

# LANG SYNE

What was life really like on North and North-east farms 100 years and more ago? In this age of electricity, combines and all-mod-con. cottar houses, most people have heard about it only at second hand—something vaguely remembered as having been talked about by Grandfather. But here is the authentic story. James Allan, a deep-thinking Aberdeenshire countryman, lived through those days, and set down a record of his experiences. This has been made available to "The Press and Journal," and here is the first of eight instalments in which it will be published.



Ploughing  
match  
drew a  
crowd of  
19,000

**C**OMMENCING in 1862 at the age of 11, I experienced 11 years of farm-servant life, and served upon 11 different farms. My fee for the first six months was 30/-, and my last fee as grieve to Mr Alsop, butcher, Inverurie, was £18/10/-.

We worked 10 hours a day in two yokin's of five hours each—from 6 to 11, and from 1 to 6, with no half-day on Saturday. In addition, we got up at 5 or earlier, to feed and clean our horses before breakfast at 5.30, and the horses required attention in the evenings.

And now for the farm-work proper in my day—and first of all, ploughing. I can remember assisting at a champion ploughing match on national scale in 1872, at Balhaggarty, near Inverurie, at which 19,000 spectators paid for admision, all farmers and farm servants, men who knew where their truest source of happiness lay—namely in skilled work well done. At this national match only those ploughmen competed who had been champions in their own district matches.

## On Harlaw battlefield

The chief ploughmakers of the day were Buchan of Balquhain, Newlands of Inverurie, and Sellar of Huntly, and the common plough was the long board. I can remember ploughing for a squatter on what was called the Free Forest of Bennachie. There we made the rigs narrow, high in the feering and low and shallow in the mids—an antiquated, easy method of drainage, practised by our forefathers, who shared rigs time about in the open fields and pooled their diminutive oxen to the number of eight to 12 to draw the clumsy wooden ploughs owned in common. The crown of the rig did well, being plled up with mould, but nothing grew in the mids.

In 1870 I ploughed the Playfold or Battlefield of Harlaw in narrow 16-foot rigs. Sometimes I had to plough with a pair of oxen (we called them owsen). The yoke over their necks made them hang their heads, but many oxen wore collars and halms like horses, with a swingle-tree fitted to the plough.

In harvest we worked an 11-hour day, from 6 to 10, from 11 to 2, and from 3 to 7, and all our food was brought to us on the field.

Harvest was a big job, for all the grain was cut by scythe. Many extra hands were employed, mostly Highlandmen.

At Balquhain in 1871, four of us scythed 140 acres of crop. For one day of 11 hours our record for the four of us was 12 acres of crop, but an average for a good scythesman was from 2-2½ acres per day, depending, of course, on the crop.

We four shearers had four women to gather, four men to bind and stook, and one man to pull the shoulder rake behind the others. At the end of a bout we sharpened our

scythes, while the others finished their jobs.

For two weeks before harvest, two women baked oat-cakes continuously, one baking and the other firing, in order to be free to gather in the hairst rig.

Threshing was done on big farms mostly by portable steam engines, the mill and engine being moved from farm to farm by horses; there were no traction engines. Small lots were thrashed by watermills, and horse mills. My father, like all small crofters, thrashed with a flail from 5 o'clock every morning, and as a boy, I had to assist.

Continued next Thursday.



# LANG SYNE

Continuing the diary of a countryman who worked on North-east farms around 100 years ago.

## Appetite made best sauce!



REGARDING our food in "farm service" I had no complaint to make—it was clean and wholesome.

At 5.30 we had water brose and milk, and as much oatcakes as we liked. At noon we had perhaps vegetable broth, or milk broth, potatoes stoved or chappit, or milk brose, whey brose, ale brose, or cabbage, kail or turnip brose, with of course the

chappit cabbage, kail, or turnip after. Seldom or never did we have meat until I entered service with Mr Alsop, at Bransbutt.

For our third and last meal we had a plate of porridge or some kind of brose, with oatcakes and skimmed milk to fill any void.

For sauce we had the very best, namely a keen appetite engendered by hard work. On this diet I weighed 14st. 4lb. at 18 years of age.

I spent two half-years in farm bothies, where we had to make our own food. The bailie got to stop his work half an hour earlier to get the fire going, but we had time only to make brose or boil tatties. On Sundays we pooled our resources and bought something extra, and the kitchie deem came and helped to cook.

Sometimes, too, there was a rabbit or a hare, covered, fur and all, below the "ase" of the fireplace, and left there until it was cooked, when the skin and entrails all came away as clean as a whistle.

On some farms on Sunday morning we got each one cup of tea, a small pat of butter, and sometimes as a great treat, a red herring. There was no flour bread.

### Chaumers

My first farm chaumer was a hut resembling a pighouse, the floor of which was 18 inches below the ground level. In rainy weather the water came in at the door and ran out under the wall at the other end of the hovel. There was no fireplace. I had planks to walk on to get to bed with dry feet. Any modern pighouse is infinitely superior. And I was a boy of 11, and alone.

My next home was on the west side of Monymusk, and there, with another fee'd man I slept in a loft above the stable, in the atmosphere which the horses had first used below.

The roof was thatched and the stable rats burrowed regularly in the roof. We had to acquire the habit, in the morning, of refraining from opening our eyes until we first shook our heads, face downwards, over the bedside, to clear from our eyelids the dust which the rats had shaken down upon them overnight!

At other farms I found the chaumer reasonably good, in some cases very good.

CONTINUED

NEXT THURSDAY

tax, but on June 9, 1855, the stamp and on August 25, 1876 the "Journal" became a daily. Six families joined to buy one copy, which went the round, and at the end of six months the carefully-preserved copies were divided among the subscribers. I can remember as a child holding a fir candle while my mother read to my father of the Sepoy atrocities to children during the Indian Mutiny.

The fir candle was a strip of a fir log from a moss bog, which burned like a candle, being full of resin. These logs were quite common in mosses

many feet below the surface, and stood there where they had once grown as trees. For holding the fir candle, some crofters had a standard, called a "peer man," because it performed the duty often assigned to poor travellers seeking a haven.

The fir candle gave a better light than the cruise, for which I had to gather rashes for wicks—always at full moon, when the rashes were said to be in the best condition. We commonly had two rashes in the cruise, peeled of course, and sometimes more for additional light. Then came the naphtha lamp, a dangerous contrivance, and then the paraffin lamp.

### At fairs

Cattle in the 60s were sold in fairs to butchers, and I can remember the founding of the first cattle mart in Aberdeen, namely John Duncan's, in King Street.

John Duncan was a dealer, importing large numbers of cattle from Orkney. He took an open stance in King Street, where he sold by private bargain. Soon the stance was divided up by means of flakes, or portable wooden fences. Then the rostrum was erected, and permanent buildings later, and that was the evolution of the modern auction mart.

As the squatters left Ben-nachie, their little fields were at once planted with trees, which were cut down during the Great War. Now the area is a waste of broom and heather, and rotting brush-wood. It has not been replanted.\*

But one can follow the old road still from near Tullos Castle westwards, and find beyond Essons the little fields where the broom is most luxurious. Look for the old holly tree, the wild cherry, the laurel, and the honey-suckle, and in their midst you will always find the pile of stones and clay which once was a homestead.

### The spring

Listen and you will hear the trickle from the spring of pure, clear water, now overgrown. And as you look around, picture the writer at break of day, with well-groomed pair, shining harness, new theats, and a Buchan plough, liltng up the old road to do a yokin' for a poor squatter.

Finally, as I look around me at the vast amount of reclaimed land in Aberdeenshire, I take off my hat to our forebears who from the '45 onwards turned bog and moor into these smiling fields, trenching, draining, and enclosing, working early and late in all weathers, waging a hard warfare with Nature, but winning for themselves and their descendants that grit and indomitable perseverance that characterise the natives of the North-east. God grant that generations to come remain true.

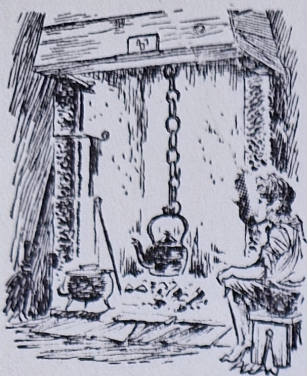




14/2/93

# THE WEE HOOSE WI' THE HINGIN' LUM

## LANG SYNE



A far cry from the present-day all-electric farmhouse was the do - it - yourself cottage of a North-east countryman 100 years ago. Here it is pictured in Part III. of the memoirs of a man who lived through those days.

MY father was a woodman and crofter, earning his living like other crofters from a double source. He took a lease of a patch of moorland at the foot of Bennachie, at a rent of £7 for 24 acres, and proceeded to build for himself a dwelling house, with barn, byre and stable. The walls were built of stone and clay, faced with lime mortar inside and out.

My father did the woodwork himself, and one Esson, a mason, who was a squatter on Bennachie, did the mason-work for £20.

There was no upstairs, just a but-and-ben, with a middle closet for the meal gurnal. The fireplace was wide open, with no swye, but with a rantle tree, or crossbar of iron inset in the walls at both sides. This supported the crook for hanging the kettle.

1829, a lonely woman in Morayshire had her house surrounded with water. She climbed up the chimney and stood on the rantle tree. A man in a boat saw her head protruding from the top of the chimney, and rowed to rescue her. Quoth she: "Ye're the blithest sicht I've seen." Quoth he: "Ye're the blackest besom I've ever seen!"

### Stone drains

In early manhood I gave up farmwork and went home to help my father in reclaiming his moorland.

"Lang Lamb," a man who was 6ft. tall, and strong in proportion, was my helper, and we contracted to trench moorland for £8/10/- an acre, which gave us a weekly wage of about 15/-.

The stones carted off were used to make the field drains, and dykes. If you have seen the "consumption dykes" near Kingswells, or Glassel, or Portlethen, or Blackhall, or Kinharrachie, you will have a faint idea of the hardness of the labour of trenching and laying stone drains.

### 'Port' canal

And I would have you note that it was the peasantry in these parts, from the Forty-five onwards, that brought into cultivation and enclosed with dykes most of our arable land; the proprietors got all this labour of generations as a gift.

The newly-trenched fields got a dressing of old guano from Peru, and oats were sown two or three years on end. This Peruvian guano was powdery as flour, and so was contained in sacks of fine cotton, out of which my mother made all the slips or pinafores for school.

Before the railway was opened in 1854 this manure was transported to us as far as Port-Elphinstone by canal, upon which I travelled once to Aberdeen in the fly-boat, an infant in my mother's arms.

[Continued next Thursday.]

### Peat fuel

The fireplace had a "hingin' lum" of wood, which was four feet wide over the fireplace, tapering to 18 inches at the top. We children could stand or sit inside it. The deep well of the fireplace was cleared of ashes once in three weeks. The fuel was wood or peat from Bennachie. The floor of the house was of earth, and became muddy in wet weather.

In the "Muckle Spate" of



# 4 LIVING STONE

## Crops—short and frozen

**H**ARVEST varied much with the weather. The year 1867 gave the heaviest oat crop, with the latest harvest, in my experience. It rained all summer, and in November, one week before the term, we were binding oats. The crop was still green and frozen, and the bands broke clean over.

We scythesmen usually followed each other in bouts, but that year we were each given a separate rig, and we just had to make the best of a bad job. One hundred acres of crop made 100 good stacks, but all straw, with very little, and very inferior grain.

The following year, 1868, was the year of the short crop. (The previous short crop year was 1826.) There was not a shower from seed-time till harvest. Straw was very short, and the ears of corn were never fully shot. Most farmers thrashed the sheaves twice to try to extract the grain.

That year I was at West Harlaw, and there we managed to bind the crop in short sheaves, and had it all in on August 23. I went to see the Highland Show at Aberdeen that year at the end of July, and the farmers near Inverurie were building their grain crops into coles. The crops measured from 15 to 18 inches.

Rain fell in late August, and only then did the grass seed, sown in April, germinate.

### Thunderstorm

I have vivid memories of the awful thunderstorm of July, 1873. It commenced about midnight and continued until five in the morning. The lightning was incessant, and the thunder almost one continuous roar.

It began again in the morning about 10 — that was Aikey Fair day — and lasted until 3.30 in the afternoon. Much damage was done all over Aberdeenshire to houses and animals.

After the storm the farmer at Tillywater Monymusk, went to see if his cattle were all safe. From a distance he saw them all lying on a knoll, and assumed they were all right.

A day or two later he went back, and thought it strange that again they were all lying on the same knoll, but on close inspection he found that all the eight beasts were dead.

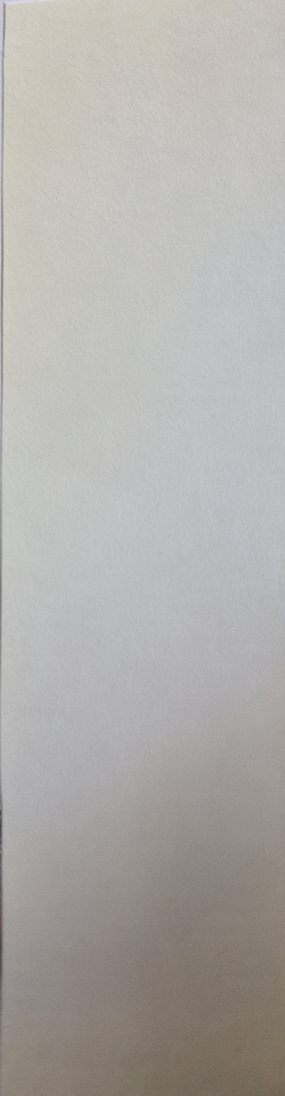
### Quarry blast

On the eve of the thunderstorm there was a great b'asting of rock in Kemnay Quarry. A Welshman had worked for three years tunnelling below a large face of rock, and had cut out a chamber to hold about three tons of explosives. Country folks firm'y believed that these explosions were the cause of the thunderstorm!

The price of dead meat in 1865 was about 68/- per cwt. whereas in 1874 it rose to 105/- thanks to the world disturbance of the Civil War in America and the Franco-Prussian war.

The high prices of meat encouraged farmers and crofters to trench in more land, and this was the last period of real land famine in Scotland. With the dismal Eighties trenching and draining ceased, and rents fell as leases expired.

reclaiming all his 24 acres—3 acres were reclaimed by the laird, and 21 by my father and me—the rent rose to £18, but the laird built a new house and steading.





14/2/9/16

Continuing the diary of a N.E. countryman of 100 years ago.

# LANG SYNE

## FACTORIES CLOSED THE COUNTRY MILLS

MY mother always went to Lawrence Fair in Old Rayne, a three-day fair for cattle, horses and timber chiefly. There she bought wool and spun it on a big wheel. I carried it to the only surviving handloom weaver in the district, Birnie, at the Glington, near the Lord's Throat, and he made for us wincey, blankets or suiting, as required.

Burnhervie wool mills killed out the individual handloom weavers of our district, and at the mill we could get the wool carded. But alas! The small rural industry of Burnhervie, with its water power, has in turn disappeared, with the rise of big industrial factories in large towns.

Lawrence Fair had its beauty competition, and the bonniest lass got a bouquet. Brawls were frequent among the gallants who were keen to escort her home.

In my childhood, in the middle of last century, before our Poor Laws were the finished article they are today, and before the dole was even

dreamed of, a lot of "gangrel bodies" travelled the country, peddling their wares from farm to farm. They had their centres where they lived for possibly a week at a time.

### Family lost

An old woman of this type used to put up at my home. In her younger days she had followed the fife and drum with her husband, who was a soldier, and whom she lost, along with her three sons, in the Continental wars.

After that she took to the road, to peddling and to drinking.

I can see her yet making through the fields of our house. With her old coal-scuttle bonnet, and a roomy black coat covering innumerable bundles tied about her shoulders, she looked like a balloon.

I had for a mate at trenching one of the strongest men I have ever seen — physically, but not mentally. When at work he worked with all his great might, and when resting for a little while he told me some of the most ridiculous lies you ever heard.

But his stories did no harm to any living soul — on the contrary they were amusing, and concerned himself and his exploits.

### Blown 'up'

One day he told me about a time when he was digging a pump well at the edge of a wood some distance from the steading. About 25-30ft. down he struck rock, in which he drilled a hole and put a charge of powder and a fuse.

He lit the fuse and began to climb the ladder. When he was half-way up the ladder gave way, and down he fell. Effecting a hurried repair, he was scrambling up again when the ladder gave way.

As he fell the second time the charge went off and blew him right to the topmost branch of a high tree, where he hung all the three days of Aul' Yule before he was discovered and taken down.

I am convinced that by repeating the stories he firmly believed they were true.





# LANG SYNE

## SQUATTERS ALWAYS FROM THE OTHER PARISH!

THERE had been squatters on the south slope of Bennachie before living memory. The first squatter is said to have settled in 1801, and by the '20s there were seven or eight. The squatters in my time were very respectable people, with nothing of the tramp or gipsy about them.

Each had built his little homestead, and reclaimed his garden and arable land, the largest holding being 12 acres. The houses were built like my father's, and there was no trouble about title deeds! As families grew more rooms were added.



### THE AUL' HOOSIE

Aul' hoosie wi' the hingin' lum at the fit o' Bennachie. Scene o' mony a childhood ploy. O' happy memory.

The burnished crook black leaded aft.  
The sturdy rattle-tree.  
The fite-washed blinkies gleamin' bright.  
The lucky aul' horse-shee.

The iron kettle singin' abeen a roarin' fire.  
Hotterin till the lld galed dance  
Aft raisin' Granny's ire.

Knittin' in her easy-chair  
The sheath tied till her waist.  
The motto hingin' on the wa'  
'East, West, Hame's aye the best.'

Throu' the wa' the shaltie Munchin' corn an' hay.  
An' faurer ben the ooo an' calf  
Snod aman' the strae,

Winter storms micht rage without.  
But we were snug an' warm.  
The wurd hygiene was never heard  
Yet nane e'er cam' till harm.

Aul hoosie wi' the hingin' lum At the fit o' Bennachie,  
You'll aye be dear till Granny,  
Still wis at ninety-three.

—I. R. Tawse, Waukmill, Craigievar.

## PARISH!

Among them were masons, dykers, thatchers, drainers, woodcutters and a cadger. The Essons were champion masons and dykers, and their work on the estates around, and on their own crofts will live long after them.

No parish recognised the squatters officially, doubtless dreading considerable claims for Poor Relief, and Bennachie being still a commonty, no official proprietor was entered on the valuation roll.

**Proclamation of marriages was a problem. Oyne proclaimed a squatter as resident in Chapel of Garioch, and Chapel of Garioch proclaimed him as resident in Oyne.**

In 1845 the whole hill of Bennachie was surveyed by Alexander Smith with a view to its appropriation by the neighbouring lairds. The case dragged on in the Court of Session until 1859, when the hill was divided among nine lairds, with moss privileges to various other estates.

### Two defiant

The squatters made no opposition at the time, and a protest from them later on was of no avail. A small rent was imposed, and all paid except two brothers, who were forcibly evicted in 1878. Their furniture was carried out, and the houses laid low.

When the rent was imposed the occupants were then tenants, and as such had legal protection for their crops, which they did not have as squatters on a commonty, where the herds of others might break in upon their crops.

In the 1860s there were still seven or eight tenants on the Hill of Bennachie, but with changing times in the agricultural world, it became impossible to make a living, and one by one they quit. The Essons were the last to go.

### Crofter's jaunt

Events which today would make no impression on the public were of great importance then. For example the performance of "The Messiah" in Aberdeen was talked of for weeks before James McDonald, a crofter, resolved to go to hear it, and here is his account of it:

"We war a' sittin' fine an' quaet fin a brazen-faced hizzie jumpit up an' shoutit that she wis the King o' Glory. Weel, the wirts war hardly oot o' her moo fin a bit mannie up an' roar't 'at he wis the King o' Glory, an' afore ye could say Jeck Robinson a hale crood o' folk a' yell't oot o' them 'at they war the King o' Glory. Nae only that, bit stannin' in the middle o' them wis a mannie waugerin' a stick. I didna bide tae hear ony mair, for Ah thocht they wid saddle their quarrels better amo' themsels, so I took ma bonnet, an' crawl't awa oot. Yon wis nae place for me."



Continuing the diary of a N.E. countryman of 100 years ago.

# LANG SYNE

## More pay for good curlers!

I CONSIDER that farmers in Aberdeenshire have little to learn from those of any other part of Scotland.

In the Annandale district of Dumfries-shire I found the farmers many years behind in method. They were still using the old cart with the wooden axle.

The Rev. Patrick Bell of Carmyllie, Forfarshire, was experimenting with his first reaping machine in 1826, and such machines began to appear in Aberdeenshire about 1872-73.

The first type was the common tilter, which needed one man to drive and one man to tilt off a pile of grain at intervals. Then came the back delivery, and then the side delivery, which had the advantage that it could go on cutting in the field for any length of time without the gatherers in attendance. Finally the binder appeared in the middle eighties.

In 1885 Annandale farmers were still using the old tilter when the back delivery reaper was already the rule in Aberdeenshire.

Instead of the modern broadcast sowing machine, a bed-sheet round the neck was the rule.

### Heavy work

The oat straw and bog hay for feeding in Annandale did not produce quality meat. The skilled cattleman in Aberdeenshire found his counterpart in the byre-woman, who earned as much as a ploughman. Women were still on heavy outdoor work in Dumfries, driving turnips and filling dung.

Life was a less serious affair for the Annandale farmer, who would pay a horseman 10/- or 15/- more if he were an expert curler and a strength to the farmer's rink.

As milk production and bacon curing were more important in Dumfries than beef production, male calves were



sold in Lockerbie from 1/- to 4/- each, to be railed off to Glasgow to make veal pies while calves in Aberdeenshire were selling at that time at £4 each, to be fed.

Young pigs were much dearer in Lockerbie. Aberdeenshire produced Shorthorn and Black beef, while Dumfries bred Ayrshires for milk. Each breed has its particular value.

No reaping machine could have been used on the uneven surface which I helped to plough for a squatter in the Free Forest of Bennachie, with high feering and low and shallow mids, as I have mentioned earlier.

I have just seen photographs of rigs of this sort in the year of grace, 1926, in Brittany, where the reaping is still done by hooks on rigs of three feet, on which a scythe could not be used, and where the knife and teeth of a reaping machine would be destroyed upon the humps and howes.



# LANG SYNE

Concluding the diary  
of a North-east  
Countryman of 100  
years ago.

## JOHN DUNCAN— PIONEER OF THE AUCTION MART

FOR a newspaper we took the "Aberdeen Journal," then a weekly. It cost 3d, including 2d of a stamp tax, but on June 9, 1855, the stamp was abolished, and on August 25, 1876 the "Journal" became a daily. Six families joined to buy one copy, which went the round, and at the end of six months the carefully-preserved copies were divided among the subscribers. I can remember as a child holding a fir candle while my mother read to my father of the Sepoy atrocities to children during the Indian Mutiny.

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