

THE GREAT ALARM OF 1804

As Napoleon's invasion force was massed at Boulogne in 1803 - 1804, the ancient system of beacons was revived in the Borders. On hills and high points beacons were maintained and constantly manned so that if the French landed on the coast, the whole countryside could be quickly alerted.

On 31st January, 1804, the system was put into action. A volunteer sergeant, new to the area, was put in charge of the beacon on Hume Castle. Peering into the darkness, he was certain he saw the flames of a coastal beacon at Dowlaw. He set fire to the one at Hume, and within minutes the beacons down the Borders were lit and the alarm raised. The volunteers in all the Border towns began to muster. Lord Minto swam his horse across the swollen Teviot to reach his men at Jedburgh. Walter Scott rode 100 miles from Cumberland to join the yeomanry at Dalkeith.

Alas, it was all a false alarm. What the unfortunate sergeant at Hume Castle had seen was not the beacon on Dowlaw, but charcoal burners, or possibly a lime-kiln near the coast. This sparked what became known as the Great Alarm. The Chairman of the Civic Society, having peered into the dusk exactly two hundred years later, has every sympathy with the wretched sergeant.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

Having made an appeal last year for issues 1 and 2 of the Newsletter, I am grateful to Sir John Swinton for supplying me with copies of them.

Issue 1 was published in 1974. Thus this is the 30th anniversary of the Civic Society's Newsletter. In fact Issue 1 was published as a News Sheet, and was put out under the title "Lamberton Toll - Revive, Restore, Resite?" Sadly nothing came of the proposal to restore the former marriage house, and as we all know, the site was eventually cleared and is now a by-pass off the A1, with little to show what stood there before. If ever there was a missed opportunity that was it, compared to the enormous tourist attraction which Gretna Green has now become.

The Newsheet ended with the words "The more people who pledge themselves to join together in retaining and enhancing the character and beauty of Berwickshire, the more chance there will be of this county being a place worthy to live in for not only our children, but our children's children's children."

I would like to think that the Civic Society has played its part in fulfilling this aim over the past 30 years, but the words remain as true and compelling today as they did then.

Newsletter No. 2 was issued in the autumn of 1974, and dealt largely with the issues raised by the plans to build the nuclear power station at Torness. In particular the proposed high voltage transmission lines which were to be erected across Berwickshire from north to south, were of particular concern.

As we are only too well aware, the lines of giant pylons were built, and are with us today and are likely to remain so for many years to come. Most of us have got used to them, but some have to put up with them every day, obstructing the view. There can be few of us who, when they come into view round a corner or over a hill, do not think or say, "How ghastly". The Civic Society, particularly Sir John Swinton, put up a good fight to modify the design and route of the pylons, but that, as they say, is history.

The Blackadder

"But a step over the moor from the Waich Water, across by Twin-Law Cairns and down by the Harecleuch Hill we come to the head-waters of the most considerable of the Whitadder's tributaries - Blackadder, "vulgarly so pronounced," says the old Statistical Account. Its real name is "Blackwater," according to that authority, because it rises out of peaty swamps that impart its waters a look of sullen gloom. I am unable to say what now may be its reputation as a trout stream, but long years ago it abounded with "a particular species of trout, much larger than the common burn trout, and remarkably fat." The Statistical Account mentions a notable peculiarity of Blackadder, on the accuracy of which one would be inclined to throw doubt. It says that though every other stream in the country which eventually mingles its waters with Tweed, swarms with salmon in the season, yet into Blackwater they do not go; or if they enter at all, it is found that they die before they can ascend many miles. The swampy source of the stream "is commonly ascribed as the reason why the fish cannot frequent the river," says the Account. Drainage, one would be inclined to think, has long ago removed that fatal nature from the water, if it ever existed."

Berwickshire Sayings

'He has a conscience as wide as Coldingham Common'
Before the year 1777 Coldingham Common was an extensive and undivided waste, containing about 6000 acres. This moor had a singularly wild, bleak, and dreary aspect: hence the proverb is with great appropriateness applied to those persons of lax principles who can accommodate their consciences to all circumstances, and who can stretch it to any extent to suit their purposes.

(Coldingham Moor was described in 1793 as the most dangerous part of the road between Edinburgh and London, but shortly afterwards a new road was built which followed the Eye Water to Ayton.)

'This is like Cranshaws Kirk, there's as many dogs as folk'
In a wild pastoral region like that of Cranshaws, lying in the midst of the Lammermuir Hills, it is usual for the shepherd dogs to accompany their masters to the church often heard applied by bustling servant-girls to a scene where three or four dogs were lying about the fireside, and impeding her in her work.

'He's as bold as a Lammermoor Lion'
.... being a sheep. The proverb is applied in a sarcastic way to a boasting and assuming person.

from the Transactions of the Berwickshire Naturalists' Club, Vol. 1, 1831 - 41
'Blackadder' came from 'Highways and Byways in the Border' by Andrew and John Lang, 1912 (republished in 1999 as 'Scottish Border Country') The excerpt on 'bondagers' overleaf came from the same source.

Bondagers

In former days every hind, horsekeeper, or man employed by the year was required to find a "bondager," or, in other words, a woman to work whenever and for so long as his employer required. This condition, though greatly modified, is not yet absolutely dead (1912), and the word "bondager," though still in general use in Northumberland, has been toned down in the Merse to "worker". The bondager was, and is, either wife, daughter, sister, or some spinster relative, and she is included in the written contract with the man. There are nothing like the number of them employed as of yore. But the regular female field-hand is still a common object of the countryside, earning wages of two shillings a day with tolerable regularity. This, added to the man's wages, or "gains" as the saying now goes, means a pretty substantial weekly income coming into the same household.....'

The Objects of the Society

The objects of the Berwickshire Civic Society shall be to promote and encourage the following objects by charitable means, but not otherwise.

- a) *To stimulate public interest in, and care for, the beauty, history and character of the County of Berwickshire.*
- b) *To encourage the preservation, development and improvement of features of general public amenity or historic interest.*
- c) *To encourage high standards of architecture and town and country planning in Berwickshire and comment on plans or decisions of Local Authority.*

(For a copy of the full constitution please contact the Secretary)

APPLICATION FORM

(to be completed in Block Capitals)

I (full name)
of

..... (full postal address)

hereby apply for Membership of the Berwickshire Civic Society and agree to be bound by the Constitution thereof. I deliver herewith my first Annual Subscription of £5.00.

BANKERS ORDER

To the Manager of
.....

(insert above the name and address of your Bank)

Please pay now to the Royal Bank of Scotland plc, Market Square, Duns, Berwickshire for the credit of the Berwickshire Civic Society (Account No 00 11 16 67), and on the 6th April annually hereafter the sum of FIVE POUNDS (£5.00).

Name A/C No

Address
.....

Signed Date

Please send this application form, with cheque or Bankers Order, to: Mr Robin Lindsay, Broomhill, Todlaw Rd., Duns, TD11 3EW