## The Sawmill on the High Street

A talk given to Ayton Local History Society by Irvine Inglis on 28th January 2003

In setting the scene for my talk possibly the first matter of relevance that I should mention is that after the 1715 Jacobite rebellion, when the proprietor, James Home, supported the rebel cause, the estate of Ayton was forfeited to the British Crown. The Homes, sometimes known as the "marauding" Homes had held the land at Ayton, and much of the surrounding land as well, since "acquiring" it in the late 15th Century. Then, over half a century after the forfeiture, it was eventually sold to John Fordyce MP, who was also Commissioner for Lands and Forests in Scotland. This was around 1770.

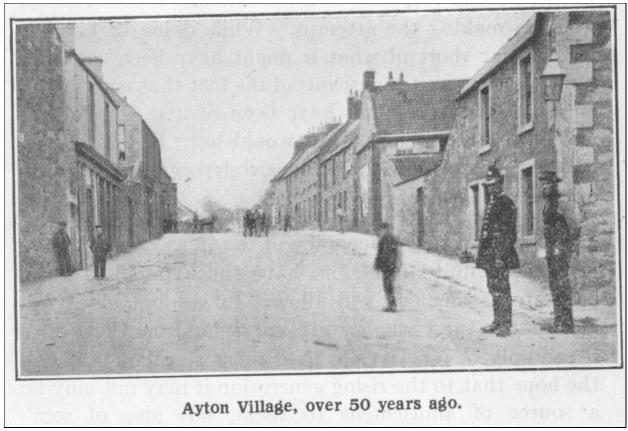
By 1773 the extensive lands (6,199 acres) formerly belonging to Coldingham Priory were being shared out amongst themselves by the large Berwickshire estates. Now this is some coincidence, the possession of those lands had been undisputed for about one-hundred-and seventy years, since the Reformation. Of course this could well have been because of hope on the part of the estate owners for the return of the Catholic Church to resume possession. Yet, within three years of Fordyce appearing on the scene his neighbouring estates suddenly felt the need to safeguard their interests. The proposed share-out was to be done in direct proportion to the lands each estate already possessed. However the other estates combined together and objected to the Estate of Ayton receiving its full share because the proprietor of that estate did not hold documentation proving or substantiating his title to most of his estate. It could be worth remembering that most of the other estates involved belonged to members of the Home tribe or their relatives. Whether or not their sympathies were Jacobite, the appropriation of one of their crony's estates by the government must have hurt, even almost sixty years later. Then, to see a member of the government come along as the new owner, and immediately set out to get his hands on a huge area of land that had been lying under their noses for the best part of a couple of centuries must have really rubbed salt into the old wounds. However, their case was eventually upheld by the courts in Edinburgh and they shared out a considerable proportion of what would otherwise have been Ayton Estate's spoils.

Most people know more about affairs in the United States of America at that time; how the West was won: how cattle barons ousted small-time farmers; how influential politicians (Congressmen) lined their pockets in all kinds of dubious land deals; the coming of the railroads; and so on. This was also the time of the events in Scotland known as "The Highland Clearances" and I was interested to read in Prof T C Smout's "A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950", that the 9% drop in Berwickshire's population then was fairly well identical to that of Sutherland and other Highland counties.

To put Fordyce into context, he undoubtedly had the vision, foresight and determination which made him one of the great agricultural improvers of his time. He also, quite undoubtedly had the same ruthlessness towards other people who happened to be in his way as the Cattle Barons of the Wild West are portrayed as having. Certainly agricultural production in the area increased. One of the signs of this was that the Calder family started to export grain from Eyemouth, building the granary which is now the Fishermen's Mission as part of their enterprise, although smuggling was also reputedly another source of their prosperity. Of course the coming of the railway killed the grain export trade from Eyemouth. While looking at Eyemouth harbour it is worth noting that

Ayton Parish extended along the right-hand bank of the River Eye to the sea until around 1946. This meant that the harbour dues for that side of the harbour had to be paid to Ayton Parish until the fishermen built the middle pier and diverted the river to run behind it. When the Eyemouth Toll Bridge was built, the Toll House was built at the Eastern corner, so that the toll money came to Ayton. We were always told that this was because the Eyemouth folk would only have spent it on drink rather than on maintenance!

But back to Ayton, where the area including the Crofts houses to the old Post Road, or the Avenue as we know it, was all runrigs, or crofts, or allotments. Call them what you will. Fordyce bought them up. He also, eventually, acquired many other small farms and properties in and around the village by an Act of Parliament that gave him Title to any property in the area which no one else held clear Title to. In 1834 he had just completed building a new mansion house befitting of his high station in life when it burnt down one Sunday morning. Some say before it was ever lived in, and others say it was on the first night he slept in it. There is something about Sunday morning fires about here. You may remember, from John Reid's talk last year, that the Millbank paper mill was destroyed by one in the 1880s, now you hear about Ayton House! At least Fordyce seems not to have had a hand in setting the property on fire. Apparently neither the house nor its contents were insured, and the family immediately left the area. Whether because of the financial loss he suffered or because he suddenly feared for his safety, or maybe even a combination of the two, I do not know. Three years later, in 1846, one of his family returned to the area for just long enough to conclude the sale of the estate to William Mitchell-Innes.

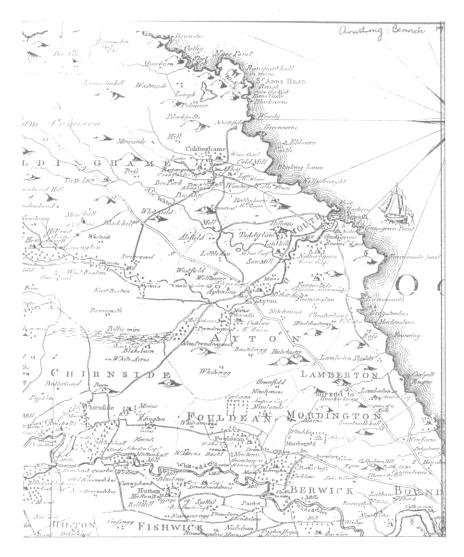


My first photograph is the earliest I know of Ayton. It is of the High Street taken from the cross roads, looking up the street. The gable of Rothes Glen is on the left. Next is Mr and Mrs

Guthrie's house. It and Miss Steer's house are still recognisable, as is the next property. However, the rest of the properties at that side have been replaced by taller two-storey houses since then. On the other side of the street South View is the first of the houses still standing, and of course the Clock Tower was not yet built when the photograph was taken, possibly around 1870. Two carters, each with two carts, are coming out from St Andrew's Square.

But, to the sawmill property on the High Street.

The first map is from one of 1771. It shows the area before the new A1 trunk road was built. Indeed the Post Road from Berwick, over Ayton Hill, by the Avenue and the Packet Hoose at Press Mains road end, then over Coldingham Moor does not seem to follow a regular line over the more boggy parts of the moor. A sawmill is shown somewhere around the confluence of the Ale Water with the Eye.



Copied from "Armstrong, Berwick 1771 map."

My story regarding the sawmill property starts around 1824, part way between the time captured on the 1771 map and this second map.



1847 Map

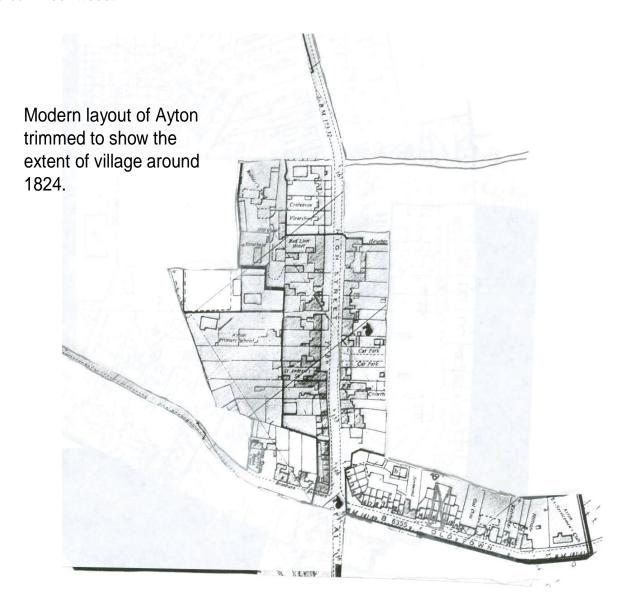
The second map is from 1847. By that time the Turnpike Act of 1751 was beginning to bear fruit, and the A1 trunk road had been built, between 1810 - 1816. Of much more significance also, the Berwick to Edinburgh railway line had been opened in 1846, only a year before this map was made. Before I leave the road improvements of 1810 - 1816, it is worth mentioning that when completed they speeded up coach travel considerably. For six days a week a coach left the Salmon Inn in Berwick's Hide Hill at half past eight in the morning. It was at Ayton at nine-thirty and Grantshouse at ten-thirty. Forty-five minutes later it was due at Co'path and after various other stops was in Edinburgh between three and four in the afternoon. However, the improved journey times afforded by the "New" Post Road could not match those of the railway that opened thirty years later in 1846. Although commerce and movement of goods and people increased massively from then on, long distance road travel declined to such an extent that road-tolls were no longer worth collecting well before the end of the century.

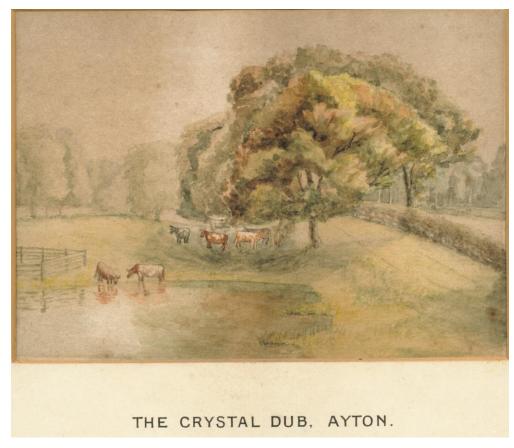


**This is an advert from an Aberdeen** Newspaper of February, 1833 showing steam passenger ships sailing to London on one Saturday and leaving for the return journey on the following Saturday.

The third map shows the extent of the village in 1824, roughly half way in time between the two previous maps. The West side of the High Street extends only to Potters Row, between the Red Lion and the Lane. The large field above the lane is called the Claypots, after the tile works that was situated in it, and the site I will be talking about is the one situated in the eastern corner of that field, next to the intersect of the lane and the main road. The site had been reduced in

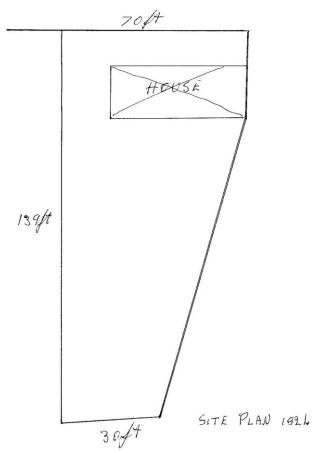
level as clay was stripped from it for the tile works. Now, as part of the vigorous land improvement scheme I have already mentioned, the government had paid for an extensive land drainage programme which not only drained the land, but also shifted streams and burns to run in a series of ditches and culverts along the edges of fields and roads rather than meandering willy-nilly through the countryside. As the village grew some of those stone culverts were built over. This site had the added complication of two culverts intersecting under what was going to be the front garden, before running on under the house down the edge of the field to eventually become the Beanburn. One of those culverts originated from a small pond, or dub, beside the Avenue. It was called the Crystal Dub. The other culvert originated to the north of the village, beside the Green Moor wood.





Beside "The Avenue", between Ayton and Huldie.

**I'm grateful to** Mrs June Buchan, for a loan of this painting. It is of the Crystal Dub, the principal source of the Beanburn at that time and possibly the water source that had sustained the Well Tower in its day.



This is the outline of the site in the corner of Claypots field that was acquired by Alexander Wilson on which to build his property. The culvert originating at Green Moor flowed left to right at the top and converged with one coming from the top of the picture and flowing towards the bottom, near to the right hand boundary. My recollection of the title deeds is that they were not drawn up until 1828. However on the 16th of November, 1824, Wilson signed a four-page agreement borrowing £500 sterling from Mifs Agnes Moscrop, residing in Eyemouth. As security he gave all and whole that piece of ground in Ayton and dwelling house and offices built by me thereon. Measuring the said piece of ground, from the New Post Road southwards one-hundred-and-thirty-nine feet. From West to East along the side of the said Post Road seventy feet. From West to East at the South end thirty feet.



Sawmill House about 1830!!!!!!! Symmetrical about the front door.

**This is Sawmill House** as it would have been originally, but less the railings round the front garden! They were part of the fue conditions and were necessary to keep out cattle and sheep as they were droved through the village. They were also needed to keep out the throngs of people and horses who attended the twice yearly fairs and horse sales. At the instigation of the increasing number of shop keepers in the village the Fairs were discontinued in 1832 and a monthly cattle market was held instead.

The sloping site allowed a cellar to be formed under part of the house. This was usually only a feature of more expensive dwellings in the village. Stone for the rear wall and the gables was brought from the Hairy Craig's or Hare Crags quarry at the top of Ayton Law Haugh, while the squared rubble for the frontage was carted from the Kip Rock quarry at the foot of Mill Bank. Several other buildings in Ayton, Eyemouth and Burnmouth have facades built of that fairly distinctive stone.

The dressed sandstone, (or freestone as it is known locally, because it is so "free" or easy to work), was brought from one of the Swinton quarries. The windows and front door are made from pitch pine from one of the Northern Russian ports. Like most of the other imported material this would be brought to Eyemouth by sailing ship. Interestingly (2003) the front door and the windows to the front elevation are still the originals from 1824, as is the distinctive "Berwick" cast-iron fanlight over the front door. The roof timbers, floor joists and such like were sawn by hand from adzed baulks of yellow pine imported from the American eastern seaboard. The opening of the Caledonian Canal two years previously allowed roof slates to be brought from Ballachulish and the islands in the Firth of Lorn without the hazardous voyage round the

north coast. Sawmill House had a slate roof. One of the first in the village, where locally made pantiles were the norm and several of the single storey houses still had thatched roofs at that time.

It might be worth making a brief mention of nails at around that time. Mostly they were square "wrought nails", made by the blacksmiths in the village, and then later, as steam power came into more general usage, they were stamped out of flat steel sheet in factories. Those were "cut nails", sometimes still used for specialist purposes in recent times, and for a time small nails and tacks were made in cast-iron. By the beginning of the twentieth century mass produced "round wire nails" were coming into use. Of course they, in turn, are now more or less obsolete having been replaced by specially shaped nails in belts containing several hundred at a time for use in the various nailing and screw-driving machines that are in use.

Sale this Bay. MIRAMICHI TIMBER. There will be Sold, by Public Roup, on Wednesday the 27th inst. on the Links, adjoining the Work of the Aberdeen Rope and Company, 14,170 Feet of YELLOW PINE. 500 Feet of RED PINE .- And 1700 Feet of HLACK BIRCH. Being the entire Cargo of the Brig Albion, Captain LESLIE, imported from Miramichi in November last. It is of large Scantling, remarkably Sound Clean, and will be found well worth the notice of the Teade. .The Birch is a superior Lot. The Roup will commence exactly at 11 o'clock forencon, and ROBT. BUTHIE. Credit will be given. Apply to Quay, 2d Feb. 1833. The ALBION will Sail hence for HALIFAX, PICTOU, and MIRA-MICHT, early in March, and has excellent accommodation for Pas-

**This is an advert** dated 27th February 1833. It gives some insight into the trade in imported timber at the time. The advert is for an auction sale of the whole of a cargo of timber brought by the sailing brig Albion from Miramichi in New Brunswick, Canada to Aberdeen. I calculate the total cargo as weighing around ninety tons and the voyage had taken from November to the end of February.

**The next four pages** are the agreement between Alexander Wilson and Agnes Moscrop. Now this original loan from Agnes Moscrop seems to have been looked on as a long-term investment rather than the modern concept of a fixed term mortgage. It was assigned, or sold on, by her to William Molle Esq., of Maines (spelt maines) on 7th March 1833.)

It should be possible to read this document with the aid of a magnifying glass.

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