

South Bantaskine Park

Geoff B Bailey

“This property is beautifully situated about a mile to the south west of the town of Falkirk, and commands magnificent views, not only of the surrounding country, but a most extensive view of the Firth of Forth from Alloa to Queensferry, with the Bass Rock in the distance, and of the Ochil and Grampian range of mountains; thus affording a view of Scottish scenery of such variety that cannot be surpassed.”(1879)



Illus 1: Plan showing the area around Falkirk Muir as it would have been in the 1750s, including the area later occupied by South Bantaskine. Brown - arable; blue marsh; green woods.

In the mid eighteenth century the common grazing land known as the South Muir of Falkirk extended over a large swathe of land on the low hill to the south-west of the town. Its margins are reflected in such place names as Muirfoot, Muirside, Tomuire and Marchfield. Standalone represented an isolated intake of land within the muir. From this open land the feuars of Falkirk had the right to take 'feal and divot', that is to say, turf for thatching as well as clay for puddling (Reid 1992). It is evident that they also took the opportunity to extract stone as well. These operations left the ground pot marked with pits and quarries. It was poor quality moorland and is marked as such on Roy's map of 1755. It was this open character that made it suitable for staging the Battle of Falkirk in 1746 (Bailey 1996).

In 1792 Sir William Forbes of Pitsligo (not to be confused with William Forbes of Callendar) purchased 19 acres of the Lands of Bantaskine from Adam Livingstone. The land lay to the east of the Glenfuir Burn and contained some old mines and a steep north-facing slope.

South Bantaskine Park

This was part of the area of the South Muir associated with Wester Bantaskine. Sir William took possession the following year and planted such a large number of trees that the plot became known as “the Plantation”. On the north-east it bordered the cultivated lands of the Bantaskine estate (Easter Bantaskine belonging to Adam’s brother Captain John Livingstone).



On the north-west it bordered the lands of Glenfuir, an estate that had been carved out of Bantaskine a few decades earlier as part of the extension of the arable land. On the east it bordered the common muir and Lands of Callendar.

Illus 2: Plan showing the lands of Wester Bantaskine in the late 18th century in green with later roads, the Union Canal and the Edinburgh-Glasgow Railway superimposed.

The “Plantation” became the heart of “South Bantaskine” and within a few years Sir William also acquired the land of Wester Bantaskine as far south as the Glen Burn. This included Hill Farm also known as Newhouse of Bantaskine. The name suggests that it had not long been in cultivation and Reid’s first note of its occurrence is in 1804 (Reid 2009, 265).

In 1796 Sir William wrote to William Forbes of Callendar with an offer to exchange lands on the east side of his holding for Hill Farm:

“Bantaskine 15th Augt 1796

Dear Sir

As you were so good as say, you should accommodate us with any ground that would render our place more convenient, I use the freedom to remind you of those fields which I mentioned, I should be glad to have at their full value, if agreeable to you, lying to the South of our inclosures, as far South as the inclosure which you have made on the top of the Brae above what is called the Coal-Heugh, where your improvements of the Moor begin. – In exchange for these, I would give you that part of our Hill-farm which lies South of the Drove road all the way down to the Glen-Burn. The relative value of the lands to be thus exchanged, & which I confess (it) appears to me would be some accommodation to both, may be very easily adjusted by a reference to Men of skill; & any Difference of value on either side can be ... paid for.”

(Sir William Forbes to William Forbes of Callendar - Forbes Papers 597/8)

At the time Newhouse Farm consisted of 56 acres of pasture (Edinburgh Evening Courant 7 April 1796, 4).

This was part of a larger consolidation of the Lands of Callendar. In 1798 William Forbes of Callendar brought an action for the division of the Muir and some two hundred people declared a heritable interest in it. The legal dispute dragged on for many years, falling into abeyance until revived in 1807 when an agreement was finally reached. Forbes does not however seem to have waited until everything was resolved before he began to develop the area. He had already initiated an extensive programme of enclosure on his estate in which he created a grid pattern of rectangular fields bordered with ditches, earth dykes and hedges. He enclosed much of the Hill of Falkirk and put aside fields for the Feuars.

Around this time, in 1807, the Plantation was bought by Patrick Wishart WS. A part of this, five acres of trees, was described in 1810 as “tastefully laid out in belts and clumps of planting, 15 years old” (Caledonian Mercury 30 April 1810, 4). Patrick Wishart was the fourth son of William Thomas Wishart of Foxhall, Linlithgowshire, and had been admitted a

South Bantaskine Park

Writer to the Signet on 9 July 1802 (Love Vol. 2). The new owner immediately erected a large house there "in the newest style" (Caledonian Mercury 30 April 1810, 4). Water was conveyed to it by leaden pipes, which unusually also supplied a cold bath fitted up in one of the dressing closets. There was also a complete court of offices with a doocot over the entrance pend facing the house. Beside this was a walled garden (now used for allotments) enclosing an area of an English Acre, which was soon well stocked with fruit trees -all in all a substantial investment. The main drive would have lain to the north east connecting the house to the town. Its remains can still be followed on the ground because it was well engineered and had a stone retaining wall on its south side. It is shown on the first edition Ordnance survey map leading to a building within a small enclosure number "1915" - which is Muirfoot Farmhouse. Another 'Avenue' led southwards from the house to Lochgreen Road (formerly Craigieburn Road). At this stage South Bantaskine had an agrarian character. Between 1807 and 1810 much of the Plantation was cleared and the ground converted to arable. The woods and shelter belts had stubby banks of earth built along their borders with hedges planted atop. By the end of this period 27 acres were under crop. To its east was the old Culloch Brae which, as the name suggests, had been worked for decades on a small scale for coal.



Illus 3: The court of offices or stable block looking south. The keystone over the arch and the plain Gothic style doocot show that this was an original feature of the 1807 complex.

The estate still included the 30 acres (39 English acres) of Hill Farm Lochgreen Road and Slamannan Road. A farm track led directly from the farm buildings to the Avenue and was looked after by a hardworking tenant.

Having delivered the accoutrements of a small country estate Wishart put it on the market. Captain John Stewart purchased the estate on 13 December 1814 (Love Vol. 1; Forbes Papers 1046/12). John Stewart was the son of Alexander Stewart, an innkeeper in Carronshore. He had entered the service of the East India Company and rose to the position of captain, marrying the daughter of General McQueen. He was typical of a new wealthy middle class that had made its wealth serving abroad.

South Bantaskine Park

It was up for sale again just nine years later when it was described as “*consisting in all of about 82 Scots acres, 70 of which are arable, and 12 laid out in planting and roads*” (Caledonian Mercury 10 June 1819, 3). The estate had evidently grown since 1810 by a further 20 Scots acres. This was the land to the south of the Slamannan Road reaching down to the Glen Burn.



Illus 4: Grassom's map of 1817

The central location of the estate was emphasised “*These lands are situated within a mile of Falkirk, and 25 from Edinburgh, and within half a mile of the Forth and Clyde Canal*” (Caledonian Mercury 10 June 1819, 3).

The reason for the sale is uncertain, but it may not be a coincidence that the Union Canal was under construction at this time. The canal hugs the 260ft contour until it descends to the Forth and Clyde Canal through the Glenfuir estate and in doing so it today passes along the northern fringe of South Bantaskine. However the canal appears to have removed the farmsteading of Dykehead and left the farmhouse of Muirfoot stranded to its south. Tomuire lay on the north side near to the commencement of a new flight of locks and subsequently became Nanny Jones public house where canal passengers waited for the next barge to ascend the eleven locks. This meant that a small amount of land from these farms was now isolated on the south side of the canal. For the estate of South Bantaskine it meant that the main drive was no longer usable. Normally the Union Canal Company would have been obliged to provide a bridge, but the drive was too recent and does not appear to have constituted a right of way.

The canal offered the new owner an opportunity to open up the coalfield in the area, without success, and before long it was on the market again (Caledonian Mercury 5 August 1824, 1). A row of brick houses called Corunna (after the battle in Spain in 1809; later known as Red Row) lay almost opposite to the entrance to the south avenue and must belong to this time. The Ordnance Survey name book compiled in 1858 describes it as “*a row of colliers' houses one storey in height, slated and in good repair.*”

Another attempt was made to work the coal and it too failed. The estate with its minerals rights leased from William Forbes was then acquired from Captain John Stewart in 1827 by James Russel and Henry Aitken of the legal firm of Russel and Aitken. Russel, in particular, already had substantial investments in coal working to the south of Falkirk. His earlier works kept him occupied and he searched around for a business partner to exploit the coalfield at South Bantaskine. For this purpose the position of the Union Canal was an advantage rather than a burden and the following advertisement duly appeared in the newspaper:

“COALFIELD IN STIRLINGSHIRE, To be Let, for such number of years as may be agreed on, with entry immediately, THE COAL FIELD of SOUTH BANTASKINE, in the parish of Falkirk and shire of Stirling.

This Coal Field is of considerable extent, and lies within about a mile of the town of Falkirk. It is bounded on the north by the banks of the Union Canal, (near its junction with the Great Canal,) and is most advantageously situated for the sale of coals, deliverable in Edinburgh or elsewhere by the Canal, not only on account of its having

South Bantaskine Park

been ascertained that two of the workable seams of the coal lie above the level of the Canal, and can be wrought by mines, through which the coal for canal sale can be run out from the workings into the boats without requiring to be raised by pits. The district or country sale will also be very extensive, as the neighbourhood is exceedingly populous, and the Bantaskine coalfield is situated much nearer to Falkirk and the adjoining villages than any other coal field in the district.

The coal lies at a very moderate depth. One of the seams is of splint coal of fine quality, very suitable for steam-engines, distilleries, & c. The other seams are clean soft caking coal, producing little ashes, and of course, particularly adapted for the Edinburgh market.

The mansion-house of South Bantaskine and Parks adjoining, and also the ironstone in the lands, will either be let along with the coal or not, as the tenant may incline.

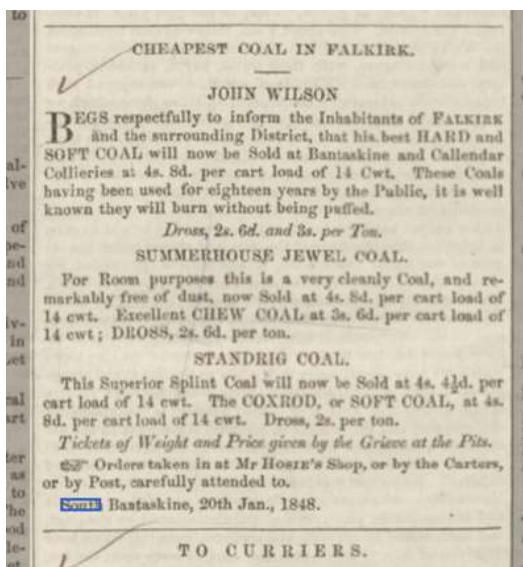
Farther particulars will be learned on application to Russell and Aitken, writers in Falkirk."

[Edinburgh Evening Courant 5 May 1828, 1]

It was spotted by Robert Wilson who had made a great success of running coal mines at Banton near Kilsyth. A large quantity of the coal there was sold to the Carron Company and he was familiar with the Falkirk area. The sales for the South Bantaskine coal would require the development of the domestic markets of Falkirk and Edinburgh - it was a gamble. He signed the lease with Russel and Aitken and moved with his family into the house at South Bantaskine in 1828 (Campbell 1996; Wilson 1996). By hard work Robert Wilson got the colliery established and whilst he concentrated on sales his thirteen year old son, John, was roped into helping with the practical side. John later noted "*my first work, for some months, was to notice the output of coal, keep the workmen's accounts and drive the Gin. Another division of the work being then opened up I was set there to take charge of the sales, men's time and output and in addition my brother and I kept all the books at home in the evenings*" (Wilson 1996, 74).

Ironstone as well as coal was extracted from the mines adjacent to the Union Canal and deep cuttings were made into the hillside to run the minerals out of adits or mine mouths on the level to new wharves.

On the death of his father at South Bantaskine House in 1836 John took over the responsibility for the estate and the coalfield. The latter continued to run profitably and he paid an annual rent of £26 for the House and offices, £12 10s for the Parks and £17 for the colliers' houses at Corunna. A large workforce was employed in the coal extraction and John Wilson set up a friendly society for them. He also ensured that their houses each had a little garden attached on the principle recommended by a Parliamentary Commission. These can be seen south of Corunna Row on the first edition OS map. However the men were not accustomed to farming and allowed them to remain from year to year in an "Interesting state of nature." Despite Wilson's remonstrances they would not change their habits. At length he offered premiums to such as should procure the best specimens of



Illus 5: Advert from the Falkirk Herald on 10 February 1848.

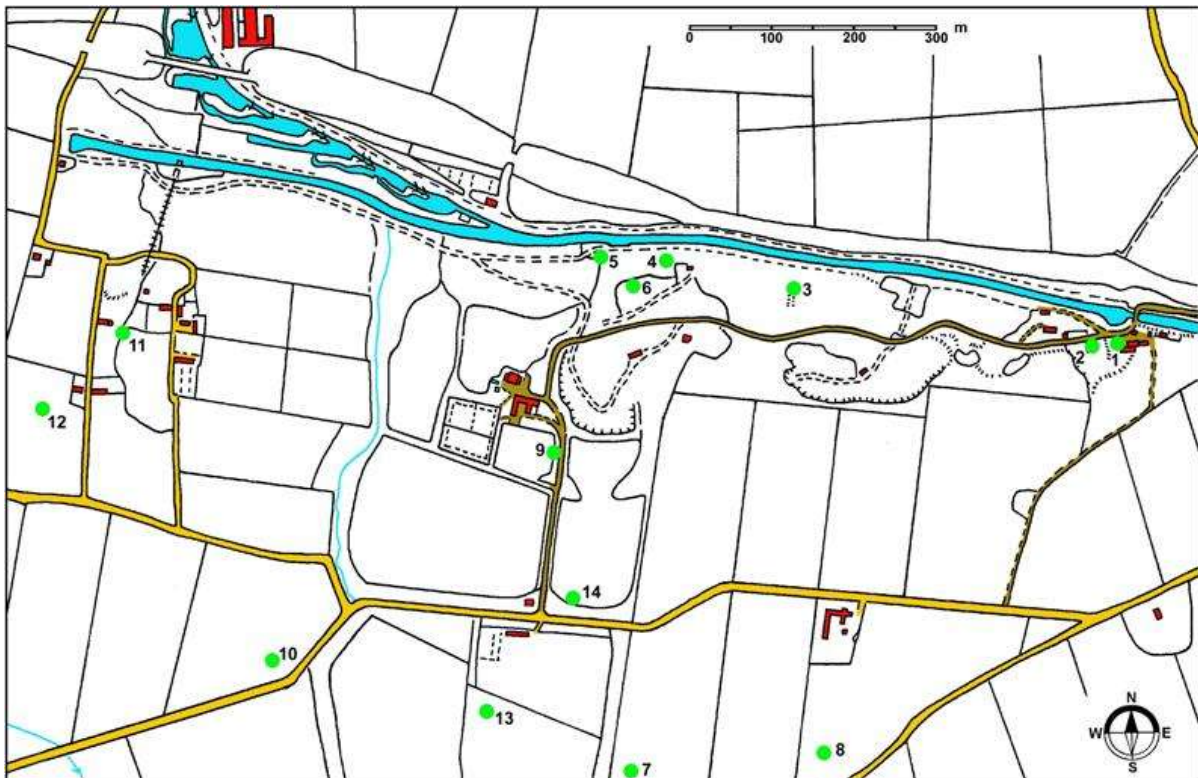
vegetables and flowers, and this produced the desired effect. Not only did the colliers grow fresh food for their families, but they actively competed

South Bantaskine Park

at annual shows (Stirling Observer 21 August 1845, 4). Wilson knew his men personally and looked after their welfare. Many of those working in the coal pits at South Bantaskine lived a short distance away in Falkirk or Camelon. *“One morning last week, at a very early hour, as a miner was crossing the canal at Camelon Bridge, on his return home from his work at South Bantaskine, had accidentally fallen into the canal. Mr Wilson ordered a search to be made next day, when his body was found. He was a sober and industrious man, and has left a wife and one child.”* (Stirling Observer 29 August 1844, 4). The names of the pits at South Bantaskine reflected the times - Triumph, Britannia, Victory and Victoria.



Illus 6 : One of the mine entrances near the Union Canal today.



Illus 7: Plan showing the locations of coal workings in 1860. 1 - Britannia Pit; 2 - pit; 3 - mine mouth; 4 - pit; 5 - pit; 6 - air pit; 6 - Victory Pit; 8 - Victoria Pit; 9 - old shaft (S); 10 - Triumph Pit; 11 - mine mouth; 12 - air pit; 13 - old coal pit (OS); 14 air shaft (OS).

In September 1848 John Wilson married Mary Russel, the fourth daughter of James Russel - one of his landlords. Just over two years later he was in partnership with the other landlord, Henry Aitken, in an alum works situated on the part of the lands of Glenfuir immediately adjacent to South Bantaskine on the other side of the Edinburgh-Glasgow Railway. For this purpose the pair purchased a new patent method of production and it too proved profitable. After a short time Wilson was able to buy Aitken out and expand the works known as “the Hurlet”, producing 30 tons or so of alum a week (Wilson 1996, 75).

Wilson was a deeply religious man and took his civic responsibilities seriously. In 1853 he started a long tradition of inviting less privileged members of the public into the grounds of

South Bantaskine Park

South Bantaskine for a treat. Juvenile members of the Camelon Total Abstinence Society were shown around the house and garden by Mr and Mrs Wilson and given curds and cream (FH 25 Aug 1853, 3).

By 1854 he was an important member of the community with an acknowledged social standing. He decided to purchase the lands of South Bantaskine from Russel and Aitken and entered into negotiations. The main sticking point was the value placed upon the growing timber. Russel and Aitken valued it at £600, but Wilson's valuer only placed it at £100. Wilson claimed that he would not have baulked at a difference of £200 in the overall sum between friends, but a £500 discrepancy for the timber seemed excessive. In the end he bought the estate for the round figure of £6,000 and settled into his own home with his ever growing family. He also set about improving the estate.

By 1854 the pits were no longer being worked from the new Policy, though the sites of several are marked on maps. The main quarry near the House was closed down, but work continued for a while on the eastern one.

The existing Avenue was short and straight, in keeping with the diminutive size of the original estate. A small square-shaped lodge stood sentinel just inside the gates on the west side. It was a neat little building with a central door facing the drive with a window to either side - all highlighted by inverted hood mouldings or 'eyebrows'. The overhanging roof was pined with a central moulded chimney stack in the short ridge. The gateway was typical of the period with four upright monolithic panelled blocks surmounted by truncated cones providing a double-leafed central gate for vehicular traffic and smaller single gates to either side.



Illus 8: The South Lodge on Lochgreen Road.



Illus 9: The Avenue looking south towards the gate.

The Avenue was one of the first to be planted and by the 1870s when the photograph in illus 9 was taken the paired oaks were well established. Other trees here include horse chestnut, beech, and sycamore. Behind the trees were wooden fences and a hedge to keep the livestock in the fields to either side.

John Wilson's main concern was the nature of this access to the house. The

route to the town from the south was rather circuitous and included the steep foot of the Glen Brae. Fashions and

ambition had changed and he clearly wanted a more sinuous and longer drive with patches of tree planting to provide glimpses of distant views and finally a sudden reveal of the house.

South Bantaskine Park

A gentler more direct access to the town was possible to the north-east which meant crossing the Union Canal at Walker's Bridge. The bridge had been provided by the Canal Company to give access for the Falkirk Brickworks and was named after the Walker family, its proprietors. Between the bridge and the Lands of South Bantaskine were what had been the main quarries for the town for many generations, and had been used during the construction of both the Forth and Clyde and the Union Canals, but which had fallen into disuse leaving behind a relict industrial landscape full of massive holes and spoil heaps. The nearest, and largest quarry was already owned by John Wilson and was no longer worked. Negotiations between the representatives of Callendar Estate went well and John Wilson arranged for an excambion of lands from Newhouse with them. Again there was a last minute hitch when part of the lands were excluded so that Forbes could make a road to Standalone Farm if required - and this area was leased for 29 years from 1854 (FH 30 May 1872, 2). Not all of the land required for the new approach was poor quality and compensation had to be given to one of the tenants, John Johnstone, for his loss of crops on an area of 1 acre 1 rood and 20 falls Scots. Wilson was then able to make his approach road and other improvements at great cost. The large number of colliers he employed was useful in removing the unsightly spoil and building embankments to create a gentle gradient, which also required the construction of two bridges over the cuttings gouged out of the hill to provide access from the quarries to the Union Canal. Wilson was delighted with the result: "*I was enabled to turn eighteen acres of the ugliest portion of Callendar estate into an excellent Avenue and a very beautiful romantic looking field and glen which will improve as time rolls on and altho' it cost me a large sum to do, it is a valuable addition to South Bantaskine*" (Wilson 1994, 76)



Illus 10: Extract from the 1859 edition of the Ordnance Survey.

South Bantaskine Park



The western of the two bridges for the new road was the tallest. It was only a single span because the gap was narrow.

Selected trees were carefully planted along the roadside to provide variety, though they took years to mature. Whilst still young they were vulnerable to the weather - and vandalism. "Alexander Wilson, miner, was brought up at the Summary Court yesterday, charged with malicious mischief, in so far as upon the night of the 8th inst., he

broke and destroyed a good many young trees, and a vase belonging to John Wilson, Esq of South Bantaskine. The trees were of various descriptions, consisting of a weeping willow, Irish yew, mountain ash, lime, poplar, & c; and were growing by the side of the avenue or approach road leading to Bantaskine House. The prisoner pled not guilty, but proof was led at length, and the charge found proven. He was sentenced to pay a fine of £2, or suffer 40 days' imprisonment. The fine not being forthcoming, he was sent off to Stirling." (FH 22 May 1862, 4).

The new drive was a vast improvement in terms of providing a direct link with the town and an impressively long approach through the landscaped grounds of the house. The problem remained, however, that there was an unsightly brickworks at the entrance just before the canal bridge and under the bridge there was a constant stream of traffic along the north bank working the barges. Once over the bridge going to the town it was also necessary to run alongside the Edinburgh and Glasgow Railway and then under it to emerge into Blinkbonny Park where a private drive was also provided. To segregate these features and to ensure the privacy of the policy grounds a new set of gates and a lodge were erected in 1860.



Illus 12 : The entrance gates and Well Lodge looking west up the East Avenue.

Wilson also decided to improve the link north-westwards with Camelon. Here he had to bargain with a number of smaller properties north of Greenbank:

| | | | |
|---------------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| William Cox for his father's feu | 4 acres | 0 roods | 0 falls |
| William Cox for A. Stark's feu | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| William Roper for Edward Cox's feu | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| William Roper for John Loudon's feu | 3 | 2 | 0 |
| William Roper for Alex Yorkston's feu | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| John Waugh for his father's | 4 | 0 | 0 |
| Widow Reid for William Reid | <u>2</u> | <u>0</u> | <u>0</u> |
| Total | 23 | 2 | 0 |

South Bantaskine Park

And he purchased land from the Union Canal Company:

| | | | |
|---|----------|----------|-----------|
| Ribels field | 3 | 0 | 32 |
| Planting east of ditto | 0 | 2 | 18 |
| Muir | 4 | 2 | 28 |
| Plantation west of old plantation on canal side | 2 | 0 | 35 |
| Ditto east of ditto | <u>2</u> | <u>2</u> | <u>26</u> |
| Total | 17 | 3 | 23 |

“Ribels field” is a corruption of Rebel’s Field - another reference to the momentous battle fought here. These latter fields may have been the parts of Dykehead and Muirfoot acquired by the Canal Company because they were no longer in touch with their parent farms. These had already been incorporated into the estate on the understanding that the Canal Company could have them back on valuation if they required the land for the construction of wharfs, warehouses and so on.

A smaller estate road now twisted through the old quarry and under one of the new bridges of the east drive before running parallel to the canal and emerging at the “Cut Lodge” on the public road down to Camelon. This gate was not for the general use of visitors and the lodge was in fact little more than a room and kitchen. It caught fire in 1923 and was destroyed (FH 15 Sep 1923, 5). As it was insured a better replacement was substituted, though this was radically altered around 2001 and its lodge-like character lost. This estate road ran under an existing inclined plane used to take stone and minerals from further up the hill to Port Hamilton at the end of the Union Canal.

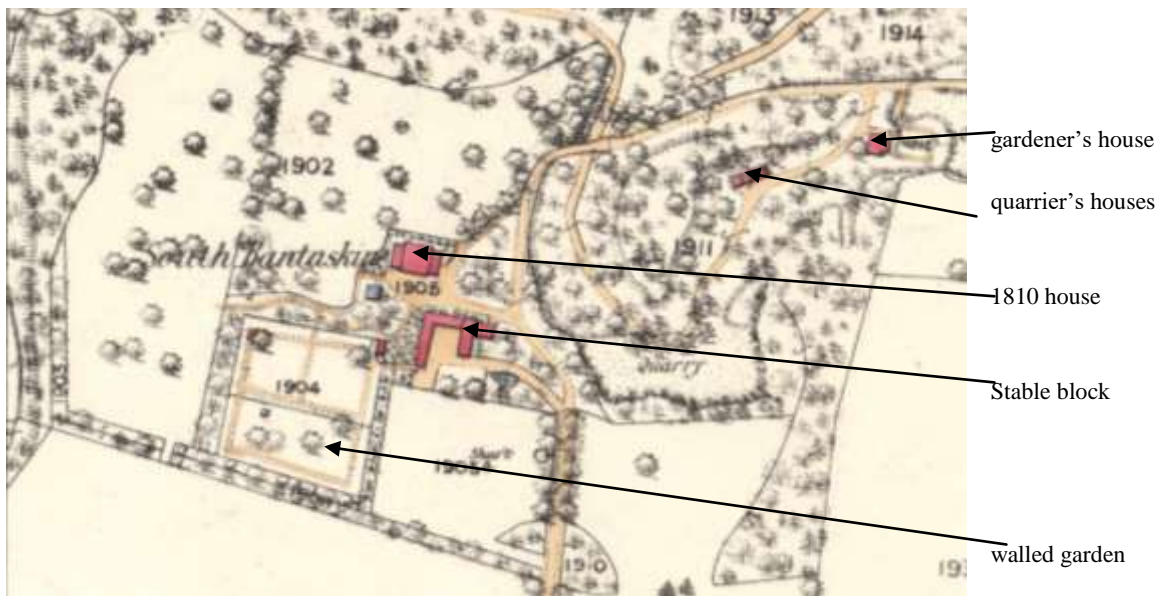
As each coal pit was worked out and abandoned it filled with water. The town of Falkirk already obtained its water supply from the derelict neighbouring coal workings to the east and before long connections were made with those at South Bantaskine in order to augment the supply. The mansion houses and villas erected down the hill to the north also took advantage of this copious supply of good quality water. In the late 18th century Camelon House had tapped into the “rivulet” in the area that Wilson had acquired from the Union Canal Company. It was gravity fed. Now a brick chamber was built at the source in order to provide a head of water. In 1832 James Russel had taken his water for his new house at Arnotdale from his lands at South Bantaskine and this too was upgraded. (The barrel vaulted brick tank beside the burn was erroneously identified as an ice-house, but it is unlikely that the such a late estate possessed one.)

South Bantaskine Park



Illus 13: Painting of the Wilson family at South Bantaskine around 1861.

John Wilson could now be considered to be amongst Falkirk's leading citizens and in 1860 he commissioned James Archer to paint the family beside the house. Archer was an influential artist renowned for his family portraits. A leading light in the Royal Scottish Academy it is not surprising that the painting called "The Family Group at South Bantaskine" should be exhibited at the Royal Scottish Academy in Edinburgh in 1863. It was not well received by the art critics (Glasgow Morning Journal 4 March 1863, 6).



Illus 14: Extract from 1st ed OS map surveyed in 1859.

The house built in 1810 had a two storey central block flanked by single storey wings to either side. It seems to have been a traditional symmetrical Georgian villa surrounded by garden ornaments in the form of urns and sundials. Between it and the substantial walled

South Bantaskine Park

garden to the south-west were two small open ponds. The office block lay on the other side of a small courtyard to the south-east. It included the stables, coachhouse, stores and a doocot. The walls were of whitewashed random rubble with a pantile roof.

Having corrected the approach to the house John Wilson then turned his attention to the house itself. He had a new building designed for a site immediately to the west of the existing one with a tall three-storey tower at its north-east corner to act as a viewing platform (SMR 604). The style was the Tudor Gothic then in vogue. A battlemented wall head possessed long merlons and narrow embrasures set on corbelling, with small square turrets carrying the chimneys at the corners of the main two-storey block and corbelled round turrets on the slightly lower west bay. The battlement, string courses and a chamfered plinth course provided horizontal banding and the large mullioned windows vertical relief in the sandstone ashlar walls. The third storey of the tower had three small square windows in each side



Illus 15: The 1861 House looking SW from the East Avenue. The previous house stood on the level area this side of it.

contrasting with those below. A large two-storey bay window thrust out from the north side of the tower and flanked the single storey entrance porch which had an octagonal turret-like buttress to either side. The windows had inverted hood mouldings. A lower west wing had smaller windows with less ornamentation. All in all the building was well articulated and designed to impart the maximum impact for anyone approaching from the East Avenue.

Specimen trees were planted adjacent to the house and today there is a weeping horse chestnut nearby. At first the drive was bounded on its northern down-slope side by a six-barred iron fence which extended in front of the house giving an open prospect in that direction. About twenty years later the area in front of the house was terraced and given a stone balustrade.

The builder for the new house was James Law who constructed many other villas around Falkirk. It was completed in 1862. It was well appointed inside and one of the best known features was the stained glass window by Ballantine's of Edinburgh on the main stair. This featured Bonnie Prince Charlie, George Murray and John Drummond, who had commanded the Jacobite army on this site in 1746. The window was exhibited at the Great Exhibition in South Kensington in 1862 (see [stained glass files](#)).



Illus 16: The House looking SE. John Wilson holds the horses whilst his wife sits on the bench drinking tea. The seven daughters and one son are with them.

South Bantaskine Park



Illus 17: The Wilson family in the porch c1862.

John Wilson now had a sizeable family. Eventually there were eight daughters. All of them were tall and John Wilson used to refer to his 40ft of daughters. They led a privileged life at South Bantaskine and their father believed in a good cultural education introducing them to music and art as well as the normal range of school subjects. They had a couple of ponies that were kept on the estate. His only son, Robert, died in 1874 at the age of 22 of tuberculosis.

Catherine (Kate) 1849 – married Prof David Hamilton, Aberdeen.

Robert 1851-1874

Margaret Henderson 1853-1947 – married Rev James Gillan, Edinburgh.

Mary Georgina Wade (Georgie) 1856-1939 - artist.

Elizabeth Hardie (Bessie) 1858-1933 – charitable work.

Wilhelmina 1860 – married James Cadenhead RSA.

Helen (Nell) OBE 1862-1939 – wood carver (worked for YMCA in France in First World War).

Johanna Octavia (Joey) 1864-1935– married David McNeill, brassfounder, Birmingham.

Janie Russel– died young, c1900.



Illus 18: Badminton on the lawn east of the house. The seated man with a white beard is Dr Moffat, the missionary, who often stayed at South Bantaskine, c1872

South Bantaskine Park



Illus 19: Croquet on the lawn to the east of the house, c 1772.

The old stables were demolished and a new suite built on the west side of the walled garden. The single storey buildings of random rubble were quite plain. U-shaped in plan the north wing was little more than a covered wood store with a central arched entrance for the coach to reach the house.



Illus 20: The 1860 stable looking north.

South Bantaskine Park

The old doocot was left standing, looking somewhat incongruous over a pend to nowhere, and the area around it turned into a lawn studded with shrubs and specimen trees, including a cedar.



Illus 21: The house from the south-east with the stump of the doocot in the centre.



Illus 22: The estate carriage with the doocot on the far right.

Large though the house and grounds were, the number of staff living on the estate was quite small. The 1871 census gives us the names of the following servants:

New Lodge

John Thomson, carter, age 48, Slamannan.

Jane Thomson, servant, 15, Falkirk.

South Bantaskine Park

Corunna

William Morton, coachman, age 66, Denny.
Jane Morton, domestic servant, 13, Falkirk.
Isabella Duthie, poultry keeper, 80, Balmerino

South Bantaskine House

Catherine Lang, table maid, age 27, Old Monkland.
Jane Waddle, house maid, 25, Larbert.
Margaret Hogg, laundry maid, 28, Grangemouth.
Mary A Robert, cook, 53, Muiravonside.

Porter Lodge

George Mckenzie, gardener, age 48, Dores.
Margaret Mckenzie, domestic servant, 18, Camelon.
Alexander McKenzie, apprentice gardener, 15, Camelon



Illus 23: The gardener's house or Quarry Cottage looking SW, with the gardener in his garden in the foreground, c1870.

William Morton, the coachman, died in 1886 after 50 years in the service of John Wilson. George McKenzie was a native of Dores, Inverness-shire, and served his apprenticeship in Inverness-shire & Ross-shire before coming to Falkirk c1850 as gardener to Colonel Haggart of Bantaskine. He entered the service of John Wilson in 1856 and died at South Bantaskine in October 1905 aged 73.

The cottage was built for the gardener c1855 near to the old quarry entrance and the old quarriers' buildings further west were allowed to go to ruins.



Illus 24: The gardener's house looking south with the escarpment of the quarry behind, c1950. The road on the right led to the fairy glen.

South Bantaskine Park

The gardener's main task was to provide vegetables for the house. In the 1850s South Bantaskine became famous in East Stirlingshire for growing early potatoes outdoors that were harvested in the first week of July. Flowers were not neglected. In January 1858 the mild weather encouraged the blooming of a range of plants including Azalianudiflora, wall flower, polyanthus, marigold, pansy, monthly rose, geant debatailles rose, anemone, Acuba Japonica, which was reported in the local newspaper (FH 7 Jan 1858, 3).

The southern bank of the canal was rented from the Union Canal Company and cut with a scythe to produce hay. On one occasion when a cattle disease was prevalent in the area John Wilson shut the animals up in one of his mine entrances and fed them on the hay until the disease had run its course.

A valuation of South Bantaskine by George Glendinning dated 19th June 1879 (Falkirk Archives EN132/Wilson/24) reported that "*The grounds have been tastefully laid out and at great expense. There is a well stocked garden with conservatory adjoining, and a well laid out shrubbery surrounding the Mansion house. The Plantations on the Property are in thriving condition and valuable.*" At the time the estate included 106 acres of arable or pasture of which 45 were within the policy and 59.5 south of the Road. 44.9 acres were in plantations. A summary of his valuation is as follows:

| | |
|---|--------------|
| 45 acres of arable & pasture within policy including garden shrubbery & c @ 30/- per acre | £67.10.- |
| 59.5 acres of arable outside policy @ 30/- | £89. 5. - |
| 44.9 acres of woodland @ 30/- | £67. 6.10 |
| 6 Cottages in south west field | £200. - . - |
| 3 cottages outside policy on road side | £250. - . - |
| 1 cottage on west side of property | £80. - . - |
| 1 house in Avenue | £250. - . - |
| 2 lodges | £300. - . - |
| Value of growing wood 44.9 acres @ £35 | £1 571. 6. 6 |
| Value of Mansion buildings, gardens, laying out grounds & c. | £10,000 .-.- |
| Amenity of Estate to a residential proprietor | £2,000. -.- |

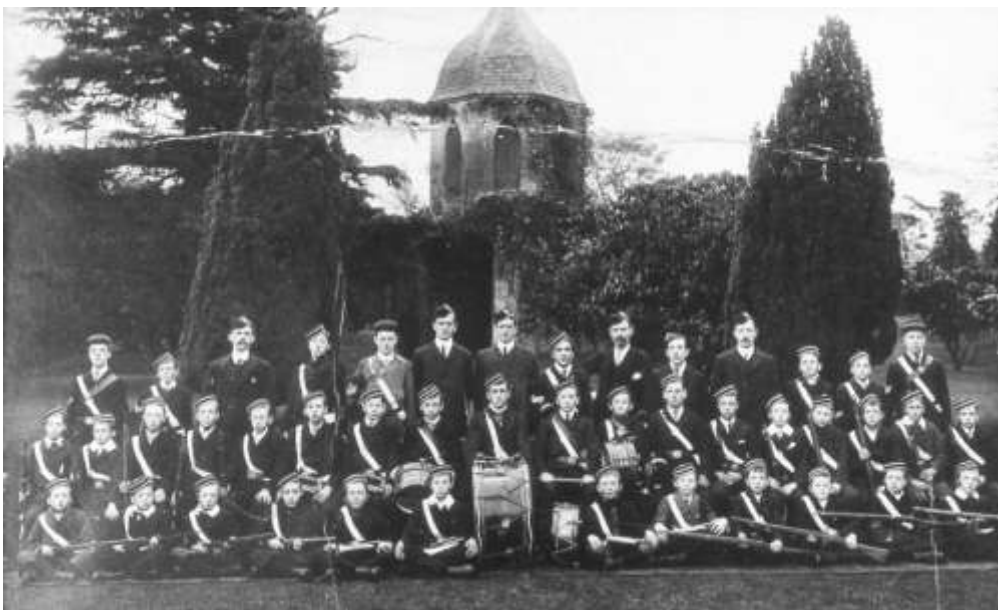


Illus 24: South Bantaskine House looking SW. The balustrade terrace can be seen on the right

South Bantaskine Park

John Wilson died on 13 April 1883 at South Bantaskine aged 68. Latterly coal mining at South Bantaskine had ceased and he had been the principal partner in the Cadzow Coal Company, Hamilton. For many years he was the chairman of the Liberal Association for the Eastern District of Stirlingshire. He served as a Justice of the Peace hearing many criminal cases and then as an Honorary Sheriff-Substitute for the county. He was a Commissioner of Supply and very active in the local churches. His son having predeceased him he left the estate to a Trust in the name of his daughters.

They had been well educated and John Wilson had instilled in them a desire to help those less fortunate. This is exemplified by both Margaret and Mary donating paintings by their own hand to a bazaar for the endowment of local church in 1875. They were quickly bought (FH 9 Oct 1875, 2). Bessie Wilson took a great interest in the Boys Brigade and revived the Camelon branch. In the spring of 1893 they were invited to South Bantaskine for an inspection and sports day - one of many such groups (FH 20 May 1893, 5).



Illus 25: The Boys Brigade with rifles at South Bantaskine, 1908.

The Wilson daughters also had a great love of gardens and this was reflected in the pastel drawings of Mary. Through their social contacts the garden and the art became well known and in 1908 combined in a book called "Scottish Gardens: being a representative selection of different types, old and new." Mary went on to illustrate other books.

Writing of South Bantaskine the author says: "*the guardians of this place of flowers rely on the commonest material—tulips, hyacinth, narcissus, arabis, myosotis and wallflower in spring—lupins, roses, poppies, pansies and such like in summer. The botanist's borders are apt to appeal only to the elect; where decorative effect is the aim there is nothing to equal the old favourites.*"

By then the shrubs and trees were well established. Rhododendrons lined the South Avenue. One species of this plant at South Bantaskine was considered worthy of note in 1908. "*Rhododendron Thomson, one of the most brilliant of a class usually reputed too tender to endure northern winters, has attained a height of eight feet, with a goodly circumference, and looks as if it only required a liberal application of stimulating diet to flower profusely*" (Maxwell 1908).

South Bantaskine Park

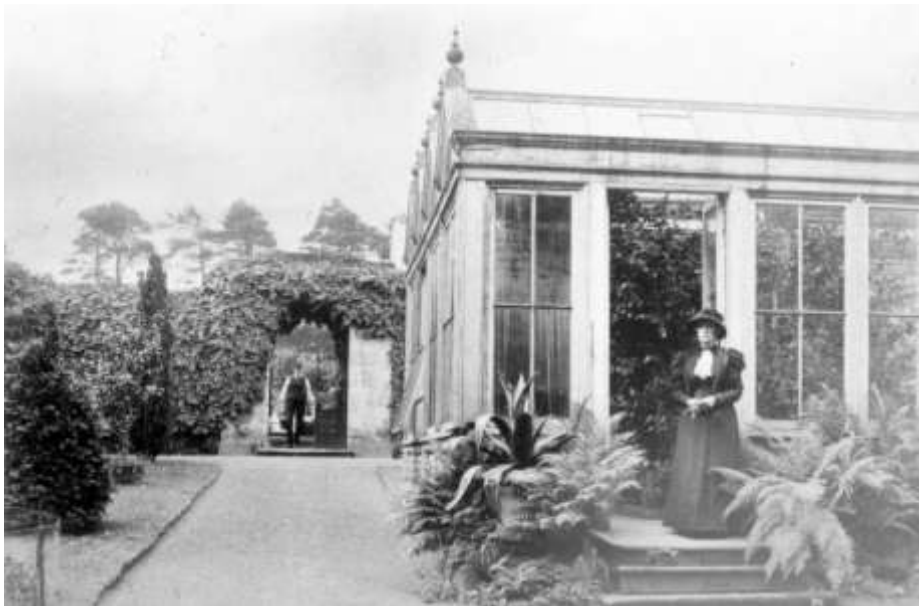


Illus 26: One of Mary's illustrations for the book on Scottish Gardens. The sundial can also be seen in Archer's painting.

Dianthv."

The main entrance to the walled garden from the house was through a small triumphal arch of ashlar placed centrally in the north wall and given a cast iron gate. Just outside this a block of conservatories was built, and inside the garden were greenhouses.

The book on Scottish Gardens also mentions: "*More ambitious, and more laborious to be carried out, is the design which these ladies have undertaken in converting a disused quarry into an alpine garden. It will be a rockwork on a Cyclopean scale. A vast vertical cliff of carboniferous sandstone bounds it on one side, at the foot of which is a fine jumble of fallen boulders and shattered shale. No material could be finer for the purpose, but it makes one's back ache to think of the amount of weeding that will be required; for none but those who have put it to the test may realise, not only the incessant diligence which must be exercised to extirpate such vulgar things as pearl-weed, Marcantia, sow-thistles, etc., but also the vigilance to prevent Aubrietia and Arenaria smothering such delicate growths as Androsace and*



Illus 27: The conservatories between the house and walled garden. The gardener can be seen in the gateway to the walled garden.

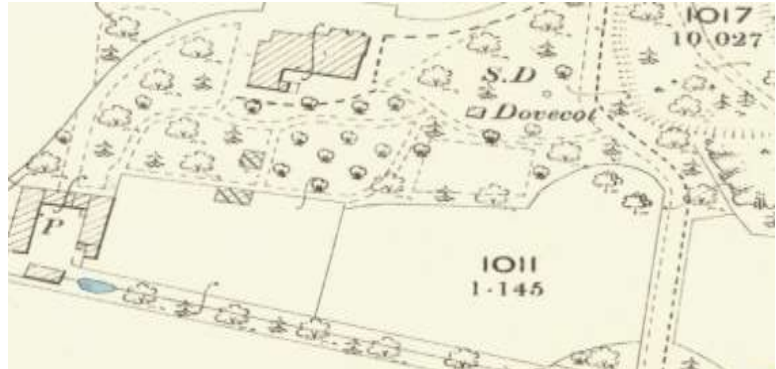
In 1909 members of the Falkirk Natural History and Archaeological Society visited South Bantaskine. As well as the historical features they visited the flower garden and "*inspected a rockery which is being formed in an old quarry, and which promises in a year or two to become one of the most beautiful of these rock gardens so dear to all lovers of flowers*" (FH 12 June 1909, 4). This proved to be the case for fifteen years later it was reported "*The beautiful gardens were visited and much admired. What perhaps created more interest than anything, as far as the more modern aspect of the policies was concerned, was the fairy rock garden, an exquisitely enchanting place. At one time a dismal quarry, with the aid of horticulture and the gardener's art, it is a place to dream about, far less visit. With the pools*

South Bantaskine Park

and ponds neatly terraced with boulders, abundant wild flowers and vegetation all around, and drops of water glistening in the sun as they fall gently from the rocks above, it formed a picture that pleased the eye and mind” (FH 14 June 1924, 5).



Illus 28: The greenhouses inside the walled garden looking north.



Illus 29: Extract from OS 25-Inch (2nd edition), Stirlingshire sheet XXX.7. The greenhouses are shown cross hachured.



Illus 30: Mary's painting of a pool in the rock garden.

The tranquillity of the garden contrasted greatly with the drama enacted around it. The occupants of the North Lodge appear to have been particularly unfortunate. In October 1895 Mrs Watson was hanging her washing out on the drying green behind the lodge which lay adjacent to the canal. The ground suddenly gave way and she fell into an old pit shaft. The hole was only a couple of feet in diameter and when her husband returned from work at Falkirk Station he did not notice anything amiss and he assumed that she had gone to visit some relatives. It was only several hours later after he had contacted those relations and they conducted a search, discovering first the basket of clothes and then the small opening in the ground. Rescuers entered the old coal mines via an entrance near Greenhorn's Well and Jacob's Ladder. They eventually found Mrs Watson's body under tons of soil (19 Oct 1895, 5). By 1923 the lodge was occupied by the Nimmo family. In May that year John Nimmo drowned in the Union Canal, aged c50 (Telegraph 24 May 1923, 9).

South Bantaskine Park



Illus 31: The Union Canal looking west from Walker's Bridge. The drying green of the North Lodge can be seen on the left.

Illus 32: Looking under Walker's Bridge to South Bantaskine Park with the North Lodge on the left.

During the First World War the grounds continued to be visited by local organisations and numerous fund raising events were held there on behalf of the Red Cross. Helen Wilson worked for the YMCA in France. James Love, the historian of Falkirk, organised large choral concerts in the grounds. To commemorate the peace of 1918 the Wilson sisters commissioned the famous English sculptor, Alfred Hardiman RA to design and execute a bronze fountain for the park. It took the form of a boy riding a seahorse on top of a column ([see Dollar Park file](#)).



The gardens continued to open to the public and South Bantaskine was one of the first places to take part in the "Scotland's Gardens Scheme" organised by the Scottish Branch of the Queen's Institute of District Nursing in aid of nursing in Scotland. The grounds were opened for public visitation and inspection on Saturday 28th May and Wednesday 1st June from 2pm till 6pm each day. The newspaper told its readership that: "*The gardens at South Bantaskine possess a charm peculiarly their own and are worth travelling many miles to look upon. Particularly appealing is the rock garden with its mass of bloom and fresh foliage, its sparkling fountain, its crazy paving, and rustic fascination, the whole being set in surroundings that are suggestive of a veritable fairy glen. The opportunity now being offered to the public to inspect the gardens will, we feel sure, be largely taken advantage of. Visitors are asked to contribute an entrance fee of one shilling, and motor cars will be allowed into the grounds at a charge of 2s 6d, the proceeds to be handed over to the Queen's Institute of District Nursing. Chars-a-banc, it should be noted, will not be allowed further than the South Lodge*" (FH 21 May 1932, 7).

This was repeated in 1933, 1937 and 1939. The latter was to be the swan song for the gardens, now having two rock gardens: "*The charming gardens of South Bantaskine have qualities of distinction peculiar to themselves. In the flower garden there are artistic displays of rare simplicity and beauty. With antique ornamental statuary as picturesque decorations, a fine array of flowers has been arranged in effective formations. In a small rock garden adjoining there is a remarkably fine display of saxifrage alyssum, aubretia, cardamine, and*

South Bantaskine Park

gentian. A feature of this garden, too, is the colourful herbaceous borders. Azaleas and rhododendrons provide colourful relief to the cool green lawns.

Then there is the famous rock garden. Fashioned from a disused quarry, this rock garden has come to be regarded as one of the most noteworthy in the country. With its mass of bloom and foliage, in which many varieties of rock plants are to be found, this garden has been aptly named a "fairy glen." The fountains, quaint statues set in restful nooks, the crazy paving, and the rustic fascination of this man-made horticultural shrine, all combine to form an idyllic retreat."(FH 17 June 1939, 9).

Both Mary and Helen died in 1939 and the house was left empty. With the Second World War looming the authorities inspected the vacant mansion and decided that it was unsuitable for use as a barracks being too cold and not watertight. However after the debacle of Dunkirk it was pressed into service and housed a unit of the Polish army. Desperate to keep warm they discovered an exposed seam of coal in the grounds and started to hand mine it themselves. By coincidence one of the new residents was also an artist and when, in August 1946, the Polish Forces in the area displayed the works of their artists in their canteen in Falkirk High Street it included "*Many Falkirk scenes including South Bantaskine Park where some soldiers were billeted, reminiscent of Miss Mary Wilson*" (FH 4 May 1946). The Service Company who occupied the estate had already mounted exhibitions in the house itself.

The Home Guard also used the grounds for training purposes. Inter platoon competitions were held here and there was a small rifle range which was taken over by the Falkirk Full Bore Rifle Club after the war. One local boy playing in the area found a rifle hidden near the monument to the Battle of Falkirk and his father returned it to the Home Guard. There was apparently quite a row. Someone mentioned that it had been hidden whilst the man's attention was turned to the ladies! The park was also part of the outer defences of the town. A flame barrel trap was put in place on Lochgreen Road just to the west of the estate and a zigzag slit trench dug at the end of the path heading west from the walled garden. It dominated the valley of the Glenfuir Burn which at the time was not wooded - echoing the position occupied by Barrel's Regiment during the 1746 battle. The trench is 21.5m long with three zags and four zigs and was accessed by a ramp from the path just mentioned. At its south end it continues for another 18m as a sinuous trench before petering out. Another 35m on are three fox holes covering the flank at a point where the ground dips rapidly down to the Union Canal.

The immediate post-war years were not kind to South Bantaskine. The sylvan splendour of Lochgreen Road had been captured in Mary Wilson's paintings. However, they were soon "*invaded by the woodman and his axe. Long known as one of the local beauty spots, the road was lined with spreading beech, willow, and elm trees, and provided one of the popular walks for local inhabitants.*

The majority of the trees have now been cut down, and the road has a bare and cold aspect. In these days of wood shortage all wood is urgently needed, but it is certainly a great pity that the beauty of this highway should be so destroyed."(FH 18 May 1946, 4).

Immediately after the war the National Coal Board took over the estate and temporarily occupied the mansion house. In 1947 it decided to demolish the house and in October offered the stained glass window from the staircase to Falkirk Town Council. The window was removed, boxed up and put into storage where it remained until 1990 when it was restored and placed into the Howgate shopping centre. The house was demolished late in 1949. A new mine with its associated buildings was set up on the former site of the coke ovens and the North Lodge was demolished. It was not far from the old Britannia Pit, and an overhead gantry fed coal over the canal to wagons on a railway siding.

South Bantaskine Park



Illus 33: Aerial photo of the NCB coal pit at Bantaskine, c1950.

Production of coal began in 1946 and by 1948 the pit had an output of 85 tons per day and employed 84 people. Pithead baths opened in January 1954 at a cost of £25,000. It reached its peak in 1954 when 141 were employed, but closed in 1959 (Oglethorpe 2006, 249). The buildings and infrastructure were removed and replaced by a large concrete apron as part of an Environmental Improvement scheme.

Some of the houses on the estate were rented out. The most notable resident at this time was John Grierson who leased Quarry cottage. He was the local leader of the Communist Party and was often writing in to the Falkirk Herald about political issues in the area.

Falkirk Council acquired the estate and the Peace sculpture was removed to Dollar Park for safe keeping. There it was placed in the centre of the old Lilly pond, replacing the cast iron bird from the Gentleman Fountain. To help with the maintenance of South Bantaskine a caretaker's bungalow was built to the east of the old house and called Elm Cottage. A car park was constructed in the northern part of the field to the east of the South Avenue and a toilet block placed to its west, north of the yew glade. In the late 1970s the doocot was demolished, as was Quarry Cottage. For a short time an archery club connected with the Callendar Park College of Education operated on the west side of the Glenfuir Burn.

Around 1978 a Lombard Car Rally type of event was held in the Park with cars occupying the field to the west of the drive before speeding down the hill to Walker's Bridge. In the early 1980s the Falkirk Rotary Club ran an MSC scheme to clear some of the excessive understorey and trees and installed an outdoor gymnasium along the path through the quarry. This has now decayed and elements of the equipment may still be found dotted along the paths. By 1996 the toilet block had fallen into considerable disrepair and was demolished. The woodland received little attention and many of the earlier paths became overgrown.



Illus 34: The Car Rally.

In 1991 a boathouse was built on the south bank of the Union Canal for the Seagull Trust. It occupies the site of the NCB pit and uses the concrete apron for its car park. The boathouse is made of buff coloured bricks with blue engineering brick trim around the windows and quoins and has three enormous arched dormer windows that stretch the full height of the building facing the canal (SMR 1567). The architects were Ross, Smith and Jamieson.

The walled garden filled with rank vegetation until 2009 when the walls were repaired and the ground cleared. On 3 September 2010 it was officially handed over to the Falkirk Allotment Society and 18 plots were worked. The site was transformed and in 2013 the area between it and the South Avenue was leased for a further 36 plots. In 2014 the long distance footpath known as the John Muir Way was formed and included a west/east section through the park, running south of the walled garden. At about the same time some local cyclists constructed a series of ramps and graded turns in the middle quarry to create an exciting mountain bike trail. In 2019 the two fields adjacent to Lochgreen Road were sold to establish a multimillion pound visitor centre for the Battle of Falkirk.

Sites and Monuments Features

- Falkirk Quarry (SMR 2127)
- South Bantaskine slit trenches (SMR 2165)
- South Bantaskine Park (SMR 2185)
- South Bantaskine House Doocot (SMR 51)
- South Bantaskine House Ice-house (SMR 74)
- South Bantaskine House (SMR 604)

South Bantaskine Park

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