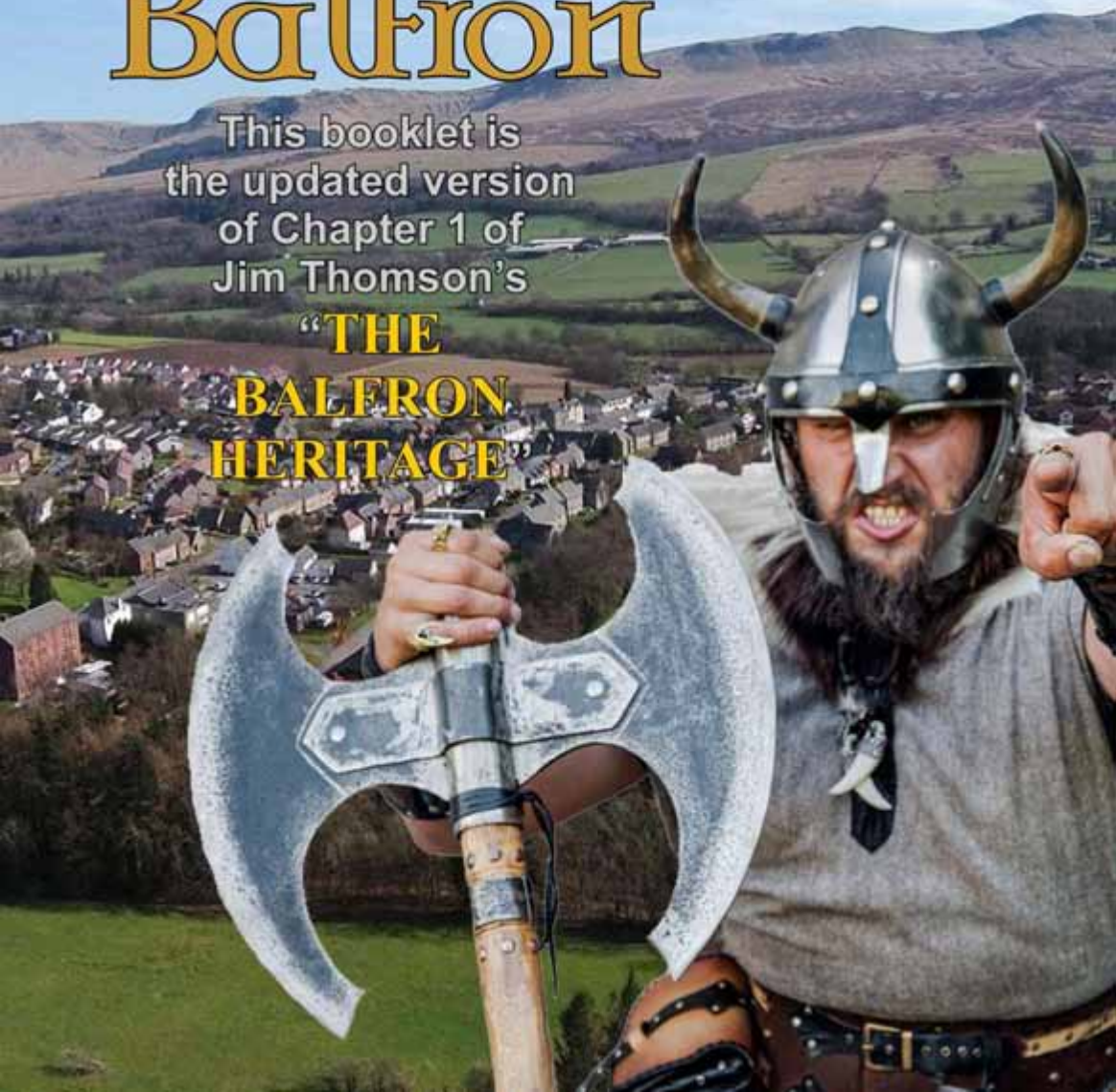


The Early History of Balfron

This booklet is
the updated version
of Chapter 1 of
Jim Thomson's

**"THE
BALFRON
HERITAGE"**





THE EARLY HISTORY OF BALFRON

TAKEN FROM JIM THOMSON'S
'THE BALFRON HERITAGE'

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THE EARLY HISTORY OF BALFRON

This booklet is based on the first chapter of “**THE BALFRON HERITAGE**”, the local history book of Balfron ‘parish’ first published in 1990 and still on sale locally.

When the book was published 1990/2003, it was expected that events would mean the updating of the later chapters.

Recent research, however, has added more to Balfron’s early history – a situation which we hope this booklet resolves.



The ‘parish’ of Balfron is the unusually long administrative and geographical area that includes the village of Balfron.

(Map courtesy of the National Library of Scotland Map Room.)

We begin with Balfron’s notorious legend.

A tapestry of dense forest sweeps down from the volcanic fells to the south before sloping up towards the high ground of the Ibert, the place of sacrifice, where the men of the village have assembled. Ritual incantations are pierced by the frightened screams of children in the clearing in the woods below, sending the villagers scampering towards the cluster of dwellings which is their home. A scene of savage devastation meets them and the eerie silence is broken only by the ominous, satisfied howl of the wolves which have taken the village’s children.



BALFRON FROM THE IBERT

(Photograph courtesy of St.Andrews University Library)

Of the various claims as to how Balfron was named, the story of “bail’-a-bhroin”, the village of mourning, is probably the least credible and yet it is the accepted origin. “Town of the meeting streams” and “Town of the drizzling rain”¹ may be more plausible to the geographer or historian, but it is the wolf which was until the early 1990s emblazoned, incongruously enough, on the High School uniform and it is the wolf which is used by the organizations such as the Women’s Rural Institute to symbolise their village. The simple reason why this should be the case is that, being handed down by word of mouth, it made the best story.

More disquieting explanations for the acceptance of the tragic tale of the disappearing children appear in both the 13th and 17th century, as we shall discover later in this chapter. The bloodthirsty and sinister happenings in these periods of Balfron’s history might make this story uncomfortably close to the truth.

The first physical evidence of a settlement at Balfron is on Ordnance Survey records, a five-foot (1.5 metre) high cairn, 30 feet (9m) in diameter, "situated upon the highest ground in the vicinity"² sited at Cairnhall Farm, to the north of the village. It was, however, destroyed in the 1960s, a fate common to so many aspects of Balfron life at that time.

CARLIN STONE

Balgair Muir

(photograph by
Iain B Hardie¹ [1990])



To the east of the parish, other Bronze Age relics still exist: the 'Carlin Stone' - a field-marker Standing Stone on Balgair Muir – and, nearby to its north east, 'The Wife with Bratty Plaid' described in the Ordnance Survey's (1870) Book of Reference as "*a flat rock on the boundary between Perth and Stirling*". The rock is certainly not flat and any relationship it had with Perth has long since gone. Instead, the stone an upright one not much more than two feet (600mm) tall.



'WIFE WITH THE BRATTY PLAID' STONE (courtesy of Campbell Griffith)



QUERN STONE QUARRY nr. Balfron (Photograph by HES)

There is also the recently excavated large, up to 5000-year-old quern stone quarry whose location is being kept secret (*at time of going to print*) in case it attracts unwanted tourist attention similar to the difficulties experienced at the 'Devil's Pulpit' near Killearn which had appeared in the "Outlander" TV series.

The legend of the wolves makes the assertion of Balfron as a place of worship. The Ibert, a name still in existence today at Station Road, was a clear indication of pre-Christian rites. Christianity is believed to have emanated from Inchcalleach or Inchcailloch, the islet on Loch Lomond near the mouth of the Endrick, and came to Balfron around the 9th century through Kentigerna, a disciple of Columba, who seems to have been the "Cailleach" or nun after whom the island was named.



The lands were acquired by the Knights Templars³, a powerful order of crusading knights, who had taken their name from the quarters given to them by the King of Jerusalem on the site of King Solomon's temple. The "Poor Knights of the Temple" had adopted the Benedictine rule, but their dealings with pilgrims' funds and their establishment of offices or "Temples" in all the major Christian countries had made them so rich and powerful that, under pressure

from the European monarchs, Pope Clement V was forced to abolish the order. Most of their lands were transferred to the Knights of St John, also known as the Knights Hospitallers, who gave their name to the Hospital Lands of Camoquhill, more commonly recognised as "Spittal" lands. "Some writers are too apt, when origin of a Spittal is doubtful, to take for granted that it was connected with the Knights Hospitallers. It seems clear, however, that the hospital lands of Camoquhill did belong to the knights in question."⁴

Although the hamlet of Balfron itself was fairly insignificant in the early history of the area, it existed near to the main mediaeval 'highway' between the River Clyde and the east coast at Stirling when most efficient travel was done by water.



ENDRICK WATER (courtesy of Campbell Griffith)

This is nowhere more clearly illustrated than in the forays of the Vikings into the Endrick Valley. Perhaps the term Vikings is misleading as these raiders bore more allegiance to the Lords of the Isles than to the Norse king. It was, nevertheless, on his orders that they arrived in the area.

We must trace the story back to Somerled who was the first of the 'sea king' lords of the isles. Although closely linked with Norway, he was an independent ruler of the Hebrides, very much similar to the Lords of Man to the south. His descendants (*the sons of Somerled i.e. Mac Somerled [McSorley]*) were powerful Lords of the Isles. Because of civil war in Norway and the focus of the Scottish kings towards England, the western seaboard was left to the devices of the Somerled dynasty.



By the mid-13th century, however, King Haakon IV of Norway decided to take more direct control of his Scottish dominions and brought his fleet to the Clyde in 1263 to challenge Alexander III the Scottish King who was also turning his attention towards the west.

Although we associate this date principally with the Battle of Largs, Haakon sent a fleet of forty (or, perhaps, sixty) ships up *Inn i Skipfiord* (Loch Long) to *Sokolofini* (Loch Lomond) where, "*they burned all the dwellings around the lake and did there great damage*".⁵ This is backed up by Haakon's Saga.

*"Those warriors undaunted they wasted with war-gales
The islands thick-peopled on Lomond's broad loch.*

FROM THE WOLVES TO THE WEAVERS
updated from **'THE BALFRON HERITAGE'**

Alan, Dougal's brother, went almost across Scotland and slew many a man. He took many hundred neat and did much ravage:

As is here said:

*Sturdy swordsmen of the earl far in Scotland pushed their forays,
Feeding everywhere the wolf, burning dwellings far and wide"*⁶



According to the saga, Alan went 'far across Scotland and slew many men', perhaps even penetrating as far as Stirling Castle.⁷ His invasion of Lennox and beyond would inevitably bring him up the Endrick. Further evidence of this incursion into the heart of Alexander's Scotland is in the Exchequer Rolls for Stirling which have an entry "...in expensis hominum vigilancium in castro tempore quo rex Noruegie fuit in partibus istis xxxv s. vj d..."⁸ ("in expense of lookouts at the time the king of Norway was in the area 35 shillings and sixpence").



LUSS 'HOGBACK' STONE (Photograph courtesy of John West)

As many have done until the present day, the invading Norsemen clearly found the Loch Lomond area an attractive place to settle as evidenced by the Viking 'hogback' burial stones at Luss on the lochside.

There is also a macabre twist to this theory of Vikings on the Endrick and that is the Viking practice of "*gallcerd*" - the tossing of children on spearpoints - which might give a new slant to the previously-mentioned legend of the wolves' attack on the village's children to give it its name of Balfron, the town of mourning.

The 2003 *Balfron700* Festival (See 'gallery' at the end of this booklet) celebrated the fact that Balfron made its first documentary appearance on 3rd October 1303 when the *jus patronatus* and tiends of the parish church of Balfron – known, at that time, as Buthbren – were granted to Inchaffray Abbey in Perthshire by Sir Thomas de Crommenane, knight, and Robert Wishard, bishop of Glasgow.

The full charter reads as follows:

Robert, 'humble minister of the church of Glasgow' makes known that in compassion for the plunderings, burnings, and innumerable afflictions which the abbot and convent of Inchaffray had suffered through war, and desirous of relieving, so far as he could, their poverty and low estate, grants to them power to convert to their use, on the resignation or death of the rector, the church of Buthbren (Balfron) in his diocese, the patronage of which church Sir Thomas of Cromennane, knight, had charitably granted them.

RUINS OF INCHAFFRAY ABBEY
(Photograph courtesy of Abby Hunt) + Inchaffray Abbey seals



Every defect, if there were any, in Sir Thomas's grant he supplies out of the plenitude of his ordinary power. Episcopal and archidiaconal rights are reserved. The monastery need not appoint a vicar, but may cause the church to be served by a simple secular chaplain, or by one of their own canons. Seal of grantor. Given at Balindarge in Angus, 3 October 1303⁹.

An ironic sequel to this was that the newly-formed Balfron Heritage Group applied for the use of the actual charter for its first 1990 exhibition in the village's disused Co-op Drapery but was turned down understandably for the precious document's safety reasons. In 1993, it was destroyed in the Perth floods that ravaged the Fair City.

Kirk o' Balphrone, in its variety of spellings, appears on the old maps of Scotland, the "village" itself being barely a hamlet nestling beside its Kirk on the site now known as the Clachan.



OLD PLACE OF BALGAIR (courtesy of Campbell Griffith)

Hill of Balgair, to the east of the Parish, was, at one time, a larger village "with a number of cottars and weavers busily employed and provided with a public house and various shops"¹⁰, with its "Laird's Seat", the Old Place of Balgair, a large, now derelict, early 18th century ruin, in the caravan park to the south towards Fintry.



CLACHAN – BALFRON (courtesy of balfron.org)

The focal point of the clachan of Balfron is the Clachan Oak. The village's penchant for entertaining "tourists" seems to date back to its claim that William Wallace rested in the shade of this oak, an attestation that seems improbable until further investigation shows that Wallace was, at one time, based at the old castle of Balglass and that Sir John de Graham, ancestor of the Dukes of Montrose whose lands included the neighbouring Parish of Killearn, was described as a "beloved friend of Wallace".



KEIR KNOWE EARTHWORKS (courtesy of Campbell Griffith)

More concrete evidence of the military significance of Balfron in the 12th and 13th centuries are the “mottes”, one at Keir Knowe _Page 10) on the eastern boundary of the Parish and one at Woodend at the present east end of the village where Dunmore Street joins the Roman Road. At that time, of course, Woodend Motte would be some way from the village and this natural mound, fortified in mediaeval times, would command a significant vantage point over the Endrick Valley and the aquatic ‘highway’ mentioned earlier.

This oval knoll has often been regarded locally as a Roman encampment but there is no evidence to endorse this assertion despite the misnomer of the road nearby – a fairly recent change of name from the original Lernock Road¹¹. That Roman Road leads from the roundabout at the motte to Balfron High School



WOODEND MOTTE as it would look in a contemporary background

One feasible connection with the Roman occupation is a possible Roman road – “a hard ridge used as a track across cultivated fields ... just NE of Camoquhill”¹².



(POSS.) ROMAN ROAD ON CAMOQUHILL LANDS
(Iain B Hardie [1990] – Campbell Griffith [2021])

Although we cannot be completely certain of the origins of this feature, it would be unfortunate if the Roman Empire were not permitted even a “walk-on” part in Balfron’s history.



OLD FARMS OF BALGAIR – site of the village (photograph by Iain B Hardie)



HILL OF BALGAIR FARM AND DATED STONE FROM BALGAIR VILLAGE

(The Old Farms of Balgair)

(Photographs by Iain B Hardie)

Moving once more to the east of the Parish, the standing stone on Balgair Muir may well have been a boundary mark for cultivated land in that area. The neighbouring “Old Farms of Balgair” give a clue to how “advanced” life was at that side of the Parish and it would be practical to assume that these remains were part of the vanished village of Hill of Balgair. A number of date-carved stones were removed from this site and occupied, or still occupy, pride of place in nearby buildings of a later date. Fine examples of these are dated stones and an oval light at Hill of Balgair farm, with its characteristic sloping roof, to the west of the old hamlet.

Vikings and Wallace apart, the outside world seems to have made only very rare incursions into the Parish of Balfron, and Balfron, for its part, seems to have reciprocated by leaving little imprint on early Scottish history, with the exception, perhaps, of Alexander Cunningham, fifth of the Earls of Glencairn, who owned Ballindalloch, among other estates, and who was an associate of John Knox and possible conspirator in the assassination of David Rizzio, the Italian secretary and companion of Mary Queen of Scots.

The Parish of Balfron also claims to be the birth-place of John Napier, inventor of logarithms, born at Edinbellie. Despite claims by various biographers that Napier was born in Edinburgh's Merchiston Reverend Alexander Niven in his Statistical Account for the Parish states:



John Napier – inventor of logarithms

*"The next distinguished person connected with this parish, is the Inventor of Logarithms, Napier of Edinbelly (sic.) and of Merchiston; to whom, in the opinion of Hume the historian, the title of a great man is more justly due than to any other which his country ever produced. He was born in the year 1550, and in the year 1617 he died, at Merchiston Castle, in the neighbourhood of Edinburgh ... as to the place of his birth, this is involved in some obscurity, there being little else to guide us on this point than the tradition of the country; and upon this Balfron, in common with some other parishes, lays claim to having been the birth-place of this great man. ... we believe that John Napier was born in Edinbelly ... mentioned by authors as "an obscure spot". In point of fact, the remains of the mansion-house of Edinbelly, in Balfron parish, are still in existence (at that time) and the arms of the family are yet to be seen on the wall of what was part of the original house."*¹³

Napier famously stopped the mill wheel at Gartness because it was disturbing his concentration.

The only reference to any knowledge of the tumult of the times in Buchanan's *Guide to Strathendrick* tells of a "tradition that when the Covenanters fought and won the battle of Drumclog, the scholars

*planted a tree in commemoration of the event. This tree is probably the old ash on the borders of the churchyard, which would then be immediately in front of the schoolhouse (Orchardlands)... the apparent age of the tree corresponds with the date of that event."*¹⁴ The ash was used as a bell tree until 1832.

Balfron's location in the Endrick Valley was a key point in the labyrinth of drove roads which criss-crossed the Country. These routes would accommodate the annual trek of livestock, mainly cattle, from Argyll and the Western Isles or the Highlands to the markets of the south. One of these followed the east shore of Loch Lomond, veered off at Loch Katrine and came south through Aberfoyle and Gartmore before heading east along the Endrick and the Carron. The second hugged the west of Loch Lomond through Colquhoun country before crossing the Leven at Balloch and heading east through Gartocharn and Drymen, joining the first route at Balfron.



BALFRON MOOR'S DROVE ROAD
leading to Balgair and Falkirk Trysts
(courtesy of Campbell Griffith)

Balgair Tryst and Balfron were important as the last stops before the cattle reached the market in Glasgow or the Tryst at Falkirk. It was an ideal spot to rest and fatten the cattle on the lush pasture after their long drive.

Drovers, by the nature of their job, were a rough and ready bunch of men, a long way from home for much of the year and, being camped near the village for an extended period while their cattle grew plump enough for market, tended to socialise with the eligible young ladies of the area. These clandestine assignations very often had unfortunate results in the following spring and although the malevolent solution to this unwanted increase in the district's population was hidden at the time and, in fact, is seldom acknowledged to this day, it is significant that, when droving was in its ascendancy, an Act of Parliament of 1690 was ordered to be read out from the pulpit to forbid the "Murthering (Murdering) of Children" *"if any woman shall conceal her being with child . . . the child being found dead or amissing, the mother shall be holden and reputed the murtherer (sic) of her own child"*¹⁵. Perhaps this infanticide, which was clearly a common practice, could be another explanation for Balfron's lost children rather than the legendary wolves who have traditionally borne the blame.



ROB ROY'S STATUE – STIRLING

The movement of cattle cannot be mentioned, especially in the lands of Colquhoun or Montrose, without its illegal counterpart of "reiving" or rustling arising and this would lead us naturally to Scotland's most famous outlaw. Rob Roy, like his English opposite number, Robin Hood, created as much myth as reality in his exploits around the Trossachs area.

Rob Roy Macgregor, however, did really exist and Balfron would be loath to miss out on the opportunity of playing host to one of his better-known adventures.

The outlaw carried out a relentless campaign against Montrose and his factor, Graham of Killearn, who had caused Macgregor to be outlawed in the first instance.

The story goes that a poor widow in the parish of Balfron near the Endrick was threatened with eviction by her harsh landlord, the Duke of Montrose, and she asked for Rob Roy's help. At great risk, considering its proximity to his archenemy in Killearn, Rob went to see her with a few of his men. He gave the widow enough money to clear her debt whereupon the group took up their places in the wood nearby. As soon as Montrose's bailiffs had been paid, the outlaws emerged and, after a short skirmish, recovered the money, leaving the widow safe with the receipt for the rent she had just tendered, the outlaws still at liberty and the bailiffs to face a furious Montrose. The story spread quickly to the enjoyment of all the oppressed tenants.

Of all the stories connected with the Macgregor clan, the most notorious is the tragic abduction of the widow Jean Kay (or Key), an event which actually happened in the Parish of Balfron and gave the village its literary appearances in Sir Walter Scott's 'Rob Roy' and Robert Louis Stevenson's aptly entitled 'Kidnapped'.



Robin Oig, youngest of Rob Roy's sons had married, but his young wife had died. His older brother, James, suggested that he should court the young widow-heiress of Edinbellie to the east of the village of Balfron. At 17, Jean had married John Wright Junior of Easter Glinns but he had died only months later while she was still only 18. She now lived with her widowed mother. Robin always maintained that he received a letter from her at Edinbellie asking him to make the pretence of abducting her as it was too soon after her own husband's death for her to appear to go willingly. At the subsequent trial, this was put down to a plot by James who had had her write a backdated letter while she was still held captive by the brothers.

In any case, Robin had gone to Edinbellie to propose as his financial prospects were less than bright and he desperately needed a good marriage. He had been unceremoniously rebuffed. Furious, James and Robin with a large band of outlaws had made a night raid on Edinbellie and abducted Jean Key-Wright.

*'This poor young victim lived with her mother in her own house at Edinbilly (sic), in the parish of Balfron and shire of Stirling. At this place, in the night of 3rd December 1750, the sons of Rob Roy, and particularly James Mhor and Robin Oig, rushed into the house where the object of their attack was resident, presented guns, swords, and pistols to the males of the family, and terrified the women by threatening to break open the doors if Jean Key was not surrendered, as, said James Roy, "his brother was a young fellow determined to make his fortune."'*¹⁶

Because of the unbalanced state of Jean's mind after the ordeal, details, almost exclusively from her evidence, are somewhat sketchy.

A minister was brought from Glasgow and married the couple, but even after that Robin was willing to allow Jean to return to Edinbellie. James, however, threatened that he would shoot Robin rather than shame the Macgregor name and the young heiress remained in captivity.

Cunningham of Ballindalloch issued a warrant for forcible abduction, this being a capital offence, and both Robin and James were captured. James, a prisoner in Edinburgh Castle, escaped with Jacobite help, through the County of Cumberland, to Isle of Man and Ireland and eventually on to France where he died two years later in 1754, the same year Robin Oig was executed.

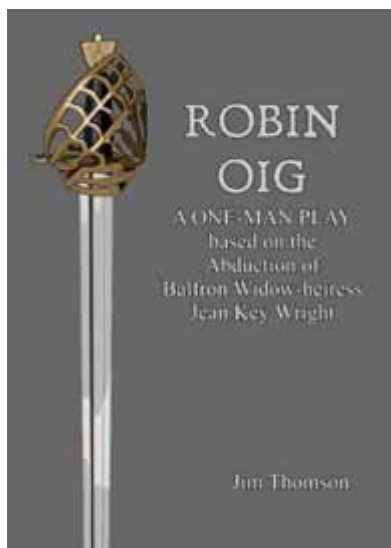
The following appeared in 'The Caledonian Mercury' of Thursday 7th February 1754:

Yesterday, Robert Campbell, *alias* McGregor, *alias* Rob Roy, was executed in the Grassmarket, pursuant to his sentence, for the forcible carrying away of the deceased Mrs Jean Key, the heiress of Edinbelly. He was very genteelly dressed, read on a volume of Gothe's works from the prison to the place of execution, and for a considerable time on the scaffold. He behaved with great decency, and declared he died an unworthy member of the Church of Rome. And further said, That, he attributed all his misfortunes to his swerving two or three years ago from that Communion; acknowledged the violent methods he had used to obtain Mrs Key, for which he has been condemned; and hoped that his suffering would put an end to the farther prosecution of his brother James Drummond, for the part he acted in that affair. His body, after hanging about half an hour, was cut down and delivered over to his friends, which they put into a coffin and conveyed away to the Highlands.

Jean Key never recovered from this traumatic experience and died of smallpox five months after her release from captivity. She is buried in the Kirkyard of Kippen. At the time of her death in Glasgow she was still only twenty years of age.

In 2020, a one-man-play was written based on Robin Oig Macgregor's thoughts in the condemned cell on the eve of his execution.

FROM THE WOLVES TO THE WEAVERS
updated from **'THE BALFRON HERITAGE'**



Unfortunately, the pandemic of that year and its consequences have prevented this being staged. Plans to make a short film of it have also been stalled at time of the Early History booklet going to print.



ASSASSINATION OF BUCHANAN OF CREMANNAN

(Sketch by Daniel McGettigan for Balfon Heritage Exhibition 1990)

A tragic consequence to this abduction saga occurred at the Clachan of Balfron where some of the Macgregor outlaws, still enraged at the capture of the brothers, were refreshing themselves in the local ale-house. One of the Buchanans of Cremannan, an estate just north of the village, was passing when he was mistaken for Cunningham of Ballindalloch, who had issued the arrest warrant, and was shot dead beside the Clachan Oak.

This hostelry and the Clachan Oak both feature in yet another sad anecdote told in Buchanan's *Guide to Strathendrick*. An iron collar was attached to the oak for petty-criminals to be displayed to public view and ridicule. The "jougs" as this was called were, on this occasion, accommodating the "wife of a vagrant accused of pilfering". Her husband, eventually tired of keeping her company retired to the Clachan House to "light his pipe", as Buchanan describes it. Unfortunately, in his absence, his wife struggled in her impatience, slipped and was strangled by the jougs. "The incident gave people such a shock that the punishment of the 'jougs' in the parish was henceforward abandoned."¹⁷

Apart from these isolated incidents, life in Balfron until the end of the 18th century seems to consist of a hamlet secluded from the rest of the world, content in its cluster of houses, its kirk and its inn with small poor farms struggling to grow mostly oats and some barley served by the 17th century Kilfasset Corn Mill along the river. A community destined, perhaps, like Balgair to the east, to disappear completely as the tide of the Industrial Revolution began to flow ... a fate which did not take into account the arrival of Robert Dunmore.

Chapter 2 of Jim Thomson's local history book "THE BALFRON HERITAGE" continues from here



PORTRAIT OF ROBERT DUNMORE
after Tassie courtesy of the National Galleries of Scotland

-
- ¹ Celtic Dialects and Stirlingshire Place Names : T D MacDonald
² Ordnance Survey Archaeological Record Cards
³ Strathendrick and its inhabitants from Early Times : J Guthrie Smith (1896)
⁴ Influence of the Pre-Reformation Church on Scottish Place Names : J McKinlay
⁵ Early Sources of Scottish History : Alan Orr Anderson
⁶ Haakon's Saga : (Trans.) G W Dasent
⁷ The Kingdom of the Isles : R Andrew McDonald
⁸ The Exchequer Rolls of Scotland : (ed.) J Stuart *et al.*
⁹ *ibid.*
¹⁰ Strathendrick and its inhabitants from Early Times : J Guthrie Smith (1896)
¹¹ List of Roads, etc.: Stirling County Council (1880/1898)
¹² Discovery and Excavation in Scotland : Council for British Archaeology
¹³ The Second (New) Statistical Account (Balfron Parish): Rev. Alexander Niven
¹⁴ Buchanan's Popular Illustrated Guide to Strathendrick : J & C Buchanan
¹⁵ Balfron Parish Records
¹⁶ Rob Roy (Introduction) by Sir Walter Scott
¹⁷ Buchanan's Popular Illustrated Guide to Strathendrick : J & C Buchanan



1303 – 2003
700 YEARS
since Balfron's first
documentary
appearance in the
Charter of Inchaffray



Balfron700 – along with our celebrations 11 years later – was one of Balfron Heritage Group's most ambitious projects encompassing heritage, arts and family events. The "gallery" which follows shows examples of some of those 2003 events.



MEDIEVAL DAY FANCY DRESS PARADE AND EVENT



MEDIEVAL DAY – DONALDSON PARK



MEDIEVAL DAY NORSEMEN DISPLAY



MEDIEVAL DAY BIRDS OF PREY DISPLAY



MEDIEVAL DAY LOCAL HISTORY FAIR



MEDIEVAL DAY LOCAL HISTORY FAIR



BALLINDALLOCH HOUSE OPEN DAY CLASSIC CARS



BALLINDALLOCH HOUSE OPEN DAY



THE *Balfon*700 DEBATE



‘CAPPELLA NOVA’ MEDIEVAL MUSIC at St. Anthony’s Church



FINALE NIGHT CEILIDH – BALFRON HIGH ATRIUM



BALFRON VILLAGE COVER PHOTOGRAPH
courtesy of Stuart Hall Landscapes & Wildlife