

A Journey Through East Lothian
Places and Personalities

(What appears below is approximately half of an original article by Peter Dobson, the rest of which makes no reference to Robert Burns or the Burns family).

(Bob Mitchell 2007)

St Mary's Church in Haddington, on which much restoration work has recently been completed, stands proudly near to our route. St Mary's sometimes called Lamp of Lothian, lay in partial ruin for over 400 years but now reflects much of its former glory. Conducted tours may be arranged through it. Within the churchyard lies Jane Welsh, wife of Thomas Carlyle, renowned man of letters. Jane Welsh was particularly friendly with the daughters of Gilbert Burns and often paid them a visit on Saturdays, which she called 'white days', because she used to get rice pudding.

The centre of our interest, however, lies around Grants Braes, a few miles out of Haddington, for it is here that Gilbert Burns and his family took up residence. It is suggested that Gilbert Burns came to East Lothian on or about the November term (Martinmas) 1800 to manage the farm of Morham West Mains for Captain Dunlop. He was the son of Mrs Dunlop of Dunlop, Ayrshire, the friend and correspondent of Robert Burns. Four years later, Gilbert was appointed by Katherine, Lady Blantyre, to the position of factor of the Lennoxlove Estate. This post carried with it a two storeyed thatched house and a salary of £140 per year, which must have seemed a fortune to him, being twenty times what he drew a few years previous when in partnership with his brother, Robert, at Mossiel. Gilbert was to be responsible not only for the management of Lennoxlove but for the planting of woods and the further development of the estate. The house at Grants Braes was the home of Gilbert and his family for 23 years. His household was a large one. Along with Gilbert and his wife, there was his eight children, his mother (Agnes Brown) and his sister Anabella. That he was a trustworthy and respected man is clear. He blended into the community and was made an elder of St. Mary's Church looking after the Lennoxlove district. When cases of discipline came before the moderator of the church, Gilbert often assisted the minister. For a number of years, Gilbert was treasurer of the Bolton Bible Society. A Minute Book does exist of meetings of the Herioters (local lairds and landowners) in which can be seen his initials and his signature, when he substituted for his master, Lord Blantyre. Gilbert was a man intent on his work and in his letter of 15th March, 1806, to his friend, Ralph Sillar of Mauchline, it can be seen that he had his ups and downs. He writes, "I have been very much disappointed with the return on my farm. The truth to say my wheat has been so mildewed that my loss on that score exceeds £100. Barley too has turned ill out".

Gilbert's house stood on a knoll overlooking the River Tyne. Although the house no longer exists, a monument erected by a Tranent man, William Baxter, F.S.A. (Scotland), now marks the spot. When the area around was completely renovated and all was tidied up, a short ceremony was held at which Dr. John D. Ross, a well-known American authority on Burns gave a short address.

Gilbert's sons and daughters attended the burgh school in Haddington where the school-master was one, Edward Irving, who later achieved fame as a preacher in

London and a certain notoriety, when he was accused of heresy. There, Gilbert's children made friends amongst whom was Jane Welsh. She visited the Burns household often and left happy records of her visits. A familiar figure to the many visitors was Mrs. Burns, the mother of Robert and Gilbert. Her love for songs ever showed itself; it is recorded that a tune or ballad was never far from her lips. It is said that whenever the poet's name was mentioned she would silence the conversation with the comment "Puir Robbie". A cherished possession of Mrs Burns was a portrait of her illustrious son, which sometime before her death, she presented to William Bogue, a farmer at Kirklands. This is now known as the "Swinton" portrait which has been mentioned earlier.

Jean Armour visited Grants Braes occasionally and Dr Robert Chalmers, a local doctor in Haddington in the 1800s, recalled when as a boy visiting Grants Braes, he was invited in by Jean Armour for a drink of milk.

The poet's youngest sister, Isobel, married to be Mrs. Begg, lived in nearby Ormiston from 1817 until 1832. As only a few miles separated the households there were frequent visitations between the families. Mrs Begg by then a widow with nine children came to Ormiston to keep house for her son William, the local schoolmaster. In a series of letters to her other son Robert, a schoolmaster at Kinross, glimpses of the domestic life can be obtained. Mrs. Begg eked out a scanty existence by starting up a sewing class in one of the schoolrooms. She had no liking for the then minister of Ormiston, John Ramsay, with whom her son, William, did not see eye to eye. In a letter to Robert in Kinross dated 13th July, 1819, Mrs Begg expresses her opinion with vigour: "I am sorry that your brother has got embroiled with this overbearing priest of ours. He is positively the greatest fool who ever wore a black coat and I expect nothing but a living plague of him, as long as we are in his power." In the same letter she refers to her mother as being still confined to bed at Grants Braes, with the suggestion that she would never be able to get out of it. Five months later, Mrs Burns died an old lady and was buried in Bolton Churchyard. In 1832, William Begg resigned his appointment as schoolmaster in Ormiston and emigrated to Canada. Mrs. Begg moved to Tranent to stay with two daughters, Agnes and Isabella, who had a dressmaking business there. Three of Mrs. Begg's children are buried in Ormiston churchyard.

Mrs. Begg remained in Tranent until 1843, by which time she was the last living member of the poet's own family. During her visits to Grants Braes she had made friends with Jane Welsh and now through the efforts of Thomas Carlyle, Dr. Robert Chalmers and others, a fund was provided by the admirers of Burns, which, along with a pension she was offered by Queen Victoria, allowed Mrs. Begg to secure a cottage called the Belleisle Cottage, on the Banks of Doon. It was here that the last surviving member of the poet's family died in 1858.

In a letter to Mrs. Begg to announce the success of his efforts, Carlyle writes the following, which stands as a memorial from one great man to another and also to his worthy sister: "Properly, however, you do not owe this to anybody but to your own Illustrious Brother, whose noble life, wasted tragically away, pleads now aloud to men of every rank and place, for some humanity to his last surviving sister. May God grant you all good of this gift and make it really useful to you,"

The year 1827 saw many changes in the domestic circle at Grants Braes. Gilbert's daughter Jean died in January, his son John in February, just before she (sic) was to be licensed as a preacher, and after a period of ill-health Gilbert himself died on 8th April. He was buried in the family plot in Bolton Churchyard being taken there in the famous horse drawn Bolton hearse, now to be seen in an Edinburgh museum. It has been used in the parish since 1783 when it arrived from Clifton, Northumberland, with the body of Alexander, tenth Lord Blantyre of Bolton House.

The burial place of the Burns family fell into the care of Gilbert's youngest son, Gilbert, who resided in Ireland. In 1877, he paid the Kirk Session of Bolton £50, the interest from which was to be expended in the up-keep of the family burial ground and any surplus was to be divided amongst the deserving residents of the Parish. The village people themselves were proud of their connection with the Burns family and William Glass, B.E.M., of Sandysmill, near Haddington, who lived in Bolton as a boy, relates how the schoolchildren were taken to see the Burns grave and used to tend it. Gilbert's widow continued to live a (sic) Grants Braes till about 1834.

Gilbert's third son, Thomas, who was born at Mossgiel, was brought up at Grants Braes, educated at the burgh school and entered Edinburgh University where he studied for the ministry. He passed his trials before the Presbytery of Haddington and was licensed to preach on 3rd December, 1822. For a time he acted as tutor to the Dalrymple family at North Berwick, which seems strange after the experience of his uncle, the poet. ("Address to the Lords2) He was then engaged in ministerial service in Scotland, before emigrating in 1847 to New Zealand where he had a notable career as a minister and coloniser. At Andersons Bay, he erected a homestead which he named Grants Braes. His ministerial labours were carried out in Dunedin, where he died aged 75. His career has been traced in a book by E.W. Merrington called "A Great Coloniser", (Dunedin 1929), in which chapter 2 deals with the East Lothian part of Thomas's life.

Grants Braes forms the focal point of the Burns connection with East Lothian. The two features there, the monument marking the position of Gilbert's house and the well where Gilbert's mother drew water, are a tribute from the Burns followers of the County. The rebuilding of the well was carried out in the 1950s by voluntary labour from the Thorntree Mystic Burns Club and the Airts Burns Club, Prestonpans, and Tranent 25 Club.

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