AYRSHIRE NOTES

HISTORY § ANTIQUITIES

ARCHÆOLOGY • NATURAL~HISTORY

No. 43 Spring 2012 ISSN 1474–3531 £2.00

Black-headed gull and eggs

Contributions for the Autumn 2012 issue of Ayrshire Notes, including information about the activities of Member Societies, should be sent before the end of July to Rob Close, 1 Craigbrae Cottages, Drongan, Ayr KA6 7EN, tel. 01292 590273, (email: thelearnedpig@gmail.com) or Gary Torbett, 165 Bank Street, Irvine KA12 0NH.

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AYRSHIRE NOTES
is published in Ayr by
AYRSHIRE ARCHAEOLOGICAL & NATURAL HISTORY SOCIETY
in association with
AYRSHIRE FEDERATION OF HISTORICAL SOCIETIES
and
KILMARNOCK & DISTRICT HISTORY GROUP

AYRSHIRE NOTES 43, 2011, ISSN 1474–3531

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Cover illustration

Graphic of black-headed gull and eggs by Susan Anderson. See the article on gulls' hags by Ruth Tittensor beginning on page 5.

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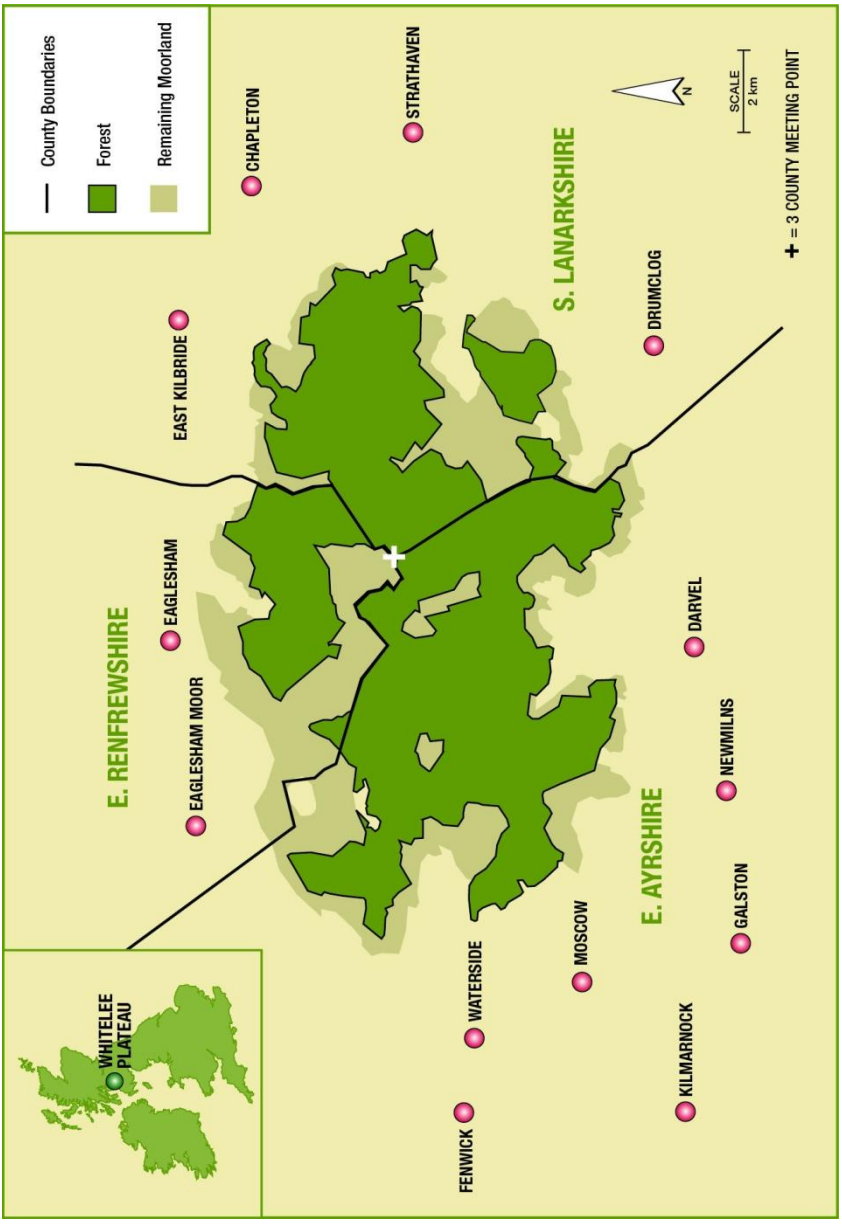

Figure 1:Whitelee Plateau Location *Graphic Susan Anderson*

The Tradition of Collecting Eggs from the Whitelee Gulls' Hags in the 20th Century

by Ruth Tittensor

(Coordinator, Whitelee Forest Oral History Project)

The Whitelee Forest Oral History Project

After the First World War 1914-1918, Great Britain's home timber resources were desperately low. The government and industry realised the necessity to grow a strategic timber reserve very rapidly. So the statutory Forest Commission was set up in 1919 to buy land and grow trees in large numbers.

The twentieth century thus became a period of vast tree-planting across the country. Productive lowland agricultural land was not used because it was needed to provide the nation's food. The Forestry Commission, therefore, was forced to buy large areas of poor hill land grazed by low densities of sheep and cattle: land of low agricultural productivity. Its new state forests (mainly coniferous because certain conifer species grow well on poor soils and in difficult climates) were planted, and gradually extended over upland landscapes throughout Great Britain. There were enormous impacts upon local communities, landscapes and ecology.

In Scotland, the degree of rural change associated with this twentieth century 'afforestation' is of similar significance to the 'Clearances' of two centuries ago, in terms of changes to land, people, economy and ecology. However, this 'afforestation' period of the countryside's history is gradually receding from living memory.

Accordingly, Ruth Tittensor, an ecologist and environmental historian, and Christopher Smout, Historiographer Royal in Scotland, set up an oral history project (The Whitelee Forest Oral History Project) to explore the personal, social, ecological and landscape history of twentieth century afforestation in Scotland. The Project was funded by the Forestry Commission with additional help from local authorities and trusts. It was carried out under the auspices of The Centre for Environmental History of the Universities of Stirling and St Andrews, giving it a strictly academic basis.

South-west Scotland was included in the large-scale afforestation of Scotland. In the region of Whitelee Plateau – on the borders of Ayrshire, Lanarkshire and Renfrewshire – there was, until recently, population stability, with comparatively little inward or outward migration of people. Families lived close, several generations remaining in the local area all their lives, with marriage usually within the locality. There are still people of an age to remember the early twentieth century, the beginning of Whitelee Forest in the 1960s and its subsequent development. There are many elderly people aged 60 to 100 who live and have lived in the locality all their lives. So their memories of the locality are unsullied by time spent in other parts of the country, an advantage for accuracy and verification.

About sixty people contributed to the Whitelee Forest Oral History Project: they gave their recorded memories, their own writings, or a written account from their spoken testimony taken down by a researcher. The period from about 1920 to 2000 was covered, so that afforestation changes could be compared with the landscape and way of life before 10 million tree seedlings came along! Aerial photographs and relevant personal photographs were accepted for later publication and archiving. We carried out little documentary research because we wished this to be an oral history as seen by people who lived in the area, who carried out the changes or who watched it happening.

Contributors to the Project told of a hard, but socially-rich, way of life in this rural locality during the first half of the twentieth century. Although seen as very poor agricultural land by the authorities, it provided rich natural resources for farm families and for residents in local towns, as well as a place for a variety of social activities. This article summarises how one of the wildlife resources – eggs of wild gulls – was used during the early and mid-twentieth century, just before the advent of Whitelee Forest.

Whitelee Plateau in the Early Twentieth Century

Whitelee is an exposed, wet, windy, upland at altitude of 687 to 1234 feet (210 to 376m), with steep sides and an undulating Plateau. It receives the prevailing south-west winds unhindered from the Firth of Clyde and North Channel. The recorded rainfall averages 68 inches (1727mm) annually, mist and fog are common, as is snow, which sometimes lay until May in the mid-twentieth century.

Whitelee Plateau lies within the triangle between Galston (East Ayrshire), Eaglesham (East Renfewshire) and Strathaven (South Lanarkshire), 20 miles (32km) south of the city of Glasgow (Figure 1, page 4).

Most of the underlying Carboniferous Basaltic Lavas and Trachyandesite of this part of Scotland, are covered in Glacial Till from the Devensian Glaciation of the Pleistocene period. In turn, most of the Till on the Whitelee Plateau is covered in deep Peat of Post-glacial (Holocene) age. The acid Peat is up to 20 feet (6m) deep according to Forestry Commission surveys and oral sources. It contains many partly-fossilised tree-trunks ('Moss Stock' or 'Bog Oak') of which birch, oak, rowan, Scots pine and willow have been identified.

Along the 90 waterways which flow in all directions from the Whitelee Plateau, a variety of glacial and Post-glacial sediments have been deposited, but these are restricted to small amounts in the valley bottoms. From soil surveys it is known that there is a variety of peat and peaty soils covering over 80% of Whitelee Plateau, with small areas of mineral soil. Most of the latter were used as enclosed inbye during the past two centuries.

Heather and grass moorland predominated on Whitelee Plateau (Figure 2, page 7). There were flushes around springs, frequent marshes, and acid peat bogs dominated by Bog Mosses (*Sphagnum* species) and the dark-green moss *Polytrichum commune*. A number of dangerous 'quaking peat bogs' engulfed sheep, cattle and horses. Rushes were a notable feature of the vegetation, said by contributors to provide good shelter for sheep and to account for the high numbers of moorland birds which used to nest on the Plateau and enclosed farmland.

Figure 2: Whitelee – Corse Hill Before Afforestation, 1980 *Photo Brian Speirs*

Before 1921, most of the farmers were tenants of the Loudoun Estate and industrial landlords. From 1921 (when Loudoun Estate sold its farms to the tenants), the Whitelee Plateau consisted of large owner-occupied, moorland farms with few trees of any kind. Occasional overgrown beech hedges, drystane dykes and deep ravines provided some shelter. Productivity was so low, that 3.5 acres (1.4 ha) of moorland were needed to support each Blackface sheep individual; the sheep lived out on the moorland all year round. Hardy Blue-grey and Galloway Cattle, kept as single-sucklers, needed just some extra feed to survive winter out on the moorland. On these moorland farms, small areas of inbye (enclosed) land were used to grow hay.

Around the edge of the Plateau and on its slopes, farms were smaller because better soil conditions meant a living could be made on less ground. Each farm had a greater proportion of inbye to moorland. Milking herds of Ayrshire cattle were kept. Oats, potatoes, turnips and hay were grown in the inbye fields (called 'parks' in this locality).

Apart from direct agricultural produce, this bleak, open Plateau provided a variety of wild food resources, including meat from game, space for social activities and recreation for youth groups and naturalists.

There were stunning views from the open Plateau, to over 70 miles (113km). The Scottish Highlands, Tinto Hill and the Pentland Hills near Edinburgh were visible in

northerly directions, while Ailsa Craig, the Isle of Arran and the Firth of Clyde could be seen to the south and west.

The Later Twentieth Century

After the Second World War, land-use at first continued much as before. However, during the 1950s, the British government realised that home-grown timber reserves were in even worse supply than in 1918. It initiated a big expansion of afforestation. As Scotland contained so much suitable upland ground, and because Scottish MPs saw it as one answer to rural unemployment, most afforestation was destined for Scotland.

Accordingly, Scottish officers of the Forestry Commission sought suitable uplands to buy for tree planting. In 1960, negotiations started with the owner of Whiteleehill farm and eventually, 1000 acres (405 ha) were purchased. During the next 25 years, land was gradually bought from over twenty Whitelee farmers and most of it was gradually afforested. Whitelee Forest now forms more or less one block of 15,000 acres (6,000 ha) of predominantly Sitka Spruce (*Picea sitchensis*) planted between 1961 and 1997, by an employed squad of four to ten local men. They had assistance from local contractors in busy times. A resident Forester and sometimes an Assistant Forester managed the forestry operations and squad. Harvesting of the first trees started in 2001, using contractors from the Scottish Borders. The clear-felled coupes were replanted soon after felling, to form the next generation of trees or 'second rotation'. Currently there are no resident forestry staff; the Forest is managed by specialists from an office in West Calder, and one nearby forester to keep an eye on developments. A wind farm of over 200 turbines was erected and started generating electricity in 2006. This necessitated clear-felling further coupes to allow wind turbines to operate without turbulence.

What Are Gulls' Hags?

Thirteen Project Contributors described how, in their young days (before, during and after the Second World War), they and many other lads and men, climbed the steep slopes from their homes below. They made for the quaking bogs on the exposed, wet peat moorland of Whitelee Plateau and Eaglesham Moor.

The object of the annual trek into the steep hills was to collect eggs, by the laundry-basket-full, of Black-headed Gulls (*Larus ridibundus*) to eat and to sell to local bakers. It is probable that eggs were also sold to bakers in London (at the time Darvel and Strathaven had busy railway stations).

These egg-collecting treks usually took place on Sundays in May each year and were important social occasions. Vivid descriptions show that there were many hundreds of gulls nesting, because, when the egg collectors disturbed the gulls' nests, 'white clouds' of birds flew up. There were at least seven nesting colonies on Whitelee Plateau and Eaglesham Moor. The nesting sites were called Gulls' Hags locally. 'Hag' has several meanings, but here 'hag' describes a 'quaking bog', which in Britain is a pool of peaty water with bog vegetation growing on its surface. A quaking bog looks like safe green ground, until one ventures onto it: then it starts to quake and ripple. If the vegetation surface is broken, the

water below its surface becomes apparent and dangerous: stock animals and humans sink and may disappear!

From 1961, the Plateau moorlands were gradually deep-ploughed by special forestry ploughs, which could (usually!) work on the deep, soggy peat without sinking. At least 10 million Sitka spruce seedlings were planted on the ploughed ridges by Forestry Commission squad workers between 1961 and the 1990s.

The testimonies below describe the Gulls' Hags from the early twentieth century until after the coming of Whitelee Forest. The testimonies are reproduced with minimum change to Contributors' spoken (recorded) memories, some of which are in the Scots language. Figure 3 (page 10) shows the location of farms mentioned, while Figure 4 (page 11) is a map with the seven known gulls' hags numbered.

Location of the Gulls' Hags

Mr Jim Leitch, a farmer retired from Gateside and High Hapton farms on the south side of the Whitelee Plateau, stated:-

> "Every spring, people from the valley went up onto the Whitelee hills to gather huge numbers of eggs from the nests of the Black-headed Gulls. They were used for eating as such, for baking and to sell to bakers in the Valley and elsewhere. There were three main sites of Gulls' Hags:-
> [The First Site] was just behind and to the northeast of High Hapton, not far east of the March Fence between Gateside Farm and High Hapton itself. The site was in the area called 'Gateside Loch', in the only heather area on Gateside Farm.
> Gateside Loch had been formed when a dam had been built in this area. It was built by Mr Dick McFarlane, the Shooting Tenant's Keeper [at the time when Mr Jim Leitch was 4-5 years old] about 1932.
> The heather in this area was divided up by natural, deep gullies about 8–10 feet deep, full of moss. Mr McFarlane damned one or more of these gullies to form the Loch. There was no burn here to be damned. Sometimes, in winter, snow would fill up the gullies. If the snow was frozen the sheep thought it was safe and walked across the snow-filled gullies.
> However, if they walked across the gullies in the soft snow of a thaw, they fell through into the gullies and would be found later, when the snow melted, dead. So Mr Jimmy Leitch [father of Jim Leitch] acquired old lorry bodies, which he put in or across the gullies for the sheep to walk over. The gulls nested around the loch in the heather and moss, and there were two or three on the island in the loch.
> [The Second Gulls' Hag] was where the farms of Whiteleehill, High Overmuir and Low Overmuir met, and this was a marsh not a heather area.
> [The Third Site] where gulls nested was around Lochfield Loch on Lochfield Farm.
> Despite egg-collecting, the Black-headed Gulls were still plentiful. The gulls' eggs were used for baking and for eating as such (for instance boiled or as an omelette), but they were rather strong-tasting. They had an orange yolk".

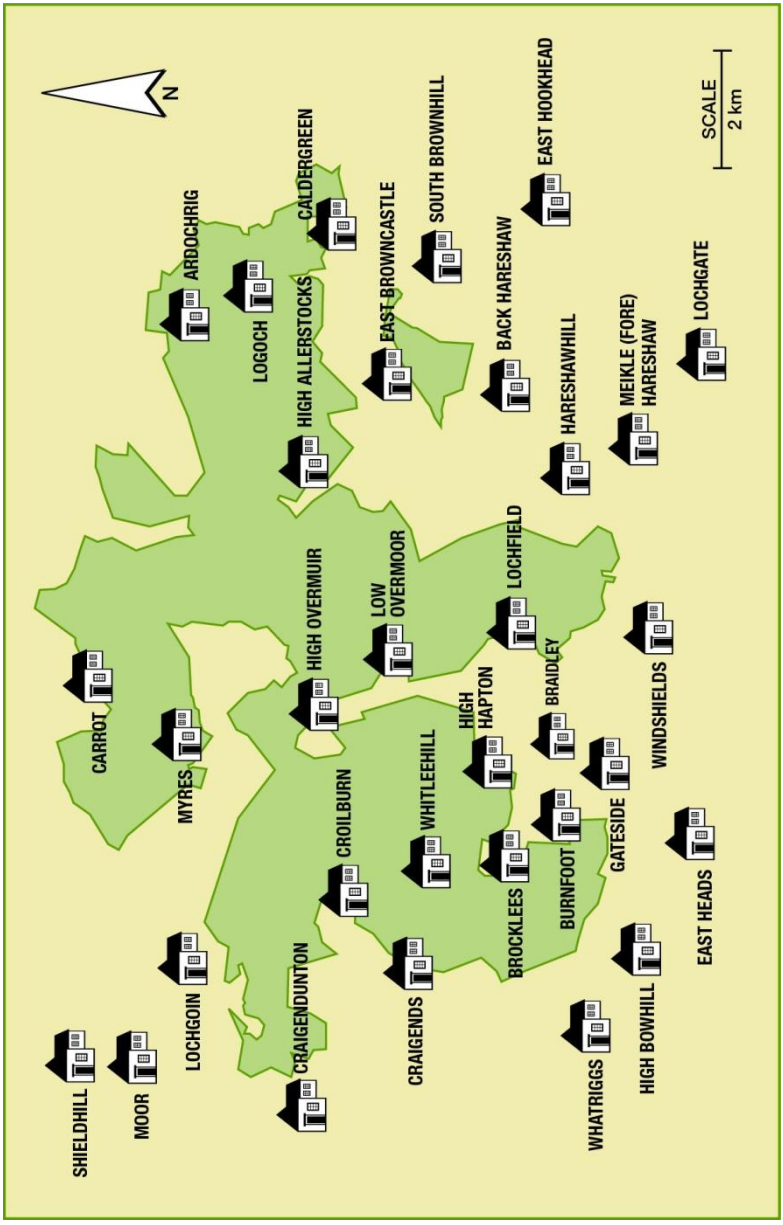

Figure 3: Farms on and near Whitelee Plateau ***Graphic Susan Anderson***

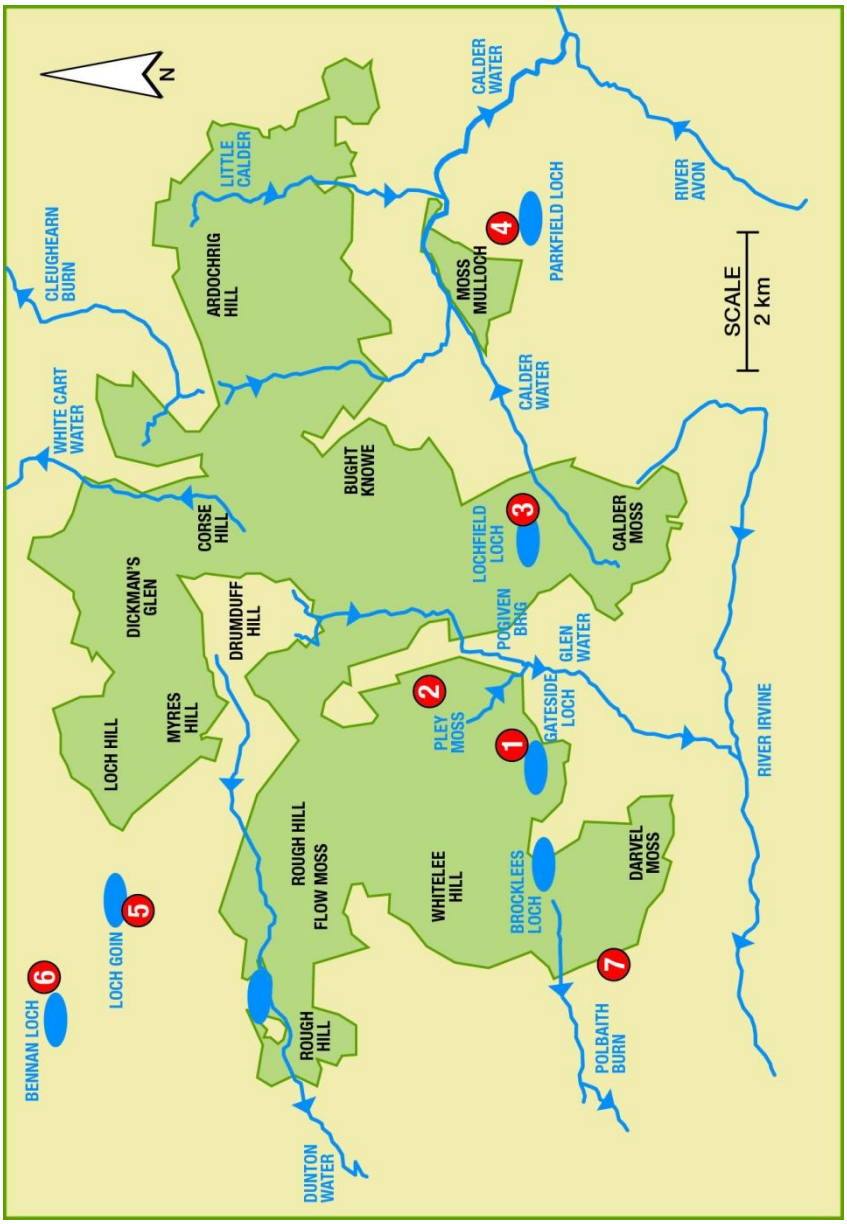

Figure 4: The Seven Gulls' Hags *Graphic Susan Anderson*

Mr Jim Kennedy, of East Hookhead farm near Strathaven, stated that:-

" [The Fourth Site] was on the north-east edge of the very flat, wet area known as Moss Mulloch (due north of Drumclog, Lanarkshire). This was a huge unenclosed basin of very wet, almost liquid, peat and avoided by sheep. This Fourth Gulls' Hag was south-west of North and South Brownhill Farms, probably just west of Parkfield Loch. Mr Tom Hope of Brownhill Farm, who is about 70 years old, will have more information".

Mr Hugh Hendry of Darvel, said that there was another site close to the northern extremity of Whitelee Plateau, on Eaglesham, Moor:-

[The Fifth Site] "Some people used to walk from Darvel, on the public road to High Overmuir, and then on over the hills to the Loch Goin area for gulls' eggs. This was a total distance of 10 miles".

In the years before and around1920, Mr Hendry's Father and Uncle were lads and used to walk to the Loch Goin hag for eggs.

Mr William Barr Senior, of Moor farm, on the edge of Eaglesham Moor, described to Ruth Tittensor how gulls nested on an island in Bennan Loch when he was a young man, although he did not go and collect gulls' eggs himself:-

[The Sixth Site]

Ruth "Did you get wild geese or duck coming in to feed on the grass?
William Ay the ducks, thay cam in whiles tae, an aw. Ay, ay, ay. Course the Binnen Loach's no that faur away, the' yist tae be quite a lote a ducks oan it, but. The ducks is aw away nou [that] the grouse, ah don-know whair thay are. Ay, ay, yist tae be quite a lote. A lote.
The' yist tae be a lote a seagulls tae, but the' waur an island up oan the Binner Loch, but eh, thay took the island away, och, years ago because the' waur that mony seagulls nestin oan it, an thay'd be thinkin thay waur foylin the watter, ken, so thay took it away. But there yist tae be a lote a seagulls nest aboot Loch Goinloch, but the'r nae seagulls thair nou aither. Ah don-know quhy".

Loch Bennan is just over half-a-mile (1km) from Shieldhill farm where Mr Barr was brought up: he was 93 in 2006, so it is likely that he remembers the gulls nesting there during the 1920s and 1930s.

Mr Archie Mitchell, of Whatriggs farm Moscow, mentioned a gulls' hag adjoining Whatriggs, which he knew of as a lad:-

[The Seventh Site] " . . . High Bowhill wis a great place for birds nesting, seagulls, seagulls would come in and nest up there".

Figure 5 (page 13) gives location details for the seven gulls' hags.

Figure 5: The Seven Gulls' Hags

Site 1	Gateside Loch	NS567421	255-260m	Loudoun Parish, East Ayrshire
Site 2	Pley Moss (Pogiven Brig)	NS567433	250-255m	Loudoun Parish, East Ayrshire
Site 3	Lochfield Loch	NS597418	260m	Loudoun Parish, East Ayrshire
Site 4	Moss Mulloch (Parkfield Loch)	NS643424	250m	Strathaven Parish, South Lanarkshire
Site 5	Loch Goin	NS540474	260-270m	Eaglesham Parish, East Renfrewshire
Site 6	Loch Bennan	NS524501	265m	Eaglesham Parish, East Renfrewshire
Site 7	High Bowhill (Polbaith Burn)	NS53-40-	225-240m	Loudoun Parish, East Ayrshire

Descriptions of the Gull's Hags

Dr. John Morton Boyd, an eminent Scottish and international conservationist, was born and brought up in Darvel in the valley of the River Irvine, just south of the Whitelee Plateau. From the age of four onwards, he spent time on the farms and moors, which he enjoyed for their freedom and the sense of adventure which he gained from them. John Morton Boyd developed a passion for the moorlands north of Darvel. In his book *The Song of the Sandpiper* he described his first wildlife expedition in the early 1930s. He wrote:-

> My first wildlife expedition was with school friends, to a colony of black-headed gulls, high on the moors near Lochfield Farm, the birthplace of Sir Alexander Fleming who had recently discovered penicillin. I was about ten tears old. The townspeople harvested the gulls' eggs for food and that was the objective of our expedition.
> The whole experience gripped me. The perilous hags sank beneath my every step, and the empty orbits of drowned sheep gaped at me from the mire. In reaching for a nest, one of the lads sank to the waist and had to be hauled out. Yet I remember the event (and others to the gullery) more for the glorious freedom of walking the moors with the wind lifting my kilt, than for the macabre look of the haggs. They were on a spacious high, rough, heather plain in which both the physical and spiritual confines of the valley were forgotten.
> This land had a dark and forbidding look, but it was possessed with air and light of piercing purity and a vigour unknown in the cloistered woods and fields below. The wild clamour of the gulls and the company of hill birds seldom seen in the valley – carrion crow, kestrel, short-eared owl, curlew, golden plover, and dunlin – was enthralling. The curlew's call (in my native tongue the 'wheeple of the whaup') is, for me the music of Arcadia.

Mr James Loudoun a retired worker in a Newmilns lace factory, who was 80 years old in 2005, remembers how, in his youth:-

"Every May, people from Darvel went with their buckets up to the gulls' nests on the moors. The nests were only a foot apart and there were hundreds of them. You could pick up dozens of gulls' eggs, which you collected in a bucket or wicker basket. Most people used the gulls' eggs for baking. Mrs Loudoun [his wife of 56 years] did not like the gulls' eggs particularly, so she did not use them".

Mr George Young, Darvel postman for many years, said:-

"The eggs of the Black-headed gulls were collected in huge quantities every year and sold to bakers in Darvel. Eggs of Lapwings (Peewits) were the only other sort of birds' eggs eaten much by local people. The gulls' nests and eggs were still plentiful when I last went to the Gulls' Hags in the early 1950s".

Mr Iain Hamilton, once of Low Overmoor Farm, Darvel, now a resident of Kilmarnock, discussed his memories of nearby gulls hags with Ruth Tittensor and Pauline Speitel:-

Pauline: "Did ye ever go tae the gulls hags and collect eggs?"
Iain: "No! But Ah ken where it is."
"Do you remember local folk goin?"
"Oh aye! Ma uncle Boab did it. Gaitherin them."
"Did ye eat them?"
"No. Fed oan waps' eggs, peasers, whatever."
"Ye didnae eat the gulls' eggs?"
"Naw, Ah didnae. Ma uncle Boab did. He went oot an gaithert them by the basket load an sellt them."
"Ye don't know how different they taste?"
"Naw, Ah couldnae tell ye. Ah honestly couldnae tell ye."
Ruth: "But if peat was so soft and moss was so soft how did they collect the eggs?"
Iain: "Well, they went oot there in they large wicker baskets an cairtit them in."
"And did they sell them down in Darvel?"
"They sellt them wherever and would tak them tae the local market. Kilmarnock market. He's the only yin Ah can remember that used tae gether them in great quantities. But Goad Ah wis just a boay then, Ah wid just be seeven, echt year auld. So yer roond aboot the mid 50s."
"And why did people stop doing it?"
Iain: "It's like everything else, it's like the – ye'd be as weel asking why supermarkets are killing aff local businesses. Folks tastes change, folk are eatin food noo that Ah wid shudder tae pit in ma mooth. It's absolutely disgraceful".

Mr Jim Leitch, a farmer retired from Gateside, stated:-

"During the nesting season many of the towns people gathered eggs for the table. I have seen a basket with 15 dozen gull eggs, the weight of the top eggs had broken the

eggs below. The broken eggs were running out the bottom of the basket. When the gulls were disturbed by egg collectors you could see a white cloud in the sky miles away."

Mr Archie Mitchell, of Whatriggs farm, spoke of mucking around with the gulls' eggs when they were kids and meant to be collecting them! In a conversation with Ruth Tittensor he remembered:-

Archie: ". . . when Ah wis young Ah yaised tae go walks up at High Bowhill, High Bowhill wis a great place for birds nesting, seagulls, seagulls would come in and nest up there."
Ruth: "And you collected the eggs?"
"Aye."
"And you ate them yourself or did you sell them?"
"Naw, the two men that were here at the time they had an egg fight wi them – that sort o thing. They went up tae High Bowhill and collectit, och just in the space o a wee while, they collectit a casefull, ken, a big case o them. But they just come doon here an had an egg fight wi them. Ah think maybe mother would cook some o them, maybe make pancakes wi them or something like that but the biggest thing wis this egg fight we had. I made a bit o a mess."

Mr David Findlay of Darvel also participated in fights with gulls' eggs:-

"Ah remember when ah wis a boy, ay, ah wis up on the moorland and it wis black-headit gulls, the herring gulls, an we used to go up an get the eggs [an that] an start throwin them about an havin a general carry-on, an come home covered in yolk, em, wi a few eggs, but, eh, we never did it often, no very often."

Mr Hugh Hendry, who roamed the Whitelee hills between the 1930s and 1980s, said:-

"Black-headed gulls had large colonies nesting in the heather of the Whitelee hills before the time of the Forest."
"Very many Darvel people collected the eggs of Black-headed Gulls, on Sundays in May each year. One particular place was near the Pogiven Brig. They walked up there (5 miles from the centre of Darvel) to what was known as one of the 'Gulls' Hags'. This was an area of ground about 150 yards square,[1] where the Black-headed gulls made nests of bits of heather. "
"People filled laundry baskets with the eggs and took them back down to Darvel for the bakeries. These eggs made cakes a nice pink colour."
"In the middle of the gulls' hags was a quaking bog, where people mostly left the eggs. However, some people had long poles or sticks, sometime broom handles, about 4-5 feet long, with tablespoons tied to the ends. They were then able to get eggs from the more boggy parts of the hags."

[1] 2250 sq. yd (1881 sq. m)

"Some people used to walk from Darvel, on the public road to High Overmuir, and then on over the hills to the Loch Goin area for gulls' eggs. This was a total distance of 10 miles."
"Another Gulls' nesting place was at Lochfield Loch, a few hundred yards east of Lochfield Farm, which was open water at that time. The nests were made on rushes in the water, and they were then very difficult to get at, so people did not get so many eggs from there as at the Hags."
"There was a large quantity of gulls nesting in the Lochfield Loch area. The local keeper did not like the collection of gulls' eggs because he thought it interfered with the grouse nesting; also, he wished to collect the gulls' eggs himself and send them to London bakeries."
"People in Kilmarnock heard about the Gulls' Hags and came to see if they could find the place, and watch, or hopefully take, some eggs, but locals were not happy with this. Eggs of Peewits and Curlews were also lifted from the Gulls' Hags, as they could be found too. Duck eggs might be lifted from the rushes if they were found."

Mr Jim Currie of Newmilns gave a unique picture of his experiences as a lad collecting eggs at the hags, while talking to Ruth Tittensor:-

Jim: "We' another thing we used tae do up there we used go collect gulls' eggs. An ah've haird other people stories about the gulls an, we collect eggs for the . . ."
Ruth: "What sort of gulls were they?"
"Black-headed. Black-headed gulls maistly . . . an Eh, we used tae collect the baker mus've had an awfu' lot o' eggs accordin' to the folk that collected eggs for the baker! . . . An, whait they used to say they used to get eggs es put 'em on a basket. Yes you could pu' 'em in a basket (Pause) but you had to pack them all, you could'na just put all th'eggs in a basket b'cause once you, the top just broke all the ones in the bo'om, ken, you had te, you could'na just full soming fu' o' eggs, you had to put it in you fill't it wi moss or some'ing . . ."
"There were that many eggs?"
"Oh Aye ken, and you ge' a wee say a basket and what you do you lay your bottle and then you get Spagnum moss, pu' all the moss it grew everywhere and you packed it all and then you pu' ye next layer-o'eggs on and then ye pu mair moss there put ye next layer right 'n so-on. Well, all they eggs tha' was all aroon the ootside o'it they were'd usually first to go, ken . . ."
"But they're seemed to be plenty o' gulls an. Bu' a lot of th'places you couldna get to them, ken root in th' middle even, well we used to go there was an old lad Slabber Jim they called him. It was one of the old time countrymen . . ."
"An Eh, so coming up by, the Co-operative used t'buy their tea in in tea chests an what they done there's the cut an the tap oot, it t' c'oor the tea oot and a' the taps were jus' fallen at the side out the back o' the shop, so Gordie y'sed to gae in and he used to lift fowr o' them and was foor'o'yus . . ."
"An eh, he used te get their things, an we went a walk t'Burnfoot and Gordie woul' ay 'is wee pipe an eh 'e broucht an aipple or somin for us, an we g'u'there a'th' sunrise an

we sat doon an' Gordie was na' he never hurried Gordie. He was so calm and colleted "Sit doon richt sit doon boy sit here right well we'er goin'e de this we'er goin'e de that. Right you de this bu' you de that bu' ahll si'here and we'll [unclear]] are all richt". So there 'e was si'in an then the firs' o' my si' ass "Whas the plywood for?" He said "Wai' an' I'll just show ye". Wi' th' an he coot i' oot an he put foor holes in it. An 'e put a bi' o' string s'roogh. An then 'e tell me tae load up my foot an' 'e tied it tae my fut, one in each fut and he tol' me to stan' up, he says "Right. Walk" well of coorse when Ah walked Ah tripped, so 'e cut them doon to th' I could walk, he says "Right walk across tha' bit" an I walk across it. Ti' Ah was walkin' stuff that had nay way Ah could'ave walked before."

"'E says "Right goo'oot there an get they eggs". So Ah went oot an I discover't Ah could get th'eggs that naebody else could Ken when Ah . . ."

"Cos it was so soft?"

"It was I mean you'se think of, right everybody said there was horse and cairts in them. Ken. "A horse went in there an it got buried". Ah mean Ah've bin up tae my knees in it but, but if Ah was up to mah knees Ah was panicking Ah wanted oot. Ken. An if he, when I used tae go there before wee Frogie an I went there m'ourselv. Ah would ge 'oot my horse an I, I'd gi' it a rope wi'us. An' I'd gae oot if Ah've thumped before he pu'ed me oot. Ken. We used to strip down to our w'our Eh, Y-fronts or, it wasn'a Y-fronts in they days it was just shirt and drawers ken"."

Young Jim Currie and his friends obviously had exciting times with their 'peat shoes' on the Whitelee Plateau! Figure 6 (page 18) is Jim Currie's 1960s photograph of a Black-headed gull nest on Whitelee.

Mr Tom Semple and **Mrs Susan Meadows** (brother and sister), who were brought up on Meikle (Fore) Hareshaw farm, Drumclog, had stricter parents, because they were not allowed onto any boggy areas on or off the farm. They explained this to Ruth Tittensor:-

Ruth: "Did you ever go out on the farm or out on to Windshields Moss, or anywhere in the area and, collect berries, or birds' eggs, or did you collect the gulls' eggs that some people have talked about, for food?"

Tom: "No. Not personally, but I have heard my father and that talking about going to collect gulls' eggs. Not just sure whereabouts it was, but it was out, out there somewhere that is planted now."

Susan: "But in a way I think as children as well they didn't... You weren't encouraged to go across, that was, could be boggy . . . And you sort of stayed there. Even if you were down that field where the forest is now, but if you were down in our field, you weren't... It was a sort of no-no to go across that fence, because it could be boggy, you could sink."

"So we never really did go across there."

Ruth: " . . . pretty dangerous?"

Tom: "Mhm."

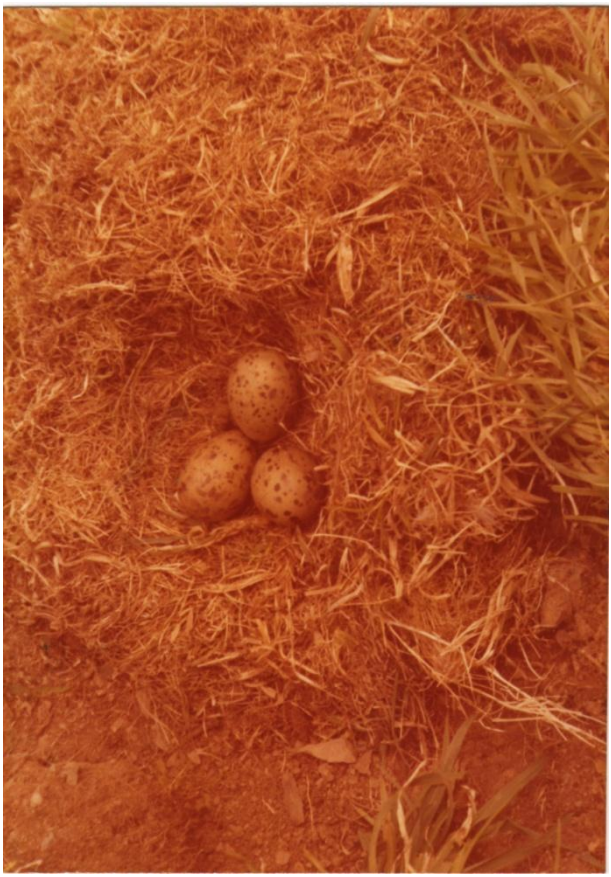

Figure 6: Black-headed Gull Nest, Whitelee 1960s *Photo Jim Currie*

Mr James Mair, a teacher and historian, of Newmilns, described to Ruth Tittensor the small island on the 'Constructed Dam' (alias Brocklees Loch). This large loch was formed by a dam built on the Brocklees Burn in the 1930s by a Newmilns builder. It is not listed here as a distinct gulls hag because it was insufficiently large enough for more than a few gulls' nests.

James Mair seems to have eaten more peewits' eggs than gulls' eggs, because his father collected them:-

> **Ruth:** "Now I've heard a lot about gulls' eggs and people collecting gulls' eggs. Did you ever do that, or did you know about people doing it? And what did they do it for?"
> **James:** "Well I knew about it, but I didn't collect any. By the time I'd started being able to collect things like gulls' eggs, they seemed to have disappeared from the land round the, what was known, as the Constructed Dam. Well we could see quite a lot of

gulls, there was a little island then there, I don't know if it's still there yet, where we could see gulls were nesting. On the little island on the Constructed Dam. But, they were not able to get out to it. There is a, there was a hut with a fishing boat in it, a boat in it, a rowing boat, but, that was always locked."

"So (laughs) we couldn't get out to the island. And, I think, all the nests had been raided out of existence. I'm not too sure about this, before we started taking an interest in collecting, because, the countryside was practically cleaned of gulls' eggs, and peewits' eggs, during the war time. Everybody went collecting peewits' eggs, and gulls'."

"This was for food?"

"Additional food, because, eggs were rationed then."

"Yes. So did they eat them as eggs, or did they use them in baking or other means of cooking?"

"Everything, cookery, baking, baking, yes. And for food."

"Do you ever remember eating them?"

"Well I've eaten gulls' eggs, and peewits' eggs, yes."

"Did you enjoy them?"

"Peewits' yes. But I didn't like the idea of my father collecting them. I didn't know then that they were going to be out of existence practically eventually, because there were millions of them. So it wasnae doing any harm then, because there were so many, you could go up the fields and, you know, they have this habit of screeching down towards you as if they're trying to frighten you off. So, I didn't like the idea. But, they were there for food when you were young, and you were glad to get something tasty that you didn't normally get on your ration book."

The Main Gulls' Hag

The biggest hag (Site 3) was on Lochfield Farm (birthplace of Alexander Fleming). This was a 'quaking bog', that is *Sphagnum* mosses, rushes and other plants growing over and around the surface of a pool of peaty water. Around three sides of the quaking bog heather grew on ground about one metre higher than the bog itself. But on the north (uphill) side of the quaking bog the ground was not as dry as the heather surrounds, yet not as wet as the rest of the bog - with grasses and little bog moss. There was an outlet to the south-east with rushes and *Sphagnum* vegetation forming a wide green band downhill. The quaking bog was of a square shape, and had been fenced since time immemorial to keep stock (and people?) from the dangerous conditions.

Mr Hugh Hendry said of this area:-

"As you walked east over the flat area from the Glen Water just near Low Overmoor, through the heather, you would first of all see one gull coming towards you. Then a bit further on about a dozen would come and meet you. As you got a bit closer you could see more gulls and you knew you were going in the right direction. As you got right up to the gulls' hag, a white cloud would rise above you, screeching loudly and dive-bombing you."

"The gulls' hag did not cover a very large area; the nests were packed close, only about a foot apart. You might go up a bit too early on a Saturday and find no eggs had been laid – but a friend who went up on the following day, Sunday, would be able to collect dozens."

After Afforestation

Coincident with large areas of land on the Whitelee hills being ploughed and then planted with trees, the gulls started nesting in a more dispersed pattern according to **Mr Hugh Hendry:-**

"Egg collecting started to die away when forestry ploughing to plant trees commenced. The birds started to move away from the main areas of the Hags and Lochfield Loch and nest in smaller quantities approx. 10 -20 pairs over a larger area, for instance north-west of Croilburn Farm, east of Whitelee Farm and south of High Overmuir and Flow Moss. At about the same time, Lochfield Loch was drained by the new owner of Lochfield Farm."

"After Whitelee Forest came - to begin with - the gulls continued to spread out (from their original few nesting hags) over the Whitelee Forest area to form lots of little colonies, such as at Flow Moss, where it is marshy." *And:-*

"The vicinity of Lochfield Loch was still used by Black-headed gulls for a year or so when birds started to split off from the main hag and when the bird numbers had already reduced drastically there."

Mr Hendry then said "then the gulls disappeared with the Forestry" from these hills.

He said the egg collecting was: " . . . mostly in desperate times associated with the war. Everything was used, and when going for the gulls' eggs, any other eggs found, like those of mallard or curlews, were collected. . . ."

'Dispersal Hags' is my name for the scattered nesting sites. The following places were mentioned as Dispersal Hags: Flow Moss about one mile north-west of Croilburn steading; the other area called Flow Moss; south of High Overmuir steading; east of Whiteleehill steading; the marsh in front of Lochgate farm near Loudoun Hill; Mean Muir, three miles south of Whitelee Forest, and in lots of small groups scattered over the Plateau.

Mr Hendry was pleased that:-

"In 2003, a few Black-headed gulls were again seen in the Whitelee hills area."

Although James Mair did suggest that the gulls and their eggs were eaten out of existence during the Second World War, other Contributors agreed that numbers of nesting gulls were as high as ever until the Plateau was deep ploughed for afforestation after 1960.

Map Evidence

Early maps give clues as to whether Black-headed gulls had been nesting in the same large colonies before the time of Contributors' memories.

Roy's map of 1750 does show "Loch" in the location of Lochfield Loch, but the area east of the Glen Water is shown with cultivation 'rigs'. Would this rigged ground surface

have been conducive to gulls' nesting? There is no evidence of ground features for the other colony locations on Roy's map.

Armstrong's map of 1775 shows Lochfield Loch in the middle of a huge rough, moor or mire stretching from Braidley Farm in the south to well beyond High Overmuir in the north. This apparently-suitable gull-nesting area would include Site 3 and possibly Site 5.

Thomson's Map of 1828 and Johnston's Map of Ayrshire of 1860 both show the same huge area of wet, unenclosed ground from Braidley Farm north to beyond High Overmoor farm. But now the maps are sufficiently accurate for the size of this area to be calculated: it measured nearly 4 miles from south to north and one-and-a-half miles from east to west. This would seem suitable gull-nesting ground. Lochfield Loch (Site 3) is shown as water within a big rectangular enclosure of marsh within that overall area. The other gulls' hags areas were not differentiated on these maps.

The 1858 Ordnance Survey 6 inches-to-the-mile map shows Lochfield Loch (Site 3) similarly within an enclosure of different ground. Sites 1 and 2 gulls' hags' locations are shown within an enormous, unenclosed, rough or moorland area covering more acreage than in the twentieth century.

The 1921 Loudoun Estate Farm Sale map does not cover the gulls' hags localities.

These maps indicate evidence for only Lochfield Loch (Site 3) having continuous suitable gull nesting site during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, Sites 1 and 2 appear to have been suitable unenclosed moorland during the later nineteenth century and verbal evidence reinforces this for the twentieth century. For Site 4, I have no early evidence. For Site 5, Armstrong's 1775 map suggests it could have been suitable gull nesting ground.

Maps suggest that at least some gulls' hags nesting grounds could have been in existence from the nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries at Whitelee.

It is interesting to know of other early evidence for gull egg collecting. Keaton and Keaton (1898) visited Scouton Mere, Norfolk in 1895, to take photographs of a very large colony of Black-headed gulls on the Mere's island. They stated that 20,000 eggs were collected from nests each spring, but that second broods were left alone.

Discussion

From the evidence of Contributors to the Project, it seems that residents of Whitelee Plateau, the Irvine Valley, Waterside, Eaglesham Moor, (as well as further afield to Kilmarnock), used this prolific wildlife resource for at least five decades: up to 1920, 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and 1950s. The springtime treks to the Gulls' Hags declined not during the Second World War, but after afforestation.

After 1960, large blocks of moorland were sold by farmers to the Forestry Commission. Areas of 500-600 acres (202-243 ha) were fenced against stock and then deep ploughed annually for the next two decades. Thus, what had been open moorland rough grazing and quaking peat bogs, were altered greatly in outline, vegetation and hydrology. They were probably unsuitable for large colonies of gulls to nest.

After attempts at nesting in smaller, dispersed colonies for a few years, the gulls ''disappeared''. They may have discovered suitable nesting sites elsewhere, or not, in which case they declined in overall numbers due to reduced breeding success.

The 1960s and 1970s were the time when human food in Great Britain became more plentiful than ever before, indeed with a food surplus; people went hungry no more. The social purpose of visiting the gulls' hags had been a trip of necessity, to provide food for families as well as cash for the sale of eggs to bakers. The disappearance of gull nesting colonies thus coincided with people's reduced need to go collecting the eggs or other wild food.

There is no way of determining accurately how many gulls nested at each hag or in total over the whole Whitelee Plateau and Eaglesham Moor locality. But the descriptions suggest it may have been in the thousands of pairs.

In recent years, I have seen two large nesting sites of Black-headed gulls elsewhere. The first was on the Pentland Hills, Midlothian, on the outskirts of Edinburgh in 2005.

Hundreds of Black-headed gulls were nesting on an island and around the shores of the North Esk Reservoir above the village of Carlops (Figure 7, page 25).

The second was close to Killington Service Station between Junctions 36 and 37 of the M6 Motorway in Cumbria, in 2010. The Killington Reservoir (which provides water for the Lancaster Canal) lies between the M6 and A6 (the 'Old Scotch Road'). An estimated one thousand Black-headed gulls appeared to be nesting on an island on the Reservoir.

Black-headed gulls are known to nest in large colonies, usually using the same locality for a long period. For instance, in 2009, the scrape at Minsmere Nature Reserve in Norfolk held an estimated 1100 pairs of nesting Black-headed gulls on this regularly-used site (www.wildlifeextra.com/go/news/minsmere-terns009.html).

The Encyclopedia of Life web site gives many interesting details of Black-headed gull ecology, habitat and breeding, for instance, that "The nest is a rough construction of vegetation based on a shallow scrape and placed on a floating mat, in broken reeds, on a hummock, or sometimes on dry, grassy or sandy ground. It usually nests in dense colonies with neighbouring nests placed an average of 1m apart" See web site:

www.birdlife.org/datazone/speciesfactsheet.php?id=3240.

It is still legal to collect Black-headed gulls' eggs for human consumption in Great Britain, under licence from Scottish Natural Heritage, the Welsh Government and Natural England.

See web sites: www.snh.gov.uk/protecting-scotlands-nature/species-licensing/forms-and-guidance/application-forms and

www.naturalengland.org.uk/Images/gull-licensing_tcm6-18281.pdf. These statutory organisations must show that they comply with such derogation as authorised under Article 9 of the European Wild Birds Directive. This means that licences are limited and have strict conditions. In England, only people with 'traditional' reasons for collecting gulls' eggs can obtain a licence and such people are in older age groups and therefore becoming fewer.

In England, gulls' eggs are collected each year from several English sites. Restaurant chefs then produce a number of strange and interesting dishes. Apparently, up to 40,000 Black-headed gulls' eggs are collected in the UK annually! For more information,

see web site: www.telegraph.co.uk/foodanddrink/foodanddrinknews/5065716/Top-restaurants-face-shortage-of-seagull-eggs.html. Nevertheless, eggs are said to be in short supply to 'top' restaurants in London, which usually buy them for £5-£6 each.

Conclusions

I conclude that from the late nineteenth century and for least sixty years of the twentieth century, Black-headed gulls nested in large enough numbers on the moorlands of Whitelee Plateau and Eaglesham Moor, that yearly collection of large numbers of their eggs was possible by local people.

I also conclude that afforestation (that is, enclosure, deep-ploughing and tree-planting) was coincident with first, a dispersal, then a decline, and finally, extinction of the nesting colonies of Black-headed gulls on the Whitelee plateau and adjoining moorland.

It is possible, but not certain, that afforestation processes caused these enormous effects upon the breeding populations of Black-headed Gulls in the mid-twentieth century. The effects, however caused, were rapid, that is within a few years.

However, two of the gulls' hags were not afforested and are still moorland or grassland today. Yet nesting at these sites also discontinued, and there is no nesting of Black-headed gulls at these sites nowadays (I do not know when the gulls ceased nesting on these sites). The moorland near Loch Goin (Site 5), where the gulls had nested in the past, was not afforested. However, levels of stock-grazing and the degree of agricultural improvement (including drainage) in the last half-century are unknown: their effects may be relevant to site suitability for gull nesting.

The Moss Mulloch site at Parkfield Loch (Site 4) was not afforested either, and is still sheep-grazed pasture. Yet it too lost its nesting gulls. Site 6 (the island in Loch Bennan) was lost as a breeding site when the water authority deliberately removed the island to avoid pollution of the new reservoir water by gulls!

Some Contributors suggested that deep ploughing and afforestation may have depleted the supply of old heather twigs which had previously been used by the gulls as nesting material and that this could have contributed to unplanted sites becoming unsuitable.

Local people who used to collect gulls' eggs feel that their collection of huge numbers of eggs each year did not noticeably affect the size of the breeding groups from year to year. There is no data to support or deny this theory at Whitelee. However, work has been carried out in Hampshire, England on the breeding success of Black-headed gulls in harvested and un-harvested sites. It showed that harvested nests had eggs with a smaller volume, smaller yolk-to-albumen ratio and thinner shells than eggs in un-harvested nests. Harvested nests also had more abnormal eggs than un-harvested nests. The poor quality of eggs in harvested nests was correlated with worse hatching and chick survival (Wood et al (2009)).

Figure 8 (page 25) shows the current use of Whitelee Plateau as Europe's largest onshore wind farm. Figure 9 (page 26) gives the English, Scots and Latin names of species mentioned in the text.

References

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Acknowledgements

I gratefully acknowledge the local people who wrote or recorded their memories of the Gulls' Hags: Mr William Barr Senior (now deceased) of Fenwick, Mr Jim Currie (now deceased) of Newmilns, Mr David Findlay of Darvel, Mr Iain Hamilton of Kilmarnock, Mr Hugh Hendry of Newmilns, Mr Jim Kennedy of Strathaven, Mr Jim Leitch of Newmilns, Mr James Loudoun of Newmilns, Mr James Mair (now deceased) of Newmilns, Mrs Susan Meadows of Dumfries, Mr Archie Mitchell of Moscow, Mr Tom Semple of Drumclog and Mr George Young (now deceased) of Darvel. James Mair was the author of two Ayrshire Monographs (see below).

Dr John Morton Boyd's book *The Song of the Sandpiper* was published by Colin Baxter Photography Ltd in 1999, and is quoted with permission of the publisher. I am very grateful to Mr John W. MacKinnon of Dalkeith, Midlothian for taking and donating the photograph of the black-headed gull colony by the North Esk Reservoir; and to Dr Keith Hobley for the wind turbine photograph. I acknowledge the skills of Susan Anderson of Eikon Graphics in designing the maps and cover picture.

Other publications

Ruth Tittensor, *From Peat Bog to Conifer Forest: An Oral History of Whitelee, Its Community and Landscape*, 2009, £22.50 + £2.50 p&p (or £20.00 from the author).

James Mair, *Cessnock: An Ayrshire estate in the Age of Improvement*, AANHS 1996.

James Mair, *A Community Rent Asunder: The Newmilns laceweavers strike of 1897*, AANHS 1999.

Figure 7: Black-headed Gull Nesting Colony, N. Esk Reservoir, Midlothian, 2005
Photo John Mackinnon

Figure 8: Wind Turbines, Whitelee Plateau 2008 *Photo Keith Hobley*

Figure 9: English, Scots and Latin Names of Species

Birch	*(Betula* species*)*
Black-headed Gull	*(Larus ridibundus)*
Bog Moss	(*Sphagnum* species*)*
Carrion Crow	*(Corvus corone)*
Curlew	*(Numenius arquata)*
Duck (Mallard)	*(Anas platyrhynchos)*
Dunlin	*(Calidris alpina)*
Golden Plover	*(Charadrius aprocarius)*
Heather	*(Calluna vulgaris)*
Kestrel	*(Falco tinnunculus)*
Lapwing/Peewit	(*Vanellus vanellus)*
Meadow Pipit	*(Anthus pratensis)*
Moss Cheeper	*(Anthus pratensis)*
Oak	*(Quercus* species*)*
Peaser	*(Vanellus vanellus)*
Rowan	*(Sorbus aucuparia)*
Rushes	(*Juncus* species*)*
Sandpiper	*(Tringa hypoleucos)*
Scots Pine	*(Pinus sylvestris)*
Short-eared Owl	*(Asio flammeus)*
Sitka Spruce	*(Picea sitchensis)*
Whaups/Waps	*(Numenius arquata)*
Willows	(*Salix* species)

A Distinguished Son of Ayrshire:

John W Mackail BA (Oxon) MA (Oxon) LLD OM

(1859 – 1945)

by Alan Mackaill

John Mackail (centre)

John Mackail was a notable son of Ayrshire, the grandson of a simple Ayrshire farm worker, and a distinguished former pupil of Ayr Academy. He rose to high rank in both the academic world and the Civil Service and had an impressive list of connections. As is often the case, he is not well known in his own country which is the reason for this article – a brilliant man!

John William Mackail was born at Ascog, Bute, on 26th August 1859. His roots, though, were deep in the soil of Ayrshire. His great grandparents, John Mckail and Mary McKelvie were married circa 1771. They had a family of five children: John (b 1771 Maybole) David (b 1777 Kirkmichael) Hugh (b circa 1778, John's grandfather) John (b 1788 Maybole) and Agnes (b circa 1784).

Hugh married Margaret Murdoch in 1809 and worked as an agricultural labourer. They had a family of eight. Their eldest son John (b 4th September 1810 Coylton) served as Free Church minister in Malta from 1843 to 1846. In 1846 he was appointed to serve in Calcutta, and in June of the same year he married Louisa Carson in 1846. The OPR for St Cuthbert's Edinburgh records the event thus:

"The Rev John Mackail, late of Malta now of the Free Church in Calcutta, presently residing in No 28 India Street Edinburgh and Miss Louisa Irving Carson, residing in 92 Lauriston Place in this parish, daughter of Aglionby Ross Carson LL.D., late Rector of the High School, have been three several times duly and regularly proclaimed in the parish of St Cuthberts in order to marriage and no objections offered. Married on the 17th day of June current by the Rev Dr Robert Gordon, Minister of the Free High Church, Edinburgh."

The Reverend Mackail resigned his charge in 1852, and seems to have lived thereafter on Bute. A daughter, Ann, was born in Rothesay in 1856, with John following in 1895. Louisa Mackail died in 1865 aged 45 at 9 Havelock Terrace, Ayr when John was aged only six and about to start his education at Ayr Academy. He progressed through Ayr Academy excelling in classics. This excellence is recorded in the minutes of the Board of Directors of Ayr Academy for the 24th of December 1874, the year he left school, aged 15, to continue his education at Edinburgh University:

"Convened the following members of the Standing Committee viz. Provost Goudie. Mr Andrew Paterson. Mr William Alexander, Mr R D Murdoch. Provost Goudie presiding.

"The Secretary submitted a letter which he had received from Professor Fraser of the Edinburgh University reporting the result of the competitive examination for the vacant Cowan Bursary from which it appeared that Mr J W Mackail had the highest number of marks but that as the third Patrick Bursary had been awarded to him the Cowan Bursary was assigned to Mr Watson second on the list. The marks gained by the respective candidates viz. J W Mackail 347, M Watson 276, D Trail 271, W Robertson 226. The report further states that "the examiners were much impressed by the high attainments of all the candidates for the Cowan Bursary. Ayrshire and Ayr Academy have a most distinguished place in our general list as will appear when it is published. We are more and more satisfied with the good work which the Cowan and other Ayrshire bursaries are doing in the higher education of the county."

"The Provost stated that it offered the Directors much gratification to receive Professor Fraser's report which he thought reflected the highest credit upon the Rector and the other masters of the Academy and he moved that the Secretary be instructed to publish an extract of the minutes of this meeting and to send a copy thereof to Dr Macdonald the Rector. The Provost's motion was unanimously agreed to."

In his excellent little book on the early history of the Schools Inspectorate, John Wilson refers briefly to his fellow students in his first year of the Arts course at Edinburgh. John W Mackail was one such, and described by Wilson as "our most brilliant classical scholar."[1] Even at this early age his fellow students recognised his ability. However Mackail remained at Edinburgh for only one year. The University has no record of the reason for his leaving and it is not known what he did before the award of an exhibition to Balliol College, Oxford in 1878, where he matriculated on the 19th October

At Oxford, he won many prizes and scholarships during his undergraduate years (too many to list here) and graduated B.A. with First Class Honours in 1881. He was made a fellow of Balliol College in 1882 and undertook postgraduate studies, graduating with an M.A. in 1885. Mackail left Oxford in 1884 (the year of his father's death)[2] to join the Civil Service where he remained until his retiral in 1919, reaching the rank of Assistant Secretary.[3]

From 1919 until his death in 1945 Mackail devoted himself to scholarship and criticism. John Mackail was a prolific writer publishing something like fifty works on the Latin poets (especially Virgil on whom he was considered an expert), Shakespeare, the Icelandic sagas and the sayings of Jesus. He was a close personal friend of the social reformer William Morris and published the official biography of Morris in 1899.[4]

He was honoured by his old university with his election as Oxford Professor of Poetry (1906 – 1911). This involved Mackail in giving a series of lectures which he published in 1919 entitled "Lectures on Greek Poetry". In the 20s and 30s Mackail was President of various literary associations of which the most important was The British Academy (1932-36). The Order of Merit, created by Edward VII in 1902 and limited to 24 members was awarded to Mackail in the New Year Honours list for 1st January 1935. He took the place left vacant by the death in 1933 of the novelist and Nobel laureate John Galsworthy. Interestingly, the first new member to be appointed after Mackail's death in 1945 was Winston Churchill.

In 1888 Mackail married Margaret Burne-Jones. She was the only daughter of Sir Edward Burne-Jones (the artist and designer) and his wife Georgiana Macdonald.[5] There were to be three children, Angela Margaret (1890-1961), Denis George (1892-1971) and Claire (1896-1975). Initially the family lived at 27 Young Street, Kensington but later moved to 6 Pembroke Gardens. This was John and Margaret's home until his death in 1945. Margaret died in 1953. Both Angela and Denis achieved fame as novelists (she wrote under the name Angela Thirkell).

Angela was educated at the Froebel Institute, Kensington and at St Paul's School, Hammersmith, "finishing" her education in France and Germany. Her first marriage, in 1911, was to James McInnes in 1911. McInnes was a bisexual and an alcoholic. Angela bore him two sons, Graham and Colin but not surprisingly divorced him in 1917. In September that year she met George Thirkell, an Australian ex-serviceman. He was an engineering graduate with little of Angela's cultural background but moved in the higher ranks of society. Early in 1920 Thirkell took Angela and her two sons to Australia where Lancelot Thirkell was born. Angela and George Thirkell drifted apart and she returned to her parents' home in Pembroke Gardens in 1929. Angela had already started writing while in Australia (her first published article appeared in the Cornhill Magazine in 1921) but now got down to the serious business of writing books, her first, Three Houses, a memoir of her childhood homes, was published by OUP in 1931. She continued to publish regularly and her final novel, Three Score and Ten, appeared posthumously in 1961. Graham and Colin McInnes, Angela's sons by her first marriage, were both well-known writers in the 1950s.[6]

Denis Mackail was also educated at St Paul's School and in 1910, like his father, went up to Balliol College, Oxford but had to leave in 1912 without taking a degree because of ill health. After three months in South Africa (again for health reasons) Denis returned to England and began work designing stage sets for J M Barrie.[7] It seemed that Denis had a good career ahead of him but this was cut short by the outbreak of the First World War. He was considered unfit, medically, for military service and so spent the war years in the War Office. In 1917 he married Diana Granet and set up home at 23 Walpole Street, Chelsea. After the war Denis left the War Office and worked for a commercial concern but eventually his employer went bankrupt. It was at this time that his first novel, What Next, (1920) was published and he decided to become a full-time writer, his subsequent books including a long biography of Barrie (The Story of J,M.B., 1941). When Diana died in 1949, at the early age of 56, Mackail ceased writing, his books quickly going out of print. He lived quietly in London until his death in 1971.

John W. Mackail died on 13th December 1945 and his funeral took place at Golders Green Crematorium. According to the list of mourners published by *The Times* several family members were absent. [8] These were his wife Margaret, his daughter Claire and his grandsons Graham and Colin McInnes. The Master of Balliol and Fellows were represented and Sir Frederick Kenyon and Sir Sydney Cockerell attended in person. Although his skills were in the field of literary criticism, he moved in artistic and literary society, and this seems to have engendered an aptitude for writing in his family that allows us to claim Angela Thirkell and Colin MacInnes for the widening circle of novelists with Ayrshire connections.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Pamela McIntyre of Ayrshire Archives for her help and advice in the preparation of this article.

1 Wilson, John, *Tales and Travels of a School Inspector,* Glasgow, Jackson Wylie & Co., 1928

2 Rev John McKaill left an estate valued at £8895 14s 4d.

3 *Chambers Biographical Dictionary*.

4 *The Life of William Morris,* London, Longmans Green & Co., 2 vols, 1899.

5 Georgiana was one of four beautiful and able sisters who married well. One married Alfred Baldwin and another married John Kipling. Margaret Mackail was therefore cousin to the future Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and also to the writer Rudyard Kipling.

6 The boys were left in Australia when Thirkell returned to England. Graham's best book is *Finding my Father,* 1967, an account of his search for his father; Colin, who took MacInnes as his surname, is best known for his novels of bohemian life in London: *City of Spades* (1957) and *Absolute Beginners* (1959), had much in common with his father.

7 A family friend, who was also Angela's godfather.

8 *The Times,* 18th December 1945

Major Alexander Martin and Lieutenant John Leavach: nineteenth century military heroism and Clyde marine natural history

by Geoff Moore

Major Alexander Martin

Charles Kingsley (1855) penned the following enigmatic sentence in *Glaucus*:

> There are those who can sympathise with the gallant old Scotch officer mentioned by some writer on sea-weeds, who, desperately wounded in the breach at Badajos, and a sharer in all the toils and triumphs of the Peninsular war, could in his old age show a rare sea-weed with as much triumph as his well-earned medals, and talk over a tiny spore-capsule with as much zest as the records of sieges and battles (p. 37).

Who, these days, ever wonders to whom Kingsley was referring? The "gallant old Scotch officer" in question was Major Alexander Martin (*c*. 1782-1857), of Mayville Cottage, Stevenston (Ayrshire). He was living at this address in 1837.[1] Referred to generally by his contemporaries though as Major Martin "from Ardrossan" he was the dredging companion of Professor John Hutton Balfour (1908-1884) and the Reverend David Landsborough (1779-1854) in the Firth of Clyde (note Landsborough 1851; Brown 1878; Moore 2010) in later life. Equally, the aforementioned "some writer on sea-weeds" was none other than David Landsborough. Why Kingsley sought so to obfuscate the identity of these two persons remains mysterious. Later in *Glaucus* (pp. 161-162) Kingsley recommended Landsborough's contributions approvingly, as follows: "Two little "Popular" Histories, one of British Zoophytes, the other of British Sea-weeds, by Dr. Landsborough (lately dead of cholera, at Saltcoats, the scene of his energetic and pious ministry), are very excellent." Miles (1872: 275) referred to Landsborough and Martin as "indefatigable" in their investigations of Arran's marine biological riches. They are listed close together in Pigot's *Directory* (1837: 276), under the heading 'Gentry and Clergy' for Saltcoats. The sixty-five year old Martin was described by Thompson (1847: 158) as "a gentleman well-known as a lover of natural history, and as a successful collector of objects of zoological and botanical interest". He left no published natural history to his own name (that I am aware of anyway).

His first commission was as Ensign in the 45th Regiment of Foot (Anon, 1802). The official history of the 45th Foot (Dalbiac 1902) contains several references to Alexander Martin and reveals an error in Kingsley's account in that Martin, then a Captain, was wounded at Ciudad Rodrigo (1810), not Badajos (1812). The eventual assault on the ramparts, breached by cannon fire, of the besieged town (12 days) of Ciudad Rodrigo was committed to the "Fighting Third" division and MacKinnon's brigade, with the 45th in the van. Sir Thomas Picton (1758-1815) ordered the formation of a forlorn hope and Captain

Martin, "commanding the Grenadier company, who was there badly wounded already, put an end to all difficulties [of selection] by requesting leave to lead as he stood with his company at the head of the regiment" (Dalbiac 1902: 88).

Alexander Martin attained the rank of Major and became one of the most decorated officers of Wellington's Peninsular campaign: his Peninsula medal bearing clasps for Roleia, Vimiera, Talavera, Ciudad Rodrigo, Nivelle, Nive and Orthéz (Dalbiac 1902: 239; note, none for Badajos).

Lieutenant John Leavach

Discovered in a scrapbook of press cuttings, assembled by a local man (the late Murdo K. MacPherson, and kindly made available to me by his daughter Mrs Rowena Sloss), was a Scottish newspaper article of unrecorded provenance entitled "Noted scientist's local link". It contained the following information:

> From a cutting received from the "Cape Argus", reference of a highly appreciative character regarding the well-known South African scientist, Dr. Robt. Broom is made. Dr. Broom received that high geological award, the Wollaston Medal, in London, recently [awarded in 1949].
>
> Dr. Broom became a scientist at the age of six when he came to Millport and stayed with his grandparents. He met here a retired army officer of the name of John Leavach, whose hobby was marine biology, and who introduced him to his small aquarium of marine animals in glass bowls in the garden wall of his home. After three years of fellowship, John Leavach died at Millport at the age of 86 and was buried here, and he left his books and microscope to young Broom, his protégé. From these early beginnings Broom went on to become the world-renowned personage he now is.
>
> John Leavach was a native of Nova Scotia. He was an officer in the 21st Foot and thereafter retired to Millport where he died on 7th September, 1875.
>
> His, now somewhat dilapidated, memorial stone in Millport's 'Old' cemetery reads:
>
> Erected by friends
> To the memory of
> JOHN LEAVACH
> Late Lieutenant in 21st Regiment
> Born at Halifax, Nova Scotia in 1789
> After an eventful life
> He died at Millport, 7 Septr 1875
>
> ———————————
>
> All flesh is grass and all the glory
> Of Man as the flower of grass, but
> The word of the Lord endureth for ever

John Leavach (1789-1875), the son of an officer of the 21st (Royal North British Fusilier) Regiment of Foot, retired in 1822 (Buchan 1925). The 21st Foot went to Nova

Scotia in 1789, serving there for four years.[2] In the 1841 census (recorded therein with the Pasker family (at Gateside, Beith, Ayrshire), however, John Leavach was stated as having been born in Scotland. Leavach[3] is a very rare surname in Scotland; in 1891 there were only one or two families of this name, in Caithness.[4]

John Leavach fought valiantly at the battle of New Orleans in 1815:

> Lieutenant John Leavach was one of two British officers who actually managed to reach and climb over the American parapet on January 8, 1815. Though wounded, he demanded the swords of two enemy officers on the scene. However, his men had not followed him over the wall, and Leavach was compelled to surrender his own sword and person. Impressed by his bravery, the Americans treated their prisoner with courtesy and respect until he was exchanged a few days later. The incident was recorded in Henry Cooke's 1835 Narrative of the New Orleans campaign. A descendant of Leavach's Tennessee captor used the heirloom sword in the American Civil War.

So read the label to the exhibit of Leavach's sword in a display of the historic New Orleans collection entitled "The terrible and the brave: the battles for New Orleans, 1814-1815" held in New Orleans, Louisiana (17 May 2005 – 8 January 2006).[5]

Robert Broom, FRS (1866-1951), the famous South African geologist and anthropologist was born in Paisley, Scotland (Watson 1952). He suffered though from bronchitis and, as a sickly child of six years old, was sent to live with his grandmother at Millport. There he met with John Leavach who was an avid amateur naturalist and who introduced him to the microscope and marine life. Broom continued to use Leavach's microscope (see above) for sixty years.[6]

Like Martin, Leavach's interest in natural history has left no published trace of which I am aware. Sadly, we know little else about them other than these tantalising mentions by others. It seems appropriate, however, to resurrect recognition of their supportive roles in natural history while noticing their valorous services to the British Crown.

Acknowledgement

I am grateful to Mr Bill Noblett (Assistant Librarian, University of Cambridge) for attending promptly to bibliographic queries.

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3 Bill Levay, formerly of Elgin, Scotland and Karoi, Rhodesia (URL, accessed 15 August 2011, familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/l/e/v/William-M-Levay/index.html).

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Diary of Meetings of Historical Societies

AA	Arran Antiquarians. Meetings in Brodick Public Hall, Brodick, at 2 p.m.
AANHS	Ayrshire Archaeological and Natural History Society. Meetings in Carnegie Library, Ayr, at 7.45 p.m.
AFHS	Ayrshire Federation of Historical Societies. Joint one-day conference with Glasgow Caledonian University. Kilmarnock Academy, Kilmarnock, from 10.00 a.m.
AMC	National Trust for Scotland, Ayrshire Members Centre. Meetings in Education Pavilion, Burns Cottage, Alloway at 7.30 p.m.
ASA	Alloway & Southern Ayrshire Family History Society. Meetings in Alloway Church Halls, Alloway, at 7.45 p.m.
BHS	Beith Historical Society. Meetings in Our Lady's Hall, Crummock Street, Beith at 8.00 p.m. (* 7.30 p.m.)
CHS	Cumbrae Historical Society. Meetings in Hiccups Lounge, Newton Bar, Millport at 7 p.m.
DHS	Dundonald Historical Society. Meetings in Dundonald Castle Visitors Centre, Dundonald, at 7.30 p.m.
EAFHS	East Ayrshire Family History Society. Meetings in Gateway Centre, Foregate Square, Kilmarnock, at 7.30 p.m.
FBC	Friends of Brodick Castle. Meetinmgs at Brodick Castle, Brodick, at 2.30 p.m.
FHS Joint	Joint Meeting of Ayrshire Family History Societies. Portland Church Hall, South Beach, Troon, at 7.30 p.m.
KCCS	Kyle and Carrick Civic Society. Meetings in Loudoun Hall, Ayr, at 7.30 p.m.
KDHG	Kilmarnock & District History Group. Meetings in Kilmarnock College at 7.30 p.m.
Largs HH	LDHS Hakon Hakonsson Lecture. In Vikingar!, Largs at 8 p.m.
Largs Jt	Joint meeting of LDHS and LNAFHS. In St Columba's Session House, Largs at 7.30 p.m.
LDHS	Largs and District Historical Society. Meetings in Largs Museum at 7.30 p.m.
L(MS)	LDHS, Marine Section. Meetings in Largs Museum at 7.30 p.m.
LNAFHS	Largs & North Ayrshire Family History Society. Meetings in Largs Library, Allanpark Street, Largs at 7.30 p.m.
PHG	Prestwick History Group. Meetings in 65 Club, Main Street, Prestwick KA9 1JN, at 7.30 p.m.
SHS	Stewarton & District Historical Society. Meetings in John Knox Church Hall, Stewarton, at 7.30 p.m.
SWT	Scottish Wildlife Trust: Ayrshire Members' Centre. Meetings in The Horizon Hotel, Esplanade, Ayr KA7 1DT, at 7.30 p.m.
TAFHS	Troon @ Ayrshire Family History Society. Meetings in Portland Church Hall, South Beach, Troon, at 7.30 p.m.
WKCS	West Kilbride Civic Society. Meetings in Community Centre, Corse Street, West Kilbride, at 7.30 p.m.

February 2012

Thurs 2nd	PHG	David W Rowan	A Postman in Prestwick
Mon 6th	KCCS	Brian Shaw	The Ayrshire Rivers Trust
Mon 6th	SHS	Gerald Cummings	History of Local Roads
Tues 7th	KDHG	Dauvit Broun	New Light on Wallace and the Declaration of Arbroath
Wed 8th	DHS	Ian Kennedy	Loans to Govan: The Life of a 19th Century Policeman
Thurs 9th	AANHS	Eric Graham	Updated aspects of the Sugar Plantocrats
Mon 13th	CHS	Val Reilly	Coats of Paisley
Wed 8th	FBC	Fay Black	A Tour and a Taste of Arran's Only Legal Distillery
Tues 21st	TAFHS	Jim O'Neill	Fenwick Weavers
Tues 21st	KDHG	Ian Mathieson	The Turning Point - Napoleon's Invasion of Russia, 1812
Tues 21st	SWT	Bob Dawson	The Plight of the Bumblebee
Thurs 23rd	AANHS	Charles McKean	Aspects of Architecture in Scotland
Thurs 23rd	BHS	Roger Griffith	Spiers, Trees and Galls
Tues 28th	WKCS	John Pelan	Future of the Civic Movement in Scotland
March 2012			
Thurs 1st	PHG	Members	Pot Pourri
Mon 5th	SHS	F Henderson	History of Dreghorn Parish
Mon 5th	KCCS	Alistair Glen	Portencross Castle
Tues 6th	KDHG	June Neilson	The Romans in Scotland
Thurs 8th	EAFHS	Stuart Wilson	Kilmarnock Wartime Industries
Thurs 8th	AANHS	Adrian Cox	Excavations at Crossraguel Abbey
Mon 12th	CHS	Alastair Dunsmore	The City of Glasgow Police - 175 Years of History
Wed 14th	DHS	Ian Macdonald	The Covenanters
Thurs 15th	AMC	John Rattenbury	Lighthouses of the Clyde
Tues 20th	FHS Joint	Bruce Durie	"The Golfers"
Tues 20th	KDHG	Bill Fitzpatrick	The *Titanic* - The Beloved, The Damned and The Forgotten
Tues 20th	SWT	Allan Bantick	Mammals and Birds of the Cairngorm National Park
Tues 27th	WKCS	Robert Fergusson	Dalgarven Mill Museum
Thurs 29th	BHS	Andrew Taylor	Tbc
April 2012			
Mon 2nd	SHS	Donald Maclean	Alexander the Corrector
Thurs 5th	PHG	Alisdair W R Cochrane	Monkton and Prestwick Churches
Wed 11th	DHS	June Neilson	The Romans in North Britain

Thurs 12th	EAFHS	John Stevenson	Tbc
Mon 16th	CHS	Charles Woodward	Clyde Muirshiel Regional Park
Tues 17th	SWT	Stuart Brabbs	Species Conservation in Riparian Areas
Thurs 19th	AMC	Roger Watts	South with the *Scotia*
Thurs 26th	BHS	Archie Comrie	tbc
May 2012			
Thurs 3rd	PHG	Members	Blether of 2012
Thurs 10th	EAFHS	John Smillie	Down Memory Lane
Mon 14th	SHS	Graham Smith	Hope Street to Holywood

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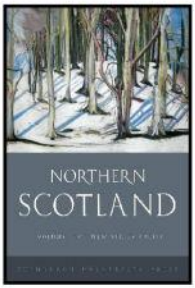

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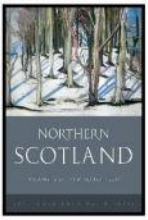

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