

Rigours of life in Golspie —200 years ago

One of the comforts of living in an island community is the ever-changing character of the sea which washes all around, sometimes gentle, and soothing, with a tranquility which makes us look afresh at the priorities of our own lives; sometimes raging and destructive, with a power which highlights man's puny achievements. The variety of its moods is its most obvious consistency. The variety of life which it supports is only altered significantly by the interference of the human race.

Nearly 200 years ago one of the aspects of the sea which commended itself to the interest of the Rev. William Keith was the abundance of life around the parish of Golspie, where the subdued waves mostly sweep gently into the shore, sheltered from the wrath of the North Sea.

Fish prices

He recorded the numbers of seals, porpoises, and even small whales which could be readily observed from the shore, and noted the plentiful supplies of haddock. The number of haddock no doubt added fuel to the fire of his indignation over the prices being charged for the fish.

It is generally assumed that inflation of food prices is a recent innovation introduced by Mr Wilson and carefully nurtured by Mr Heath. However, the Rev. Keith was dismayed to recall that the price of haddock five or six years before was one penny a score, whereas now, in 1722, they were a penny each. Mr Pitt apparently had his problems, too!

Prices of everyday food presented serious problems to the ordinary family whose average size was seven children. One might also be listening to present-day situations on hearing that in this period, unemployment was responsible for seasonal migration to the south, where there were better opportunities for work.

It would appear that the picture has changed little, but in fact the migration was for the summer months, with a return home in the winter.

Battle near Little Ferry

Excitement had not been lacking in the area, for it was in the vicinity of Golspie that one of the last battles the country had been fought. In a kirmish took place between

a party of rebels and the militia of the country. The rebels were beaten, and several men of rank were taken prisoner. This event is reputed to have taken place on the low lying ground between Golspie and the Little Ferry. The present writer does not know if any evidence has been uncovered to substantiate this claim, but perhaps some reader may know of something.

It is not so surprising to discover that there was only one two-wheeled carriage in the whole of the parish. This is perhaps not so much an indication of the level of prosperity as the level, or lack of it, on the surface of the tracks that passed for roads. In 1782 the banks of the Golspie burn overflowed twice in 10 days and made impassable the main, and only, route into Caithness.

While the roads have improved with the passage of time, if not of vehicles, some of the older remains distinguishable at that time have suffered from exposure so near to the sea. There was evidence of the remains of an old castle, supposed to be Pictish, some three-quarters of a mile from Dunrobin Castle, and at the time some of the cells were intact.

One might have expected there to be an enthusiasm for seafaring of some sort from the inhabitants of a parish so near to the sea — however, such enthusiasm was singularly lacking. The only persons known to have entered the Navy had been "pressed" into the service. It is difficult to imagine the advantages of shore-based living which proved so attractive, but not so difficult to consider the hardships.

Health problems

One of the principal shortages in a coastal parish was of materials suitable for fuel. Peat and turf were used, but required to be brought from areas over three miles away. This practice gave rise to serious health problems. The only means of transporting the peats was to have them carried on the backs of Highland garrons or, more often, on the backs of the collectors themselves. This necessitated their sleeping out all night in the peat fields, and frequently gave rise to rheumatic disorders. The descendants of these hardy people are proof that at least some of them survived the rigours of life in the parish of Golspie.