

***CURRIE & DISTRICT
LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY
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Currie Toll 1897

Hello folks

As I sit in my living room writing the introduction to the current Chronicle I am anxiously watching heavy swirling snow (which we are told is coming from Siberia) striking my front window.

It has been falling for a couple of days and nights. A few minutes ago I ventured outside and measured the depth of the snow that had fallen so far. At that time 15" (or 38cm) covered my back garden. At that time I was getting concerned that as I was unable to move my car would I be able to get the copy to the printer before his deadline. However I pressed on and kept my fingers crossed.

Mary Coghill (former secretary of CDLHS and wife of Hamish Coghill, our Honorary President,) has kindly passed on to the committee her notes on the talk she gave at the members night in December. I have made a precis of these notes which I have used as the contents of the March Chronicle. This will enable any members who missed the December meeting to read what she had to say, or additionally would enable any members to keep the contents in writing.

The draft syllabus of the 2018-19 meetings is also enclosed. A copy of the usual syllabus will be enclosed with the September 2018 Chronicle.

Keep Warm

Ron Dickson - Editor

CHANGES AT COLINTON AND DISTRICT

By Mary Coghill

I hope that you are all familiar with modern day Colinton but I want you to strip away all the modern additions and to think of how the area would have looked in medieval times. The river of course would still be there running between very steep banks with heath and scrub, most of the countryside will still be bare moor, crossed by narrow tracks, with the occasional fermtoun, a cluster of thatched cottages surrounded by shared unfenced cultivated infield strips, outfield strips and common grazing. Most importantly in the deep valley where the river made a tightly curved bend was a ford, an easy way to cross the river.

From ancient times tracks led down to it and no doubt a cluster of cottages grew around the ford and its deep hollow. By the 12th Century it was on the Monks or Pilgrims route which led from Melrose Abbey north over the hills, coming down from the Pentlands to cross the Water of Leith at the ford at Halis or Hailes as the area was then called, and on up the northern equally steep slope to the top of the Lanark Road ridge from where they had a view over the Forth valley to the Queens Ferry and on to Dunfermline Abbey, from where pilgrims would continue to St Andrews Abbey.

At this time the great Abbeys were important places. They were not just wealthy centres of religion but also places of learning and teaching owning libraries of precious books. They had hospitals with herbalists and apothecaries available to treat the sick. They owned vast areas of land and farms and were centres of administration and commerce. They housed saintly relics and were places of pilgrimage. Melrose Abbey was also a Royal residence.

It is possible prince Ethelred son of Malcolm Canmore was travelling this route homeward, or perhaps hunting in the Pentlands, when he discovered the pleasant glade at Hailes and decided to build a church there. He gifted it to the monks at Dunfermline. A gift that was later confirmed by his brother David 1 and by the Pope in the twelfth century. This was probably a simple small rectangular stone building on the site of the present church.

We will now look more closely at the route the path took. It came down from the Pentlands about where Westgarth Avenue now runs and continued down to the ford. Pedestrians went straight down the southern slope which was so steep steps had to be cut to help them down. The Long Steps are still there today. Horses and pack animals had to take the long way, moving down across the slope with a very sharp turn half way and then on down to the river. This route is still followed by Bridge Road and Spylaw

Street. Having reached the ford they would be glad to rest and get some refreshment before tackling the equally steep northern slope to the Lanark Road. This has no equivalent modern road. It started out up Spylaw Bank Road but continued to the Lanark Road by way of the Tirlies a footpath marking the old right of way.

We are now going to fast forward a few hundred years to the end of the eighteenth century when the Statistical Account was published. In it the village is called Collington, the name had gradually changed from Hailes to Collingtoun alias Hailes, and then just Collington.

Dr Walker writing his account of the parish says "In the year 1635 and for a long time after, it appears to have been a wild and uncultivated tract of country, thinly peopled. Since 1709 however the lands have been enclosed and much cultivated". The Agricultural Revolution was sweeping away the old run-rig open type of farming and making farms with large fields and pastures enclosed with walls and hedgerows. He also says that new mills were being erected for wheat and barley, flax, tobacco and snuff and particularly paper. Waulkmills and bleachfields and two large quarries, Hailes and Redhall were flourishing. The population of the parish was increasing. A low stone bridge had long since replaced the ford.

In the second statistical Account the minister of Colinton parish church, (Note the final change of name to Colinton.) Dr. Balfour, writing in 1838/9, describes a scene made beautiful with hedgerows, by trees which surround the houses of heritors and by dense plantations on the larger properties. These changes were caused by the craze for planting trees and beautifying their gardens which was part of the land reforms of the previous century. He comments that the original village school was rebuilt in 1815 to a healthy situation above the village on the south side of Bridge Road where it still stands. The church and manse have over the course of time been ruined, rebuilt, repaired, enlarged and rebuilt again. Farming was still improving. More mills were being built, but little else has changed in the Parish. Almost as a footnote he adds that the only fuel used is coal which is obtained from the barges on the Union Canal. This was the first hint of the changes the rest of the nineteenth century was to bring.

The Union Canal was proposed mainly to bring coal cheaply from West Lothian to Edinburgh. It was to join the Forth and Clyde Canal at Falkirk. It was opened in 1822, and for about twenty years it was very successful. By the 1840s "Railway Mania" was beginning. The Caledonian Railway Company began to construct a railway line from Edinburgh to Carstairs crossing the Water of Leith at Slateford on a viaduct parallel

to the Union Canal aqueduct, and on westward passing north of the Lanark Road largely missing the villages of Juniper Green, Currie and Balerno, and a long way from Colinton, although the first two had nearby stations. The increasing numbers and sizes of mills, particularly paper, on the Water of Leith situated as they were on in the bottom of a deep river valley with steep access roads up to the Lanark Road gave the mill owners and land owners the idea that a railway branch running alongside the river would be a great benefit to their transport difficulties. It was proposed and plans drawn up. They approached the Caledonian Railway Company to build it as a branch line from the Carstairs line leaving it after Slateford and running to Balerno. It was accepted in 1864 and received the Royal assent in 1865. However the Caley ran into financial difficulties and the project was postponed until 1870. There were a few changes to the original plan. A loop was to be added at Balerno to join the Carstairs line. About ten months after the start of the work the Turnpile Trust, responsible for the maintenance of roads approached the Caley with a proposal to build a new bridge at Colinton with new access roads. This would allow the old bridge with its awkward approaches to be bypassed. The Caley whose plans had included a bridge at Colinton as the new road would new road would make access to the station easier, readily agreed and offered to contribute £1500 to the costs. The new road was to leave

the Lanark Road at what is now the Gillespie Crossroads and slant down the north slope of the riverbank to the position of the bridge. It was called Gillespie Road. The high bridge has eight arches, three being used by the railway line and sidings. It was completed in 1873. Its southern end connected to Bridge Road at its junction with Spylaw Street.

The Balerno Branch Line was quite a feat of engineering. It involved 28 bridges, a long tunnel at Colinton and many cuttings, embankments and retaining walls for the river, most of which were stone lined for strength and to prevent landslides. It employed many trades – managers, overseers, engineers, masons, blacksmiths, carters etc and about 200 navvys to do the ground work. It was opened on 8th July 1874.

Now Colinton was served by a quick railway journey and a much easier road to Edinburgh. Very quickly Edinburgh's professionals realised that they could live in pleasant countryside and still work in their offices. Land was bought, and architects employed to design and build spacious country houses along the new Gillespie Road and on the southern slopes above the village. By the start of the twentieth century Colinton was prospering and becoming a dormitory suburb of Edinburgh. No longer the smallest, poorest and most isolated village in the valley.

The Balerno Branch Line stopped carrying passengers in 1943 and was closed to all traffic on 31st December 1967

almost exactly 50 years ago . As the suburbs of Edinburgh continue to spread what an asset to modern day commuters that little railway might have been.

Who knows in another decade or two there might be an electric tram running along the walkway!



Colinton c1750 old bridge looking up Spylaw Street

From J Grant's Old and New Edinburgh