked for one employer, Denny's – he worked there for 48 years. He was therefore present at the demise of both Argyll Motors and Denny's and there must have

been very few people who could claim that – not that anyone would want to. But how far away a lifelong career with one firm seems in industry today.

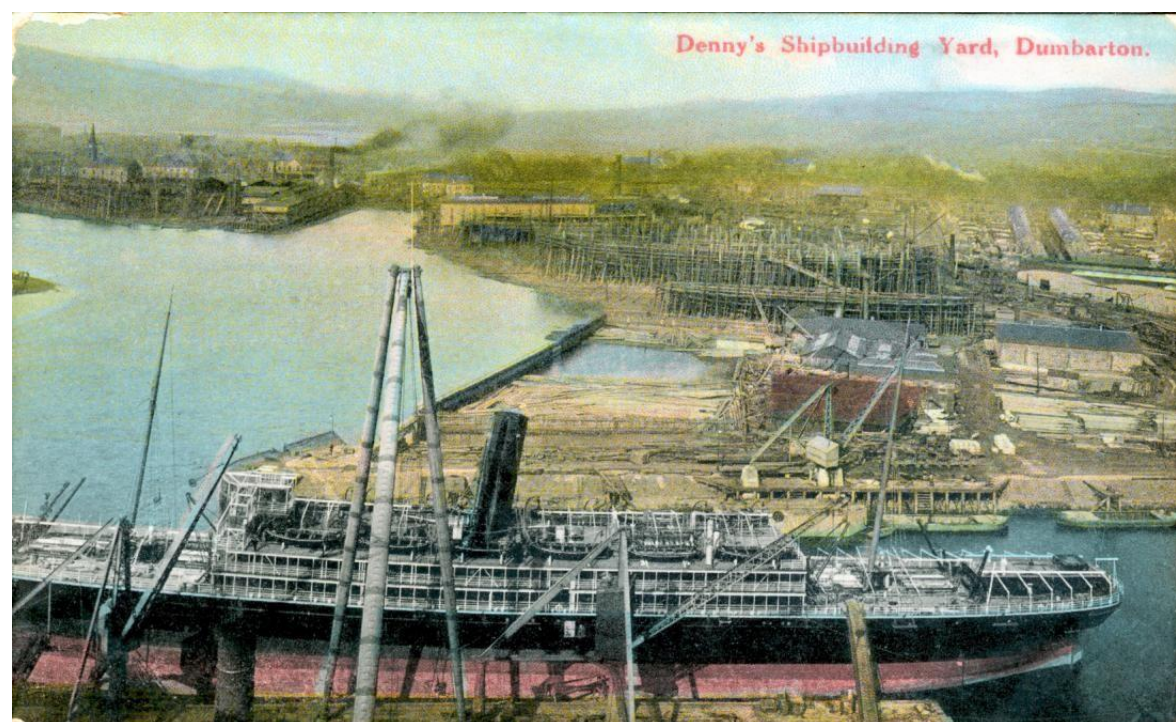
Catherine Cameron herself must be part of a very select group of people who had a parent, as opposed to a grandparent, who worked at Argyll Motors in Alexandria.

Peter McLean was born in June 1899 in Bonhill and was educated at Bonhill Primary School where his name is on the Roll of Honour, which originally hung on the walls of the old school, but which was safely carried across the road to the new school building where it is on display in the entrance hall.



Bonhill Primary School Roll of Honour in the new school building

Peter was too young to join the Army when war broke out in August 1914, so he got himself a job in the Engine Shop of Denny's shipbuilding yard in Dumbarton, which was located in the Artizan where the Health Centre now is, and started his engineering apprenticeship, probably at 16 but maybe earlier because of wartime needs.



Peter was living at Dillichip Terrace Bonhill when he was called up into the Army in 1918, aged 18. Conscripted along with him were a group of fellow engineering apprentices from Denny's Engine Shop in Dumbarton.

The young recruits were drafted into the Seaforth Highlanders and travelled up to Fort George just outside Inverness for a brief training at the Seaforth's regimental depot before being taken by train to one of the Channel Ports and on by boat to Belgium. Although we don't know for certain, it's most likely that Peter was serving in the 2nd Battalion of the Seaforths. Peter recounted his first night in a billet in the battle zone, spent on a lower bunk of a three tier bunk bed: as the older soldiers returned from their duties they chose the higher levels and shook their clothes on the rookies below to remove the lice. Peter was told not to remove his boots as the enemy were not far ahead and the men would have to move at any minute.

He had arrived at a critical time on the Western Front in 1918. The German attack which began on March 21st 1918, the "Kaiserschlacht", was the German's final attempt to achieve a breakthrough and win the war. To begin with, they made substantial gains along almost the whole of the BEF front, inflicting heavy casualties on the British Army to such an extent that the Fifth Army ceased to exist for all practical purposes and was replaced by a newly-reconstituted Fourth Army, to which Peter's unit belonged.

The Germans were halted after a month and steadily, inexorably pushed back amid very heavy fighting from May 1918 onwards, until their collapse led to the Armistice in November 1918. Peter and his colleagues were part of that fighting in the trenches with only no-man's land between his battalion and the enemy. However, they were winning and their steady advance took them to the outskirts of the city of Namur, south-east of Brussels, which had fallen to the Germans in the opening days of the war four years before. He had many terrifying experiences but on 11.11.1918, just outside of Namur, the battalion were advised to take off hard helmets and wear Glengarries! The Armistice had been signed!

Peter remained in Belgium with the regiment until the early part of 1919 when he was demobilised and returned home to Bonhill.



Dillichip Terrace in the early 1900's, still quite recognisable to-day

Thereafter he married Jenny McDermid, who is pictured below on the right of the group standing outside the shop in which she worked – the Co-op Dairy next door to the Albert Hotel at 295 Main Street Alexandria; it later became Mitchell's newsagents.



They set up home in Alexandria and had two daughters, but like so many other soldiers who had seen heavy fighting, he spoke little about the war.

Peter resumed his apprenticeship in Denny's and qualified as an engineer. As these pictures show he remained a part of the Denny's team of engineers for the rest of his career. In the first photo below he is working in the Heavy Turning Shop in 1928 and is seated at the extreme right of the front row of seats, with his arms folded.



Five years later he has moved to the Light Turning Shop. He is seated in the middle of the front row behind the board, with a flat cap and tie.



He must have seen many changes at Denny's Engine Shop and in the yard over the years as the photo below shows. It is of the Sarah Bowater fitting out about 1955 and was taken from a very similar spot on the Castle Rock from the 1910 photo.



(Thanks to Jim Biddulph for this photograph)

On the outbreak of World War 2 in 1939 Peter was too old to be called up and instead he served in the Home Guard in the Vale. His Home Guard duties included target practice up at the Auchencarroch Shooting Range (known locally as "The Targets"), just off Auchencarroch Road at the end of the Golf Course.

Peter stayed with Denny's until it closed in 1964, when he retired. He had many years to enjoy his retirement before he died in 1980, 62 years after his exploits on the Western Front.