

Memories of Kilmacolm

A talk given by Brown McMinn Esq. in old St. Columba Hall
on the evening of Tuesday, 9th February, 1953

Ladies and Gentlemen, this is not a story of far away places, the rolling prairie, or the wide blue sea. It is a simple tale of the village that most of you were born in — as were many of your parents – and, in telling it, I want to make it quite clear that there are others who are more competent than me to describe the village as it looked over half a century ago,

At the risk of being taken for an ancient relic, however, I will do my best to tell you something of a village that is now only a memory. If names are mentioned, you will believe me that I have no desire to cast aspersions on the lives of those long dead people whose very existence is almost forgotten. Like all Scottish villages, Kilmacolm had its quota of worthies and characters - about whom I shall speak later.

When I was very young, the children used to sing a song the first verse of which went something like this -

Oh, Kilmacolm is a funny wee place
And a funny wee set of people,
A midden hole
At every door,
And a kirk without a steeple,

I remember the midden holes, but they have given way to the more sanitary ash bin. The funny wee village has given place to the modern village of today, and the kirk without a steeple has been replaced by the one with the tall spire known as St. Columba. As for the funny wee set of people - well, you will be able to work that one out for yourselves.

At the time I speak of the paraffin lamp was still fighting for existence against the gas bracket, some of you may remember the folding bracket on the kitchen mantleshelf with its small burner that gave a flame half blue and half yellow. There was also the chandelier in the parlour that had to be kept filled with water so that in raising and lowering it, the gas could not escape and suffocate the family. The matter was finally settled by the introduction of the incandescent mantle, but these first mantles were inclined to be like Hollywood film stars – temperamental. Often on a winter evening during the service in the church next door, one of them would start hooting like an owl till turned off by the beadle. The electric torch had still to arrive, but most of the boys were the proud possessors of a bulls-eye lantern. The lighting of the streetlamps was regulated by the moon. At full moon no lamps were lit and it was just too bad if the moon played truant behind the clouds, for often we had to suffer a blackout that lasted the whole evening.

There was no traffic problem the only menace to life and limb was the two horse bus that ran between the station and the hydropathic. Farm carts, milk carts and a few horse cabs made up the rest of the traffic. The motor car was being spoken about - the aeroplane was an idle dream. Tennyson's vision in Locksley Hall of seeing the heavens filled with commerce and the airy navies grappling in the Central Blue made good poetry, but to a boy's mind belonged to the pages of Jules Verne. All know what has happened since 1914!

The first bicycle I remember seeing belonged to a man named John Buchanan and was of the penny-farthing type. After he left the village, it was discovered in a cellar at Norval Place.

The finders soon dismantled it, and the wheels were used as hoops or girds for some time afterwards. The first safety bicycle I remember was owned by a young German named Willi Roth. He had come to Kilmacolm as masseur to the late Mr. Adam Birkmyre of Shallot. This bicycle had solid tyres, was very heavy to ride up hill, and, having only front brake, was very dangerous to ride down one. A too quick application of the brake and you were over the handlebars. Willi was anxious to see the country and one day set off to see the Firth of Clyde. He had been warned of the dangers of Clune Brae - but for some reason chose to ride the whole way down. Later in the day, Willi was brought home in a cab with the remains of the bicycle tied on behind.

I should like tell you of his role as an executioner. He was a great believer in Physical Culture and used to take the boys for long walks into the country and woe betide any boy who couldn't keep the pace set by him. The boy who fell out was left to find his own way home, which was often a considerable distance. On one of these forced marches we met a hen that had stayed a little too far from home - so Willi, scenting a good dinner, deployed his forces and the hen was captured. It was carried to the back of Burnside Terrace and a boy was sent to borrow a carving knife. Before a very excited audience, Willi held the hen by the head and sliced its neck clean through. Instead, of dying at once, however, as the audience expected, the headless hen flew straight up into the air and in a matter of seconds, Willi and the hen had the green to themselves,

The late Sir Charles Renshaw of Barochan owned the first motor car that I remember seeing. It was a small type of open brake with solid tyres and was steered by a tiller-like handle. It caused a sensation when it appeared, and on a dry day it was followed - not by trailing cloud of glory, but by a cloud of dust that would not have disgraced the Sahara Desert. The roads at this time were of earth and stone rolled by the steam roller until they were smooth. In wet weather the surface broke, and during a dry spell there was always an inch or two of dust on them. To paddle through this dust in your bare feet was a joy never to be forgotten.

The first telephone exchange was in the late Mr. Doig's fruit shop at the station bridge, but was moved later to the plumber's shop at Norval Place. After a brief stay there, it went to Rachel Place, from there it went to St. James' Terrace, and its next move was to its present home in Meadowside.

However, let us forget bicycles and telephones for a while and take a walk round the village of the nineties of the last century. The Post Office still occupies the same site as it did then but had just emerged to the dignity of a full Postal and Telegraph Office. The grocery and confectionery side of the business had been given up. The Office was run by old Mrs Sinclair whose daughter some of you may remember as her successor. The old Inn stood opposite the Parish Church and was a favourite meeting place for farmers coming home from the markets. Many a weary hour a boy would spend at the Inn holding some horse. If the company was good and the owner of the horse tarried too long in the Inn, another boy would relieve the first boy, and so on until four or five boys would have a share in the contract. The usual reward after a great deal of flattery for being such a good boy for standing so long at the horse's head would be one penny - handed over in such a fashion that made the recipient feel he was being overpaid. To avoid dispute between the contracting parties, the penny would be taken to Jeanie Dunlop's shop where eight large bouncers would be purchased. These were placed on the pavement and broken up by a large stone lifted off the road. The resultant heap of dust and smashed confectionery being ample to satisfy all the partners in the deal.

The gable end of the Inn that looked towards the Cross was a favourite stance for travelling cheap jacks who sold all kinds of goods by the time-honoured method of "How much am I bid for this?" Much wordy warfare ensued and the children loved to hear the repartee that passed between the salesman and his customers. Sometimes a man would arrive with a performing bear, and I have seen a herd of goats resting at the gable end till their owner quenched his thirst at the Inn. The man whom the boys liked best was the artiste with the rope. He would challenge all and sundry to bind him in such a fashion that he could not free himself. He would be well tied with many knots, but after much struggling always managed to free himself. I often thought it was a hard way to earn a few coppers, for his audience was anything but rich. This man was often accompanied by a sword swallower whose performance was always witnessed by a silent audience. The sight of so much sword going down a man's throat held you in a kind of waiting expectancy wondering what would happen if the sword took the wrong turn.

At the time I speak of the cemetery wall that runs up to the Parish Church gate from the bus stop had got into a dangerous condition, and the repairing of it was entrusted to the late Mr. John Sheperd. While the work was going on, many coffins and bones were exposed to view - so, to facilitate the work, Mr. Sheperd started to pile up the bones in front of Mr. Davidson's shop. The sight of the relics of so many old Kilmacolmites was too much for Davidson, who sought the aid of the local policeman to have them removed. They were afterwards re-interred inside the old ruin that stood where the addition to the Church is built.

The house that stood opposite Church Lane was known as the Old School House. I never knew it as anything but a dwelling place, but in the old days it was a school serving a big district. The scholars helped to pay for their education by bringing peats to keep it warm in winter. Beyond the Church where the Kidston Hall stands was a row of thatched houses. The one at the Church end was a small shop carried on as a shoemakers and confectioners. In a narrow lane beyond these houses stood Townhead Farm kept by the Crawford family. Where the Main Garage stands was the stackyard. There were no houses on the Port Glasgow Road beyond the farm. Auchenbothie House had not been built and the new Cemetery was only being spoken of. The only thing of interest on the Port Glasgow Road was the slide crags where many a good pair of trousers met their Waterloo on its once popular slippery slope,

Passing through Townhead Farm lane let us turn left and go up past Low Shells. Low Shells had been a school and a Baptist chapel before becoming a dwelling place. On the lintel of one of the doorways is the date 1817. Where Armitage and Woodbank now stand was the Shells Farm occupied by an old Mr. Caldwell I can still picture him - a fresh complexioned little man dressed in a kind of smock and tight fitting trousers. A fore and aft peaked cap on his head, he could be seen on a summer evening standing on the brow of the hill looking down towards the village. There were no houses at that time, of course, to obstruct his view. Beyond Shells Farm there were only six houses - Rosslee, Edgehill, Kilmory, Belmont, Misty Law and East Park (now Glenraig). The Hydro, of course, was there. It had been opened in 1880. Finlaystone Road or Langbank Road, as it was known before the first housing scheme was built, was a narrow country road, and the only houses on it were Wateryetts, Planetreeyetts Farm and Old Hall the residence of a once prominent Kilmacolm family.

Coming down High Street there was a row of houses where part of Laird's garage and Pymont now stand. In front of the houses a small burn that ran from Low Shells till it disappeared underground at Glenburn Lane. In one of the houses lived an old couple. The old man was somewhat superstitious and loved to tell a story of how at the funeral of the last Porterfield of Duchal the devil had frightened horses. The old lady lived till she was over a hundred, and the late Mr. Gregory of St. Columba's used to tell of how on her hundredth birthday, he took some sponge cakes to her. She told him that Mr. Murray had called and given her a golden sovereign. Then not to hurt Mr. Gregory's feelings added "Ye see he's the Parish Minister and was bound to dae mair than ither folk". Mr Gregory used to tell of how he had to be careful when reading the Bible to the old man. He would say, "I kent a meenister who was often asked to read a chapter at the big hoose where I worked. Well, he once read the wrang bit and was never askit back."

In the building facing Church Lane, there was a barber's shop that opened once a week. The barber walked up from Port Glasgow and if the day was warm, would have to quench his thirst at intervals in the old Inn. A boy going late for his twopenny haircut was lucky to come out with his ears intact. At the corner of Church Lane stands a small building known as the hearse house, but I cannot remember it ever being used to house such a vehicle. In the old days, the Parish owned a hearse and I believe it was in this building that it was kept.

Inside the gate of the Parish Church, there is a little white cross sacred to the memory of Lily McLellan aged 2 years. I do not remember the little girl, but I remember her family who came from Trinidad. The reason I mention the little girl is that some one had started a rumour among the smaller children that an angel came every night to watch over this grave. Night after night we peered through the gate watching for the heavenly visitor, but either our faith was weak or the vision was not for earthly, too inquisitive, eyes to see.

In Church Lane, where the building used by the Youth Club stands, was a thatched house kept by a woman known as "Big Jean". She ran the place as a lodging house and, as a sideline, used to deliver coals in a wheel barrow - two bags for ½d. The smaller boys used to follow Jean after the coal was delivered so as to get a hurl in the wheel barrow. Many a soiled pair of trousers bore mute evidence of contact with the bottom of the barrow. Saturday night always found some boys in the vicinity of the lodging house looking for a little fun. Drink was very cheap, and if any of the lodgers had taken a little too much, they were fair game for the boys. To be chased was the highlight of the evening,

Opposite the Hearse house there was a shop kept by a grocer by the name of "Split the Peas". He was said to be so mean that in weighing green peas he would split one to make the weight. Coming down High Street, there was a Candy shop. It was open on a Sunday and many a Sunday-school penny that was intended for the good of some little boy or girl in Africa or India found its way into the Candy Shop till.

At the corner of the Cuddy's Close opposite Hope Place there was a thatched house where an old woman by the name of Maggie McPherson lived. In good weather she used to sit at the corner of the house puffing contentedly at her clay pipe, while watching the comings and goings of her neighbours in what was once a busy part of the village. In the Cuddy's Close lived John McColl who was a well known figure in the village. He acted as a kind of local bellman, and officiated at the Cattle Show, as well as going round announcing sales of furniture or notifying the inhabitants of any event about to take place. I remember him going round with his bell announcing the exhibition of a devil fish - admission one penny. The

devil fish was a dead catfish in a tub of water in the middle of John's kitchen floor. He had received it in a box of fish - for besides his other activities he sold fish from a small cart.

I remember going with some other boys to see a wedding celebration in the little lane that runs from the Cuddy's Close to the back entrance of Burndale. The ceremony was held in a house where Mr. Cameron has his garage and yard. The actual ceremony was over and the feasting had begun when a young man climbed to the roof and placed some turfs on top of the chimney. In a few minutes the guests came rushing out to escape suffocation - and stamped on my memory was the appearance of the bridegroom. He was a little deformed sort of man and looked more like a candidate for an Old Man's Home than for the Matrimonial Stakes. The merciless beating of a big drum by one of the bigger boys in the crowd drowned all attempts of the aggrieved ones to make themselves hear. How the party ended we didn't wait to see.

Leaving the Cuddy's Close and coming down towards Market place there was a row of houses running down to the Police Station. In the front of one of these houses there was a shop owned by a gentleman known as "Black Diamond". His special line was a fancy paper packet containing a small pipe and some powdered leaves which certainly had no relationship with tobacco - the price one halfpenny. The pipe was the attraction for, when the leaves were finished, it could be used for blowing soap bubbles. The late Mrs. Fletcher, whom many of you will remember, once gave the Diamond's wife a recipe for a cloth dumpling. Returning home one evening later, she found the lady and the pot on the pavement in front of the house. The dumpling was in the pot but refused to leave it, and the lady had one foot on the rim of the pot trying desperately to release it. Despite her best efforts, however, the dumpling had to be taken out in pieces. The Black Diamond premises had one great convenience - by lifting a few short floor boards, the lady of the house could get all the water she needed for washing from the wee burn that flowed down from Low Shells and passed right under the house. Behind the Black Diamond's house a man who shall be nameless carried on business as a chimney sweep. Finding business quiet, he started a laundry - but he found that the combination of black and white failed to attract custom and one night the premises burned down. It was the first time I had seen a building on fire.

The Police Station had been recently built and I'm told that previous to its erection anyone who was arrested was taken down to Port Glasgow in a cab - or if the prisoner was sufficiently harmless, he would be lodged for the night in of Mr. Davidson's shop in the front street. The Parochial Board Office at the time I speak of was housed in the boot repairing shop beside the Gas Office. The Superintendent was a benign old gentleman by the name of Mr. Knox. In Hepburn Land beside Crawford's Dairy, lived old Mr. and Mrs. Hepburn who had a long connection with Kilmacolm, Mr. Hepburn could tell how after the Disruption in 1843, the Free Church congregation used to meet in Burnieston Barn in Duchal Street. Lilac Lea is built on the site of the old barn. The Hepburns lived to celebrate their Diamond Wedding.

Leaving Market Place, we will go down to the Smiddy Brae. On the right hand side where Mr. Fleming has his store, was a slaughter house owned by one of the local butchers. When a pig was being killed, you could hear the squeals right up into the centre of the village. The Joiner's shop in Burnhouse was owned by old Sanny Lang and the repairing of farm carts was the main part of the business. A story was told of how Sanny had put a young cartwright to do some repairs on a cart. Returning later to see how the work was progressing, Sanny found the young man bending over his work but whistling a very doleful tune.

Waiting a moment or two, Sanny barked out "If you try the 'Flowers of Edinburgh', you'll maybe get on a bit faster. Church Place, now a ruin, was the site of an early church, the present telephone exchange being the manse connected with it. There were two Smith shops which were a never failing attraction for the boys. There was always a large number of horses to be shod, and any of you who have ever seen a horse being shod will never forget the smell of singeing hooves.

Where Rosebank Terrace is built was a beautiful garden belonging to the Buchanan Arms Hotel, which occupied the building now known as the Institute. There was no concrete pavement in front of the front of the Hotel, and it made a fine spot for playing marbles. There was only one drawback - Mr. Gibson the Hotel proprietor had a nasty habit of slipping out and picking up all the marbles lying about. Where St James Terrace is built was the site of the old U.P. Church and Manse. The street was much narrower than now and from Mr Rose's shop to Drumpellier Place there was a row of lovely trees. The Church gate was opposite the Girls entrance to the Public School, while the Manse gate was where Cooper's shop now stands. There was a small hall between the Church and the Manse where a Good Templar Lodge for boys was carried on by Dominie McDonald and Mr. Thomas McNab. It was easily the most popular boys' meeting in the village. There was reciting every week, but no prizes were awarded as the boys were saving up for a piano. It says a great deal for them that this aim was realised. The favourite recitations were the "Burial of Sir John Moore", "The Death of Little Jim" and the "Destruction of Senacheril". Sir John Moore's soldiers may have buried him at dead of night, but we often did so with a great deal of gusto - and as for "The Death of Little Jim", it varied from the tragic to the comic. When it came to the angel of Death spreading his wings on the beach, it was only the lack of wings that kept some of the boys from flying round the hall. I often think that the shades of Sir John Moore and Little Jim must hold palaver with the Dark Angel in the vicinity of where the old Lodge was held.

I remember the late Sir William Quarrier marching the children of the Orphan Homes to the Public School and demanding admittance for them. This was after he had lost his law case against Kilmacolm Parish. The big children marched - the smaller ones came in carts and carriages and, as the great procession arrived at the school gate, the Janitor locked them out. A great argument ensued between Mr. Quarrier and members of the School Board and the Parish Council. It was all very exciting for the children, but Mr. Quarrier's army had to march home without gaining their objective.

The Royal Bank was where Mr Thomkinson has his tearoom and was really a dwelling house adapted to the use of a Bank. The Agent was a Mr. Forgie who died shortly after moving to the new office at the Station bridge. Mr. Blackwood's shop was occupied by a Mrs, Herbert as a chemists shop and the reason I mention it is because of the young man who managed. He was known to all the boys as Specky Gillies and was quite a favourite. If a boy delivered a message for him, he would be rewarded with a fizzing drink or a few Beecham's Oracles. These oracles when touched on the spot marked X with a lighted match would trace out a message extolling the virtues of Beecham's Pills. The Spanish-American War broke out and Specky volunteered for service on a hospital ship, and that was the last of him as far as the village was concerned.

Mr. Thomkinson's baker shop was occupied by a Mr. Blair and his chief claim on my memory is not his excellence as a baker, but as a gentleman who regarded private property as something really private. He owned Drumpellier Place and the land that ran down to where

the electricity station stands. There was a fine shortcut down this way if you were in a hurry to get to the smiddy – but woe betide the hurrying boy if Mr. Blair got a glimpse of him. He would arrive at School next morning, and with unerring eye, pick out the culprits who would be given two or three with the tawse by the Dominie or Mr. Walker.

The Railway Station had two earthen platforms with an iron bridge connecting them. There was no shelter except in the waiting rooms or booking hall. Whitelee Read stepped at Norwood and a fence kept you out of the fields beyond. On Castlehill Road there were no houses beyond the tennis courts, but the road went round to the park as now. The Park used to have a nice bandstand beside the flagpole, and twice a week during the summer, the Artillery Band came up from Port Glasgow and gave performances. Shallot was the last house on Knockbuckle Road - if you exclude the cottages in the centre of the Park. The houses from Dardenne upwards were building at this time. Pacemuir mill was still being driven by its water wheel and Mr. Fergie with his wife and family of ten sons lived in the little cottage beside it.

The Gryfe was spanned by an old fashioned bridge and it, together with the old mill, made a very pretty picture. Balrossie was built a little over 50 years ago and was opened by the then Marquis of Lorne. Just near Mountblow where the seat is stood a small house in which lived the famous Jimmy Green of whom I shall speak later. At Bridgend Toll lived a Highlander called John Grant. People might pass him by and never think there was anything notable about him, yet he had worked hard to put his younger brother through the university, and had the pleasure of seeing him a minister of the Free Church. On the wall on the right hand side of the Toll you can see a stone bearing some initials and a date. This stone was carried from Killochries to its present site by two boys – one of whom still lives in the village - the other was killed in the First World War.

Let us retrace our steps homewards and take a look at the other side of the village as it was over 50, years ago. Gryffe Road ended at Moorcote, the home of Lady McLure's parents. A fence across the end of the road kept you out of the fields of Denniston Farm. There was no Duchal Street as we know it today. Between Wardend and Killallan there wasn't a house and where Duchal Terrace stands was a vacant space with a kind of quarry hole at the top end where people tipped their garden refuse. St. James' Church had not yet been built and the only houses on that side were from Allen Bank to Roslyn. The road went round as now by Lyle Road to Gryffe Road but there was a shortcut across the small field where St Columba's School is built. The Cattle Show used to be held in a field, the gate of which used to be across the road from where Overdale stands. The furthest out house on the left hand side of the Bridge of Weir road was Grafton - now known as Drumadoon. On the right hand side, the last house was the one now known as Beechwood. St. Columba Church had yet to be built and the speaker is one of the very few left who worshipped in this hall when it served as the Church.

I can tell you on good authority that the favourite place for burning witches was just across the road in what is now Dr. Peebles Brown's garden. The last witch to be burned there was named Maggie Wynckes. Kilmacolm and Inverkip were noted for their unflagging zeal in clearing the countryside of anyone suspected of dealing in the black arts. Prior to the opening of the old U.P. Church in 1860 a place of worship for the Free Church stood where George Villa now stands. It fell into a state of disrepair and was used as a home by an old woman who was known as the Free Kirk Minister.

Moss Road was much narrower in the old days - there was no Cooperative Society Building, no English Church and no houses on that side until you came to the Lea, now occupied by Dr. Ferguson. The site of the present buildings was a field known to the children as Dunlop's Park. It was owned by one of the local butchers whose son kept a watchful eye for boys taking a short cut through it to the village. There are two large trees still to be seen behind the Cooperative Building, and on an evening just before dark some of the bigger boys would invite the smaller ones to hear stories under the spreading branches of one of the trees. As darkness fell, a voice with a graveyard croak would come from behind the adjacent tree, muttering "It's coming, it's coming". A small boy would tremblingly ask "What's coming?", and the voice would shout "The Ghost! The Ghost!" Those of the audience who weren't suffering from temporary paralysis would give an exhibition of sprinting that would have put a champion to shame. No matter how many frights you got, you always went back to the next meeting - not so much for fear of the ghost but in case that dreaded word "Fearty" was fastened on you. On the authority of a note left by the late Mr. Walker, I can inform you that rooks built their nests in these same two trees in 1921 for the first and only time in living memory.

In Burnside Terrace opposite the Glebe Gardens lived old Mrs. Smith (better known as Polly) who kept a "mangling done here" business, and owned a very lively cockatoo. On wet days the boys would call on Polly and ask to help with the mangling. This was great fun - it became a challenge as to who could make the mangle go fastest. What with the thumping of the mangle weights, the screeching of the cockatoo and Polly shouting for you to stop, the noise was deafening. After an interval, Polly doled out 5 or 6 raisins to each boy in return for his very doubtful aid. Polly had a great friend in a little lady called Miss Mulholland. She had been a childrens' nurse and had retired to Kilmacolm to end the evening of her days. Dressed in a bonnet that tied in a bow under her chin, a large shawl on her shoulders and wearing elastic sided boots, she was a well known figure in the village. There was a boy called Johnny who used to shout "Oh Mary Mulloly" whenever he saw Mary. This annoyed her very much and she used to complain to his mother. She made it clear that it wasn't the shouting that annoyed her - it was the mispronunciation of her name. Poor Mary is now a handful of dust in the cemetery and Johnny lies far away in a South Pacific Island where he sleeps in the same earth that holds all that is mortal of the late R. L. Stevenson.

The Old Church Manse stood to the East of the present residence and the old stairway to the front door can still be seen. It was a peculiar thing that if any of the boys were going guddling for trout some boy was sure to have seen a big one in the burn near the manse. Experience taught you to guddle with your jacket on when near the manse. Mrs. Murray had an uncanny knack of removing any discarded jackets to the top of the front door steps. The lady of the Manse would summons you by name to the door to claim your jacket, and you had to listen to a little lecture on what happened to boys who broke their promises. Some boy would remark afterwards that if Mrs. Murray had been out and Miss Halden been in, nothing would have happened. Miss Halden was a niece of Mrs. Murray and was loved by every child who had the good fortune to know her. In addition to the burn, of course, the Donkey's Park, the Minister's Hill and the Moss were great playgrounds at this time.

The little bridge that spans the burn halfway up to Glenmosston was the scene of a drowning accident during the building of the Hydro. According to the story, a workman

had gone to the village and got too much to drink. He had then fallen into the burn and got drowned. Children had heard this story from their parents, and it only needed a squeak from someone as the children were passing homewards at dusk to send the whole lot flying helter-skelter down the road shouting, "It is the drowned man's ghost." We all had a genuine belief in ghosts, and there were few boys who hadn't seen one or two at least. A boy delivering milk up in Belmont direction claimed that on two successive evenings he had been chased by a ghost right, down to the Hydro gate below Kilmory. On the third evening, he was accompanied by a valiant band of ghost destroyers, each armed with a large stone to do the needful. The milk was duly delivered, but the ghost failed to materialise. Each boy began to tell what he would have done if it had appeared at the road end into Overton House, when the valiant band became aware of a pat pat noise coming from behind. On the company turning round, there was the ghost coming straight at them out of the dark. All, bravery was forgotten -stones were dropped. Nothing mattered but speedy flight. But, the ghost was faster than the boys and it was with heartfelt relief they saw it disappear into the grounds of the Hydro. The ghost was a well known runner training on the road. Some of the boys couldn't get their hair down for a day or two.

To return to the Moss, however, Glenmosston is built on the site of an old steading known as the Gowk House. The quarry opposite was in full working order. Where Dunfraoich and Torridon now stands was a great natural playground, and was the scene of many a mock battle that was but the prelude to the sterner warfare yet to come from which so many of the boys failed to return. Overton House occupies the site of the old Overton Farm and a piggery belonging to the Hydro. There was a road open to the public running from Kincrag to the Bishopton Road, but, with the building of Overton, the right of way disappeared. The Moss itself at this time the great centre for skating and curling and on a good old-fashioned winter's day would be crowded with skaters from Glasgow, Greenock and Paisley. The site of the 7th green at the corner of Moss Wood was the scene of a prize fight about a century ago. The contestants were named Burnie and Ivory - one a black man and one a white man. The contest was sponsored by the then Laird of Craighends, the white man won, and for some time afterwards the scene of the contest was known as the Battle Neuk.

On the Houston road where Knapps house stands was a small croft of the same name tenanted by a man called Barney McDermott. He made a living by keeping pigs and hens. There is a story told of a previous tenant who had quarrelled with a neighbour who lived the vicinity. During the course of the quarrel, the tenant of Knapps told the neighbour that if he, the neighbour, died first, then he, Knapps) would come and dance on his grave. The neighbour died some time after the quarrel and was buried at Kilallan where you will notice that most of the stones are flat on the ground or resting on small piers. I believe this was to discourage body snatching, which was once a lucrative business. At any rate the man from Knapps had many a good jig on his old enemy. As he grew older, his joints began to stiffen, so he removed the tomb-stone to his own back yard at Knapps, where he carried on with his dancing in more comfort. Whether the story is true or not, I can't say, but the tomb-stone can be seen to this day at Knapps where it acts as a bridge over a small burn. I think this must have been the first instance of country dancing being performed in Kilmacolm.

There were no houses on the Houston Road and the quarry opposite Knapps was in full working order. Corbie Knowe, or Craigrowan as it was known then, was the last house

coming up from Stoddart's corner, but the road ran round to the Bridge of Weir Road as it is today. In the fields beyond stood the steading of Rowantreehill occupied by old Jennie Fleming. The path to the golf course lay through the steading and boys going up to the steading used to cast longing eyes on two old plum trees that can still be seen at the foot of Windyhill garden. A boy could approach the trees with the stealth of a Red Indian, but the moment he started climbing operations, the old collie dog would let out a few warning barks. This brought Jennie to the door at once - but no boy ever waited to hear what she had to say. With a look she could quell the stoutest hearted boy.

She had a wee man who worked for her called Jemmy Coats. Come rain or shine, Jemmy was never absent from church. When Miss Fleming died, Jemmy went to live at Barfillan near Houston and even from here walked all the way to St Columba Church next door. I never knew Miss Fleming's father, but there is a story told of him during the raising of the first volunteers. He was in Greenock one day. On being asked if there were any volunteers in Kilmacolm he replied, "If the French land at Greenock, there will be plenty of volunteers in Kilmacolm - but they'll all be Greenock ones." A gable end of the old steading can still be seen in the grounds of Rachan while the old boiler house, still in good condition, can be seen in Windyhill garden.

I can just remember a cattle show being held where Clovelly stands, and over in Clovelly gardens there is a large stone that was dug up when the garden was being made. From what I can remember the rock of which it is composed is foreign to this locality.

I think I have spoken long enough about the village, so we will turn to some of the characters who lived in it. Chief among them in my time was Jimmy Green whose tales of doughty deeds in the Crimean War was sure to draw an audience of the bigger boys. Jimmy would tell of how Lord Clyde rode past his regiment, the Connaught Rangers, as the battle of the Alma was about to begin. "Is Private Green in the ranks?" shouted Lord Clyde. "Here, sir." shouted Green "Then, let battle commence" shouted Lord Clyde. A hair-raising tale would follow of Jimmy routing the enemy almost single handed. The climax came when some boy with an air of innocence would ask Jimmy if it was true that he was wounded in the back. This was the time to run, for Jimmy in his anger was a fearsome spectacle.

There is a story told of how he nearly hanged himself. He was living in a wee house where the seat is before you come to Mount Blow. He had asked Flora his wife for some money so as he could visit the Public Houses in the village. Flora refused him the money so he decided to give her a fright. There was no ceiling in the cottage, only open rafters under the roof. He fastened one end of a rope to a rafter, rolled a tub underneath, got up on the bottom of it, and fastened the other end of the rope round his neck. He announced to Flora that if she didn't give him the money, he would jump off the tub and hang himself, but he had no sooner spoken when the bottom fell out of the tub and left him dangling. Flora calmly loosened him and went about her work as if nothing had happened. Green once had occasion to visit a friend who was ill and after sitting at the bedside for a while, remarked to the patient's wife, "I was just thinking it'll be a hard job getting a coffin doon thae stairs o' yours." In speaking of Jimmy Green, it makes one realise how a few lives can span a great number of years. Lord Clyde was born in 1792 - he fought at Waterloo and commanded the Highland Brigade in the Crimea. Green saw him in the Crimea, and I knew Green in Kilmacolm. Up till now that is a period of 159 years.

Alex the Swinger was a story teller of a different type than Green. He was a gentler being with a good fund of wit. His favourite story was of a trip to the moon. He would describe the people and the shops - especially the Public Houses, where you didn't pay for anything. If you asked him why he didn't stay in the moon, he always replied "I couldn't speak the language."

Mattha Crawford, better known to the boys as the white faced bull, was a gardener in the village. His favourite slogan when he got a drop too much to drink was "Hauf croons are no sae easy got". He had a very red nose and always at the end of it hung a very large drip. Never once did I see him without it, and I used to watch to see it drop, but all my watching was in vain. He was always fair game to the boys owing to his inability to ignore them. The late Miss McDonald of the School House used to tell a story about Mattha. He had called at the School House on some errand, and had to ring twice before the door was answered. On the door being opened, Mattha exclaimed "It's weel seen that Mrs. McDonald's deid, or I widnae be kept waiting".

Jock Paisley was another of the gentler kind and was quite a good singer. The late Mrs. Walker of Knockbuckle Farm was very good to him, and one day, getting his dinner at the farm, a piece of meat lodged in his throat, and despite the best efforts of willing helpers, poor Jock passed away. Many years ago in Calgary, I met two of the people who had tried to save Jock's life. When I mentioned the incident, they argued about what should have been done. Well, they have both gone to join Jock in the land from which no traveller returns, so maybe the argument is settled.

Another character of a different type was a deaf and dumb shoemaker known as the Dummy, who lived, worked and ate in a kind of glorified cellar on the site of Mr. Ritchie's paint and wireless shop. Drink was his failing - but he was immune from teasing by the boys. When he had taken too much to drink there was something frightening about the noises he made when trying to speak. I remember the late Mr. Gregory going to see him one New Year's morning and finding the door of the shed open and the Dummy lying on the floor covered with snow.

Willie Logan the gardener was a bright wee fellow who had come from Ayrshire, and when in his cups would extol the virtues of Ayrshire in contrast to the shortcomings of Kilmacolm. He used to attend the garden of an eccentric old lady who lived in the village. Once when she gave him some money to buy seeds, he went, instead of buying them, to the Public House and spent it. Some weeks later, the old lady asked him why the seeds weren't coming up, so Willie explained that as it was kinda dark when he planted them and as he had only one eye 'maybe they were growing down the way. The old lady was quite satisfied with the explanation and handed over some more money which Willie promptly spent on himself.

John Lee from Cloak cottage used to visit the village at intervals and when he got one over the eight, became quite dramatic. That all the world was a stage and he the principal actor was his favourite boast. Then would follow "Alas Poor Yorick", but ere the middle of the speech was reached, John would be sinking gradually to earth. How at times he reached Cloak I don't know, for one of his legs was very stiff.

All these characters were simple men with little harm in them. We must remember that they lived in age when there few social services of any kind. Often unknown to us they must have felt lonely and forgotten and knowing only too well that there was only the poor house or the lee of a wall to receive them at the last.

Among the outstanding citizens of the village at the time I speak of was Mr. Adam Birkmyre of Shallot. He it was who presented the Park and the Reading Room to the village. He owned a Hansom Cab that was unique, the passenger facing; the back instead of the front. In the grounds of Shallot garden he had a kind of sedan chair that was totally enclosed save for a small opening for seeing out. The chair revolved on a pivot and one of the gardeners had the job of keeping, the opening turned to the sun or away from the wind while Mr. Birkmyre was seated inside. Mr. Birkmyre used to spend holidays in Switzerland, and, on his return to Kilmacolm, always received a great welcome. At the Railway Station the horses would be taken out of the carriage, and the men of the village would attach ropes to it and haul Mr. Birkmyre out to Shallot, followed by all the children yelling their heads off. Some days Mr. Birkmyre would come up to the village just as the school was coming out. The children knew his pockets were filled with sweets, and a great deal of cap lifting went on to accelerate the process of handing them out. The Pied Piper of Hamelin had nothing on Mr. Birkmyre when it came to the matter of dress. A kind of deer stalker cap, a Highland cape on, no matter the weather, an open umbrella held aloft. He looked like a mixture of Sherlock Holmes and R. L. Stevenson.

The Rev. James Murray was very prominent in all affairs connected with the village. Many of you will have read his history of the Parish. He used to tell of how when he came to Kilmacolm as a young minister, the practice of handing out church-warden pipes to mourners at funerals was still in full vogue. The pipe would be lit during the service - afterwards they were broken and cast into the grave. Before the days of motor cars, Mr. Murray used to visit his more distant church members mounted on a tricycle.

The Rev. Thomas Gregory of St. Columba's was a very distinguished scholar of Baliol College, Oxford. He used to tell us stories of famous lecturers he had heard while he was at Oxford. John Ruskin and Graham Bell the inventor of the telephone, were two of whom he had very pleasant memories. Many years ago, I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Gregory in Canada and visited Niagara Falls with him. Dominie McDonald and his retriever Carlo stand out clearly in my memory. The tawse, always lay on the top of his old-fashioned desk as a warning to anyone who might have ideas about behaving contrary to regulations. When he used the tawse, he used to tell us that it caused him more sorrow than it caused us pain. This took some believing, for his use of the tawse bespoke a long acquaintance with them. In passing I may tell you that he was session Clerk of the Old Kirk 96 years ago.

The late Mr. Nigel Fullerton and his brother John took a great interest in the boys of the village. They started a Boys' Brigade that flourished for some time. One of the outstanding events during my service in the Brigade was when we marched to the station to escort Mr. Dai Carson home to St. Oswalds on his return from the South African War.

The late Mr. John Greenlees deserved well of the village for his efforts to provide a concert in the school Halls every Saturday night during the winter. The price of admission was 2d and the talent of the artistes who gave their services free was excellent. The Public Houses were open late and not a few inebriated gentlemen would sometimes find their way to the concert, and woe betide any artiste who didn't come up to their expectation. This was what the boys liked, for as soon as the interrupters were ejected they would reappear at one of the side doors and start addressing the chairman on the injustice of their treatment. The favourite artiste at the concerts was a wee man called Howie who could imitate the bagpipes on his violin. This always silenced the critics.

Sandy Leven who was Beadle of St. James' Church was a kenspeckle figure in the village and on the left hand buttress of the tower that looks towards the north can be seen a very fine carving of his head done by a young sculptor called McDougall. In the early days the heating of the church was poor, and Sandy had of lot of complaints about the church being cold. One Sunday he had got the apparatus going well, and taking one of the elders down to the stoke hole, showed him the temperature gauge. Tapping it, he exclaimed "If that's no hot enough for them, then they ken where to go."

Before closing this part of my talk, I would like to mention the late Mr. Thomas McNab, who was known as the Provost. Mr. McNab took an interest in everything that went on in the village. Every year after the Cattle Show was over, he used to run a sports meeting in the Public Park. The races were long and the prizes small. The event of the evening was the greasy pole. The Pole stood for a number of years opposite West Break, and was a great centre of attraction while some poor soul tried to reach the prize.

Now as time is flying, I would like to talk about the children and their amusements. There were no moving pictures - the old magic lantern was still the supreme attraction at Sunday school, tea meetings or Band of Hope socials. The late Messrs. Parker and Ritchie had a fine collection of slides dealing with local characters, and other subjects. The highlight of an evening would come when Jimmy Green or some other well known person was flashed on the screen. The boys would shout at the picture as if it were the original himself. If a picture stayed on the screen too long, there would be shouts of "hurry up with the next picture". One day vie were marched down to the school Hall to see our first moving pictures It wasn't dark enough and the film suffered. There were no Charlie Chaplins or Greta Garbos - only a lot of people walking about in what looked like heavy rain.

A visit from a travelling theatrical company with such plays as "Alone in London" or "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was always something to talk about for a while after the actors had gone. There were always plenty of games to be played - "Hi Spy", "Kick the Can", "Bobbies and Thieves") "Bar the Door", and many more too numerous to mention. There was one game called "Guesses" which was really the invention of one of the bigger boys and which had a spice of danger in it. The shops didn't close till between 7 and 8 o'clock in the evening, and as the windows were always well lit, they proved admirable for this game. Two shops would be chosen whose proprietors were a bit short tempered. The boys would gather at one of the windows, and the leader would shout out two or three letters the answer to which was known by the other boys. Wrong answers would be given as noisily as possible until the shopkeeper came out to chase you away. The correct answer to the letters would then be shouted out - maybe "Highway Robbery", "Cheat the Public", or some other equally libellous statement. When you think of it now - in some of those shop windows there were matches at 1¼d a dozen, sugar 7 lbs for 10d, and ham at 6d a lb. No wonder the shopkeepers were angry.

The shop most favoured by the children was carried on by a Miss Gibb in the front street. It was a sweet shop, greengrocers and dairy combined. Here could be had an infinite variety of sweet and sticky goods ranging in price from the humble farthing to one penny. The value was so good that a boy spending twopence on himself could be sure to be off school next day. Poor Miss Gibb - despite her great services to the sugar toothed youngsters, she was known to them as "Chough Jean". It was good time when half a dozen boys were in the shop spending their Saturday penny. Miss Gibb would be serving milk or vegetables and the boys would be shouting out their orders - "A stock of nail rod", "A cake of chocolate" or "A

ha'penny worth o' bashed aipples". The eagle eye of Miss Gibb was never at rest and suddenly would come back the order "Tak yer haunds aff they pears, Willie so and so." or "Pit back that aipple where you got it, Jimmy so and so. There'll be nobody served here. till ye a' stan' back frae the counter." We never fell out with Miss Gibb and she retained her popularity till the end.

Another shop that was a great attraction to the children was owned by Mr. McNaughton in Octavia Buildings. Duncan had an artistic nature and like many artistic people was untidy. The shop was heaped with newspapers, boxes of cigars and cigarettes, library books and on occasions, false faces and old umbrellas. Behind this heap of merchandise, Duncan presided with the air of one who knew where to put his hand on anything asked for. To go in and ask for two farthing blisters was to annoy Duncan very much. These blisters were small balloons that took a great deal of trouble to inflate, and the finding of them was to Duncan a greater trouble still. During the hunt for them, the would-be purchaser would be having a free look over some of the comics that lay so conveniently to hand. The smell of kippers being fried in the back premises would come wafting through to the front where, mixing with the odour of books and tobacco, would form a blue haze that gave Duncan the appearance of an Aladdin in his magic cave.

Before closing I want to mention another shop (a dressmakers) owned by an old Miss Boyle. The day of the lady's bustle had passed away and Miss Boyle was left with some on her hands. If some of the boys wanted a game of football, and there was no ball available, one boy would be sent into the shop to ask for an old bustle. Miss Boyle would ask what it was for, and the boy would answer "A fitba". In a few minutes what was once an aid to the feminine form would be reduced to rags by the tackety boots that most of the players wore.

The closing of the school for the summer holidays was always a day to look forward to - dressed in your Sunday suit, your hair well brushed, and a bow tie fastened to a white linen collar, you were completely disguised. I was always sorry for the boy who had to wear a Glengarry - before he had reached home, the ribbons would be gone. The proceedings opened with the singing of that doleful hymn "Childhood's years are passing over us." A local lady would then address the pupils, and here again stress was laid on the fact that life was no empty dream, but a series of well laid ambushes where the enemy held all the advantages. As we had been well grounded in "The Pilgrim's Progress" this was only to be expected, and caused no undue alarm for the future. The prize giving would then take place after which three hearty cheers would be given for the lady to show that we appreciated her presence even though her admonitions for our- our future behaviour often fell upon deaf ears. The singing of the 2nd Paraphrase brought the proceedings to a close.

Well, Ladies and Gentlemen the time has come for me to put the shutters up and leave the old people and the old village in the land of forgotten things. There is much more I could tell you but enough is as good as a feast - so in closing I will say with Robert Burns

Still o'er' these scenes my mem'ry haunts
And fondly broods with miser care.
Time but their impressions deeper makes
As streams their channels deeper wear.