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SKIRLING

"One of the Sweetest Parishes"

JAMES VEITCH

UNLESS you have a quick eye for pastoral beauty, there may seem at first sight to be nothing for you in Skirling. No hotel or pub, no tearoom, not even rustic seats to tempt you to linger on the village green. This does not mean that you will be unwelcome here, for the inhabitants are friendly people. The simple explanation is that, as near as possible in this clamorous age, Skirling is that rare thing, an unspoilt haven of tranquillity.

Although it is situated a mile and a half from Biggar in Lanarkshire, the little parish lies within—and only just within—the western boundaries of Peebles-shire. Daily bus services between Glasgow and Peebles operate on this route, so there is no question of Skirling being cut off through lack of public transport. In a curious way, though, one soon becomes almost unaware of passing traffic, as if it belongs to another world altogether.

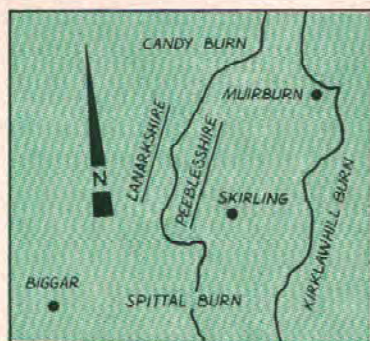
Nestling among trees, Skirling is surrounded by well-cultivated farms. It is all very different from the second *Statistical Account* of 1834 in which the Rev. John Alpine drew attention to the need for plantations and fencing. He believed that "when the ditcher shall be preparing the thorn-bed, and the dike shall be plying his hammer and the planter his spade, and the harshness of the unenclosed place, and the unwooded hill, shall no longer glare upon the eye of the observer," Skirling would be trans-

formed into "one of the sweetest parishes in Scotland." To a great extent, I think that old country minister's dream has come true.

Arriving from the Muirburn airt, one cannot but notice Skirling Burn between the road and the trim houses on the right. In Dr Pennecuik's *Description of Tweeddale*, the upper part of the stream was called the Candy Burn and the lower part Spittal Burn. Like Kirklawhill Burn, the only other stream in the parish, the Skirling Burn bickers on to join Biggar Water which, beyond Broughton, eventually finds its way between Rachan Hill and Dreva Hill to the Tweed.

Recently, whilst paying a Sunday visit, I had just turned from the burn when I met a lady who knows a good deal about the past history of the village. She is a widow, Mrs Mary Ritchie. When I asked her if she knew the whereabouts of the Piper's Stone, it was no trouble for her to turn in her tracks and conduct my photographer friend, George Pennel, and me to the front of a house beside the village shop.

In the wall is fixed a small stone





Miss Kelly, schoolmistress at Skirling, with her pupils outside the village school.

effigy of a piper. From time to time, it has been repainted, and at the moment the piper looks out with a distinct glower in his black eyes. Whatever the truth about him, he very definitely is not going to tell!

The stone is supposed to have come from the original Skirling Castle, which is said to have been built in 1315. As Mrs Ritchie remarked, even the site is uncertain, but, according to tradition, it stood on Gallalaw Hill at the foot of which is the memorial to those who fell in the First World War.

Certain it is that King Robert the Bruce, by a charter dated 14th January 1326, granted the "Barony of Scravelyn with the advocacy of the kirk thereof" to Sir John of Monfode. Sir John was succeeded by his daughter Margaret who, after the death of her first husband, Walter de Craigie, married Alexander Cockburn of Langton about 1365.

Their descendants, including the quarrelsome Sir William Cockburn, who was for ever in and out of trouble with the law, succeeded to the title; but none of them had the impact of Sir James Cockburn, who was deeply embroiled in the tangled affairs of his time.

A faithful follower of Mary, Queen of Scots, he was a member of the jury at the farcical trial of Rizzio's murderers. In 1563, Queen Mary paid a visit to Skirling Castle and later, on 21st March 1566, she appointed Sir James to command Edinburgh Castle.

The same day, one Robert Birrel recorded in his diary, "ther rais ane vehement tempest of wunde which blew a very grate shipe out of the rode of Leith, and sicklik blew the taill from the cocke which standes on the tope of the steiple away from it: so the old prophesy came trew:

"Quhen Skirline sall be capitaine,
The cocke sall vant his taile."

But dark days loomed ahead for Sir James. His appointment

lasted only a few weeks and in August 1567 he was accused and tried for complicity in the murder of Darnley at Kirk o' Field. By now, his adherence to the Queen's cause had enraged the Regent Moray, who decided that it was high time to destroy this hornets' nest. Accordingly, he ordered the demolition of Skirling Castle, and on 12th June 1568 the deed was done by a company of soldiers with three pieces of artillery. Accompanied by the Earl of Morton and Lord Hume, the Regent witnessed the end of the castle.

Although declared a traitor, Sir James survived his misfortunes and came to terms with the authorities. "Scraling, Knycht" was a subscriber to the "Band of Roxburgh," a bond of loyalty to King James, signed at Jedburgh on 28th August 1578.

It has been asserted that the Piper's Stone was used when the second castle was built, but it is clear that the original castle was never rebuilt and that succeeding proprietors occupied a house in the village. Standing in what is now the glebe, this House of Skirling was in ruins by the end of the 18th century and for a while afterwards was used as a quarry. Yet at least someone, somewhere along the line, made sure that the wee piper survived to take his niche of honour in the village.

As we left him, I remarked to Mrs Ritchie that they had chosen a good place for the parish kirk. It stands on a knowe, the site of an ancient hill fort, and looks down upon the road and across the village green to a row of houses beyond.

"Ah, but nowadays," said Mrs Ritchie, "we don't have a resident minister. The services are conducted by the minister from Broughton. That shows how things change."

At the Disruption in 1843, the parish minister, the Rev. William Hanna, left the Church of Scotland and became the first Free Church minister in the parish. How tongues must have wagged in those days!

Thanks mainly to the generosity of Sir Alexander Gibson Carmichael, the church was built, and in 1846 a manse, costing £450, was also built. Of this sum, £400 was contributed by Mr Hanna and his friends. Two years later, he resigned his charge in order to reside in Edinburgh and to edit the letters

The Piper's Stone. The little figure has an uncertain history. Today he surveys the scene from the wall of a house in the village.



and MSS of his father-in-law, Dr Thomas Chalmers.

The kirk survived until after the union in 1929 of the Church of Scotland and the United Free Church.

Taking our leave of Mrs Ritchie, we stepped into the village shop. Behind the counter was Mr John Brown. After we had spoken for a while Mr Brown accompanied us out to the door. With the road a ribbon of sunshine on the right, the Green stretched before us to the timber-faced front of Skirling House at the far end, and all the way along the



The attractive timber-faced front of Skirling House, on the village green.

spreading foliage of tall trees cast heavy shadows across the grass.

"There are owre mony trees," commented Mr Brown. "The sun canna win through at a'. It would be better if yin or twae on the Green were cut doon."

He has a point, no doubt, but I wonder how many in the village agree. To many those guardian trees must be like old friends.

After Mr Brown had returned to his shop, my eye again caught the shaded front of Skirling House. I thought of Lord Carmichael, the remarkable man who had converted it from what was originally two cottages. Obviously, he had not hankered after a mansion standing apart in its own grounds. When he decided to live in Skirling, he must have wanted to be able to step out of his front door and have a blether with the first person he met.

Thomas David, eleventh Baronet and first Baron Carmichael, was born in 1859. On his father's death in 1891, he succeeded and took up residence at Castlecraig, where he was noted for the personal interest he took in the estate workers.

In 1893, however, he disentailed his estates. He was drawn towards politics and had already contested Peebles and Selkirk without success. Then in 1895 he was elected for Midlothian in succession to W. E. Gladstone and held the seat until

his retirement in 1900. Five years later he was appointed Governor of Victoria, then of Madras, and in 1912, the year he was raised to the peerage, he became first Governor of Bengal, where his work was marked by his efforts to improve the lot of the Indians. His rule in India is remembered by a Carmichael Institute of Hygiene at the School of Tropical Medicine.

This, then, was the man who, in 1905, had built Skirling House and who, in 1921, became Lord-Lieutenant of Peebles-shire. It was said of him that he had a contempt for any kind of pretence and that his friendships bridged wide gaps of age and station.

A connoisseur of art, too, he was a trustee of the National Gallery as well as a trustee of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery. But at Skirling he expressed his impish sense of humour in an extravagant use of wrought iron. He engaged a famous artist in this medium, Thomas Hadden of Edinburgh, to fashion all sorts of things: devils, animals, birds, reptiles and flowers. At one time, a wrought-iron Satan



This painted bird still survives to brighten a garden in the village. Over the years the weather has wrought decay on most of the others.

Mrs Mary Ritchie, who recalled some of the lore of Skirling for the writer.

did duty on a weathervane and, at the front of the house, a wrought-iron lizard on a bracket is still ready to carry a lamp if required.

Meanwhile, along the narrow road behind the Green, we had passed a row of houses and now reached Firknowe, the farmhouse of Mr Philip Sommerville. It looks out over the Green and is situated at right angles to Skirling House itself.

The five-barred gate alongside the house was wide open and in the yard we found Mr Sommerville at work. He took time off from his hay, however, to talk to us in his sunlit garden behind the house, over a cup of tea and his wife's home-baking.

He recalled the crofts that had once stretched along from his place, and lamented the decline of the village population.

I remarked that Skirling must have been busy enough during the fairs, with two in May, one in June and another in September.

"Ay," he agreed. "They say the June fair was yin o' the biggest markets in Scotland for horses and cattle, but that was mony a long year ago."

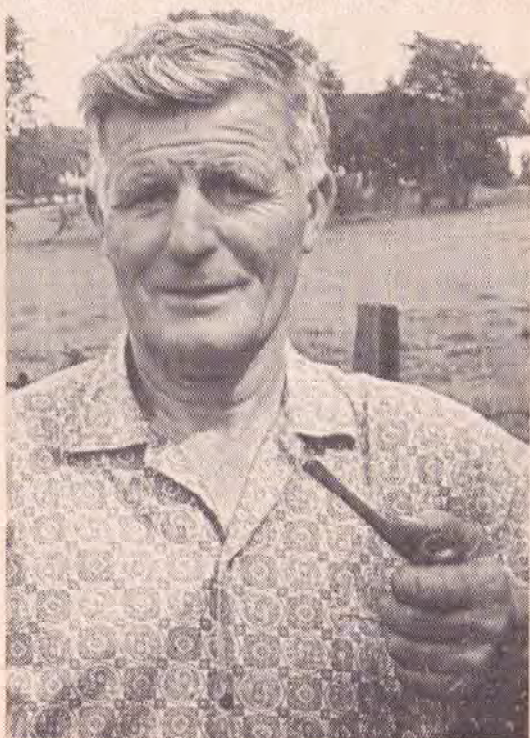
To be sure, all roads must have led to Skirling. I once read that the place then was chock-a-block with cattle dealers, horse coupers, ballad singers, pickpockets, prick-the-garters, hawkers of curry combs, recruiting parties with pipes and drums, merchants with their stands,



and gingerbread Neds with their baskets. Small wonder that, in those days, there were two inns in the village!

"Ye ken," said Mr Sommerville, no doubt thinking of those wild days, "part o' my hoose was yince the jile. That stane wa' next to the back door is a bit o' the auld building."

From the flowers around us came the drowsy hum of bees. It was hard to imagine that there had been any need for a jail in Skirling, and, indeed, it is on record that it



Mr Philip Sommerville, who farms at Skirling. Part of his farmhouse was originally the local jail.



Some of the wrought-iron ornamentation outside Skirling House. It was the work of Thomas Hadden of Edinburgh who, at the beginning of the century, was well-known as an artist in this medium.

was never used except "for holding mort-safes and other parochial implements."

Yet until the beginning of the 19th century, even a gallows stood on the Gallows Knowe, south of the village. It was removed by Lord Carmichael's grandfather and was kept for a time, probably as a kind of curio, at Castlecraig. It was believed to have been the last gallows standing in position, in Scotland.

Anyhow, when the fairs were discontinued and transferred to Biggar in 1864, peace and quiet descended upon the village.

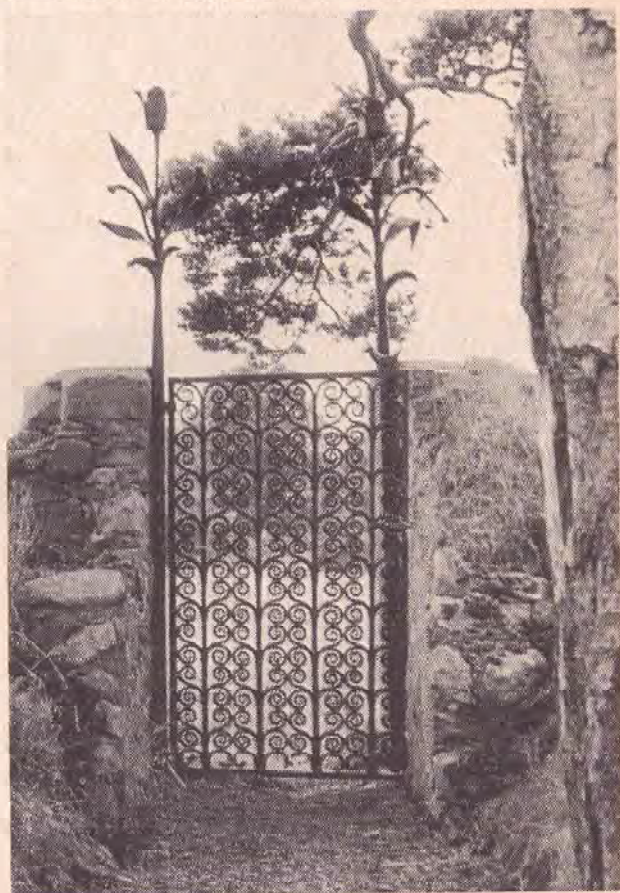
"Whenever I cycled this way as a boy," I told Mr Sommerville, "there were wooden birds, painted every colour of the rainbow, on poles in almost every front garden. Now, it seems, most of them have gone. I saw only one today."

"The laird had a lot to do with *that*," he replied, with a laugh. "They were shipped over from Canada and I daursay a lot o' folk mind o' Skirling as the place wi' the painted birds. It was the weather that went for them in the end."

After we left Mr Sommerville and his wife, we went across the Green and the main road and walked up past the school to the kirk on the knowe. Not difficult to guess who was responsible for the gates. They are made of wrought iron. Even more decorative is the Minister's Gate at the other end of the kirkyard.

The doors of the kirk were locked and everywhere around it there was a great stillness. Here, the names of farmers, shepherds, ploughmen and their families are engraved on many an ancient stone, whilst near the Minister's Gate, lie the remains of the Rev. Professor W. P. Paterson, a distinguished churchman and scholar, who was born at Skirling Mains in 1860 and began his schooling at Skirling. It must have been a deeply moving experience for him when he came back to his childhood haunts to dedicate the village war memorial. In the grim years of bloodshed and sacrifice he had lost two sons of his own.

Moving round to the other side of the kirk, I had no difficulty in finding the Carmichael burial enclosure against its background of friendly trees. Lord Carmichael himself knew exactly what he wanted, and Sir Robert Lorimer, who was the architect responsible for the local war memorial, carried



The Minister's Gate, Skirling church, another fine piece of Hadden's work.

out his design. The sculpture was done by Mrs Meredith Williams, whose work is also to be found at the National War Memorial in Edinburgh.

Lord Carmichael died in London on 16th January 1926, and his body was brought home to rest, as he always wished it, on this quiet knoll above his beloved village. He was survived by his wife, but they had no family and there was no heir to the barony.

There was still another grave which I wanted to see and, eventually, I found it, only a few paces from the gable-end of the kirk. The inscription on the stone tells us:

Here Rest
The remains of
James Howe, Artist,
son of the Revd William Howe
minister of Skirling.
Born 30th August 1780.
Died 11th July 1836.

He who would make with life the
canvas glow
In death's deep slumber lies this
turf below.
But death which triumphs o'er the
mouldering frame
Dims not the lustre of the painter's
name.

Erected by his admirers
In his native parish.

The lines were written by his old schoolmaster, the Rev. James Proudfoot of Coulter.

James Howe was one of those talented artists who narrowly missed greatness. From an early age, he revealed a natural aptitude for drawing and painting and began his career by becoming an apprentice to a house-painter in Edinburgh. There, his spare time was spent in painting panoramic views and animal portraits—especially horses. In Skirling, horses had fascinated him and they continued to do so all his life.

No doubt full of ambition, he tried his luck in London, where, it is believed, he painted the horses of the royal stud. None of this work, however, appears to have survived, and when I later discussed Howe with ex-Provost Brian Lambie of Biggar, he expressed the opinion that the artist had been disillusioned.

"His visit was not the triumphant success that he had hoped it would be," he said, "and so he returned to Scotland."

All the same, Howe was now well enough known to attract the interest of Sir John Sinclair, the

Kneeling angels protect the entrance to the Carmichael burial enclosure. It was built by Sir Robert Lorimer, whose best known work is probably the National War Memorial, Edinburgh Castle.





Left, the village church occupies an ancient site which bears traces of a hill fort. Below, a palette is engraved on the gravestone of James Howe, the Skirling artist who died in 1836. His pictures are still much admired today.

noted statesman, agriculturist and writer. He commissioned Howe to travel through Scotland with the object of painting various breeds of cattle, a task for which he was well-equipped.

Howe lived at Newhaven on the Firth of Forth, and on one occasion when there was a loud knock on his door, he found a very large, uncouth-looking man before him.

"Is it you that paints beasts?" demanded the visitor.

"I do," agreed Howe and, looking him up and down, added, "Just come away in!"

He went abroad in 1815 to visit Waterloo and paint his impression of the famous battle. But it was on his calf ground that his best-known works were done. He died on July 11 1836, and today he is remembered by his large, action-filled pictures, *Skirling Fair* and *Skirling Horse Fair*. Brimful of life and movement, they enshrine a spirited, roistering age long gone.

Over his grave, a palette is depicted on his tombstone, and it would have pleased him to know

that, for many years, someone who admired his work painted daubs of colour upon it, as if it were still in use. Now, with time, nothing is left but the grey stone.

As I turned back towards the main gate, Aberdeen-Angus cattle were lazily chewing the cud; in an adjoining field grazed white-faced Leicester sheep; here and there through the trees I glimpsed the rooftops of the village below. I was reminded of how the late Dr Clement Bryce Gunn of Peebles once described Skirling as "a contented parish." I like to think that that is still true today.



**Photographs by
GEORGE PENNEL**
