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Berwickshire's Towns and Villages

In and about "The Garden County of the Borderland"

WRITTEN FOR "THE BERWICKSHIRE NEWS" BY BORDERER

AYTON (SUPPLEMENTARY)

[We are indebted to an esteemed contributor and worthy Aytonian, Rev. Wm. Wilson, Springbank Manse, for the following supplementary notes on Ayton Parish. Also largely through the kind help of the same gentleman, we are able to announce that in an early issue we will give a series of "Annals of Ayton" by the late Mr. Robt. Mennon, the Ayton poet.- Ed. "B.N.]

ORTHOGRAPHY

In a charter of King Edgar (1097-1107) to Durham, of Coldingham and its dependencies mention is made of Eitun and the Other Eitun. The successor of Edgar, King David I (that sair sanct to the Crown) confirmed Edgar's charter when the same phraseology and orthography is still used. But as far back as 1247 the spelling of Ayton was in vogue for in that year Sir Richard, Prior for the time of Coldingham, held a full court at Ayton in connection with the sale of a Neyf or Serf belonging to Adam of Prendergeste. Some years later one Robert of Prendergeste sells a Serf to the Prior and Convent of Coldingham, and among the witnesses to the transaction appears the name of Helyas of Upper Eyton. This reference to Upper Eyton implies a lower or Nether Eyton, which I take to have been situated about a mile or so further down the river, but on the same side of it, nearly opposite to the present Netherbyres Mill. In the midst of these orthographical changes it is interesting to notice how a Law of Euphony pervades them. For example, the fishing town at the mouth of the Eye is invariably spelt Eyemouth never Ay-mouth, nor Aye-mouth nor even Ey-mouth. While the village on the banks of the Eye is never spelt Eye-ton, but either Ei-ton or Ei-tun or Et-ton or Ay-ton as the case may be.

SITE OF VILLAGE

In 1741 the village of Ayton is said to have contained some 320 of a population and the country part of the parish about the same number. But at that time it lay a little further to the east, or rather southeast, than it does now, stretching along the road leading out of the present Ayton towards Eyemouth, and sloping down over the bank which is now enclosed within Ayton Castle policy. The post-road between Berwick and Dunbar at that time led over Lamberton Muir, and descended Ayton Hill, not far from the present road from Ayton Station to the village. But after crossing the Eye by the bridge which was both lower and narrower than it is now, it turned immediately to the right, and followed practically the present approach to Ayton Castle for a considerable part of the way. Holding northward, however, it crossed the parochial road leading from Eyemouth to Duns, went through what is now known as the Avenue Park, and then onwards by Cairncross and Coldingham Muir to Co'path and Dunbar. A very small portion, if any, of the village of 1741 now remains. When the present post road between Berwick and Dunbar was completed about the close of the last century, the old cottages were forsaken and their sites enclosed within the policy of Mansion House. The houses bordering the present highway are therefore comparatively modern, and after this fashion Ayton may be said to have renewed a youth whose infancy began some eight centuries ago.

POPULATION

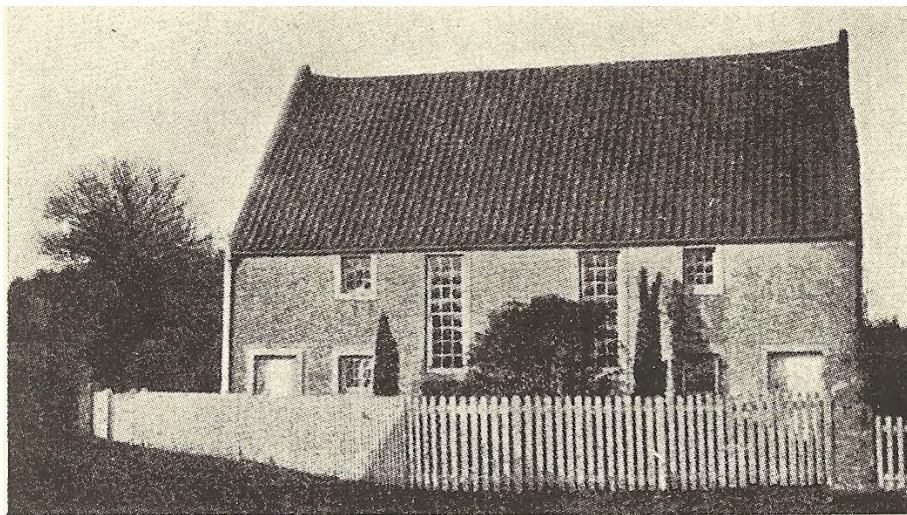
As far as can now be ascertained, the population of Ayton Parish in 1741 was, as already mentioned, about 640. In 1755 it was reported to be 707. In 1794 it was estimated at 1245 and in 1801 when the first Government Census was taken it was found to number 1453. It will thus be found these six decades at an average of 135 each time. In 1831 the census returns were 1680 of which number 663 resided in the village. In 1851 the census was a little over 1900 with well-nigh 700 residing in the village, thus making for the past 30 years an average of about 150 per decade. But this census of 1861 has been as yet the high water mark for the population of the parish. Census after census since then has shown more or less of a decrease, and the one recently taken shows the present population to be much the same as it was 80 years ago.

CHURCHES

In addition to the Parish Church, there were until recently two other places of worship in Ayton. Both of these had been set up in the closing quarter of the 18th century, and became known as the Burgher and the Antiburgher

congregations. After the Union of these two denominations in 1820, the Burgher congregation came to be known as Ayton East and the latter as Ayton West, and at a later period as Summerhill and Springhill, respectively. But in 1894 a union between these two congregations was at last effected, and the new congregation became the Ayton United Presbyterian, and since the great Union of 1900 the Ayton United Free Congregation.

From Presbytery records it appears that in 1773 a congregation was formed in connection with the General Associate, or Antiburgher Synod, and planted for the time being in Coldingham. Three years later, the Synod sanctioned the removal to Ayton where it worshipped for a time in a carpet factory, which then stood where the present Volunteer Hall now stands. Having settled in Ayton they immediately secured a site on which to build a Church since the payment of feu duty for the piece of ground on which the Church and Manse were subsequently erected begins in 1776. The building of the church has been assigned to 1781 but an earlier date seems called for. We are fortunate in being able to present a photo of this old church which continued to do service until 1871, when it was taken down and a new Church was erected on its site, which in turn was taken down some 12 years ago. The original Church was built out in the open fields to the west of the village, and it, along with the Manse, formed a most picturesque rural picture. The Bean-burn, as an open burn then, rippled its way through the Manse garden and down by the side of the Church, crossing the road on the way to the Eye, just at the point where the worshippers gathered from week to week.



“THE AULD MEETIN’ HOOSE.”

The following verses were written in memory of this quaint old building: -

THE AULD MEETIN' HOOSE.

The auld meetin' hoose wi' its roof o' red tilin',
Its white washen wa's an' its windows sae trim,
The burn wimplin' by't and the summer sun smilin',
A' mak' up a pictur' that never grows dim.

O weel dae I min' the square pews wi' their tables,
The coorts i' the laft whaur the gentle folk sat,
The stairs creepin' up at the sides o' baith gables,
An' the board 'bune the poopit sae smooth an' see flat.

In cauld wintry waither, my teeth aften chatter'd,
My taes were benumb'd, an' my fingers were chill'd;
Lat weet come, or sleet come, or snaw drift, what matter'd,
Oor seats on the Sawbath had aye to be fill'd.

But then i' the simmer 'twas lichtsome an' cheerie
Wi' chirpin's o' sparries amang the yew trees,
Wi' the burnie's saft murmur; an' less ane should weary,
Stray veesits frae bummies, an' bricht butterflees.

That auld Meetin' Hoose was a hame o' the saintly;
The flock was selec', an' the numbers but sma';
Their service was bare, an' the words spoken quaintly;
But the speerit o' worship pervaded them a'.

Aroun' the kirk door I can see them forgaither
In twas an' in threes for a neebourly chat
'Bout the state o' the craps, the forecast o' the waither,
The ailin's an' failin's o' this ane an' that.

I can see them gang an' sit down sae doucely—
The men doff their bannets wi' rev'rence an' care,
The wives wi' their buiks row'd in hankies fu' loosely
An' wi' bunches o' spearmint to sweeten the air.

The doctrines o' grace was the theme o' the preacher,
An' covenant blessin's to a' that believe;
A faithfu' an' upright expounder an' teacher,
A man frae whose mouth the pure word you'd receive

I min' i' the hame gannin how sagely we listen'd
To screeds o' the sermons frae guidly auld men,
An' hoo their pows wagg't, their very e'en glisten'd,
As heids an' partiklers were gane owre again.

Thou auld Meetin' Hoose, thou art gane an' forever,
They've no left a stane o' thy weel packit wa's;
But nae flicht o' time frae my memr'y can sever
The sicht o' thy face, or the licht o' thy cause

INDUSTRIES

In the beginning of the last century (or rather before it) a small paper mill was set up in that part of Ayton Parish where the Ale Water joins the River Eye about a mile from the sea. The spot is a most picturesque one, a triangular piece of ground a few acres in extent, with the Ale coming in from the north-west, circling round the roots of the formidable Kip rock and meeting the Eye from the south-west, with high precipitous banks on the right, and giving the name of Millbank Paper Mill to the new industry.

Paper-making must have been a skilled industry in those days, for Mr Robert Kerr, who erected the mill, writing in his most minute and valuable report on the County of Berwickshire in 1800, remarks that the earnings of journeymen in the paper manufacture are three shillings a day of regular pay besides lodgings and coal money, and some small allowances for extra jobs. Hence each man may receive about £50 yearly. Women, girls and boys could also be employed in various branches of the manufacture, earning a shilling or even eighteen pence a day, bringing the earnings of the families of paper-workers up to two guineas weekly. These wages would compare favourably with those of other artisans at that period and when money went much further than it does now. In the Gazetteer for Scotland in 1843 we find this mill continuing its work, but in 1867 or 1868 it was burnt to the ground and never went up again. The residential house, Millbank House, was some years afterwards purchased by the late Alex. Mitchell Innes of Ayton Castle, and practically re-built, and renamed Eycliffe House as a residence for his eldest son. About 25 years ago, the house and grounds were purchased by the late Sir Walter Simpson, son of

the famous discoverer of chloroform, and renamed by him Balabraes. The present Baronet, Sir James Simpson (named after his grandfather) is non-resident and the house is occupied by A. Aylmer-Morton, Esq., Ex-M.P. The successor of Mr. Kerr in the paper mill industry just referred to was one Ebenezer Martin, and during his time, or that of his son William, who succeeded to the business, the small paper mill was started a little to the east of the village, on a piece of ground that had been previously used for bleaching purposes and hence its designation as the Bleachfield Paper Mill. This mill is exclusively devoted to the manufacture of heavy boarding for book-binding, box-making, and such like purposes, and is carried on at present by Mr. Jas. Martin, who is in succession to the Ebenezer mentioned above. Seeing that our County is so distinctively agricultural, and that so few industries nestle down beside our small towns and villages, it is also worth noting that some 13 years ago, a fellow-townsmen, James Connachie, jun., set up a business as a nursery and seedsman, and has succeeded in establishing a good and growing connection, not only to the north and south, but to the west as well.