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My Denholm memories

The story of Denholm in my boyhood days (1900) by John Ramsay

Written on the 14th December, 1951

John Ramsay was one of a big family brought up in the old chapel at the foot of the Hole of the Burn. Mr. Ramsay's father was a colporteur who travelled on foot over the district far and near. He was also 'whipper In' for Cavers school board. John, the writer, was a postman and in his spare time a keen gardener. He was a Sunday school superintendent in Allars church till just before it closed.

We shall begin a journey round the village starting at the Church. In front of the Church was a white painted fence and gate with shrubs and wallflowers in the enclosure and always neat and tidy. The main road too had a brush up every Saturday, so it was an ideal place for playing the 'Bools'.

We shall now turn into the Hole o' the Burn. There was a piece of ground next to the church with some bushes and a hawthorn hedge around it: it was then a right of way around the Church. The entrance to the Hole o' the Burn was much narrower than it is today, the corner was taken off the 'Wee' Green opposite and a large elm tree was taken down and the entrance to the Little Green was made wider, and the gate into the market setback. The mart was held every alternate Wednesday. The Christmas sale was a big day, with the little green being filled with extra pens.

The first house was the House of Refuge and that was sometimes used as an overflow jail. A large water barrel stood in the front of the house and many duckings took place of those who needed to be sobered up.

The next three houses were thatched, two at the front and one at the back. There was a well here and a large stone trough lay on the top, upside down and was used as a seat. Beyond this the burn often burst its channel and flooded all the houses and gardens further down. Croft Cottage was there then and occupied by a thatcher and there were only two thatchers then. There was a large corner of common ground here in front of the three houses (where the Grove is but further forward) this common ground was used for the boys' cricket, swings, grazing rabbits etc., It was much used under the shelter of the elm tree during warm weather. Basket makers often sat here making baskets etc. In front of the corner of the common ground lay two large carved stones with JB on them. They were also used for seats. A large number of fruit trees grew all around here. This burn was built up with a sort of flagstone on the top. I just once saw it opened up from near the monument to this common ground (hence Hole o' the Burn).



PHOTO: The old Cameronian Meeting House and Manse

We are now at the Chapel, the old Cameronian Meeting House and Manse where I was born. The place was lit by oil lamps and there was a large iron stove for heating. We never learned when this place was built but we found lots of old coins while digging in the large garden. I have a coin with the Scots thistle on it, so that may be a small clue.

Next door were two houses, known as the Poplars. It was a cobblers shop at the bottom flat. Two brothers were cobblers (Humes) and they also kept canaries which seem to be always singing.

We come now to the top of the Canongate. Here grew two poplar trees, two laburnum trees and two large hawthorn trees and next to the wall with two seats, one iron and one wood, which were much used.

We now go down on the right hand side of the Canongate. Here was a byre which held several cows and next door another cobbler's shop (where Swiss Villa is now) Peter Jamison's which had clay floors and next door a sister of the cobbler sold fruit, mostly pears, and toffee. All the houses then in the Canongate were thatched.

The next house, Flint House, was all one roomed houses where elderly women lived, (Bella Hobkirk for one) and next, Jim Ford's, was a grocer's shop (Mrs. Mack) with lots of home baked scones etc. Further in from the street was a square of common ground with four houses occupied by hawkers and suchlike. At the end of this row was another well but I do not remember it ever being used. From here right down to the style gate was a large tract of common land used by hawkers and all sorts of people. We sometimes played football here. The common was twice fenced in but this was always destroyed till finally the wall was built and the ground lost to all and sundry who used it. There was a style and the gate at both ends of the land was known as the style gate and here there was a fine spring of water used when the eight village pumps became frozen and this is often.



PHOTO: The Canongate

Coming up the other side of the Canongate we come to Denholm Hall farm and another piece of ground walled round and commonly used as a drying and bleaching green. [John W. Turnbull, Tailor and Clothier and Registrar etc, who lived in Rosebank on the road to the Dene, said that the retaining wall of Denholm Hall was built of the stones from the old East Castle which stood in the Croft across from the Police Station, on the Knowe] The house at the top of the lane was occupied by a man who kept a lot of horses. There was a right of way from Denholm Bridge to the Ford along what we called Bulmans Scar with a stile at both ends. A large hawthorn grew here at the top of the lane with several seats under the branches and a favourite spot for courting couples. Now we come to some small houses mostly occupied by people who worked on the farm. Fruit trees grew in front of the cottages. Near the top of the row was a large stable and house for a horse-couper family. Lots of hawkers returning from St Boswell's and James Fairs called here so it was a very lively place.

The Smiddy

The road going to Hassendean station was called the 'cut'. Then we come to the smithy at the corner which was a busy place in the days when iron hoops were put on the wheels. Next door to the 'smiddy' was a small house where the old lady mangled clothes for one penny a bundle. She was Parcel so we said "here's a bundle Mrs Parcel". Adjoining was the home of the village Bible woman, then a grocers shop, next a wide pend or close where stood stables, a byre, and a two storey lodging house kept by an old lady known as Bridget Danny Hoo'. Many people were housed here, particularly Irishmen during the summer months.



PHOTO: Leyden's Cottage

A large pump stood in front where lived a farmer [Davidson, who had the byre at the top of the Cannongate] who sold bundles of cane but as boys, I'm afraid we had our free! Another shop [Lizzie Murrays] and house [Brownlees] and onto Leyden's Cottage. It was a great day when the tablet was inserted on the house where grew a great Scotch thistle which when at its best in the summer our schoolmaster marched us down to get a lesson on it. Onto Davidson Brothers engineer's shop, then to the village Registrar who lived next door[Fernbank]. He was a very tall stately man who always wore a half-tile. Behind his house was another stable.

We now come to walled-in house called Belleview where the tenants buried all their horses, dogs, or cats and several stones were there bearing their names. Next was a poultry shop and what the woman could not sell in Denholm she carried to Jedburgh and Hawick. Several two-storey houses followed before we came to the doctor's with his stable and a coachman's quarters up the back; another house and then a grocer's while behind was a tailor's shop that we called 'Black Jimmy's'. In the front house lived a wood merchant [Cairns] whose sawmill was at the bottom of Minto Brae. This side of the village was called Sunnyside and two people who live here were known as the King and Queen! Next we come to the school house and school where I spent all of my schooldays. A large number of boys and girls attended and over 50 came from the Canongate alone! Then came 3 two-storey houses followed by a stocking shop where Johnny Little worked and who, along with the others, carried their goods to Hawick. Another 3 two-storey buildings [Greenview and The Hollies] and we come to the Wynd. Up here was a joiner's [Amos] and then a farmhouse with byre [Thornbank] at the Wynd top leading to the right of way to Denholm Mill and behind all the houses to come out at the 'cut.'



Coming out of the Wynd was the village library, with a small fee was paid for lending, and then another four houses, large and small, to at Baker's shop at the corner with the usual stable behind. Round the corner stood the Kirk Manse while opposite was a wood which made a very dark entrance to the village. Now we come to the old hall, or Westgate Hall, where a representative of the Douglas family stayed. Up at the corner of this road [Dean Road] was known as the Windy Hole where all the village rubbish was dumped. On the other side of the road was a tailor's shop [Rosebank] employing men and apprentices. Then another stable and a byre, and a blacksmith's shop [Broomieknowe] with two or three workmen. From there was the back road down to the Loaning. To complete this part called the Townhead there were four or more houses and a saddler and harness maker employing two men and an apprentice.

We now enter the Main Street which had a causeway in front of all the houses which were whitewashed and looking nice after each spring clean. The first house had a shop that sold sweets and pies, next was a Reading Room with an occupied flat above. Here I spent many a happy hour reading the magazine 'Black and White', 'Sphere', and many others. Next door was a house [Text House] with very small windows and a shaky winding stair, a quite large grocers selling ironmongery, dishes etc, a cobblers and boot and shoe shop always nice and clean, a larger building with several small windows where lived a solicitor or suchlike [WmTurnbull, banker in Hawick], and who always wore spats and was a rather 'swell', another tailors and onto the Cross Keys Inn with its stable at the back. The innkeeper was called Anderson. There was a wee shop next but I cannot remember what it sold. Then a large two-storey building used as a lodging house appearing to be always full of people like muggers, tramps, tinkers and Irishmen in summertime. It was often very noisy and the village constable was in attendance. The woman who belonged at this house was called Blyth whose son was a Newcastle constable, her daughter a lady's maid, and her sister Katie an assistance school teacher. We all liked the Blyth's. Part of this building was used as a crockery shop where everything seemed so big like jugs, basins, tankers and urns. The man that ran the store had one cork leg, and always wore a blue jersey and a sailor's cap. His name was Car or Kar. Several iron rings were inserted in the front wall and there was also a stable at the rear.

A great Christmas display

Next door was the Post Office which was also a grocers and paper shop, and a joiners workshop behind, all managed by the same family. Onto quite a big Draper's which always put on a great Christmas display. There was also a house at the back. Then a Slater and a plumber's wee shop where you had to go down two or three steps to get into the house and premises. A strange little man lived here who said he came from Salt Lake City in America and was a Mormon, and he used to lecture us about America. Several people lived in the next buildings both back and front. Then we come to the house and shops just before the Fox and Hounds pend. There they sold all sorts of ginger cakes, pies, hot peas, and lemonade while lodgers, who were generally Irish, were also kept. The inn folk always kept their place tidy. From the large stable behind they had a dogcart and a wagonette which was often out on hire and also ran to Hassendean Station every day. There was a change about this time when Mr. Brodie and then a Mr. Sanderson took over the inn. Many people stayed there during the summer months. And then came a three Storey building where behind was a stocking shop with several hand knitting frames. Willie Cook and John Stafford were the last who worked there. We boys went in here where it was fine and warm with its large iron stove and, since and very little light found its way in, the burning candle lamps. Behind this again was a slaughterhouse, and hen and pig houses. (Back to Main Street.) Then there was a butcher's shop where they also sold groceries etc and home baked scones and others we called 'baps' with a slice of potted meat in between which were very good and cost a penny. Also made were long sticks of sweet rock. Another butchers was adjoining with a slaughterhouse and stable behind which were lit by candles and we often held the lights.



PHOTO: Main Street

Round the corner was a public washing house where several womenfolk were regular washers. From here and onto the next building was called Cooper Street but why I do not know. In the adjacent bottom flat lived a dressmaker and a mole catcher and upstairs a man of some note but I don't know what he did. Then there came a farmhouse, Short being farmer's name. Attached to the house was a stable and a large hay shed. Next was a two-storey house where several people lived while part of the bottom flat was a sweet shop with a causeway in front. Here was a deep well with the pulley wheel on top where we often drew water when pumps were frozen but the Farmer and other tenants in the house used it regularly. There was a gate here into a square of common ground with a light fence around it and three or four silver birch trees. At the other side was another entrance called the Flake Gate. Butchers sometimes put in a few sheep or cattle before going to the slaughterhouse.



PHOTO: Eastgate, Denholm.

The Loaning

We are now on the road that takes us up the Loaning and to the Back Road. On the right was the bleaching green but part of it was used for grazing. The Hearse House was here on the road beside the Loaning Burn which often overflowed and flooded the houses further down. In the cottage lived a hedger, then there was a joiners shop where several men and boys

worked. One of the joiners was our flute bandmaster and we practiced in the shop at night. I have my flute yet! The master joiner's house was next door called Eastgate House.



PHOTO: Rubersvale and Ruberslea behind the horse and carriage

Back on the main road to the right was a field and then came the Police Station behind which had another good well, often used, and a pump too. Opposite the Police Station on the other side of the road was the field called the Croft and three low houses. The first one, a woman, sold baskets and brushes, then the House of the Brethren where some stocking makers from Denholm, Hawick and Jedburgh worshipped. The interior resembled a bookshop. Here could be heard some hearty singing and on special occasions some boys were allowed in. We wore 'tammy shanters' then and your headgear was kept until the meeting was over. Near the fireplace was a large bare stone in the wall with FF cut on it, and supposed to be some secret place. Several people lived in the next two-storey building and through a gate in the dyke was another house for three or four residents, one I knew was a molecatcher. There was a pump here too and a few apple trees before coming to another cottage that house a farmer called Armstrong. Part of the house was the milk house where the eggs and butter were on sale. The family were kindly folk who bought in the milk and if the queue formed for their supply no-one had stayed out in the cold but waited in the kitchen where one gathered all the latest news. We didn't mind going there for our milk. Next lived a master builder who often worked in Hawick or Jedburgh, walking there and back morning and night. And onto Elm House where lived two dressmaking sisters upstairs and an old lady called Porter stayed in the bottom flat and sold pies and toddie scones. I never knew the name of the man next door who sold coal and turnips using a weighing machine that hung from the rafters. He gave a lot of 'tick' and marked it up on a slate on the wall. He was a tall man and lived in another house round the back. Then came a fenced in garden containing several apple trees and onto Elm Cottage and the path behind the Kirk to come into the Hole o' the Burn, our starting place.

Before leaving the Kirk let me tell you of a great gale of wind in October or November 1896. A man was leading a large cart load of straw past the Little Green when the wind blew the lot over the wall into the field. With the westerly Gale the straw blew over the Kirk removing many slates and one hand from the clock. It caught on chimney pots, trees, windows, and everywhere down the Hole o' the Burn. I got plenty straw for my rabbits for a long time. The top part of the monument was blown off, while Denholm Hall and Bulman's Farm looked like skeletons. The Old Chapel suffered badly too and one of its poplar trees felled.

The Village Green usually called the 'Big Green' was common ground belonging to the feuars. It was let annually to the butcher's for grazing but sometimes a circus or shows would be allowed in, or travelling people who sold donkeys, goats, and strings of horses going to or coming from fairs. Regiments of soldiers on Recruiting Marches also camped on the Green and had a civic reception by the Mayor, who was the chief feuar, along with the Doctor and head school teacher and the Minister. That was a great occasion and always accompanied by a band. The old volunteers, before the Boer War, drilled here.



Denholm Ba' started play off the Green and it sometimes lasted two days when all the balls could not be thrown in one day. A man called Best was once killed on the iron railings opposite the Cross Keys at the Ba'. About the time I write the iron spiked railings around the green facing the Main Street was the scene of many an accident. Large crowds of men came to play at the men's ball from Hawick, Jedburgh, and all around the countryside. The apprentices played their ball starting at 9.00 am, the men's ball 1.00 pm, and the school boys held theirs on a Friday.

A large bonfire, the Bow o' Bale, was always held on the Green but no Guy Fawkes. Most of the shops supplied the paraffin to help the blaze. During the summer large numbers of people came from Hawick in breaks and wagonettes to put up at the Fox and Hounds Inn and came onto the Green to dance to music from a fiddle or concertina. These were cheery occasions. The monument got an annual wash by the local fire brigade whose headquarters was somewhere in the Wynd. There were six large elm trees in the Green, two opposite the Cross Keys, two opposite the Fox and Hounds, one at Elm Cottage, and the other opposite the Kirk. Notices of all descriptions were tacked on to them which gave all the village news. When the leaves came off in the autumn the streets were very untidy until farmer Armstrong came with sacks and gathered most of them to use as bedding for his pigs. Large numbers of starlings roosted in the elm opposite the Kirk and made a chorus that was sometimes louder out than in! The Green was always used on New Year's Day as a meeting place of old friends from near and far. At the south end on the street side was a large weighing machine where loads of coal, hay, straw etc., were weighed. I don't know who it belonged to but the baker, in the shop near the corner, looked after it.

Leaving the Green we shall look at school with its headmaster, two teachers, and two assistant teachers, in one large room partitioned into three with three doors, two fireplaces and an iron stove. It was very cold during the winter. I wonder if the skeleton is still in the wall press? It was brought out once a month by the headmaster for our lessons. The taws were freely used in those days.

Summer holidays

There was also the routine visits of the parish minister and school board. My father, at that time, was the school-board officer. Nearly all the children went barefoot to school in the summer. The day before the summer holidays all the parents came to the prize giving when we sang a lot and sometimes gave a play. I can remember being Hamlet in the Merchant of Venice. We had our own garden at the top of the playground with the boys' names marked on the plots. Then there was the 'Barrin oot' Day when the teachers were locked in and we all went home with a senior boy left to unlock the doors when we were all gone. We had lots of nicknames - the headmaster was Razor. Others were the Girsell, Piggot, the Basket, Banty, Chalk and so on. The school was also the village hall used for concerts, dances, flower shows, and for local and parliamentary polling booths.

Let's now look into the Kirk where there was an annual 'swarrie' with its Christmas tree and a bag of buns. The Hope Trust magic lantern shows generally the Pilgrim's Progress, or about John Knox, or John Wishart. The service in the Chapel, the old Cameronian Meeting House held services alternate Sundays with the Kirk and once a month the preacher was the Minister of Cavers. The Independent Sunday School was well attended and we carried large banners when going on our annual picnic.



PHOTO: Denholm School Picnic 1912

Denholm Mill was a flour mill where we bought our oatmeal. The millers name was Watt Young and we loved getting inside and, if behaving, got a piece of locust and some beans. He also kept a boat. Denholm Hall farm had a horse mill and we were sorry for the poor animal going round and round. We preferred the water mill with its large wheel and grinding stones.

Turning to some of the old customs, on the men's Ba' day, most children would visit Mrs. Macks shop in the Canongate for 'taffy' and a bottle of 'black sugar wine', or Black Betty, as we called it. Those that got married presented a Ba' for the men. At the actual wedding a short race was held in front of the house for lady and gent guests – the running o' the Braes - gifts being given to the winners. And there was the usual 'strive' for the children. For the couple the first Sunday after the wedding was Kirkin' Sabbath.

On Auld Year's Night it was a custom to take off all the gates and lay them aside to let the New Year in. Early in the morning was Cake Day when numbers of boys and girls visited the mansions in the country and sang a 'Guid New Year'. There was First Fittin' too with cake and wine and stepping over the threshold carrying some omen for the future. But a death in the village was a sad occasion for all. The undertaker, whoever he may be, sent his apprentice round the houses at night with the lantern, when dark, to bid all to the funeral. This was called the 'Biddin' and practically every man left his work to attend the service. The hearse was seldom used, except for a distance, the coffin being carried by pall-bearers. A service had always been held at the 'Chistin' and also at the deceased's house on the funeral day when some strange garments appeared!

The village was lit by 8 oil lamps and the lamplighter had often a rough passage when we boys were about if he had indulged rather freely in the strong stuff. He was a great target for snowballs but there were no lights during windy nights or when the moon was up. Annual sports were held in the field on the Jedburgh road which, I believe, belonged to the feuars and now occupied by Mr. Dickman (the saddler). Road cycle races were held the same day. Many cricket and football matches were also held there. The playing ground down at the bridge was a lively place and used as the quoiting ground with the grassy bank as a grandstand. In the summer church services were held here and attracted many folk that otherwise never went to church. More stir was brought to the village by German bands, men with dancing bears, Punch and Judy, and the Hawick worthy called 'Hawick Wattie' (Walter Scott). The postman came from Hawick with a light cart and a grey pony.

Now I come to the end of my story and if I have created a little interest and some pleasure, I am rewarded for lifting my pen.

I am, yours faithfully,

John M.Ramsay, Orchard Terrace, Hawick.1951.

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