

OBAN'S FORGOTTEN STREETS

by Lake Falconer

Miss Macfie's article in the 2002 issue of Historic Argyll, narrating her walk around the town, set me thinking about some of the town's older streets, which seem to have disappeared, or lost their original identity. For example, as Miss Macfie glanced up High Street, I wonder if she knew that it had originally been called Black Street? I have never been able to find out who Mr Black was, who was honoured by having a street named after him, and one theory I have heard discounts his existence. It suggests that the street acquired its name because it contained a blacksmith's smiddy, which belched forth a great deal of smoke, blackening all the buildings - not to mention the passing pedestrians. It seems unlikely.

Nearby is Gibraltar Street, now alas only a stump of what it once was. It contains only the Gallery restaurant and a solicitors' estate agency office, but originally it followed a pleasant curve across what is now the Tesco car park until it ran into Lochside Street, just at its junction with Market Street. It was a magnet for a schoolboy wending his weary way homeward at the end of the day, for it contained on his left, on the west side, the railway stables which housed the dozen or so draft horses used for local deliveries. I speak from personal

knowledge, for I spent many a happy time there helping to groom these marvellous beasts as they returned from a day's work. Then across the road stood a blacksmith's, another wonderful place for a schoolboy. The smell of a hot metal shoe being fitted to the horse's hoof was an aroma one still remembers, and it was counted a great privilege to be allowed to pump the bellows. Incidentally, when returning from the High School the boys didn't always stick to Soroba Road, but instead followed a footpath which ran along the bank of the Black Lynn burn. The burn ran placidly between parallel banks, and was therefore known to the boys as the canal, and the path as the Canal Road. Across the canal at one point, behind the steam laundry which is now subsumed into the Co-op car park, ran a cast iron pipe, about 3 or 4 inches wide and about a foot above the water: it was a challenge to run across it and back. On more than one occasion, I had difficulty explaining to my mother why I arrived home with my shoes wet.

The homeward trail to the north end of the town offered several routes. One was to climb up Star Brae, pass in front of the Free Church, continue the climb up Rockfield Road, and bear left along a footpath which cuts off a loop of the main road, and now proudly bears a painted sign telling us that it is "Taylor's Brae". This is a mistake, for there never was a Mr Taylor, at least not one worthy of commemoration. The path was correctly called Ach-na-sithe Road, but was colloquially known as the tailors' brae, with the definite article disappearing over time. This is because the tailors employed in Mr Chalmers' emporium used to sit on the sunny bank there (all before the houses were built) to have their lunch break, and sometimes to sew in the sunshine. The field now occupied by the Nunnery, and the houses to the north of it, was at one time a market stance known as the *Field of Peace* which in gaelic is Ach-na-sithe.

Another road whose name has disappeared is the short one leading from the car park behind McCaig's Tower to the gates of the former County Chest Hospital, where it turns right and becomes Laurel Road. It bore the name Auchinellan Road, but now bears a name plate saying "Laurel Road", so it must have been the subject of a take-over bid. Incidentally, the area occupied by that car park was once a reservoir supplying water to the distillery, known, not surprisingly, as the Distillery Pond. It was filled in sometime in the 1930s after a fatality when two local men were drowned, falling through the ice when trying to skate.

A number of Oban streets bear boys' names. George Street and William Street are still thus called and were no doubt named for the monarchs of the early 19th century, when the town was developing. There is still a John Street, but who he was is a mystery*. But where are Charles Street, and Peter Street, and Stewart Street, and indeed, who were they? The latter question will have to remain a puzzle, but one can still identify the streets themselves.

Charles Street led off the Esplanade, and commenced by entering the pend which still exists in the frontage of the Argyll Hotel. It ran along the rear of the

buildings of Stafford Street, then turned and followed the buildings on the seaward side of George Street, finishing behind what is now the office of the Yorkshire Building Society, but which in my youth was a china shop. It was rather splendidly called The Auld Lang Syne China Shop, but was invariably known to the locals as Dochie Teapot's. Actually, Charles Street continued further north, and still exists as a lane between the rear of the Regent Hotel and the rear of the George Street shops.

Peter Street ran across it and still exists, but is no longer a street, as it is punctuated by a set of steps. It runs from the Esplanade to George Street, between the two portions of the Regent Hotel. If you followed it across George Street, you would find that you had arrived in Stewart Street. This is invariably referred to nowadays as Craigard Road, but that road only commenced at the point where the road divided. From George Street to the point of bisection it was Stewart Street. The name is chiselled into the stonework of the building on the south side, but has for many years been obscured by the shop front. From the point where the road divides, the left hand, and less steep road, is not, as everyone calls it, the Low Craigard; it is Albert Road, and you will not need to be told who he was. Of course, not just boys' names were used; the great Victoria herself is also commemorated.

One or two other streets with the most odd names existed, and still exist although the names (mercifully, perhaps) have long gone. Rangatira Place appears in the valuation rolls prior to the first world war. As far as one can ascertain, it is what we tend to refer to as the Park Hotel lane, i.e. the back road which runs down from beside the Farm Foods shop to the esplanade, emerging beside Coasters pub. The building which houses Coasters was once the home of the Bank of Scotland**. Rangatira sounds Maori, and indeed it probably is, as it crops up in New Zealand as the name used for a couple of islands. How on earth it came to be used as a street name in Oban will always be a mystery - unless one of our readers knows? Do pass on the story if you know it.

One last road with an odd name leads off Rangatira Place and runs behind the Farm Foods building, and behind the Esplanade Apartments block. It originally ran on behind the Great Western Hotel and emerged about where the car park now is, in front of Victoria place, until it was blocked off by the Great Western Hotel, after a litigation with the owners of the then existing Esplanade Hotel, who wanted to keep it open. Its name is perhaps the most inexplicable of all. It rejoiced in the name Patagonia Place. Again I would love to know why. Tell me, somebody, please!

Editor's notes

* Possibly named after John Stevenson, property developer in Oban?

**This part of the esplanade appeared briefly in the 1959 film *The Bridal Path*, starring the late Bill Travers. The bark featured in the story, though whether the interior shown in the film was that of the Bank of Scotland I am not sure. Scottish actress Annette Crosby, beloved of the TV series *One foot in the grave*, appeared as a waitress in a tea room, now occupied by

a decorating shop, at the south end of this short frontage. The film includes many scenes in Lorn but, sadly, gets far less publicity than *Whisky Galore*.