

Galloway Bothy Connections

The Murrays of Galloway - Extracts from correspondence collected by Hugh Burns

Few families can have had such a close connection with so many bothies as the Murrays of Galloway.

In 1974 the Scots magazine carried the following letter from Mr Alexander Gordon, the aged 88 and living near Nettleton, Lincolnshire:

Dear Sir,

I have been a reader of your magazine for a good number of years, and the April issue was particularly interesting to me because of the reference to Backhill of Bush. My Grandmother was born there 164 years ago and lived to the age of 93 despite the hostile situation of her upbringing, and was alert to the last. Perhaps because there was no tinned food in her day.

Hugh Burns contacted Mr Gordon and received a letter containing more enlightening information:

...the picture...in no way represented the house in my Granny's time. In her day there were no chimneys as shown and the roof was probably grass thatch. They grew potatoes and turnips and as for meat there was plenty of mutton, rabbits and fish. As for food, her father used to go to Dalry or Carsphairn to get oatmeal, salt and black treacle as there was no sugar at that time. When a sheep was killed for food, that not required was salted for later use. She did not have a cow but had plenty of goat's milk from which they made a kind of cheese. They had a pack pony so that they could look over the sheep.

Mr Gordon's Grandmother's maiden name was Murray, a relative of the great linguist Professor Alexander Murray. In 1980 Hugh Burns received a letter from another branch of that family, Mrs Pat Murray of Tavistock, Devon, who had been seeking information on the family on behalf of her American cousin.

Your interest in Backhill of Bush and the letter from Mr Gordon are indeed of benefit to the 'Murray family tree' for, although he doesn't mention it, Mr Gordon is a relative of Professor Murray. His grandmother was obviously Helen Murray who married William Gordon. We know a bit about Helen and I am in touch with her descendants (through the female line), but Alexander Gordon is entirely new to us, and therefore very interesting. Helen Murray was my father's great grandfather's sister.

We hope to do some exploring when we're in Galloway next time and visit Darnaw (where my husband's grandfather herded for over 30 years) and Craigencallie, where other family members lived. White Lagan is another family home and Ronald's father was at Castlemaddy as a young man. I'm glad that Backhill of Bush is maintained – so many others are just names or ruins.

I do not know whether Mrs Murray was aware that both White Laggan and Castlemaddy were also still standing and maintained as bothies. But it is interesting that 3 of our bothies should all share the same family connection.

From 1932 to 1937 Backhill was occupied by a shepherd named David Thomson who, in another letter to The Scots Magazine commented:

In my day...the cottage had box-beds and was woodlined from floor to ceiling. All the stores, everything (including furniture!) had to be carried on our backs and/or in panniers slung on the old pony, across the moors and round Corserine from the Forebush.

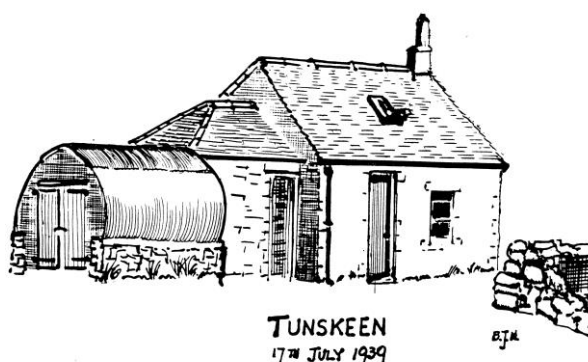
Mr Thomson was succeeded at Backhill by William McCubbin who, like Mr Thomson, provided bed & breakfast accommodation at the rate of 5/- per day. In those days there was good trout fishing to be had too. The last occupant was Mr A Renton who left in 1944 after which the building slowly deteriorated. The Forestry Commission, who acquired the land after WWII allowed the building to be used as a bothy and it was there that a certain Huddersfield cyclist named Bernard Heath came

across an entry in the bothy book written by Alan Murdoch suggesting a club be formed to take on the maintenance of such bothies – and thus was born the MBA.

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Backhill of Bush, drawn by Richard Martin



Drawn by Bernard Heath

Tunskeen

S Sidaway

Recently I made a trip to Tunskeen bothy. Walking through the hills and rugged countryside, I wondered how people used to live here in such empty, lonely places. Then I happened to meet Mrs Mary Thirtle from Carsphairn, whose parents lived there in the first years of their marriage.

Her father, Mr William Templeton, had started herding when he was thirteen years old. In 1911 he married Mary Murdoch and moved to Tunskeen. Their nearest shop was in Straiton; they cut their own peat, kept hens and grew their own vegetables and tatties. Their daughter, Mary Thirtle, told me the following story:-

'One day, around the end of 1912, my mother had a terrible pain in her stomach and, having decided she needed help, William carried her in a wooden armchair strapped to his back over the hill towards Ballochbeatties. As they were passing a loch she said the pain was so bad that she thought she was dying, and that he had to throw her into the loch. In fact, by now, her appendix had burst. He turned back and carried her three miles back to Tunskeen. He then set out alone for Ballochbeatties, able to go much faster, to get word to the doctor, Dr Cowan from Maybole.

When the doctor arrived, the two of them, plus the shepherd from Ballochbeatties, walked the five miles to Tunskeen. Dr Cowan saw that the woman needed urgent treatment. A stretcher was made from the wooden armchair by putting some boards across it. And using that, the three men carried her out. On the way the doctor picked up a horseshoe in the hope it would bring them good luck.

They got to Ballochbeatties where they had a cup of tea and a change of socks as it had been a snowy day. Then the doctor took her into Ayr Country Hospital, where he operated and saved her life. In those days there were no blood transfusions, so my mother had to drink bullock's blood, still warm, fresh from the slaughterhouse next door. The nurses stood with their backs to her and heaved when they heard her drink it!

She survived and lived until the age of 90, but didn't go back to Tunskeen. My dad kept on herding the flocks until he 'retired' at the age of 70, but went on catching moles and helping with the lambing for a good few years longer. He enjoyed making walking sticks and would travel miles to hunt a fox. Those were the days.'

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Contributed to the website by Richard Genner