

Talk given by Alex McLeod to the EEHS in the Toll Green Hall on Wednesday 10th November 2004.

Good evening Ladies and gentlemen. Our worthy chairman Jim phoned and said "I'm sure, Alex, you will give a short talk at our opening meeting. It will be our AGM and is only a fill-in – no more than half an hour. You're not one of our main speakers for our season." Who could refuse such an invitation and I asked what Jim had in mind for a subject? "Oh, something about your circa 50 years as factor on Elie Estate."

Ladies and gentlemen – here is a short, only a 'fill-in' talk! The sensible thing is to start at the beginning. In September 1951 I came to Elie with a young wife and a six-month old daughter. I don't suppose Lorna will object to me giving out her age. My appointment was to Factor Sir Michael Nairn and his family's estates in Fife and Perthshire. This covered four properties and two large farms-in-hand. It also involved motoring an average of 24,000 miles each year. I retired after 34 years in 1985 from all properties – but the present Sir Michael (my third generation), asked me to continue factoring Elie Estate. This was a marvellous semi-retirement until 1998. My point is 1951 to 1998 is 47 years – only 3 years short of Jim's 'circa'. I will concentrate on the **changes** during these years and will try to work in sections.

Section 1 Owners

I was engaged by Sir Michael Nairn, who had purchased Elie Estate in 1928. Sadly Sir Michael died just a year after my engagement but I remember him well. Wonderful, kind, thoughtful towards others, particularly to his young factor in my first year. Lady Nairn died a year later. Not a very hopeful, bright start to my new career. Their only son, George, succeeded and was my main employer until he died in 1984. It was then that the present Sir Michael asked me to continue at Elie until 1998.

Section 2 Employees

When I arrived there were on Elie Estate: 5 Gardeners, 4 Foresters, 1 Gamekeeper, 1 Joiner, 1 Chauffeur, 6 in the House and, please note, 1 Harbour Master - around 20 employees. On arrival I was given a typed list with the names of each employee and each tradesman. Perhaps you will not believe it but here are the very sheets. Please handle with care. Now there are 2 handymen/foresters and a part time keeper. Quite a change. Imagine how difficult it was for me, just three years unto my first employment and having to dispense with so many employees after Lady Nairn's death – no redundancy

then. It was not easy but I managed to find most into other jobs or a retirement cottage. The only person still with us on that list is Robert Allan who was then 'the garden's boy'.

Section 3 **Elie House**

By far the biggest change. Sir George inherited Elie and Estate and he already had two attractive properties. Pitcarmick Estate in Strathardie and Cairnie outside Cupar. He instructed me to sell Elie House and retain the farms and woodlands. I don't think I need to go into the details of this very sad affair in the history of Elie. I tried the Church of Scotland but they had just been given Leslie House by Sir Robert Spencer-Nairn and I suggested it to Miss Storrer for a school. Eventually Elie House, gardens, garage block and 25 acres of ground were sold to the Nuns in 1954/55. The rest is common knowledge. However it must be remembered that in those days, if a house had a roof, then full rates were payable – hence the reason for so many properties still standing in ruins.

Section 4 **Farm Tenancies**

The present acreage of Elie Estate – at least when I left - Ardross - 368; Broomlees - 213; St. Ford - 342; Grass Parks - 57; Woodlands - 350 some 1,350 acres. I was fully responsible for selecting and recommending to Sir George, the tenants:

- Ardross - Robert Pollock succeeded Fred Berwick in 1968 (Robbie Pollock succeeded his father in 1984)
- Broomlees – Robert Burns succeeded his father in 1970
- St. Ford – Harry Thomson succeeded Andrew Allan in 1964 (Donald Thomson succeeded his father in 1984)

So each of these gentlemen can either thank me or curse me for being there. All farm cottages are now let, there are no farm workers.

Section 5 changes in **other subjects**.

As I may be over-running Jim's time schedule I will summarize some of the main transactions for which I was directly responsible. To me each is a story in itself. You may have some questions.

Purchases additions to Elie Estate – Session Lands in 1965 added to St. Ford. Grange Farm in 1967 added to St. Ford. Grange Field from Frazer and Grangehill (14 acres) from J Black in 1971.

Disposals reductions from Elie Estate - Elie Harbour and Granary gifted

1954/55. 26 acres of Elie Ness from Lighthouse to Lady's Tower etc 1967. Wadeslea House and Steading to Dr Semple 1966. Dunreggan Nursing Home. Grangehill Farm House to Dr Cumming. 4 houses at the Toft in the 1980s. The Playing Field at Wadeslea, the Surgery.

Notes to self - Mention the Glebe Field and the Elie Sea Box. I was responsible for Sir George and Lord Lyndsay for allowing curling on the loch on Sundays after church service in 1963 and arranging with Sir George and Miss Baird to give over lands Mellon Park and the 14th to allow Golf on Sunday.

Apart for the sale and the follow-on of the sale of Elie House, the biggest change has been in the woodland and plantations. After Sir Michael's death all the large hardwoods, particularly beech, which grew throughout the estate and on either side of the avenue were felled. The best of the sycamore was eventually exported to Austria for making musical instruments. The hardwoods were replaced with mixed conifers and hardwoods. My particular pride is in taking credit for the suggestion and carry-out of the 150 acres of conifers out towards Shell Bay. I take no credit for the hard work involved which was all done by Bob Jobson and Dave Thomson – with casual labour. Bob and Dave deserve all credit for the high state of the woodlands.

Ending on a very personal note – according to the present Sir Michael, when he was saying nice things at my retirement party, said my special gift was man management and organisation. To me an estate is sometimes like a village and the diversity and ability of each one involved, owner, employee, tenant and factor is so important.

To have been given the responsibility for the well-being of a part of our Earth is a very humbling, satisfying vocation and such a privilege for which I am truly grateful, having spent my working/professional life right here as Elie Estate Factor.

Thank you.

Footnote - with questions the talk lasted over an hour.