

Realms of Reality and Flights of Fancy.

This Border Country of ours is full of interest.

We love to look out to our Hills of Home, the Pentlands. In past times, a great deal of trade passed through from the north and from the south.

West Linton was an important stop for many of the traders. In older times the town was known as Linton Roderick on what we now know as the Cauldstane Slap droving route. It had the reputation and name of the Thieves Road due to the robberies of cattle or monies perpetrated on the drovers going to, and returning from, the markets. It also had the earlier name as the Pass of the High Cairns as it passed between the East and West Cairn hills.

This trading route ran from the highlands and the market town of Perth down to Carlisle and beyond. Money was made at the mints of Roxburgh and Carlisle as well as many other towns in the country, whereas we only now have the one Royal Mint in Wales at Llantrisant. The trade in and out of the Borders was massive hence this need for all this hard currency. The trade was with England, the Low Countries and Scandinavia and Russia. Much of it was in the control of the wealthy Border Abbeys. It is recorded that in the 12th century under the rule of the Alexanders the taxes paid by Berwick on Tweed were one quarter of the total taxes levied on the whole country.

Many of you will have noticed the rooftops of Berwickshire and East Lothian are decoratively topped with attractive tiles which was used as ballast for the returning trading ships from the Low Countries. Sheep business was 'king capital' throughout the borders in these times. Fish roads from the coast ensured a good way of life for the monks, perhaps supplemented with the 'old Scottish national drink' of claret!

The old drove roads were the main highways of movement across the difficult and dangerous required routes across the country. They often held to high ground for safety, drier going, and freedom from tree cover which could hide attackers. From here south of the Pentlands the roads crossed the Cloich hills, the Broughton Heights, the Hills of Manor. It crossed Dollar Law, Fyfescaur Knowe through Meggat and St Mary's loch area, still known as the Thieves Road, and down to the Border with England and beyond.

One region of the Borders had a troubled past. This was the Broughton area. On the eastern side of the Broughton Heights range of hills the fertile estates were under the stewardship of Prince Penvalla. His seat was at Castle Craig on the road to Peebles from Blyth Bridge. Such was his success with the estates that all the

residents were very happy with his considerate care. Blithe the old name of the village was corrupted to the newer form of Blythe. Blithe certainly indicated the happiness of the residents with their lot under Penvalla and for long times after, in such an idyllic area.

Unfortunately on the western side of the Heights, lived a very different character, the dreaded reiver, Trahenna, who protected his family and immediate henchmen in the heavily defended, Great Bastle of Broughton. Such was his, and his forbears, dreadful predations to the south in Scotland and England that it became increasingly difficult for them to continue to reive to the south. The long-used Beef Tub, instigated as a holding pen for the thieving by the rogues, had been removed from their safe use, by a concerted effort of the Southern Borderers.

Trahenna had started his forays to the west but was also was keen to take advantage of the rich pickings he saw available by raiding through the Heights to Blythe and the east. His natural route was over the Hammerhead above Broughton, through the Heights to the deep cut col between Flint hill and Ladyurd hill, to drop down into the tempting Castlecraig estates and Blythe.

However, two hindrances existed on this route, a natural one was of the sometimes fierce storms which raged through the two high cols on the route. Another which he had not reckoned with was a certain resident of Hopehead.



Stobo Hopehead

and the col thro' to Blythe

This was 'Wee Stobo' as he was known locally. He was a very determined virtual hermit who was known to defend his domain fiercely. He managed to eke out a precarious living only with the discrete help of Prince Penvalla.

Stobo was very small in stature but had an immense strength in his wide frame. Rumours circulated that he probably had family connections with Davie Ritchie of the Manor valley!



Davie Ritchie 'the Black Dwarf'

Davie was also really small, at not much above three feet high but was also renowned for his prodigious strength. He lived in a cottage with a very low door. His sister lived alongside in an adjacent cottage, but they did not communicate at all. So he lived a quiet life and was fond of his garden. After Sir Walter Scott's novel about him, after he visited him, his character in the novel was named 'The Black Dwarf'. Thereafter was always thought of as the 'Black Dwarf'.

Wee Stobo did not take kindly to any intrusions into what he saw as his private domain. He had earlier taken steps to deter mounted travellers approaching from the west by putting great stones known from early times as chevaux de frise on the route up from Broughton at the Hammerhead. He had seen them on, and copied them from, the ancient fort on Cademuir Hill at Manor. When he became aware of Trahenna's intentions to attack Penvalla he decided to lay a trap.

He worked tirelessly and frustratingly for days and nights on his project. On the approach to the Ladyurd col he set up more chevaux de frise boulders, which was a herculean task for him on his own. He placed them in a 'vee' formation to lead the attackers onto an established path downhill to Castlecraig. At the head of this vee of the formation, on the steep downhill route, there was a natural hollow on the ground. This he dug out into a great hole which could hold as many as a dozen mounted horsemen. He then covered this over with brushwood and heather to disguise the trap. After his prodigious labours, he passed word to his nearest neighbour, another poor man of the land, to let Penvalla know of the perceived threat. This allowed the estate be on their guard.

Trahenna had no qualms about riding roughshod through Stobo's terrain when he decided to attack with his small group of reivers. Needless to say all went well, as Wee Stobo was not at home, until they started their charge down to Castlecraig. Their collapse into Stobo's trap made them an easy capture for the Prince's men who were ready in waiting. This was because Stobo had signalled his warning by a pre-arranged beacon, hidden from the south. This was on the Broughton Heights, out of sight of Trahenna's men.

With the menace of Trahenna safely removed, Penvalla made sure that the area was guaranteed a far greater measure of peace. This also included the Broughton estates of Trahenna, as under him the locals had lived in penury and terror and were relieved to be released from this tyrant and his henchmen.

The great Bastle of Broughton was restructured as a great hall and resource centre for the residents.

A strange thing came to light when the locals were now prepared to talk of it. A well known but reclusive resident of the nearby Merlyndale had been suspected of having magical powers. When life was so hard under Trahenna, strange 'happenings' occurred locally. There was suspicion, although it was ridiculed by many, that white witches did good deeds to help the residents under the cover of darkness. So positive were some of the recipients that they tried hard to identify the source. Many were convinced that in local woodland where a number of white barked birch trees looked very scenic during daylight. But these were the same trees that turned into white witches, during the wee sma' hours. forming what the locals called the Kilbucho Coven.



Suspicious 'trees'?

The White Witches then set about doing the good deeds from which so many of the villagers benefitted. But the recipients were reluctant to admit their good fortune in case of the good deeds stopped, that they were ridiculed, or worse, were accused of witchcraft themselves, which in those times were very severely dealt with. The 'ducking stool' on the local village pond was never meant to allow any poor soul, accused and committed to the ordeal, to survive the ordeal.

Merlin, the name of this suspected perpetrator, had been converted to Christianity by St Kentigern as recorded in stained glass in the local Kirk.



A recording of the conversion of Merlin at the Kirk of Stobo.



James Douglas

Another resident - there are many interesting characters living locally - who was at Drochil. James Douglas, 4th Earl of Morton, Lord Chancellor and later, Regent of Scotland was building a large castle where the Tath joins the Lyne water. He had the dubious reputation of introducing another terrible instrument of so called justice, 'The Maiden', This was the dreadful Scottish version of the French 'guillotine', another sad means of dealing with any miscreants in those earlier times. Unfortunately because of his political activities, he was one of the first to experience the Maiden's efficient action.

He had been cleared of involvement with David Rizzio's murder, but was later found guilty of being involved in the murder of Lord Darnley. So Mary Queen of Scots made sure that he did not see his castle completed.



The finished castle



The Maiden



Later ruin

On a much happier note we have to report that our hero Wee Stobo was richly rewarded for all his prodigious efforts. While digging out all the great boulders he

needed for his trap, he suspected that someone, or others, had been digging at Tarcreish in 'his' glen . He went back to this area and did some more digging. To his amazement and great delight he discovered, not one, but three great hoards of what he took to be ancient artefacts along with what he easily identify as silver and other metallic coins.



Some of the hoard



Quality items



Horse's chamfron

He reported this to Penvalla, who, because of his debt to Stobo, allowed him to benefit to the full from his endeavours.

With this windfall, and his tremendous following industry, his wee hovel of earlier times in the Hope was exchanged for his own 'Stobo' Castle.



Locals jocularly suggest it was the sweat of his great labours, and frustration, that created, the burn that threads down the glen and forms the loch and waterfall in the grounds of his now grand residence.

Penvalla set up the great mill at Blythe, and a brewery was established at Broughton. Stobo also made sure all his estate workers enjoyed a much easier life than he had had to experience in the Hopes.

Because of the more settled times and prosperity, many festivals were held in all three of the estates. Many dances, and even grand balls, took place and some of the ladies attending, along with the occasional appearance of Merlin, were thought to be quite 'enchanted'. Although some the ladies, who were aware of certain

connotations, were not too keen to be complemented as being enchanting or bewitching in their finery, but that is perhaps a story for another day, or should that be other nights!

Walkers nowadays, whether they be on the track between Biggar and Broughton, or on the 'Way' through the Heights must be appreciative of the great peacefulness of this beautifully scenic area. Although some regulars do give more than a passing glance at the white barked trees on the knoll by the Broughton burn. Some seem to think that each tree is not always in the same place on the knoll as that when they passed the previous times - surely this must be impossible, is it not?

Although Wee Stobo always appreciated his great fortune, not only for himself, but also for all his friends on the estate, there were times when he did disappear from the castle for some times. The call of the beauty and solitude of his old glen was often was too strong for him to resist.

Many were the strange constructions that appeared in the locality, after his absences He just loved his enjoyment of physical work especially with the great quantities of boulders, rocks and stones in the area.



Penvalla Hill from the Hopes

Some would say that it was not only his work, but that other 'agencies' might well have taken great delight in working alongside him. The fact that often there were lights shimmering away up the glen in the wee sma' hours did add some credence to their suspicions!