

Article 6: Stot Hill before the forestry

by Ann Raeburn

Rising to the south of Lumphanan village is the large outline of Stot Hill. A hundred years ago this was heathery with rough grazing but now those braes are clothed in a thick forest of commercial Sitka wood.

Intrepid walkers who enjoy a challenge may have braved the maze of rutted trails to find the Trig point, dominating the summit. Once it might have been visible from the village. Battle further a little west through the trees to reach Cairn Mude, an ancient burial mound in a small clearing ringed by the indomitable conifers.



Cairn Mude

If you are still up for the adventure, from here, a narrow rough ride will take you down to a collection of ruined crofts, small field systems, grass tracks lined by stone dykes and a later farmhouse and steading. This is a Narnia world among the dark dank forest and a delight to discover.



A route through the dense forest plantation

Up here in 1912 George Smith was born in a thatched croft, one of nine children. The Smith family survived on a small income: Father made thirty-two shillings a week working on the roads and grew vegetables on his croft lands. Stoats nested in the heathery roof thatch on their house which was falling into disrepair even then.



Stothill Croft



Stothill Croft

In 1926, aged 14, young George went to work at Knappyround for John King. The Kings had no children and usually employed a boy, known affectionately in the parish as “King’s Butler”, to help them on their 14 acre croft. John King had been gardener at Glenmillan House and his own garden at Knappyround was a splendid sight of perfect rows of flourishing vegetables. The damson tree at his drive end was a temptation for schoolchildren walking to the old school just down the road and the fruit would suffer from frequent raids.



Stothill Croft fireplace

Young George arrived at Knappyround, west of Lumphanan, with just the clothes and boots he wore, for his first taste of work in the big wide world. He slept in a pine-lined upper part of the steading, just a bed with a caff (chaff filled) mattress in the small attic chaumer with no heating. At 6.30 every morning, John King would bang the anvil to rouse the young lad and the day would begin.

George was expected to help Mrs King around the house. He would turn the paddle of the churner to produce butter from the house cow's milk. On weekly washday there was much activity in the wooden wash house behind the house. Here a big metal boiler was filled with water, heated with a fire and the clothes bashed and churned before being wrung through a mangle, turned by George, and hung out to dry.

There was also work to be done in the fields. In early Spring, dung was shovelled out of the steading, thrown up onto the cart and dumped in small heaps in the grass parks. The fields were then fertilised by scattering the dung heaps with a fork.

Young George was paid five shillings a week plus his board and "meat". Appearing for breakfast on his first morning George could not believe his luck when he saw the table laid with margarine and treacle to enjoy on his bread, a rare treat which could not be afforded back home. George slapped margarine and treacle on to his slices of bread. By the third morning the parsimonious Mrs King could endure the sight no longer:

"Na na laddie, you'll hae butter or you'll hae treacle but nae both" she declared, putting a stop to this luxury!

Lunch consisted of cabbage brose, or the curds from the butter whey. Meat was rarely seen.

A stackyard of corn stood behind the steading and sheaves were taken by horse and cart to the mill at Torphins. This activity took up most of a day.

The grain was fed to the cattle and the carthorse. Cooked potatoes and the second milling of corn, in other words, the more husky bits of grain, was fed to the hens.

John King kept a Clydesdale horse and a sturdy pony; no one but himself could manage the horse. When John King was laid up in bed, George would drop hay down to the horse through a trapdoor to where the animal was tethered. George would not chance entering that stall!

The farmer from neighbouring Hillock decided that the horse needed exercise during this period of inactivity and hitched the animal to the cart to deliver milk down to the village where it was put on the train for Aberdeen. Once down in Lumphanan the horse refused to move and then kicked the cart to bits. John King had to be roused from his bed to fetch his horse home. The huge animal walked home beside him like a lamb!

Old John King would take his place by the kitchen fire in the evenings and spit into the coal bucket! He was a Church Elder at St Finans and kept his Sunday top hat in a cupboard under the stairs.

Various vans went round the countryside selling produce to the farmers' wives. Often in lonely rural settings, they must have been a lifeline to such families. The grocer's van called every Friday and Mrs King bartered her eggs and butter for margarine, sugar, tea and flour. What the grocer did not know was that Mrs King mixed a pound of the bought margarine into her butter! George was shocked that the wife of a Church Elder should be involved in such underhand trading!

George liked to smoke but Mrs King disapproved. When he was working away down in the lower Knappyround park he would have a long tube attached to his pipe hidden under his jumper so Mrs King could not see any sign of smoke from her vantage point at the house.



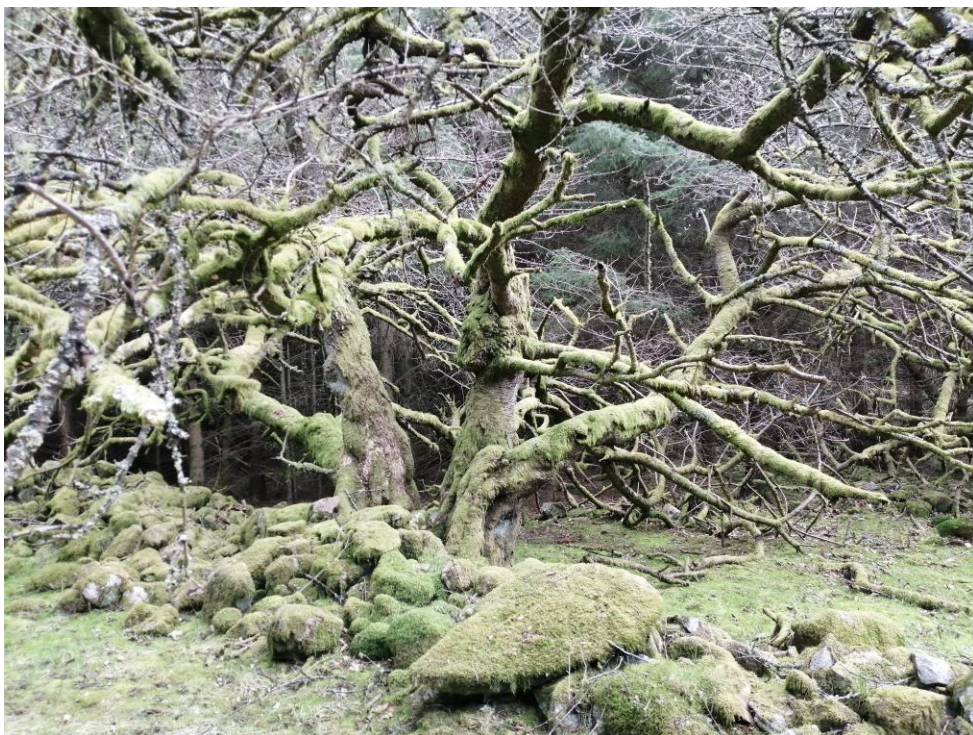
Clay pipe finds from the area, discovered by the field walking group [Mesolithic Deeside](#). (Photograph courtesy of Mesolithic Deeside)

A bagpipe enthusiast, George would often practise in the evening up by the corn stacks, walking up and down in time to the beat.

Time off was given on a Sunday when George was allowed to walk home after church. By sitting up in the gallery he would sneak out early before Mrs King could spot his disappearance and make his way across the fields for a few hours at home before the long evening walk back to Knappyrround.

George Smith worked for the Kings for that year of 1926-27. He was then apprenticed to Mr Leslie, builder in Torphins, and in 1939 he went to war. On his return George settled in Fife and prospered with his own building business. He married his sweetheart from Lumphanan, the gardener's daughter of Glenmillan House.

One summer day in 1983 George, aged 71, headed north to Lumphanan with his wife. He drove a fine new 4x4, proud that he had also bought one for each of his children. George gazed at Stot Hill. He slowed down by Knappyrround where he had begun his working life and he told his tales of those far off days.



A gean tree growing in the Stothill croft garden