

THE FISHING VILLAGES OF THE EAST NEUK OF FIFE

Presented by Ron Budd at the Calgary Burns Club meeting of March 8, 2011.

The boundaries of the County of Fife in eastern Scotland are approximately those of the ancient Pictish Kingdom, meeting the counties of Perth, Kinross and Clackmannan in the west, the Firths of Tay and Forth to the north and south respectively and the North Sea to the east.

From Scandinavian words the county name, in various spellings, from Fife to Fibhe, means “*wooded land*”, and Firth is connected to “*fiord*”. Perhaps also related to a Scandinavian tongue, *Tay* and *Forth* are of pre-Celtic origin, their meaning lost. Many of the place-names in the county itself are Gaelic.

Geology of Fife

Four principal events controlled the formation of the present-day landmass. Over 300 MM years ago the existing surface of Old Red Sandstone was eroded to a flat desert plane, except for the low-lying hills south of the Tay. This surface became submerged and generally tilted to the south as over it a thick series of grits, sandstones, limestones and shales was deposited with thin scattered coal beds in the later stages.

Roughly 200MM years ago, as the seas withdrew, upwelling igneous material gave rise to all of the present-day higher land in the county. There are countless small volcanic vents and much of the central bedrock is from lava flows. The “*riggin*” of Fife is its igneous backbone along which to the east, the extinct volcanoes of Largo Law and Kelly Law are located.

The Last Ice Age, which extended from approximately 25,000 years ago until about 11,000 years ago, saw a sequence of sea-level changes. Broadly while the ice was forming, sea level was dropping. Later, as the ice masses melted and retreated, the sea level rose again, as it is still doing, very, very slowly.

Geography

The East Neuk, or corner, of Fife is generally considered to contain the area southeast of a line running from Kinraig to Boarhills, more or less following three small burns, the Strathallan, Pitharhie and Pitmillie. The shallow rise of Kelly Law is the only hill of note and from that point the land falls away gently, southwest and southeast to the Forth and northeast to the North Sea. There are no rivers but there are numerous burns, a few of which are navigable for a very short distance, but only to small vessels.

Though well treed in parts there are no very large wooded areas remaining. Most of the available land has been developed as pasture or is cultivated in fields of 10 to 30 acres or so.

Along the present shore the greatest resistance to erosion has been in the long tilted ridges or skellies (skerries) running seaward while the softer intervening shales have been more easily removed, leaving in their place sheltered coves with sandy beaches, described as the “fringe of gold on the Beggar's Mantle”.

The historical changes in sea level in East Fife can be noted where long periods of stability left former shorelines which can be identified as 'raised beaches' with shelves and plateaus, at levels of 25', 50' and between 75' and 100' above present-day shores, measured at low tide. East Neuk tidal range is about 12'.

Harbours

From the earliest times the sandy beaches, particularly those more protected by a neighbouring headland, became the landing areas and the vessels were dragged up beyond the high tide mark. In the ten miles of coastline from Kinraig to Fife Ness there are seven good permanent harbours and numerous beaches. From Fife Ness to Boarhills the only harbour is at Kingsbarns. This rocky northeast-facing part of the coast is inhospitable to craft and this is the least used harbour in the Neuk.

Communities

Except for a few farming villages in the extreme west there is no other inland community in the East Neuk – all are on the coast. Several hundred yards inland, Kilrenny has its kindred harbour at Cellardyke. Besides their good harbours, to be successful the communities had to be near, or were later able to develop, reliable fresh water supplies.

Not much is known of the early history of the area; Fife was first known as Pictavia and remained a semi-autonomous kingdom when the Picts of the east and north united with the Irish Scots from the west in the 9th Century. Together they linked with the Angles of the Lothians and Borders and the Welsh Britons from the southwest to form Scotland in the 11th Century. All of the present communities in the Neuk were well established by 1000AD.

All the coastal names are Gaelic, apart from Boarhills and nearby Kingsbarns; both probably translated from Gaelic. Inland, all the older farm names are Gaelic. Four and a half miles offshore, the Isle of May became home to a large colony of monks who also built a priory in Pittenweem and established a measure of ecclesiastic control over the East Neuk. This authority was later taken over by the more powerful centre of St Andrews. In most ways and customs very similar, each of the Neuk communities has its own individuality, sayings and version of the dialect.

Occupations

Perhaps for safety the earliest inhabitants moved inland and became farmers. The ancient lava flows from Kelly Law and other vents helped in creating a very fertile soil, very suitable for mixed farming. The next to take up residence came by sea and remained as fishermen. For convenience they built their homes close to the shore, sometimes very close.

Growing communities required stable harbours with piers, jetties and docks. This construction and constant need for repairs created work for tradesmen. Silt and sand frequently had to be removed from harbours and the entrances. New vessels had to be built.

As trades were developed and not having to stay close to the sea the tradesmen found it better to build their homes on the 50' raised beach level. The common trades gradually appeared – labourer, sailcloth maker, carpenter, hunter, weaver, baker, butcher, saddler, builder and so on. As the communities grew they found a need for professionals and they often selected the highest convenient level on which to build their homes.

The new towns all had their own churches and frequently many denominations. There were so many in St Monans, population 1500, that locally it was lightly referred to as The Holy City. There were many breweries – Pittenweem, a town of 1700 souls, at one time had a known thirty brewing stations.

Many of the inns grew by being able to accommodate visiting traders and crews, many of whom came from the continent. The continental traders sought a favourable harbour where the landing and trading fees, by which the towns made some cash to help maintain their harbours, were most favourable. St. Monans made the best deals with some Dutch traders who came then for generations to that town, eventually leaving an identifying vowel in the town's dialect!

The basic exports from the Neuk ports have been fish, salt, linen, coal and a variety of farm produce. As the economies grew there was an increasing use of ferry traffic from the Neuk, mostly to the south coast of the Firth but also to points on the north shore, west from the Neuk as far as Stirling. There were few safe, usable roads outside towns until mid 19th. Century by which time the coast railway line ran through the Neuk giving a huge boost to the economy. Railway closure in the 1960s, briefly restored a degree of isolation to the Neuk.

People

It seems that there was always a loss of many of the younger men from the coastal towns, often as crewmen on larger ships sailing out of other ports or as soldiers in some cause. In spite of this the populations appear to have remained remarkably steady. Some of the European traders came and stayed; some of the many seamen shipwrecked on the rocky parts of the coast decided to remain instead of returning to their homes on the continent or in other parts of Britain and this even though it took several generations to shake off the term *incomers*.

Over the years English names such as *Wightman*, *Dishington*, *Woodrope* and even *Budd* showed up. French names like *Bisset*, *Moncrief*, *Melville* and *Dairsie* for *D'Arcy* were not uncommon. Even the Spanish *Montador* survived, reputedly from Armada times. There has been a strong tie, and often marriage, to members of other fishing families around the coasts of Britain and the western edge of the continent. This tie appears to have been as strong as any link to the non-fishing and inland centres of Scotland.

The East Neuk townspeople were very loyal to the Crown. They suffered brutally under Cromwell and supported the Restoration. Many were dedicated Covenanters; all were glad to see the last of the Catholic Stuarts and welcomed a Lutheran to the throne.

The people have been stoutly religious up to the second half of the 20th century. Strongly Protestant since the Reformation, there was little of the Jacobite to be found in the Neuk. Of the few who left to support the Stuart cause, most of those who returned were required to apologise publicly for their indiscretion and were heavily fined by the church sessions.

Generally slow to warm to political matters the folks in the Neuk are said mostly to be supportive of Gladstonian liberalism.

The Royal Burghs.

At the west end of the Neuk, EARLSFERRY and ELIE are now joined. Earlsferry owes its name to Macduff, the Thane or Earl, Duke of Fife as he fled by boat from the approaching clutches of Macbeth. An unusual tradition started with the establishing of this ferry. A fugitive in flight and using the ferry, which was initially just a row-boat, could not be pursued until he was at least halfway across the Firth.

The harbour at Elie is the least developed in the Neuk and very little fishing has ever been based there and very little trade.

Perhaps the best known inhabitant of the town was Jenny Faa', the wife of Sir John Anstruther, a local laird. To Sir John's discomfort Jenny had a liking for skinny-dipping in a corner of Elie Bay. His embarrassment was reduced when he purchased all of the nearby houses. All with a view at any rate. Red garnets known as Elie rubies, are readily found in metamorphosed rocks near the bay.

ST, MONANS has a good harbour as well as a prominent fishing fleet and for long had an important boat-building yard. A lot of the boats fishing from East Neuk harbours were built here. In more recent times the demand changed to pleasure yachts and harbour launches, and ships' parts, such as capstans, have been produced and orders from many corners of the world were filled. Sadly, like most others in Scotland, this yard is now closed.

At the west boundary of the town is the 'Auld Kirk' of St Margaret's first opened in 1365, and among the very oldest still in service in the country.

A few hundred yards west of this church lie the remains of Newark Castle, built by King David and the one-time home of General Sir David Leslie, the adversary of The Duke of Montrose. It was only after the Reformation that PITTENWEEM broke loose from the control of the Augustine monks in the May Island and St Andrews and the local priory was shut down. An underground passageway leads from the priory to nearby St Fillan's cave within which there is a 'health-giving' spring. Since this water was used in many of the town's numerous breweries there was surely significant belief in the water's powers.

A feature of the town is the number of steep, narrow wynds, leading from the shore up to the 50' level. Except in Elie, which lies at about the 25', level these are common in all of the East Neuk towns, but they are most remarkable here.

Today, Pittenweem is the only one of the Neuk fishing ports still quite active. Unlike their neighbours the fishermen of Pittenweem changed their fishing techniques and established their own fish market in the town. Now the boats dock in their home port every night and their catch leads to a lot of local employment for cleaners, curers, packers and shippers. The busy market is attended by buyers from all over the British Isles and Western Europe. Expert refrigeration and speedy transportation have greatly expanded the reach of the marketers.

A noted visitor to the Pittenweem area was the Scottish-American privateer John-Paul Jones from Dumfries. One evening seeing unusual lights offshore the Laird (provost) of the town went out to meet what he thought would be his small fleet returning from an exploratory trade venture to West Africa. Instead he found Captain Jones. The gifts carried out for the safe return of the Pittenweem ship were accepted by Jones who, in return, gave the laird a barrel of gunpowder for his own protection. Jones also borrowed the Pittenweem pilot (later well-rewarded) who was taken by Jones to Holland.

For most of its recorded time CRAIL has been well-known for its crab and lobster fishing. Few other sea resources were harvested in much quantity but the town gained some fame for its Crail Capons. These are haddock cured in the sun without first being split. A few buildings between 600 and 700 years old and a most picturesque harbour are its most interesting attributes.

East of the town is a Royal Naval Air Station, closed since about 1950 and beyond that, at Fife Ness, is Balcomie, the fine, 300+ year-old, links golf course, which is number three in the world after Edinburgh and St. Andrews.

KINGSBARNs is more of a small rural community than a fishing town mostly because of its northeast-facing shore. A feature of interest is the old milestone giving distance to nearby locations of interest beginning with "Kingsbarns 0". It served as a staging post on the way round the Neuk to St Andrews. More recent fame has arrived in the form of a stellar new public golf course on which you can play if a round is worth £165.00 to you!

ANSTRUTHER, a 20th Century amalgamation of the Royal Burghs of Anstruther Wester, Anstruther Easter and Kilrenny, which included its port of Cellardyke, is by far the largest of the East Neuk towns. Generally the centre of the East Neuk, it has more historical association and more amenities. It has the largest harbour with a capacity greater than all of the other Neuk harbours combined. It has been home to traders and smugglers alike. For many years it was the hub of Scottish herring fishing and the famed champion fishing boat the *Argonaut*, was out of Anstruther.

While the Tay is more often recognised for its salmon fishing, at the mouth of the Dreel, the burn separating the Anstruthers, Forth salmon fishing thrived for many years, ceasing only in the 1930s.

It was in the nearby Commercial Hotel that the robbers Andrew Wilson and George Robertson, from Pittenweem, relieved the exciseman of his takings, leading, after their trial in Edinburgh, to the Porteous Riots.

Among the notable mariners from the town is Captain John Key who learned his trade from his father and Captain Fowler of Cellardyke. Key gained fame in the tea-clipper races of the 1860s when he was master of one of the fastest clippers ever launched, the *Ellen Rodger*, owned by Captain Rodger of Cellardyke. These races were to bring the season's first tea cargo from China to London, where the winning crew got a bonus and the best price for their tea. In 1866, as captain of the brand-new *Ariel*, Key left Foochow in company with Captain Mackinnon who was aboard Rodger's *Taeping* and nine other clippers. In the lead the *Ariel* and *Taeping* came side-by-side up the English Channel, closely followed by a third Scottish craft, the *Serica*, with Captain Innes as master. All three ships reached Greenwich on the same tide after a voyage of 16,000 miles and 99 days at sea. *Ariel* was 10 minutes ahead but with the help of the tide and its shallower draft the *Taeping* forged ahead and docked first, winning by 20 minutes. Less than an hour later the *Serica* clocked in.

Mackinnon generously insisted that the bonus and bounty be shared with Key and his crew. An unexpected after-effect of this close race was that with so much tea in the market, the bottom fell out of the price!

The only Fife lifeboat is housed at Anstruther harbour and though, like all other Fife ports, it is not accessible at low tide the lifeboat always answered the call. At first it was drawn manually into the water but it is now carried out on a mechanised unit. Never a year goes by without it being needed.

The National Fisheries Museum is located on Anstruther Shore Street and is well worth a visit. So also is the Buckie House, a novelty structure the outside of which is covered with Buckies (shells) embedded in the plaster. There is a 9-hole golf course at the Billowness in the west end of the town.

Anstruther boatbuilding rivaled that of St Monans for a while but with great quality and ability to diversify, the latter pulled ahead and eventually outlasted the Anstruther yards which are now also closed. Other factories in Anstruther have produced sailcloth and oilcloth or oilskin and through the last century there were two golf club makers in the town.

Thomas Chalmers is the best-known Anstruther churchman and in 1840 was responsible for the separation of the Free Church from the main body of the Church of Scotland by declaring that the right of each congregation to choose its minister should come before the right of a presbytery to do so. Nowadays this is how the Church of Scotland does it and the Free Church has again been absorbed. Another famous townsman was Sir John Goodsir, the eminent anatomist who was one of the earliest and most astute observers of cell life.

Little remains of the old castle where a Stuart king thanked his host for a fine meal and added, in regard to the extremely limited space in which they had dined and the very narrow flights of circular stairs climbed in order to reach it, that this was the “first time he had eaten in a Craw's nest”. On the road to Pittenweem an old manse has since been converted into a fine award-winning hotel and given the name – *The Craw's Nest*. Only a few parts of the outer wall of the castle remain while some of the houses which are now on Castle Street were built onto the old castle foundations.

Most of the old houses in the town were made with stone, hauled from the beach, with the right to do so gained by paying a levy to the town. Beach sand used to strengthen the mortar was free. House fronts are immaculately kept. The roofs, often alongside crow-step gables, were finished with slate from the west of Scotland, or tiles, some made in Fife and others from the continent.

Town revenues were realised from renting boat space on a harbour pier, for fishing in front of the town, for landing fish, for curing and packing fish and so on. Repairs to harbour walls and the cost of dredging were funded by subscription from the residents. Tradesmen, shopkeepers and some burgesses also paid town tax.

The Most Ancient and Puissant Order of the Beggar's Benison and Merryland, a gentlemen's club, was formed in 1732. Such clubs had been around since the 15th Century and after the introduction of Coffee Houses in the middle of the 17th century they became particularly common. The notoriety of this particular club and the fact that it outlasted all similar clubs in Scotland, closing its door only in 1820 makes it of interest. Among the mottos left behind are “Be fruitful and multiply” and “Lose no opportunity...”

The name of the club came from a visit of King James V to the Neuk when he was carried over the Dreel Burn ford from West to East Anstruther by an old beggar woman for the price of a gold coin. On the spot James formed a new order of knighthood with the beggar woman's *benison* (blessing) - “May yer purse ne'er be toom an' yer horn ay be in bloom.” (May your purse never be empty and your manhood never fail you.) The club's seal showed a full purse hanging from a full phallus and the anchor of Anstruther in the background.

On the Dreel, a stone's throw upstream to the west above the ford, complete with its water-wheel, are the remains of the last working corn mill in Scotland. It ceased operating in the 1940s.

The Musomanik Society of Anstruther was formed by William Tennant, a very talented linguist, schoolmaster, and later professor at St. Andrews University. He was the author of *Anster Fair*, a delightful record of the local people and their activities at the annual fair. As in the traditional song - *Wha widna be in love wi' bonnie Maggie Lauder ? Gin ye should come tae Anster Fair, Spier ye for Maggie Lauder.*

Members of the society - “..met to rhyme and scribble in what shape, manner and degree (they) will, whether (they) be pleased to soar in the epic, sink in the song, puzzle in the riddle, astonish in the ode, or amuse and make merry with the Bout-rimes (end-rhymes).” This worthy society was formed in 1812, likely in part as a respectable option to the outrageous Beggar's Benison. The Society counted among its members Sir Walter Scott and James Hogg, the Ettrick Shepherd.

Today

The East Neuk has changed its character over the last half-century. It is no longer an industrious, modest, relatively homogeneous community of small fishing towns. The towns are full of bed-and-breakfast signs, the fishing boom has gone and the harbours are full from quay to quay with all kinds of pleasure yachts.

Instead of fishing boats of all sizes and shapes, the Firth is now the playground for schools of brightly coloured yachts and the scene of national yacht events.

Some 20% of the population is made of incomers, many from England, the rest from all parts of the world. But they all love the East Neuk. Use of the old dialects has waned and now, three hundred years after it was decreed, the school English prevails, albeit with a Fife accent. Instead of fishermen's barrows the narrow streets are jammed with cars and vans. There are still fish and chip shops though, including in Shore Street, the very best of them.

And in the East Neuk the sun still shines between the showers. The air is sharp and salt. It's not a question of whether there will be a breeze but just what direction it's from. And always the sea – the beautiful, awesome, living, inviting and challenging sea.

Postscript: Some notes were taken from **Anstruther, a History** by Stephanie Stevenson, and **Harbours of the Forth**, by Guy Christie.

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