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# Education and the Heritors of Larbert Parish 1808 – 1880

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The extant records of the Heritors of Larbert parish provide valuable information on the administration of education in century before their power was removed by the 1872 legislation. The period between 1808 is particularly interesting, covering as it does the years when the full impact of industrialisation was seriously straining the resources which the Heritors were legally obliged to provide.

The heritors were the leading land owners of a parish – often as few as three or four and frequently including non-resident members who might well be heritors in several parishes. The Act of Parliament in 1696, which clarified and reinforced earlier legislation, identified these men as the keys to the achievement of the Protestant reformers' original aim of a school in every parish.

*“that the heritors in every parish meet and provide a commodious housed for a school and settle and modifie a salary to a schoolmaster which shall not be under one hundred merks nor above two hundred merks”* [1]

Up to half the costs involved could be passed on to their tenants and presbyteries were given power to call on the Commissioners of Supply if heritors failed to make the legal provision. There is a considerable body of evidence to suggest that heritors across the country as a whole were reluctant to spend on education and commentators have been able to cite a number of examples where the Commissioners were called upon to force local landowners to act.[2] The early position in Larbert seems to reflect the same attitude as one extract from the early session records would indicate:

*“November 1<sup>st</sup> 1713*

*The schoolmaster represented to the session that the schoolhouse stands in great need of repairing; the session finding that the Heritors is very averse for repairing the said house and they appoint John Russel to provide straw and divots to right the said house”* [3]

Around the same time, a group of ministers from the Presbytery visited Larbert and found the schoolmaster's salary of “four bolls, three firlots of oat mele and 25 pounds Scots” to be below the legal limit. [4] By the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, the parochial school, that is the Heritors' school, was in Stenhousemuir and was described as a “thatched, one storey building” which in 1791 had 70 scholars [5] By then there were three other schools in the Parish, one each in Larbert and Carronshore, each with around 40 pupils and another at Kinnaird Colliery with 24.[6] These schools are not mentioned anywhere in the Heritors' records, which are

concerned exclusively with 'Stenhouse School'. That these additional schools were needed is quite obvious from the recent analysis of population statistics, which show that the population of Larbert Parish rose from around 1,800 to over 4,000 in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – a far greater rise than any of the other twenty-seven parishes in Stirlingshire or Clackmannanshire. [7] When Rev. George Harvie reported on the Parish for the Statistical Account of Scotland in 1791, he claimed that there weren't 1000 children under the age of twelve – even allowing for inaccuracy in this estimate it is clear that, with only 174 children attending school, the system was failing to cope with the rapidly increasing demands made upon it. [8]

One might have expected this inadequacy and renewed attempts to remedy the situation to have dominated the Heritors' discussions but there is precious little evidence to suggest any great concern on their part beyond what was their legal obligation under the Acts of Parliament which governed their activities. In 1803 a further Parliamentary Act increased the legal salary by 100 merks and confined the role of heritor to landowners within the parish with land to the annual value of £100 Scots. This Act was a double-edged weapon, giving as Andrew Bain observes:

*"strength by eliminating the semi-ignorant small farmers but also weakness by increasing the proportion of absentee landlords on the managing body."* [9]

The Heritors of Larbert in 1808 were certainly not small farmers but men of considerable wealth and position and among their number by this time was of course [Carron Company](#), represented by either Mr. Cadell himself or later, when the Cadells were Heritors in their own right, by either of their two famous managers, Joseph Stainton or William Dawson. When they gathered at the first extant meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1808, only three heritors joined the minister to note the death of their parochial teacher, William Porteous and to acknowledge *"the long and meritorious service of their late worthy schoolmaster"* by allowing Mrs. Porteous to retain a "small sum" owing to them as a mark of their regard. [10] They then proceeded to arrange for a successor, the first of five such appointments to the post in the period 1808 to 1854. The various methods of recruiting the teachers show a surprising lack of uniformity when judged by the more codified procedures of today. In 1808 a newspaper advertisement was placed as follows:

*"A schoolmaster wanted for the parish of Larbert in the County of Stirling. He must be qualified to teach latin and English language, writing, arithmetic, book keeping and the practical branches of mathematics. A knowledge of church music will be an additional recommendation. The salary will be the maximum allowed by law. The whole emoluments of the office will amount to £80 sterling. None need apply who cannot produce the most unquestionable certificate of good moral character."*

Five applicants were interviewed, not by the heritors and the parish minister but by two independent ministers who found that Mr. Scott was best qualified and had *"besides the additional recommendation of professing a knowledge of the French language"*. In appointing Scott parochial schoolmaster, they asked the Presbytery to examine him on his knowledge of languages, arithmetic, writing, etc.

but interestingly enough, not on his moral standing or knowledge of the Bible. Indeed, in none of the subsequent appointments does a religious question arise. This coupled with the clear emphasis on the mathematical and accountancy skills, is evidence for a gradual secularisation of parochial appointments. Four years later, when Scott resigned, the Heritors decided to adopt a less arduous approach – poach a well-trained teacher from the other Parish with which Larbert was united:

*“The meeting having been well informed of the ability and success of Mr. Wm. Young, now schoolmaster at Dunipace and of his good moral character do here by unanimously nominate and elect him to the office of parochial schoolmaster in Larbert”*

In 1826, on the death of Young, the minutes record only that Mr. John Bell was appointed after producing *“very good testimonials”*. He served for 23 years and his successor was appointed without interview on the advice of the Minister John McLaren, himself a trained teacher, later to be President of the EIS and a distinguished educationalist. Despite these qualities, his recommendation of Mr. Alexander Stuart was a grave disappointment, as the Heritors were soon to find:

*“December 1852*

*The meeting taking into account the irregularity which Mr. Alexander Stuart has displayed in disbursing the money for the Heritors dismiss him from the office of Heritors’ Clerk”.*

Eighteen months later, Stuart was dismissed from his teaching post for what was called *“notoriously discreditable behaviour”*, which another source has identified as excessive indulgence in alcohol!

The fifth and final appointment saw the Heritors return to the more formal approach and the position was advertised in the North British Advertiser, the Falkirk Herald and the Stirling Journal. There were 62 applicants and the man appointed, Alan Carswell from Falkirk, was still in post long after the Heritors’ powers passed away in 1872.

The appointments of teachers were moments of such importance that four or even five heritors struggled along to the meetings but for most of the time the once or twice yearly meetings could attract only two or three members who would decide the level of assessment with which to stent themselves and to review the list of the poor legitimately in receipt of benefit. The most frequent educational matter to occupy them was the state of the parish school and how far they should go to effect proper repairs. There is seldom a meeting at which the subject of defects in the school building was not discussed and dispute and delay were the most common outcome of their deliberations. There was a clear tension between the most wealthy and powerful of the Heritors – the old style landowners – and the more hard-headed, self-made men like those representing Carron Company, who examined each item of expenditure with the greatest care. There is an early example of this on the record.

In November 1808, the four heritors at the meeting agreed that the school building was *“neither central nor convenient for the parish and too narrow for the scholars”*. They agreed unanimously to erect a new school and Sir Michael Bruce,



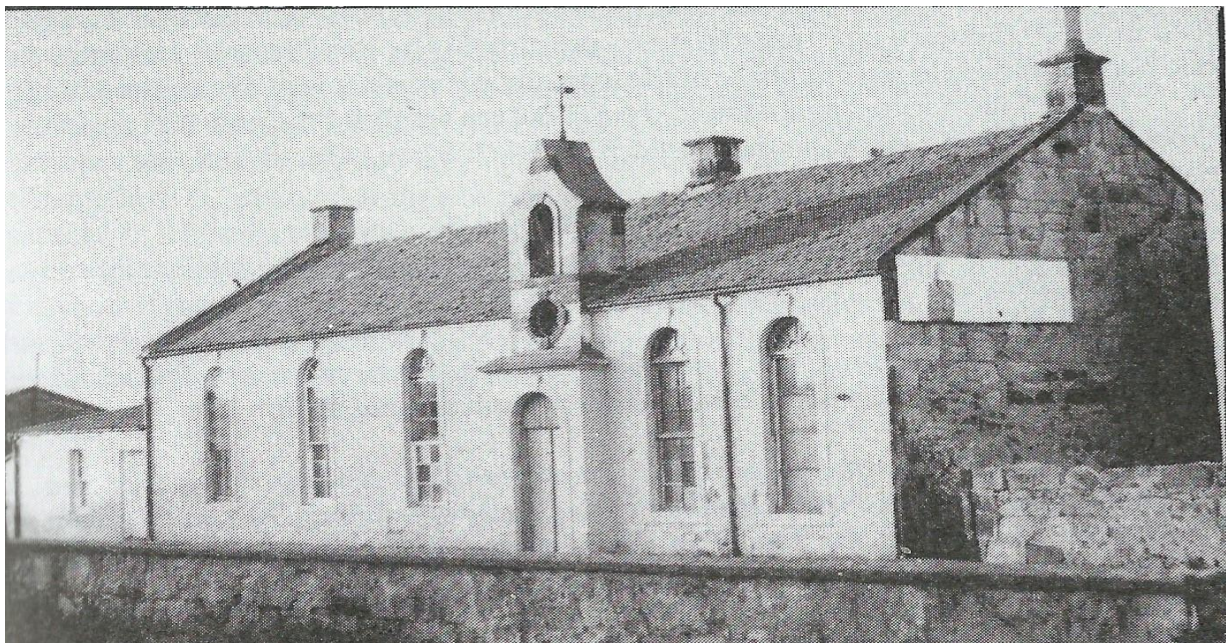
the Chairman, offered a parcel of land at a 'reasonable price'. A figure of £280 was accepted for the building work. At the next meeting seven heritors – almost a record for the century – appeared and one carried a voting proxy from an absentee heritor. An inspection of the schoolhouse roof was ordered and an acrimonious dispute arose between some heritors and the Minister over his power to call, or not call special meetings. There is a clear implication that the Minister was trying to force the re-building through against the majority wishes of the heritors. The Minister defended himself with some vigour:

*"Mr Knox is not the servant of the heritors. He considers himself as holding a rank in society as dignified and independent as that of any heritor."*

Despite, or even because of this spirited defence, the Heritors voted to build or repair and, after a 4-all tie, the casting vote of the new Chairman, James Bruce, went against re-building. With him were the representatives of Carron Company, though against was William Cadell, now a landowner of substance in the Parish. Just five years later in 1813 the Heritors were, without challenge, able to carry through their resolution that:

*"they were unanimously of the opinion that the present school is very insufficient, very incommodious and very unhealthy and that a new one ought to be built."*

Throughout the minutes, re-buildings such as this are always noted with full descriptions of the accommodation to be provided, including detailed dimensions, construction materials and other small detail. This is a useful source for anyone researching in the type of provision made in early 19<sup>th</sup> Century Scotland and extracts will be included in future editions of *Calatria*.



The Parochial School in Stenhousemuir

The arrival of the new teacher in 1826 signalled the start of yet another building programme. He made it clear that 124 pupils he now had on the roll were too many for one man and that help was needed. He also thought that new accommodation was vital. The Heritors' solution was an ingenious one. They would build a new school which would cost them £210 if he would, at his own expense, convert the schoolroom below his house into a dwelling which would accommodate a new 'helper' teacher and allow him to "take in boarders" and thus defray the costs of the teacher's salary! Bell agreed and the work went ahead; seven years later he is pleading for financial help because he still owes a substantial sum for the reconstruction. The heritors agreed to lend him £40 though a curt inserted note – presumably by Bell himself – indicates that one heritor refused to pay his share of the loan since it was not legally required of him.

In 1855 the Heritors again found the school too small for the now 200 pupils and proceeded to convert an outhouse to hold 50 or 60 children. One significant comment emerged in the discussion:

*"ta sift would be highly desirable to have a building especially appropriate to female children."*

Six years later, the schoolmaster's "contract" under the terms of the new Parochial and Burgh Schoolmasters Act gives him £60 per annum as long as he

*"keep and pay a properly qualified female teacher and agreeing that the appointment and dismissal and the entire superintendence of such Female teacher shall be in the hands of the Minister of the Parish and Colonel Dundas."*

Scattered through the minutes are small items of interest including a £34 per year pension for a retired schoolteacher, a generous decision to allow *"pauper children to attend the Parish School at half price"*, £6.18 to build a *"privy"*, 11'x7', in the school and eleven pounds spent on a well and pump in the schoolhouse:

*"it being understand that the pump and machinery are the property of the Heritors of Larbert."*

Throughout the records there is a complete lack of urgency in the heritors' response to the real educational difficulties facing the rapidly expanding parish. This is after all the Parish where *"the illiterate boy moulders of Carron aged nine years and upwards worked a 12 hour day at the furnace mouth."*<sup>[11]</sup> – and where the situation in the many coal mines was even worse. It is the Parish where the number of scholars is:

*"smaller than could be desired and it arises in a great measure from the circumstances that the colliers, moulders and others are enabled to turn their children's labour to profitable account at the age of 12 years."*<sup>[12]</sup>

By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Parish Minister claimed that 513 children out of an estimated 1100 children under twelve were attending one of the

seven schools which were in operation, with the parochial school offering schooling to only 150.<sup>[13]</sup> Despite this, when the spokesman for the Heritors, Colonel Joseph Dundas, appeared as a witness before the 1864 Argyll Commission, he claimed that the existing parochial schools were sufficient to meet the requirements and that “*managers other than the heritors would have an adverse effect on the school.*”<sup>[14]</sup> Commenting on this assertion, Andrew Bain has concluded that “*based on three well-managed parishes in Eastern Stirlingshire (Larbert, Dunipace and Bothkennar) his contentions were no doubt correct.*”<sup>[15]</sup> There is certainly evidence of the Heritors’ records and the population statistics do not support the view that provision of education in the parish came even close to an adequate level and that steps to address the real problems were not taken until their power was swept away in 1872.

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