

*The Jim Hamilton*  
Heritage Society of Coalburn  
Newsletter 58  
Spring 2020



*Bellfield Road in Bygone Days*



## Chairman's Remarks

Now that March has arrived it is only four months until the Gala Day. Ideas for the annual display would be appreciated. My own thoughts are that we should feature different subjects in an endeavour to vary the display. Suggestions will be welcome.

I recently was invited to give a presentation to Larkhall Heritage Group. I did the one I had used in the bowling club, about the stately homes in the district. In addition I've been asked to visit the Church Guild here in the village, to give a Powerpoint show; however due to the poor weather so far this has not been possible.

We are having Primary 5/6 in the Heritage Centre to seek information for their school project this year which is "*Coalburn in Victorian Times*". Due to the numbers involved we will have to use the middle floor of the Welfare.

Billy Hamilton from Rigside has presented us with a book he has been promoting: "*A History of Rigside and Douglas Water 1892 to 1992*". It's quite a publication. Several pages are taken from the Rigside Records Jim Hamilton produced. It is rather a large volume and is in my possession meantime.

Recently there was a report in the local press which intimated that South Lanarkshire Council have decided to demolish what now stands of Birkwood House, retaining only the front part of the building. Since many Coalburn people were employed there when it was formerly used as a hospital, I thought it might worth looking at how Birkwood came about in the first place and the early history of ownership. The first part of this article is in this issue.

Peter McLeish

March 2020

*In deepest sympathy - Coalburn related deaths*

John Aitken [in Thailand]

Ellen Paterson (Campbell)

Nettie MacLean (Longmuir)

Margaret Greenshields (Stevenson)

Agnes Hurst (Imrie)

Jean Inglis (Clark)

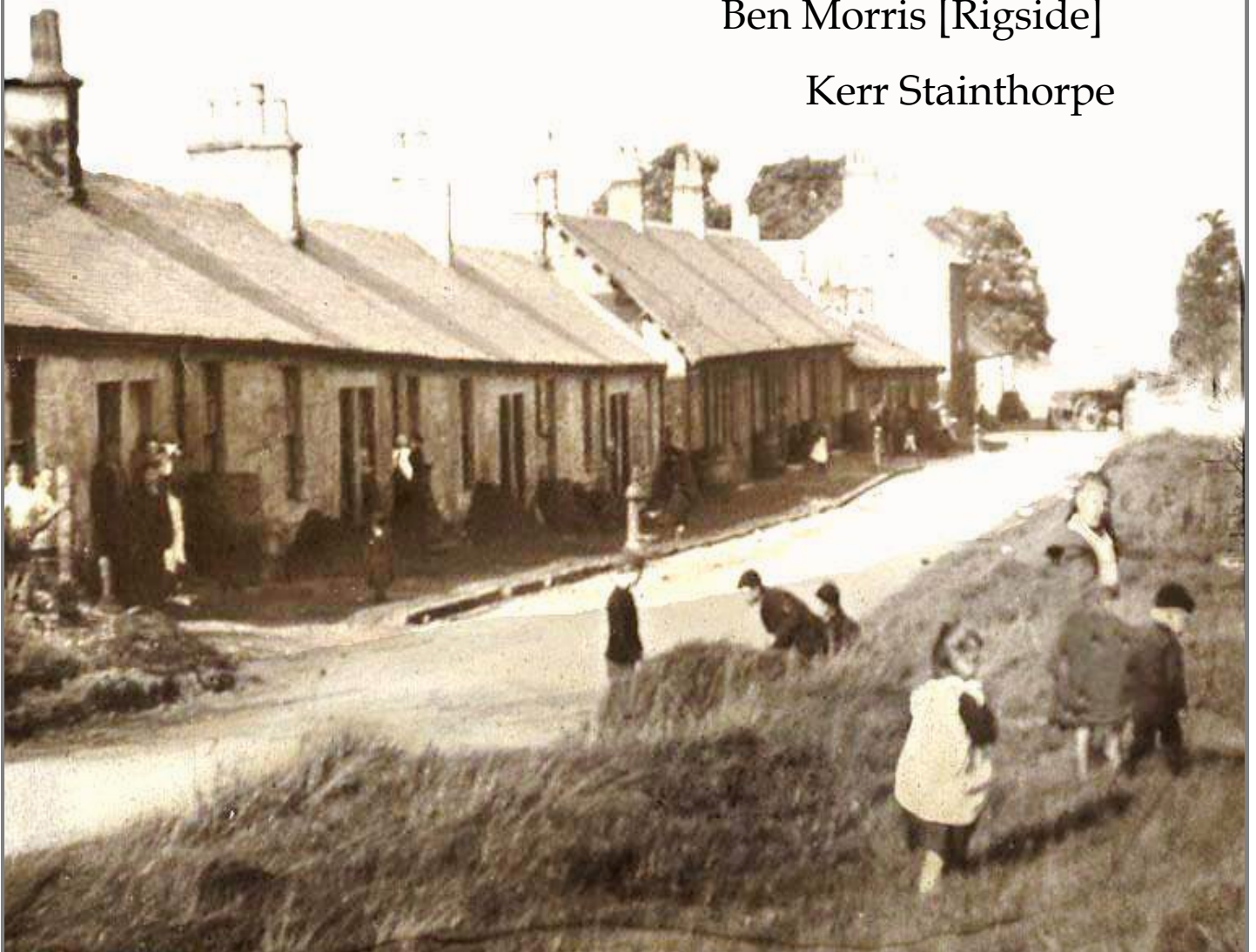
Anne Lawrie (Meikle)

Myrtle McDonald (Murray)

Leigh Gardiner

Ben Morris [Rigside]

Kerr Stainthorpe



# COALBURN DRAMA GROUP

## **Part 3: *Through The War***



The Drama Group had been running for almost a year when World War II broke out. From the outset of War in September 1939 the Drama Group was a popular method used by various organisations desirous of raising money for their particular cause.

In January 1941 Glasgow Royal Infirmary was the beneficiary, thanks to a concert performance by Drama Group in conjunction with Coalburn Women's Royal Voluntary Service. This ran for three consecutive nights in the Miners' Welfare, Mr Shanks having changed the regular Coalburn cinema night from Wednesday to Thursday so that Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday were available for the concert. Drama Group members didn't lack stamina as they staged eight performances over the twelve days from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 30<sup>th</sup>, braving the January elements for bookings in Lintfieldbank, Blackwood, The Trows and Stonehouse - as well as Coalburn.

Despite a busy schedule of performances time could still be found for a social occasion. One such took place in January 1942, when a social and dance was held. Among the entertainers were 'The Harmony Sisters' - unfortunately the ladies' names were not recorded. In March 1942 an invitation was received from Tollcross Co-operative employees seeking a concert party for their Soldiers Comfort Fund. Held in May, this event was the Coalburn Drama Group's first performance outwith the local area.

1943 was another busy year, with visits to Lintfieldbank S.W.R.I. on behalf of the 'Wings for Victory' week in May. Another request for support came from Douglas Water Central War Committee: the hall was crowded for the performance, mainly with children.

January 1944 saw another performance in Douglas Water, after which a committee meeting took place in a side room to discuss a forthcoming concert in Douglas: possibly the first such meeting held outside Coalburn. Also on the agenda was the loss of a tablecover belonging to a member's mother which had been used by the Drama Group. The loss had occurred two years previously. She was reimbursed to the tune of 25/-. The con-

cert at Douglas was duly held, however the scheduled programme finished with an hour to spare before the bus was due to arrive to pick the performers up. Fortunately the Drama Group was able to fill the void with songs and recitations. Finally heading home, the minute book records that a meeting was "held in Love's bus between Douglas and Coalburn". Continuing in a similar vein, at a later date a committee meeting was held in the bus while returning from a concert in Auchenheath.

Further concerts were staged in Coalburn that year, on behalf of the local British Legion and the Rechabite Pipe Band.

### **Drama Group Members - Wartime Service**

Having been appointed Stage Manager when roles were formalised in December 1941, Jimmy Findlay later joined the army. Another well known local, Jimmy 'Ginger' Meikle, took over as Stage Manager.

In March 1942 another member, Barbara Reid, intimated that she had been advised that she had to report for training in the Women's Land Army.

### ***Rehearsals & Training***

The Drama Group had applied to join the Scottish Community Drama Association (SCDA) shortly after inception in 1938. Now, in 1942, mindful of the benefit of further training, SCDA organiser G. Paterson Whyte was invited to visit to give tips and advice.

Mr Patterson Whyte remarked on the unsuitability of the premises being used for rehearsals, which were held in Coalburn school (initially in the Cookery Room and then in the Woodwork Room). Mrs Calder of Holm View and Mrs Gordon of Station House offered facilities within their homes: both were gratefully accepted. It was agreed that the ladies should each receive 10/- to cover the cost of heat and light. This not insignificant sum was a costlier option as the school let had been just 3/-, a price set by the Janitor. At the 1943 AGM (held in the ante room of the Miners Welfare), the treasurer presented a credit balance of £13-18-4d and rehearsal facilities were reconsidered. The secretary was instructed to write to enquire about a room in Coalburn school and also to find out if

the Group could be accepted as a Continuation Class under the Education Authority which would open the door to funding. This later became the place where the Youth Drama Group rehearsed.

G. Paterson Whyte later returned to oversee a Weekend School to enhance the abilities of Drama Group members in future productions. This was held in the Victoria Hall on Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> July 1944. At the conclusion of the course he had Honorary Membership of the Drama Group conferred.

In later years several members attended a two day course, held over a weekend at Middleton Camp, Gorebridge. This course was run by the Coal Industry Social Welfare Committee.

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***Rehearsals of a different kind... crew working on 'The Big Man', 1990 feature film shot in Coalburn***

'The Big Man' stars Liam Neeson as a miner unemployed during a strike and unable to support his family. Desperate for money, he accepts an offer from a Glasgow gangster to fight in an illegal boxing match.

The movie was an adaptation of a book of the same name by William McIlvaney. Published in 1986, the book was based on the real life story of Thomas Tallen, miner and bare knuckle boxer.

Many locals enjoyed their moment of fame appearing as extras.



## The Ghost

*By Sandra Cook, December 1992*

Poetry

Corner

There must be a ghost in oor hoose,  
An' it's a devious thing an a',  
It disnae tak wan biscuit,  
It rins awa wi' them a',  
An' it feenishes aff ma ginger,  
An' eats ma sweeties tae,  
Dinsae maitter whaur a hide them,  
The next day, they're away,  
The weans aye tidy up their room,  
They really try their best,  
Bit when a go tae check it,  
The ghost his made a mess.

An when a fin, a mark oan the wa'  
It wis nae o' the weans that done it,  
It must be that wee ghost again,  
A'll murder it when a fun it,  
It leaves the bathroom light oan,  
It must be feart in the dark,  
In the sink, it leaves dirty dishes,  
So it must be also feart o' wark,  
The bikes are aye pit in the shed,  
Bit the ghost then taks them oot,  
An' fur a' they pit their claes by,  
Next day they're flung about.

So, a'm fightin' a losin' battle,  
With this ghost that's oan the attack?  
Naw, we ken wha the ghost is,  
Ma heed disnae zip up the back.

# History of Birkwood

*Early history is sketchy.* It is known that the Birkwood lands originally belonged to the Priory Church of Lesmahagow, and that by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century it was in the possession of the Weir family. Precise information begins in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**John McKirdy - proprietor 1807-1835** Records show that on 27<sup>th</sup> July 1807 John McKirdy, styled as 'of Demerara' - a district in British Guyana - acquired the Birkwood estate from the Weir family. He was descended from a Robert MacKuerdy who was a landowner on the Isle of Bute.

John McKirdy had married Mary, daughter of David Elliott, a tobacco baron in Glasgow, in London in February 1802. They went on to have five children, including three sons all of whom - as we shall see - went on to inherit the Birkwood estate.

At the time of purchase their third child was expected. She arrived in November 1807 and, like her elder siblings, was born in Gorbals Parish. John McKirdy is described as a merchant and his location in Gorbals parish tends to imply that that the family may have been living in one of the fine merchant's houses located on the south bank of the Clyde at this time.

The next child, Charles, was born in September 1811 by which time the McKirdy family were living on the Birkwood Estate. The house where they lived was 'Old Birkwood', previously known as 'Ivy House'.

John McKirdy of Birkwood died in February 1835 at the age of 68. He was buried in Lesmahagow Churchyard on the 11<sup>th</sup>.

## **Demerara and the Sugar Trade**

It is not known where or how John McKirdy made his fortune. However, since several sugar plantations existed in Demerara, this designation raises the possibility of involvement in the sugar trade.

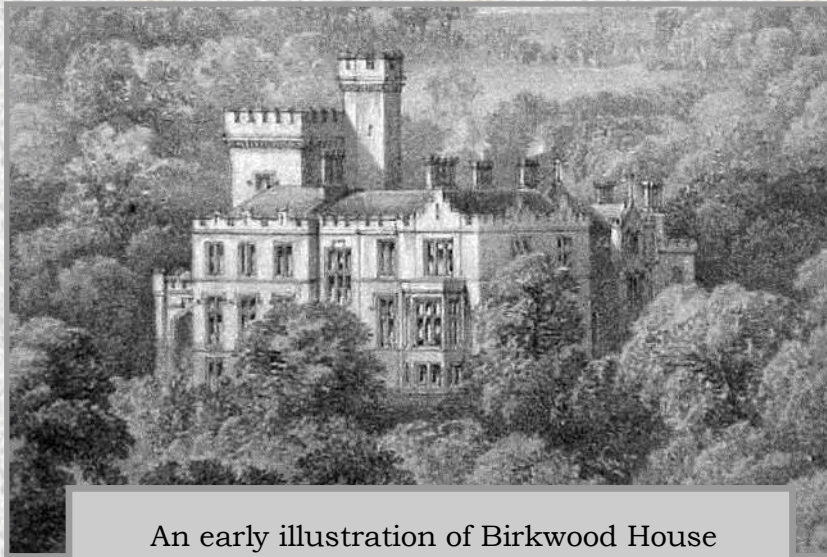
If so, it is likely that the sweat and toil of slaves played a part: over 100,000 laboured in these plantations. However it should be noted that extensive documentation by University College London [*Legacies of British Slave Ownership*: [www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs)] does not reveal slave ownership by any person named McKirdy or MacKuerdy. Possibly Mr McKirdy may have been involved in shipping sugar.

The slave trade was abolished in 1807. However it took a further 26 years to effect the emancipation of the enslaved.



**John Gregory McKirdy - proprietor 1835-1881** It is not known exactly when the building of Birkwood House began as no records exist. However it is generally assumed that it was built by John McKirdy's eldest son, John Gregory McKirdy.

Born 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1806, John Gregory inherited Birkwood estate at the age of 28, on his father's death.



An early illustration of Birkwood House

Four years later he married Augusta Bradshaw, daughter of a Captain in the Royal Navy. Both resided in the Parish of St Marylebone, London, where the wedding took place in June 1841.

Ten years later, the Census of March 1851 shows John Gregory

McKirdy, 44, "landed proprietor farming 200 acres employing 20 labourers" and wife Augusta, 32, residing at Birkwood. Also present is his eldest sister, Mary. Five household servants looked after these three people. There was cook Mary Ritchie from Muirkirk, aged 35; lady's maid - local girl Margaret Murray, 16; housemaid Marion Hamilton, aged 44 and from Lanark; kitchen maid Margaret Dodds, a Douglas girl of 17; and Lesmahagow lad James Marshall, just 12 years old and employed as a page.

Valuation Rolls begin four years later, in 1855, and find John G McKirdy, esq., proprietor and occupier of "Mansion House and *etc.* Birkwood", "Grounds of Birkwood" and "Farm of Dunside". He is also proprietor of a number of farms and houses in the parish and a shop at Abbeygreen. Further tranches of Valuation took place in 1865 and 1875 and show a steadily expanding portfolio of McKirdy property and land in the parish.

Birkwood House was extended several times over the years. The first extension was completed in 1856. The *'Hamilton Advertiser'* informs us that Mr John Gregory McKirdy held a commemorative dinner for family and tradesmen to celebrate its completion. Accordingly, the Ordinance Survey name book of 1858-61 describes "A large castellated mansion recently enlarged."

It is notable that there were several further properties named 'Birkwood' at this time, including "Mansion two storey, with offices" which was property of one J Tod esq., as was "Birkwood Farm". Meanwhile "Old Birkwood: a

two storey house thatched in good repair" - where the McKirdy family had first taken up residence at Birkwood - remained in McKirdy hands.

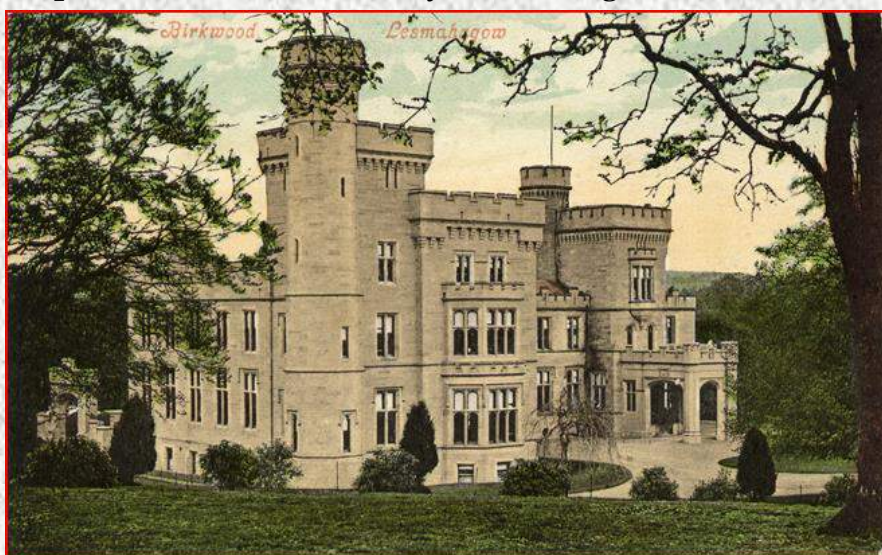
Sorrow came to Birkwood in August 1867 when Augusta suffered an aneurism and died, aged 47.

And so the 1871 Census saw 64 year old widower John Gregory McKirdy living at Birkwood House without family: but with five house servants. He also had a butler, resident at "Old Birkwood"; a 15 year old groom, living with his grandfather at "Monkstable" - a thatched cottage, said to have been built on the site of the old stables of the Abbey of Lesmahagow; seamstress Isabella Miller, living in "Birkwood Lodge"; while "Birkwood Office" was home to dairymaid Marion Muncie and her grandfather James. Few were locals, exceptions being Isabella Miller, a widow of 62 from Hamilton and Marion Muncie, 42, of Lesmahagow.

John Gregory McKirdy remarried in August 1873 at the age of 66. His second wife was Clementina McDonald-Lockhart *"of Bormio, in the kingdom of Italy"*. Clementina's father was Norman McDonald-Lockhart, the 3rd Baronet of Lee. The lands of Lee, situated between Lanark and Carlisle on the north side of the Clyde, had been granted to William Locard in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. The Lockhart family also had lands in Carnwath and a connection with Birkhill. Clementina was born at Lee Castle, near Cartland, in 1848. Very much her husband's junior at 26, her marriage took place in the Parish of St James, Piccadilly, where John Gregory McKirdy was resident. Sadly, before the year was out Clementina was dead. Her death occurred in Hampshire, so it is unclear if the second Mrs John Gregory McKirdy ever lived at Birkwood.

And so to the 1881 Census. Taken on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, this found 75 year old John Gregory McKirdy with his servants: a housekeeper, footman, laundry-maid, cook and housemaid. However all is not well at Birkwood that spring. Mr McKirdy now has the help of a live in nurse, 50 year old Agnes Yuill of Hamilton. Her employment was not to last much longer, for John Gregory McKirdy died soon afterwards - on April 21<sup>st</sup>. He had no issue, and was succeeded by a brother.

Peter McLeish  
*to be continued*





**We are delighted to wish Happy Birthday to one of our more senior members - Mr Alex McMurdo, born in Coalburn March 16th 1926.**

The picture is recent, showing Alex on Christmas Day 2019 during celebrations with neighbours prior to his festive dinner with daughter Jennifer and family.

Alex has lived in Glasgow for many years, where he had a distinguished career in the police force. However he retains fond memories of the village and likes to keep in touch with friends there. Though attending meetings and dinners is just a bit too demanding, he receives the newsletter with interest and is generous in sharing memories and photographs. His recollections of Winter 1942 appeared in the last newsletter, and we look forward to more.

Thank you Alex for your valuable contribution to the Jim Hamilton Heritage Society of Coalburn - and *Lang May Yer Lum Reek*.



**Mrs Margaret Mary Ann Smith**

The Birkhill Sabbath School article Issue 57 included information about Mrs Margaret Mary Ann Smith, who made premises available for the School in 1922. She was born Mary Ann Stewart in Morningside, Edinburgh, in January 1870. Her family and moved to Lanark when she was still very young. The Census of 2nd April 1871 shows that her father David was by then proprietor of the Black Bull Inn. Margaret Mary Ann Stewart married Andrew Smith of Birkwood in 1900.



A scenic photograph of a riverbank. In the foreground, a large, light-colored tree trunk is visible on the left. The middle ground shows a grassy bank with several trees, some with sparse green leaves and others bare. A large, dark log lies horizontally across the grass. In the background, a river flows through a wooded area under a pale sky.

*The Jim Hamilton*

## Heritage Society of Coalburn

Heritage Society Meetings are held in Coalburn Bowling Club on the 1st and 3rd Wednesdays of the month, from September to April, starting at 7.30 pm

[www.coalburnheritage.org.uk](http://www.coalburnheritage.org.uk)

*Water Meetings in Springtime*