

**A Short History
of
Prestonpans
Airts Burns Club**

**Compiled by
John Hogg**



Airt's Burns Club
Prestonpans (516)

**Dedicated to
Walter Muir
(1930 - 2000)**

I feel by producing this short history of the 'Aids' Burns Club, I am in a world fulfilling a dream. Not my own however) Because, for many years before I passing ,Walter Muir, our late Secretary and President, had often mentioned ambition he had to record and leave some 'nostalgic memories' of the dub's ear days. Sadly, Walter's life was cut short in April 2000

I well remember in March, 1996, he was asked to submit an article on the 'Airi which was to be Included in the town's Summer gala programme and he hurried collated some information, but told me in his own inimitable way, "Ah'm no real pleased wi' It John"!

So, helped by those facts of Walter's and a little detective work of my own, sincerely hope he's better pleased with the following effort, which I dedical to him.

J Hogg
May 2002

Before delving into the life of The Airts Burns Club, I feel a mention should be given to the original club which existed here in the town of Prestonpans.

The date of its formation is unknown, but the "Jolly Beggars" Club was certainly flourishing here in the mid 1800's. Indeed, it is on record (and I quote from a volume produced in the year 1860) "that in 1859 the centenary of the poet's birth was celebrated by a public dinner in the Queen's Arms Inn, where about forty gentlemen were present. The chair was ably filled by Or Ritchie, with Davie a local merchant acting as croupier. & Ritchie then gave the toast "The Memory of Burns", touching on the man and his place as a poet".

The highlight of the evening, the report goes on to say was when Or Ritchie read from a letter written in Burns' own hand! It was addressed to his brother Gilbert, and had been kindly lent for the occasion by a lady, resident Prestonpans. Oh, were that letter in the hands of our club today; what an acquisition). Sadly, no records, minutes or documentation of any description survive of this club.

However, the 'Airts' Club itself was formed in 1934, and was affiliated to that Burns Federation in 1936. The early meetings were held in the Railway Tavern still a thriving public house to this day. The officials in 1934 when the club began were - Honorary President @ Thomas Kinghorn (Proprietor of the Railway Tavern); President - Joseph Colquhoun, Vice President - Robert Loga, Secretary - Thomas J Gilles, Assistant Secretary - John McLurg, Treasurer Wilfred Flockhart, Assistant Treasurer - Thomas Oavidson; General Committee members were - John Cunningham, James Cunningham, Robert Rodgers, Thomas Godfrey and Robert Ross.

Nation being asked to 'put their shoulders to the wheel' for the war effort Miners were asked to produce more coal; Bruntons in Musselburgh, were producing steel and wire ropes. Prestonpans itself then, was a hive of industry, with brick and pipe works, salt works and a soap works. We had two collieries, and of course a brewery too. At that time, many of our men and women from the town were proudly serving in the armed forces.

Strangely, that conflict (1939 - 1945) was in a way partly responsible for the Airts' Club rising from the ashes,

Jim Bush, our Honorary President, and a man to whom the club is greatly indebted, tells us that during his time in the army, a colleague loaned him a book of the poems of Robert Burns, Jim, who has always had a retentive memory, earned many of those poems, especially the lengthy pieces. So, a few years after the war (the early 50's), Jim, Bowdy Edmond, 'Tzar' Cunningham and a few others, decided to "resurrect" the Airts, and it was only natural that they, and some of the original members, returned to the Railway Tavern for their meetings.

The year 1959 (the bi-centenary of the birth of Burns) was approaching, and was undoubtedly a momentous year in the eyes of all his enthusiasts. The Airts' Club decided that to mark the occasion, they must do something special, and so in a joint effort involving the Thorntree Mystic Burns Club, contributions from local businesses, traders, pubs, clubs and even schools and personal contributions, after more than three years planning, a Burns shelter (opposite The Coronation Gardens) was erected, and was formally opened by Mr Sinclair Morrison on the 25th January 1959.

Walter Muir, our late Secretary, related to me an amusing story, when on a summer's evening in 1960, he and his father Hugh, (pipe major of Preston Links Colliery Band and the Airts piper for many years), were sitting in the Railway Tavern enjoying a quiet pint. Suddenly, Hugh turned to his son and said "Walter, I'm going upstairs to the Airts meeting, if ye fancy coming up, ye'll be mair than welcome". So, the unsuspecting Walter follows Dad, "like a lamb to the slaughter" he said later, and before the meeting had finished, he found himself the new secretary, a position he held for 35 years. Relinquishing that post in March 1995, Walter proudly stepped into the Presidential chair of the 'Airts' serving two years, thus fulfilling a dream he had nurtured throughout those previous thirty five years.

Walter it must be said, was one of the real characters in the club, for besides his secretarial skills, he loved singing, dancing, acting and conviviality. Indeed, he was a man after the Bard's own heart, and one who would have been at home in the tavern of Poesie Nansie in Mauchline, joining in the singing with those "Jolly Beggars". Yes, it was a sad day indeed for the Airts, when Walter passed on.

The early suppers of the club, were actually held upstairs in the Railway, and were admittedly a bit congested, but it added to the fun, with the camaraderie spirit always evident. With no cooking facilities on the premises, the meals were prepared in the houses of various members. As some of those houses were in close proximity of the tavern, Hugh Muir the piper, often led a procession along the High Street, with men carrying haggis, some with pots of soup and ashets of potatoes, some with neeps and platters of cheese and biscuits! Shoppers and bystanders were told applauded, and stood in amazement at this hilarious sight!

However time moved on, and in 1967 the Royal Mussleburgh Golf Club, came into the possession of CISWO (The Coal Industry Social Welfare Organisation) in short, the 'Miners Welfare'. J. Edmond, George Mastic, J. H. Bush and A.C. Robertson (all of the mining fraternity) suggested the 'Airts' make their new home in these 'palatial surroundings' (a far cry indeed from that humble cottage in Alloway!)

The move proved a wise one, as from then on the club flourished, with new members coming in, social events being arranged, trips to the Burns country, outings and monthly dances (at the present time our main source of income).

Over many years now, the 'dirts' members have tried to attain and keep up certain standards. They have striven to make their annual Suppers successful and entertaining to guests and visitors alike. Even back in the (late 1960's, early 70's, high profile Burns experts spoke at the Royal Mussleburgh. They included Fred Belford and Jane Burgoyne. both Past Presidents of the Burns Federation (Mrs Burgoyne was actually in office at the time of her visit).

Trade Union leaders *Abe* Moffat and Jimmy Reid too, have thrilled audiences with their oratory, as has the (late Peter Dobson, who was an acknowledged expert on Burns' association with fast Lothian; all speakers of the highest quality. Men of the cloth have given toasts here, as have miners and men of the *profusions*: indeed, people of all walks of life and one can't help thinking, that is exactly as 'oor Rab' would have wanted it.

However, at this point, can I come nearer to our own times, as *for* many years now, 'dirts' members themselves have proposed the toast "The Immortal Memory of Robert Burns". A study of our records reveal, that from the year 1978 to the time of writing, only *flw* gentlemen outwith the club have proposed this important toast!

It goes without saying of course, that to take on such a task require willingness, a desire to do so, dedication, and most importantly a love of the subject, and thankfully those qualities have always been in the minds and heart of our members.

Visitors to our annual gatherings have often remarked on our sketches on centre-pieces, such as 'The Jolly Beggars' and the 'Holy Fair', both great satirical compositions of Robert Burns, and are pieces during which the player can 'let their hair down', and really enjoy themselves. One of our 'senior statesmen' within the 'Airts', Davie Jefferies, who is more or less our thespians guide and mentor, felt that if we alternated those two pieces every two year audiences may soon tire of them. So, he sat down and wrote his own production which he entitled "1801" that year now being more or less accepted in Burns circles, as the year of the first Burns Supper. And what a success it proved to be) But Dovie wasn't finished yet) He thought that if there was a fourth centrepiece, then we could perform them over a four year cycle) So, yours truly was given the task of introducing and writing a new piece, and 'A Reflective Burns' was the result, being first performed in January 1996.

However readers, I feel here I must take this opportunity to give David Jefferies an extra word of praise, mainly because of his skill in the directing and adaptation of the works of Robert Burns, plus the encouragement he has given to aspiring reciters - John Gordon, Dovie Jardine, Hendry Bush, Peter Hunter and now a new recruit Scott Gordon, will I'm sure appreciate the help they've had from Davie. Of course, he's no slouch himself when it comes to reciting, as he has proved when performing with the Carroll brothers. Their delivery of 'The Two Dugs' and 'Death and Dr Hornbook' for example, must be seen to be fully appreciated.

I myself tend to become caught up with the present, which perhaps is understandable, although listening to stories and tales of the club's origins over those years now gone, can indeed be fascinating. Sadly, most of the 'ould yins' and the characters in those stories have now passed on; those early pioneers who contributed to the club's beginnings, building it up and handing on the legacy we have today. Let's remember James 'Bowdy' Edmond, Tzar' Cunningham, Jock and David Ostler, Joe Colquhoun, Jock McLurg, Tommy Davidson, Tarn Godfrey, 'City Hood and Tammy Gillies. One could go on and on! However, it would be unforgivable of me to omit four personal friends and ex-workmates; namely, Hugh Muir, AC Robertson, Willie Currie and of course George Corroll. All good men, and characters in their own right.

Thankfully, we do have a few older and 'wise' Burnsians still to the fore, men who have kept the flag flying over the years. Jim Galloway, George Hastie, Willie Cowan and Willie Rodaer, not forgetting our oldest member Bob Hamilton! All the aforementioned have given sterling service over the years and have held up the traditions of the 'Airts'. Early in this brief history I mentioned the name of James Hamilton Bush. It is a name readers that has been synonymous with the 'Airts' Burns Club for half a century!. It is reckoned that Jim has attended more suppers than that modern day "Rabble Burns". John Calrnie! Aye, and Jim was a better reciter too!

He has the distinction of having taken the office of President twice, and has for many years now, been our Honorary President.

Jim is perhaps the club's foremost authority on the poet, and as far as the poems of Burns are concerned, nothing was beyond him! "Tarn O' Shanter", "The Cottar's Saturday Night", "Man was made to mourne". Burns' epistles; his addresses, and his gems. You name it, Jim knew it, and could deliver it. Probably though, his greatest strength was the "Immortal Memory" (always done without reference to notes), plus he was an expert at reciting the poems of Stanley McDougall and 'Pump' Anderson. Both well known local poets. I offer wonder, when will we hear Jim's like again?

The year 1984, marked the Golden Jubilee of the Dirts'. This milestone was commemorated when a large crowd assembled in brilliant sunshine at the Burns Shelter, on 21 July. George Manderson our President then, extended a warm welcome to all, introducing the guests, namely Tom McIlwraith, President of the Burns Federation, and Tom Bell from the Edinburgh and District Burns Clubs.

The date chosen for this event did have some significance, as it was 188 years to the day since Robert Burns died, so really. It was a day of both celebration and of remembrance. Wreaths were laid, speeches delivered, and the day culminated with Monktonhall Silver Band playing a selection of tried and tested Burns airs. The chairman drew the afternoon to a close by thanking everyone for their attendance. Yet another great day in the annals of the Airts

Over the years, this club has been blessed with talented singers. John Anderson, who sadly passed away a few years ago, was always a great favourite at the 'Airts' suppers, having a style all of his own, bringing feeling and sincerity into the songs of Burns.

Bobby Ross, another long standing member (he actually sung when the club occasionally held their suppers in Prestonpans Town Hall), is still attending annually, and still in great voice! Willie Rodger too. another active member is thankfully still singing well. At the time of writing, I might add that those seasoned performers are being "seriously challenged" by one of our past chairmen, George Manderson. I George besides singing the songs of Burns has a wide variety of music, and is the inspiration behind our "Wee Concert Party". A small group within the club, visit OAP Groups, nursing homes, hospitals etc. and we try to bring that little bit of brightness into the lives of people fortunate than ourselves.

The remark has often been passed of course, those singers are only as good as the 'backing' they receive! Well. if there is any truth in that statement, the 'Airts' singers must rank amongst the best (n the land, because our musicians certainly are! In days long gone now, Bruce Mcfiuff was a firm favourite and played accordion at the '-Airts' suppers.

John Meek, our resident pianist, has also given years of sterling service, and long may those fingers continue to "tinkle the ivories"! Thankfully, we can also call upon another talented pianist and church organist, namely ~Robert Hooker. Accordionist Tommy Kerr, Jock Henderson on fiddle, along with pipers John Bisset and Bob Dean all go to make up our list of accompanists.

So, in many respects, we are really fortunate to be able to call upon the services of the aforementioned musicians, and it goes without saying, we are very appreciative of their efforts.

At suppers, invariably performers, (certainly in recent years), are usually over forty. It has become something of a rarity to hear young men (or indeed women) sing or recite at suppers, and yet, audiences can be full of young people, proving if they are present, they obviously enjoy the Bard's works. So, why not participate?

I feel it absolutely essential that somehow we motivate those young people now, in order that we carry on a tradition handed down to us by our forefathers. We owe it to them. and to Robert Burns himself.!

May I at this point, mention my old friend Walter Muir once again, and say he'd never forgive me if in this article I omitted to mention an organisation he held dear and had a great affinity with. I'm referring of course to "The Airts Lassies"! By virtue of his late wife Isabel being a member, Walter was present at many of their functions, and he enjoyed them to the full. Instituted in 1977, this year will see the celebration of their Silver Jubilee. They of course have their own suppers, with their meetings held fortnightly throughout the year in the Royal Musselburgh. "The Lassies", just like the 'Airts', are always keen to welcome new members,

As was mentioned earlier, that day in 1959 when the Burns shelter was opened, was indeed a milestone in the history of the 'Airts' club. but perhaps even **that** occasion was 'topped' 37 years later, when on 21 July 1996 the year of the bi- centenary of the death of our National Poet. a commemorative cairn was unveiled, opposite the Coronation *Gardens*, This venture, again a joint effort, included ourselves, Seton Burns Club, Thorntree Mystic Burns Club, Castlepark Bowling Club and Tranent 25 Burns Club.

The cairn itself was constructed and generously donated by James Strang (Builders). It's interior was hollow, going down to approximately two feet below ground level. This then gave us the opportunity of placing a time capsule within the chamber. The capsule, made of stainless steel, was kindly donated by McMillan Fabrications, and contains various artefacts donated by the individual clubs. When finally placed in the cairn, liquid cement was poured in, sealing the interior completely.

Three bands were in attendance that day, leading a procession from the Lady Susan hostelry, along the length of the High Street, to the site of the cairn. A gathering close on a thousand had now assembled to witness the unveiling ceremony. Following the Chairman's opening remarks a lengthy programme ensued. It included speeches, songs, verse, brass band and fiddle selections, along with pipers and a choir consisting of school children and the "Airts Lassies".

Sir Hugh Dalrymple, the Lord Lieutenant of the County, carried out the actual unveiling, which included the laying of a wreath at the foot of the cairn. At the end of the programme the club invited everyone to join them at the Royal Musselburgh for a social gathering.

I firmly believe that day in July 1996 must rank as one of the most memorable days in the history of the 'Airts'. *M* who were present, I feel, were caught up in an atmosphere of both nostalgia and pride, as they thought of those messages of wisdom, sincerity, and the songs of love, which had flowed from the pen of Robert Burns, more than 200 years prior to that gathering.

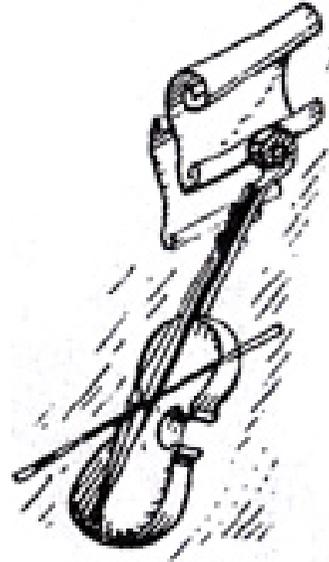
However readers, we are approaching the end of the 'dirts' story we remember, began way back in 1934. I say we're near the end of our story, in conclusion, I sincerely hope that this could well be the beginning of a new one and there are three points I hope will continue to be uppermost in the minds hearts of our members:-

1 A desire to continue to retain high standards in all our performances.

2 The future of the "Airts" Club lies in the younger element of our society being prepared to participate with us. Let's encourage them to do so.

3 Most importantly, we, and Burnsians globally, should continue to sing the songs, recite the poems, and generally "spread the gospel" of Robert Burns which ultimately would result in the fruition of his great dream- The Worldwide Brotherhood of Man.





Prestonpans Airts Burns Club welcomes new members. Anyone with an interest in the life and works of Scotland's Bard should contact: The Secretary – J. Telford 73 Polwarth Terrace, Prestonpans. Telephone 810720