

A SCHOOLBOY'S SNAPSHOT VIEW
OF FARM LIFE AT INVEREEN
1948 - 1951

The farm of Invereen, perhaps a mile long by half a mile wide, lies on the fertile floodplain of the River Findhorn in Lower Strathdearn bounded to the east by the river, and to the west by a steep faced 100 foot high gravel terrace on which the A9 road is constructed.

The Farmhouse lies at the foot of a very steep, winding track. This place was the home of the Dunbar family who first arrived in Strathdearn in 1720. They had originally settled at Edinchat, about three miles distant across the river, but had moved to Invereen in 1907. Resident at the farm in descending order of age were old Mrs Dunbar and her family of Jimmy, Mary, Janet, Meg, May and Angus, although May, a nurse, sometimes worked away. Jimmy retained the tenancy of Edinchat and grazed a flock of 200 ewes there. Gaelic, speaking, devout Free Presbyterians, Angus was the Precentor in the local Church and was a fine ballad singer.

In 1948, at the age of almost eleven, I first visited Invereen with my father during the potato harvest. Angus had added two extra drills to his potato crop for our benefit so we were only too glad to help with the harvest. My father had fortunately returned from Japanese captivity and had started building his dream house at Alt-Dhubhag. Famously, he had filled in a post war tax form requesting details of previous occupation and employer, and had simply written

'Railway Worker, Imperial Japanese Army!'

The 'tattie howker', like all implements at Invereen, was horse drawn and so began my fascination with Dolly and Prince. Dolly was middle-aged, docile and easily handled. Prince, the younger horse, was larger and often contrary. Occasionally infuriated and rendered breathless by the antics of a wayward animal Angie and his sisters would pause and merely remark with a sigh, "Well, isn't that provoking." Looking back, it is a tribute to Angie's endurance that he was able to match the pair so well, spending long days in harness with his mighty voice reverberating from the heights if one of them dared put a hoof out of line. Angie always watered and cooled the horses in the Findhorn after a hard day's work, usually in the middle of the river as he sat sideways on one of them. As a wee loon I was keen to work with them although I was a bit wary of Prince when feeding him in the stall. He would never kick, tread or bite, but he would lean on me and try and squeeze the life out of me against the wall. I was thrilled when I was eventually allowed to take a cartload of neeps to the cattle. However, instead of throwing out the turnips to the cows I opened the tailgate. Out tumbled the neeps - and off went Prince, galloping about rodeo style until the cart was empty. The beasts had to search around for their food - and I got a good lecture.

In June the cut grass was tossed and turned by pitchfork for a few days until dried into hay then "colled" before eventually being carted to the stackyard. "Stooking" corn sheaves behind the binder; learning to build a secure cartload before

“leading” back to Angus, the Master Builder in the stackyard - for an eager schoolboy like me this was a great big playground.

Jimmy was a piper, an ex-Lovat Scout, historian and wonderful storyteller. He had once ploughed up the bones of two executed Culloden fugitives at Invereen and had placed them under a rough cairn with a plaque to mark the spot which is on the left at the foot of Wade’s Road (looking south).

When Jimmy didn’t use his old 500 BSA motorbike to take the long way to Edinchat he crossed the river in a leaky old wooden box, standing up, fending off the boulders with a long wooden pole. The box was hauled up the far bank to allow the ankle deep water to drain away ready for the return trip. I often travelled on the back of the bike but only once, in a moment of madness, in the box. Every Monday Jimmy would lean the BSA against the telegraph pole beside our house and spend the evening sitting by the fire filling the room with “bogie roll” smoke while exchanging stories with my father and sometimes adding the “mouth music” as Dad searched for a tune on his fiddle. As bedtime approached he would “hypnotise” me and my sisters with ghostly stories and it was often long into the night before we dared shut an eye.

The Dunbars had three working sheepdogs and a larger, older, wise one called “The Kremlin”. These animals would usually be kept in the outbuildings but sometimes they would wander about the back door of the house which was hidden from view as one approached down the track. On my many visits I

would peer over the edge of the hill before nervously setting off down the brae praying that the dogs were in the byre. Sometimes I would be about midslope when a single bark signalled a mad headlong charge up the slope to meet me and in the ensuing frenzied greeting I would always get “nipped”. They regarded me as a two legged sheep! One busy day at the fank I bent down to stroke the idle old Kremlin but was rewarded with a loud yelp, a blast of hot breath and teeth grazing my eyebrows and chin. I had clumsily trod on his paw. Of course, the Dunbars rightly regarded being bitten by a dog or stung by a bee as trivial. They had more serious matters to consider.

As you entered the kitchen at Invereen the kists for the meal and flour were on the right, with a sideboard beyond, above which hung a wonderful painting of excited wild horses. By the window was a gun case (another source of fascination) containing shotguns - some with real hammers, rifles and, most enthralling of all to my cowboy brain, a Winchester 43 - the one with the lever action. Jimmy would often take down a gun and return with some rabbits which were stewed in a wide iron pan on the “Modern Mistress” iron stove in the corner. His mother would caution me when eating to watch out for lead shot and to spit them out as they wouldn’t be good for me.

Grace was said before all meals at Invereen. Porridge, mutton, rabbit, hare and salted herring made up the main diet. I never had breakfast at Invereen, but if I had, I am certain it would have been porridge or brose. Mid-day fare was usually broth, followed by boiled mutton and potatoes, with semolina with a dollop of jam in the middle to finish

off the meal. Supper was porridge with a side bowl of milk. The porridge was thick enough to stand up as you cut it away with the spoon, so you thus carved your way across the dish, washed down with milk from the bowl. I remember the bowls had a spider's web-like structure of cracks and were obviously ages old. The Invereen water supply was piped from a spring high up on the bank close to the house. One day after my first meal of salt herring I remember bypassing the plumbing and sprinting up the hillside to quench my raging thirst at the cistern overflow spout - much to the amusement of those below. Obviously they must have shot the odd deer on their ground, but I don't recall eating either venison or salmon. They had both plunge and tumbling churns for making butter, and made crowdie every other day (proper crowdie, not the wishy-washy stuff sold in little tubs today).

After supper a ten minute silence was observed as the weather forecast and national news issued from the wireless which was powered, like all households without electricity, by a long lasting "dry" battery shaped like a book and a "wet" battery shaped like an upright brick which lasted about a fortnight. This battery or accumulator, like a square glass bottle, was protected by a wooden case with a carrying handle attached. Two of these were required, an exhausted one being exchanged for a charged one at MacRae & Dick's Garage on each visit to town.

Although deeply religious and leading a wearisome working life, the Dunbars were always humorous. One day, a teenaged Angus and one of his sisters, rummaging about in the loft, opened a box and found

a suit of dark clothing complete with a Minister's hat. They then hatched a plan to surprise their parents and family. Angus smuggled the suit up the hill and changed in the wood while his sister stood by the kitchen window. As Angus appeared at the top of the track she alerted her parents who, with one look, panicked, and tidied up the place for this unexpected visit before returning to the window. Angus, halfway down the slope, began to stumble and sway and his "condition" worsened with every step. Consternation in the kitchen turned to incredulity as they realised they were about to be visited by a drunken Free Presbyterian Minister. This spontaneous piece of drama would have tickled the Dunbars when order was restored.

Donald Gordon MacAskill