

DESCRIPTION OF
THE PARISH BY
REV. ADAMS - 1952

The Parish of Aberdour – by Rev. A.M. Adams – June, 1952

Physical Basis: The name of the ancient establishment set up on the knoll overlooking the burn mouth and the sea was obviously taken from its position at the mouth of the Dour – Aberdour. For church purposes – the parish is now Aberdour St. Drostan. Irregular in shape it lies along the south shore of the Moray Firth. It stretches for 7½ miles from Poukburn, west of Rosehearty, to the mouth of the Tor Burn and from north-east to south-west it is about 8 miles. The raising of the two parishes “quoad sacra” of New Pitsligo and New Byth has reduced the size of the parish ecclesiastically, since all the land west of Glasslaw Den and the Gonar Burn was handed over to New Pitsligo and New Byth. The civil parish is bounded on the north by the Moray Firth; on the east by the parishes of Pitsligo and Tyrie; on the south by New Deer; on the south-west by King Edward and on the west by the Tor Burn which separates it from the Gamrie parish in Banffshire. The detached portion of Auchentumb (1,482 acres) was handed over to the Strichen Parish in 1891 by the boundary commissioners. Such detached portions were a common feature in old parishes, but the reason is not always clear and has been the source of much debate. The most apparent explanation is that it was a grazing ground for shore farms and was owned by the same laird. It is remarkable that after so long a period the residents cleave to the old parish – they pay teinds. The land area of Aberdour Parish is now 14,033 acres.

The highest part of the parish is the western cliffs, up to 300 feet, in the farms of Bankhead, Clinterty and Pennan, all of which are now separate from the Auchmedden estate – in fact the whole estate has broken up and the holdings acquired by the farmers. A few weeks ago the estate of Aberdour was sold, and with one exception, all the farms were purchased by tenants. The highest point inland is Windyheads Hill, used during the last war as an R.A.F. station, and now used as a radio station by the Civil Aviation.

Antiquities and Eminent Men: The shore is very rugged and the rock scenery between Scorgie and the Red Head of Pennan is magnificent and seldom surpassed in our island. It contains many caves, of which the most historic is Cowhaven, the shelter of Lord Pitsligo after Culloden. The Quaynan, between the farms of Clinterty and Pennan and the foot of the den that divides them, has a natural dock and quay wall, and the staple, which held the lamp to give light to smugglers landing their silks and spirits, can still be seen firmly embedded in the roof. The Pipers' Cave is at Nethermill, west of Pennan Bay. The old legend of the piper dies hard, it is said that he piped and marched into the cave and never returned, and that to-day, in a storm, the skirl of his pipes is heard.

Mess John's Well is 400 yards west of the burn mouth at the foot of the Dordar Den. A mineral spring trickles down the cliff and into a cup chiselled out of the rock; the present writer has been told by the old folk that after the church service (even from the present parish church) people used to drink from this well and then, if the tide suited, climbed over the part of the raised beach called the Little Kipp to the Lady Rock, where the best dulse was found, filled their pockets with it, had another drink of water from the well, and so had their weekly medicine. One John Whyte, who resisted episcopacy, led the people down past the kirk to worship in the shelter of the cliff – hence he was Mass John and so Mess John's Well. In the next bay, which lies at the foot of a beautiful amphitheatre of grass, in the west corner, is still another cave, where for years a stranger reputed to be an Irish Protestant, lonely and indignant made his home. His local name was Jock, so it is and will always be known as Jock's Cave. The light and dark caves are part of the Broad Shore.

A hamlet, on the brae-face opposite Aberdour on the east side, is the site of the first community, of which no trace now remains. St. Drostan's Well, on the Broad Shore, on the site of a primitive well is of modern origin, having been built there by a native of the parish, Andrew Findlater, who was headmaster of Gordon's College, Aberdeen (1842-9). He created a fund, which is in the hands of the kirk session, to keep the well in order. It is now his memorial.

The parish possesses in Dundarg Castle one site of great prehistoric and historical importance. Excavations conducted here in 1950 and 1951 have revealed a very complex series of remains extending from the Iron Age until the sixteenth century. The site is a long narrow promontory or red sand stone, jutting out into the North Sea. It is thus aptly called Dundarg - Red Fort. In the Iron Age, apparently about the third century, the site was occupied as a place of strength, and isolated from the mainland by a formidable series of banks and rock cut ditches. There can be small doubt that this fort was the 'cathair' of Abbordobor, which the mormaer, Bede the Pict, made over to St. Drostan on his arrival at Aberdour in the sixth century, as narrated in the "Book of Deer". In the thirteenth century the Cmyrn Earls of Buchan built a strong stone castle within the prehistoric fort, widening its inner ditches to form the castle moat. This early stone castle was destroyed, no doubt by Bruce, during the "Herschip of Buchan" in 1308. In 1334 the castle was restored by Henry de Beaumont, the English Earl of Buchan. In it he withstood a famous siege but eventually was forced to surrender to Sir Andrew de Moray, the warden of Scotland, on 23rd December, 1334. Thereafter the castle was again destroyed by the warden. About the middle of the sixteenth century, probably during the "War of the Rough Wooing", the upper part of the inner gatehouse was rebuilt, the new works being provided with gunloops. The history of the site and the results achieved by the recent excavations are fully set out in "Dundarg Castle" by Dr. Douglas Simpson, published in 1954.

Population: The population of the parish mounted steadily in the first half of the nineteenth century - (1801) - 1304: (1841) - 1645: (1861) - 1997: - and attained a maximum of 2176 in 1871. Thereafter it declined more rapidly than it had risen. By 1901 the figure was 1601, by 1931 it was down to 1180, and in 1951 the census recorded only 1032 - 501 males and 531 females living in 301 houses.

Agriculture: The state of cultivation is high and good: crops of oats, turnip, beer and barley are grown. The parish is not a dairying centre because of its distance from large populations. Only one dairy, Woodhead had been modernised recently and another up-to-date dairy, Sauchentree, supplies milk to the village. Most of the farms have one or two cows, which supply milk for the farmer, his family and his workers. Farms not suitable for beef or not in the trade carry suckling cows for the rearing of store cattle to fill the beef byres, but most of the fat stores are brought into the parish. Several farms are noted as producers of beef and during the war one such farm put 365 cattle to the market in a single year. It is indicative of the quality of beef raised, and of the advanced state of production in this parish, that the farmer in the above farm has been chosen as sole judge this year (1952) at the Smithfield show for the supreme champion of beef cattle. Breeding and marketing of fat pigs is in a thriving condition and along with poultry takes a big place in many of our farms. Apart from the mosses, which are well inland, most of the land is cultivated. One of our farmers was the pioneer of rearing cattle in the open, and his plan has now spread to a form of ranching further west in the Highlands of Scotland. His farms cover most of the west of the parish and 200 calving cows run wild and are only fed in severe times with hay, straw and turnips and are never inside.

Changes have been caused by the price of coal and its shortage. Before the war, farmers were giving up mowing, but again, more than ever, they are cutting peats. Poor quality coal and prohibitive costs will make this back to-the-old days practise, common, especially if labour conditions improve on the farms.

The agricultural statistics for the parish at 4th June, 1953 were: tillage 3,647 acres: temporary grass 4,238 acres: permanent grass 827 acres: rough grazing 3,644 acres: for livestock totals were: horses 48: dairy cattle 255: beef cattle 3,127: sheep 5,050: pigs 657: poultry 35,284. Holdings over one acre totalled 127. At 18th February, 1954 total tractors numbered 95 and electric motors 17.

Fishing: A hundred years ago the inshore fishing was flourishing. Pennan haddocks being in demand even in Aberdeen. Now fishing as an industry has almost disappeared. The decadence started with the employment of bigger boats which could not use our small harbours and bays. This led many fishermen to move to Fraserburgh to take part in the herring fishing. Then locally the seine net was used on the "Skaw", a valley in the sea parallel with our shore, said to be one of the best white fish nurseries and fishing grounds round the British coast, now it is fished by seine-net boats from every harbour but our own. This completed the destruction of the hand line fishing and our own seatown of Pennan now depends on mackerel and lobster. It is tantalising to know it was one or two Pennan men who developed the seine-net in the Moray Firth.

Education: One cannot but regret that the trend of education is to the bigger towns. Rural schools are threatened with extinction. This system of centralisation is aided by modern transport. The care of the apt pupil is gone, and even our high schools are swamped by all classes of pupils of post qualifying age. There are 3 schools in the parish – Aberdour with (at September, 1955) 118 junior secondary pupils, 5 full time and 5 visiting teachers: Auchmedden and Glasslaw with one teacher each for 15 and 14 primary pupils respectively.

Church: Aberdour and Old Deer are the two oldest fountainheads of Christianity in Scotland. The old church of Aberdour was built on a site whose history goes back to Celtic times; it was closed in 1818, when the new church was erected at the north end of the village. In the kirkyard of the old building, the oldest flat stone (broken) is dated 1593. It must be that of Whyte of Ardlawhill, whose grandson, Mess John, saved Presbyterianism in the midst of the Episcopal stronghold of the north. It was only this year that the '3' of the date was scarred by the mower, and I state this for future proof. Other three tombs are in memory of Baird, Gordon and Leslie of Auchmedden, Aberdour and Coburty respectively. The Baird tomb is a panel stone also dated 1593, and on the other side of the entrance the companion panel is said to have had the date 1420, but it is completely weathered. The 1593 stone is perfect and is in memory of George Baird of Auchmedden, the mathematician, who is said to have set the course in advanced mathematics, which resulted in Napier's Logarithms. Another stone, fixed to the Aberdour Mausoleum outside, bears the sly humour of the Walkers. In more recent times the parish produced another noteworthy scholar, already mentioned, Andrew Findlater (1810 – 85), who edited the first edition of "Chamber's Encyclopaedia" (1861 – 8). Still another stone shows where James Bridie (Dr. Mavor), the famous playwright, got his "nom-de-plume" from his grandparents. His great-grandfather was a shoemaker in the village.

Unfortunately the parish records were destroyed at the flitting from the old church to the new in 1818. A Chapel of Ease was built, with much help from the Baird trust, about the end of the last century. Regular worship is held there, but changes in the fishing have reduced the numbers attached to that beautiful church and faithful congregation. At the time of the New Statistical Account (1840) communicants at the Parish Church averaged about 600, today the number is 391. There are 30 members in the Woman's Guild and 30 in the Sunday School. A United Free Church was in Aberdour until 1927 when it was amalgamated with the Parish Church.

Public Services and Leisure Activities: There are no resident doctors in the parish, but the area is covered by doctors from Fraserburgh and New Pitsligo. There is a district nurse at New Aberdour.

Aberdour enjoys a high frequency of buses to Fraserburgh, Peterhead and Aberdeen. The drainage of New Aberdour is by settlement tank, filters and septic tank, with effluent to the sea. There are 5 general merchants businesses (one of which houses a sub-post office), a bank, hotel, tailor, and shoemaker.

For leisure activities indoor facilities are full adequate, with Aberdour School and the New Aberdour Public Hall (seating 350). The latter is in constant use for meetings of the badminton club (15 members), the juvenile society (96), the youth club (41), the whist club (40), the Freemasons and for weekly dances, concerts and sales. The Woman's Guild meet in the school (except on special occasions when it meets in the Hall). A local club for Carpet Bowls has now been formed.

Way of Life: The fishing community and rural population still pursue their traditional way of life, but easy contact with three large urban centres has greatly increased the circle of interests, especially for young people. With its adequate shopping and recreational facilities the parish is in no danger of losing its individuality. The fall in population and a seeming indifference to organised religion has reduced the church roll to two-thirds of what it was 100 years ago, but the church remains the focal point of the community.

SOURCE: The Third Statistical Account of Scotland
"The County of Aberdeen"
Published by Collins in 1960
Chapter 11 "Deer District" pages 345 - 349