

Reminiscences of the Falkirk Archaeological and Natural History Society 1903-2003



Jenny Service

By 1903, Edward VII was two years into his relatively short reign, but a reign forever remembered as the Edwardian Era. Only the year before, the South African (Boer) War had ended and what was to be a period of peace for 12 years allowed Britain and the World to expand in many spheres. Orville and Wilbur Wright made their first controlled flight in a heavier than air machine at Kittyhawk, USA in 1903. In Britain, the government was Conservative under Prime Minister Arthur Balfour. The newspaper, *The Mirror*, became officially the *Daily Mirror*, though it was not to change its image and appeal until the 1930s under Cecil King.

Arnold Bennett, Rudyard Kipling and H.G. Wells were bringing a realism to writing with less romanticism. The Nobel Prize had been first awarded in 1901 in the fields of chemistry and physics. Things were happening. Minds were ready for change and new ideas were being put forward particularly in scientific areas.

And what of Falkirk in 1903? On Tuesday 10th February 1903, John Philip Sousa was due to conduct an orchestral concert in Falkirk and alongside the advertisement for that on the front page appeared the following notice in the Falkirk Herald:

"It is proposed to form in Falkirk, a Society for the study of Natural Science and Archaeology. A meeting of those interested will be held in the Christian Institute, Newmarket Street, on Monday, 9th February at 8 o'clock."

(Falkirk Herald Saturday 7 February 1903).

After this, the inaugural meeting was duly held. 36 gentlemen were present with seven apologies. The meeting was composed of a cross-section of people, but with a leaning to the professions and academia – e.g. four ministers, three doctors, five members of the teaching profession and two legal men were among the numbers. Names still evocative to some people in Falkirk included the Rev. James Aitchison, the Rev. Alexander Loudon, the Rev. J.B. Johnson – Auchinachie, Blackadder, Mitchell. Fred Johnston sent apologies, *"but it was thought a Herald interest be good for publicity."* A society would be formed to study Natural Science and Archaeology. A president and four office-bearers and a council of ten would be appointed with a remit to draw up a constitution for a month hence. From the minutes: *"On suggestions being asked for the guidance of the council in framing the rules, it was mentioned that ladies be invited to join and that an age limit be fixed."* (Was it for their contribution that the ladies be asked, or to make the teas? Did the age limit relate to all members or ladies? What were the age boundaries to be?)

By March applications were being made for admission. By June 133 members were on the roll. The speaker at the first meeting was Mr J.G. Goodchild G.G.S., F.L.S. of the Edinburgh Museum of Science and Art and his subject was 'Ants.' *"By picturesque description and limelight illustration, he contrived to interest, enlighten and amuse those present for an hour and a half. Thanks were given to the lecturer, who came without reward."*

Other topics that first year were Celtic Customs and Characteristics of a Bygone Age; Prehistoric Archaeology; Raised Beaches of the Forth Valley; and Sculptured Monuments of Scotland. Sections in Botany, Zoology, Geology and Archaeology came to be formed. Members undertook to compile lists of plants in the district, lists of books relating to the district, excursions were begun either on foot, by use of train and sometimes in horse-drawn vehicles. The syllabus in the early years has an emphasis on natural history and the environment, no less!

By 1905, a slight fall in enthusiasm and membership was noted and the Committee decided to hold a conversazione (after all, it was the Edwardian era) in the High School on 13 October 1905. Three speakers, Sir John Murray, K.C.B., Dr George Neilson of Glasgow, and Dr Peach, President of the Scottish Natural History Society, were invited to speak. Tea was served, songs were sung, and music was also given by a small orchestra. There was an exhibition of maps, books and objects of scientific interest.

Although a financial surplus of only 10 pence is recorded, interest must have been stimulated and the Society continued to flourish with the Committee putting forward other suggestions to increase the interest of the members in the work of the Society, such as – appoint a man to go round to collect subscriptions; encourage discussion after papers were given; try a different venue; have a conversazione at the beginning of each session; advertise; have a cinematograph entertainment. Ladies were not mentioned in Council until 1911.

Outings which had been mainly local began to go further afield by about 1920, e.g. to Hamilton Palace grounds. Subscriptions which were 5 shillings in 1903 are now £5, but proportionately this is not excessive and excellent value for the quality and standard of the syllabus which has always been maintained. Gifts of artefacts and books have been made to the Society throughout the years. The Society has also published four sets of proceedings. Members have written essays, pamphlets and books, and these can be seen in the Local Section of the Reference Room in the Library or in the Historical Research Room in Callendar House.

The Museum Service in Falkirk is linked with the Society. Negotiations began in the 1920s over the institution of a Museum in Arnotdale House. Progress was slow, but Provost Russell stated that he would be pleased if the Archaeological Society would oversee the work of establishing this. Eventually, the Museum opened on Saturday 8 May 1926. It consisted of one large room. The Town Council supplied glass cases, picture frames and drawings. Exhibits included a collection of antiquarian finds made by the late Mungo Buchanan and bequeathed to the town; coins found at Camelon; a collection of prints gifted by the artist William Gibb of Laurieston; and photos of samian pottery from R & A Main. It has been from these simple beginnings that the Museum progressed to Orchard Street and now occupies such a modern and attractive presentation in Callendar House.

It was shortly after this, in 1928, that the Society suffered the loss of a member, James Love. Students of Falkirk history cannot praise sufficiently nor acknowledge the debt to Mr Love, who catalogued the History of Falkirk in four splendid volumes – erudite but eminently readable. Many gifted people have contributed to the Society either by conducting meetings or by the written word. R.L. Hunter was one of these and by coincidence his daughter, Doreen Hunter, was the first Curator of Falkirk Museum, when such an appointment was

made. The Rev. William McLaren of Bothkennar Church was a well-known antiquarian, known for his research and articles, and Lewis Lawson, now the Society's honorary president, made an all-round contribution in chairing the Committee, arranging outings and writing a book on the history of Falkirk and also one on its Parish Church. John Anderson also published articles on Falkirk's wells. The Rev. Thomas Miller of Airth (a kenspeckle figure in Falkirk with his plaid over his shoulder) researched the origins of the Falkirk Trysts. Henry Stewart spoke on the tombs of Egypt and also Heraldry. Visiting speakers have included Sir Francis Grant, at one time the Lord Lyon, Professor Stuart Piggott, researcher on Cairnpapple, and even TV personalities such as Neil Oliver and Tony Pollard of the battlefield Archaeology Team.

Outings have always been a feature of the Society from its early days with afternoon or evening trips to local sites, eg. Dunmore, Avon Valley, Brightons quarries, Torwood, and Carron Glen. Can you imagine today "*stopping the train at Manuel*" or abandoning the Torwood Castle excursion because it was the nesting season? The trips went further afield for a whole day in the post-war era of the 50s and 60s, branched out into 2-day excursions in 1965 and in the last 15 years have included a weekend outing.

1935 was a definitive year in the annals of the Society. The AGM was fixed for April of each year, a new constitution was drawn up and the Society changed its name to the Falkirk Archaeological and Natural History Society. Though the topics were still of interest, sub-sections were discontinued and talks on natural history were included in the syllabus. Original research was still encouraged and papers were to be read to the Society and might be published thereafter. Links were established with other Societies but when the war broke out activities were suspended though the present Committee were to remain in being to resume activities as early as possible, which they did in October 1945, when R.L. Hunter was re-elected president.

Mr Hunter called for some practical fieldwork and the first excavation was made at Torwood Broch and Arthur's O'on (1949). The Museum was re-opened in 1951 and a Jubilee dinner was held in 1953. A diamond Jubilee dinner took place in 1963 when the main speaker was R.B.K. Stevenson, Keeper of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, with a distinguished guest list of Sir Ian Bolton, Malcolm Macpherson M.P., the Provost of Falkirk, the Director of Education for the County, James Middlemas representing the Falkirk Arts and Civic Council, and the President of Stirling Field and Archaeological Society.

Throughout the years, items of interest taken up or promoted by the Society have included publications; the Burgh Museum and its collection; the establishment of a Youth Group with activities rather than talks, which has now evolved into the Young Archaeologists Group, held outwith the Society, but supported by them; pressing for the appointment of a Curator for the Museum; amassing a collection of glass slides of "disappearing Falkirk" given to the Museum on loan; and affiliation with the Council for British Archaeology (Scotland) – now the council for Scottish Archaeology.

However, it must be admitted the Society had a low ebb in 1980-81. Valuable members had resigned for various reasons (age, retirement, leaving the district) and membership generally had fallen. Venues were proving expensive and the financial situation was grave and session 1981/82 was a hard struggle to maintain the Society. But the President, Officer-bearers and Committee with the support of loyal members turned the proverbial corner and the last twenty years have been much more secure and stable. Publicity has played a part in this. Outside lectures in the Town Hall have reached a wider audience; the quality and diversification of speakers have made for attractive syllabuses; outings bring fun and friendships beyond the bare fact of membership.

Appreciation is owed to all dedicated presidents who have influenced the Society over the years and where would they have been without the support of hard-working secretaries, treasurers, and hardworking committees with loyal members behind them?

The Society first met in the Christian Institute, made digressions to Matheson's Rooms, the Temperance Café, the Metropolitan (now Friendly) Hotel, St Andrews Church, and has been happily back in the Institute for some years. I see the scaffolding is up, so long may the building and the Society flourish for many a year to come.

Chairmen of the Society 1903-2003

1903-5	Dr Clarkson
1905-07	D Mitchell
1907-09	Rev J B Johnston
1909-11	Major F D Ferguson
1911	Dr R D Clarkson
1912-13	Rev J B Johnston
1914-19	Lt Col F D Ferguson
1919-28	Thomas McGrouther
1929-35	Fred Johnston
1935-54	R L Hunter
1955-62	R S Taylor
1963-71	Lewis Lawson
1972-77	William Aitken
1978-80	James Ross
1981-93	Jenny Service
1994-95	David March
1996-97	William Holden
1998-99	David March
2000-01	William Holden
2002	Dr Alison Meville

I am indebted to the President and Committee for kind permission to review the Society's Minute Books.

Jenny Service, September 2003.

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