

The Balloch Fair

One of the highlights of the year for a very long time was the Balloch Fair, which, as a market for horses, was virtually a national institution. Horses were brought to the Fair from all around the country, and, with buyers also travelling from sizeable distances away, large sums of money regularly changed hands. Locally the Fair was one of three permanent annual holidays, the Bonhill Sacramental Feast Day and New Year's Day being the other two, although the Fair usually lasted for more than only one day, with travelling being so much of a problem in these times. Many small dealers would arrive from Glasgow and Paisley a day or two earlier, seeking shelter in some of the poorer houses in the neighbourhood, while the mass of larger stall holders would travel overnight. There was only one way to travel from Glasgow and that was on a morning steamer to Dumbarton, for there was still a five mile hike after the boat had moored and a valuable part of the day could have been lost.

The day of the Fair was truly a sight to behold, with numerous show caravans scattered around. Tents selling beer and whisky were also studded about the field, for in those days there was no forced Excise prohibition. A few seats some glasses and a jar of whisky, and anyone could become a spirits dealer for the day, and many indulged in such a money making escapade. The great day, for which everybody had been keenly awaiting had arrived and the children, armed with their pennies, which had been considered a rather large amount in those days, had gone to bed early the night before, in preparation for the great adventure.

It was a wonderful spectacle, watching the comings and goings of the many vendors with their stall furniture on barrows or on carts, the Candy men, the Apple men, Cheap Johnnies, Roly Polies and dealers of in numerous grades. The horses came not in alone or even in pairs but in droves creating much interest among the grown-ups, who all pretended to have great skill and knowledge about horse flesh. On this day, all the public works in the Vale were closed and by noon the Fair was in full swing with virtually all the inhabitants of the area in attendance there. Much interest was also concentrated on the ferry and Adam Walker had a fine day of it with his boats which tested all the strength and energy that he could enlist into his service. From morning until night they were kept going, the large boats crammed full of horses and people and under such circumstances the passage was sometimes precarious if not downright dangerous. Indeed one time a boat did capsize drowning several people including a Highland drover whose body was not recovered for some days, but his dog, which had managed to reach land, for two days afterwards ran along the shore howling confusedly, so much so that the incident continued to be the prime topic of conversation.

A good deal of business was also done at the local inn where a fiddler was employed to keep the singing and dancing going till a very late hour. Towards the afternoon the proceedings became extremely animated with the highway from the ferry up towards the field lined on both sides with stalls of all kinds, from confectionery to boots and shoes, cutlery and saddlery. A story was told about two brothers from Drymen, who, needing a new pair of shoes, measured the length of their feet the previous evening by means of a pair of tongs laid along the floor. Next day, on their way to the Fair, they discovered that they had forgotten their foot measurements and decided that they had to go back for them!

The perils of the Fair were, it might have been supposed, sufficiently dangerous to neutralise the pleasures. Honest and decent men and their wives and children could be seen struggling in consternation through the crowds and making continuous efforts to avoid horses and vehicles. Anxious and excited mothers would be running from spot to spot, dragging their candy chewing children with them to corners of safety to wait until the opportunity offered for a new attempt at progress.

Such, then, was the Balloch Fair and the present day Balloch Highland Games, which attracts visitors from all over the world, must surely be a rather tame affair when compared to that gathering.

THE BALLOCH FAIRIES

This tale concerns two brothers, Iain Og McLaren and Findlay McLaren. He was a hardworking man and expected the same approach to life from his family and, he therefore taught his two sons well in the skills of sheep farming and all that was associated with it. Before he died, Iain Mor had acquired some land from a neighbouring farmer who was much nearer death than he was and, when he eventually succumbed, the two brothers were equally catered for, in that each of them had a working croft.

As time went on the two brothers married and prospered and, in the process, they both gained a great reputation as breeders and judges of good quality sheep. Every time they went to the markets of Falkirk or Jamestown they could guarantee they would get a top price for their stock, not only because of the quality of the meat from the animals, but the wool was second to none in the area.

Each of these markets had a main sale of the year and, one year in particular, the brothers decided on Jamestown since it seemed that they would gain more there. There were no animal floats in those days so the journey had to be made on foot by beast and man alike and, on route, they stopped at a cousin's house on the shore of Loch Lomond just to the north of the Village of Gartocharn. Whilst there, the sheep were able to graze for a short time and the men enjoyed a light repast of oatcakes and cheese, washed down with a flagon of ale and enjoy the exchange of local gossip. Then they were once again on their way along the Loch shore heading for Balloch and thence to the Jamestown market.

Their sheep, as was to be expected, made top prices and the profit was even more than they had anticipated. It was essential though that they made some purchases which were necessary for them to continue their life on the crofts, some of which they had to arrange to have delivered such as fencing, staves, heavy sacks of meal and flour and the like and, some of which they would be able to carry on back packs. When that business had been attended to only then could they see to their inner selves.

Whilst consuming a very favourable meal at a local hostelry they also partook of a few drams of some rather fiery 'Uisghe Beatha' or Whisky as it is more popularly known. They were, of course, regaled by several friends and acquaintances whom they had met over the years of attending the market and eventually, late in the afternoon they decided that it was time for them to make their

departure, it was after all, a long march back to their crofts. So, strapping their packs to their backs, off they set.

Their journey was just a reversal of the Southward route, along the East bank of the River Leven, by the extremity of Boturich to where the Loch spewed out into the source of the river, then swing round the shore of the Loch and head for their cousin's house once more where they had arranged for a boat to ferry them across the Loch to Balmaha and avoid the extra miles on foot. As they rounded the point, young Findlay complained that he "could fairly tackle something cool to drink and slake my thirst and cool this fire in my belly". The whisky was, by now, playing up within his stomach. His elder brother was not as sympathetic as Findlay would have liked.

Barely five minutes later as they trudged along in the still warm early evening they espied a woman approaching from the opposite direction. She was neither old nor young, dressed in a full skirt, colourful blouse and a black front lacing bodice and on her feet were light pumps. She was carrying, across her shoulders, a wooden yoke, from the ends of which hung two pails to one was fixed a lade and, to the other, a small bowl.

"Oh my goodness gentlemen" she said, in a light, musical voice, "You both look very tired. You must have had a very stressful day. Would you like to sample my buttermilk. I am sure it will take the thirst and weariness from you". Findlay could scarcely contain his joy and took up the offer immediately. The ladle and bowl were detached and a liberal helping poured. Findlay gulped down the soothing liquid in one continuous swallow. Iain Og however, was not hesitant. There was something just not quite right about the whole set up, it all seemed too much of a coincidence as well as which, for all the years that he and his brother had been travelling this road to the market, never before had they met with anyone like this 'apparition' with the singing voice.

With a gay enticing smile she said, "Would you not like to rest awhile gentlemen? My home is not far away and you would be most welcome". Once again Findlay was inclined to be rash and set out along a little path towards a small glen. Iain, on the other hand, held back, he couldn't remember ever seeing this path, nor was he aware of any glen. Nevertheless, Findlay was desperate to get some rest and let the effects of the whisky wear off before continuing with their journey. Iain Og followed on somewhat warily and even nervously.

Their guide soon swung a little to the left and then within less than a hundred yards they came upon a glade within which grew the most luscious grass either of the two men had even seen. In the middle of the glade was a grassy knoll which stood about eight feet high and perhaps ten feet in circumference. Into the side of the knoll there was an arch shaped door which stood ajar.

Immediately Iain Og's misgivings grew and he felt in his pocket for one of the purchases they had made earlier in the day – an iron nail. He was more and more convinced that this strange lady was one of the 'Wee Folk'. Now, it is well known that the 'Wee Folk' have amazing powers. They are not all dainty little creatures with gossamer wings on which they flit gaily around. Indeed, no. They can portray themselves as whatever takes their fancy. So, in his hand Iain gripped not just one nail, but two, one for himself and the other to give to his brother at the first opportunity. Out of necessity rather than keenness, he reluctantly entered the knoll after his brother, who nonchalantly passed through the doorway.

They found themselves in a narrow passage leading to a room at the far end from which was coming the sound of music, wild frenzied music the like of which neither of them had ever heard in their lives before. Findlay was immediately caught up by the sound and was already skipping towards the room.

Iain Og gasped as he entered. The chamber, although contained with a comparatively small knoll, was about twenty feet square but with slightly rounded corners and the cacophonous noise of the music and the squealing and hooching was almost ear splitting. Along the full length of one wall was a table set with the most amazing foodstuffs. Meats of all kinds, jellies and cakes adorned the table. Now, it has to be remembered that Findlay had consumed a large draft of the buttermilk and it was obviously having the desired effect. He was dancing and jigging around the room, much to the delight of the occupants, who goaded him on with their stamping feet and clapping hands. On and on he danced. Round and round he whirled, now even stopping when he sampled the wonderful fare on the table.

Some time elapsed, with the young man still dancing when Iain Og pretended to stumble against the door, which was firmly shut. As he gained his composure, he surreptitiously pushed the nail into the woodwork of the door and stood with his back to it concealing the nail. There was neither latch nor handle on the firmly closed door!

At the first chance, he grabbed for the still whirling Findlay and thrusting an iron nail into his open hand took to his heels, dragging his protesting brother with him. Once outside that enchanted place, they kept on running to put as much distance between them and the "Wee Folk" as possible.

By the time they reached their cousin's house they were exhausted and Findlay was gibbering incoherently with an uncontrollable stammer. Iain Og explained to his cousin what had taken place, but received peculiar glances for his pains. Although there was no doubting Findlay's condition.

It was three worrying and wearisome days before the fever broke and a further two before Findlay was considered fit enough to be ferried across but, from that day until his death, Findlay McLaren never again uttered an intelligible word!

THE BAWBEE BRIDGE

Wednesday, the 15th of May, 1895 was a day which marked an important point in the history of the Vale of Leven. For almost sixty years the inhabitants had been paying a toll for the privilege of crossing the Bonhill and Balloch bridges, and all efforts to get rid of this levy had proved fruitless, but at long last it was agreed to scrap the toll completely and that Wednesday, at noon was the appointed time for the last toll to be lifted. A very large crowd gathered to witness this most historic event. Jamie, the toll collector, stuck to his post until the very last second, but gave the honour of lifting the very last bawbee to James McIntyre, a smith in of the local textile works, who had actually lifted the very first one when the Bridge was opened in 1836.

It was originally intended that a celebration procession should take place in the Cricket Park, from which it would march across the Bridge into Bonhill, but the risk of such a great number crossing at one time was pointed out and after some discussion, arrangements were made for the procession to

form up in a field at Ladyton farm at 3 o' clock in the afternoon. The gathered assembly was almost one and a half miles long and finally got under way a full hour later than anticipated. A long line of carts headed the procession and represented such firms as John Anderson and Son, a well known Alexandria baker, the vale of Leven Co-op. John McPhie had a lorry smartly turned out with evergreens and a Turkey Red cloth, a huge tea pot at the front and a jelly pan at the back.

Bryden the Wood Merchant had two carts decorated with fir trees, a circular saw and some cut wood demonstrating their trade. Mr Glen, a grocer, had a young lad smartly rigged out in military uniform driving his cart, whilst a lorry, looking like a barber's shop was driven by hairdresser, Mr Leckie. Great amusement was caused by the van of Mr Sand, the Butcher, who had a small pig mounted on a bicycle, and members of Pinders Circus brought up the rear with a festive theme. The walk round Balloch took nearly two hours and, when the procession had passed Bonhill there had been a rush of people wanting to cross the Bridge, so that police had an anxious time seeing that no harm came to anyone.

A half holiday had been declared and it seemed that everyone had gathered at the Cricket Park to hear the bands and speeches, which told the history of the various attempts to free the Bridges. It was mentioned the May, 15th would long be remembered in Alexandria and that it was also hoped that a new bridge would soon be built between Bonhill and Alexandria. The existing bridge, the crowd was told was akin to a man with a heart condition, it could go down at any moment or it could last for a few years more.

The first thing the Road Trustees did when they took over the Bridge was to give it a coat of white paint. It was not until February, 1898 that the new one, [which has since been replaced], was opened, taking over from the Bawbee Bridge.

The late Mr John Agnew, in his book, 'The Story of the Vale' has pictures of the Bawbee Bridge and the Toll Board which used to be displayed there.

The Hall

Long ago it was the done thing to have your wedding reception in the side rooms of the Public Hall. The happy couple were usually lifted and driven round the Vale in a large horse drawn carriage, decorated with white trimmings.

A story was told in the Vale of one man, who, on seeing his tenth daughter married, went down on his knees and earnestly prayed, "Now, oh Lord, let thy servant depart in peace!"

The great thing at these weddings was to prevent the couple from 'joukin' awa' without a doing'. This generally consisted of pelting the pair with rice and old 'bauchles' [shoes] as all this took place in the days before confetti and artificial flowers. The following morning the couple would catch the 8:56 a.m train to Glasgow for a one day honeymoon, an afternoon at the pantomime perhaps and then a meal and a visit to another show then back home by the last train to the Vale. On the next day, Sunday, the blushing bride and her new husband would walk down the aisle trying to appear nonchalant, but usually without much success.

It is also interesting to note the kinds of dances at weddings in those days, Polkas, Waltzes, Petronellas, Vasuviienne, locally known as the 'Vasoovianna' Haymakers Reel, Quadrilles Lancers Floo'ers o' Edinburgh, Eightsome Reels and many others. How many people could even attempt half of these in present times? Every now and then the men would go outside for a smoke and a chance to change their paper collar, which, by this time had become as soft and limp as pulp. The dancing would go on until around four o' clock in the morning.

The Christie Minstrels, Troupe often played to full houses in the public Hall. Try to imagine a stage with a big half circle of chairs, covered in white linen. The lights would go up and a group of entertainers, all with their faces blackened, would take to the stage. The Master of Ceremonies would call out, "Be seated, gentlemen" and to a tapping and shaking of tambourines, the entertainers would sit down. Their songs were generally of a sentimental nature, but were always beautifully sung with sweet harmonies, and they told jokes, all of which had a local flavour. For example, the Master of Ceremonies would ask, "What is the difference between a greyhound and Carman Hill?" The answer would come immediately, "One's a fast dog and the other is a slope up!" This would evoke a great round of applause from the audience, and some more enthusiastic shaking of the tambourines. Among the troupes which entertained there were 'Vestries' Bernard Queen's, Matthew Brothers Sam Hughes, the Livermore Brothers and the Dennystown and Vale Minstrels.

The annual horticultural Show always created a great interest, as did the Caged Bird Show. One enthusiastic winner of the Bird Show boasted to a friend, "See yon canary, Willie? Well, last night Ah pit it through ma wife's waddin' ring." His friend retorted, "Huh, that's nothin'. A'body kens that your wife's fingers are as thick as ma wrist!!"

Another popular entertainer at the Hall was Sloman, the bird whistler, whose imitation of birds was said to be absolutely wonderful. Revival meetings were also held in the hall by Moodie and Sankey, assisted by the Reverend Thomas Collins of Bonhill, the Reverend James Allison of Bridge Street Church and the Reverend William Sutherland of Bank Street Free Church. Among those who acted as helpers were A E Orr-Ewing, who went to China as a missionary, Tom Baird who also went to China and a Miss Sinclair who went to South Africa as a missionary. Moodie's last revival meeting was held in March 1892 in Dumbarton Burgh Hall.

Everyone who visits the Vale Hall these days hopes that theirs will be a full house, whilst in the old days you hoped that there would be plenty of room for you when you arrived.

TALES OF THE VALE

Over the centuries, Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age man; Britons, Romans and Gaels, monks, landowners farmers and peasants and, latterly, industrial managers and workers have come to and lived out their lives in the glaciated valley that separates Loch Lomond from the River Clyde. Dalmonach means 'Monk's Field', and in the middle ages monks from Paisley Abbey ran a ferry across the River Lven and fished for salmon at Linnbrain Hole. At that time the whole area was under the sway of the Earls of Lennox, with the rest of the population being in varying degrees in subservience to them. Within this feudal social structure a system of peasant farming had emerged and was to last for centuries.

When the Earldom of Lennox came to an end, a small number of principal landowners came to prominence within the area. Notably they were the Smollets of Bonhill, the Colquhouns of Luss and the Lindsays. A somewhat larger number of small proprietors made up the hereditors. Most of the people were tenants of the Laird.

This would have been the state of affairs around the time of the mid sixteen hundreds. Some old place names still survive and can easily be discerned. Some have different spellings from the original, for example, Dalquhurn, Ladyton, Napierston, Tullichewan and by no means least, Kirk of Bonhill. The last is of course originally spelt 'Bunile' and is from the Gaelic and means either bend, foot or house of the burn. It has nothing whatsoever to do with a hill. Many of the locals, to this day, omit the 'h' from the pronunciation of the name. Bonhill is the name of the parish which covered most of the Vale of the Leven, and which was extended around the time in question North Westward towards Arden and North Eastward towards Boturich. The Renton part of the Vale belongs to Cardross parish.

In the mid seventeenth century, and for a considerable period after, most of the inhabitants derived a precarious living from the land under conditions virtually the same as those in Highland crofting communities. In charters names such as Napierston represented certain lands with stated boundaries. For the ordinary people they meant huddles of 'biggins'. stone walled but and bens with smoke blackened turf roofs. These were dwellings of cottars and small tenant farmers and of their livestock. The cottars worked for the tenant farmers who paid rent to the landowners. The tenants would have the advantage of a strip of the communal ground in which to grow barley and oats, the latter being ground at the mill. The Mill of Haldane and Balloch Mill, the latter at modern day Jamestown, were examples of mills which had long existed. Cattle were sold at Autumn fairs or slaughtered at Martinmas for salting. The few sheep would provide the farmers with wool which the women would spin, waiting then for the webster to come round with his loom to weave the cloth. These were the custom weavers, another small group within the community. The resulting cloth was the proverbial 'home-spun' which the tailor would, in his turn, stitch into rudimentary garments. Country blacksmiths and shoemakers plied their trade. Bad harvests, disease and pestilence pushed many people into early graves, and it is hardly surprising that the population numbered, at this time, about three hundred and fifty souls.

Round about a hundred and twenty years later, in what might be considered a transitional stage between a community based arranged husbandry and one of fully fledged industrial activity with peripheral more sophisticated farming, some fine mansions were built, such as Levenside, later to be known as Strathleven House and Broomielea, later Bromley, and there is much evidence of tree planting. The age of estate and agriculture improvement had begun and was to continue. Estates such as Tullichewan, Balloch and Strathleven [Levenside] were beginning to take on a prosperous look and some of the small farms had doubtless already disappeared, or were about to be merged to form larger ones. The agricultural labourers who were obliged to help the farmers in the larger farms came from the cottar, and dispossessed tenant farmer class. Perhaps more significant, however, and more specific to the Vale, are the early bleach fields and print fields. Government subsidy in the early eighteenth century had encouraged the setting up of bleaching establishments. The first to be carried on the Vale in any notable scale was at Dalquhurn in the early seventeen hundreds on the site shortly after was to be exploited by the famous firm of William Stirling and

Sons. The activities of this firm were responsible for the creation of the village of Renton. The pure, fast flowing waters of the River Leven were ideal for such ventures.

The Leven print field was the earliest print works in the Vale, and was later known as Levenfield. The Cordale print field began around 1770 and was the second. In the first three decades of the nineteenth century the Vale was still in a period of transition and a large number of the working population still derived their living from the land. The new village of Alexandria was popularly referred to as 'The Grocery'. This was in reference to a shop which stood near the large oak tree which grew near the site of the present day fountain. Alexandria did not have a complete street then. There was only a small indiscriminate scatter of houses.

Jamestown, which had up till then only been referred to as Damshead of Balloch, was by this time, growing with the development of the Levenbank print works. Renton had, by now, become a flourishing community, with an identity very much separate from that of the rest of the Vale. In those days the people's houses were lit by tallow, candle or oil lamp. The houses themselves, would still mostly be small cottages, although the two storey building had already appeared for the working people. Tiled roofs were becoming more common. However, the peat reek would still be a feature of the atmosphere. The print work buildings would be of native stone. The large brick buildings would be of Victorian structure later and much more modest in size than their successors. The fields adjacent to the 4 print works were still sometimes used for open air bleaching purposes and also used for grazing cattle. The inhabitants were probably beginning to have a greater sense of community interest, as their locale began to take on a status of some industrial significance in the country. However, there were still no trains, no bridges over the Leven except at Dumbarton and only ferries at Bonhill and Balloch and older men, such as Patrick McAllister, the miller at Mill of Balloch could still be seen clad in Highland plaid. Many fishermen caught trout and salmon in the river, although the days of industrial pollution were not too far ahead.

The annual Moss o' Balloch fair, with its cattle dealing, its stalls and its acrobatic and other entertainment's brought joy and elation to the onlookers. There were also some unscheduled 'fisticuffs', which were also enjoyed. These latter clashes were very often the direct descendants of the Clan brawls between the McFarlanes, the McGregors, the Colquhouns and others. These had graced the proceedings well into the previous century. These early eighteen hundreds were years when there were no temperance or tee total movements. Even the schoolmaster was known to give his pupils a small measure of the native beverage on special occasions. This was done with the full approval of the parents of the children. There was no hearse, and bodies, covered by 'mort cloths' were carried on a stretcher of stakes to the cemetery by men working in a relay system. It was a period when beards were few, and men of the parish took it in turn to watch over the kirkyard at night, in order to protect the dead from resurrectionists. The lairds and industrial masters were probably highly respected even by a growing workforce already showing signs of a political awareness and radicalism which were later to grow and the industrial masters tended to be quite close to the employees.

James Kibble at Dalmonach Print works had been known to have taken his Bible around the factory to give readings to the workmen. There were many dissenters from the established Church, but, it seems not much rancour.

The steam boat had arrived and excursions on Loch Lomond were made from 1817 by the 'Marion'. Sometimes she left from the river at Balloch and sometimes the passengers were ferried to her in scows and in winter months she was moored in the Levenbank works lade.

The country smithy still did good trade, there would still be a few country shoemakers and scattered about were many inviting drinking howffs. Gabbards plied on the river taking timber from Loch Lomond side to Clydeside in Glasgow. Big changes occurred in the late 1820's and 1830's in the run up to the Victorian period.

Turkey red dye was introduced to the various works and Calico printing received a big boost. When Ferryfield and Croft and Gare bleach works were turned into print fields and the innovations took a hold at Cordale a huge influx of workers from other areas occurred. Many Highlanders, particularly from the upper part of Loch Lomondside and Argyle settled in the Vale. Some of these had probably been seasonal workers before. Englishmen, skilled in the new techniques came as managers and foremen, especially from the Manchester area. Journeymen came from other print fields in Stirlingshire, Glasgow and Renfrewshire. The population then grew rapidly and was further enhanced by the Irish migration of the 1840's and after. The earlier Irish immigrants came, desperate to escape from the dreadful famine and destitution in that country at that time. They laboured in the print works or in the flourishing building trade. They helped to build the railway which was being constructed between Bowling and Balloch from 1847 and 1850. Few returned to their native land and their descendants spread into all walks of life, the Roman Catholic community in the Vale being large to this day. The religious differences between the Presbyterians began to take on a degree of gravity bigger than before. This was in common with other areas. This culminated in the destruction of 1843 and the subsequent of the formation of the 'Free Church'. The Victorian moral influence was on its way. Temperance movements began to flourish and, somewhere along the line, beards began to grow.

The industry of the area spread, the works being increased in size and many coming under new ownership. One or two smaller, less adaptable works disappeared. Generally, however, the mid-nineteenth century was a period of growth. Much house building took place, a lot of which would disappear in twentieth century slum clearances. A few of these lower terraces, though, remain even today. The number of schools and churches increased. Alexandria developed into the largest township of the five. Its streets were complex and its many shops and small business flourished. Bridges had been built to replace the ferries at Bonhill and Balloch, and the railway, with its branches into the works, and the consequent large scale movement of goods into and from the works facilitated the expansion of industry. It also increased the mobility of the workforce.

At the time of peak Victorian enterprise Renton and Jamestown had become fully fledged villages and Alexandria a veritable small town. Bonhill village had extended Southwards adjacent to Dillichip works. Jamestown had spread South adjacent to the Milton works. A large number of churches were in evidence. The surrounding estates for the merchants were prospering. About this time a great deal of land near the core of the villages was feud and many large and cottage style villas appeared. Streets such as Middleton street [later nick-named by the wags as 'Pea brose an' pianna Street] had been created to accommodate a growing middle-class of managers, professional men and shop owners. Also many rows of fine two storeyed terraced houses, higher than those of forty

years earlier, began to be seen in varying degrees of elegance or plainness , to accommodate the ever increasing number of journeymen, foremen and even some of the labourers.

The chemistry of dyeing and printing had become more sophisticated and the mechanics, more complicated. Machine printing had more or less taken over from the block printing of the earlier process.

The retail trade flourished, in particular the retail side of the Co-operative Society and a few large bakeries came into being. Schools came under the new School Board and sanitation was gradually improved along with the water supply and gas lighting had arrived, although contemporary newspapers suggested that there was little satisfaction as to the amount of lamps allocated to each street.

Recreational activities took on a new dimension with football providing a long lasting passion for many and more than its fair share of national success to some local teams. Many were the teats of sporting prowess achieved then and later by natives and residents of the Vale. Countless clubs and societies existed reflecting the social, political, religious and cultural interests of the population. Political awareness was growing. The Vale, having shown a large support for the chartist movement earlier in the century, and now in theory the idea of household franchise was being put into effect and would give greater power to the artizan classes. The Victorian period was , with a few hiccups, one of expansion and commercial success, though, undoubtedly at great social cost. The poor relief records of the parochial boards , which had controlled such matters since the eighteen forties, show much evidence of misery, misfortune and squalor. By contrast, Archibald Orr Ewing, one of the most successful of the print work owners, became a baronet. In 1897 The U.T.R. [United Turkey Red] was formed by an amalgamation of a number of the works in the area. All the rest shortly came under the umbrella of the Manchester based Calico Printers Association. From then until World War One, it was a period of consolidation within the industry. The Argyle Motor Works opened its colourful early career in this area in 1906, its splendid buildings being erected near Alexandria.

At the end of the war, however, came the slump. Foreign markets for printed cloth were lost and the vale textile industry, so dependent on them, suffered grievously. Some works were closed for good and unemployment rose, along with a re-emergence of radicalism of many of the workers, which they had inherited from their ancestors. The Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party and the Communist Party received considerable support. It was felt by some that, while much of the drop in trade was outside the control of the U.T.R. management, more could have been done in the way of technical innovation, federation of factories and the finding of new markets. The Argyle works had failed and was unable to relieve the situation. Some men moved to labour in the Clydeside shipyards, but many of these were caught up in the depression of the 1930's. It was a sad and desperate period. In 1932, an amazing 64.2 per cent of the male population were out of work, along with 31.3 per cent of the female working population. With the exception of some parts of South wales, the Vale of Leven was the hardest hit community in Britain. There was a strike at the newly opened British Silk Dyeing factory at Balloch and there were protest and hunger marches, the destitute being fed at soup kitchens.

Housing was becoming increasingly inadequate and substandard for many of the population, and although some clearances were effected under the authority of post world war legislation, and new council housing schemes erected at Tontine, Cordale and other parts of Renton, and at Burnbrae,

Bonhill and Levenvale, many old, tumbledown houses which had been formerly condemned, were still occupied at the end of the second world war. In 1946, out of 5,457 houses in the Vale 3,493 were officially considered to be substandard and 50 per cent of these were without baths. Even at that date 73 did not even have water. Gas lighting had come and gone and electricity was the norm. However, the standard of housing which we have become accustomed to in these days, was enjoyed by far too few. Although many had emigrated in the inter-war years over crowding was still a great problem. Nevertheless, the community spirit of the Vale people was, if anything, strengthened by this experience, and pride and loyalty more than survived.

Some improvement in the unemployment situation resulted from the Admiralty's decision to convert the old Argyle works into a torpedo factory. After the last war prosperity never really returned to the U.T.R. In spite of slimming operations and technical processes, a dreadful blow was delivered to the U.T.r. by the takeover by the Calico Printers Association, and the closure of the works in 1960.

Housing developments came after the second world war at Tullichewan and Haldane. Large scale demolition and clearance of old Renton in the late 1950's was the prelude to a new look area, many new council houses appearing in the 1960's with some streets being curtailed or realigned. Alexandria has been recently transformed by the demolition and clearance of whole areas and the building of new roads, houses and a shopping centre in the vicinity of the former Mitchell Street. These developments have affected mainly the centre of the town. Many late Victorian terraces survive round about. On the West side of the Vale, the Alexandria by-pass now takes through traffic away from the built-up areas and on the East side the large, sprawling complex council housing schemes, such as Nobleston, Ladyton and O'Hare have eaten some ancient farm land. Private housing estates occurred in the 1960's and are still expanding. These are at Strathleven Park, Balloch and Tullichewan, and in the case of Balloch, transforming the village into quite a large residential area. There is now an industrial estate in Alexandria, another at Strathleven. Other estates, however, have disappeared, Tullichewan into houses and Balloch into a fine public park. The industrial estates have had mixed fortunes, as have the large number of small firms which have, from time to time, occupied the remainder of the old U.T.R. buildings particularly at Alexandria and Dalquhurn.

What the future hold for the Vale is difficult to forecast. The closure in 1980 of the British Silk Dyeing Factory at Balloch, the Vale's largest factory for printing and dyeing fabric, brought to and an era spanning more than two hundred years. However, it can truly be said that the work and effort of the Vale people over that period has been enormous. It ought to be a source of pride and inspiration.

REVEREND WILLIE GREGOR

Aul' Willie Gregor wis a shrewd, canny man
Och, aye, he wis fond o' a dram
A minister o' the Kirk wis the Reverend Mr. Gregor
An' boy, could he roar oot a psalm

Weel, a beggar mannie cam' tae the manse door ae day
He wis cairried in a special kinda chair
"He's nae near as gaunt as he should be." Gregor thocht
Bit the mannie moan't that life jist wisna fair

"Because o' my condition Ah'm nae able tae get work
an' due tae that Ah canna earn siller."
An' he asked the Reverend Gregor for a copper or twa
So that he micht ging an' buy a belly filler

Noo the Reverend Willie Gregor wis worldly wise
Ye could say that he wis naeboddy's fool
An' he'd guessed the situation in a blink o' his een
An' ower them ye couldna draw ony wool

So he eyed the beggar mannie wi' a sly, wry smile
"Noo, young laddie, jist you leave things tae me
We'll tak' ye tae the burnie that's rinnin' ower there
An' a miracle we micht jist maybe see."

Quaietly a man wis sent up tae the mill
Faur he asked o' McAllister its maister
"Wid ye open up the sluice 'at controls yer dam
So the watter micht rin doon a' the faister?"

Noo the beggar an' his chair were set up inside the burn
He wis weel warn't that he wisna tae look roon'
Syne the rushin' watter hit him wi' sic' a force
The sower wis convinced that he wid droon

Weel, he coughed an' he splutter't as he scammle't up the bank
An' he took the Reverend Gregor's name in vain
Then he took tae his heels an' he fled awa'
An' wis nivver seen near the place again

Reverend Gregor hid allowed 'imself' the hint o' a smile
Oh, aye, wile an' guile hid proved tae be the best
Nae only hid he saved 'imself' a copper or twa, He'd gotten rid o' a richt bloomin' pest.

Noo he'd got 'imself' esconced in the kitchen o' a fairm
Takkin' shelter fae a sudden Summer shoo'er
There wis him an' the fairmer an' wi' John barleycorn
They hid passed a maist pleasant, chatty 'oor

He hidna ony mind o' the job that he'd ta'en on
A mairriage at the Mill o' Haldane Inn
There the bride an' the bridegroom were champin' at the bit
An' sae were their kith an' kin

A laddie wis sent oot wi' a horse an' cairt
Tae fetch the Reverend Gregor fae the fairm
He slipp't on his coat, slapp't on his hat
An' the Holy Book wis tuck't anaith his airm

Weel, they hid scarcely traivel't aboot half wye tae the Inn
When the cairty broke een o' its wheels
The rest o' the journey he'd need tae dae on fit
So aul' Willie showed a clean pair o' heels

"Oh, ye're late, affa late, sir." Said the bridegroom when they met
"An' puir Annie's in the deevil o' a state."
"Oh, aye," said the minister, "Ah can see that for mase'l'
An' Ah jaloose Ah maun be six months affa late!!"

VALE TALES

This series of stories come from a selection compiled by two Vale men, James Ferguson and John G Temple around 1929.

STORY ONE

An elderly man and his wife kept a wee shop in the Vale where they sold sweeties, matches, bunches of firewood, candles, paraffin oil, gas mantles, metal polish, emery papers, soaps, pots and pans and penny books.

It was a wet Saturday night and as 10.00pm struck the old man decided to shut the shop and go upstairs to join his wife. But, about 1 hour later after they were in bed, he thought that he heard a knock at the shop door. Getting up, he crossed over to the window, opened it and shouted 'Wha's at the shop door' – it's me, wee Geordie Robertson came the reply. What are you wanting at this hour of the night replied the shopkeeper to which came the reply – only a cup and a ha'penny worth o' scented oil and a penny dream book for my auntie. Not wanting to pass up a bit of custom, the old man shouted to Geordie to hold on while he came down the stairs and opening up the door gave the lad all the items he requested.

After the customer had left the old man returned to bed but, no sooner had he settled down when he heard another loud knocking at the door and grimly enquired via the window, 'What's that', it's me wee Geordie, my auntie wants her penny back, she says her dream is no in the book.

Quivering with anger, the shopkeeper retorted, 'och awa' and tell yer auntie to dream a dream that's in the book and he slammed down the window leaving poor wee Geordie to return home without his aunts penny.

STORY TWO

Another story well worth telling is that of the boyish escapades of a Vale of Leven man. He recounts, I was just a wee laddie at the time it happened but I mind of it as though it was yesterday. My guid auld faither used to have a worship every Sunday morning after breakfast and, when it came to the

prayer, my faither, mother, brothers and sisters went down on their knees resting their elbows on the kitchen chairs.

One Sunday however, I happened to kind of half open my eyes and to my surprise I saw my brothers and sisters had their eyes wide open. Fancy I thought to myself and I had been keeping my eyes shut all the time and theirs was opened.

Right I thought, I'll terach them a lesson for not doing what their faither telt them. The next Saturday I bought a sheeps head and got it singed at the smiddy. I sneaked it into the house when naebody was looking. I tied a thread tae the nostrils of the sheeps heed and hid it under the kitchen bed. When it came tae worship the next morning I got the end of the thread and as my brothers and sisters were praying and looking through the bars of the chairs at the same time, I pulled the thread and oot came the sheeps heed frae under the bed. Oh the screaming and yelling, they jumped up and ran for the door. My faither didnae ken whit was happening, jumped up tripping on the fender, tramped on the cat whit started squealing. I never said a word. I just knelt there as white as a ghost. I never dreamt that s singed sheeps heed would have given us such a fright.

When he recovered, my faither says tae me right, I want to see you in the garden. I followed him, shaking in every limb but, to my surprise, he turned and said that was a richt good joke and he laughed.

STORY THREE

In the early part of the nineteenth century, the land of Dalmoak was farmed by a family named Donald. One day, one of the farmers sons was taking a cart load of farm produce into Dumbarton for selling and with him was his father who was becoming rather old and frail. As they approached the toll gate at Dalreoch one of the wheels came off the cart, the horse slipped and fell and everything, including the old man, landed on the wet and muddy road much to the concern of the young man. He immediately set about getting the horse back on its feet and had just about managed when a man came rushing from the toll asking, Why the devil did ye no tend tae yer faither first and not let him lie there this length of time helpless as if the horse was of mair account than year faither.

Weel weel replied the son in a matter of fact tone, ye may say that as ye like but the mare is guid for £10 onyday and that's mair than the old man is worth.

STORY FOUR

One time, there lived in the land of Drumkinnon where Balloch pier now stands, a man who had combined his jobs of shepherd and fisherman. He had spread his nets out to dry after his morning fishing and, in the afternoon, set out for Stonymollen to tend his sheep. He told his eleven daughters that when his nets were dried they were to roll them up and take them home.

The afternoon was warm and sunny and the girls, tempted by the warm weather, decided to bathe in the stream. One girl decided to cross the gravel bank in the middle of the stream but was swept downwards by the treacherous current. A second sister was also swept away while attempting a rescue and the others became panic stricken all being swept away and drowning while trying to save each other. Therefore came the name, 'The Riveer of the Eleven' and later the River Leven.

It was claimed by superstitious people that on certain nights the whales and screams of the girls could be heard across the river.

STORY FIVE

Patrick Neil was Headmaster and Session Clerk of the parish in Alexandria. Patrick was intellectual and income was meagre. He had a limited and, by no means, accurate knowledge of English. He used Gaelic and was happy to say that Gaelic was the most expressive language with which I am acquainted.

When he received his scroll and with his scant knowledge attained, like to many people, managed to make a success of their working life.

The headmaster would write in very good copperplate and half of the bible in the streak o'er the name oh Fiona written in Patrick's handwriting. This became known as what was the 'Candleman's Auchin' when every pupil at Candleman brought an 'Auchin' or silver money, usually about sixpence a rarely 'half a crown'. The pupil bringing the most money was pronounced the king or queen for the day and was lucky to receive two oranges while the rest of the school received only one.

One day, a boy by the name of Walker, a nephew of the headmaster arrived at School and showed his 'Candleman's Auchin' or two half crowns to the other pupils. When all the Auchins were collected, Walker disappeared and one pupil suggested to the headmaster that perhaps he had gone to change one of the half crowns.

Patrick was about to order a search when the boy arrived back at School. Right away without asking any questions, Patrick set about the boy and shouted 'How dare you boy' going to change any of the money your aunt gave you for your offering. The poor boy had not known the reason for this sudden mishap and denying the allegation, proceeded to prove his innocence by producing the two half crowns. The change was miraculous, the vent just gave way to words of kindness and tenderness. Patrick praised the boy, describing him as an example to the rest of the class and proving the change by awarding him two oranges.

It was this same day that Patrick produced a cork bottle and filled it up wit hot water passing it round for all the pupils to have a drink. When the pupils arrived home in good humour, the parents looked upon the headmaster's act as a kindly one as the day had been quite cold.

Parents recently had become dissatisfied with Patrick's teaching and a deputation to the ministry, who approved of their actions, but satisfied them that matters be left with the headmaster. He returned to the board that Patrick would teach as a wee group – true enough was the parents reply but, the fact is that he could never teach.

(Correction: Local tradition has it that it was actually the Reverend Willie Gregor (mentioned earlier) that the deputation of parents appealed to. When they had complained to the teacher about his failing abilities he claimed that he could teach as well as he ever could. Gregor told them, "That's true, but he never could teach".)

VALE SPORT

Athletics have always played a big part in the lives of the district and in the book 'The Old Vale and It's Memories' we learn of many great sporting characters of the past. It is claimed that many athletes gained their first interest in sport competing in events at Sunday School outings and Heather Avenue was the main training ground for Vale athletes.

NUMBER ONE

Jess McLeavy from Bonhill won the four mile race for the championship of the world at a place called

Lilybridge in 1873 at the age of 18. He ran the distance in 19 minutes 52 seconds then took on the world champion at a mile beating him with a time of 4 minutes 21 seconds.

NUMBER TWO

Another great runner was Alexandria man James Ferguson and one of his greatest moments came when he beat McLeavy at football games in Alexandria. The honours were not limited to just runners as Vale cyclist Robert Taig carried off many trophies and was aid to be one of the very fastest wheel men in Scotland.

NUMBER THREE

James Curry, better known as 'Curry the Clugger' was a very famous wrestler – Cumberland style. Although born in Ecclefechan he lived in the Vale for many years and made thousands of pairs of clogs.

NUMBER FOUR

Another great athlete was Andrew Hannah captain of Rentons famous football team which excelled in the Renton Highland Games in 1886. The event incidentally was held where the Tontine Housing Estates are today and Hannah won 1st prize in the hop, skip and jump with a distance of 47 feet and 9 inches.

At Tilly Toodlum Games, springing from behind the board he cleared 48 feet at his 1st attempt but on trying 50 feet tripped and hurt himself.

Later at Dumbarton Highlands Games held at the Castle ground he managed 46 feet and ten inches. His best long jump was 20 feet 10 inches, standing jump 9 feet 7 inches, standing hop, step and jump 29 feet 7 inches and hitch and kick 8 feet 7 inches. Dressed in football gear he could kick the crossbar of the goal posts.

For a number of years he won all the jumping events at the Liverpool and Everton games running second to Fred Geary, the Nottingham Flier. He was tied to jump with Tom Burroughs the world hop, step and jump champion but the stakes were withdrawn.

Hannah won a bowling tournament at Liverpool Club and was the first three of several billiard handicaps. He could putt a 16 pound ball 43 feet and pole vault 9 feet. He captained Renton when they won the football championship of the world and later captained Everton when they won the English League Championship. He was also captain of Liverpool for 3 years and when staying in the town was given a gold medal after being challenged to enter the lion's cage of a travelling zoo and doing so without any fear.

NUMBER FIVE

Another great athlete was Peter Campbell of Renton who was the footballs teams greatest supported and a real pillar of sport in the community.

NUMBER SIX

Other grater sporting names of the past included Joseph and Richard Newton of Alexandria, short distance runner John Drummond of Renton and Robert Wilson of Alexandria who won a half mile handicap in Glasgow and a brewers prize at Renton Games.

NUMBER SEVEN

James and Peter Logan were amateur runners, James running all distances from 880 yards to 10

miles and hold the Scottish half marathon and one mile record for a year. Peter was best at a 100 yards to 440 yards events and was also a prominent player with the Vale of Leven football team.

NUMBER EIGHT

This first gets a mention in the Vale in 1870. While in skating, Sandy McKee of Balloch once took the title of figure skater of Scotland.

NUMBER NINE

In March 1873, Queens Park Football Club instructed their Secretary to write to Scottish clubs inviting them to a meeting with the idea to buy a cup and play competitions. Only 8 clubs were represented at the first meeting, Queens Park, Vale of Leven, 3rd Lanark, Clydesdale, Easton, Dumbrek, Granville and Rovers. It was agreed that they should call themselves the Scottish Football Association.

Donald McFarlane represented Vale of Leven on the 1st committee of the association and with practically all the remaining clubs in Scotland forming soon after the first competition for the Scottish Cup took place in the season 1873 to 1874.

Clubs subscribed towards the cost of the cup where Alexandria subscribed £3, Blythswood £1, Calendar £1, Clydesdale £5, Dumbarton £1.50, Dumbrek £1, Eton £1, Granville £2.10, Kilmarnock £1, Queens Park £5, Rovers £1.25, Renton £1, 3rd Lanark £3.15, Vale of Leven £1 and Western £4.

The Vale did not manage to play in the 1st year but in the 3rd they got as far as the semi final when they were beaten 2:1 by Queens Park. Queens Park were the recognised masters of Scottish football but, in the 5th round of the Scottish Cup, in the season 1875 to 1876 on their own ground, they suffered their first defeat on Scottish soil when Vale of Leven beat them 2:1.

The rain lashed down during this match with the Vale playing against the wind in the 1st half and it was to their credit that they only lost one goal. Everyone thought that the Vale would tire quickly in the 2nd half but they stormed into their opponents and as the final whistle neared, Baird equalised for Vale and minutes later the whole Vale forward line literally scrambled the ball over the Queens Park goal line to gain a historic victory.

Having disposed of Queens Park everyone felt confident that the dip would come to the Vale for the first time but they had three very hard games to play against the young Rangers as they were then called. The first two games were played at the West of Scotland cricket club in Partick and both apparently ended in a goalless draw. During the 2nd game, Rangers claimed that the ball had gone several feet through the Vale goal before it had been punched out and their supporters also thought this and rushed on to the field to congratulate their team. They were quickly followed by the Vale supporters claiming no goal. After consultation the officials confirmed this and another replay took place at Old Hampden Park.

It was estimated that 10,000 people watched the match inside the ground and a further 4,000 outside and trees were crowded with men and boys all anxious to see the game.

The 3rd game was a hard fought affair, the Vale took the 1st goal but it was scored by a Rangers player who headed passed his own goalkeeper. The Vale held onto this lead until half time. The second half had just started when a Peter Campbell, a Rangers player, tried a long shot at the Vale goal. Goalkeeper Wood missed the ball and it rolled into the net for an equaliser. Minutes later William McNeill put Rangers into the lead and their supporters roared in delight, throwing their hats and sticks into the air thinking it was all over but the Vale fought harder than ever and manager to

equalise, then in the closing minute scored a winner to bring the Scottish Cup to the Vale for the first time.

Bobby Simpson M.B.E.