

## **Rivers of Improvement in Lower Strathearn - Irene Hallyburton MLitt.**

In 1786 Sir Walter Scott made the journey from Edinburgh to Invermay over the Wicks of Baigie on the Wallace Road. His view of Perth recounted in his *Fair Maid of Perth* was from 'one of the most beautiful points of view which Britain, or perhaps the world, can afford'. The view of Perth from West Dron Hill Farm would have been striking, but five and a half miles distant. However, looking to the east along the Tay, the parishes of Rhynd and Abernethy were more immediately laid out for the observer.

The late eighteenth century was a period of extensive agricultural improvement in Scotland and a major requirement for rural development and prosperity was an accessible countryside. Local economics and infrastructure had to be able to support improvement to accommodate the movement of goods; to bring necessary materials in, and to take surplus produce out to market. Transportation needs increased and rivers supplied a ready-made route where roads needed substantial labour, and time, to build and maintain.

Liming was one of the first improvements to be adopted almost universally, and without suitable stone, or coal to burn it available locally, lime had to be brought into much of Perthshire. The rivers were the ideal route inland for substantial quantities of lime being brought from Fife. Statistical accounts suggest it was even brought from the north of England, up the east coast and into the parishes on the Tay. The number of boats carrying lime into the harbour at Perth increased more than four-fold in the ten years between 1781 and 1791 and the importance of river access to farming is evident in its inclusion in newspaper advertisements placed to attract new tenant farmers.

*FARM to LET. Upon Wednesday the 8th May, 1771, the FARM of NETHER ABERARGY... N.B. The Farm lies five miles from Perth, three from Newburgh harbour, and about a quarter of a mile from the river of Earn, which is navigable for barks with lime and coal, for two miles above the farm, and the tide comes up the water of Farg to the foot of the lands, so that manure and fuel may be carried by water to the farm*

*Caledonian Mercury - Wednesday 03 April 1771*

In the 1790s single masted sloops brought 50-ton cargoes of lime up the Earn to Bridge of Earn. Redistributed to smaller boats, it shipped as far upstream as Forgandenny. The landing site at Bridge of Earn was founded around 1769 when John Gilloch obtained a 99-year lease from Moncrieff estate with rights to levy duty where ships unloaded. From at least 1730 the Ferry from Carpow linked the parish of Abernethy to the Carse of Gowrie, an easier trip than by poorly maintained road. By 1836 this was a significant port with a Public House, and rights to load and unload goods and produce. Ferryfield of Carpow lay within the mouth of the Earn, ideally positioned to transfer goods coming down the Earn Valley into the Tay for further carriage to Perth or Dundee. These officially recognised ports were a conscious act of estate improvement by landowners such as the Earl of Kinnoull; encouraging enterprise and of great advantage to their estates. Alexander Moncrieff, the landowner at Culfargie, was well aware

of the advantages of having access to a small port. In 1756 tenants of the old Waulkmill on his estate were instructed to build and maintain a stone pier on the bank of the Earn, unfortunately, there is no evidence that this was ever built.

The River Tay and the lower reaches of the River Earn would have been strewn with small landing places and ferries. The Castle at Elcho is likely to have been long served by the small pier there which later became one of the 'Tattie Piers', but there are more places on the Earn and even the Farg where a shallow draft boat could have easily been landed. Ferry routes to Inchyra and Cairnie on the opposite bank of the Tay were as important as the roads to the parishes of Rhynd and Abernethy. Social science often ignores maritime connections with riverside settlement, mainly concerned with commercial enterprise such as salmon fishing. This disregards the close community connections enabled by a short boat trip. Regular routes for the traffic of goods and people, but also influence. The multiple ferry routes across the River Tay meant that the communities on either side were closer than today when transport and community links are dependent on the road network. Rivers are seen as a barrier, but in the eighteenth century they were the path of least resistance. Rural areas now considered to be 'backwaters' were places where people brought goods to be shipped elsewhere and to board ferries to places which are now many miles away by road. Culfargie to West Rhynd is less than 100 yards across the Earn by boat, but almost seven miles by road!

With the introduction of the turnpike trusts in the 1820s, adoption of roads and improved wheeled transport reduced the reliance on rivers for everyday transport. The small ports and harbours along the Tay and Earn became less of a lifeline to those living along their banks. Parts of the landscape, better served for access by the rivers than the roads, may have developed differently if river transport had been maintained longer.

Due to their proximity to the river the parishes of Rhynd and Abernethy, were the most agriculturally advanced in lower Strathearn. The Tay, Earn and even the Farg were routes for the exchange of goods and ideas key to development. Materials such as lime and fertiliser came to those places most easily accessed by river transport first, and the landowners were quick to realise the commercial opportunities to be had. Making the most of their access to the rivers to encourage trade and to entice new farmers keen to implement progressive ideas to their estates.