

The Blue Bell Inn—A Century in Camelon

Claire Wilson Callender

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I am usually interested in researching people. Ancestors. And of course, the social fabric and historical events that defined the lives and times of those ancestors. But sometimes in genealogical research a building or a place seems to take on a life of its own. This is such a story—the Blue Bell inn in Camelon became the centre of my research into my colourful Cowie and Baird forebears, and inspired me to trace the history of the establishment and its innkeepers and publicans over more than a century, from humble beginnings in the 1840s until it became the Hop Inn in the late 1950s and was eventually demolished, along with much of Camelon Main Street, in the 1960s.

I was struggling to find out much about my genealogically elusive fourth great-grandparents, Alexander Cowie and Mary Baird, when I discovered that they were tavern keepers in Camelon, a village on the west side of Falkirk between the River Carron and the Forth and Clyde Canal. Camelon is bounded by the Dorrator estate to the north and the canal between Lock 9 and Lock 16 to the south, with the Falkirk-Glasgow Road running east to west through it.



Camelon in 1860 showing Locks 9 to 16 on the Forth and Clyde Canal. Map is OS 25-inch to the mile, 1st edition, 1855–1882 Stirlingshire XXX.3 (Falkirk). Survey date: 1860, Publication date: 1862. Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland.

In the first few decades of the 19th century the population of the village had grown rapidly, due to the establishment of nail manufacturers, distilleries and foundries, attracted by the reliable and swift transportation offered by the nearby canals.¹ In 1831, around the time this story begins, the population was just over 800.² By 1837, Pigot's Commercial Directory³ noted that Camelon's inhabitants, "in number about one thousand, are chiefly employed in the manufacture of nails".

In the period of industrialization following the construction of the canals (the section of the Forth and Clyde canal through Camelon was completed in the 1770s and the flight of locks linking it with the newer Union canal was completed in 1822)⁴ several inns and taverns were established in the village to provide refreshments and shelter to workers and travellers. On the 1860 map of Camelon shown above inns and taverns are marked as PH (public house). There are at least nine in the section of the main street shown. The Blue Bell inn, shown in the photo on the right, was located near the canal, between Lock 11 and Lock 12, and is mentioned by name and location in later valuation rolls, censuses and newspaper articles. By the early 20th century, the street address was 1 Main Street.



Detail from 1860 map of Camelon showing location of The Blue Bell Inn on Main Street, Camelon. Below is a photo of the inn around 1900. Falkirk Archives.

The New Statistical Account for Falkirk (1845)² was less than enthusiastic about the multitude of public houses in the parish that Camelon was a part of, stating: "Inns, Alehouses— Within the parish, there are 6 Inns and 110 other houses of public entertainment. So many houses of this description can scarcely be considered as favourable to the morals of the people."

Camelon, like many other Scottish towns at the time, had an active temperance movement. Various groups met from time to time to discuss how to promote "moderation" or total abstinence⁵ and discourage the working people of the village from spending their hard-earned wages on liquor. But the Blue Bell inn, like the many public houses and taverns in Scottish towns and villages in the mid-19th century, served not simply as a purveyor of alcoholic beverages, but played a central role in the village. The inn was a meeting place, a rest stop for travellers, a refuge for victims of crime, and a venue for life's important

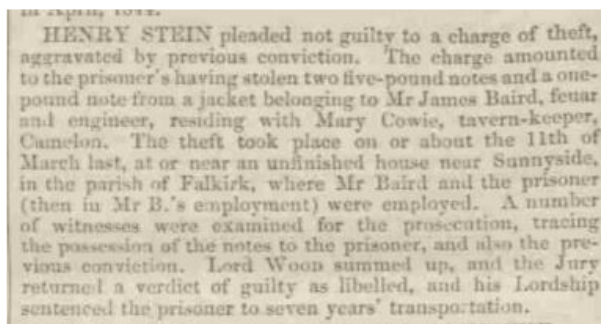
celebrations such as weddings and funerals.⁶ The newspapers of the time frequently reflected all those functions with reports of drownings in the canal, crimes in the village, weddings, meetings

of clubs etc. and helped to establish dates and relationships as the inn passed its various owners and publicans over the years.

Alexander Cowie and Mary Baird

It is difficult to determine exactly when the inn was built, but it was probably on land feued from John Baird⁷ Esq., who was a writer to the signet and wealthy owner of Camelon House⁸ and other lands in the area from 1826 until his death in 1853.⁹ Feu duties for the inn, recorded in some valuation rolls, were paid to his heirs for many years after his death.^{10,11,12} The first innkeepers of the Blue Bell were Alexander Cowie and Mary Baird. They were married in Falkirk parish in 1823¹³ and had at least four children between 1824 and 1831. John,¹⁴ James,¹⁵ Elizabeth¹⁶ and Mary¹⁷ all survived to adulthood. Alexander Cowie is listed as a vintner in Pigot & Co.'s New Commercial Directory of Scotland for 1825-6¹⁸ and again in 1837.¹⁹ His occupation is given as “innkeeper” on the death certificates of his children, although a specific inn is not mentioned. The 1841 Scotland census²⁰ lists Mary Cowie, publican, aged 40, living in Camelon with her four children. Alexander Cowie had probably died sometime between 1837 and 1841. With four children to support, Mary Cowie continued as innkeeper, as many widows of publicans chose to do. She is mentioned in a newspaper article in 1845 as innkeeper of “Cowie’s public house,” located near Locks 11 and 12 in Camelon.²¹ The earliest mention of the Blue Bell inn by name came in 1845 from a report of a village melodrama in which two local butchers were accused of stealing a dead cow from a field and hanging the tainted meat in the stable of the inn.²²

In April 1849, a brief report in the *Stirling Observer* described the theft of money belonging to James Baird, by Henry Stein.²³ James Baird was living in the Blue Bell tavern with Mary Cowie while he built a new house for his family. He was the son of John Baird and Elizabeth Logie, farmers at Sunnyside,²⁴ and the grandfather of John Logie Baird, inventor of television. Much has been written about John Logie Baird, and although some of the published information on his forebears is vague, it is well established that his grandfather was an engineer and part time farmer. James Baird took over Sunnybrae Farm in Camelon in 1825²⁵ and married Jane Simpson, the daughter of a Falkirk builder, in 1839.²⁶ James and Jane Baird lived in Glasgow until around 1848/9; their first four children were born there.²⁷ They later moved to Camelon where their fifth child was born in 1852.²⁸



Stirling Observer, 19 April 1849. britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk. Copyright British Library Board.

The relevant High Court documents pertaining to the theft,²⁹ including precognition, trial papers and minutes confirmed James Baird’s identity and revealed more detail about his connection to

Mary Baird Cowie and the Blue Bell inn. On 16 March 1849 James Baird gave a witness statement to the High Court:

I am a feuer and engineer and reside in or near Camelon in the parish of Falkirk and county of Stirling with Mary Cowie, tavern-keeper there. I have built or am in course of building a new dwelling house at or near Sunnyside near Camelon aforesaid to be occupied by myself. It is my own property and is called or is intended to be called Sunnybrae. The mason work is completed and the carpenter work is nearly so and I expect to take up my residence at the house in about a fortnight.

His identity is also confirmed by a statement from his wife, Jane Simpson, who testified:

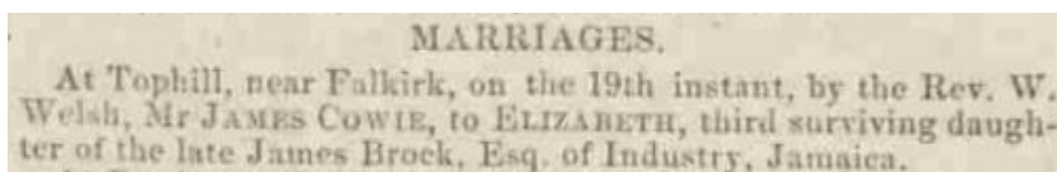
I am 36 years of age. Wife of James Baird an engineer and I reside with him in Abercromby Street of Calton in or near Glasgow. On the morning of Monday the 12th day of March current my husband was going to Falkirk and before he left I took from a drawer in a chest of drawers in the house two 5 pound notes and three one pound notes and gave them to him.

Although not mentioned specifically in the witness statements, it seems likely that Mary Baird Cowie was James Baird's sister. I have written about further evidence for this elsewhere.³⁰

After living with Mary Baird Cowie at the Blue Bell tavern for several weeks in 1848/49, James Baird finished building his house at Sunnybrae and by the 1851 census he was living there with his wife and children.³¹ The house, shown in the photo on the right is still standing today. The last child in the family, Robert Simpson Baird was born on 11 January 1852 and baptized in Falkirk parish on 3 February.³² Witnesses on baptism were Mr Fulton, a local landowner, and Mrs R. Neilson. Mrs Neilson was Mary Baird Cowie's daughter Mary, who married Robert Neilson in Camelon on 30 April 1850,^{33,34} another confirmation of a family connection.



James Baird's house, Sunnybrae. Falkirk Archives.



Falkirk Herald, 9 May 1850. britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk. Copyright British Library Board.

John Cowie

Mary Baird Cowie did not appear in any census after 1841 and so probably died between 1849 (when she was last mentioned in the newspaper) and early 1851. After her death, her eldest son John inherited the Blue Bell. John Cowie was born in 1827 and lived at the inn when he was young. By the age of 16 he was an apprentice attorney.¹⁹ He went on to establish Cowie & Cox, Writers in partnership with his colleague and friend Josiah Cox. They practiced law in Camelon from around 1848 until John Cowie was appointed Town Clerk of neighbouring Bo'ness in 1861.³⁵

By 1855 John Cowie was listed as the proprietor of the Blue Bell inn in the valuation roll³⁶ but he may not have lived in the inn himself—his sister Mary and her husband Robert Neilson were listed as innkeepers at the Blue Bell in the 1851³⁷ and 1861 censuses.³⁸ In addition to being a publican, Robert Neilson was also a cabinet maker and spirit dealer³⁶—it was common for innkeepers to have more than one profession in order to support a family.⁶ Mary Cowie Neilson probably took on many of the responsibilities of running the inn, as her mother had done before her. In an odd twist, in 1861, before he left Camelon for Bo'ness, John Cowie was living as a boarder with the Stein family³⁹ whose son Henry had stolen the money from James Baird.

MELANCHOLY ACCIDENT—DEATH OF MR JOHN COWIE.—An accident of a most distressing nature occurred near South Queensferry at an early hour on Friday morning, whereby Mr John Cowie, writer, Barrowatounness, lost his life. Mr Cowie, it seems, left Bo'ness in a gig on Thursday afternoon, in company with Mr Robert Baxter, sheriff-officer, to transact some legal business at Queensferry. After disposing of their business, it was agreed to take a drive as far as Cramond Bridge, on reaching which place they made up their minds to go as far as Edinburgh, which they accordingly did. Having spent a short time in Edinburgh, they proceeded on their journey home. It was now late in the evening, and exceedingly dark. After passing through Queensferry, Mr Baxter was thrown out of the gig in consequence of the jolting occasioned by the excessive roughness of the road. What happened to Mr Cowie afterwards until his body was found can only be conjectured, as he was not again seen in life. It is believed that he was also thrown out of the gig, receiving injuries about the head. Owing probably to the darkness of the night, and to the fact that the unfortunate gentleman was thrown into a deep cutting, Mr Baxter seems to have been unable to find any traces of Mr Cowie. His dead body was found by some navvies next morning, however, near Port Edgar. There was a cut on his head, and his chin was resting on his breast. The horse and gig were found in a turnip field in the morning, but no injury had been done to either. Mr Cowie was about 40 years of age, and, as many of our readers are aware, belonged to Falkirk, where he at one time carried on business as a legal practitioner. He was much esteemed for his many amiable qualities, and his melancholy end has called forth the deepest feelings of regret. The remains of the unfortunate gentleman will be interred to-day in the West U.P. Churchyard.

Falkirk Herald, 14 August 1866. britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk. Copyright British Library Board.

including several houses in Bo'ness⁴⁶ and the Blue Bell and land that he had inherited from his parents then passed out of the Cowie family.

Jessie Donaldson

At the time of John Cowie's death in 1866, his sister and her husband, Mary and Robert Neilson, were still the publicans at the Blue Bell inn. They remained until 1869 when they left for Cumbernauld to carry on the family tradition of tavern keeping at the Spur Inn.⁴⁷ By that time the inn was owned by John Cowie's fiancée, Jessie Donaldson. As a single woman, Jessie would have legally been entitled to own and administer the inn herself, but she seems to have passed it to her father, William Donaldson, a prominent builder in Bo'ness. In his will, dated 24 March 1871,⁴⁸ William Donaldson bequeathed the inn back to her:

In August 1866 John Cowie died at the age of 42 after falling down a railway cutting following an accident in his horse-drawn gig.^{40,41} According to Scots law at the time, heritable property could not be willed, but passed automatically to the oldest son. Since John was not married, the Blue Bell inn would normally have passed automatically to his brother James. However, the 1875/76 valuation roll lists the proprietor of the Blue Bell as Miss Jessie Donaldson, Bo'ness.⁴² One report of John Cowie's death mentioned that "...he was to have shortly been married to a lady most respectably connected in Bo'ness"⁴³ so it seemed that he had found a way to leave the inn to his betrothed. A search of the Register of Deeds in the National Records of Scotland revealed a Disposition and Settlement,⁴⁴ a legal document used to transfer heritable property. Originally dated 1859 the document specified that the Blue Bell was to pass to John's younger brother James, but restricted to a "liferent," which meant that James could not sell the property to cover his debts. In February 1866, only a few months before his death, John Cowie revoked his original instructions and left his "whole means and estate with power to her to make up titles thereto" to Jessie Donaldson.⁴⁵ All his assets,

PRESENTATION.—A number of the friends of Mr Robert Neilson, Blue Bell Hotel, Camelon, met in his hotel on the evening of Wednesday last, for the purpose of presenting him with a purse of sovereigns as a mark of their regard for him, as he is about to leave Camelon to occupy the Spur Hotel at Cumbernauld. Mr J. Beeby, Falkirk, officiated on the occasion, and in proposing "Health and prosperity to Mr Neilson," expressed regret at that gentleman's removal from this district. He spoke of his ability and taste as a tradesman—Mr Neilson having carried on business as a cabinetmaker in Falkirk for a considerable number of years. After wishing Mr Neilson every success in the new sphere of labour upon which he was about to enter, Mr Beeby concluded by presenting him with a purse and sovereigns. The toast was enthusiastically responded to. Mr Neilson acknowledged the gift in most suitable and feeling terms.

Falkirk Herald, 14 August 1866. britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk. Copyright British Library Board.

I direct my trustees to dispoise, convey to and in favour of the said Janet or Jessie Donaldson, in the event of her surviving me all and whole that licensed house and other premises together with a piece of land belonging thereto all situated at Camelon Bridge near Falkirk, as the same was at one time possessed by the late John Cowie, writer in Borrowstouness and now to me...

His will also specified that this and other bequests of property to Jessie and her two sisters were granted:

under the express exclusion of the *jus mariti* and right of administration of their present husbands, or of any husband which any of them may afterwards marry.

Prior to the Married Women's Property (Scotland) Act 1881,⁴⁹ the Scots law principle of *jus mariti* meant that a married woman's heritage passed automatically to her husband, along with rights of administration of property.⁵⁰ William Donaldson must have been concerned about Jessie's future after John Cowie died unexpectedly before they could be married. The re-bequeathing of the Blue Bell Inn was perhaps a method of legally ensuring that Jessie would always retain possession and control of the property, since John Cowie, himself a lawyer, had not expressly excluded the *jus mariti* or rights of administration in his will. In a codicil to his own will, dated 7 June 1872, William Donaldson stated that he now considered that the original provisions he had made for her were "scarcely sufficient for her seeing that she is unmarried and not otherwise provided for as the other members of my family are." The codicil directs that the multiple properties that he owned in Bo'ness be held in trust for four years after his death and all rents paid to Jessie Donaldson to supplement any income from the Blue Bell Inn.

In the 1875/76 valuation rolls Jessie is listed as proprietor of the Blue Bell inn,⁵¹ with Robert Webster as occupant and publican. She is also listed as occupant of a house in Bo'ness that was held in trust as per her father's will.⁵² On 8 November 1875, Jessie Donaldson married Robert Brechin,⁵³ a widower and father of six who was nine years her junior. Her occupation on the marriage certificate is given as "house proprietor," his as "wood merchant." Robert Brechin appears in the 1885¹¹ and 1895⁵⁴ valuation rolls as proprietor of the Blue Bell inn "in right of his wife," but it was Jessie Donaldson who continued to be listed as proprietrix for the purposes of the Certificate for the Sale of Excisable Liquors⁵⁵ and it was she who sold the inn and associated lands to Robert Webster's daughter Mary Laing Webster in 1904.⁵⁶

The Websters

Robert Webster took over as tenant innkeeper of the Blue Bell shortly after the departure of Robert and Mary Neilson in 1869. Formerly a miner, he is listed in the 1871 census as a spirit dealer living at Camelon Bridge with his wife Margaret and his two daughters Mary and Margaret.⁵⁷ Six more Webster children were born between 1871 and 1881.⁵⁸

During the 1870s and 1880s the Blue Bell Inn continued to be an important community centre for various village activities. Perhaps the most dramatic event in Robert Webster's tenure there came in 1873, when, on the 15th of December that year⁵⁹ severe gales swept through the region, causing damage and deaths in various places. In Camelon, an iron steam lighter filled with pig iron, making its way along the canal from Calder Iron Works to Grangemouth, stopped at Camelon Bridge to wait out the storm. Overnight, the gales upset the boat, which became swamped and partially stuck underwater. The captain, his mate and a 14-year-old boy were trapped for several hours. The next morning several villagers assisted with rescue efforts and the men were removed from the boat. The captain lost his life— the others were taken to Mr Webster's Blue Bell Inn where they were looked after until they recovered. A day that Robert Webster likely didn't forget!



*Blue Bell Inn entrance
c. 1900 Sign reads
'M L Webster, Spirits,
Porter and Ales.' Falkirk
Archives.*

Robert Webster was innkeeper of the Blue Bell until his death in 1885.⁶⁰ His wife Margaret took over,⁶¹ then after she died in December 1888,⁶² their daughter, Mary Laing Webster became publican, reigning over the inn for almost four decades until her death in 1928. It is her name above the door in the photo of the inn taken around 1900.

In October 1905, less than two years after purchasing the Blue Bell from owner Jessie Donaldson, Mary Laing Webster applied for permission to build new premises adjacent to the existing building. The application was approved provisionally and confirmed in April 1906, by which time building of the new inn was well underway⁶³ and a license had been applied for.⁶⁴

The newly extended inn is seen in the image from a postcard below, viewed from the other side of Camelon Bridge. The new building is the yellowish one just to the right of the bridge—the original single-storey inn was now used as a house. The photo dates to around 1909, only a few years after the new building was completed.



*Postcard from c. 1909. Camelton Bridge with new Blue Bell inn on the right.
Falkirk Archives.*

In September 1907, Mary Laing Webster appealed a valuation⁶⁵ of £80 that was proposed for the inn, arguing that it was a huge increase of the previously assessed value of £45,⁶⁶ and that the trade of the inn was less than at other nearby establishments (of which there were still several in the village). The committee agreed to £70, a valuation that remained unchanged for Mary Laing Webster's tenure at the Blue Bell and till at least 1940.^{67,68,69}

Mary Laing Webster never married and seemed to have been an astute and independent businesswoman. In addition to the Blue Bell inn and adjacent house at 1 Main Street, she owned a shop and store at 320 Main Street, and two houses at 322 and 324 Main Street, all of which she rented to tenants.⁷⁰ She was well-known in Camelton⁷¹ and was involved in many activities in the community. A keen bowler, in 1925 she became the first female president of Camelton Bowling club.⁷² She was the donor of the Webster Trophy, which was competed for annually by the bowling clubs around Falkirk. She was also an active member of the Order of the Eastern Star in Falkirk, possibly following in the Freemason traditions of her father before her.



Camelon Bowling Club in 1906. Mary Laing Webster became president in 1925/26 and is possibly pictured here. Falkirk Archives.

Mary Laing Webster died in 1928 at the age of 62 after collapsing suddenly in the street. Her obituary⁶⁶ describes her as “of a kind and liberal disposition,” noting that “she gave generously of means to help deserving objects. The extent of her benefactions were known to be great, but her charity was dispensed in a quiet and unobtrusive manner.” She was known as “as kindly and genial hostess”, and during her tenure the Blue Bell inn was “the headquarters of many sporting organizations and gatherings.”

After her death, her brother James Webster took over as publican of the Blue Bell⁷³ but after only 3 years, he sold up and in 1932 James Doak took over.⁷⁴

James Doak

James Doak was a much younger brother of John Doak, well known owner of a dance hall and dance school in Falkirk.⁷⁵ Before taking over the Blue Bell, he had been the manager of the Royal Hotel in Grangemouth.⁶⁹ In 1946, he also took over a licensed grocer in Falkirk High Street.⁷⁶ By that time he had been publican at the Blue Bell for 14 years, including the difficult years of rationing and uncertainty during World War 2. In granting his license, the police superintendent noted that James Doak was “a man of good character, and his premises had always been well conducted.” He later also ran a wine catering business that was popular for weddings and funerals.

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Falkirk Herald, 27 November 1954 (left) and 25 June 1955 (right). britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk. Copyright British Library Board.

A typical publican, James (Jimmy) Doak was active and well-connected in the community. In his 20s he had played football for Forth Rangers,⁷⁷ and over the years he was involved with the administration of various local football teams and leagues,^{78,79} including a stint as chairman of Falkirk football club in the 1960s.⁸⁰ Like Mary Laing Webster before him, he was a keen bowler. In 1944 he gifted a trophy named after him to be competed for by the several bowling clubs in the area.⁸¹ The James Doak Trophy is still competed for annually today.

Jimmy Doak was not the longest serving publican of the Blue Bell Inn, but he was the last. In the late 1950s, the inn changed hands again and was renamed the Hop Inn. Local legend has it that the original floor tiles from the Blue Bell were still visible in the entrance to the Hop Inn.⁸²

The Hop Inn is shown in the photo below, along with the original Blue Bell Inn building now whitewashed and named JessMar cottage after James Doak's daughters Jessie (Janet) and Margaret.



Original Blue Bell Inn, by then a house named Jessmar Cottage, with 2-storey expansion, laterally known as the Hop Inn. Falkirk Archives.

Both buildings were demolished in the 1960s as part of the redevelopment of Camelon Main Street. It was the end of an era—the Blue Bell Inn had sustained for more than a century, providing community support, lodging, refuge and refreshments to the changing population of Camelon and surrounds. To the canal boatmen, nailers and foundry workers of the early days, to the bowlers, footballers and revellers of the mid-20th century, and to all those who went between, it was a well-loved Camelon institution.

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