

2. Bygone Barrhead Revisited

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Being Secretary of an organisation such as Barrhead and Neilston Historical Association for twelve years can be both rewarding and frustrating. There are times when nothing is happening, times when too much is happening, and times when suddenly you are off in a different direction from what you expected.

This is what happened in May 2001 when I received a package of photographs in the post. They came from a Miss Jean Gibson in Castle Douglas, Dumfries and Galloway. In the accompanying letter she explained that she had been born and brought up in Neilston Road, Barrhead but had moved away in 1971. In 1968 she had walked around the town taking photos of streets and buildings and now, rather than dispose of them, she wanted to gift them to our Association. Interestingly, Miss Gibson features in East Renfrewshire's "Portals to the Past". She was an older sister of Margaret Gibson who died from pneumonia at the age of eleven in 1932. They were daughters of Robert Gibson, Publisher of Educational textbooks.

As a group, Barrhead and Neilston Historical Association have amassed a comprehensive collection of photos and postcards, looked after at one time by Peter Johnstone and now in the capable hands of Robert Humphrey. We were unsure what to do with Miss Gibson's photos until we hit on the idea of following in her footsteps and photographing the same locations 33 years later.

Our team of Meg Pollok (Hon. President), Letty Tytler (Treasurer) and the author undertook the task. We chose a bright day in August 2001, arranged the photos so that we had a continuous route through the town, and set off. It was a thoroughly enjoyable experience. We felt like "Private Eyes" working out where Miss Gibson had stood and what angle she had held the camera. In addition there was interest in what scenes had changed - indeed work was in progress making more changes, eg to East Renfrewshire Council Offices, - and in what had remained the same.

Along the way, we encountered various folk interested in what we were doing. The gardener at Arthurlie Church had to act as First-Aider when Meg had a slight accident. A lady appeared at her door to ask why we were photographing a tree stump (in the original photo it had been a significant landmark). Trees, we realised, caused the most problems as they had grown significantly and in some instances obscured the subject of our photo.

We were also surprised at some of the points of interest that Miss Gibson had chosen not to record. We chose to remedy this by photographing the former Municipal Building on Main Street and Letty was sent up the "Big Stairs" (linking Main Street and Craigheads) as we thought the resulting photo would look better within someone in it. With the photos taken, Meg mounted them in a photo album and they are now part of our collection.



Figure 7: Cross Arthurlie Street, Barrhead (before and after removal of Railway Bridge)

We now move forward to 2008, when we had the notion that Irene Hughson's book of photos "Bygone Barrhead" could undergo a similar exercise. Having learned from our previous experience we chose to take the photos in the spring - before the trees were in full leaf.

The most obvious changes were Main Street/ Dovecothall with the absence of

Levern Mill, although there is still some stonework as evidence. The junction of Arthurlie Street/ Main Street is totally transformed save for the street sign. Some streets have been re-aligned or renamed, eg Stormyland Street is now Ralston Road and one of our photos shows Glen Street before its recent change to a cul-de-sac.

Of the large houses on the outskirts of the town, several have become old Folks' Homes as is the case of Levernholme, once the property of one of the Paisley Coats Family) and the large house on Donnie's Brae recently demolished and a new purpose-built home built on the site. There is a recent development at Montfort House where new properties are being marketed at prices in the £450,000 price range. At these locations we asked permission to take our photos as we did not wish to risk being accused of spying!

The next decision was to decide the best way to store the photos, and perhaps make them more accessible than in a photo album. With the growth of the internet it became clear that the old photos and the new could be digitally transferred to one sheet of paper and could then be more easily compared. With that in mind, East Renfrewshire's Local History Librarian, Amanda Robb was approached.

Amanda's reaction was most encouraging and she offered assistance in the work of scanning the photos. Robert unearthed the originals from our collection (used in Irene's book) and Jenny McGhie (Library Assistant) set to work. At that stage we were unsure what to do with the finished items. Amanda offered to have them mounted for a Local History Week exhibition in Barrhead Library in April 2009. They've also had spells in Barrhead High and St. Luke's secondary schools. In our digital and computer age, photos may seem old-fashioned but they are accessible without the need for a machine and can easily be passed around.

Hopefully our History Group representatives will consider helping future historians, by using photography to record evidence of our whereabouts, our associations and their membership. I would suggest that they can be as valuable and revealing as a Minute Book any day.