

The Barony of Brunton and Dalginch - A Walk Around the Heart of Fife

The newly opened Braes Loan Walk enables us to take a tour around the ancient barony of Dalginch, one of the Earl of Fife's most important estates. It will take us past the very heart of Fife where laws were once debated and judgements enacted.

The walk is in the form of a square. Beginning at the Glass Street car park (once a marsh), the walk proceeds up the old "Causey" or causeway, past the 12th century church and along Northhall Road flanking Markinch Hill and under the railway tunnel. From Northhall Cemetery gates we go up the Cuinan path, past North Lodge, turn right over the hill and then down Braes Loan to the Back Burn. We then go back through another tunnel and to the start. Assuming dry weather, it's a simple walk of around an hour but it takes us through a thousand years of history. As we go round the square, the core estate of Brunton is always to our right whilst to our left are the many other estates that were contained within the larger Barony of Dalginch. I'll leave consideration of it until last.

Our knowledge of the area has improved greatly in recent years due to an increased interest in local history and the attention of academic historians such as Dr Simon Taylor whose recent book¹ has provided much of the material from early charters used in this survey.

St Drostan's Church

The route passes by the 12th century Romanesque church tower, a magnificent and near perfect example of the mason's skill. The door and the spire are later additions but most of the interior and exterior remain along with about a dozen windows and two fine arches linking it with the now vanished nave. This was what Edward's chronicler referred to as the minster of Markinch. A short detour around the building will reveal Norman-style decorative carving embedded in the more recently built walls as well as arrow sharpening marks testifying to the importance of weekly archery practice during the long wars of independence. The session house with its reused medieval stonework is the work of one of Scotland's greatest architects, Robert Rowland Anderson who designed the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

The walk continues through the heart of then old Kirkton of Markinch, past Mansefield, the former Prior's house and down to the Victorian post box at Bowbutts where the arrows shot from the church reached their target. Northhall Road links Markinch village to its 19th century graveyard, laid out to accommodate an expanding industrial population.

Northhall

We take the path under the tunnel to the cemetery at Northhall, a mound in the crook of the Markinch Burn. The old charters don't mention Northhall by name although it may be the same as the "Auldhall" mentioned in a late 13th century list of the Earl of Fife's Markinch landholdings drawn up for Edward I. Recent research indicates that this mound is the "Dalginch" referred to as the capital place of Fife in the 13th century bundle of legal documents known as the *Regiam Majestatem*. The name in Gaelic means something like "the raised land of the thorn trees surrounded by water". On this mound legal disputes over movable property such as cattle would most likely have been settled. A thorn tree or a thorn hedge were once associated with moot hills or places of debate and judgement. The

¹ Simon Taylor with Gilbert Märkus. The Place-names of Fife. Vol 2

mound gave its name to a great medieval estate which in turn gave its name to the 19th century farmhouse further up the hill which preserves the name Dalginch to this day. Markinch's burgh charter sets the town firmly within the Barony of Dalginch with its principal manor house at Brunton. The house was demolished in the 'seventies but the walled garden remains.

This mound was therefore once at the heart of Fife, the place where all Fifers would come to seek justice from their earl or clan chief. It would fit with what we know about the first Earl of Fife known as Constantine who is recorded as a Judex or great judge presiding over land disputes all over Fife in the early years of the 12th century. He was also known as MacDuff, the successor of the MacDuff immortalised by Shakespeare. When his descendants were granted land in Falkland half a century later, and St Andrews grew as a place of trade and pilgrimage, their family's focus of attention moved away from Markinch, and Cupar became the seat of judgement and the location of the sheriff court.

By the 18th century the land around Northhall was owned by the Dewar family and known as "Prickhillys". This may refer to the small heaps of "prickings" or coal waste that once covered the land over the burn from the present day cemetery. An 18th century document recently discovered in the Leslie Melville archives sets out a contract for extracting coal from a pit probably next to the burn just across the wall at the far end of Northhall cemetery. The document describes an agreement to construct a water-lead from what is now the Balbirnie estate to supply a head of water for the pump. In the process, the course of the burn was transferred from a twisting route closer to Markinch Hill to a straight channel on the north side of the "Playfield". All this was around 1715, well over a hundred years before the cemetery was laid out and the railway embankment was constructed. This pit appears to have been sunk close to where the burn emerges from a tunnel under the railway line. In fact the whole of the area covered in trees at the side of the burn opposite the cemetery was partly an open cast mining area and partly a quarry. Perhaps some of the stone that we see on the church tower was extracted from here.

Northhall may have been linked to the "Holy or Holly Land" running along the side of Markinch Hill close to Northhall Road and may even have a connection to the long lost landholding of Pittenhaggles (the land of the church) but there is more research to be done before we can be more certain. There was an early 12th century dispute within the church over the land at Pittenhaggles and this is likely to have been over the coal reserves that once cropped out of the ground along what is now Northhall Road.

In the early 19th century Northhall was bought up by the Balfours of Balbirnie to provide a carriage route around the Playfield, but when the railway embankment was built the mound was cut off from the estate. Its use became limited and the land was sold to the town for a cemetery to replace the one around Markinch Parish Church. The Balfour estate could access the graveyard via a path that crossed the railway to the north of the mound where it led to a small bridge once spanning the burn close to the village water spout. The foundations of both bridges can still be seen.

Newton and Whins

The next estate on the left hand side as we go up the Cuinan path became composite landholding of Newton and Whins, made up by the Balfour family who acquired the land in the 19th century from two much older farm units with the same names. The earliest record we have of Newton is a reference to its owner Multrie (a relative of the Lord of Markinch of the same name) who died at Flodden and to his wife Mariotta Pitcairn. She fought through

the Scottish courts for her land ownership rights at a time when property in Scotland was being redistributed following a heavy loss of life amongst the Scottish nobility.

As the path veers to the right, notice the old hollow way, now disused and overgrown, that runs down the back of the wall. Old maps show it passing close to the iron age settlement recently excavated near Newton farm and then, most likely, on to the prehistoric complex at Balfarg. The Cuinan path is likely to be of similar antiquity. Close to the same spot and opposite the stile that leads to Star, is a monument of more recent times. The parish boundaries were amended in the 19th century, possibly in connection with a dispute over heritors' contributions to the kirk. The new boundaries were marked by about a dozen stones with an "M" on one side for Markinch and a "K" on the other for Kennoway. Look carefully just across the fence and one of these stones is visible. There is another built into the wall at the North Lodge just at the top of the hill. The path from North Lodge to Brunton is now impassible.

Just before we reach the right hand turn near Rob's Howe, it is worth looking north towards Star. Aside from the lands of Broomfold, Braes and Bowhouse, this area contained much of the common land that was enclosed in the 19th century. Maps show that it was criss-crossed with common loans so that cattle and sheep could get to pasture. Around Star (as was the case in Markinch, much of the land was feued out into small parcels owned by cottars and smallholders. Beyond Star was Dalginch Moss, now Star Moss and once a sizable loch, which was the northern frontier of the Barony of Dalginch. As the barony became split up, the moss, an essential source of fuel was also split up, creating Star of Brunton, Star of Dalginch and Star of Treaton. Only later in the 19th century did it become known as Star of Markinch as the town became more significant than the big estates. The word "star" linked to the modern word "stair" signifies a raised crossing place.

Bowhouse, Braes and Broomfold

We now turn sharp right up through a well worn hollow way. Braes Loan itself divides the southern part of what was once known as Braes farm on the left from the Brunton estate on the right. The two were split up by the Earl of Leven in the 18th century and marketed as two land parcels. Braes fell into the combined holding sold as Bowhouse, the ancient cattle sheds of the Barony. It also included the tofts of Broomfold and the mill lands of Brunton down by the Myres which formed the southern boundary of the Barony.

It is clear from the earliest estate plans that the present day farm of Dalginch was not known specifically by that name and the way the name was introduced is very interesting. The estate called Bowhouse was bought up by Sir William Arnot of Auchmuir at the beginning of the 18th century, presumably from the Leven estate. Arnot was a career soldier keen to deepen his pedigree. He came to refer to himself as Major William Arnot of Dalginch, a title that he must have known was both ancient and noble although there is no evidence that he had any hereditary claim to it. It is not known whether he purchased the Dalginch baronetcy from Lord Leven or simply styled himself after an ancient local title. His eldest son Robert inherited the lapsed baronetcy of the Arnot family but the precise circumstances are not known. After the death of his first son in 1767, his second son William inherited the estate along with the unrelated family baronetcy of Arnot.

The following year Sir William drew up a plan of his Bowhouse estate showing the three farms of Broomfold, Braes and Bowhouse itself. There is no farm called Dalginch on the 1768 estate plan, only an empty field in front of Braes Toft where it would later be built.

However, by 1797, horse tax records refer a Robert Arnot esq. of Braes of Dalginch. As Bowhouse is not listed, the family may have resided at Braes while the farm now known as Dalginch was built. All this may explain why, when the land was bought by the Balfour estate, the name “Dalginch Farm” was used for the newly constructed property. Built in the early part of the 19th century just to the south of Braes Toft and Bowhouse Toft (later known as Bowes), the newly built Dalginch Farm incorporated outbuildings from both of the old farm steadings. To summarise, during the 18th and 19th century the place-name Dalginch came to refer to the land around Bowhouse farm, a fraction of the once substantial barony of Dalginch. It is only in recent years that place-name historian Simon Taylor has shown us that the barony itself is likely to have derived the name from a mound in the loop of the Markinch Burn, about a mile to the west of the 19th century farmhouse now bearing the Dalginch name.

The 1768 plan also outlines a small landholding shown as Delginch Miln (*spelt this way in antique lettering*). This had been marked as Mill of Brunton on the earlier Roy map and may have had its name changed by Arnot to indicate that it did not belong to the neighbouring estate of Brunton. Also, the antique style lettering on the plan may have been designed to suggest the antiquity of his recently acquired estate and title. The local population were evidently not convinced and the name later reverted to Brunton Mill. The plan also designates as Deginch Moss, the area now known as Star Moss and this was probably its original name. Curiously, the highest point of the farm was named Bowhouse Hill on the plan and not Dalginch Law which may have been the old name for Cuinan Hill. Sir William died in 1782 and the land was inherited by his nephews, William Glass and Thomas Arnot of Chapple. The baronetcy lapsed and the separate title “of Dalginch” was never used again. The land was divided into two north-south strips known as East and West Dalginch and sold to a Dr Prescott and a Dr Towers. Both were listed as church heritors in the 1790s before the estates were purchased by the Balfour family.

The path passes between the designated lands of Dalginch to the east and Brunton to the west and would have seen a regular flow of cattle herded between the low lying Myres and the common land around Star in the north.

Brunton Mill

At the bottom of the hill the path passes by a clump of fir trees. This hides the remains of one of the area’s most important corn mills. Brunton Mill, (called Dalginch Milne on Arnot’s Plan) was a small-holding in its own right with infield land (mucked), outfield land (fallow), meadowland and pasture. There seems once to have been a specially cut mill-lead to the north of the existing burn channel, two dams and a toft as well as the mill itself. The estate plan of 1768² also seems to show a corn kiln that would have been used for drying the grain in a wet season. This would have been fueled by peat dug from the mire. Fresh drinking water was supplied from a source shown indistinctly on the plan as Samferr Well or possibly Samson’s Well.

The Burn and the Mires

This long stretch of flat land, still subject to flooding, would undoubtedly have been a loch at one time. The mouth of the burn was close to the mound where the church now stands and its adjacent Glebe meadow. The loch may at first have given some defensive protection to the Dalginch lands but became an important economic resource for all the

² National Archives of Scotland RHP 23533 Sir Robert Arnot

large estates as it silted up. It was carefully divided between Dalginch, Treaton and Balgonie, and then subdivided again, providing peat, reeds for thatching and basket making as well as meadowland for grazing cattle. Before the estates of East and West Dalginch were created, there are records of Dalginch Mire (close to Brunton) divided into three strips running north-south. This provided three pieces of dry land close to the edge of the marsh known as the east butt, the middle butt and the west butt. Attached to them were three strips called the east, middle and west mires respectively. Finally, further to the south would have been strips of open water known as the east, middle and west lochs. These very specific names are an indicator of the economic importance of such wetlands in medieval times. Sharing them out fairly was essential to the local economy.

Agricultural improvement led to a programme of progressive drainage including the cutting of a channel for the burn to the east of Brunton Mill. The spire of Markinch church seems to have been used as a marker for the labourers and a series of bridges were built over the Burn linking the north and south parts of the estates. In the Victorian period Backside Farm was renamed South Barnslee and later simply Barnslee. The name Brunton was reintroduced in place of North Barnslee.

During the Second World War, this whole area would have been flooded in the event of a tank invasion and again, the evidence of a barrage across the burn still existed until recent years.

Brunton and/or Barnslee

From the path it is possible to see a walled garden and to the right of it is a flat platform of land where Brunton House stood within living memory. The historian Sibbald says that MacDuff once had a castle on this spot but it has never been investigated. Local folklore speaks of a tunnel from this building to Maiden Castle near Kennoway. This would always have been the heart of the Dalginch Estate before it became known as "Brunton and Dalginch". The earliest written reference to **Dalginch** relates to a knight called Ness of Dalginge witnessing a charter³ of the Earl of Fife around 1165. He signs along with his neighbours, Aviel of Strathleven (Markinch shire), Kenneth Thane of Kettle and Merleswain (of Kennoway). A hundred years later the estate was in the hands of William de Valoniis (Vallance) whose son granted part of it, now known as the Glebe, to the church, by then owned by St Andrews Priory. This demonstrates that the original Dalginch estate had land on both sides of the Markinch Burn and may point to its origin as a smallish estate that expanded to east and west probably originally encompassing East, West and Nether Markinch. Brunton (or the Burntoun) may have been a small farm or settlement within that estate.

The name **Brunton** (Burntoun) does not appear in written form until 1435 when Lady Christian de Valoniis (or Vallance) took up residence with her second husband, John Cockburn. Christian's previous marriage had been to Sir Andrew Wardlaw and it was their son Henry Wardlaw who went on to found St Andrews University. Along with her sister Euphemia, who married Sir John Sibbald of Balgonie, Christian was the last of the Valoniis line.⁴ Although John Cockburn styled himself Cockburn of Dalginch, the feudal superiority of the estate remained in the hands of the Wardlaw family and became part of the larger Barony of Lochoreshire when the Valoniis family improved their social position through marriage. Dalginch came to be known as "Brunton and Dalginch" by the 15th century. It

³ Renewal of 'Gillecamestone' (ELO) 1160 X 2 April 1172

⁴ Bruce McAndrew, Scotland's Historic Heraldry

covered a wide area from Markinch in the west to Treaton in the east and as far north as Balfarg Loch and Star Moss.

As the feudal landholding system developed, **Wester Markinch** (which ran down to the Leven) was feued to the Keith family, Grand Marischalls of Scotland who part exchanged it with the Lindsay family for Dunottar Castle. **East and Nether Markinch**, on the other hand were feued to the Moultray family who came to style themselves Lords of Markinch. As already noted, **Newton of Markinch** was feued to another branch of the Moultries until that line died out after Flodden.

The estate called Brunton on the Markinch side of the Loan was purchased from the Wardlaw family by Archbishop Law for his son George in the early 17th century. George Law's widow married the sister of the Earl of Leven in 1647 and began a process of property transfer from one family to the other that was to last almost one hundred years. In 1673 Charles II recreated the ancient barony and granted it to James Law. It was to be known as the barony of Dalginch with its principal domain at Brunton. The village of Markinch, inside the barony, was at the same time granted burgh status. However, as an Episcopalian, Law's position of power did not last long. The Protestant William of Orange seized the Crown in 1688 and the fortunes of the Leslies and the Melvilles rose. The Laws seem to have entered into some kind of mortgage agreement (wadset) with the Earls of Leven (by now the Leslie- Melvilles), but continued to occupy the land until 1740.

After 1740 the estate appears to have been sold to the Simpson family. It was later extended to include the lands of Whins to the north, Backside to the south, Brunton Barns to the east and some lands along the Markinch Burn. The entire holding was renamed Barnslea (or Barnslee) some time later.

Agnes, the widow of John Simpson of Barnslee married Colonel William Paston around 1804, and the following year he drew up a plan of the estate. This 1805 plan already refers to its neighbouring estate as Dalginch. Farms and steadings are clearly marked on the plan but not named, and the entire unit stretching from what is now Star Moss to the Markinch-Milton road was simply called Barnslee and South Farm. Evidently, the Gibb family which had rented Backside for almost a hundred years was no longer in possession. Whins was later sold to General Balfour who combined it with Newton of Markinch to create a modern viable agricultural unit within the wider Balbirnie estate. A map of 1865 shows Brunton House marked simply as "Mansion House". Brunton Barns is referred to as North Barnslee and Backside or South Farm has become South Barnslee. William Paston died in 1830 and in 1844 Mrs Paxton (or Paston) of Brunton and Mrs Aitken of Barnslee were joint founders and benefactors of Brunton United Free Church⁵. Mrs Paston died five years later and was buried, with both husbands, directly in front of Markinch Parish Church. Brunton estate itself reverted to the Sim(p)son family and the last Simpson of Brunton was Mary Cuncliffe Simson who married Lt Col Walter Cook. Their daughter Mary Emma Maidie Cook lived in the house until it was demolished within living memory.

The Railway

The walk passes twice under the railway completed in 1847. It was initially known as the Edinburgh and Northern Railway, a company chaired by Robert Balfour. The Markinch section from Coaltown to New Inn was completed by Messrs Ross and Mitchell on a tender of £54,000. The viaduct was a massive undertaking involving around a thousand

⁵ MHG Newsletter, Mima Magna, 2010

men including masons, some of whom came from Italy. Many of the labourers were from Ireland and the burial records show several deaths in 1846-47 marked simply as "Irish stranger" with one from January 1848 marked "Irish child under one year" showing that some navvies travelled with their families. The Markinch section of the line also included a deep cut through sand near Newton, and a section that required a small forest to be cut down to provide piles and rafts for the line where it crossed a bog at Lochmuir near Kirkforthar Feus. A substantial part of the Balbirnie estate was mortgaged to provide security for the cost of this expensive section of line.⁶

The Glebe

Under the tunnel and to the right, as the walk returns to the car park, there is an expanse of meadowland that was granted in perpetuity by William Vallance, to the church. This is a very interesting charter⁷ signed at St Andrews on St Andrews day in 1284. In it William along with his mother and sister leave a piece of land to the east of the church (now known as the Glebe) to the Priory of St Andrews. He requests that the monks pray for the souls of his recently deceased father along with that of Malcolm the Earl of Fife. It is presumed that this is the Malcolm that died in 1266 and the likely feudal superior of the Valognes family. The charter also refers to grazing rights on the adjacent Dalginch meadow lands and to the gardener at the prior's house. The walled garden can still be seen in the far corner of the glebe around what was once the Prior's House, now known as Mansefield.

We turn right into Glass Street to return to the car park.

Bruce Manson
Sept 2013

⁶ G. P. Bennet, *The Great Road Between Forth and Tay*

⁷ St Andrews Lib. 420 -cited by Taylor 2008