Forgotten Lives of
Aberdour

Hugh Coventry Esq.
1758-1845

A Gentleman of Weight & Property

A short talk tracing the life of Hugh Coventry Esq.; Captain of the Aberdour Volunteers, Factor to the Earl of Morton, Farmer and Elder of the Aberdour Kirk Session.



Hugh Coventry Esq.

1758-1845

A talk by Steven Blench

At the Aberdour Residents Association AGM on Monday 19th February 2024.

And at the Aberdour Cultural Association on Monday 27th January 2025.

Images and notes taken from his Power Point Presentation.



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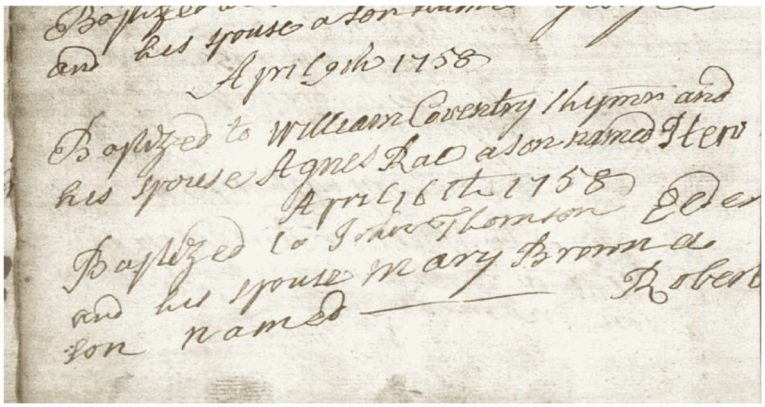
When it comes to the history of Aberdour, what interests me most is how the community evolved and development in the late 18th & early 19th century.

Tracing the tangled web of relationships that held the community together. Relationships between families, neighbours, businesses as well as religious and civil authorities.

There is no shortage of accessible historical sources for Aberdour during this period and it is often possible to gather together a surprising amount of information about the lives of former residents in the village.

Anyone who delves into these historical records will quickly encounter references to Hugh Coventry – in fact he is almost impossible to avoid.

As we'll see this evening, he was involved in so many aspects of day-to-day village life… and that is what makes him a really great starting point for beginning to understand what life was like in Aberdour during the early 19th century



Slide 2

Hugh was born in Aberdour and baptized in St Fillan's, on 16th April 1758. This is how his baptism was recorded in the Parish Register.

His parents were Agnes Rae and William Coventry - a shipmaster. The couple had been married a little over a year when Hugh was born.

Hugh's father, William is a slightly enigmatic character, he doesn't appear to have been born in Aberdour and it is possible that he originated from Pittenweem or perhaps Cupar were you find clusters of families with the same surname at the period – but we can't be sure.

Agnes Rae on the other hand came from a family with deep roots in the village stretching back at least as far as the mid-17th century.



Slide 3

At the time of Hugh's birth in 1758 Easter Aberdour would have looked something like this.

This is a little detail from a larger plan drawn up for the Earl of Morton which is believed to have been created in about 1750.

As you can see the main street of Easter Aberdour almost appears to be a cull-de-sac at its western end.

The route of the current main road linking the Villages of Easter and Wester Aberdour wasn't formed until the end of the 18th century.

At this period the west end of main street split into two narrow roadways - one heading up toward Hillside and the other bypassing the castle toward what is now Aberdour House.

However, perhaps more interestingly the plan also shows that Aberdour was still employing the agricultural system that had been in use since the medieval period – run rigs

With relatively small strips of agricultural land being cultivated by individual families. If we look at Kirk Shots for instants the first is

d. David Robertson's

a. James Robertson

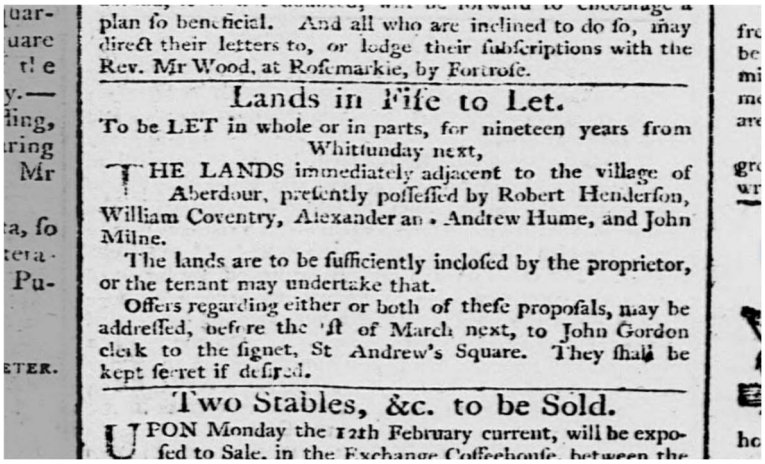
c. Robert Kenell

b. William Anderson

e. John Wardlaw

This is the landscape that Hugh would have grown up with and known intimately.

Although the Coventry family don't appear listed on this particular plan – we do know that his father William cultivated land within this system


plan ſo beneficial. And all who are inclined to do ſo, may direct their letters to, or lodge their ſubſcriptions with the Rev. Mr Wood, at Roſemarkie, by Fortroſe.

Lands in Fife to Let.

To be LET in whole or in parts, for nineteen years from Whitſunday next,

THE LANDS immediately adjacent to the village of Aberdour, preſently poſſeſſed by Robert Henderſon, William Coventry, Alexander an . Andrew Hume, and John Milne.

The lands are to be ſufficiently incloſed by the proprietor, or the tenant may undertake that.

Offers regarding either or both of theſe propoſals, may be addreſſed, before the 'ſt of March next, to John Gordon clerk to the ſignet, St Andrew's Square. They ſhall be kept ſecret if deſired.

Two Stables, &c. to be Sold.

UPON Monday the 12th February current, will be expoſed to Sale, in the Exchange Coffeehouſe, between the

Slide 4

The evidence comes in the form of an advert in the Caledonian Mercury Saturday 10th February 1787

The use of the word 'inclose' within the advert is a hint as to what was happening here.

The process of enclosure (which had been taking place across Scotland since the middle of the 18th century) saw the previous system of farming in Aberdour – those narrow strips we saw at Kirk Shots rented to individual families – replaced by much larger, well defined field systems enclosed with fences or dykes.



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This plan of Kirk Shots dates from 1788 – the year after that advert had appeared in the Caledonian Mercury.

Hugh Coventry would have been 30 years old at this point.

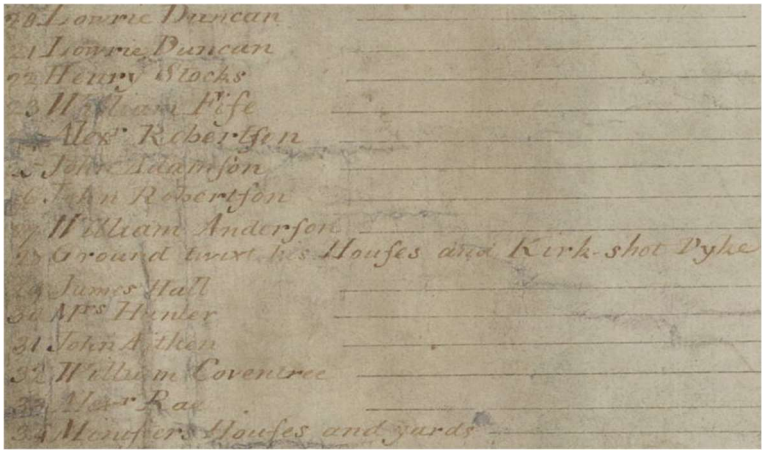
You can see here that Kirk Shots is now a single unit of land and would have been rented to a single tenant farmer.

It would have been an enormous change for the villagers of Aberdour to come to terms. Many of whom would have lost out. If the previous advert is anything to go by Hugh's father, William Coventry was probably one of them.



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However, this particular plan is also useful in that it allows us to identify property owned Hugh's father William Coventry. The properties are all numbered and the numbers correspond to a key on the plan



Slide 7

and number 32 – near the entrance to the castle - is listed as being in the possession of William Coventry.

Interestingly number 33 (which was blocked out in black at a later date) belongs to Alexander Rae – who is very likely to have been a relative of Hugh's mother Agnes Rae.



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These properties have long since been demolished however their former positions correspond roughly with 4 or 10 Main Street today.



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If we have a reasonable idea of where Hugh and his parents may have lived in the latter part of the 18th century it is a bit harder to shed light on his early life and career.

When Hugh's obituary appeared in a local newspaper in 1845 simply recorded that he was born, raised and educated in Aberdour before moving away to learn his business.

Fortunately, there is a document in the national Library of Scotland that offers a small clue as to where he may have moved to and what he might have been doing there



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It reveals that by 1787 Hugh was the Factor of the Pitfirrane Estate - now the home of the Dunfermline Golf Club. Here it is depicted in a plan from 1764.

As the Estate factor Hugh Coventry would have been responsible for the day-to-day business of managing the estate – collecting rents from tenants, monitoring crop yields, overseeing the feuing of land and ensuring everything ran smoothly.

It's probably worth underlining the point that in the very same time the Earl of Morton was busy enclosing a modernising his Aberdour Estate. Hugh was gaining experience managing an estate that appears to have already undergone that process.



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Hugh's employer at this time would have been Sir John Halkett. Pictured with here with his wife and rather enormous family.

Sir John died in 1793.

That same year Hugh is first recorded as being working for George Douglas 16th Earl of Morton as his Estate Factor at Aberdour.





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So this is the 16th Earl alongside Robert Beatson of Kilrie –

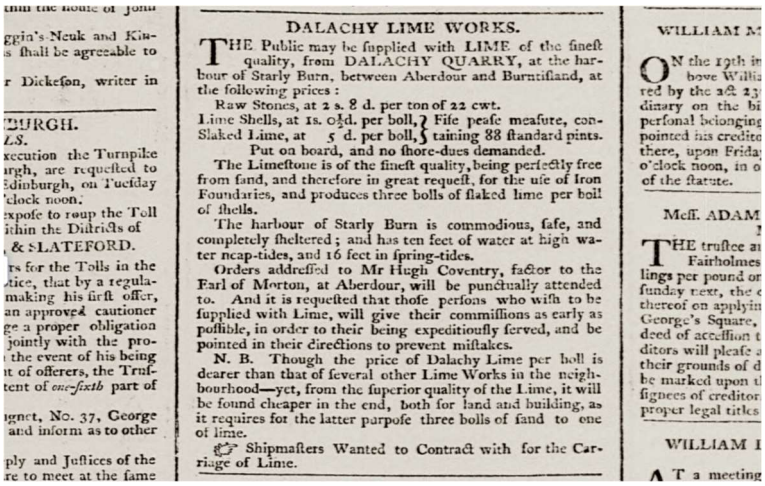
Prior to the appointment of Hugh Coventry as the Factor of the Earl's Aberdour Estate had been run by a factor called John Thomson.

However, Thomson doesn't appear very much in the Morton Estate papers and it seems that the Earl relied quite heavily on the advice and guidance of Robert Beatson of Kilrie when it came to the management of his estate.

Beatson was actually the Factor of Sir John Henderson of Fordell the estate neighbouring Hugh's former employer Sir John Halkett – it is very likely that Beatson knew Coventry and perhaps even recommended for the position as the Earl of Morton's Factor.

Whatever the circumstances of his appointment Earl of Morton's enthusiasm for improving his Estate and increasing revenues gave rise to quite diverse enterprises which would have kept Hugh extremely busy!

I have gathered together a few newspaper clippings to help give you some sense of what Hugh had to contend with.



DALACHY LIME WORKS.

THE Public may be ſupplied with LIME of the fineſt quality, from DALACHY QUARRY, at the harbour of Starly Burn, between Aberdour and Burntiſland, at the following prices:

Raw Stones, at 2 s. 2 d. per ton of 22 cwt.
Lime Shells, at 1s. 0½d. per boll, } Fife peaſe meaſure, con-
Slaked Lime, at 5 d. per boll, } taining 88 ſtandard pints.
Put on board, and no ſhore-dues demanded.

The Limeſtone is of the fineſt quality, being perfectly free from ſand, and therefore in great requeſt, for the uſe of Iron Foundaries, and produces three bolls of ſlaked lime per boll of ſhells.

The harbour of Starly Burn is commodious, ſafe, and completely ſheltered; and has ten feet of water at high water neap-tides, and 16 feet in ſpring-tides.

Orders addreſſed to Mr Hugh Coventry, factor to the Earl of Morton, at Aberdour, will be punctually attended to. And it is requeſted that thoſe perſons who wiſh to be ſupplied with Lime, will give their commiſſions as early as poſſible, in order to their being expeditiouſly ſerved, and be pointed in their directions to prevent miſtakes.

N. B. Though the price of Dalachy Lime per boll is dearer than that of ſeveral other Lime Works in the neighbourhood—yet, from the ſuperior quality of the Lime, it will be found cheaper in the end, both for land and building, as it requires for the latter purpoſe three bolls of ſand to one of lime.

☞ Shipmaſters Wanted to Contract with for the Carriage of Lime.

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Caledonian Mercury - Saturday 20 April 1793

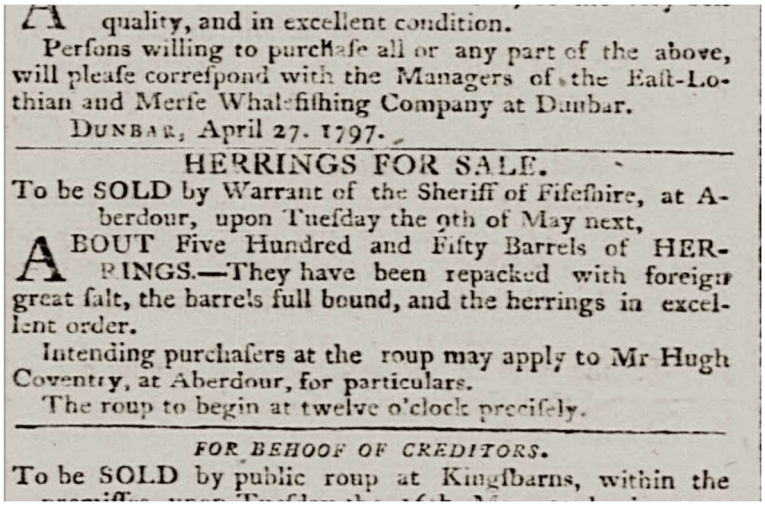
One significant and relatively new venture Hugh had to manage was the Dalachy Lime Works. The Earl had constructed kilns for burning locally mined limestone and had started shipping both raw and burnt lime through the harbour at Starleyburn.

The lime was used as an agricultural fertiliser as well as a construction material but also found a use in iron works.

As the advert makes clear orders should be addressed Hugh Coventry - the earls Factor and they will be promptly dealt with.

This advertisement dates from 1793

A very similar advert was placed a couple of years earlier in 1791 - but it was Mr Beatson who was then responsible for taking the orders.



quality, and in excellent condition.

Perſons willing to purchaſe all or any part of the above, will pleaſe correſpond with the Managers of the Eaſt-Lothian and Merſe Whale-fiſhing Company at Dunbar.

DUNBAR, April 27. 1797.

HERRINGS FOR SALE.

To be SOLD by Warrant of the Sheriff of Fifeſhire, at Aberdour, upon Tueſday the 9th of May next,

ABOUT Five Hundred and Fifty Barrels of HERRINGS.—They have been repacked with foreign great ſalt, the barrels full bound, and the herrings in excellent order.

Intending purchaſers at the roup may apply to Mr Hugh Coventry, at Aberdour, for particulars.

The roup to begin at twelve o'clock preciſely.

FOR BEHOOF OF CREDITORS.

To be SOLD by public roup at Kingſbarns, within the

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Caledonian Mercury - Thursday 04 May 1797

If Hugh wasn't managing lime sales on the Earl's behalf...then he might be selling herring.

In this advert from 1797 we find Hugh organising the sale of five hundred and fifty barrels of herring all in excellent order and repacked with best quality foreign great salt.

If you're anything like me, you'll find 550 barrels of herring quite hard to imagine...

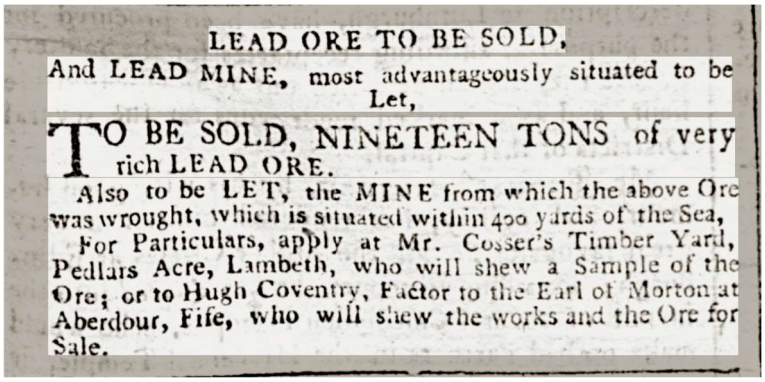


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However, this image helped …This is the Herring station at Lerwick in about 1880 so a little under 100 years later.

But to give you some indication of the quantities we are talking about …. there are about 500 – 600 barrels of herring within this block.

Aberdour harbour must have been rather packed!



LEAD ORE TO BE SOLD,

And LEAD MINE, most advantageously situated to be Let,

TO BE SOLD, NINETEEN TONS of very rich LEAD ORE.

Also to be LET, the MINE from which the above Ore was wrought, which is situated within 400 yards of the Sea, For Particulars, apply at Mr. Cosser's Timber Yard, Pedlars Acre, Lambeth, who will shew a Sample of the Ore; or to Hugh Coventry, Factor to the Earl of Morton at Aberdour, Fife, who will shew the works and the Ore for Sale.

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In yet another slightly later advert from 1804 we find Hugh managing the letting of a lead mine in Aberdour along with the sale of 19 tonnes of lead ore.

This is a fascinating reference if anyone is looking for a research project – lead had been discovered on the Morton's Aberdour estate as early as 1758 (under the 14th Earl of Morton)

However, Aberdour's lead mine which was situated just 400 yards from the sea – has been almost completely forgotten.

It isn't referenced in any publication on Scottish lead mines and its location currently remains a mystery.



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The closest documented lead mine in this area was at Castleland Hill…just outside Inverkeithing and Rosyth.

It seems to have been accidentally discovered about 1750 and was worked soon afterwards. About 50 tons of ore are said to have been raised, but at a loss, and the mine was soon abandoned.

The vein was said to run north-east, and to be partly in basalt and partly in sandstone. An analysis of the ore by performed by Rev. Robertson claimed it was about 84.63 per cent of lead and little or no silver – perhaps the Aberdour mine exploited the same seam?

The Castleland Hill lead works were a financial failure and it seems unlikely that Hugh Coventry was able to find a tenant for the Aberdour lead works. As there appears to be no further mention of them. Perhaps those 19 tonnes of lead ore was all that it produced.



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However, if you live in a house 400 yards from the sea and ever dig up something that looks like this…you may just have struck lead!

This lead ore sample is from Leadhillls north of Dumfries. These particular lead ore deposits were on the land James, 3rd Earl of Hopetoun and were extensively mined. But at some cost to the local people.

William Gilpin, a visitor to Leadhills works in the 18th century observed “an infirm frame, and squalid look in most of the inhabitants”, due to their high levels of exposure to lead.

However, from the Earl of Hopetoun’s perspective they were a great success.

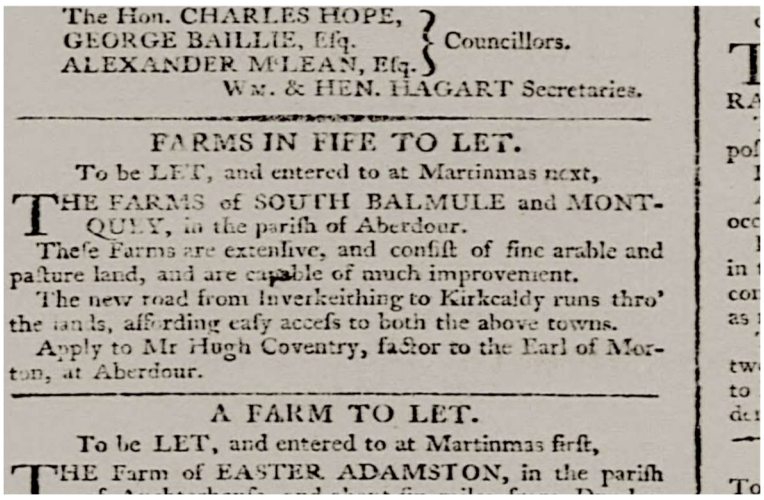


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In 1786, the earl of Hopetoun commissioned a set of paintings from the Scottish artist David Allan illustrating the mining operations at Leadhills.

And I think you can imagine very similar scenes in Aberdour…if only for a very brief period.

It was probably a blessing that Aberdour's lead mine didn't take off.



The Hon. CHARLES HOPE,
GEORGE BAILLIE, Efq.
ALEXANDER M'LEAN, Efq. } Councillors.
WM. & HEN. HAGART Secretaries.

FARMS IN FIFE TO LET.

To be LET, and entered to at Martinmas next,

THE FARMS of SOUTH BALMULE and MONTQUEY, in the parish of Aberdour.

These Farms are extenlive, and consist of fine arable and pasture land, and are capable of much improvement.

The new road from Inverkeithing to Kirkcaldy runs thro' the lands, affording eafy access to both the above towns.

Apply to Mr Hugh Coventry, factor to the Earl of Morton, at Aberdour.

A FARM TO LET.

To be LET, and entered to at Martinmas first,

THE Farm of EASTER ADAMSTON, in the parish

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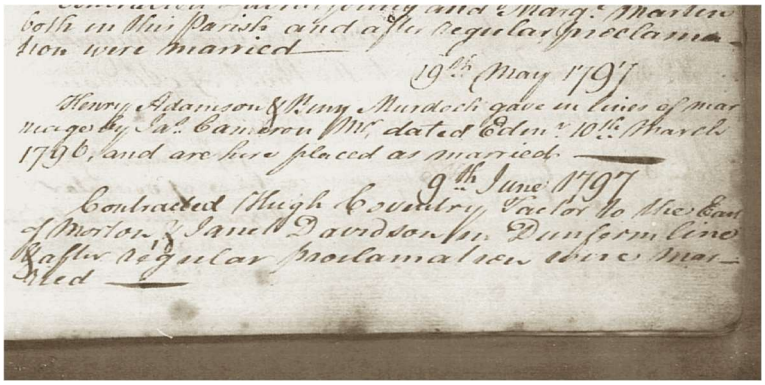
Caledonian Mercury - Thursday 01 August 1793

In addition to managing these commercial enterprises Hugh also dealt with the Earl of Morton’s tenant farmers on his newly enclosed estate…. collecting rents and as indicated by this advert showing new prospective tenants vacant farms.

In this particular instance South Balmule and Montquey.

A little over a decade later he would also be heavily involved in the fueing of residential building plots during a period when the 16th Earl attempted to establish the so-called Aberdour New Town – in Seaside Place and Manse Street.

Which we will touch upon a little later on.



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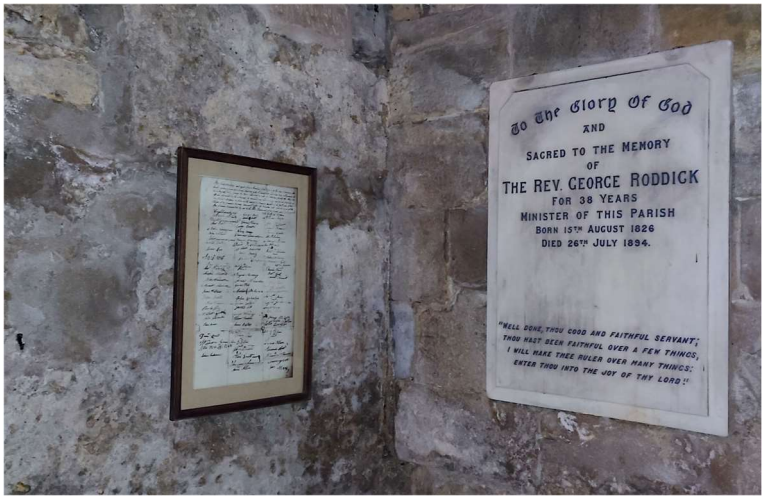
In 1797, with his career seemingly going from strength-to-strength and during an incredibly busy period of his life Hugh married Janet Davidson in Dunfermline

This is how their marriage is recorded in the parish register.

Within a year the couple had their first son – named William after Hugh's father. During the following years Hugh and Janet went on to have another five children: Hugh, Elizabeth, David, Agnes, and Alexander.

Many of them led very interesting lives in their own but we are just going to skip over them here.

As the 18th century drew to a close, you would think Hugh had more than enough on his plate - with a hectic job, new wife and young family but apparently not…

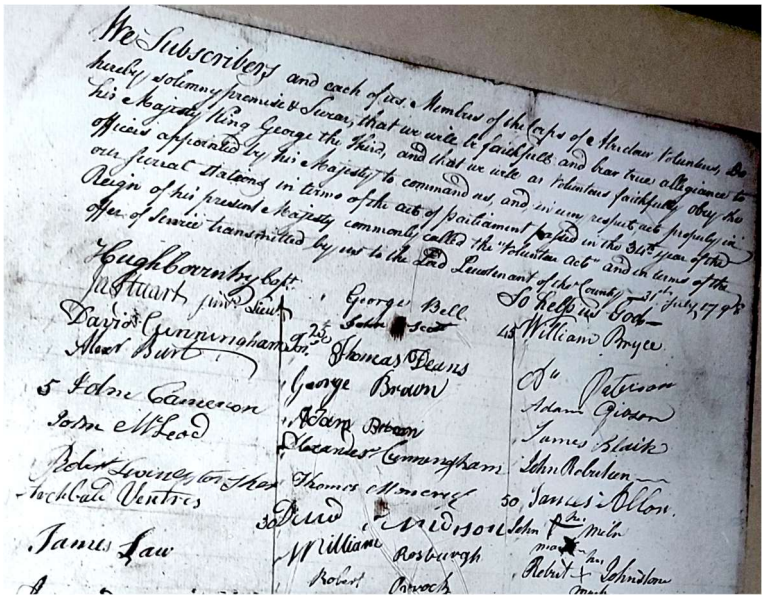


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The same year as William, his first son was born, Hugh took on something entirely new…

If you venture into St. Fillan's Kirk, just near the entrance, next to the memorial to Rev George Roddick, you will find a framed photograph of a document which was gifted to St. Fillan's by Hugh Coventry's grand children in the late 1920s.

It is a copy of the oath of allegiance taken by the Corps of Aberdour Volunteers which Hugh Coventry raised 1798. The oath appears at the top of the document and is followed by the signatures and marks of over seventy men who joined the volunteers.



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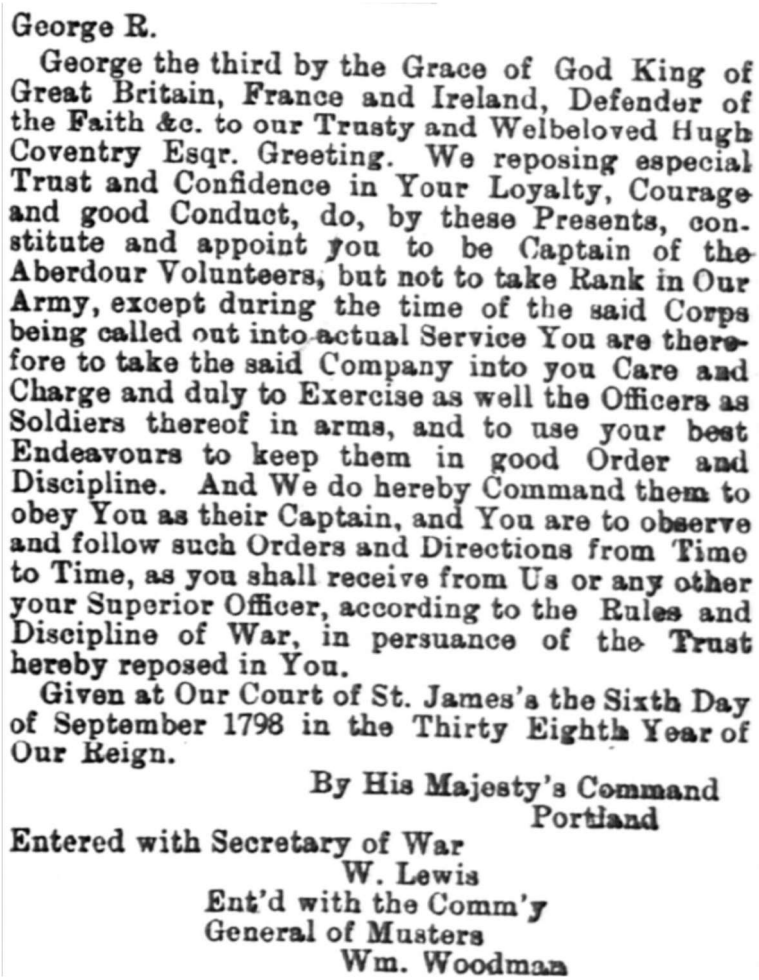
I will just read out the oath before explaining a little more about the volunteer corps and Hugh's role in establishing it.

We subscribers and each of us Members of the Corps of Aberdour Volunteers do hereby solemnly promise and swear that we will be faithful and bear true allegiance to his Majesty King George the third, and that we will as volunteers faithfully obey the officers appointed by his Majesty to command us, and in any respect act properly in our several stations in terms of the act of parliament passed in the 34th year of the reign of his present majesty commonly called the Volunteers Act and in terms of the offer of service transmitted by us to the Lieutenant of the County 31st July 1798.

So help us God

The first signature on the list is Hugh Coventry as Captain

What this document doesn't make clear is that it was actually Hugh who raised the volunteers – However an official charter which was still in the possession of the Coventry family in 1900 clarifies his role.



George R.

George the third by the Grace of God King of Great Britain, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith &c. to our Trusty and Welbeloved Hugh Coventry Esqr. Greeting. We reposing especial Trust and Confidence in Your Loyalty, Courage and good Conduct, do, by these Presents, constitute and appoint you to be Captain of the Aberdour Volunteers, but not to take Rank in Our Army, except during the time of the said Corps being called out into actual Service You are therefore to take the said Company into you Care and Charge and duly to Exercise as well the Officers as Soldiers thereof in arms, and to use your best Endeavours to keep them in good Order and Discipline. And We do hereby Command them to obey You as their Captain, and You are to observe and follow such Orders and Directions from Time to Time, as you shall receive from Us or any other your Superior Officer, according to the Rules and Discipline of War, in persuance of the Trust hereby reposed in You.

Given at Our Court of St. James's the Sixth Day of September 1798 in the Thirty Eighth Year of Our Reign.

By His Majesty's Command
Portland

Entered with Secretary of War
W. Lewis
Ent'd with the Comm'y
General of Musters
Wm. Woodman

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This is transcript of that charter.

We needn't go through it all, but the first part is worth reading.

George the third by the Grace of God King of Great Britain, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith &co. to our Trusty and Welbeloved Hugh Coventry Esqr. Greeting. We reposing especial Trust and Confidence in Your Loyalty, Courage and good Conduct, do, by these Presents, constitute and appoint you to be Captain of the Aberdour Volunteers, but not to take Rank in our Army, except during the time of the said Corps being called out in actual service....

So, what is all this about?

The volunteer act referred to in both documents' dates from March 1794. When the Home secretary of the time formally invited "Gentlemen or weight or property" to contribute to the defence of the Nation by raising civilian volunteer forces with local communities.

Hugh Coventry clearly considered himself to be such a gentleman.

The motivation behind raising these Volunteer forces was really National anxiety. Britain had been at war with the forces of Revolutionary France since 1792. And there was growing concern over the possibility that the forces of the first French Republic might mount an invasion. The Volunteer Corps were raised to provide not only an internal defence, should that happen, but also provide some security against the possibility of internal political or social unrest.

The Volunteer Act of 1794 had quite an impact....by 1800 over 380,000 men had enrolled in local volunteer corps just like the one raised by Hugh Coventry in Aberdour.



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Volunteer Corps were established throughout Scotland. Edinburgh was quick off the make and by 1797 a total of 2000 men in the city had joined either infantry or cavalry corps.

This print depicts the Royal Edinburgh Volunteers and dates for 1802 - the text at the bottom of the image claims that by their example more than thirty thousand men we inspired to arm themselves across Scotland.

They certainly look rather gallant and professional and that is very much how they would have liked to have been portrayed and remembered.

However, from the very moment of their inception volunteer corps across Britain were a popular target for ridicule and satire. Rather than gallant professionalism they were widely portrayed as either disorganised, inept or as preening narcissists keen to through their weight about.



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This print is quite typical. It dates from 1794 and depicts the Volunteer Corps of St. Georges Square, London. They are rather an interesting group with torn and tattered uniforms – the text at the bottom reads....

St. George's Volunteers...Charging down Bond Street after clearing the Ring in Hyde Park & storming the dunghill at Marybone.

Corps across the British isle found themselves the subject of similar satirical attacks. This next one is one of my favourites:



Slide 27

It depicts the Essex Volunteer Cavalry dressed in green retreating from the Revolutionary French troops on the backs of calves.

The caption reads Essex Calve lry for internal defence Oh : Heaven protect the Common Veal.

All rather ridiculous



Slide 28

There is one caricature sketch of Scottish volunteers held in the National Galleries of Scotland. What is interesting here is that the volunteers aren't wearing matching uniforms as in the previous images. In this instance the only unifying part of their dress is a cartridge belt pouch with a GR cipher for George III.

And this is an important point – the volunteer corps were responsible for their own uniforms and there was a great deal of variation in the quality and make of uniforms depending on the wealth of the locality in which they were raised.

Although we don't know much about the uniform of Hugh Coventry's Corps – some evidence does survive.



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This brass button is from the uniform of one of the members of the Aberdour Volunteer Corps. It was in the possession of Harry Liston who died in 1991, and the photo was kindly provided by John Burrell.

The use of a crowned thistle is a bit unimaginative when compared to some other buttons from Scottish volunteer corps uniforms. It isn't the only surviving button from the Aberdour Volunteer corps there are two others...



Figure 3. Two buttons of the Aberdour Volunteers. The example on the left is reversed to show the restrike seam. Found near Aberdour. (© Crown Office)

Slide 30

These two rather corroded examples were found by a metal detectorist near the village and handed in to the NMS treasure trove unit for assessment – they interpreted this line on the back of the button as a re-strike seam.

The button appears to have been a mass-produced off the shelf brass button which was customised by being held in a vice and struck with a specially produced die to impress the insignia.

The curators at the NMS speculated that this was possibly done by a local blacksmith.

Which is quite a nice thought.



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Other objects associated with Hugh Coventry and the corps of Aberdour Volunteers include a silk standard bearing the corps motto – which survived in Aberdour until at least 1870.

We don't know exactly what it looked like however the volunteer's motto was recorded.

The motto, in latin, was taken from Vigil's epic poem Aeneid. It translates as .... presumably victory or death.

This silk standard was created by Lady Anne Stuart, the sister of the Earl of Moray and presented to Hugh Coventry when the Aberdour Volunteers were formed – there are newspaper reports of it being unfurled on special occasions into the 1830s – however by that time the corps itself had long been disbanded.



Slide 32

Two other objects associated with Hugh Coventry and his Volunteers surfaced for sale at Bonhams auction house in 2007. These silver wine goblets bear the inscription....

'Presented as a mark of respect and of their grateful sense of his unwearied assiduity and attention, by the non-commissioned officers and privates of The Aberdour Volunteers to Hugh Coventry Esq. Captain of The Corps, April 1802'

The date of April 1802 is significant. It probably marks the disbanding of the Aberdour Volunteers. Many volunteer corps, across Britain, also disbanded around this date. In the previous month, March 1802, Britain signed a treaty with the French Republic effectively ending the war.

They weren't to know that only a year later war would reignite with the French- this time led by Napoleon Bonaparte.



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Before we move on to other aspects of Hugh's life, I just wanted to touch upon the actual makeup of the men who served under him.

If you look at the facsimile in St Fillan's it is easy to dismiss it as just a list of names. You don't really get a sense of the men themselves.

I thought I would pick on just one of Hugh Coventry's men… private Gavin White.

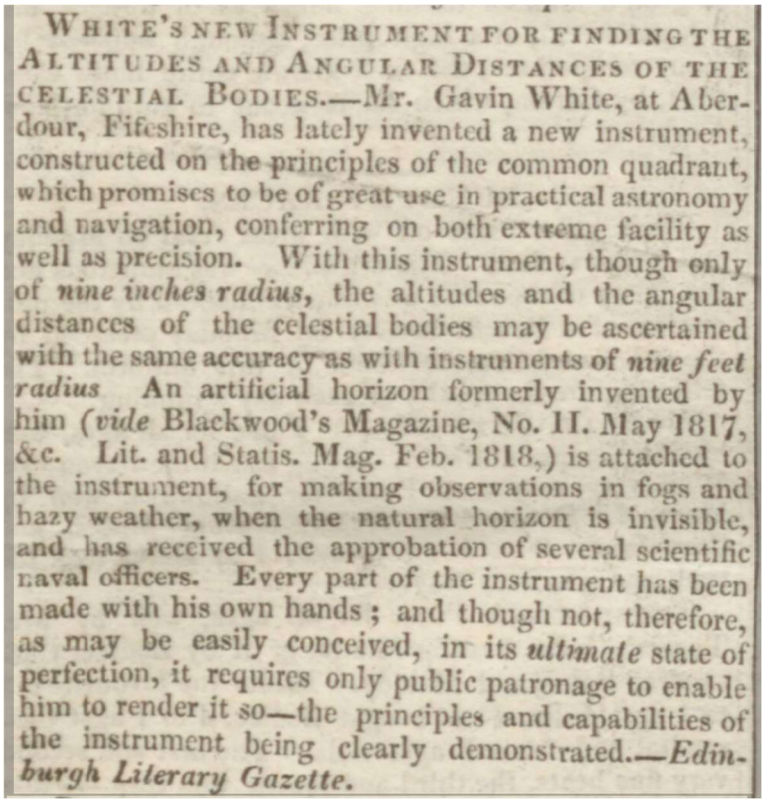
Gavin out lived all the other members of the Corp of Aberdour Volunteers. He died in 1866 at the age of 85 so he would ha been seventeen when he joined the Aberdour volunteers

He worked as a shoemaker in Aberdour but led a far more interesting life than you might imagine.

For instants. on completing his shoemaking apprenticeship, he along with another young shoemaker (perhaps his elder brother John White) produced a stock of shoes and carrying them in a bag set off for Greenock. Selling their stock along the way the pair managed to pay for passage from Greenock to America.

Once in America, they didn't like the 'new country' and worked their passage back to Scotland.

Back in Aberdour Gavin developed a fascination with telescopes and microscopes and would clean and repair clocks and watches in the village. This interest in all things mechanical culminated in him inventing a device for help ships navigate in foggy weather…this newspaper clipping from 1829 describes some of his achievements



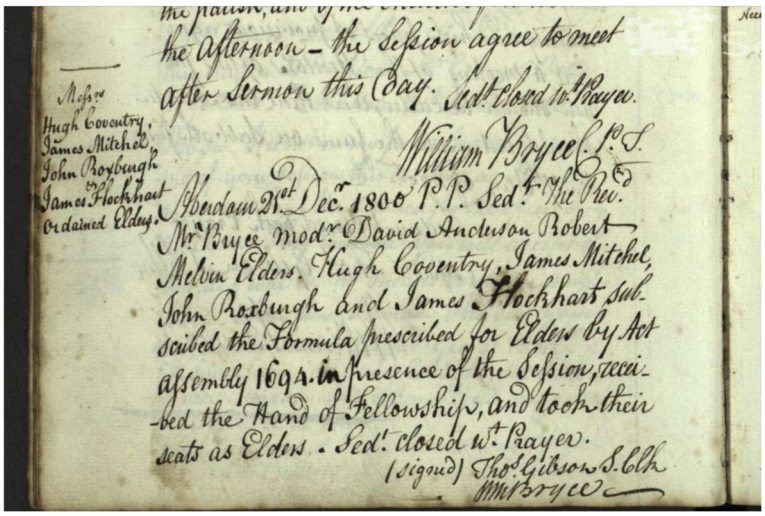
WHITE'S NEW INSTRUMENT FOR FINDING THE ALTITUDES AND ANGULAR DISTANCES OF THE CELESTIAL BODIES.—Mr. Gavin White, at Aberdour, Fifeshire, has lately invented a new instrument, constructed on the principles of the common quadrant, which promises to be of great use in practical astronomy and navigation, conferring on both extreme facility as well as precision. With this instrument, though only of *nine inches radius*, the altitudes and the angular distances of the celestial bodies may be ascertained with the same accuracy as with instruments of *nine feet radius* An artificial horizon formerly invented by him (*vide* Blackwood's Magazine, No. II. May 1817, &c. Lit. and Statis. Mag. Feb. 1818,) is attached to the instrument, for making observations in fogs and hazy weather, when the natural horizon is invisible, and has received the approbation of several scientific naval officers. Every part of the instrument has been made with his own hands; and though not, therefore, as may be easily conceived, in its *ultimate* state of perfection, it requires only public patronage to enable him to render it so—the principles and capabilities of the instrument being clearly demonstrated.—*Edinburgh Literary Gazette.*

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Unfortunately, before he could bring his device to market another inventor independently patented a similar device and his opportunity was lost.

Nevertheless, this shoemaker from Aberdour had adventures and skills that I for one wouldn't have expected. -and I'm sure the same will be true for others on this list.

With the disbanding of the Volunteers in 1802 Hugh Coventry's busy life might have slowed down a little – but that wasn't the case he had already taken further responsibilities within the village.



the afternoon – the Session agree to meet after Sermon this Day. Sed.t closed w.t Prayer.

William Bryce C.P.S.

Mess.rs Hugh Coventry, James Mitchel, John Roxburgh & James Flockhart Ordained Elders.

Aberdour 21.st Dec.r 1800 P.P. Sed.t Mr Rev.d Mr Bryce mod.r David Anderson Robert Melvin Elders. Hugh Coventry, James Mitchel, John Roxburgh and James Flockhart subscribed the Formula prescribed for Elders by Act assembly 1694. in Presence of the Session, received the Hand of Fellowship, and took their seats as Elders. Sed.t closed w.t Prayer.

(signed) Thos.t Gibson S.Clk

Wm Bryce

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Hugh was ordained as an Elder of the Aberdour Kirk Session on the 21st of December 1800 – a position he would continue to occupy for the next 43 years. As far as I know he might still be the longest serving Elder the parish has had.

This is the entry in the Kirk Session minutes recording his ordination along with three other parishioners who became Elders on the same day: James Mitchel, John Roxburgh and James Flockhart.

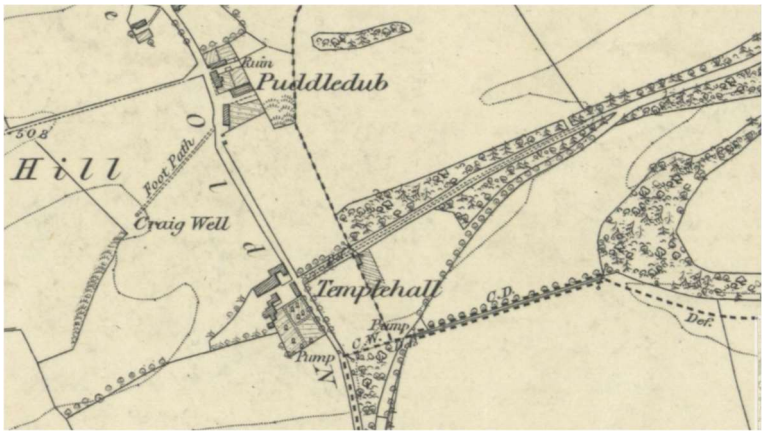
The Aberdour Kirk Session and its Elders was hugely important to the lives of the residents. The Kirk Session was the local church court - not only did the court deal with any disciplinary matters arising within the congregation they were also responsible for raising and administering funds for the relief of the poor of the parish as well as aspects of Education.

It was a powerful presence within the community – but could also be a troubled one.

The ordination of Hugh Coventry and the other three elders in December 1800 really marked the end of quite a turbulent period for the Aberdour Kirk Session.

The Minister, William Bryce had been appointed in 1796 and had immediately encountered variety of difficulties.

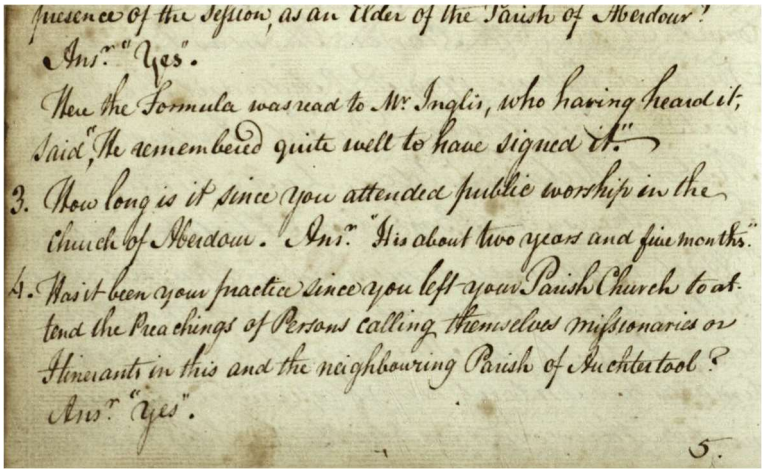
I've picked out a few events from the year leading up to Hugh Coventry becoming an elder which provide a glimpse into how unsettled the Kirk Session had become.



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The first incident relates to William Inglis of Templehall - William had been ordained as an elder under the previous Minister Rev Liston in 1790. However, a little over a year after William Bryce replaced Liston as Aberdour's Minister William Inglis stopped attending the parish church.

Eventually William Inglis was summoned and interrogated by the Kirk Session. The questions and answers he gave were recorded in the session minutes.

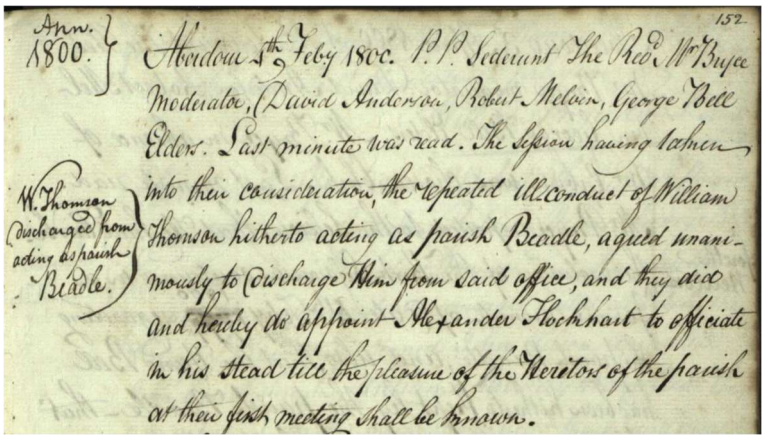

presence of the Session, as an Elder of the Parish of Aberdour?
Ans.r "Yes".
Here the Formula was read to Mr. Inglis, who having heard it;
said, "He remembered quite well to have signed it."
3. How long is it since you attended public worship in the
Church of Aberdour. Ans.r "His about two years and five months."
4. Has it been your practice since you left your Parish Church to at-
tend the Preachings of Persons calling themselves Missionaries or
Itinerants in this and the neighbouring Parish of Auchtertool?
Ans.r "Yes".
5.

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The significant of these are probably questions 3 and 4:

The story gets worse…despite still being an elder of the Aberdour Kirk Session this 'itinerant preacher' whose name is recorded simply as Mr Rait was actually living with William Inglis and his family at Templehall.

After a rather length process led by Minister Bryce, Mr Inglis was deposed and dismissed as an Elder.


152.
Ann. 1800. Aberdour 4th Feby 1800. P.P. Sederunt The Revd Mr Bryce Moderator, (David Anderson, Robert Melvin, George Bell Elders. Last minute was read. The Session having taken into their consideration, the repeated ill conduct of William Thomson hitherto acting as parish Beadle, agreed unanimously to discharge Him from said office, and they did and hereby do appoint Alexander Hochhart to officiate in his stead till the pleasure of the Heritors of the parish at their first meeting shall be known.
W. Thomson discharged from acting as parish Beadle.

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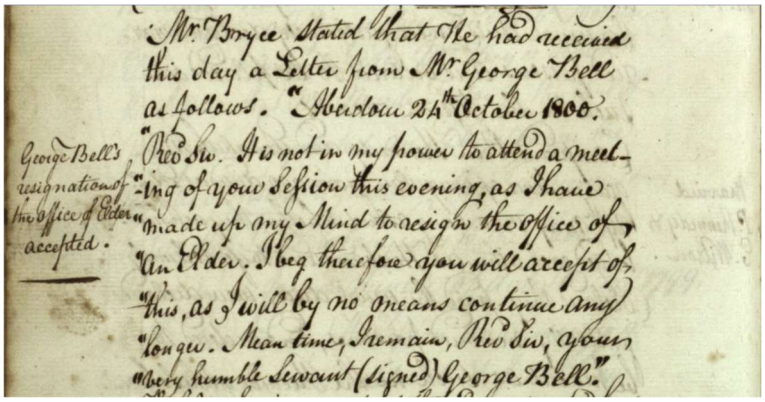
Slightly earlier that same year William Thomson, the parish Beadle was dismissed from office for repeated ill conduct – as it states in the minutes.

As the parish beadle William Thomson was supplied with a brass bell engraved with the names of the Earl of Morton and Moray. He acted essential as a town cryer – and it was his responsibility to ring the hand bell and call out official announcements or 'advertisements' as they were referred to at the time.

It turns out that Thomson was in the habit of calling out his own unsanctioned announcements which enraged both the Kirk Session and Heritors.

I would love to know what these announcements were but unfortunately their contents weren't recorded in the minutes.

An elder and a beadle being dismissed from their positions in the same year was bad enough.... but there was more to come.

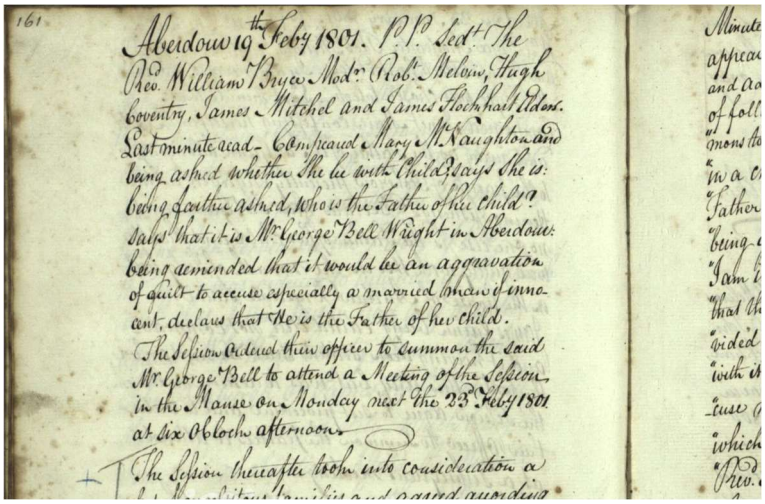

Mr Bryce stated that he had received this day a Letter from Mr George Bell as follows. "Aberdour 24th October 1800.
George Bell's resignation of the Office of Elder accepted.
"Rev Sir. It is not in my power to attend a meeting of your Session this evening, as I have made up my Mind to resign the Office of "An Elder. I beg therefore you will accept of "this, as I will by no means continue any "longer. Mean time, I remain, Rev Sir, your "very humble Servant (signed) George Bell."

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In October 1800 George Bell an Elder in the Kirk Session, private in the Aberdour Volunteers and village wright rather abruptly resigned as an elder with very little explanation.

His resignation letter addressed to Rev William Bryce is recorded in the within the minutes.

The reason for his resignation became clear a few months later...


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Aberdour 19th Feby 1801. P.P. Sed.t The Rev.d William Bryce Mod.r Rob.t Melon, Hugh Coventry, James Mitchel and James Hochhall Elders. Last minute read. Compeared Mary M.cNaughton and being asked whether She be with Child? says She is: being further asked, Who is the Father of her child? says that it is Mr George Bell Wright in Aberdour. being reminded that it would be an aggravation of guilt to accuse especially a married man if innocent, declares that He is the Father of her child. The Session Ordered their officer to summon the said Mr George Bell to attend a Meeting of the Session in the House on Monday next the 23 Feby 1801 at six Oclock afternoon.
The Session thereafter took into consideration a

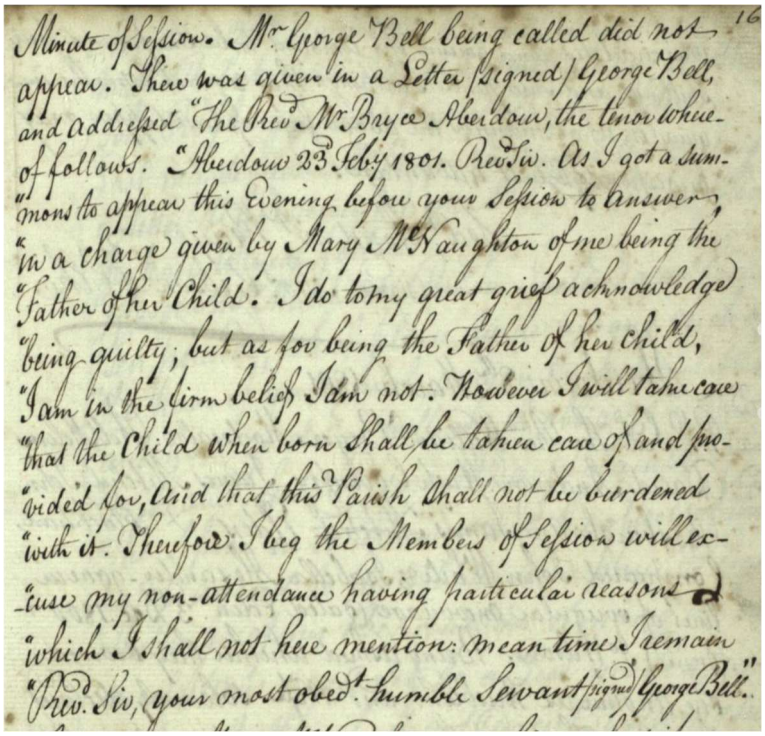
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...In the very first Kirk Session meeting which Hugh Coventry attended as an Elder in February 1801

Mary McNaughton declared that she was pregnant with George Bell's child – George was already married to Isobel Thomson – so this was quiet a serious case of adultery involving one of sessions own elders.

Interestingly, George Bell's Wife's surname was Thomson...just but the recently dismissed beadle William Thomson...maybe further research might show that they are related?

Did the beadle use his position to announce George Bell's adulterous activities to the Village?



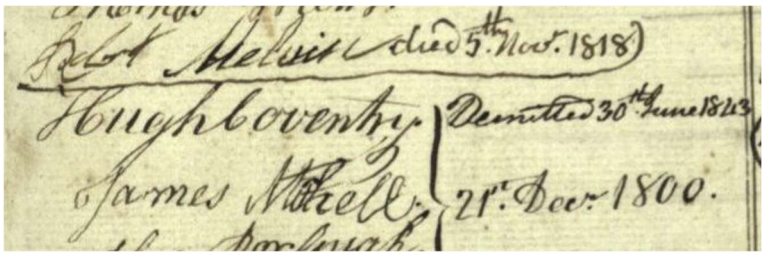
Minute of Session. Mr George Bell being called did not appear. There was given in a Letter (signed) George Bell, and addressed "The Revd Mr Bryce Aberdour, the tenor whereof follows. "Aberdour 23 Feby 1801. Revd Sir. As I got a summons to appear this Evening before your Session to answer, "to a charge given by Mary McNaughton of me being the "Father of her Child. I do to my great grief acknowledge "being guilty; but as for being the Father of her Child, "I am in the firm belief I am not. However I will take care "that the Child when born shall be taken care of and provided for, And that this Parish shall not be burdened "with it. Therefor I beg the Members of Session will excuse my non-attendance having particular reasons "which I shall not here mention: mean time I remain "Revd Sir, your most obed. humble Servant (signed) George Bell."

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In the next meeting of the Kirk Session George Bell fails to appear… however he does send a letter.

All is not well in the Aberdour Kirk Session.

However, this tumultuous period seems to have come to an end with the appointment of the new elders – and with Hugh Coventry amongst their number Kirk Session settled back down to relative normality.



(died 5th Nov. 1818)
Hugh Coventry } Demitted 30th June 1843
James Murrell } 21st Dec. 1800.

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The surviving Kirk Session Minutes for Aberdour only go as far as 1842. However, there are some notes on one of the back pages. Where it is recorded that Hugh Coventry demitted the office of Elder on the 30th of June 1843 – bringing to an end 43 years continuous service in the role.

Another elder, Robert Hay demitted or resigned on the same day.

The date might be significant – a few weeks early on the 23rd May 1843 the church of Scotland suffered what became known as the Great Disruption. 450 ministers breaking away to for the Free Church of Scotland.

It is equal possible that Hugh Coventry – who was now 85 years old was beginning to slow down.





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Before we bring this to a close …. I was trying to think of a tangible example of how deeply entangled in village life Hugh Coventry really was and I thought of this tenement on Seaside Place. Nos. 10-14

It might seem like a strange choice. At first glance there are no obvious connections…but all you need to do is scratch the surface…and Hugh's involvement soon becomes apparent.



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If we go back to the 1788 plan of Aberdour we saw at the beginning. You might remember that Hugh's parents' property was number 32 just here.

Well across the main street at the plot marked as no. 8 on this plan lived a tailor by the name of James Horn. At his death in 1813, he left his estate to his three Grandsons: James, John, and David Horn.

James Horn's will also stipulated that it should be Hugh Coventry who was to ensure the division was equal and that each grandson got their fair share.

During this same period Hugh's employer, the 16th Earl of Morton was busy acquiring property in Easter Aberdour and relocating residents to the so-called Aberdour New Town centered on Manse Street and Seaside Place.

One of James Horn's grandsons also called James Horn used his inheritance to secure a plot for himself in Aberdour's burgeoning New Town.





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This plot infact.

So having acted as the executor of the will...Hugh Coventry, as the Earl of Morton's Factor would have also overseen the initial feuing process for this site.

However, his involvement didn't stop there. By 1821 James Horn had begun construction, and by September that year the ground floor and first floor flats appear to have been largely complete.

Perhaps Horn was struggling financially as between September 1821 and March 1822 Horn made a series of agreements with a local stone mason by the name of James Caution.

These agreements not only saw James Caution buy the ground floor property from James Horn but also allowed him to build an additional second floor at his own expense on top of the first-floor apartment which remained in Horn's possession.

Not only did Hugh Coventry witness the legal agreements between Caution and Horn but his son David Coventry (an apprentice solicitor at the time wrote some of the legal dispositions)

What is more... in March 1823 once the building work was completed James Horn sold the first-floor apartment to Hugh.

Hugh's involvement doesn't end there...

Four years later James Caution found himself in financial difficulties.

Three stone masons who worked construction of this property… George Peddie, Robert Hay and James Drummond were pursuing James Caution through the civil courts.

At this date you didn't have legal aid in the way it exists today but there were similar systems in place –if you had been admitted to the parish poor rolls or had an 'certificate of poverty' issued by the Kirk Session you were legally recognized as "a person without means" which would enable you to access legal assistance.

These three stone masons did just that - and during a meeting of the Kirk Session in 1827 Hugh Coventry and the other elders provided them with a certificate of poverty enabling them to seek redress in the civil courts.

Interestingly one of the masons, Robert Hay was also an elder at the time…but he absented himself from this particular meeting

So, this is quite a tangled story but as you can see Hugh Coventry is present at every twist and turn.

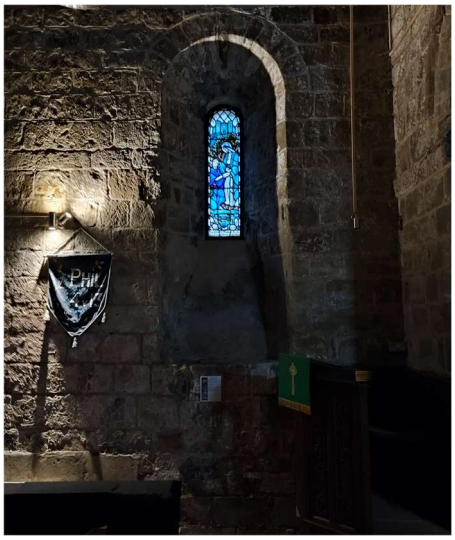
I should make it clear that this wasn't Hugh's only property…he also had two farms in Aberdour and another house in Easter Aberdour. He sold his flat here in 1843.



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On 6th February 1845 – Hugh's remarkably busy life came to an end – at the age of 87.

He was buried in the old church yard of St Fillan's – and although the details of his gravestone have been recorded – I haven't identified it as yet. Perhaps it is one those laid flat and face down.





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Anyway, Hugh has a much more impressive memorial at St Fillan's – when the Kirk was restored and reconsecrated in the 1920s. Two of Hugh Coventry's grandchildren – named Agnes and William after Hugh's own parents - gifted a stained-glass window of the healing of the blind to the Kirk in memory of their family's connection with the village.



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