

Some Memories of Samuelston

The remains of the ancient village of Samuelston lie within the extreme boundary of Gladsmuir Parish, close to the River Tyne. It is quite hidden and difficult to find which seems to be a peculiarity of East Lothian villages. No trace at all of the church of St Nicholas in which, it is said, John Knox officiated as a Roman priest. The shops, school, joiner business and village hall have all gone. All that is left of this once busy village are four farms - East, West, Mid and South Mains. East, Mid and West Mains are now farmed as one, with South Mains independent.

That all portrays a pleasant, quiet rustic scene as one would expect in a country village, but all was not quite what it seemed. At least, not 300 years ago, when the lands of Samuelston were plagued by witches and warlocks. So much so that the tenants of the Earl of Haddington all threatened to quit their lands unless he took steps to end the evil deeds and acts of Black Magic, which they alleged were being perpetrated nightly in their barns, fields and steadings. Faced with such an unusual ultimatum, the Earl decided that immediate action was called for and ordered that four women in the Parish, who were believed to be witches and be leaders of the coven, should at once be seized. With the authority of the Earl behind them, the villagers of Samuelston marched immediately to the cottages of Jean Carfrae, Margaret Bartilman, Marion Ouhuitt and Elspet Taylor and dragged them to the big house so they could be searched for witches marks - which were found. A letter was sent to the commissioners of King Charles II in Edinburgh to report the capture of the four witches and they had implicated no fewer than 11 of their neighbours. Thus a Commission of Fudging Witches in Samuelston was set up and after hearing evidence from the Earl that he considered that infestation had been caused by the Laws being silent on this matter for over- long, all the accused were found guilty and sentenced to death. They were put to death on the Birlie Knowe on the south side of

Samuelston between the River Tyne and the old mill dam.

Alas, their deaths did not rid Samuelston of its links with Auld Nick. Within years another warlock was terrifying the villagers. His name was Sandy Hunter but the devil named him Hatteraick. It was said Hunter could cure or kill any man or beast as his fancy took him, by use of his magic and his charms.

One evening at the gate of Samuelston House he met Lady Samuelston's younger brother, William, riding with some friends. Showing off, Samuelston asked Hunter what he was doing hanging about the estate. Without waiting for a reply Samuelston raised his riding crop and slashed Hatteraick across the shoulders. Hatteraick screamed as he dashed down the path bawling, "You'll buy this dear ere the dawn." William and his friends rode to the big house where he boasted to his sister how he had dealt with the warlock, and bade the company good-night, then rode off in the darkness to his own home. Just as he was about to enter some trees, his horse suddenly reared and flayed the darkness with its hooves. He saw the shadows come alive with all kinds of hideous evil spirits, each with the face of Hatteraick. William revealed all that had happened to him in Allers Wood. Next morning he was in such a delirium that he had to be bound to his bed. When Lady Samuelston saw him she sent for Hatteraick. She decided that bribery might work better than threats, promising Hatteraick a sackful of beef, cheese and meal if only he would remove his curse. This Hatteraick accepted and Williams fever is said to have left him as speedily as it had come. But he did not have long to live for when warlock came to collect his wages, as he described them, he told her Ladyship that her brother would soon leave the country and never return to Scotland. This indeed came true. It is a pity that Hatteraick did not also leave the area because his victory apparently led him to more daring and wicked

deeds until in the end he was arrested at Dunbar. He was charged under his own name of Sandy Hunter alias Hamilton and was brought to court at Edinburgh's Tollbooth in the High Street. The verdict was guilty and he was taken out to be burnt on Castle Hill.

Samuelston continued, relatively free of evil spirits, as a flourishing farming community, through the agricultural improvements, and into the 20th century. The writer was fortunate indeed, to be given access to the correspondence between a lady, who had been born in West Mains farmhouse in 1897, and the present farmer's wife. This lady, Janet Kennedy (Alexander), returned to visit her birthplace 91 years later, in 1988. Her comments make fascinating reading, and it is worthwhile recording them, and so provide an insight into life in Samuelston at that time.

On her return visit she found the village very recognisable; the joiner's house, the gamekeeper's house, Mid Mains where the Smalls lived and Minnie Gordon's house, now boarded up. There was the cottage where Mr and Mrs Bobby Banks lived, the Gordons' shop, even the school where the little Janet Alexander had started her education. West Mains cottages (now renovated) and up past the well to West Mains Farm House this, in the 1900s had neither bathroom nor lavatory.

East Mains Farm House was much grander and bigger. It had quite a drive between the trees up to the front door. Mr Watson was a gentleman farmer, always dressed with a dickie and tie.

The blacksmith's busy forge was just across the road from Janet's home, and there were the sandstone remains of a mill at the entrance to the Haugh. Alongside the school were two playgrounds, formed by a piece of grass divided in two. Next to it a clump of trees, no hall at that time. Then came the Gordons' House with its big garden enclosed by a stone wall, and next to that, their shop, where they sold everything from sweeties to paraffin oil. They emigrated to Canada around 1908/10. In

a nearby cottage lived Mrs Banks, a widow with her son Bobby, he worked at West Mains. Across the road were two more Gordons, an old man with his wife, Meenie. They too, had a general store, and were great Moody and Sankey enthusiasts.

Janet goes on to say that her mother died soon after she was born and, as her eldest sibling was her eight year old sister, it was necessary for the family to acquire the services of a housekeeper. There were thirty children in the age range five to fourteen at the village school, sharing the only classroom, they all came under the austere tutelage of the schoolmaster, Mr Watson, who travelled daily by pony and trap from his home in Gladsmuir. Janet started school when she was five and remembers him as a white-haired, bearded man. Her father was a member of the school board which realised that another teacher for five to seven year olds was needed.

A Mrs Baird was appointed and she arrived to stay at the School House with her two sons, James and Alick. The new teacher is also remembered as having white hair, this with blue eyes and a pleasant manner. She wore a *pince nez* and was always fashionably dressed with an enveloping black cotton apron covering her skirt, buttoned from waist to ankle. Soon a harmonium arrived, which she pedalled vigorously at singing classes and once a month when the Church of Scotland minister, Mr Mack, conducted an evening service, which was very popular with the villagers. She also taught the piano at 3s.6d (17.5p) for five lessons.

When a real Christmas tree was installed great excitement prevailed and the whole school sang carols and a few of the best pupils recited poetry; Janet remembers timidly reciting *Four paws had little pussy, whiter than the snow*. Mrs Baird's annual present from the farmer was a sack of potatoes.

There was a lovely big garden sloping south at the School House, but inside no sanitation, paraffin lamps and cold water. In severe frost

water had to be carried in pails from a nearby spring which never froze. Janet says that she was in the penny class, so-called because that was the price of their reading book. She remembered still the big black print and the green cover.

When she left Samuelston school at the age of eleven, she went to the Knox Institute in Haddington, where her first teacher was a Miss Orr. Her brother had a joinery business next to Henderson the baker and Bell the draper. He married Miss Rhind the cookery teacher who lodged with Miss Cunningham the dressmaker. Janet visited the newsagent, Mr Dickson, every Tuesday to buy the Christian Herald, price 2d (0.8p). She also had 2d each day to buy a pie in Teviotdales, in the premises now occupied by Norman Craig, who deals in carpets and furnishings.

Janet and her family were members of Pilmuir church, where Mr Bonar, son of the hymn writer, was minister. This church closed in 1917. The Alexander family, including Janet, to whom we are indebted for this interesting information on Samuelston, left the village in 1923. Alas, this lady with the wonderful memory died in 1992.

The school closed in 1923, the Haddingtonshire Courier reporting that the pupils would be transferred to Bolton school. The school was eventually converted into a dwelling house, but up until 1934 it was still used for Sunday school services. The school bell, which once served as a marriage bell, now reposes, care of the library services, in their headquarters in Haddington, awaiting the

day when it can take its place in a town museum.

During the thirties the Kirk Session converted two old houses into a serviceable hall with a kitchen at a cost of £256. It was dedicated by the Rev. M Lang of Whittingehame on the 16th January, 1938. A piano, curtains, lamps and a special chair were gifted towards its furnishings.

So we have a glimpse of Samuelston ringing with the laughter of children playing at the school, and strains of the harmonium to the background screech of the joiner's saw and the thump of the smithy's hammer, working hard at the blazing forge. No doubt hens and ducks scraping round the farm yard and the friendly mooing of the cows in the byre. The clatter of milk pails and the chatter of the cottage wives as they meet at the well to fill their pails, and, of course, the steady clip clop of the handsome working horses as they pull their carts along the stoney road. The shepherd's dog too, never far from his master's heel; yes a happy, contented life. Today, all we would see down that same road, no longer stoney, would be a monstrous tractor hauling an equally huge piece of modern machinery, and, perhaps, the farmer's car as he rushes here and there, trying to keep up with all that we now call progress.

Just let me finish with a quote from the Courier, 'No more vivid representation of the picture outlined by Goldsmith in *The Deserted Village* can be seen than at Samuelston. It brings home the truth of the statement that *a bold peasantry their country's pride, when once destroyed can never be supplied.*'

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