**Highland Memories (not this year)!**

I first went to the Highland as a Teenager – and that was neither today nor or yesterday (!) – in the days when it was ‘de rigueur’ for parents of kids in farming communities to take their offspring out of school for an educational a day (commonly known as a skive!) at the Show. With a father who was a shopkeeper (a toy shop at that), at first sight, my credentials to be called a ‘country boy’ might sound a little dubious – but dad did sell the most amazing range of the make of toys called ‘Britains’ – a company which specialised in model farm implements, farm yards and those wee, almost perfectly made models of farm animals, where even the difference between a milking cow and a bull was very tastefully accentuated!

Besides, I spent all my waking spare time working on an uncle’s farm. Jimmy’s farm was my life, beyond my immediate family and school, and I spent every spare moment I had at Innercraigie, near Madderty, by Crieff. There I received a real education, which would stand me in great stead in advising farming clients in a 30-year career as an accountant. I got to know about cattle and sheep and lambing (always at Christmas, for heaven’s sake!) and about yields for wheat, barley, and oats. There, in what would be a real breach of modern ‘elf n safety’ regulations, I learned to drive a tractor (an old Fordson Dexta –‘Jimmy’s wee Fordie’, without cab, safely bar and all the mod cons of the modern machines) and endured annually ‘picking my bit’ (it started as ‘a half bit’ ) at the tatties. I went with Jimmy and ‘Auntie’ Jenny to auction marts – usually sheep sales - at Perth (McDonald Fraser & Co mostly, but occasionally to Hay & Co), Killin, Dalmally and Oban (but interestingly, never to Stirling).

So maybe, just maybe, I can legitimately lay claim to my day off school for the Highland!

It’s good to reminisce, isn’t it?

Much to Jimmy’s chagrin, I then chose a career behind the desk rather than following in his footsteps at Innercraigie. University life and my early working days down in the dissolute city of Edinburgh, saw me rarely venture down Ingliston way. Like a traitor, I had deserted the cause - albeit temporarily!

But I was to make a Lazarus like return when, as a practising accountant (and before someone else says it, I practised until I got it right!!) - increasingly I seemed to inherit the farming clients in the practice – a turn of events which made me realise that if I was to have any real credibility in giving advice to these ‘unique’ characters, I would have to get my act together and learn more about them and their industry – so that I could talk the same language as they did.

And so, as part of my continuing professional education, I started to buy the Scottish Farmer and attend shows – local shows – shows in the area where my clients would show - and of course, the Highland.

I began to look forward once again to my annual pilgrimage to West Edinburgh for 4 days of ‘more skiving’ - making everything legitimate by trying to meet up with clients on the days they were there. But being honest, apart from a few hours in the middle of the day where client meet ups legitimised my expenses, I was free to roam – and roam I did. From first thing in the morning, where I spent hours around the sheep judging rings (my great love from my Innercraigie days) – and having great crack with folks I knew from the old market days - until the gates closed, this Highland thing got to me, like a powerful addiction, and I was like the proverbial pig in the proverbial you know what for these 4 days.

And of course, a late afternoon / early evening break for the umpteenth bacon, steak or venison burger of the day, and resting the weary legs ensconced in the grandstand, afforded me the opportunity to relax and watch these big horses and their ‘impressive trailers’ come into the ring. I vividly remember one evening sitting behind a couple of gents, both of whom had clearly imbibed one too many glasses of ‘the water of life’[probably on the CHS stand!], and a lively discussion was brewing - between the respective merits of things called ‘Clydesdales’ and other things called ‘Shires’. To me they all looked the same - but for fear of being lynched today, I should add – ‘I now know differently’!

Whatever they were, I concluded that most of them were of the Scottish variety called Clydesdales and the sight in the ring was always really impressive. Little did I ever think – never in my wildest dreams did I ever believe – that one-day fate would have me working for the Society of which most of them were a part.

I heard the names Skinner, Ramsay, City of Glasgow – and more - ring out over the tannoy and year after year, though I did not know them then, they became my unknown ‘Highland Show‘ friends – just like the faces of some of the stewards who seemed to turn up in the main ring every year.

Every year I listened for these ‘big horse’ names – I waited for them – and I loved to watch out for a lady called Ruth, who always looked so elegant and genteel – and who always got a resounding round of applause and cheer as she left the ring. And I ventured to wonder ‘could ‘my Highland’ friend called Ruth possibly … just possibly … be related to that chappie, also called Skinner, who drove the teams of ‘big’ horses?’

And that remained an unsolved mystery until 4 years ago when I met the iconic George, face to face, for the first time at the Heavy Horse Day at Collessie. Somehow George’s lovely Doric vernacular was quite unexpected!!

In little time at all, suddenly and somewhat sooner than I could ever have imagined, these, until now, anonymous ‘Highland’ friends became real people - folks whom I now count upon as being ‘real’ and not imaginary, friends.

Last week Kate Stephen responded to my Highland Show build up post by commenting that the Highland was ingrained into her DNA and I can, for many different reasons, empathise with that – as I suspect can all of you, in your own way.

This year the loss of the Highland is undoubtedly a blow but let’s not despair and I would urge you all to reminisce over all of your own experiences of your times at Ingliston – and may these happy memories keep you in good cheer – and raise your hopes that in 12 months’ time we will be able all do it all again.

I saw on Facebook on Saturday night that Benny Duncan is proposing to share with us some of his Highland Show memories and his photos in the week ahead and those on FB can look forward to that, as I certainly am.

One of our followers, Craig Twaddle, has also been reminiscing and the only horse photo I am sharing this week was sent to me by Craig. It was taken at the Highland in 1959 at Aberdeen. The first two geldings in the picture belonged to Craig’s grandfather, Lance Twaddle. No 721 is ‘Bob’ led by Dick Bell and No 726 is ‘Dick’ led by Craig’s own uncle Lance. The happy family memory here is that ‘Dick’ won his class and ‘Bob’ was very highly commended in another. Thank you, Craig, for sharing this memory with us.

I hope you will forgive my own personal indulgences in this week’s blog and next week, just as it would be after the Highland for real, it will be back to ‘auld claes and parritch’ and the normal routine of life will continue.

And so, to end, a photo of my favourite ‘Wee Fordie’ tractor -- ah the memories!!

Stay safe and well till then.

All the best.

Ian