

Johnstone Daily Gleaner

Letter to the Editor;
July 1875

Sir-

This being The Fair week allow me to give readers a few lines about the fair in olden times. This was an annual event that appeared great in the estimate of Johnstonians. We shall only go back a quarter of a century, it was scarcely necessary then to divide the years into months and weeks; we had a division of our own, and cut it into 2 parts- The Fair and Ne'erdy.

We'll do well to remember the joy and pride that filled our hearts when we awoke each Fair Thursday morning. There was our annual suit of Kilbarchan moleskins, new from the tailor waiting. The dark coloured cloth was called Kilbarchan because it was mainly used there, and it kept the new appearance better than the lighter shade.

Out we set along the High Street to the centre of attraction; Houstoun Square.

The streets had not then the aristocratic appearance they now have, the shops were smaller and the buildings not so grand, but most of them were decked out for the occasion.

Purchasing a "penny cane" at the foot of the square to give us a kind of cattle dealer look, we marched through it as if the speed of thought was in our limb, as Byron has it!

Having inspected the cattle we next turned our attention to the shows. There was a theatre, and the principle actors the Keans and the Garricks were allowing a Johnstone lad to have free entrance to the pavilion, on account of having caught a scone dipped in molasses in his mouth while his hands were tied; and for also allowing himself to be shaved with whitening by the clown.

Besides the theatre there was a wax work and shooting alleys, "two to one upon the blacks," and the kingsfly and hobbyhorses. There were the dealers in "black and yellow man"; women with sparkling lemonade and ice cream. There was a man with "all on the board a penny;" boxes toys and all pennies.

There was Robin Milliken with his "cup and a flet for a penny," and twa chappin bowls for a bawbee; and all the other sights too numerous to mention.

Friday was then as now the cattle show day, and the farmers daughters who attended were as bonnie and numerous as present. There was only the one show but it had the reputation of being the best in the west of Scotland.

On Saturday there were races, but it was donkeys who did the racing then. And Sir, we are not sure if we have improved by the change made in this department.

Every shop was busy and the confections were bought and divided with alacrity; everything had or seemed to have a joyous look.

There were another part of the amusements that were considered the cream thereof. The Penny Reels!! They took part in 3 different parts of the town, namely the Bucks Head, the Fintry Hall and the Assembly Rooms.

The Assembly Rooms business was the most refined, and was also the most lucrative. The Bucks Head buildings are now converted into a butchers shop, and where the Johnstonian of today shall dance no more, but the Fintry Hall was the chief delight; there was a homeliness about it. There was no gas, but in its stead there were 6 penny farthing mould candles, giving illuminating power to the proceedings.

The musicians were civil kind of men who had taken the hall on "Spec" and I acted as master of ceremonies and I acted as cashier, in addition to their musical vocation. They were not in full evening dress according to our present ideas, but dressed as an old soldier wished to be, as called to fight Waterloo over again – in his shirt sleeves.

In you went, selected your partners who were seated around the room, paid your penny then off you went wi mirth and glee; kings may be blessed &c.

Saturday evening came and though Forbes McKenzie had no whip in his hand then, our fathers had, and so we went home, our hearts and our purse both light.

But to give some sort of ventness to our anger at the fleetness of time, we in passing, thrust our hands through all the paper panes in Sandy Cardy's weavers shop.

I am &c.

A Johnstonian

Researched by Iain Reynolds