

2. Nether Paisley

Part 1: The Burn Gets Busy

Sylvia Clark

In 2003 Sylvia started work on a booklet - the provisional titles were 'The Valley of Paisley' and 'Nether Paisley' – on the industrial development of the right bank of the St Mirin Burn, in Paisley. The themes she found on this narrow plot were her favourites: the interweaving of manufacturing and commerce, cultural aspirations, and the irony of human affairs. All that remains of the booklet are the passages which I word processed for her, and her notes on later chapters. For all its shortcomings (incompleteness and the absence of references) 'Nether Paisley' is a charming and entertaining work. Although incomplete, it is hoped readers will hear Sylvia's voice through her work.

If I had been brave enough to suggest to Sylvia the inclusion of earlier history of the burn, I would have pointed out that for 400 years its chief business was to water the Prior's Croft, while the lands at the burn mouth started out as a hazel copse, then cleared for pasture, then converted into the Nether Bailey of Paisley. Its earliest development – late medieval – was a series of burgage plots, mostly for officers of the Stewart, on what is now the east front of The Paisley Centre. Sylvia's account begins in the 17th century when the backlands around the burn were employed as 'yards' – let out for a variety of commercial, agrarian, and industrial functions.

Alan Steel

The Valley of Paisley: the name does not appear on the map, but it is an accurate description of the valley which runs between Oakshaw on the north and the rising ground, Common Hill, on the south, through which St Mirren's (or rather St Mirin's) Burn used to flow from its rise in the Broomlands to the White Cart Water.

Although it was only about a mile long it caught so much run-off from the slopes on either side that it brought down a load of detritus to form a ford across the Cart. The ancient pilgrims' road from the south turned to this ford where travellers on two or four legs could cross directly to the Saint's shrine. Wheeled traffic would have to cross a little higher up at the Hammils.

Important travellers along the east-west highway from Glasgow to the Ayrshire coast used the high stone bridge, a medieval flyover, and then proceeded along the shoulder of Oakshaw. The valley itself, being rather wet, was not built on until the 1730s. From then onwards it was a vital area of Paisley. That is what this article is about.

A Green Prospect

Captain John Slezer saw and drew a view from Saucel Hill a few years before 1700. If he had been painting in colours he would have needed mostly shades of green. To his right the Hammils were hidden behind the waterside trees. To his left, the hamlet appropriately called Causeyside marked the position of the old pilgrimage road from the south. On the slopes ahead lay pasture and arable except for the beginnings of build-up on the track which was to be Gordon's Lone. With those exceptions stone and thatch were clustered round the bridgehead. However, a ribbon-development of good houses stretched westward from the bridgehead along the important east-west highway. Captain Slezer could just see the tops of them rising from a fold on the Oakshaw hillside.



View of Paisley by Slezer (1690s).

These were the holdings of burgesses, and the long wavy enclosures which can be seen draped down the facing slope were the burgess holdings, each of almost exactly one acre, occupying all the land between the High Street and St Mirren's Burn, which was their boundary. On Captain Slezer's side of the valley the land was the common property of the burgesses, which they leased or feued out in blocks of various shapes and sizes.

One High Street holding called Aikett's Yard had never been built on; it had changed hands repeatedly as an investment. At one time Thomas Inglis, a successful lawyer, bought it, but in 1623 he died unexpectedly. This was somewhat awkward for his apprentice, Robert, the bright son of Bailie Alexander, a leading member of the shoemaker's craft. This youth was upping himself socially by moving from trade to the legal profession; but he found another lawyer to take him on and gentrified himself very successfully by buying estates in several places.

Things were worse for Thomas Inglis's daughter Ann. Her mother re-married and Ann was inconvenient in the new household, so she was married off, at the age of twelve and against her wishes, to the laird of Aikett. The piece of land was her dowry.

She lived to sell it to Robert Alexander of Newton, once her father's apprentice; but for over a century it was always known as Aikett's Yard. The transaction had evidently been much talked about. Robert Alexander also bought land, which he used as a kitchen garden, on the other side of the burn. We can imagine a plank between them, and an unofficial, but tolerated, footpath from the Laigh Common to the High Street. It could continue straight over the ridge and down the other side before the High Kirk was built.

Pride, Piety and Profit

If Captain Slezer had looked from the same viewpoint in 1530 or in 1730 he would scarcely have noticed anything different. If he had done it in 1750 he would have seen a change.

By 1730 the Burgh of Paisley, like some others near the Clyde estuary, was aware of being prosperous. It was what we should call scandalously overcrowded, partly with

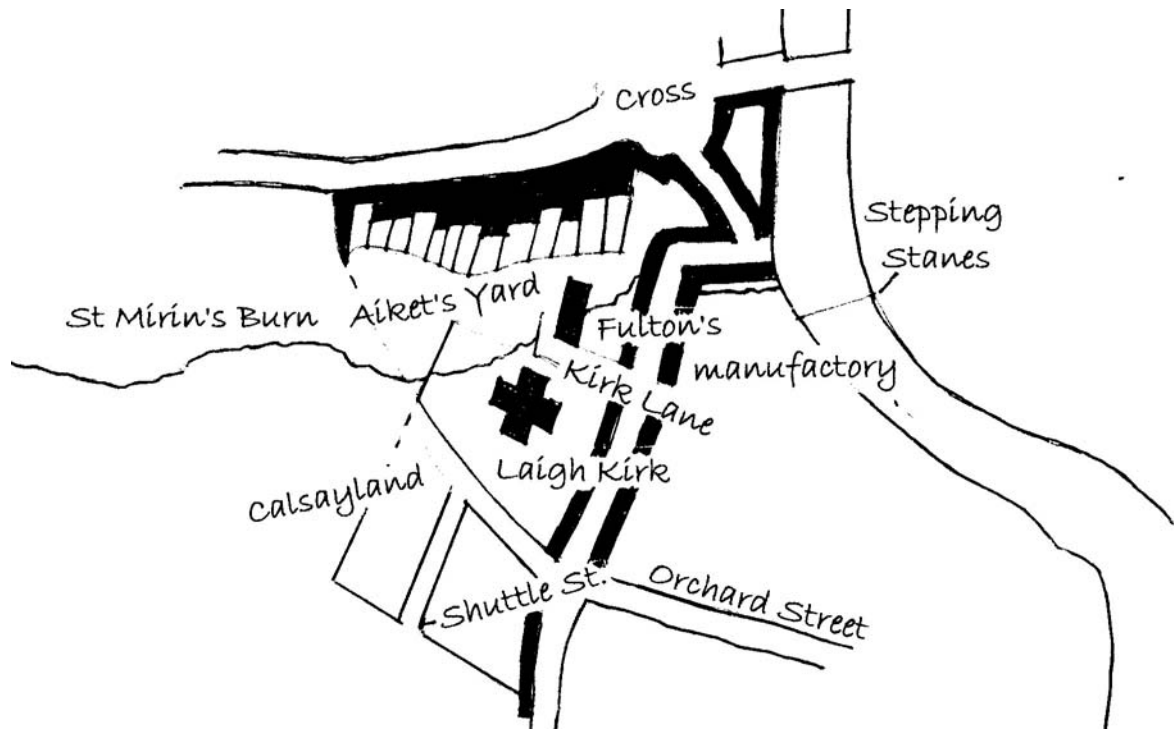
destitute immigrants to the town; but that was a symptom of its success. It was no business of a Town Council to provide housing, any more than it was their business to relieve the poor - the Kirk had that duty; though when a great fire laid waste St Mirren's Wynd in 1733 the Council attempted, not very effectively, to ban thatched roofs for the future.

But it was typical of the time that the Council felt that civic self-esteem demanded a Burgh parish church. The Abbey, apart from being dilapidated, belonged to the landowner, and there were stirrings of protest in Scotland about "patronage", the landowner's right to nominate a minister. Paisley councillors were not opposing that right but they wanted to be the patrons themselves. The size of the Abbey Parish provided justification for "disjoining" a new parish, and the Earl of Dundonald was willing to sell his patronage rights.

The hardest difficulty was financial. They had to build a seemly church and guarantee a minister's stipend, and they did not carry much of a reserve fund. But they were all, in their personal capacities, accustomed to buying and selling property just as the affluent today understand share prices. They approached the Alexander of Newton of their day. He agreed to sell them (not, of course, cash down but with a reasonable rate of interest) Aikett's Yard and the part of his holding in the Common lands called Calseyland, or the Meikle Yard. This strip they converted not only into a site and access for their church but into a most eligible street. They laid out twelve building plots on either side in Aikett's Yard, each with forty feet of frontage. In Calseyland, beyond the burn, there was the churchyard on one side and nine steadings on the other, only thirty feet wide but going back a long way. Bailies and former bailies and future bailies were keen bidders at the auction of the feus in 1734. The disaster in St Mirren's Wynd had put up property values. In general, they did not buy to get a place to live in themselves, but to let or re-sell. Property was a more trustworthy place to deposit one's own capital than a bank.

Bailie Thomas Kerr got himself a partner, Robert Pollock, whose financial resources could back up his own; and partly by lavish bidding at the sale, partly by private trading afterwards, he secured seven plots in a row opposite the church. These were the ones with the long backlands. Kerr and Pollock built there a row of weavers' cottages, Shuttle Street, and at its corner a two-story Manufacturing House - not a factory as we understand it, but the HQ of a little outworking industry. It was up and running by the time the new Burgh Church was open in 1738. Bailie Kerr presented a communion cup.

Kerr and Pollock used the opposing side of Shuttle Street as a 'bank'. There, they let sites, preferably with houses on them. When opportunity offered, they sold one and with the proceeds built on another, which they again let and sold, as they needed money. The Council also re-sold a little land along Causeyside Street (where the Russell Institute is now) under the condition that if any of it was used to build a Manufacturing House, all the journeymen must be made to join the Weavers' Society.



The Feelgood Factor

If "feeling good" makes people support the Government, the Jacobites chose their time badly in 1745. There had been hunger just after 1740 when harvests failed, but Paisley was full of optimism in 1745. Kerr and Pollock were acquiring a large new bleaching-field over in Neilston Parish. It stretched from the Kirkton Burn to the Levern Water along what is now called Cross Arthurlie. James Fulton, "surgeon" (though he did not depend on his practice for a living), was laying out a new street of his own in the one-time Abbey Orchard. There was another Manufacturing House there, but Orchard Street was to become known as the place where big corks ¹ had their showrooms. It was properly paved by the standards of the time, for the original occupants contracted to pay a rate to the Council to have it done. But it was said that the Surgeon's even richer, elder brother, "Baillie" Robert Fulton, had urged him not to go to unnecessary expense about the street. It was narrow and, from its situation, subject to wetness. There were as yet, of course, no underground drains. The weavers relished seeing the grand merchants from Glasgow pick and splash their way along and they called Orchard Street 'The Plunkin'. It was said satirically that the reason why the bell of the Tolbooth was hung, unusually, to swing north and south, instead of east and west, was so that 'The Plunkin' corks could hear it better!

The brothers Fulton were part of an extensive family of "bonnet lairds" with estates on the moor road to Beith along the boundary between Lochwinnoch and Neilston. A Fulton of Auchenbathie became a Paisley merchant in the 17th century and his grandsons were probably the richest men, real gentry excepted, in the town. James collected house property and mortgage bonds. He died childless soon after starting Orchard Street, and his brother, the frequently-chosen Bailie, became even richer. The Bailie collected estates at Muirshiels, Stewarts Rais near Barrhead, Inchinnan, the Elderslie neighbourhood, and the Townhead of Paisley. He also died childless, after marrying into the Maxwells of Castlehead and Brediland, and left his cousins to litigate over the lands.

¹ A 'cork' was an agent or merchant who 'put out' and collected the woven cloth.

The Maxwells of Castlehead, in that same Jacobite year, were founding a new village, Maxwellton, west of Paisley and between Ferguslie and Newton, to house more weavers, as well as some prosperous commuters from Paisley. Among these was Nathaniel Forrester, of a good family in Stirlingshire, who had set up as a dyer over St Mirren's Burn at the foot of Mirren's Wynd during the rebuilding which followed the great fire of 1733. His workmen stood on the stepping-stones at the ford, rinsing out cloth. He moved into Maxwellton and married Gavin Maxwell's daughter with the eventual result that his own five daughters became the co-heiresses to their Maxwell grandfather, as well as to their father's estate at Arngibbon - not to mention the profits of the dyeworks. Not surprisingly, Nathaniel's sons-in-law and grandsons were all men of some note in Paisley. The least of them, Thomas Stevenson, had a big tape factory at the top of Caledonia Street in the north of Paisley, and raised his son to the social eminence of an Edinburgh lawyer. Two others built the two grandest houses on the High Street, including Townhead House, where Townhead terrace is now. Another, Andrew Brown, took over the Shuttle Street empire of Kerr and Pollock. One daughter stuck with the Stirlingshire gentry and her grandson was a very superior mercenary in Spanish service:

Sir John Downie, Major-General in the Army of His Catholic Majesty, Commandant-General of the Province of Andalusia, Governor of the Palace of Seville, Knight Grand Cross of the Military Order of St Ferdinand...

The rumoured factory in Causeyside made its appearance in the Jacobite year. Probably at least three storeys high, it stood close to the churchyard on the same south side of the burn and was reached from Causeyside by a path later called Kirk Lane. The partners were Bailie Fulton, Claud Alexander of Newton, his brothers-in-law John and Robert Neilson (no connection with the later Institution) and one James McWilliam who was, simply, rich.

This was more like the modern idea of a factory in that much of the weaving was carried out on the premises, but it was far from cheap mass-production. Its weavers were picked men using the best of materials on up-to-date looms. Bailies' sons were afterwards among the apprentices there under the "Master", or foreman, John Wilson, who was a weaver of celebrated cleverness. He figures among the Paisley Poets by virtue of his comic ballad "The Peat-Stealing", which celebrates them. He was one of several John Wilsons who figure in Paisley records.

At the same time, the white linen thread industry was spreading from its place of origin in Bargarran (Erskine) into Paisley via Brig of Johnstone; and Colonel McDowall, the Caribbean sugar magnate was pushing forward land improvement (he reputedly introduced the wheelbarrow as well as the turnip) at Lochwinnoch.

The Hanoverians had no need to worry about Paisley's loyalty. At the battle of Falkirk, the Prince's last victory on his way south, the Paisley Volunteers stood their ground, lost some men, and retreated in good order. "Honest John" Renfrew, a New Street house-buyer, brought their flag back to be flown on important occasions for the next century.

Just before Hogmanay a detachment of Highland troops appeared at Bailie Fulton's front door in Causeyside Street, and, not finding him at home, left a summons for the Council's representatives to come and pay a fine, or in other words a ransom. Two men were held hostage until £500 was raised and paid. The Council were obliged to Colonel McDowall, the West India sugar magnate, for lending them the money. Unlike Glasgow, Paisley never got any compensation from an ungrateful

Government. When, a few months later, Fulton's impressive new factory beside the burn started work, it was named after the Duke of Cumberland. Beside it, in due course, developed Cumberland Place, Cumberland Court, Cumberland Calico Printing Works, the Cumberland Shawl Finishing Works, and quite a few little Cumberlands in later years.

The Low Parish

The original Parish Church was relatively small, a Greek Cross (i.e. with all its arms equal) in the middle of a larger churchyard than can be seen now, with one lofty hall and a gallery. The possession of a seat for a year was auctioned to make a considerable contribution to the running expenses and some craft societies made block bookings. More surprisingly to modern minds, family lairs, nine feet square, in the graveyard were sold by auction and the kerbstone markers which some of the proprietors put down are still there in the grass around the Arts Centre. Some people put down corner markers only; the Old Paisley Society has rescued a few of these little stone posts with mysterious initials on them and they can be found at Small Shot Cottages. People who could not afford to buy a lair were buried round the outer edges, decently enough but with no guarantee of perpetuity, and since the yard has been cut back drastically on three sides those outlying sepulchres are beyond being located now.

Finding the minister's stipend was a matter never free from anxiety. Even in 1753, when a second Burgh church (the High) was built, unsuccessful attempts were made to cover that minister's pay by the ancient unpopular device of taxing twopence Scots (one sixth of a penny English) on the Scots pint (three times the English) of ale, but it did not work.

However, the Rev. George Mitchell accepted a call. He might have felt it as a compliment, since those who called him certainly knew all there was to know about him. He was the minister "of the second charge" at the Abbey, which had so large a parish that it needed two ministers. He was also no outsider to Paisley society; he married a daughter of Provost James Glassford and was thereby the brother-in-law of the celebrated Glasgow Tobacco Lord, John Glassford. At his death in 1747 his New Street congregation subscribed for a massive table-tomb bearing a long and fulsome inscription culminating in a scrap of well-intentioned versification:

...for Piety and Purity of Conversation as a Christian, Exemplary to all. In Zeal and Fidelity as a Minister, Inferior to none. In Dignity and Prudence as a Presbyter, equalled by few. After travailing as in birth, spending and being spent, for the Salvation of Souls, this Church was bereaved of a burning and shining Light, this Place of an useful and excellent Pastor, his friends and acquaintance of a safe and sweet Counsellor and his Family of an admired and affectionate Head...

*His life how laborious
His death how victorious
His state now how glorious
No chisel can tell.*

Unhappily these words are now very hard to decipher, not least because the table-tombstone on which they are inscribed has been pushed around somewhat and now stands back-to-front and a little out of kilter, sharing a recess in the Arts Centre wall close to a hot air outlet with the equally decrepit monument of his successor.

However, I am glad to see that the practice of dumping the snack bar's empty crates and cartons on these convenient pieces of furniture has been banned. To what base uses we may return, Horatio!

A Paisley American

The most famous minister of the Low Church is buried in America, where his name is held in honour. John Witherspoon was already a prominent supporter of the Evangelical wing of the Church of Scotland before he left Beith for Paisley. He had written pamphlets against the Moderate party and against stage plays, and there can be no doubt that his views were approved by the Paisley congregation when they sent him a "call". He helped found a Society for the Reformation of Manners ("manners" meaning life-style). It brought prosecutions against some notorious evil-doers and tried to subject the upper class to Church discipline. He summoned one group of young men of the too sophisticated merchant elite to appear before the Presbytery on a charge of blasphemy. It seemed that during a drunken party they had enacted a parody of the taking of communion. But this had only been witnessed through a window of eighteenth-century glass and with the help of a lawyer they got a verdict of Not Proven. Pushing their victory a little further, they sued Witherspoon for libel since he had printed the sermon he preached against them. Technically he had no defence and he had to pay them heavy damages. Three years later he was still in debt for the amount.

Not surprisingly, he yielded to the urging of his American admirers and accepted the headship of the College of New Jersey at Princeton, subsequently raised to the status of a university. His wife was very unhappy about what she probably saw as a downward step from Paisley, but she need not have mourned over it. He took a leading place among American intellectuals and also among the fosterers of rebellion against George III. His importance in that field was even somewhat exaggerated in Britain. "Daughter America has run off with a Presbyterian parson!". And he was one of the "Founding Fathers" who signed the Declaration of Independence.

Before the total breach took place, however, Witherspoon interested himself in an organisation, the Philadelphia Company, for bringing destitute Scots to settle in the great areas of land which the British Government had annexed from the French after winning the Seven Years' War. There was a great deal of it to be had virtually free on condition of populating it with industrious, white, Protestant settlers. Much of it, in northern Nova Scotia, did not offer at all an easy way of life, but it was supposed that Highlanders were used to that. The two chief sponsors of the scheme seem to have been Witherspoon himself and his friend Dr Pagan (unfortunate name) who belonged to a leading Paisley family of silk manufacturers and was probably the most important financial backer. He was the owner of the piece of land at the end of Shuttle Street which stopped the way of a much-needed junction of George Street with Causeyside Street.

There can be no doubt that Witherspoon acted from well-meaning motives, but neither the Company nor the emigrants knew much about what they would find or what they would need - not to mention the conditions in the holds of ocean-going ships. There was a degree of suffering which today would demand that someone be punished. But it was not deliberate or callous. Witherspoon and Pagan were not heartless any more than they were "two English gentlemen" with no intention of going on that journey themselves, as a reputable modern writer has carelessly assumed. Pagan himself settled at Pictou, the chilly headquarters in Nova Scotia. Admittedly he would be able to afford more comforts than most of the emigrants.

Emigration was not only from the Highlands. There was a depression, with a bank failure, in Ayrshire and the neighbouring counties, around 1770 and many farmers and tradesmen thought of leaving for America. A well-run Emigration Society offered the most hopeful way to minimise disappointment. There was such a society based in Inchinnan in the seventies, and its leading spirit, a land surveyor named Whitelaw, went on ahead to prospect. He made contact with Witherspoon and bargained for some land that was in Witherspoon's personal possession, in pleasant 'New Hampshire Grants' (now Vermont). The Society set sail but unhappily they arrived in Boston harbour just as the war was breaking out. They walked into the arms of British port authorities, who would not hear of their going to live on Witherspoon's territory. They were offered three choices: either join the British Army, or go to Pictou like the Highlanders, or get the next ship back. Although they had only just emerged from the miseries of one transatlantic voyage, the Inchinnan Society chose to embark on another. It was years later that the surviving members got to Ryegate, in Caledonia County, Vermont, at last. But they never showed any resentment against Witherspoon. Their descendants respect his memory.

It is a pity that there is not a worthy monument to Witherspoon at the Old Kirk, now the Arts Centre, although the naming of Witherspoon Way has recognised him. I have heard it said that Witherspoon would not wish to be associated with a building where stage plays are now performed. But it is not certain that he would prefer to be associated with the temple to twenty-first century materialism which the University of Paisley is ². What is certain is that the University has no connection whatever with Witherspoon, despite the statue (by the distinguished sculptor Sandy Stoddart) standing in its forecourt.

(The second part of Sylvia's 'Nether Paisley' will appear in the next issue of the Journal – Ed.)

² Now the University of the West of Scotland