

Lasswade: Background Notes

According to local legend, the picturesque village of Lasswade was so named because, before there was a bridge, a sturdy local girl, called Jenny, would struggle across the river carrying travellers on her back – hence '**Jenny lass, wade!**'

More likely the name of Lasswade originated from a combination of the Old English words *læswe* (a meadow or pasture) and *wæd* (a ford).

The settlement of Lasswade has had a long and varied history, being one of the most ancient parishes in Scotland. There is evidence of a church from as early as 850AD. Then, during the C13th, the Church of St Edwin was consecrated (we will visit its surviving architectural remnants).

Subsequent centuries saw many changes. In the 1690s Lasswade was reported to have "90 tradesmen including mealmakers, millers, weavers, tailors, wrights, smiths, brewers and merchants". In the 18th and early 19th centuries the valley sides became an idyllic rural setting for the country retreats of rich Edinburgh citizens who wanted to escape "Auld Reekie". These included Sir Walter Scott. While resident at Lasswade Cottage, off Green Lane (which we stroll along) Sir Walter played host to several literary figures, notably William and Dorothy Wordsworth who walked down the river valley, from Roslin, also the writer James Hogg (the 'Ettrick Shepherd').

By the mid-19th and 20th centuries, Lasswade had transformed into a hive of industry: including a distillery, candle manufactory, oatmeal and barley mills, an iron and brass foundry, a manufactory of fine carpets and damasks. flour milling, and paper making, all benefitting from the fast-flowing waters of the N. Esk. Consequently, by the C19th Lasswade had become the largest parish in Midlothian.

The acclaimed "Scottish Impressionist" William McTaggart (1835-1910), one of Scotland's most popular and celebrated landscape painters, also lived in Lasswade. William was a great interpreter of the Scottish landscape, being especially well known for his powerful and enduring images of Highland seascapes. His grandson, the artist Sir William MacTaggart, was born in Lasswade. His evocative, local works include "Snow near Lasswade" and line drawings of the "Pentland Hills".

Paper Mill & other old industries

The café-restaurant building, we use, was previously part (the garage) of Tod's large, bustling Paper Mill. A mill was first established on the site in 1792. At times of big orders, the mill operated around the clock. Its massive chimney, at 272 feet, towered above the valley and could be seen for miles around until the mill closed in 1965.

Originally, rags were the main source of cellulose fibre used to make paper on the N. Esk. The effluent from washing and bleaching the rags was discharged straight into the river. Worse, with the introduction of papermaking machines in the early 1800s, the tonnages involved greatly increased. This resulted in complaints from local landowners about the worsening pollution. More serious still, by 1866 the replacement of rags by Esparto grass, which had to be boiled with caustic soda, resulted in even severer pollution. In spite of anti-pollution measures, including soda recovery systems, lime settling ponds, fibre filtration and settling plants, the river remained in a terrible state until Esparto pulping ceased in the 1960s. More recently water quality level has improved to "moderate"; otters have returned; but pollution incidents continue to arise from multiple sources – such as disused coal mines (pyrite & acidic ferruginous groundwater), diesel spills, and from sewage waste.

Lasswade Bridge, Toll House and Post Box

The heavily trafficked A769 bridge is one of the few crossing points of the North Esk. A bridge here was first recorded by Blaeu (1640). As early as 1716 it was noted that the Bridge of Lasswade 'was in great need of repair and assistance required from neighbouring parishes to bring hewn stones to the bridge'. In the later C18th the bridge formed an important link in the road south to Melrose and Jedburgh. The current structure derives mostly from the late C18th. The metal foot gangway was added later, supported by a 19th century pier. The adjacent tollhouse is located on the central axis with the bridge, giving it excellent views.

Further along the High Street, note the free-standing, traditional, red post box.

Coffin Lane

After Burke and Hare's killing spree had come to an end (1828), the Old Lasswade Kirkyard became a target for the resurrectionists. A total of eleven body snatchers and surgeons were involved in a plot to strip Lasswade clean of its dead. The Calderwood Enclosure is a caged lair, designed to outwit the body snatchers.

The runic cross (the Baird Smith sandstone obelisk) at the top of the lane, beside the former manse, was erected to the memory of Dr Richard Smith, the local doctor for many years and his son, Richard Baird Smith, Chief Engineer at the siege of Delhi and a hero of the Indian Mutiny.

Old Kirk Graveyard and Cemetery

The first Old Kirkyard contains the ruins of the old (13th-century) Norman Church. A series of mausoleums surround the original footprint of the church. This early church is now represented only by a portion of its former south wall. It was used as a place of worship for over 500 years, first following Roman Catholic Orders, and then, after the Reformation, as a place of Protestant worship until its closure in 1793.

There is an interesting collection of grave markers throughout the kirkyard. The many notable stones include: the 16th Bannatyne stone, a later 18th stone depicting mining surveyors, a stone for a blacksmith with hammer and crown dated 1742, and a pillar recording the lives of two bleachers, father and son. Also note the large lump of rock, a mortstone (another anti-theft device) beside the Eldin Aisle.

In the new Cemetery, is the grave of Charles Thomas Clough (1852 – 1916). A prominent British geologist and mapmaker who became famous for his meticulous mapping and in gaining a detailed understanding of the geology and tectonic history of the Scottish Highlands. Also, Charles d’Orville Pilkington Jackson’s grave (1887 – 1973). As a sculptor Charles’ most noteworthy creation (in my view a magnificent creation) is his iconic, equestrian statue of Robert the Bruce.

Green Lane

NB. old holly hedges. The grounds of Walter Scott’s former abode lie to the right.

Ecohouse

A modern (2023) 4-bedroom home split over three levels with an eco-friendly footprint which cleverly maximises the natural energy benefits of the site’s south-facing position. The property boasts four different energy efficient heating sources: namely passive solar, solar thermal panels, a pellet stove to heat water, and an air-source heat pump. In addition, German-made windows fitted throughout minimise heat loss. It also has electric vehicle charging points and a ventilation heat recovery system. The home was recently put up for sale accepting offers of over £1.25million. Predictably, the building has divided the opinions of locals:

“A total blot on the landscape in what is meant to be a conservation area. This hideous construction is totally out of keeping with the rest of the area and Midlothian Council should be ashamed approving yet another horrendous characterless brick box.”

Three responses:

“You’re entitled to your opinion as am I. This is a stunning family home which is almost hidden and fits in well with its surroundings, it’s a huge improvement the 60’s/70’s houses in Church Road and fits well with the new Town Houses in School Green.

“I think it’s a true architectural masterpiece. The only thing horrendous is [your] comment. It oozes bitterness and jealousy. Channel your energy into something positive.

“I think [the eco-house] is rather tastefully designed and demonstrates good use of natural materials. Architecturally it’s more of a pleasure to look at than some of the carbuncles local landowners have, and continue to throw up without an ounce of design thought.”



The grave [*beside and to right of central pathway*] of **Charles Thomas Clough** (who helped establish the Scottish Highlands as a key site in world geology). A preeminent field geologist, his detailed mapping was unrivalled for completeness and accuracy. Clough worked in the heroic age of Scottish geology in which, without any prior knowledge, a fundamental understanding was attained of thrusting, refolded folds and metamorphism in mountain belts. His work, alongside that of other members of The Geological Survey, has had an enduring influence on the elucidation of tectonic processes extending far beyond the Highlands. The research outlined many of the principles of structural and tectonic analysis – ideas that have subsequently guided generations of geologists working in other mountain belts from all around the world.



The grave [*halfway up northernmost edge of graveyard*] of **Charles d'Orville Pilkington Jackson** (creator of the magnificent equestrian statue of Robert the Bruce at Bannockburn). Charles designed both his own gravestone (following the death of his wife), and that of his parents, which stands alongside.

