

Ivy Cottage: The poem, the history, the mystery.

By Joshua Wells

Since I moved to the village of Balmaclellan, just over 2 years ago, I have been amazed by the amount of history in such a small area, from the Balmaclellan mirror to the large motte with its missing bailey sitting upon a hill above the village, Balmaclellan has so many tales to tell. One place really stood out to me.

Every time I walk my dog, I stroll past a little sitting area, with an old wooden bench creating a focal point. At first, I didn't think much of it, thinking it was just a spot for tired travellers to rest after a long day's hike, taking shelter from the pouring rain or seeking shade from the gleaming sun.



1 My view as I walk down the road



2 Kentucky bench

After walking past a couple of times, I looked a little closer and noticed that this boring bench wasn't so boring after all. The bench has an engraving with the name 'Kentucky,' this made me wonder, why has this name been given to such a small, seemingly unimportant bit of land?

So, while in the local village shop, I chatted with a long-term resident and member of the Balmaclellan Village Hall Heritage Group. I was informed that it was not unimportant at all. This sad little spot was once the site of a tiny cottage and home to numerous people over the centuries.

The 'Ivy Cottage' as it was once known, was a single-story building, probably built with stone and whitewashed to give it a nice finish. It stood proud in between the slender trees, and large bushes. A small black door stood off the centre, with two windows sitting on each side, in contrast to the empty rectangle that is all that remains today.



3 A photo of Ivy Cottage

It stood with a thatched roof, which was typical of its time, as it was a practical roof design, according to Hendricks architecture, protecting it from the harsh climates of Dumfries and Galloway. A small chimney poked out the top of the straw roof, keeping the house cosy in the cold Dumfries and Galloway winters.

Whilst researching on Facebook, I came across a group called 'Memories of the Glenkens,' which had various theories on why the site was called Kentucky, two theories being it was named after a song called 'My Old Kentucky Home' and that people emigrated and returned from America. However, after reading two books naming Scots who emigrated to the USA, I could not find any evidence that anyone from Balmaclellan moved to the USA and returned. A theory of why it no longer stands today is that it may have been destroyed by a fire, never being built again.



4 A newspaper article referencing the big clean up

Further evidence that supports this theory, is a Galloway News article from 1996 written by Angela Corrie. On Thursday the 17th of October, an article explaining the 'tidying up' of the Kentucky plot of land, after it was burnt down 80 years before in 1916, was published. This clean-up was arranged by the Templetons of The Holm of Balmaclellan. To make the site more attractive to passers-by, both a kissing gate (made by Joe Corrie) and a second bench (made by Doug Carson) were added to the area. Having visited the site, I noticed that there is now only one bench.

Remnants of a house similar to Ivy Cottage can be found locally in Dunketterick, the birthplace of Alexander Murray, who is renowned locally because of his education and occupation at the university. A large monument standing on top of a hill can be seen from the old house. According to 'Visit Scotland', the monument was dedicated to Alexander Murray when he became a professor of Oriental Languages at Edinburgh University.



5 Cruck Cottage interior

I also visited Cruck Cottage in Torthorwald, just outside Dumfries, given the name due to its structure. A cruck is when an oak tree is debarked but left in its original state. They would stand within the walls of the house to support the purlins, the long beam that reaches from one side of the roof to the other (as shown in the photo).



6 Cruck Cottage exterior

Cruck Cottage seems similar to Ivy Cottage, with its straw-thatched roof and its lime washed walls. The lime washed walls were originally made of clay or turf but were later improved into stone. Ivy Cottage was most likely made with the same wall design looking very alike in photos. The house design seemed to be a trend at the time with many being built in the south-west of Scotland. However, despite it being a very old house design, it was lived in until the 1970s, unlike Ivy Cottage.

Ivy Cottage is set around half a mile from the rest of the centre village of Balmaclellan, by the crossroads at the bottom of a hill. Balmaclellan is a small village in the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright, near St John's town of Dalry.

According to the Reverend Gavin Cullen and Reverend George Murray in the Presbytery of Kirkcudbright, Synod of Galloway, the village's population has fluctuated through the recent years; in 1755 there were 534 residents, in 1841 1134 residents however now in 2024 around 130. At the time of when the cottage stood, 4000 acres were taken up by farmland in the village. Cullen and Murray reported that grain, potatoes, turnips, and peat were farmed along with sheep and cattle.

At the time of the humble Ivy Cottage, the village was bustling with people and had numerous occupations, for example, according to the census records of 1841, Daniel McMichael, most likely a resident of the tiny village, was the local innkeeper. Fashion obviously also meant a lot to the residents as there were 5 tailors and 3 dressmakers. Unlike modern Balmaclellan, the roads were cared for with 2 road makers working in the village. Balmaclellan also had a mole catcher, Thomas Shearman, meaning that most likely moles were a nuisance to the inhabitants.

As I could see from the map that featured the cottage, by the National Library of Scotland, Balmaclellan was a thriving village with a blacksmith ('Smithy'), a church and an inn.



7 An old map of Balmaclellan 1888 - 1915

Where the house used to stand, all that is left is a rectangular rock foundation that reaches just above your ankle. Moss and twigs both call the resting place of the house home. The site is flanked by two towering chestnut trees, one a horse chestnut, and one a sweet chestnut, while a rhododendron stands in the background, with the engraved bench sitting snugly in between. In the photograph I worked from, these towering chestnut trees were barely more than saplings, giving an idea of the age of the plot where they stand.

In the corner of the fenced boundaries, in the winter months, you will find a mysterious circle of Trooping Funnel mushrooms, commonly known as fairy rings. The fungi hide among the grass blades surrounding them. According to 'National Trust,' in Celtic folklore, fairy rings were believed to be the trails of graceful fairies dancing in circles. It was also believed that if a human joined this fairy dance, they would be punished by dancing to death. According to Britannica, Celtic folklore had long since died out in the 4th century, so the Ivy Cottage residents would most likely not believe in these stories if the fairy ring had appeared in those times.

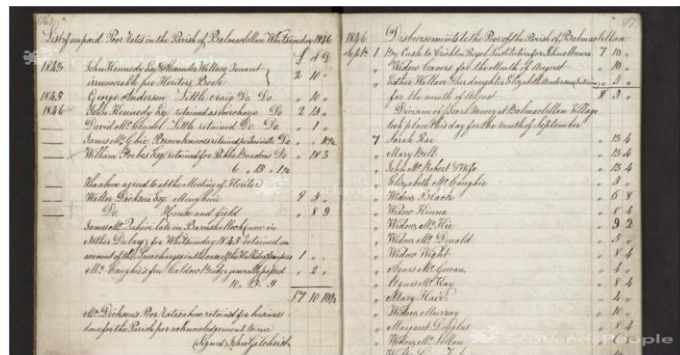
A past residence of this humble abode was a lady called Sarah Rae, a seemingly poor lady of the 18th and 19th centuries. According to Find My Past Sarah Rae was born in 1795 to Margaret Gordon and William Rae and her occupation was described as a lunatic. However, according to the website WeRelate Sarah Rae was born around 1784. Her younger brother, also William Rae, was believed to have died on the 20th of January 1871. I am unable to confirm Sarah Rae's date of birth due to the differing records, either way, she was 23 years older or 34 years older than her brother which are both big age gaps.

Sarah Rae lived to 90 and died in Ivy Cottage on the 27th of May 1874, three years after her brother. Reverend George Murray, mentioned previously, wrote a poem about Sarah Rae after she came to his parish. In the poem of 'Sarah Rae,' he wrote:

*"In yonder cottage, by the stream
That wanders through the moor,
Lives Sarah Rae: ah ! weak of mind,
Most feeble, old, and poor."*

He describes how Sarah and her mother sat spinning wool while singing together as she was a child, he thought teaching spinning was such a lovely gift to give to a child. For seventy years she spun wool and continued to sing.

At the end of the poem Murray was concerned that wool spinning might be lost art. Murray wrote that Sarah was poor and further evidence found that in the Balmaclellan kirk session, Parochial Board poor accounts (1845-1855) Sarah Rae paid rates of 13 shillings and 4 pence (1 merk.) Sarah Rae is also described as boarding at the Ivy Cottage meaning she rented out a room of the house.



8 Parochial Board poor accounts

While Alexander Murray of Dunketterick and Sarah Rae had similar upbringings, they had very different lives after childhood. Murray went to university in Edinburgh where he studied numerous languages and Sarah Rae stayed poor for the rest of her life.

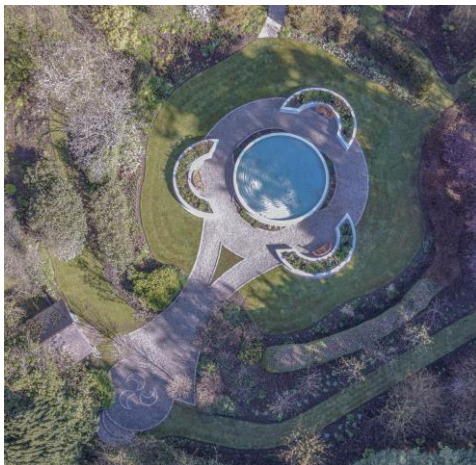
Rev. George Murray is mentioned in Alexander Trotter's 'East Galloway Sketches,' it is a biological, historical and descriptive notice that names numerous local names and places such as Thomas, Earl of Selkirk, Threave Castle and Joseph Train. According to 'East Galloway Sketches', Rev. George Murray was known as "the poet priest of Balmaclellan" for the many poems he wrote during his lifetime, such as 'The Birkin Tree' and 'Bridge'.

In the same book, he was quoted as "a model minister" for treating every person equally, wealthy or short of money. Apparently, Rev. George Murray gave tips to a servant on how to better hold her finances. In the village, he was highly thought of. As he went to the University of Edinburgh, he was most likely a very intelligent and educated person. After listening to similar things in childhood, he started to get into antiquarianism.

This obsession with antiquarianism led him to the finding of the Balmaclellan mirror alongside multiple other artifacts. The Balmaclellan Mirror is a local artifact that is currently being held in the National Museum of Scotland and has been previously held in the British Museum for an exhibition between the 24th September 2015 and 31st January 2016



9 The Balmaclellan Mirror



10 A birds eye view of the Mirror Garden in Balmaclellan House formerly The Manse

The reflective bronze face of the mirror is surrounded by decorations in the shape of foliage. There is a pond in the gardens of the former Manse, now called Balmaclellan House, where Rev. George Murray once lived, (just a few hundred yards from where Ivy Cottage once stood). The pond is in the shape of the mirror, with the three moon-shaped cut-outs at the base of the handle, these shapes can be seen marked within the path

Other residents of Ivy Cottage included Elizabeth Mcnea and James Welsh. Elizabeth Mcnea, a 52-year-old former laundress (at the time of the 1881 census) who was born in the village, lived in the cottage from 1829 to 1881, these dates also coincide with the dates of which Sarah Rae lived in Ivy Cottage.

James Welsh, a stonebreaker who was born in the neighbouring village of Dalry, aged 58 at the time of the 1901 census also lived there presumably up to the fiery end of the cottage. James Welsh also became a Widower.

Although Ivy Cottage is only a small piece in the long history of the village of Balmaclellan, it does allow us to picture what life was like for villagers of the past. The village has seen so many changes throughout its time in Dumfries and Galloway, not only have residents been and gone, old houses have been demolished and new houses have been built. It makes a person wonder what would the village be like in a short period of time such as 100 years, would it have grown to a bustling town or shrunk to a singular row of houses.



11 The village of Balmaclellan

References

- <https://www.hendricksarchitect.com/architecture/thatch-roofing-in-rain-and-snow>
- [werelate.org/wiki/Person:Sarah_Rae_\(1\)](http://werelate.org/wiki/Person:Sarah_Rae_(1))
- <https://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/side-by-side/#zoom=16.0&lat=55.08882&lon=-4.11560&layers=1&right=ESRIWorld>
- https://www.francisfrith.com/ewanston/map-of-balmaclellan-1904-1905_rnc631651
- https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/virtual-volumes/volume-images/volume_data-CH2-981-1/GAZ00266?image_number=17
- <https://stataccscot.ed.ac.uk/data/pdfs/account2/StAS.2.4.98.P.Kirkcudbright.Balmaclellan.pdf>
- <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/blog/2019/08/what-is-a-fairy-ring/>
- <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Celtic-religion>
- <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/balmaclellan-mirror-national-museums-scotland/IAGRquxyNq8AwQ?hl=en>
- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/105684281520296>
- Trotters, A. (1901) East Galloway Sketches: or Biographical, History and Descriptive Notice of Kirkcudbrightshire Chiefly in the Nineteenth Century. Castle Douglas: Rae.
- <https://www.scottishindexes.com/51transcript.aspx?houseid=86807016>

- <https://www.scottishindexes.com/51transcript.aspx?houseid=85608025>
- The Scots Overseas Emigrants and Adventures from Southern Scotland (Part One) by David Dobson
- Scots in the USA and Canada 1825-1900 by David Dobson
- <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/balmaclellan-mirror-national-museums-scotland/IAGRquxyNq8AwQ?hl=en>
- <https://www.visitscotland.com/info/see-do/murrays-monument-p254271>
- <https://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/side-by-side/#zoom=16.9&lat=55.08850&lon=-4.11510&layers=6&right=ESRIWorld>
- <https://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/#zoom=16.9&lat=55.08850&lon=-4.11510&layers=6&b=ESRIWorld&o=100>
- <https://ancestors.familysearch.org/en/L5LP-86C/rev-george-murray-2nd-1852-1920>
- Sarah Rae and Other Poems By The Late Rev. George Murray (1882)
- <https://www.balmaclellan.co.uk> (currently offline)
- <https://blog.nms.ac.uk/2016/04/25/reflections-on-celts/>
- <https://glenkens.scot/reports-resources-archive/the-balmaclellan-mirror>
- Stewartry of Kirkcudbright Monumental Inscriptions pre-1918 Vol 1
- Register of Sasines Index of Persons Kirkcudbright 1912
- Sasines Kirkcudbright 1916-20
- Stewartry of Kirkcudbright Census Records of 1841 by Surname
- <https://canmore.org.uk/site/208411/balmaclellan-house>
- <https://www.facebook.com/groups/memoriesoftheglenkens/posts/1247808096106431/?rdr>
- <http://cruckcottage.com/>

- <https://www.visitscotland.com/info/see-do/cruck-cottage-heritage-p2620041>
- <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/research/learning/hall-of-fame/hall-of-fame-a-z/murray-alexander>
- <https://www.scottish-places.info/people/famousfirst2214.html>
- Statistical Accounts of The Stewartry of Kirkcudbright 1845
- The Thatcher's Standard Issue No. 58 autumn 2024