

3. A Weaver, an Old Paisley House and an Heiress

Helen Calcluth

This article originated in the search for my great-grandfather, James Knox. From this meagre scenario I resolved to trace the history of this Paisley weaving family. Little did I know that it would take me back to the mid eighteenth century, to one of the oldest surviving buildings in Paisley, and to a disinherited heiress. All I knew about him was that he had worked as a weaver in Paisley and died a cripple in 1911.

The Knoxes

Four generations of Knoxes were weavers in Paisley. All were eldest sons of eldest sons and, in the Scottish tradition, all named James Knox.

James Knox (1) was born at 38 Canal Street, Paisley in 1850. In his youth he was a woollen shawl weaver, and later a pattern weaver. He married Mary Wilson in the High Church in Paisley on 9th November, 1869. By 1901 he was designated 'retired shawl weaver' ¹. By this time due to ill-health he was unfit for work. Although he was regarded by the family as a clever man, his wife Mary was not well educated. On her marriage in 1869 she 'made her mark' on her marriage certificate.

Their house at 38 Canal Street was as important as the family, as it is one of the oldest surviving houses in Paisley. The family lived there for a considerable part of the nineteenth century ².

James Knox's parents lived at 38 Canal Street. James Knox (2) married Margaret McTaggart, daughter of Lachlan McTaggart, a shoemaker in Lochwinnoch ³. They had seven children, James, William, Margaret, John, Robert, Alexander Lachlan, and Mary. Although the family lived in the 38 Canal Street building most of their married life, they are not recorded at that address in the 1871 Census. James died in 1898 in 38 Canal Street. His death certificate designates him as a 'shawl weaver'.

The grandparents of James Knox (1) were James Knox (3) and Mary Edmiston ⁴. They had two children, Elizabeth, born in 1821 and James in 1824. By 1841 the parents had died and Elizabeth, now aged twenty was a sewer and James, aged fifteen, a hand loom weaver. Later in that year young James went to sea, possibly for economic reasons as a slump in the weaving trade (1841-3) had caused independent weavers' wages to plummet. It is also of some relevance that Lily, the sister of James married Robert Bissland in Paisley in 1814. They all lived with their grandfather and their Uncle William's family in the 38 Canal Street property.

The Original Knox

The original Paisley Knox weaving family came to Paisley from Stewarton in the late 1780s. The first John Knox (4), the great grandfather of John Knox (1), was the eldest son of eight children born to yet another James Knox (5) and Janet Barclay in Stewarton in 1760 ⁵. He married Elizabeth Somerville on 14th June, 1788 and moved to Paisley, where his first son, James (3), was born in October of that year.

By 1801 he had another six children, Joanna, Lily, Elizabeth, John, William and Janet. In the 1841 and 1851 Census he was a widower and lived in 38 Canal Street

¹ General refs to the dates 1841, 1851 etc up to 1901 are from the Census records.

² Census and Parish Records

³ Married 30th November, 1847

⁴ Married High Church, Paisley on the 15th July, 1821

⁵ Married Stewarton, 10th Nov 1750.

with his son William, a hand loom weaver, and a number of grandchildren. He was designated 'independent' in 1841 and 'house proprietor' in 1851. Four other families also lived at this address. These facts led to the assumption that James (4) was reasonably prosperous and was likely to have been the owner of this property. He lived to a ripe old age and died between 1851 and 1855.

The Building at 38 Canal Street

Old maps of Paisley and other documentary sources indicate the family's ownership of the property. The inhabitants must have lived in very cramped conditions. At various times, up to five families lived in the modest property.

The property is first mapped in 1781 in Common Lone (opposite, top) ⁶. This was the name of Canal Street before the building of the Paisley Canal in 1810. In 1825 John Robertson, operating his business from 38 Canal Street, was a Manufacturer of Shawls and Plaids ⁷.

In 1839 James Knox, John Robertson and Robert Lothead lived in adjacent properties in Canal Street opposite Lady Lane (arrowed in opposite, bottom) ⁸. Presumably they were the owners. In 1841 Robert Lothead, hand loom weaver was in No.36, John Robertson, shawl manufacturer in No.37 and James Knox, Ind. (retired, aged 75) were in No.38.

The building in Common Lone, shown on the 1781 map, stands alone with no other building in the immediate vicinity. It later became Nos. 36-38 Canal Street. In 1923 house numbers in Paisley were updated and No.38 Canal Street became No.73.

The front wall of the building is still standing in 2007, with a blocked window. The infill of this window includes two lintel stones, both dated 1780, with a mason's mark on the upper stone. The property is almost certainly one of the 64 houses, which Semple states, were built in the town in 1780. George Young, mason, is the probable builder⁹. The corner stones of the building stand to the full height of the wall, and an adjoining building (shown on the 1839 map) situated to the south on the former lane which led to the old bridge over the Canal is still upstanding and roofed.



Tracings of the Lintel Inscriptions (Helen Calcluth)

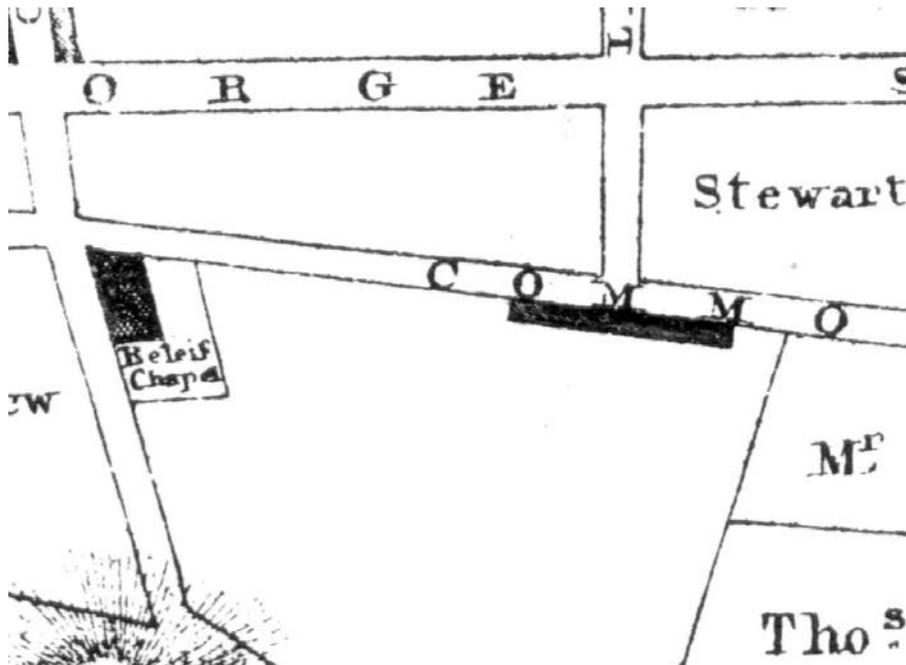
The present-day No.73 Canal Street is used as an industrial yard and a workman informed me that the little adjoining building to the south had formerly been the canal-keeper's cottage and the building to the east had been canal stables.

⁶ Wm. Semple's survey of 1781

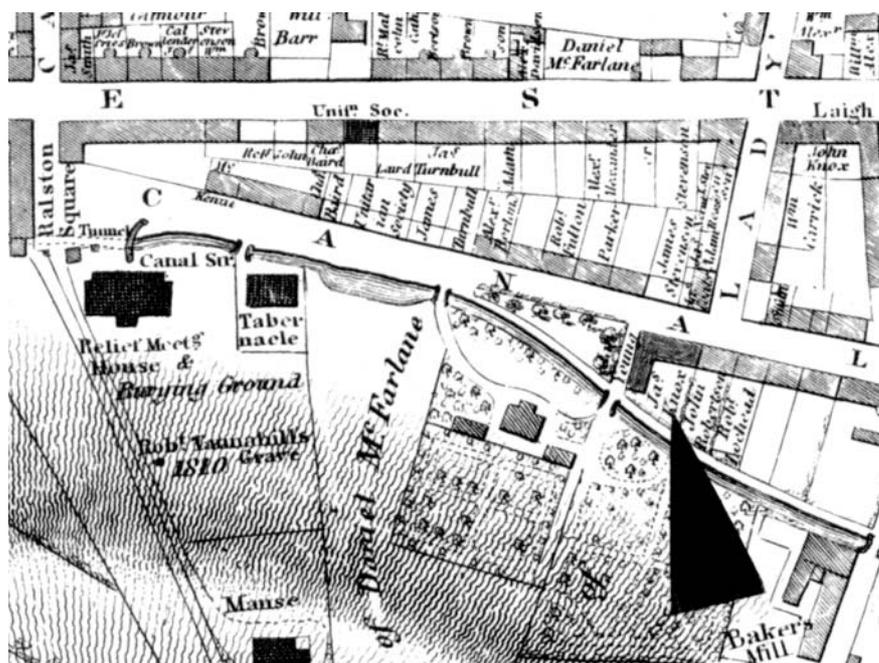
⁷ 1825 Piggot's Directory of Central Scotland

⁸ James Knox's Survey revised by George Martin, 1839

⁹ Renfrewshire Sasine, 1st Aug. 1808



Detail from Plan of Paisley by Wm Semple (1781)



Detail from Plan of Paisley by James Knox (1839)

Landed Family

The canal operated from 1810 until 1881. The line of the canal followed the south boundary of the Knox's steading and the family would have been constantly aware of activities on the canal – the Irish 'navigators' toiling on the building of the canal, the horses on the tow path and stables, barges going past carrying raw materials such as coal, slates, timber and grain, and passenger boats able to carry up to 150 passengers. James (1) must have lived here in 1810 when the Countess of Eglinton tragically capsized in the nearby canal basin with the loss of 85 lives.

Despite the supposed humble origins of the Knox weaving family, the clues about property ownership hint at moneyed or landed backing. Checking this has provided a fascinating link with some of the west of Scotland's greatest landed families. The clue is through the wife of James Knox (4) who first came to Paisley, Elizabeth Somerville in Stewarton.

Elizabeth was related to the Somervilles of Kennox and her husband's ownership of property in Canal Street appears to have come through her family connection and wealth.

The Disinherited Heiress

Some clues to Elizabeth Somerville come from her 1809 monumental Inscription in the Church Yard of Paisley High Church. The family was prosperous enough to afford a gravestone. The inscription reads:

‘This burying ground is the property of James Knox, Weaver in Paisley and this stone was erected by him in memory of his wife Elizabeth Somerville who died on the VIIth June MDCCCIX, (blank) XLVII years and III months’.

In *Renfrewshire Monument Inscriptions, pre-1855*, a footnote by Lohead (1917) quotes from a newspaper cutting:

‘James Knox was a servant at Sorn Castle, Ayrshire, and Betty Somerville daughter of his master. She was disinherited by her father, James Somerville d.1791, a founder of the great West Indian House of Somerville, Gordon & Company. Sorn Castle went to a cousin, Russell of Maulside’.

This information in RMI is not entirely accurate, possibly based on hearsay. Lohead may have been a descendant of the Robert Lohead who lived in Canal Street ¹⁰ and was a neighbour of the Knox family. The James Somerville, named as Elizabeth's father did not own Sorn Castle in 1788 at the time of her marriage. He was James Somerville of Hamilton Farm, Rutherglen, whose family bought Sorn Castle shortly after his death. He did have a daughter, Elizabeth, but she was born on 23rd March, 1770, and would have been 39 years old in 1809, not 47 years 3 months as stated on the gravestone.

The Elizabeth Somerville who married James Knox (1) was born in Stewarton on 30th March, 1762. She was the eldest of two sisters born to William Somerville of Kennox, Stewarton, and Lilley Porterfield of Hapland. She was disinherited by her father on her marriage to James Knox, because he was a common weaver, and may well have been a servant at Kennox, and her younger sister, Janet, inherited the Kennox estate and a portion of Hapland. In 1792 Janet had married Charles McAlester of Loup who, on his father in-law's death in 1805, added the name and arms of Somerville to his own. From that time he was known as Charles Somerville MacAlastair of Loup and Kennox.

Although Elizabeth was disinherited because her marriage displeased her father, it is said by American descendants of her daughter Lily (1792-1829) that in his declining years her father to some extent restored Elizabeth to favour and returned some personal belongings, including a watch and a guitar. The guitar was in the possession of Lily's Bissland descendants in Connecticut for many years. These

¹⁰ See Knox's map 1839 and 1841 census.

Bissland descendants believe that James and Elizabeth eloped to Gretna Green.¹¹ It is possible that James and Elizabeth may have eloped before their church marriage in Stewarton in 1788.

It is not surprising that Elizabeth was disinherited. The Somervilles of Kennox and the Porterfields of Hapland were landed gentry with powerful family connections. Elizabeth's maternal grandmother was Elizabeth Cunninghame, daughter of William Cunninghame, 8th Laird of Craigends, and Christian Colquhoun of the Colquhouns of Luss. On her father's side, she was directly descended from Hugh, created 1st Earl of Eglinton in 1508, and Robert, 3rd Lord Semple.¹² Marriage to a common weaver was in no way acceptable in this echelon of society.

There are further clues about the property in Paisley's Canal Street. Elizabeth's husband James Knox (4) appears in various Renfrewshire Sasines. On 1st August, 1808, after the death of Elizabeth's father, her brother-in-law, Charles Somerville McAlister of Kennox, bought 'a steading in Commonhill, Paisley' with the consent of James Knox, weaver, Paisley. This purchase may have been guilt money to compensate for Elizabeth's loss of inheritance. James Knox's consent, presumably as the owner of adjacent property, was required on February 24th, 1829, when Mathew King bought a property in Canal Street. On January 6th, 1838, the Glasgow, Paisley and Ardrossan Canal Company bought 'two falls and six ells of ground, being part of a steading in Commonhill, Paisley' from James Knox, weaver. This may have been the site of the canal-keeper's cottage.

Further documentation confirms the Knox family owned 38 Canal Street until the end of the nineteenth century. The Inventory of James Knox (2), weaver in Paisley, lodged at Paisley Sheriff Court, 1st Sept. 1898¹³ values his total estate at £553.17.6, and the proportion of rent owing to him by tenants to the date of his death was £4.9.0. His will, registered in the Books of Lords of Council and Session, 1st Sept. 1898¹⁴ states that his heritable and moveable estate was to be sold by public roup or private sale and the proceeds to be shared equally among children.

Footnote

My grandmother, Helen/ Nellie Knox, was born in Paisley in 1889, the youngest child of James Knox and Mary Wilson. I recall hearing that my great-grandmother, Mary Wilson, was very house proud and every time she moved a jar from a shelf in her cupboard she wiped the surface clean. I think her grandchildren were possibly very much in awe of her.

Some time before 1891 the Knox family moved to Abbey Street, Paisley, where Nellie was born. By 1901 her father's health had deteriorated and he was unfit for work. His young sons, a carter, a van driver and a wood turner provided the household income. Hopefully, in pretty dire circumstances, he would have received a small legacy from his father's estate. He may also have had an unexpected windfall. A newspaper cutting of unknown date and origin may have provided the family with an inheritance from his Somerville great-grandmother's family.

Helen Calcluth

¹¹ Bissland family paper given to the present proprietor of Kennox

¹² Paterson, James in History of the Counties of Ayr and Wigton, Vol. III – Cunninghame, Part II, James Stillie, Edinburgh (1866) pp 604-7

¹³ Ref. SC58/42/590

¹⁴ Ref SC58/45/59.