

Characters of other days

During the past two generations, Addiewell has produced some very successful men in various spheres. Amongst these were the late William Robb, M.A., who was Chief Inspector of Schools for Scotland, and William Rennie, who was Professor of Greek in Glasgow University. Two men played an important part in the shaping of the careers of the youth of Addiewell. They were Mr Watson, then headmaster of Addiewell School, and the Rev. Mr McLaren, minister of Addiewell Parish Church. A memorial plaque stands in the vestibule of the church to the memory of the little minister who played such an important part in the Addiewell of former days.

Addiewell was built by Dr "Paraffin" Young, to house the workers who were all employed in his famous oil works. The streets were all named after famous men of the generation, and they included Livingstone Street, Graham Street, Watt Street, Davy Street, Campbell Street and Faraday Place. Only a remnant of the old Addiewell now remains and this includes Livingstone Street, Watt Street, Davy Street and Faraday Place.

Addiewell derived its name from a spring of water which was known as "Addie's Well". The original Addiewell Work was a hive of industry, employing some 1,000 men. Dozens of chimneys belched forth smoke, and it was a veritable "pillar of fire by night, and a pillar of smoke by day". To-day not one of these original chimneys remain, the last one being taken down several years ago. Power is derived from a large electric generator, near which stands Addiewell's new but somewhat lonely chimney.

"Light of the World"

The foundation stone of the oil work was laid by Dr David Livingstone, the famous missionary and explorer. The foreman mason on that day was the father of the late Willie Robb, who handed the trowel to David Livingstone when he laid the stone. To his dying day, Mr Robb spoke of the highlight in his career, and loved to talk of all the things that went under the stone, coins, papers, letters etc.

No refinery existed in the Addiewell work's early days, the crude oil being taken to the "secret" work near Bathgate. Subsequently a refinery was added at Addiewell and a famous candle house was built, these candles, along with Young's Addiewell No. 1 oil, becoming known universally as "the light of the world".

Spoke the Gaelic

The workers simply poured into Addiewell in search of work in these early days, and a host of Irish navvies came across from Ireland to dig the foundations. Most of the conversation between themselves went on in their native Gaelic tongue, and the following true story is told:- the foreman labourer was not too popular with his workers through his sharp tongue and his driving power. One day he had given the labourers a real dressing down, and a deep muttering arose from the men. They were cursing him in the good old-fashioned Irish way. The foreman angrily demanded of one of the men who spoke both English and Gaelic, "What are they talking about?" The man answered without a blush: "Oh, sir, they are blessing you for your goodness of heart!"

It was one of these same labourers who arrived at work one morning with a neat patch in the seat of his trousers, and in the centre of the patch was a button. (In those days, patches, with a button attached, were supplied with each new suit of clothes, and in her haste to patch the man's

trousers, his wife had forgotten to remove the button.) The quick witted navvies immediately dubbed the man “Button” and the name stuck for more than one generation.

Housing Shortage

In these early days houses simply could not be built fast enough to accommodate the rapidly increasing population, and in many cases the houses were occupied before the windows were in. Addiewell was indeed a “promised land” to the humble farm workers and the men from Ireland who at most were only earning some ten shillings a week in the jobs they had left.

West of Addiewell Church is a stream known as the Scollie Burn. The rock formations around here form for the geologist a veritable treasure chest.

Pugs

The shale from the pits was drawn to the retorts at Addiewell by steam locomotives which were better known as “pugs”. The drivers of the pugs were great characters, among them being Jock Caldwell (always pronounced “Jock Carwall”), Jim Cowe, Frank Cowe, Mickie Lee, and Wullie Robertson. These old timers used to stage races with their pugs on their way from Gavieside to the oil works, and the youngsters used to give them a great cheer.

Miss Brown on the footplate

It was on the footplate of one of these pubs that Miss Brown of Addiewell, then headmistress of Gavieside School, used to make her journey night and morning. A difference indeed from the travel facilities of the modern school miss!

Oil works fumes make good singers!

Addiewell folks were always famous for their singing talent – indeed it has been seriously declared that the fumes from the oil works led to the development of good voices! Be that as it may, a very famous singer was born and brought up in Addiewell in the person of Catherine Mentiplay, whose father was precentor at Addiewell Church for a number of years. Miss Mentiplay used to delight audiences in Addiewell and West Calder with her singing of “O Rowan Tree”.

Yes, Addiewell has indeed made history in the past.

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