

PARISH OF AIRTH

(County of Stirling)

Rev Robert Ure

Origin of the Name – The name *Airth*, is of Gaelic extraction, and is derived from the word *ard* or *ardhe*, which, in that language, signifies a high or eminent place. Probably it bears that name, because the hill of Airth, on the south-east corner of which the church and mansion-house are built, rises considerably higher than the grounds immediately adjacent. The perpendicular height of this hill is upwards of 70 feet. From the mansion house of Airth, and every part of the Hill, there is a delightful and extensive prospect, over a country rich, populous, and beautifully diversified. In this prospect, part of 10 or 12 counties are to be seen.

Situation and extent – Airth lies in the county and presbytery of Stirling, and in the synod of Perth and Stirling. The extent of the parish, upon the side of the river, is about 6 miles, its medium length 5, and its breadth fully 2 miles. The figure is irregular, and approaches nearest to the parallelogram. The whole parish is a plain, the hills of Airth and Dunmore excepted. This last hill is termed, by some writers, *Airth-beg*, or Little Airth.

Soil – This soil is, in general, a strong deep clay, but the hill of Airth is a very rich mould. It is believed, a great part of the low ground, near the river, once made part of its bed, as many sea shells are mingled with the earth; and a few years ago, an anchor was found upon Dunmore hill, by the Earl of Dunmore, about half a mile from the present course of the river, when digging a few feet below the surface. At a small distance from the same place, there is a large stone, called *Carling Stone*, to which the cables of ships are supposed to have been fastened, and of which there are still evident marks. On the west side of the parish, there are part of two mosses, called the Mosses of Dunmore and Letham. Within these 25 years, 100 acres of ground have been gained from that part of the Moss of Dunmore which belongs to the Earl, and added to the arable land. Here are settled 30 families, called *Moss Lairds*, as the ground is given them for a certain number of years, at a very low rent, in recompense for their labour in clearing away the moss. The settlers are industrious and healthy. The moss is from 5 to 10 feet deep, and when removed, the soil under it is not inferior to that of the neighbouring Carse.

Climate, &c – The air is pretty dry, and free from fogs; and, though mists are frequently seen on the distant hills and high grounds, yet they are seldom experienced here. The people, in general, are healthy and laborious. The sea breezes, doubtless, contribute to the health of the inhabitants on the river side. Though the people in the Carse are said to be much subject to the ague, of late years instances of the disease have been few.

Rivers and fish – There is a small river, which runs through the parish, from west to east; it takes its rise in St Ninian's parish, and discharges itself into the Forth, at *Higgin's Neuck*. Stream tides flow in this rivulet a mile or more from its mouth. In time of great rains, it overflows its banks; if these fall in harvest, it is hurtful to the farmers in its immediate neighbourhood. This small river is between 20 and 30 feet in breadth in many places, and has 5 stone bridges over it. One of these is on the public road, leading from the villages of Dunmore and Airth, to Carron and Falkirk. It is called Abbey-town Bridge, which name corroborates an opinion many have entertained, of there having been formerly an abbacy at Airth, belonging to the Abbey of Holyroodhouse; and that this bridge had that name, from its being the direct road to the abbey town. It also appears, from several old writs, that the parish of Airth belonged to the Bishop of Edinburgh, during the times of Episcopacy. The fish caught in the river Forth are salmon, herrings, flounders, and trouts. Cod and turbot are also sometimes taken. Salmon are chiefly caught in July and August, with staff-nets, at the time of low water, and are all

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consumed by the parishioners. Within these 25 years, 300 acres have been gained from the river Forth, and made good arable ground. It is defended from the river by a strong dike of sods.

Hills, Coal, & c – The hills of Airth and Dunmore abound with free-stone, and the rock, in many places, is within a few feet of the surface. The stones are used for building walls and houses. There is a fine coal under the rock in both hills, and in the flat field around. The greatest part of the level free coal of the former was wrought some time ago; at present there is no work carrying on, although there is a great deal of coal still in the ground, which might be wrought to advantage. The latter, viz, Dunmore, has been wrought, to a considerable extent, for many years past, and the work is still carrying on. The coal consists of 3 or 4 seams; a great deal of the parish, and adjacent places, are supplied from it, and a considerable quantity is exported. The fire engine at these coal works, is the second that was built in Scotland.

Ferries – There are two well known and much frequented ferries in the parish, viz. the ferries of Kerse and Higgin's Neuck. The former is about half a mile in breadth. The proprietor, John Francis Erskine, Esq, of Mar, lately built a pier upon each side of the river, which renders it commodious for passengers, and all kinds of carriages, with or without horses, either at high or low water. The latter, viz, Higgin's Neuck, is about a mile in breadth. There is a passage boat once a day, from Airth and Dunmore to Alva, and the places opposite; its time of departure varies according to the tide. There are three harbour, viz, Airth, Dunmore, and Newmiln, all of which are within the precincts of the customhouse at Alloa. At each of them vessels are occasionally built.

Wood – There is a wood of considerable extent upon the Hill of Dunmore, which consists of birth, oak, ash, elm, beech, and fir. On the side of the hill, contiguous to the moss, upwards of 40 acres have lately been planted with oaks and firs, most of which are at present in a very thriving condition. There are a great number of fallow trees planted about many farmers' houses, and interspersed through the fields, which add greatly to the beauty of the country.

Orchards – There are 9 in the parish, which let annually at from 10.L to 20.L each. The fruits which they produce are, apples, pears, cherries, and plumbs.

Rent – The rents are paid chiefly in meal and barely, at the rate of 10 firlots per acre; which, when converted, are, at an average, for the last 20 years, from 1 L.14s, to 1 L.18s. per acre, and upwards. When the rent is paid all in money it is from 1 L.14s to 2 L.2s. according to the quality of the soil. The valued rent of the parish is 8638L.16s. Scotch.

Farms – The farms are mostly small; few exceed 50 or 6 acres, and the greatest number are from 20 to 30. The farmers generally put 3 horses into their ploughs; but of late, the mode of using only 2 horses, which are driven by the ploughman, has taken place, and, it is hoped, will soon universally prevail throughout the parish.

Produce – The crops are wheat, barley, oats, beans, pease, and potatoes. The wheat is sown after fallow or potatoes. Those who sow no wheat, divide their farms nearly into 3 parts, one of which is sown with barley, another with oats, and a third with pease and beans. Of these the barley crop is by far the most expensive, as it requires most manure and labour. There is more grain produced in the parish than is sufficient to maintain its inhabitants. Many bolls of beans and pease are sent to Falkirk every Thursday, and sold there. Barley is sold to distillers and brewers in the neighbourhood; but most of the oatmeal is consumed in the parish.

Mode of agriculture, and expense of labour – The barley fields must be three times plowed. The first plowing is November, the second is March, and the last at the end of April or beginning of May. Previous to the last, a quantity of lime and dung is spread upon the fields. The effects of the lime are particularly beneficial; in hard clay ground, it separates the stiff particles from each other; and, if the soil is soft and wet, it sucks up the exuberant moisture. The farmer should be very attentive, as to the time and manner of putting lime on his barley fields. Perhaps the best time is the beginning of November, when the ground should be plowed with a very thin and slight furrow, as the lime naturally sinks into it. By its being put on at this season, the saline particles, and hot burning quality of the lime, are absorbed by the earth, and incorporated with it through the winter; whereas, if it be deferred till after the second or third plowing, little advantage is derived from it that season; and in case of much drought, it is often found to be hurtful. There is a prejudice entertained by many farmers, that lime is not beneficial to light sandy ground. This opinion may be presumed to proceed from the want of a fair trial; for it is well known, that lime incorporates with sand, and tends to consolidate its small particles, and to give the ground a peculiar strength and firmness. The farmers often roll their barley fields with a heavy wooden or stone roller. This, in a dry season, is of great use, as it tends to preserve the moisture in the ground, and hinders the drought from penetrating into it; but if heavy rains fall soon after the rolling, it is necessary to open the surface with the harrow. It may be observed, that the barley sown in April is the strongest grain; but that sown in the middle of May is the most prolific. Beans and pease are sown at the beginning of March, and oats immediately after. Ploughmen's wages, at present, are from 8 L. to 10 L. per annum. Those of servant maids, from 2 L. 10 s. to 3 L. About 20 years ago, the former had from 5 L. to 6 L.; and the latter; from 30 s. to 40 s.

Population – The number of inhabitants, in 1755, was 2316. The population has not since decreased. The families in the parish are 508; these families, by the nearest computation, exceed 4½ in each family at an average; and the whole population may be stated at about 2350. The villagers are about 1200; tradesmen and seamen about 140. The annual average of births, for the last 10 years, is 66; of deaths, 54; and of marriages, 20.

Decline of trade – The trade in Airth, prior to the year 1745, was very considerable, but has since been on the decline, owing to a number of vessels being burnt at that period. The occasion of this was, that the rebels, having seized a small vessel at a narrow part of the river, called Fallin, by means of it transported a number of small brass cannon to the harbours of Airth and Dunmore, near each of which they erected batteries, and placed their cannon. Upon the King's vessels coming from Leith to dislodge them, a reciprocal firing took place. The commanders of the King's vessels, finding their efforts ineffectual, sailed down the river with the tide, and gave orders to burn all the vessels lying on the river side, to prevent them falling into the hands of the rebels, who might have used them as transports, and harassed the people on both sides of the river. The loss of these vessels were severely felt by the trading people in Airth, and trade has since removed to Carronshore and Grangemouth.

Shipping – There are at present 8 vessels belonging to the parish. Some of these are employed in the Baltic, others in the coal and lime trade.

Church and school – The stipend is 69 bolls of meal and barley, and about 1000 merks of money, with a manse and glebe of 10 acres of good arable ground. The patron of the parish is James Graham Esq, of Airth. There is an established school in it, and a schoolmaster, who has a dwelling house and legal salary allowed him by the heritors. The number of scholars, taught in it, is between 70 and 80. There are some other schools of lesser note, but the masters of these have no allowance, except what is given them by the parents of those children whom they instruct.

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Heritors – There are 5 heritors, who reside constantly or occasionally in the parish, and 6 who do not reside in it. Besides these, there are several lesser heritors and feuars.

Poor – The number of poor supplied weekly is 30; and of occasional poor, there are about 12. They are supplied by an annual assessment, which the heritors voluntarily impose upon themselves, the one half of which is paid by them, and the other by their tenants. By the interest of money, the assessment, and the weekly collections, the sum given annually to the poor is between 80 L. and 90 L. Sterling.

Antiquities – There are 3 ancient towers in the parish, one at Airth, another at Dunmore, and a third at Powfoulis. The tower of Airth was built before Sir William Wallace's time, who lived at the beginning of the 14th century. If credit can be given to Blind Harry's poetical history of that hero, he says, that Wallace came privily into this tower, slew the captain and 100 men, and relieved his uncle, who was a prisoner in it. This tower is in good repair; it makes part of the house of Airth, and bears the name of *Wallace's Tower*. The antiquity of the other two is not accurately ascertained. In one of the aisles of Airth church, belonging to the family of Airth, there is a black marble stone built in the wall, with the *Bruce's* arms elegantly engraved above it, bearing the following inscription in very neat legible characters.

M.S
ALEXANDRO BRUSSIO,
EX ROBERTI BRUSSII SCOTORUM REGIS
FILIO NATU SECUNDO, PROGENITIO,
BARONI AIRTHENSI
PRIMUM IN BELGIO PER ANNOS XLII.
DEIN IN ANGLIA PRO TRIBUNO REGIO.
Viro cum strenvo tum pientissimo,
Aetatis, anno LVI. vitaeque simul defuncto,
A.D. XVII, Kal. Oct. CIC DC XLII.
G. LAUDERUS AFFINIS, M.P.

BRUSSIUS hic situs est; pietate an clarior armis,
Incertum est; certum regibus ortus avis.

Heer lyes a branche of Brusse's noble stemm,
Airth's Baron, whose high worth did svte than name.
Holland his courage, honovred Spain did feare,
The Sweeds in Fvnen bought the trial deare.
At last his Prince's service called him home,
To die on Thames his bank, and leave this tombe,
To bear his name unto posteritie,
And make all braue men loue his memorie.

Mineral springs – There is a well, near Abbeytown Bridge, called *Lady-Well*, which is thought to be medicinal. Numbers have used it, and still use it, as such. It is supposed to have obtained that name, from the holy water, in the time of Popery, being taken from it, to supply the abbacy, or Catholic chapel, then at Airth.

General character of the people – The morals of the people are, in general, good; and most of them are sober, industrious and attentive to their respective employments. They are particularly regular in

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attending Divine worship every Sunday, at the parochial church, and are, upon the whole, a well-behaved and respectable set of people.

1793.