

Basket Making in Gargunnoch



A view looking northwards from the White House in the Square in the early 1900s.

The basket shop on the left was demolished by the County Council to enable road-widening after the Travis' left in the mid thirties.

The precarious looking lean-to collapsed one day without warning, luckily while no-one was about!

Early in 2001 Angus Harris, from Loftbrae, told me that a lady called Miss Travis had been in touch with him looking for information. She had been born and brought up here she said but left as a young girl in her early teens for England from where her family had originally come.

The name Travis immediately rang a bell with me as it appears in the old graveyard on one of the finer family stones near the entrance. It is a name associated with the basket making industry which provided much needed employment here from about the mid-19th century through to the 1930s. This was good news as I had never found much in the way of information or photographs of the Travis family or the industry.

Unfortunately her telephone number had not been retained by those to whom it had been passed but a search of appropriate directories, and a bit of luck, soon bore fruit and led to my first contact with the lady.

Gertrude Jean Travis, "Gertie" in old village records but Jean in adulthood is an alert, bright-eyed octogenarian with a splendid sense of humour and a wealth of interesting stories about her family and early life in the Gargunnoch of the 1920s. She was surprised and not a little delighted when I 'phoned and we began a correspondence in which we exchanged information about the Gargunnoch of today and that of the past. That led to Helen and I spending a pleasant afternoon at her home in Middlesborough one day during the October 2001 school break. From that came lots more information and a some interesting photographs including the one shown here which is, I believe, the only surviving picture of the basket making industry in the garden of the White House in the Square.



Gertrude Jean Travis

That industry came to Gargunnoch during the 1860s. An Englishman, Thomas Travis, brought it here. Oak-spale baskets were used widely by farming and other industries and the Travis family and others who hailed from northern England had gradually moved northwards over the years, perhaps following the supply of raw material. Gargunnoch in the mid 19th century was apparently in decline so perhaps they were encouraged to come here by the local Laird. Whatever

the reason, subsequent census reports show the Travis name and a good number of locals, perhaps 15 or so at one time, being employed in the trade.

The White House in the Square was the Travis' home and the garden was filled with workshops. The late Rev. William Turner who ministered here from 1934 to 1970 wrote in the Gargunnoch contribution to the Third Statistical Account for Scotland as follows:

"Since the New Statistical Account was written (1840s), the industry of basket making has come and gone. The industry was begun in 1865 by men who came from Ulverston, Bolton, Kendal and Gatehouse-of-Fleet. They came here because there was a plentiful supply of young coppice oak and the ash and hazel, which they used, in the woods of Gargunnoch and Leckie and at Gartmore and Loch Lomond. The industry ceased in 1931, largely because the supply of this wood ran out. These oak spale (spelk) baskets were used for potatoes, for coaling ships and, generally, in industry. A large customer for the 36-inch size was Messrs. Coats of Paisley the thread manufacturer..

The wood was boiled, shaped and split. The reins or 'bools' (bowls) were made of ash, hazel or oak. The broader and thicker strips of oak that went from side to side of the basket were called 'spales'; the narrower and thinner strips of oak that went lengthways were called 'the tawse.' The baskets were oval in shape, the usual size being 22 inches long. During at least part of the period mentioned, Gargunnoch was, it is believed, the only place in Scotland where these baskets were made. Descendants of the basket-makers still proudly assert that the Gargunnoch baskets were far superior to those made in England.

The basket makers worked from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. and, in the evenings, the basket shops with their large boilers and cheery fires were the gathering places for the men of the vil-



The White House in the 20s or early 30s with the basket shop, the position of which caused difficulties for the then new omnibuses during the turn into Station Road.

At the corner of the basket shop stands one of the old paraffin street lamps which were in use up to the first world war.

In the lower photograph, taken from about the position of the Manse today the basket shops can be clearly seen as can Klondyke Cottage on the left, in what was to later become the Rest Garden.

(Note the general absence of trees Cathie and Helen!! - Ed)

lage. The larger basket shop, employing 15 men, was situated in what is now the garden of the White House in the Square. The smaller shop was situated on the north side of the village street beyond the third house from the bridge.”

That smaller shop mentioned was run by the Craik family, one of whom was trained by the Travis family before starting up on his own, a sore point at the time. The only descendent of that family, Elisabeth, still lives in the village today.

The eventual demise of the industry was as much due to unfortunate family circumstances as to the replacement of old methods of manufacture and materials with new. Jean was born in Trelawney Cottage in the Square in 1919 and shortly after, her parents (John Travis and Gertrude Elisabeth Hunwicks from Hornchurch, Essex), moved into the White House when her father took over the business on the death of his mother who had been a widow of long-standing.

Unfortunately John Travis died a relatively young man in 1923, probably from the effects of his service in the First World War, leaving his wife to bring up two children and manage the firm. By this time only two workers remained, Sam Caig who lived in the northern part of the house now known as Burnbank, and John Hodgson in Viola Cottage (now Longrigg, at the top of the village). Mrs Travis took part daily in the preparation of the raw materials for the

trade and soldiered on till the early thirties.

In the early thirties Mrs Travis became ill and eventually died in 1934. The house was sold and the two girls moved down to Romford. Thus ended an era in the life of our village.

Jean Travis became a teacher of French.

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The date of the photograph and the identities of those in it are unknown which leads to some fascinating conjecture. Are Sam and John in there? I like to think they are. Who are the young, smartly dressed couple? Jean doesn't know but surely they must be Travis's. Does their dress give a clue to the date? In 1910 there was a professional photographer taking similar high-quality photographs in the village for the inauguration of the first piped public water supply. The ceremony for that was held opposite the White House in front of the newly built fountain in the Square but that's another story.

I last met Jean Travis between Christmas and New Year 2001 when she came up to spend time with a friend in Cupar in Fife. Perhaps on a later date she will revisit the village and tell us

even more about its history.

*From the local history collection of John McLaren .
Gargunnoch Village History - www.mclarn.freeserve.co.uk*

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