

PULTENEYTOWN AND THE PLANNED VILLAGES OF CAITHNESS

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BACKGROUND

The planned village or town was very much the product of the age of improvement. Professor Smout has said: 'The 18th century village was developed in response to and to assist a revolution in the economy of the estate and the nation; it was expected to provide a completely new framework for human life in the countryside' (Smout 1970. 75). In this movement the role of the village was aesthetic, social and economic — it was expected to be neat and spacious, and to act as a market and as a place of employment. There was an element of the theoretical, but the basis had to be practical. In a prize essay written for the Highland Society in 1803 Robert Rennie wrote: 'The great desideratum for the original establishment, the steady support of the village ... is trade or manufactures. Without this men will not feu; or if they do they cannot build; or if they build it must soon prove a deserted village' (ib. 78). One of the important trades, especially in Caithness was, of course, fishing. But a fishing village was not to be a village consisting only of fishermen. John Knox, a retired bookseller who wrote much on the subject, considered that the ideal was a small community of 36 houses of which 20 should be for fishermen, 12 for tradesmen, and one each for a general merchant, a surgeon, a schoolmaster and an innkeeper (ib. 92).

In this paper I propose to look rather quickly at a number of villages and then to consider the first ten years' development of Pulteneytown in more detail. Thurso is an outstanding example of something more pretentious than Knox had in mind, but where better to begin to consider planned villages and towns than at our door and under the aegis of Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster — Agricultural Sir John himself?

THURSO, HALKIRK AND CASTLETOWN

Eighteenth century Thurso as it existed north and west of Olrig Street was already the social centre for Caithness and a market for a good part of the country's produce (Grant 1966. 1, 49). By the mid 17th century it had been notable for having two sloops of 30 tons each, and a customs house was established in 1707. Thurso dealt in corn from the landward areas, and in cod and ling, but the currents of the Pentland Firth did not encourage the small boats then used for fishing. In 1735 the town was described as a neat little fashionable town, with one principal street, several wynds and sufficient buildings in it. In 1800 a bridge over the river was built by Robert Tulloch and paid for by subscription from local landowners. Two years

later Sir John Sinclair managed to get an Act of Parliament authorising the building of a harbour and the promise of a loan of a part of the total cost of £7000, but he was unable to raise the rest and the harbour scheme was dropped. But the town plan which Sir John drew up did materialise. The formal streets built on a grid plan with the square, now named for him but marked by him as Macdonald Square for his wife Lady Diana, still preserve many of his original elevations [Fig. 8.1]. Mrs Mitchison has pointed out that he overbuilt for his own day and the houses filled slowly with the result that they were not improved out of all recognition in Victorian times (Mitchison 1962. 190, 191).

Sir John also laid out Halkirk [Fig. 8.2], an agricultural village which included 55 one-acre lots and where he intended to establish a woollen mill. The plan is still recognisable but the original lots have been broken up and lost their neatness and, as Mrs Mitchison has said, 'all that remains of Sinclair's scheme is a dispersed village that has to have twice as many roads as most other places' (ib. 191-2).

East of Thurso along the coast lies Castletown which was planned by Sheriff James Traill of Rattar of flagstone-quarrying fame. Begun as early as 1802 it started to operate fully about 1825 and was founded, almost literally, on the local flagstones, quarried and exported in large quantities.

THE DEVELOPING FISHERIES

These examples of a planned town and two villages are the only ones I am going to mention that were not based on the fishing industry, or 'founded on the bones of herring' as was said of Amsterdam. So it would be useful to take a preliminary look at Caithness and the east coast fisheries in about 1786. The date is chosen because there is very full information to be found in the Reports of the Parliamentary Select Committee of 1785 and the consequent legal changes which had very important effects in Caithness (Gray 1978. 15-20). The east coast, as compared with the west, had little sheltered water to fish in or to keep boats on, but there was no long stretch of the coast without its own small fishing community. The vast majority were small boats out for a few hours only and never far from the shore. They might be out by day for haddock, caught with baited hooks on light lines and cured by smoking at home or sold fresh if there was a market near enough — Thurso was really the only one in Caithness. Then, in the spring especially, came the cod and ling, caught in the same way on heavier lines and cured by drying on the beach in the sun and wind (mostly the latter I imagine and plenty of it). Finally there was the herring fishing, later to become the staple industry, then worked only with small boats using drift nets, sailing at sunset and hopefully bringing in the fish at first light. Herring was very perishable and must have a preliminary cure if kept for more than a few hours. Red herring was the result of smoking which needed special buildings for adequate cure, while white herring was the result of pickling which needed salt.

The salt laws were one of the greatest problems to be overcome on the way to establishing a viable fishing industry. Salt was so valuable and so

highly taxed that it could only be used in quantity and tax free under the strictest regulations. It had to be signed for at a Customs House, kept under lock and key in a storehouse, and the cured fish produced again at the Customs House along with any salt left over. The form-filling was almost up to present day standards, fishermen were illiterate and Customs

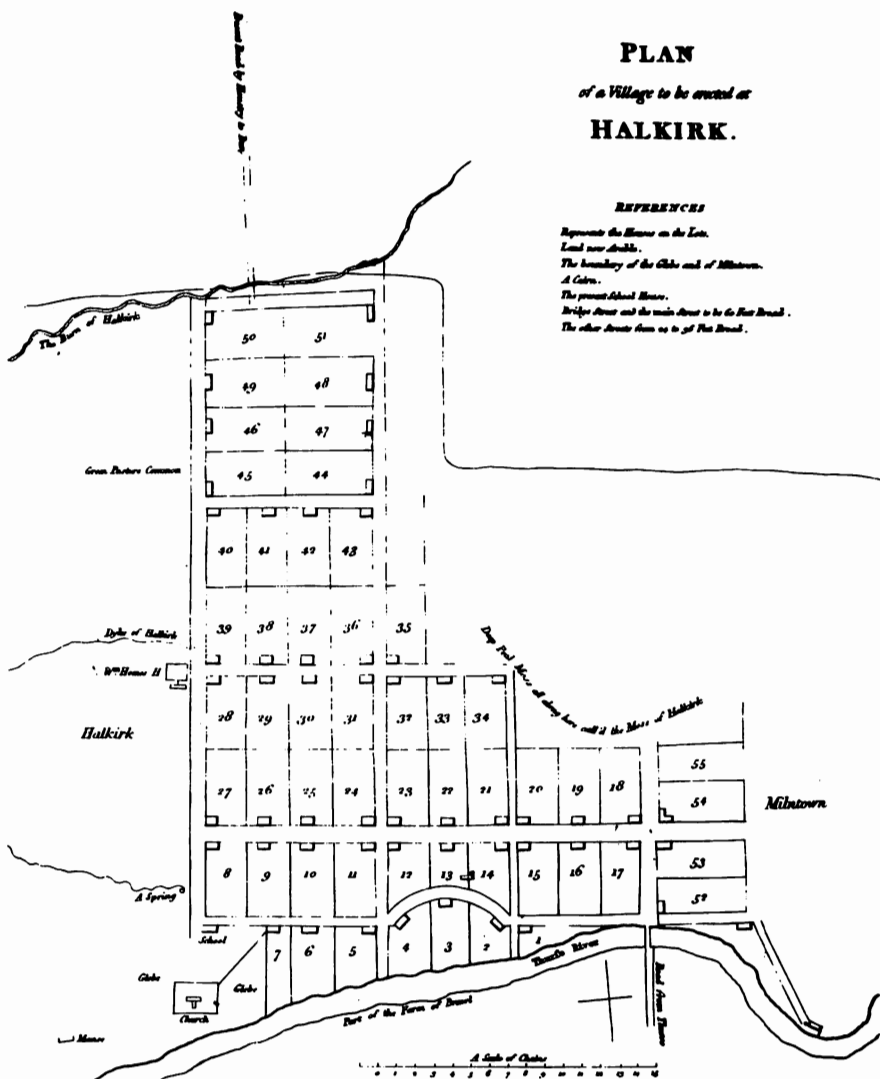


Fig. 8.2. Sir John Sinclair's plan for the agricultural village of Halkirk. Henderson 1812. plate V.

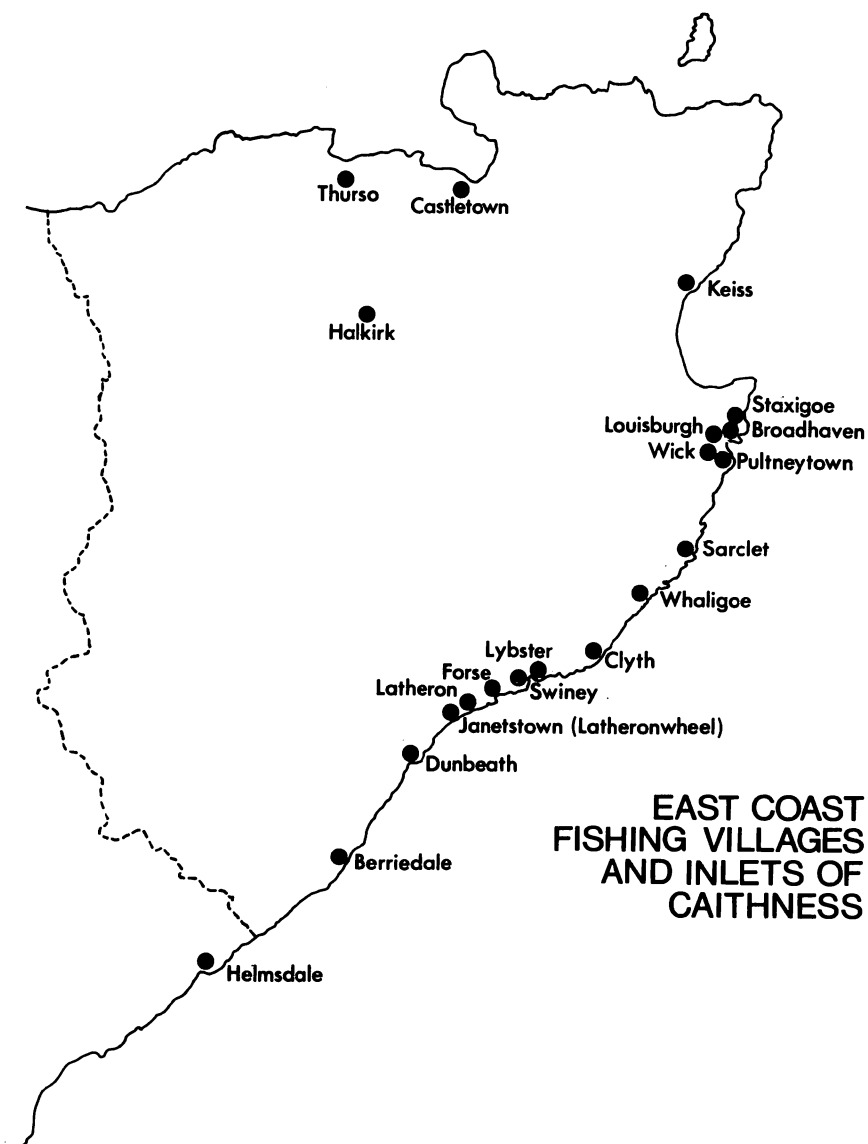


Fig. 8.3. Distribution map of the fishing villages and inlets of eastern Caithness. Also the planned settlements of Thurso, Halkirk and Castletown.

houses spaced only at very long intervals in the north. Thurso did have one but the lock and key storage was beyond most boat fishermen to supply. In 1750 a fishery act (23 Geo II cap 24), with recruits for the navy more in mind than a fishing industry, had offered a bounty to larger decked vessels or busses, but the formalities required that they had to prove their existence by attending a rendezvous at Bressay on 11 June and at Campbeltown, Loch Fyne on 1 September before they could start fishing, and having got to Shetland the busses fished there rather than off the Caithness coast. Also there was a rule that the bounty busses could not buy fish from local boats, nor might they leave the fishing ground for three months even if they had caught a full cargo well before that time. In any case the shoals of herring had been, as ever, unreliable on the east coast during most of the 18th century — even the Firth of Forth had been deserted.

In 1785 and 1786 changes in the law helped the small boat herring fishermen of both east and west coasts (25 Geo III cap 65; 26 Geo III cap 106). Busses were now allowed to buy fish from local boatmen, and boats could be involved in the general bounty system — also the rendezvous was abolished. But the greatest help came from the fish themselves — shoals of herring appeared on the east coast, in the Firth of Forth between 1794 and 1805, and off Caithness regularly from the late 1780s. In 1789 there was such a good fishing that all the salt available for the season was used for the catch of four marvellous nights.

THE CAITHNESS FISHING INDUSTRY

By 1790 there was the beginning of a fishing industry in Caithness. As early as 1767 three merchants John Sutherland of Wester, John Anderson of Wick, and Alexander Miller of Staxigoe fitted out two sloops to go to the Bressay rendezvous. In the words of the *Old Statistical Account* (OSA. X.9), 'owing to some informality' they lost the bounty. Next year they tried again with one sloop, and got their bounty with difficulty — no mention was made of any catch of fish. To quote again, 'the adventure, on the whole, not being very encouraging, their ardour was abated for some years'. Mr Miller alone seems to have carried on his enthusiasm — Pennant on his first tour in 1769 (Pennant 1790. I. 202) says that 'near Staxigoe creek is a small herring fishery, the only one on the coast; cod and other white fish abound there; but the want of ports on the stormy coast is an obstacle to the establishment of the fisheries on this side of the country'. Miller later claimed to have had the whole cod and ling fishery from Portserra to the Ord except for Thurso, Clyth and Dunbeath (GD 9/283a). It was possibly also from Staxigoe or from Wick itself that the Dunbar firm of Charles and Robert Fall began in the 1780s to buy herring for curing at Dunbar — presumably after the essential preliminary cure on the spot. They became bankrupt in 1785 — not solely as the result of their Caithness venture. This seems to be the earliest example of the industrial pattern which Malcolm Gray says that Caithness set before other parts of the country, by which professional curers regularly bought catch from

local boatmen on contract (Gray 1978. 28, 29). The example of the Falls was evidently followed. By the mid 1790s there were some 200 boats and local merchants began to go into the curing trade. In 1800 there were 16 curing firms in Wick each employing 20 to 30 workers and each producing some 500 barrels of pickled herring per year — the system being that boats fished on contract for a price fixed at the beginning of the season, the risk being with the curer. Fishing was still a part-time job with farming or crofting, and indeed every kind of tradesman including such unlikely ones as weavers, tailors and shoemakers were occupied as fishermen during the very short season (*OSA*. X.11). And there was still only the river frontage at Wick — 200 boats were unloading along 20 yards of shore and 10,000 barrels of herring being removed by sea. The congestion was great and in 1791 44 vessels crammed very close together were much damaged by a storm at the height of the season (ib. 10).

THE SMALL FISHING STATIONS OF CAITHNESS

Before looking at the early development of Pulteneytown I would like to take a voyage along the Caithness coast from north to south looking at the various creeks and geos which were used in some way as fishing stations and villages during the early 19th century [Fig. 8.3]. Thomas Telford made just such a journey in 1790 looking for places worth development and his descriptions and sketches give us a good start (GD 9/32). Keiss Bay [Fig. 8.4] he found possible for shelter for a tide or so but too exposed to the sea for more than very small boats hauled up through tiny inlets formed by clearing away loose rocks and stones. In fact Keiss had no great future although a pier was built in 1820.

Staxigoe

The first point of real interest to Telford was Staxigoe of which we have already heard. He found the inlet narrow [Figs. 8.5; 8.6; 8.7], but the water deep enough to admit boats and larger vessels at all times. He reports red herring houses already there and Miller was claiming that he could dry 3000-4000 barrels of herring at one time. Between Staxigoe and Wick was Broadhaven, owned as was Staxigoe by Sir Benjamin Dunbar of Hempriggs. He began villages at both places and also at Louisburgh, a northern suburb of Wick, and soon collected some 300 inhabitants between them.

In 1840 the New Statistical Account gives the populations as 379 in Louisburgh, 170 in Broadhaven, and 261 in Staxigoe (*NSA*. XVII. 157). They were not model villages in the planning sense but they certainly provided the framework for the fishing industry for a time. Like so many of these small havens (*NSA*. VII. 158 uses the word 'harbouret' for Sarclet, Broadhaven and Staxigoe) they were abandoned about 1860 when the boats became too large to use them.

Sarclet

Passing Wick for the moment, which Telford certainly did not do, we next

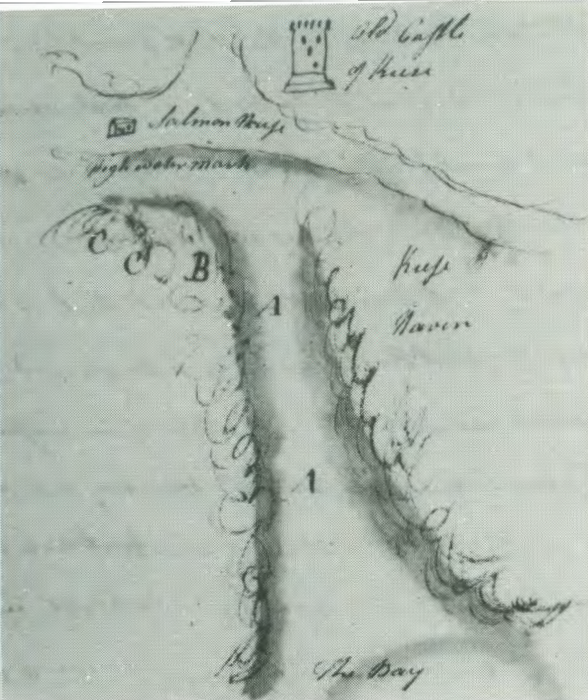


Fig. 8.4. Keiss — 'A fine bay with plenty of water and may be useful for ships to pass a tide in previous to their passing the Pentland firth'. Telford 1790.

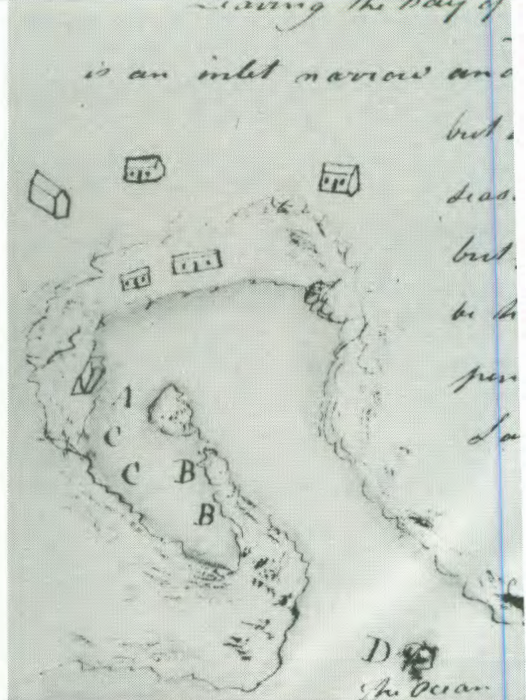
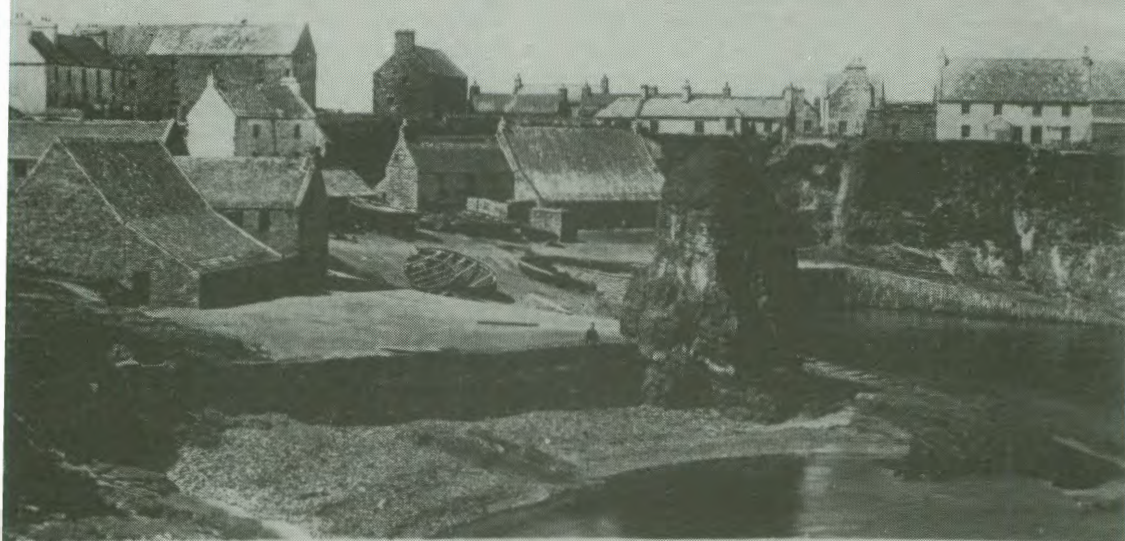


Fig. 8.5. Staxigoe showing the prominent rock at 'A' and Miller's herring houses. Telford 1790.

find Sarclet [Figs. 8.8; 8.9] on the estate of Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster, of Thurso and Halkirk fame. Telford reported of Sarclet that 'it is used by the country people for fishing from in boats and there is a curing house there belonging to Creswell and company', and he made suggestions as to how the harbour might be improved. Sir John's tenant was David Brodie of Hopeville who planned a village there to be called Brodiestown. The plan appears in Henderson's *General View* (Henderson 1812. app. 67) [Fig. 8.10] and in 1802 there were 21 houses. Possibly little more than this ever happened as there is no boat record or separate population figure in later years, although the *NSA*. (XVII. 157) calls the fishing station 'pretty good'. Today, the remains of the houses stand in one long line on the top of a windswept cliff.

Whaligoe

Two miles south is Whaligoe. Telford dismissed it as 'a dreadful place' but the tough Caithness fishermen — who seem to have pronounced it Faligoe — were not so easily beaten. Here David Brodie, not content with his work at Sarclet, spent £53 on 'clearing the harbour by blasting and removing large stones and building a platform for boats to secure them from being carried away', and a further modest £8 for 'making stairs in the face of th'



413

STAXIGOE, NEAR WICK

VALENTINES SERIES

Fig. 8.6. Staxigoe 1891.

Fig. 8.7. Staxigoe 1979.





Fig. 8.8. Sarclet 1979.

Fig. 8.9. Sarclet. Telford 1790.



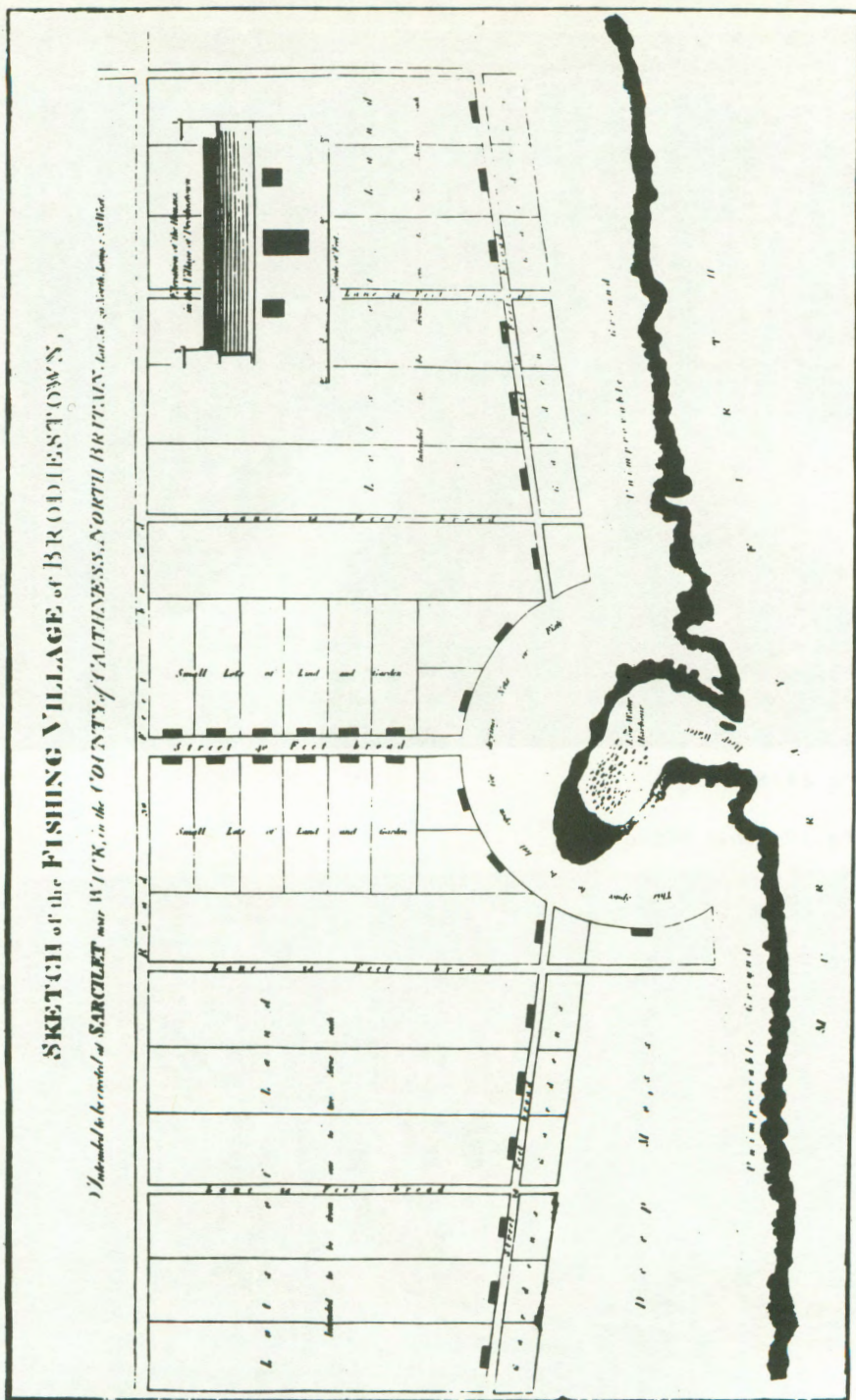


Fig. 8.10. David Brodie of Hopeville's plan for a new fishing village, to be called Brodiestown, at Sarclat. Henderson 1812. plate IV.

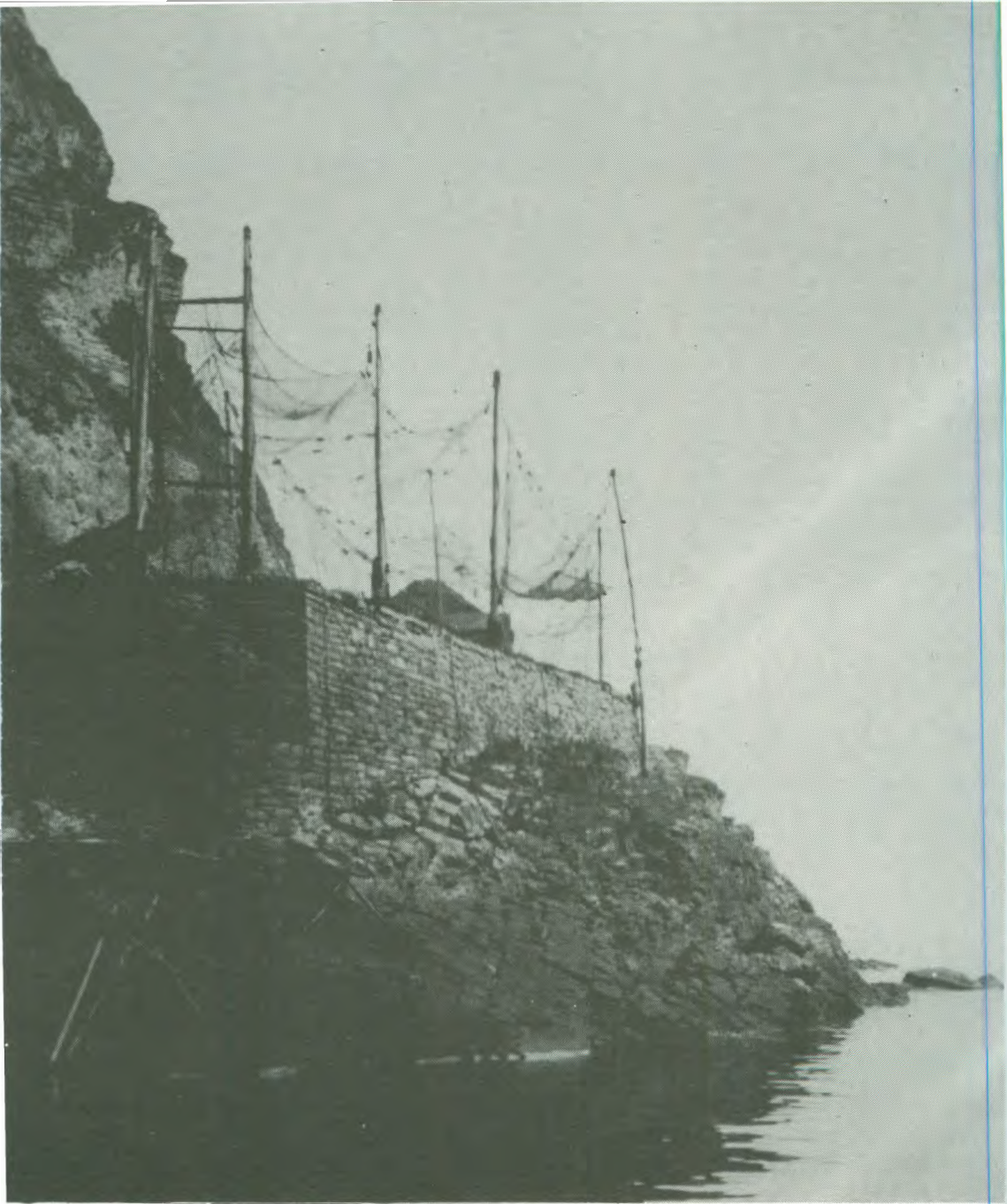
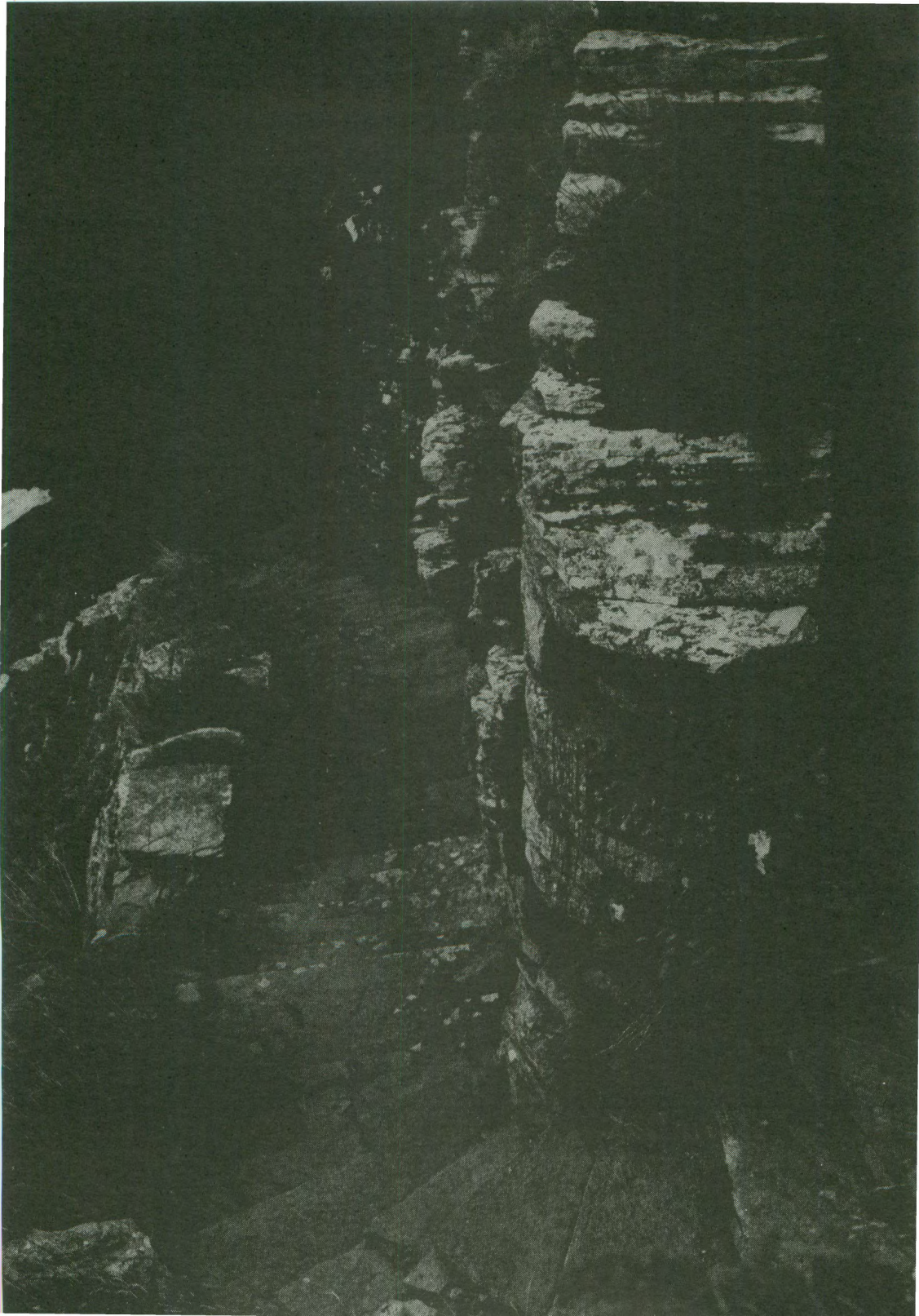


Fig. 8.11. Whaligoe in 1936 — a calm day. The nets are drying on poles set up on the platform built up on the rocks. Boats were hauled in stern first and moored to each side of the creek.

Figs. 8.12; 8.13. All that remains of the Whaligoe station in 1979. The 330 steps leading down the cliff at Whaligoe were built about 1800 at the cost of £8. Telford dismissed it as 'a dreadful place'.





rocks to lead down to the boats' (Henderson 1812. app. 54) [Fig. 8.11]. The *Old Statistical Account* describes how:

'fishermen, on this part of the coast, to get to their boats descend a huge precipice by winding steps in the face of the rock, by which some lives have been lost, and yet, from frequent practice, it is often done without assistance by a blind fisherman in Ulbster. To secure their boats from being dashed against the rocks, particularly in storms and stream tides, the fishermen hang up their yauls by ropes, on hooks fixed in the face of the rock, above the level of the water, where they are safely suspended till the weather is fit for going to sea.' (OSA. X.3)

In 1808 seven boats were using Whaligoe and in 1814 there were 24. Sir Thomas Dick Lauder visited Whaligoe in 1841 and left a vivid picture of the place:

'About 100 yards off the road stand the curing houses of Mr Millar of Leith, and a little way below these the curious enquirer finds himself on the edge of the cliffs which drop downwards above a couple of hundred feet into the wild and narrow voe of Whalligoe, his eyes at once falling from that giddy height upon the topmasts of a large schooner receiving her herring cargo. Mr Millar[sic] has cut out a zigzag passage in the face of the otherwise impracticable cliff, and has there planted a good stone stair of 330 steps, in most places six feet wide, with shelves here and there for the women who bring up the nets etc. to rest their burdens on. It is really a wild romantic spot, and might serve as the screened lurking-place of some pirates of Vikinger race, though fortunately now more honestly and usefully employed. Vessels entering here anchor outside, and letting out their cable, they are hauled in stern foremost, and then moored on each side. The heaving of the windlass in the schooner, the wild voices of the boatmen as they hauled their crafts, the screaming of the sea-fowl and the busy talk of a number of good-looking country girls, with the hoarse pervading murmur of the sea, all added to the effect of this truly singular place.' (Wilson 1842. II. 190-91) [Figs. 8.12; 8.13]

Clyth

The creek at Clyth [Figs. 8.14; 8.15] had begun to work by 1790. James Henderson had 'already been at upwards of 4 guineas expence and a good deal of trouble' in blasting and clearing away rocks and had built two storehouses. In 1794 a survey by William Cowie of Tain shows a salt cellar, a red herring house and a house for curing cod and ling, and Telford later refers to Henderson's 'spirited and persevering conduct'. Business increased fast — 10 boats in 1808, 40 in 1814, while in 1817, 2025 barrels of cured fish were shipped from there (Salton 1815. 198). Alas, Henderson went bankrupt in 1815 though evidently others carried on.

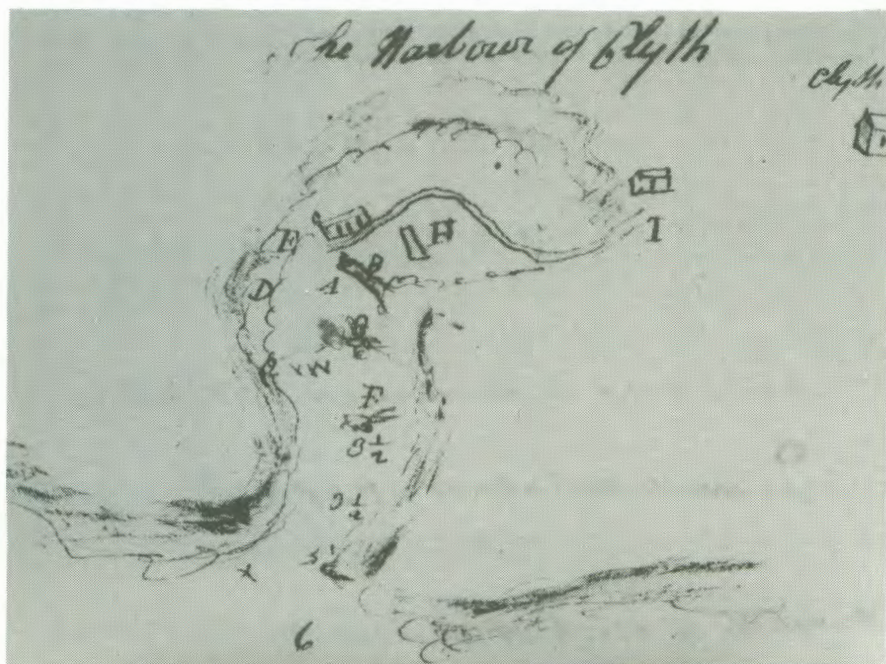
Lybster

There was no separate village at Clyth as the inlets along the coast to the south are all within reach of the villages of Lybster and Latheron. The former was placed near the inlet of the Reisgill burn where a harbour was built of timber in about 1810 and of stone with a jetty and a row of curing houses some 20 years later (Mowat 1959. 5, 12) [Figs. 8.16; 8.17]. The village was begun in 1802 but made little progress for some years as can be guessed, for when the streets were laid out by the proprietor, General Patrick Sinclair of Lybster, they were named for Liberal statesmen — Grey Place, Russell Street, Jeffrey Street; and for a time Halygoe was called Amherst Bay by the proprietor if not by the local fishermen. The result was



Fig. 8.14. Clyth in 1979. Like most of the local creeks it was difficult of access, as shelter was provided mainly by what Telford called 'its bending form'.

Fig. 8.15. Clyth showing two storehouses already built. Telford 1890.



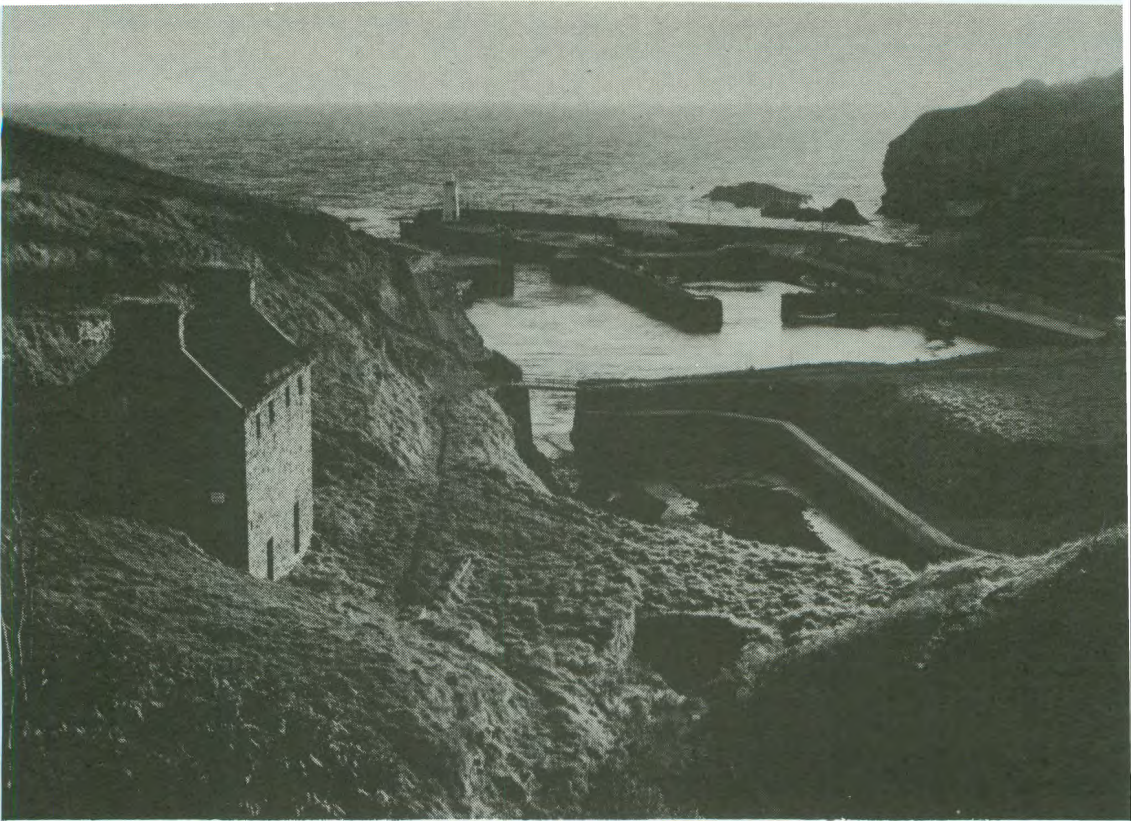
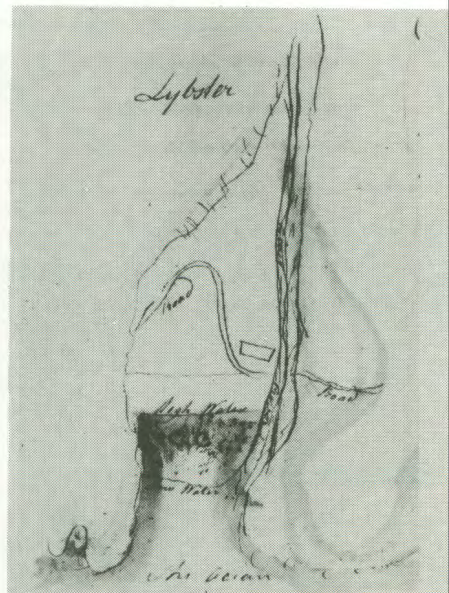


Fig. 8.16. Lybster in 1979. It had a timber jetty built about 1810 and a stone one some thirty years later. Modern Lybster has a later, outer harbour.

Fig. 8.17. Lybster in 1790. Telford wrote 'It is seldom where there is a place whose shore is so clear of Rocks.'



an increase in population to 400 in 1840 and in boats from 14 in 1808 to 98 in 1814. In 1817 the district was thought important enough to be recognised as the station for the Fishery Officer for Latheron parish and in 1833 the station's output was classed as the third best in Scotland behind Wick and Fraserburgh (Mowat 1959. 6). Included within the district with Clyth and Lybster were the inlets of Swiney, Forse, Latheron and Latheronwheel, and Dunbeath. Forse and Dunbeath were noticed by Telford and with little enthusiasm, but they enjoyed an increase in fishing and the latter, having 18 boats in 1808, had no less than 155 in 1814 (Salton 1815. 198).

Latheron

At the time of the New Statistical Account in 1838 (NSA. XV. 102-3) there were in Latheron parish 1321 fishermen, 106 coopers, 937 women packers and 178 labourers — during the previous 30 years the population had increased by 227% and there were 555 inhabitants in Latheron village. In 1838 they had exported more than 39,000 barrels of fish, cured 2800 for their own use, and eaten about 907 barrels of fresh fish locally.

The *New Statistical Account* includes a description of the fishing carried on at Latheron:

'The boats usually leave the shore from 5 to 7 o'clock in the afternoon according to the direction of the wind and the distance at which the fish are supposed to be found, and shoot their nets about dusk. In this state they remain, with the boat attached to each drift by means of a head rope, and slowly carried east or west by the tide, until about 3 o'clock the next morning. Then all hands are employed in the hauling of the nets and fish at the boat's stern, where they remain together, dispersed over the boat, till it comes to shore, when they commence the operation of disengaging the fish from the meshes of the net, by shaking the nets. This operation is frequently performed at the time of hauling the nets, should time and weather permit. The herring being thus separated from the nets, are immediately landed and deposited in the curing box, where a number of women are engaged in gutting and packing them in barrels with salt. Having delivered their fish they bundle up their nets, carry them on shore, and spread them out carefully one over the other. Here they remain to dry, until taken up again in the afternoon to be used as formerly. After securing their boats, they return to their homes, take some refreshment and a few hours' repose, as their time permits, and proceed to take up their nets, and put to sea again for the next night's fishing. In this manner they proceed for five successive nights every week Not unfrequently a storm suddenly arises during the night. The boats are all riding quietly at their nets, and unprepared to meet it. Some endeavour to haul in their nets, others cut from them, and make for the place of greatest shelter, whilst others, afraid to put up sail and encounter it, abide by their nets in the hope of the storm abating. In proportion to the danger at sea are the confusion and anxiety on land. The shores are instantly crowded by enquiring relatives, hurrying from place to place in search of husbands, brothers and sons..... The risks are very great and the employment is most trying to the constitution.'

(NSA. XV. 101)

Obviously this sprawling community along the cliff top had made the best of its meagre natural resources to encourage a fishing industry which, in common with almost all the villages along the coast, flourished only until the boats increased in size beyond the capacity of their harbours. The exception, of course, was Wick including Pulteneytown.

PULTENEYTOWN AND THE BRITISH FISHERIES SOCIETY

In 1790 Telford had come down heavily in favour of the improvement of the natural harbour of Wick. He thought that when cleared it would hold 150 vessels of 80 to 100 tons, the total expense of such improvement being estimated at £3500. He was followed by many others including the writer of the *Old Statistical Account*. It was obviously a large undertaking for a private individual or company, and all eyes were turned and hands held out to the British Fisheries Society.

British Fisheries Society Projects

This Society, whose history has been told in detail (Dunlop 1978), was a typical late 18th century semi-charitable joint stock company founded in London through the Highland Society in 1786. It had influential directors including a good many Scottish M.P.s and landowners and its governor was the Duke of Argyll. The first object was to establish fishing stations on the north or west coasts from Duncansby to the Mull of Kintyre. Ullapool and Tobermory were quickly chosen as suitable sites in the course of a tour made by a number of the directors in the summer of 1787, and a suitable site at Lochbay in the north of Skye was also selected but acquired rather more slowly. Ullapool began in a promising way but had not attracted very much business before the herring deserted the west coast and did not really come into its own again until the 1940s, some 100 years after the Society had sold the village it had planned and helped to build. Tobermory was successful in a commercial sense and soon attracted trade but its distance from the herring grounds meant that the Society failed to encourage the independent crofter-fishermen they had hoped for. Finally Lochbay had barely started to develop before the herring left the west and, the land being quite fertile, the few villagers turned themselves into crofters paying little attention to the sea — ‘those lubberly tenants’ as one of the Society’s Agents called them.

In addition to their three settlements the directors were anxious to undertake what they rather pompously called ‘the patronage of the fisheries’ — in other words they worked away in Parliament and elsewhere to rationalise the salt laws and among other things to establish law and order among the crowds of large and small boats which collected in narrow sea lochs when herring shoals were present.

The Case for Wick

Telford had been brought to the notice of the Society by one of their directors, his patron Sir William Pulteney — by birth a Johnstone of Westerhall not far from Telford’s native Langholm, he had married the heiress to the earldom of Bath. In 1790 Telford had just come from making a survey of the works at Ullapool, including in his report (GD 9/32) many helpful suggestions and some criticisms, when he made the journey along the Caithness coast already mentioned, and his report was addressed to the directors of the Society. He was in no doubt that Wick [Fig. 8.18] seemed

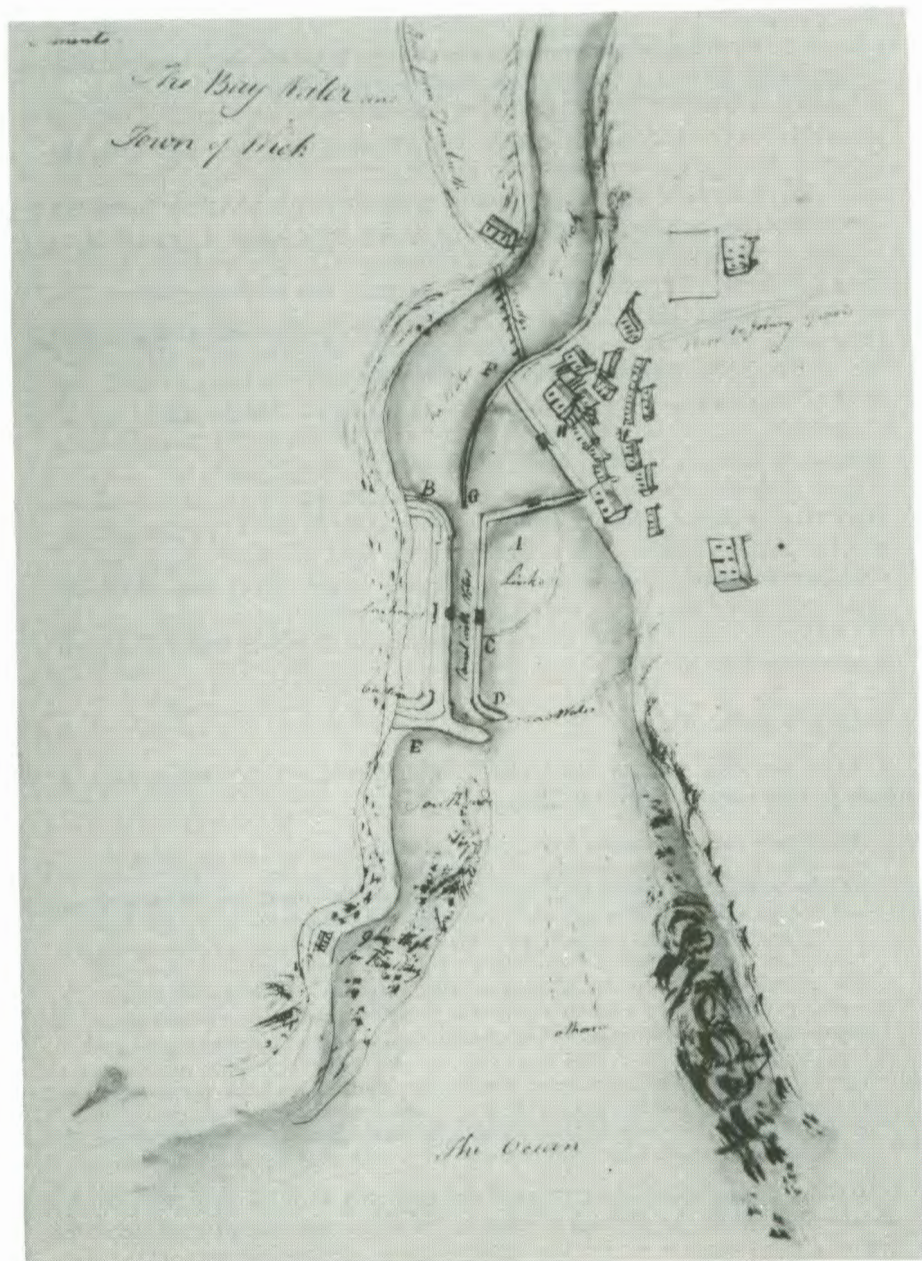


Fig. 8.18. Wick in 1790 — with development north of the river and the old wooden bridge, later demolished. Telford recommended redirecting the river towards the north bank so as to increase the low ground to the south.

well calculated for a fishing station but was not at first decided whether it should be to the north or south of the river — both banks were owned by Sir Benjamin Dunbar and apart from the burgh of Wick on the north bank either was available, though part of the north was 'in high cultivation' and probably more expensive. He also thought he could lead water from the Loch of Hempriggs for mills and manufactures if the south bank were used. No immediate decision was made as the directors had their hands full on the west though they were in touch with Sir John Sinclair (who became a director himself in 1792) and with Sir Benjamin. At one time they seem to have considered improvement at Clyth instead, but had rejected the idea by August 1797 (GD 9/10. 200). The *Aberdeen Journal* was a little ahead of the game when on 22 June 1801 it announced: 'We are happy to hear that the British Society for extending the fisheries and improving on the sea coasts of Scotland, is immediately to establish Buss Fishery on the coast of Caithness'. Finally in 1802 the Society and Sir Benjamin were nearing agreement and on 11 March 1803 the contract was signed.

This gave the Society 390 acres on the south side of the mouth of the Wick river including the headland, the hill of Old Wick as far as the castle, and the lands of Harrow. Above the river the land rose into terraces which could be adapted for the layout of the new town. There was plenty of excellent building stone on the property along with 46 acres arable land, 27 of moss, 22 of lay and 295 of pasture nearly all of which was considered improvable into arable.

Buiding a Harbour

The first essential was to create a harbour and in May 1802 Telford put the case to the Treasury (GD 9/266):

'On the west coast of Scotland, every Loch is a Harbour and no vessels can ever be at a loss to find protection but the case is very different on the N.E. coast, at present there is no place where a vessel can run into or even lye with safety; from the bay of Cromarty in Murray Firth to the Roadstead of Scrabster on the Western side of the Pentland Firth. Vessels frequenting the Herring Fishery in this Quarter lye in the River of Wick but they are confined within a shallow Bar in a Narrow Channel, and so exposed to the N.E. that they dare not wait the equinoctial Gales, and instead of Fishing for the whole season they push off as soon as they can get anything like a Cargo. They have no place but the Beach on which to land and stack their Fish, and they frequently cannot get over the Bar, even to reach their Beach, but lye with their Fish in their open boats exposed to the Sun until they are spoiled. It is generally allowed that the deep sea fishing might be carried on this Quarter, but no person will risk his vessel and Capital while there is no place of security for them to run into in case of Stormy weather nor any convenience whatever to enable them to carry on their business with advantage.'

In the familiar way of government departments it took four years to find the means to help the Society in spite of the close personal involvement of many of the directors, and it was 1806 before an Act of Parliament (46 Geo III cap 155) allowed them £7500 from the surplus of the Forfeited and Annexed estates money then being distributed. Plans for the new harbour which included two piers and a breastwork involved the demolition of the old wooden bridge over the river Wick and the Society applied to the Commissioners for Highland Roads and Bridges for their usual half

contribution — in this case £1000, a matching sum having been raised from among local landowners. Telford, already working with the Society and with the Roads and Bridges Commissioners, designed both bridge and harbour and in July 1805 recommended George Burn, a local architect, as the only person he knew able 'to devote his whole attention to the station'. It was later pointed out that Burn had had no previous experience with harbours. Burn was contracted to finish the harbour by December 1811 and in August 1808 the new work was already providing some shelter for boats. Of course the herring fishing based on the foreshore at Wick was still 'business as usual' and in 1807 there were 17 boats all the way from the Forth compared with only three the previous year, and a Mr Lewis a curer from South Wales had bought fish and thought that boats from the Isle of Man would soon come (GD 9/300).

The Development of Pulteneytown

Meanwhile the new settlement, called Pulteneytown after Telford's recently deceased patron who had been Governor of the Society for a few years before his death, had inevitably reached Thomas Telford's drawing board. It was the only one of the Society's villages to be designed by him from scratch and the main section of the town, built within 20 years, was almost completely according to the plan he made. 1807 was a very good fishing season and so plans for building the settlement were pushing ahead fast. In August Telford wrote: 'With regard to the plan of the town I have after repeated examinations found one to suit the ground and have marked 72 lots to which in my opinion the settlers should be for the present confined' (GD 9/300). These 72 lots were in what are now Breadalbane Terrace and that side of Argyll Square, Grant Street, Smith Terrace, Huddart Street as far as Kinnaird Street and Vansittart Street [Figs. 8.19; 8.20]. Incidentally all these streets were named for directors of the Society and this practice continued and included some of the officials as well. Each lot was 50 ft (15.2m) on the street frontage and 100ft (30.5m) deep. Almost the whole frontage had to be filled and the building had to be right on the street. It seems to us rather strange that front gardens should not be allowed — there was plenty of room behind of course — but the regulation was an attempt to keep the usual midden off the main street. Indeed the settler was required to lay flag paving stones 6ft (1.8m) wide with a kerb 2ft (.6m) deep, the flags to be 4ins (10.2cm) thick (GD 9/337). This pavement had to be 4in (10.2cm) below the level of the ground floor of the house. Each house was to have a narrow access to its garden from the street without going through the house — modern flat and terrace dwellers will appreciate the convenience of that bit of planning. The streets were to be 30ft (9.1m) wide and covered with a coat of sea gravel 10 in (25.5cm) thick. Telford supplied suggested plans for houses — 2 storeys for the better streets to be not less than 17ft (5.2m) at the gable, door 6ft x 3ft (1.8m x .9m) and windows 5ft x 3ft (1.5m x .9m) — total cost about £300. He had hoped for 'uniformity of Building in point of Elevation of the Houses and Dimensions of the Doors and Windows' but as he feared he never really

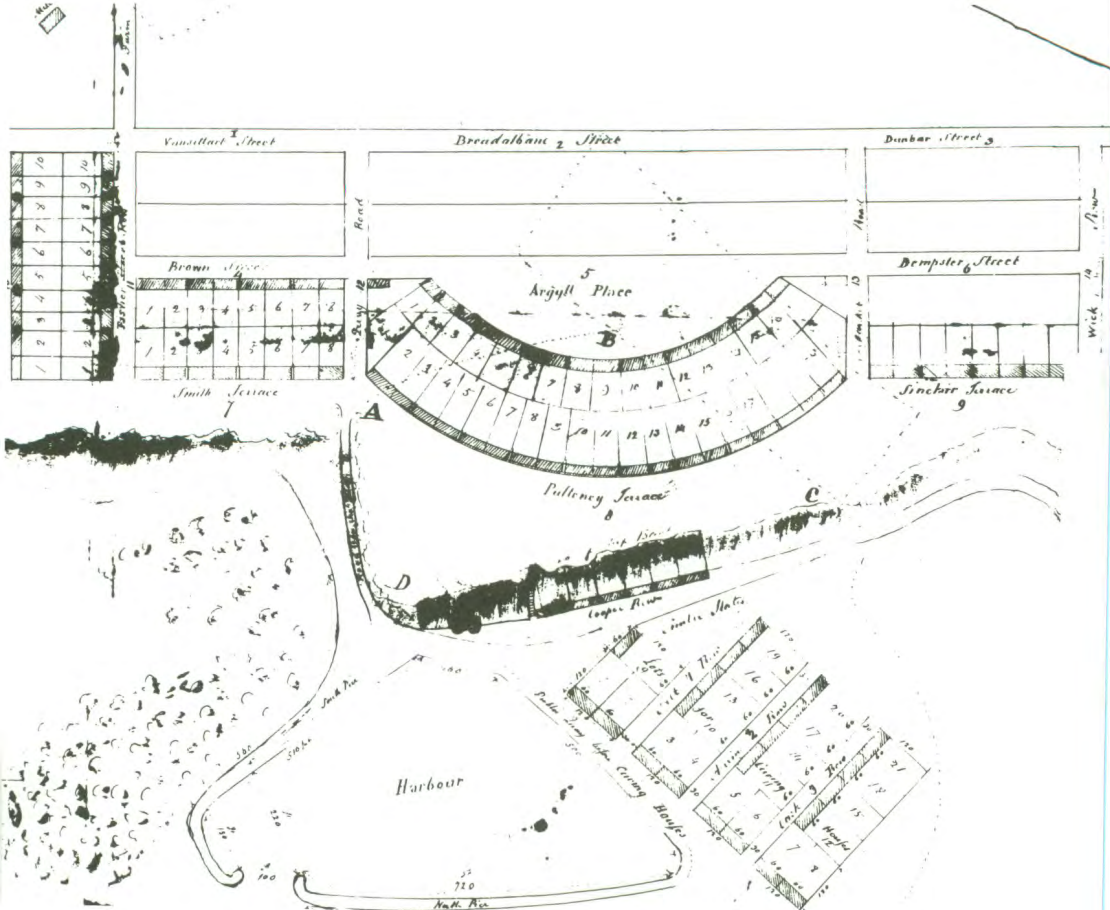


Fig. 8.19. Telford's plan of Pulteneytown village and harbour area, dated August 1807.

got that from individual builders. The lesser streets could have single storey houses at least 8ft (2.4m) high at the gable, doors also 6ft x 3ft (1.8m x .9m) but windows only 4ft x 3ft (1.2m x .9m) — the cost reckoned to be about half, or £150. All houses were to be stone-built and roofed with slate, though tiles were permitted. In June 1815 Telford sadly admitted that houses were not built to specification and hardly two were alike but he agreed that to challenge them would lead to endless disputes (GD 9/289. 51).

The lower ground, mostly sandy links, on the quayside was to be divided into 21 lots for curing houses — the lots were 60ft by 120ft (18.3m x 36.6m) and the curing houses had to be at least 60ft x 22ft and 18ft high (18.3m x 6.7m x 5.5m) with proper sheds and cellars at the rear or under the building (GD 9/337). The frontage, which had to be filled, could be used for a dwelling house (provided it was 18ft (5.5m) high) and the sheds built at the side of the lot, but in any case the buildings had to be used by fish curers, fishermen or people employed by them. It was estimated that it would cost a settler £500 to fit up one of these curing lots.

for several water wheels; and there is an excellent Spring within a short distance of the Town and Harbour. The Herrings have set in, on this part of the coast, for the last 30 years, without a single failure, about the 1st August; in the last season no fewer than 30,000 barrels were taken, and, in the opinion of the fishermen upon the spot, the quantity might have been doubled, had the Harbour been then sufficiently advanced to afford shelter to the boats.

The Town is divided into Building Lots of 50 feet in front by 100 in depth, which may be feued in perpetuity at the easy rate of 25 and 20 shillings, according to the position of the Lots. The choice will be regulated by the priority of the application, the first year's rent remitted to those who shall have completed their Houses within the year; and the first 12 real fishermen who become settlers, will receive other advantages. The Curing House Lots will be disposed of by auction in July next, and future notice will be given of the day and place.

Further particulars may be learned from the Society's Agent, James Williamson Esq. Upper Ackergill, Wick; from Lewis Gordon, Esq. W.S. Edinburgh; and their Secretary, Gilbert Salton, Esq. Furnival's Inn, London.

Unlike the Society's western villages, Pulteneytown was to encourage not crofter-fishermen, but declared professionals, and the fertility of the surrounding countryside combined with the success of the fishing meant that these professionals could make enough to pay for any food they didn't grow in their back gardens or pull out of the sea. There was doubt in the early years as to whether this would work and reference was made to 'the dangers of any attempt to change in too sudden a manner the habits of the lower ranks' (GD 9/13. 119). But settlers came and they prospered.

The Society's Agent in Wick, James Williamson, was brother of the laird of Banniskirk. He was a soldier turned farmer, and, though considered excellent at dealing with people, was described by the Society's secretary as 'not by any means what is denominated a ready Pen and Inksman — I could write his name thrice for his once'. His accounting was even less adequate but the secretary remorselessly bought him a large blank book to be used as a ledger (Salton 68. 161).

By 1808 Williamson was getting an increasing amount of work. As well as the response to the advertisement of building lots there was, as promised, a public roup of 11 curing lots. Five of these were taken by men from Wick, one by James Henderson of Clyth, two by Peter Davidson of Dundee, two by James Miller merchant in Leith, and one by David Kid cooper there. Three of these lots were reported by Telford as built up by August 1809 as well as one lot in the village (GD 9/300/2) — the latter by John Sinclair, millwright. Sinclair had been busy at the mill also, for in February 1809 Williamson wrote, 'upon Saturday I saw the mill set to work' and it 'is this day grinding a grist of corn for me'.

A visitor to Pulteneytown in 1809 was the Deputy Governor of the Society, Sir William Smith, M.P., a philanthropist perhaps most remarkable as being the grandfather of Florence Nightingale. He arrived during the fishing season and told his fellow directors later: 'From the great resort of persons employed in the Fishery, a guinea and a guinea and a half per month was paid for a mere lodging room at Old Wick and even at that unexampled price a lodging was difficult to be procured' (Min. 26/3/1810). He was sure that Pulteneytown had a future. He was told that already during one part of the season 400-500 vessels and boats were

employed and that in the course of one night 6000 barrels of herring were taken.

1810 saw further advance — 60 lots were now taken and building was going on both above and below the bank. One problem arose which was described in a letter from George Wares, an original feuar of a lot in the links area (GD 9/318). He said that he had built sunk vaulted cellars for salt and had begun a red herring house, but as the harbour had not yet been finished his property was not properly defended from the sea 'which had lately been in it and round it' and 'has now nearly filled all my cellars with sand'. He said that the feuars had built temporary bulwarks of stone and wood to protect their houses, but he would pay no rent and would call the sheriff to arbitrate if the Society did not agree. The directors did agree to ask no rent for three years which sounds only fair.

1811 saw the feuars busy — 'the quarry field resembles a rabbit warren — all alive' (GD 9/311). Late the previous year Williamson had written:

'Tho' at all times sanguine, the rapid increase of settlers far exceeded my expectations.... In my early operations as the Society's Agent I had to bear the scoffs of many who from malice or selfish motives ridiculed the idea of such a settlement on such a scale; I may now be permitted without arrogating too much to myself to claim some merit in having at so early a period feued off one third of the village.'

(GD 9/275)

In 1812 the lines of the village had to be extended — Macrae Street, Frances Street, Macleay Street, Brown Place and Thurso Street were added about this time (GD 9/311 no 4). The population was already 211 and likely to be doubled after another good season. February 1813 saw carts employed daily carrying stones, and masons were said to be full at work (ib. no 5). Lots above and below the bank continued to be taken and feuars were building busily if not in all respects as Telford would have liked. He paid a visit to Pulteneytown in October 1813 and inspected the pier, 'every yard was minutely examined' and iron rods sunk to see that the foundations were correct — to all of which the Agent was an eye-witness (Salton 1815. 96). The harbour was one of the permanent problems for the Society — it was no sooner finished than it was found to be too small for the increased number of boats (and their larger size) and it was continually filling up with sand, like poor Mr Wares' cellars some years before. It would take many years to improve matters and Robert Louis Stevenson recorded that work here, 'the chief disaster of my father's life', was a failure. But while the local people at this time were blaming George Burn, Telford never did so and maintained that his workmanship and materials were excellent.

The Society was still trying to carry out Telford's street and house plans and the secretary, Gilbert Salton, wrote to him in 1814 that the details of the houses 'seem to render minute attention necessary' and added 'How far it is practicable to define the situation of each privy I do not know' (GD 9/321). Considering that among other projects Telford was then building the Caledonian Canal, it seems a ludicrous suggestion, but the directors were very keen to set an example of cleanliness and the feuars, in spite of their contracts, were not being very co-operative. There was greater

success in other directions (Salton 1815. 60). Mr Oal, a vintner in Wick, agreed to take a corner site for an inn on the building of which he undertook to spend £1000 (there were dram shops in plenty already), and a cookshop had early been established to cater for workmen on the harbour and the bridge. One sign of the growth of the fishing was the arrangement made by the Deputy Governor in 1813 that a customs officer from Thurso should come over whenever required to operate at the new station. Another mark of success was the establishment of a boat-building yard. In January 1812 Telford recommended a suitable site for enclosure for this purpose, and in May 1813 the first ship was reported to have been built — a sloop called 'Brothers'. The owner was George Burn the architect but the builder was almost certainly James Bremner, a native of Keiss who had trained in a Greenock shipyard, returned to set up his own yard in the new settlement and later became an expert in wreck salvage and harbour work as well. Burn claimed that it was traditional for the first vessel built at a station to be exempt from tonnage duty (Min. 8/5/1813). The directors, too experienced to fall for that too easily, asked the Agent to investigate and he replied that he had not been able to establish any evidence to support Burn. Bremner carried on building ships and in the early weeks of 1815 had 'a fine Brig on the stocks which will be named the Duke of Wellington. Bremner has given her a Figure-head of the Duke in uniform, cut by himself and well done' (Salton 1815. 155, 178). The brig was of 94 tons and designed to take herring to the Baltic.

The description of the figure-head comes from a fascinating diary kept by the Society's secretary Gilbert Salton, an Edinburgh-born London-based lawyer, who paid a visit to Pulteneytown from 17 January to 9 March 1815. He stayed with Provost Macleay of Wick, whose brother in London was a director of the Society, and he worked hard with James Williamson to sort out the affairs of the settlement. The diary, like all the papers of the Society, found its way to Dunvegan — Sir Reginald Macleod of MacLeod was secretary when the Society faded out of existence in 1893 — but it did not go to the Scottish Record Office with the rest of the papers after I found them in 1949 and I saw it for the first time early in 1979. Salton recorded all his doings in great detail, often sitting up until the early hours to write the diary, and many of the conversations with local people are set out verbatim. At one point he even adds stage directions and in a debate with 'old Mr Miller' (the Leith merchant I think and not Staxigoe) says that he (Gilbert) was 'looking gravely and assuming a dignified air' (Salton 1815. 88). He spent days meeting the settlers and preparing the first detailed rent roll, he discussed difficulties with Wick Town Council and endlessly with Sir Benjamin Dunbar. He met some new feuars including Major Innes of Keiss who proposed to take two lots in Breadalbane Terrace and two in Argyll Square and to build good houses, one almost certainly for himself. Curing lots were taken by David Brodie of Hopeville who as we know was himself a fishery developer at Sarclet and Whaligoe, and Josiah Rhind, accountant in the Caithness bank who later acted as agent for the Society and was father of A.H. Rhind of Rhind lecture fame.

Salton had to explain to the local community the Society's position over

harbour dues which, by an act of Parliament of 1814, they could levy on all vessels going in or out. He told them that the Society would use the money to pay a harbour master and pilots, and the rest would all go towards the upkeep of Pulteneytown and not to any of the western villages. He went to see the customs officials in Thurso to arrange for their presence when needed, he appointed John Rose of Ormlie, Thurso, as law agent for the Society in Caithness (Salton 1815. 135), and he reported that there were 23 vessels in the harbour on 15 February — three having just left for Ireland with cargoes of herring. He was present at the wedding of his host's daughter to the local minister Mr Robert Phin, with a mixture of dancing, prayers and supper. He attended Sunday service and heard Mr Gunn, minister of Watten, preach for 1 hour and 37 minutes (Gilbert evidently had his watch out) — 'He is a man of talents but his sermon was tiresome from repetitions and without repetition it is difficult to conceive how 37 minutes could be expended' (Salton 1815. 173). Of many graphic passages, I would like to quote just one more (Salton 1815. 53-4). On 29 January he:

'went to the Parish Church and dismissed about 12 minutes from 3. High water was about 3 and as the Spring Tides continued and there was a heavy sea, I wished to visit the Harbour and Mr J. Macleay accompanied me..... At the Bend of the Pier I was foolishly curious to see the effect of a heavy wave upon the back of it. Having got my toes rested upon a small projection I fixed my right hand by way of security across the Buttress, my Curiosity was in a few seconds not only gratified, but ineffectment was given me as the Society's Representative by delivery not of Earth and Stone but of a body of water in which my head and back were completely enveloped; and my poor friend did not escape much better..... Luckily we were Great Coated and buttoned up to the Throat, so that by casting loose and shaking our Coats and Hats we got off tolerably well.'

Pulteneytown: The First Ten Years

Salton has given us a valuable glimpse into the life of Pulteneytown in 1815, and the first ten years of the Society's development of the town can best be summed up in the Agent's report dated early in 1818 — a report which is unusually detailed and includes a very full rental describing the state of each lot (GD 9/376). By now 102 building lots had been feued on which had already been built 7 red herring houses, at least 12 cooperages and many salt cellars, and 108 dwelling houses — 8 more houses being under construction — but privies were still almost non-existent. Parts of the quay had recently been allocated as curing lots for letting to strangers, more streets were to be laid out as soon as Telford or John Mitchell, his deputy in the north, could come and do it, while the start on a much needed extra boat harbour was being delayed by yet another dispute with Sir Benjamin Dunbar. 59,043 barrels of herring had been shipped the previous year — 5½ thousand to the Baltic, 8½ to Ireland and the rest coastwise much probably for re-export. The total resident population had risen to 852 in Pulteneytown itself and the establishment of a school was being pressed for. The total number of male residents over the age of 12 was 247 and their professions were listed so that we can have a picture of the community as it existed 10 years after the first feu was allocated. There were 1 architect (Burn), 6 fishcurers, 5 merchants and shop keepers, 42



Figs. 8.21; 8.22; 8.23. In the late 19th-early 20th centuries the harbours at Pulteneytown, lined with curing sheds, cooperages and other ancilliary buildings, were filled with herring boats and with cargo vessels waiting to take away the fish. Sail for long co-existed with steam.



carpenters, 8 blacksmiths, 11 carters, 6 weavers, 1 bookbinder, 2 customs-house tidewaiters, 2 plasterers, 8 shoemakers, 5 tailors, 5 ship and boat carpenters (this increased greatly the following year when work swung from houses to boats), 2 millwrights, 4 innkeepers, 1 miller and 37 labourers and others, including 1 excise officer.

From 1818 onwards the great increase in prosperity at Pulteneytown and Wick [Figs. 8.21; 8.22; 8.23] cannot really be ascribed to the efforts of the Society — indeed the directors seem to be dragged along by the momentum. But it was a momentum that they had created — their foundations had been good even if luck played a large part in the success of this most important planned town, which indeed provided a ‘new framework for human life in the neighbouring countryside’.

Acknowledgement

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