

Old Days at Addiewell Recalled

Although I cannot claim to go into the distant past in years, I come from one of the oldest resident families in Addiewell and the following history may be of interest.

My grandfather, after a failure in a small coopers' business in Glasgow, came to work in the Addiewell Works in 1870, and a few weeks later brought his wife and family to lodge in a room in Graham Street. There was no Railway Station at Addiewell and the only houses were on the west side of Graham Street, Cross Street, and the south side of Livingstone Street. A journey to Pie Jock's at West Calder had to be made to obtain a newspaper.

Paraffin cancer and smallpox

The lodgings were very unsatisfactory as the man from whom the room was let suffered from the then very prevalent disease of workers in the oil refinery, paraffin cancer. Coming from such different surroundings in the city, the family were much upset by this introduction to the oil industry, and were thankful when the addition of the east side of Graham Street, Baker Street, Simpson Street and Campbell Street was made to the "low rows", and they were given a single end [a one-roomed house] in Simpson Street. A number of workmen were accommodated in wooden huts on a site between the present retorts and the low road. There was a virulent outbreak of smallpox among the men in the huts, and residents in the village were given instructions to combat the disease, which included burning sulphur under the bed each morning.

The High Rows

The next addition to the "high rows" or the rows of two storied houses was the building of Watt Street and the north side of Livingstone Street. The first six houses of Faraday Place were built for foremen in the works, and Stephenson Street and Davy Street were added to the "high rows". Bank Street, the short street of 8 houses facing the Institute Hall was built with two houses added at right angles at either end for some of the lesser foremen in the works. The two houses at the west end were included in Bank Street, but those at the east end were listed as 41 and 42 Graham Street. [There is a mistake here: it's not clear which of the "wests" in the previous sentence should actually read "east".] The village was completed by the addition of seven houses to the foremen's row of Faraday Place. During the addition of these seven houses, Mr James Pattison was murdered while going his rounds collecting church dues in Campbell Street. He was hit on the head by slate, thought to have been thrown from cover of the buildings under erection.

Shops and schools – and the Watt Street Hall

The first shop or store in the village was run by the Oil Co., and was the part of Muirhall Cottage, at Addiewell Station which is now used as a wash-house or store room. Later a store was erected on the site of the present Co-operative Society, but was at one time burned out, and then rebuilt as it stands at present. The School was first held in Watt Street Hall, which will be well remembered by the older residents. It consisted of two downstairs houses with the dividing walls removed. The School was afterwards held in the Institute, and some of the teachers, such as Mr Hislop who was later in West Calder and Mr Watson who was later headmaster of Broughton School, Edinburgh, will be remembered.

Sunday Schools

An undenominational Sunday School was started by Mr James Kelly in the village and was at first held in Watt Street Hall and afterwards in the Institute. This Sunday School ran for many years even after the two churches opened in the village, and the ministers attended in turn.

Once the Churches had established themselves, however, they opened their own Sunday Schools and the open organisation was disbanded in face of competition from two such powerfully backed organisations.

The Churches

The Free Church was first on the scene and held services in the Institute up to the time when the “tin” church – built of corrugated iron sheets – was next erected behind Graham Street and Cross Street. The “tin” church was later sold and the material was used for the erection of a picture house at Stoneyburn.

A good-sized church was erected by the Established Church [in 1885] and the Free Church later erected a brick church beside the schools which went out of use after the union of the churches, and is now in use as a dwelling house.

The farmhouses under the bing

There are two farm houses now completely covered by Addiewell shale bing, the first was named “Clash Me Doun”, a most appropriate name for its fate. The second, which seemed in quite fair condition, was Breich Mill, and a good many people alive must remember it still. Its position was between the new part of the low road to West Calder, north of the bing which is marked by a sleeper fence, and the old road which cut right through from the railway crossing at the start of the bing to the road at Burnhouse Farm. The old road was still in use a little less than forty years ago.

The site of Burnhouse Farm is uncovered, although the buildings were demolished at a still later date. The garden wall still stands to some extent with tall ash trees in front, on the road west of the Drove Loan where the small Army Camp was during wartime.

The burning bing

Burnt shale was first tipped on the red bing west of Addiewell Farm and opposite the church. At that time it was not so well burnt as at present, and was taken up by a small engine known as “the black stuff” engine. This bing went out of use when it went on fire and burned fiercely owing to the condition of the shale. A tarry substance liberated by the heat ran down the sides and quite an amount of this lodged on a lower level on the south-west side. This still remained, at least up to recent years and during hot summer weather it was a favourite game for children to make footprints with their bare feet in it.

There was a small cottage with a thatched roof and small square windows immediately opposite the position of the former Muirhall Row, which was tenanted up to about fifty years ago. The last tenant was named Daleney and they kept hens and ducks and operated what would be considered a small wellcroft here.

Bricks and the clay hole

The village at Addiewell was built from bricks made by the Company at their brick works which were positioned between the locomotive shed and the station road, and traces of this could still be seen some years ago.

Clay was dug from the clay hole, on the right hand side a little further up the road, which has been filled in recently.

Entertainment and the pictures

Entertainment has changed throughout the years and many will remember the New Years' concerts in the Institute Hall with such artistes as Jessie Livingstone, Catherine Mentiplay, Hugh Freil, Philip Malcolm, Robert Burnett, and the comedian Charles Gamble with:- [this sentence is unfinished]

During the 1914-1918 War, Cadona the showman brought the pictures to Addiewell. His first Picture House – of corrugated iron – was built on the site of the Police Station but it was removed the following year to a little further along the road at the turn of the Cuthill Brae, and across the road from the first erection. The pictures were of course silent and shown to the accompaniment of a piano, often played by a local. Such serials as “The Tray of Hearts”, “The Black Box”, “The Broken Coin”, and “The Master Key” were shown and “followed up” enthusiastically by the youth of the village.

The pictures were shown in reels or parts with a pause between, during which the lights were switched on, and the operator changed the reel on the single projector. Break-downs were frequent especially during very cold weather when the internal combustion engine was not very reliable.

Appalling sanitary conditions

Some of these are very pleasant recollections but a subject ignored and almost considered unmentionable is that of the appalling sanitary conditions that prevailed even up to as late as 1924. Until that year, except for the houses of both policemen and the Co-operative, there were no water closets [toilets] in the village, although Faraday Place houses, the foremen's row, each had an individual dry closet and a tap with running water of their own. There was no provision of lavatories of any kind whatever for women or girls, either individual or communal, up to the year 1924. There were communal buildings for men here and there in the village of the most primitive type, with no privacy whatever. They were cleaned once a week. They were the breeding grounds of all kinds of flies. There was no running water in the houses, which had to be carried from wells positioned at intervals in the streets along the “gutters”. Perhaps we should forget those blots!

“Breich Mill”

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