

# Helensburgh Heritage Trust

Number 57

August 2013

## Newsletter

The Newsletter is edited and published by Kenneth N Crawford 'Ardlamont' 3, Loch Drive, Helensburgh G84 8PY kn.crawford@virgin.net

Contributions and suggestions are urgently required and welcome

### A TALE OF RAILS AND WIRES

When the railway came to Helensburgh in 1858, it brought with it not only the promise of swift and easy travel, but also another modern marvel: the electric telegraph. Townspeople were quick to note its presence, and began to dream of access to such a system - after all, this was the year when the first transatlantic telegraph cable was laid. However, as we shall see, there were various alarms and excursions before their dreams became reality.

Ever since the invention of the Leyden jar in 1745, visionaries had foreseen the possible use of electric current in transmitting information, but technical difficulties meant that it was not until 1837 that the Cooke-Wheatstone telegraph system became a commercial reality. With the railway network beginning to take off, engineers saw that the use of the electric telegraph could be a godsend, on both operational and safety grounds.

While not all railways used the telegraph, many did, including that linking Helensburgh and Glasgow. Early hopes that the railway would allow others to share its telegraph were quickly dashed, however, despite petitioning from the Town Council, among others. The railway's own system seems to have been provided in association with one of the big commercial concerns, namely the Electric and International Telegraph Co. - usually known as "The Electric". Pressure mounted, and by 1862, the railway company and The Electric were conceding that they would be willing to become party to a public system, if the communities involved would subscribe £325 between them.

For whatever reason, or reasons, this does not seem to have come about, and by the following year, the local press was commenting that "it is strange that this area has remained so long without telegraphic facilities. Later that same year, however, telegraph poles and wires were being erected in Helensburgh and Dumbarton - not everyone was happy about the changed streetscape! This system was the work of the British and Irish Magnetic Telegraph Co., usually known as "The Magnetic," with Helensburgh offices in Sinclair Street.

From 1865, the public could now make use of another telegraph system, in the form of the famous West Highland Telegraph, sometimes called the Cautyre Line. While backed by a large company, the Universal Private Telegraph Co., the conception here was of a low-budget system, linking Glasgow to the Clyde coast as far as Kintyre - there was strong backing from shipping interests, but private use was also seen as essential. A key feature was the use of simple equipment, meaning that a minimum of training was needed - indeed volunteer labour was used throughout.

The Helensburgh office for the West Highland was at Battrams, newsagents and stationers, opposite the railway station in East Princes Street. Poles and wires carried the line to Row (Rhu), where an underwater cable gave a linkage with Rosneath, where Robert Morrison, grocer, was the agent. The line then crossed the hill to Cove, where business was handled by a Mr Harris, postmaster, after which another submarine crossing took the line to Cowal and beyond.

In 1870, an early form of nationalisation saw all commercial telegraph systems come under the remit of the Post Office.

*Alastair McIntyre*

The 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of John Logie Baird was marked by his Grandson, Iain Logie Baird, Curator at the National Media Museum in Bradford in August. Only somebody very innovative with mechanical techniques could have developed high definition and 3D in colour and made progress with fibre optics, infra red scanning and fax in war-time - and that was my grandfather. Iain is son of our President, Malcolm Baird.



This beautiful presentation Carriage Clock has been purchased by the Trust for display in the Heritage Centre



Presented to

Private W M<sup>C</sup>Kinley A&BH  
in recognition of patriotic  
service in the South African  
Campaign Helensburgh  
June 1901

UR Helensburgh has reopened the Tourist Office in the clock tower and is doing a lively trade. It has published a new Guide to the town, spoilt only by many typos! United Reformed *not Untied Reform nor Waverly nor even Helesnburgh!*

## Three Lochs Cycle Tour

It was in 1949 that I first visited Helensburgh. I had cycled for three days from home in Salford, Lancashire to a relative's home in Greenock. My version of the then much advertised 'Three Lochs Tour' was to catch the morning Ritchie Bros. ferry from Gourrock to Kilcreggan. Riding North alongside the Gareloch and Loch Long to Arrochar and Tarbet for lunch I then turned South along the 'Bonnie Banks' but even then I described the lovely winding road as 'spoilt by traffic!' By mid-afternoon I was able to call on a Cousin in Luss Road Alexandria, and was extremely well received and entertained, to the extent that it was after 7 p.m. before I could hit the road again. So, back to Arden and over the hill, just in time to cycle the length of Helensburgh Pier and catch the 7.45 p.m. Ritchie ferry back to Greenock and my base for the week. A 52 mile; 10 hour trip.

But what of the weather? Fair, but rain at Whistlefield, however the outward crossing I described in my tours book as "choppy, but nothing to compare with the return over a very rough sea in a large open boat." I can still remember being in the bow in my cycling cape with the Clyde breaking over me! My bike was cowed at the stern, behind the Skipper!

*N.B. The July and August 1949 timetable announces the crossings from Greenock to Helensburgh Pier at 9, 11, 2, 4, 5.30, 7, and 9 p.m. With the return a half hour later! Who were the normal passengers? Did Erskine Bridge take them all away?*  
K N C

## A Fund Raising Idea?

A visit to the West Highland Museum in Fort William recently was most interesting. Like our Heritage Centre it is Independent, with Free Admission, and open year round. Somehow they have a paid member of staff and a number of volunteers. With eight rooms, many larger than ours, filled with display cases there must be much maintenance and cleaning to be done!

Described as a Treasure Trove of Highland Life, crofting, costumes, coins and medals as well as of Queen Victoria and John Brown, Commandoes in WW2 and the Jacobite Story, these and many other subjects are well covered.

Each room is devoted to a subject and each case to an aspect, so it is quite easy to seek out the parts that are of interest and pass by those less so. Of particular interest was the announcement in the corner of many that:—  
'This display case is sponsored by – followed by the name and business of a local Company or Person.' Enquiring at the desk, I was told that sponsors pay £25 or £30 per year to maintain their sponsorship and keep their name on view. A useful funding stream I should think.  
K N C

## Correction - Tribute to John W Johnston.

Our Member Andrew Bilsland writes to say that he started on the same day as John and they served their apprenticeship together, and that the name of the firm of Chartered Accountants was McClelland, Ker and Co.

## *A new Archaeological Group*

As exclusively forecast last time, the group has been formed. Tam Ward is Chairman and Sandra Kelly is Secretary. A programme is being prepared.

## Meetings Programme

Upstairs in the Lawn Tennis Club, Suffolk Street  
7.30 p.m.

### **Wednesday September 25**

Joe Brown:

***The Ferry Inn, Rosneath***

Wednesday October 30 —

7pm *AGM*;

7.30 app. David Norman:

***Loch Goil — noises off***

Wednesday November 27

Mark Nixon:

***The 1884 Reform Act - Agitation in Helensburgh and Dunbartonshire***

## Members' Notice

The recent change in the Income Tax threshold may mean that you are no longer paying tax. It will follow that we can no longer claim a refund on your subscription. Good for you, not quite so good for the Trust. You will have signed a Gift Aid Form and it seems now to be your duty to tell us if this is the case so that we do not make an improper claim on the Revenue. Your subscription will have been paid by your Bank in March and our tax reclaims have to be made shortly. Please tell Stewart Noble if you are affected by the Tax change.

## The Time has come!

Soon after our mention of the town timekeeping problem, the Colquhoun Square Clock on St Andrew's Spire was running slow! However all is now well, Summer time corrected the King Street Library Building Clock, St Andrew's caught up and an overhaul at the Pier resulted in a new minute hand and all faces pulling together.