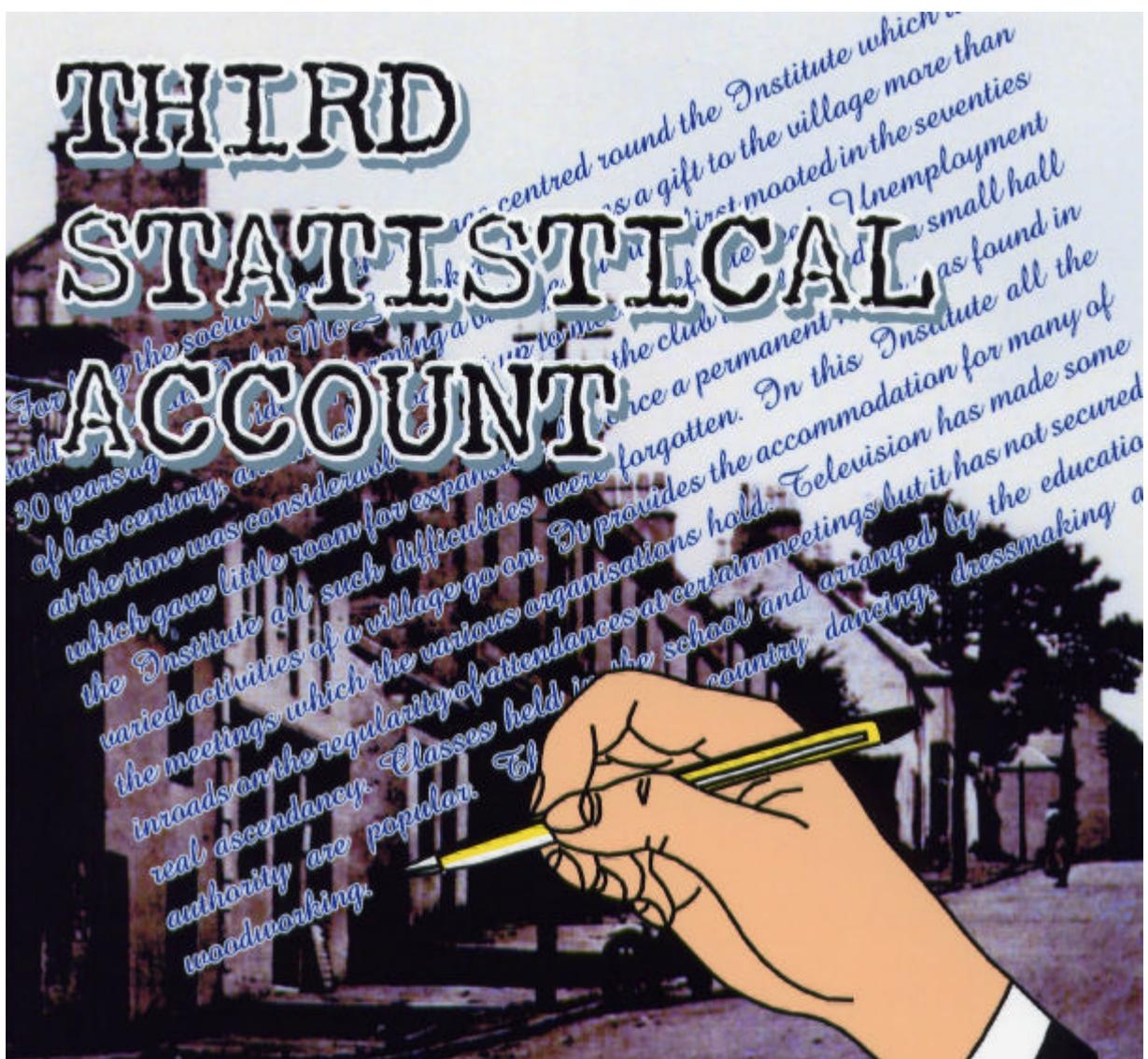


THIRD STATISTICAL ACCOUNT



FOR

BALFRON

STIRLINGSHIRE

(1949/1961)

PARISH OF BALFRON

by the Rev. THOMAS. H. BURNS-BEGG.
(1949 – Final Revision 1961)

In his book *The Place Names of Stirlingshire* (1904) the Rev. J. B. Johnston has suggested that the origin of the name Balfron may be in the Gaelic bail'-a-bhroin - village of mourning. The parish extends over 7,823 acres and is bounded by five other parishes. Part of the southern boundary is the river Endrick. In the west lies the principal village, Balfron, which provides a centre for the parish area and for areas outwith its bounds.

One has only to read the Statistical Account of this parish which was written more than a hundred years ago, and compare it with the condition of things at the present date to realise the tremendous change which has taken place in the parish in the last hundred years, and to understand that this was due in very large measure to one fact, namely that, shortly after the beginning of the hundred years with which this present account deals, the work at the cotton mills was brought to a standstill, and the community reverted to agriculture. Since 1789 the life of the district had centred on the mills, but when they ceased to function great and revolutionary changes had to be made in the manner of life as well as in the whole outlook of the people.

Population. The census figures reveal the disastrous effect which the closing of the mills had on the population of the parish. In 1831 the population was 2,057, in 1851 it was 1,900, in 1861 it dropped to 1,517 and continued to decrease until the total of 1,092 was reached in 1901. Since then there has been a gradual and steady increase. The census of 1951 recorded a population of 1,411, an increase of 211 over the total for 1931, and the total recorded in 1961, 1,393, represents only a very slight decrease. It does not seem likely, however, that the high figures of the middle of the nineteenth century will ever again be achieved. The population of the village of Balfron itself, in 1951, was 1,107.

Agriculture. With the cessation of the industry which had come to the district with the introduction of the mills it was essential that some work be found for the many who had their homes in Balfron and who were unwilling to leave the district. It was no doubt this consideration which compelled many to turn again to agriculture. Lying on the north bank of the river Endrick, and with a very considerable slope down towards the river, the parish is ideally fitted for farming, and farming in the area has proved to be rewarding. The parish boasts 33 farms of which 29 are recorded as owned by their occupiers. One farm consists of heath and moorland; the remainder are in arable land and pasture. Oats are grown to a considerable extent and there is some attention to the growing of potatoes. Almost three and a half thousand acres are in crops and grassland and a little more than that in rough grazing. There are more than 2,000 cattle in the parish and upwards of 5,500 sheep. The number of horses is decreasing and has now reached 22, an outcome of the steady growth of the use of machinery in many branches of the industry.

Other Industries. A number of people in the parish find employment with the Forestry Commission but these are not many. From Balfron many of the younger people look beyond the parish to find work. Some travel to Glasgow, others to Stirling, but the most important centre of employment for Balfron people outside the village is Killearn Hospital, where both part-time and full-time work is available for women and full-time work for men. A group finds work in public transport, there being a large bus depot in the village. The retail and distributive trades and services offer employment to still more. The local Co-operative Society employs more than 50 people. The usual range of smaller shops is to be found in Balfron and nearby, as are workshops and garage facilities.

Education. Balfron has developed during the present century into the educational centre of west Stirlingshire. Before the decline in population which took place in the middle of the last century there were four schools in the parish but by 1904 there was only one three-teacher school housed in a small single-storey building at the top of Cotton Street. Educationists in the parish had, however, the vision of a school which could provide an education up to university entrance and serve a wide area in the western part of the county and they started to plan accordingly. In 1919 additional building was undertaken and the school became an intermediate school. In 1925 the school was re-organised as a secondary school and the name changed to Balfron High School, offering a full six year course. Balfron High School is now the senior secondary school for the whole area and children are brought in daily by special school bus from the surrounding villages. The original school buildings and the temporary classrooms which have been built since 1939 are now both inadequate and obsolete. A start has already been made to reconstruct the school on the original site in Cotton Street at a total cost of £270,000, and, in order that the education of the pupils may not be interrupted, the work is being phased so that construction is always ahead of demolition. The school is due for completion in August 1962.

Balfron High School now has a roll of 555 pupils and a teaching staff of 28. Courses are varied and designed to prepare pupils for industry, commerce and for further academic study.

Religion. The ecclesiastical history of Scotland as a whole had its repercussions even in a small place like Balfron. This present century has seen two major unions in the Scottish Church: the union of the United Presbyterian and the Free Church in 1900, and that of the United Free Church with the Church of Scotland in 1929. While on the occasion of the latter union the church life in this district was little affected, this was not the case with the union at the beginning of the century. At one time there were three separate denominations in Balfron - the Parish Church, the United Presbyterian Church, and the Free Church, and one effect of the earlier union was that the last of these three was closed and the members of the Free Church began to worship in the United Presbyterian Church.

About 1867 there came into existence a Roman Catholic chapel to meet the spiritual needs of a great number of Irish immigrants who settled in the district. At that time it had been found necessary to increase the supply of water for Glasgow and this involved the laying of a new pipe-line from Loch Katrine. With a view to carrying through this work the authorities brought over a labour force from Ireland. On seeing this, Mrs. Cooper of Ballindalloch, who was a Roman Catholic, though her husband was not, decided to build a chapel for the Irish, and this chapel is in use to this day, though there is not a resident priest in Balfron.

It was not only the Roman Catholic chapel that was built during this period, however, for it was then also that the present United Free Church was built, while extensive alterations were made to the old Parish Church. The Parish Church had originally consisted of an oblong building with galleries on three sides of it and no transepts at all. Towards the end of last century the whole character of the church was changed, the main door being placed at the north end, and the pulpit at the south end. A transept was added on each side, thus giving the church a cruciform shape.

Just before the outbreak of the war of 1939 the manse belonging to the old Parish Church was sold, and a new manse was built nearer the church. This is a comfortable building standing in its own grounds, and is very much more easily worked than the old manse, as well as being much more convenient for the work of the parish. In recent years the church at Fintry has been linked with that of Balfron South and both are in the charge of the minister of Balfron South.

Transport. Like many of the other villages of Scotland, which must have been very isolated in days past, Balfron has been brought into touch with the outside world as a result of the introduction of the buses. Now buses pass down the main street, and there is a good service both early and late to Glasgow as well as to Stirling. The consequence is that there is constant communication with the city, as well as with the surrounding villages. At one time the only way of getting to Glasgow was by catching the train at Dumgoyne; then towards the end of last century the Glasgow line was continued to Aberfoyle, passing through the station of Balfron, and running for a number of miles on the old line between Stirling and Balloch. This facility is now no longer available because the station has in recent years been closed in accordance with the policy of British Railways.

Public Services. Balfron was early to adopt gas for lighting purposes. The village was able to make use of gas produced for the local mill surplus to the demands of the mill's processes. This supply ceased, however, with the closing of the mill, and the village and its environment turned once more to the older methods of lighting. Lamps and candles came again into use. There is still no main gas supply but electricity has been introduced in recent years and is being used on an increasingly large scale. Street lighting and the lighting of public premises is by electricity and almost all the homes in the area have had it introduced.

Water supplies are very good. The new provision to the west of the county from Carron reservoir has allowed the whole parish to make plans which are based on really adequate water supply. Closely associated with the provision of water is the provision of modern sanitation and systems of sewage disposal. This last matter has for long given concern in the area and is now nearly solved. Reconstruction of the existing system is at present being carried out at a cost of some £30,000. When complete the system will provide ample capacity for the district and probably will be capable of dealing with greater demands than are likely to be made.

Housing. In Balfron for some years before the war of 1939 the housing situation was not good. The village possesses, particularly on its outskirts, a number of fine, old houses of the mansion type. Several are good instances of architectural skill; for example, there is a house in Dunmore Street designed by 'Greek' Thomson, who was a native of the village. In the centre of the village, however, at that time many houses were old and reaching the end of their period of use.

Houses built by the county authority after 1919 numbered 72, all of traditional pattern. The war prevented further development and it was not until recent years that the building programme could again be begun. In the period since 1945 a further 115 houses have been built or reconstructed by the county authority. Indeed at the present time the face of the village street is being completely altered. During the past seven years a scheme of comprehensive redevelopment has been carried out on the west side of the main street by the county council. Many of the houses in the village street had been built early in the nineteenth century to house the mill workers and did not meet modern standards. The county council's plan was, therefore, to obtain control of these houses, many of which had been condemned under the Health Acts, demolish them, and build modern houses on the existing sites. These new houses have been carefully designed to fit into the present background and combine modern standards with traditional styles of Scottish architecture. The progress of this large transformation is indicated by the fact that, so far, 59 houses have been acquired and demolished and 40 more have been acquired of which 12 have been or will be reconstructed while demolition of the remaining 28 will be carried out. There remain, in addition, 30 houses which have been condemned but have not yet been acquired by the county council.

Seventeen houses for agricultural workers have been built, most of these in Station Road and Fintry Road. There has been little private building in the parish. The total number of privately owned houses of all types is recorded as 217, of which 157 are owner occupied.

Sport. Balfron has advanced greatly in this respect in the past century. Football retains its popularity and the local team holds its own in the competitions which are regularly held. The golf course succumbed to the demand for more agricultural land and has not, to the sorrow of the enthusiasts, been replaced. There are numbers of keen anglers in the parish and not a few with a deep knowledge of the countryside and wild life of the area which has been gained on shooting, fishing and walking expeditions. Bowls provokes a great deal of interest and many a happy evening is spent in that pursuit, not only by the players but also by the spectators who do not come down into the green but watch the game from over the wall. The formation of a ladies' bowling club has greatly encouraged interest in bowls. The green itself is most beautifully situated, placed as it is at the bottom of the village, and having a clear and uninterrupted view of the Campsie Fells. At the High School there is considerable attention to athletics and this has produced in the village much interest. At least one athlete of international calibre has gone out to represent us in wider fields.

Village Life. For long the social life of the village centred round the Institute which was built by the late John McLintock and given as a gift to the village more than 30 years ago. The idea of forming a village club was first mooted in the seventies of last century, and the club was set up to meet a definite need. Unemployment at the time was considerable. For some time the club was housed in a small hall which gave little room for expansion, but once a permanent home was found in the Institute all such difficulties were forgotten. In this Institute all the varied activities of a village go on. It provides the accommodation for many of the meetings which the various organisations hold. Television has made some inroads on the regularity of attendances at certain meetings but it has not secured real ascendancy. Classes held in the school and arranged by the education authority are popular. They include country dancing, dressmaking and woodworking.

There is a strong Masonic Lodge in the village. When the old Masonic Hall in Buchanan Street was demolished to make way for the redevelopment of the main street, members co-operated to build a fine new hall in Dunmore Street. The women of the village have their own organisations. Both churches have flourishing branches of the Woman's Guild. A local branch of the W.V.S. was formed three years ago and the Women's Rural Institute has a membership of 80.

Much time and thought is given to the welfare of the older residents. In 1958 the county council built a home for old people at the top of Hillhead Brae, which has made it possible for those who can no longer look after themselves to stay in the village in comfort. There is also a "meals on wheels" service provided jointly by the county council and the W.V.S. The staff of Alexander's bus depot have for many years taken a generous interest in the welfare of the older citizens and they raise money to provide a regular summer outing and a Christmas treat for those who have reached the age of sixty-five.

Balfron has a growing population of children and young people, some of whom seek recreational facilities outside the village. For the younger children there are two Brownie packs and a Life Boy company and many of the older ones have joined the Guides and Boys' Brigade. Residents of all ages use the library which is kept stocked with books from Stirling.

A change which has been received with mixed feelings concerns the sale of liquor. At one time there were many public houses in the area. Nearly forty years ago several prominent men in the place were strong in advocating temperance and succeeded in persuading the village of the wisdom of their view. Balfron became 'dry' with the support of the great majority of its people. An unsuccessful attempt to change this decision was made after some years. Then, a few years after the war of 1939, a new attempt succeeded. There is one public house now and one licensed grocer. Customs have undoubtedly changed. The number of cases arising out of drunkenness dealt with by the police in 1960 was nine. Yet there are many who regret the passing of the 'dry' period.