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The Ossington Hotel looking along John Finnie Street from Kilmarnock Station. From a Valentines postcard about 1936

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Archibald Finnie of Springhill and History of John Finnie Street with Order of Buildings

By Hugh Watson

In 1861 the Kilmarnock Town Trustees turned their attention to the last street they were permitted to install under the Parliamentary Act of 1802 following the successful creation of Duke Street (1859) and Union Street (1860). By 1861 Duke Street was almost complete with all plots sold and classical buildings built using the grey sandstone from Dean Quarry. Like all the previous improvement streets in Kilmarnock, Duke Street was funded using monies from the Improvement Trust bank balance, Burgh Departments including the Police Commissioners, Road Turnpike Trusts, and perhaps in large part from public subscribers and hopefully preferential loans from the bank. Even so there was a delay in getting the final buildings built. The minutes of the Improvement Trustees of 1874 record that at least two plots had been sold between 1859, when the street was laid out to 1861 with the obligation to erect an approved building on the sites “within two years”. These last buildings according to Archibald McKay’s History of Kilmarnock fourth edition print 1880 page 335 were described as follows “The recent Building by Messrs Thomas Stewart and Sons of an imposing range of buildings, comprising the new Royal Hotel, shops and Warehouses, has completed the street. The architectural beauty displayed in the design of these and the other buildings there erected, entitles it to be ranked as

one of the finest streets in the town.” In 1861 it is possible that the Burgh Departments did not have money to spare and subscribers were short in supply and additionally, preferential loans were not available from the banks. So it was going to take a very long time to raise the money for the new street.

The Provost of Kilmarnock was Archibald Finnie of Springhill House, confusingly a son of another Archibald Finnie and ex provost of Braeside and a grandfather who had been treasurer of the burgh with the same name. He was approaching the end of his term as Provost of Kilmarnock and Chairman of the Town Improvement Trust so he perhaps wished to leave his mark by inspiring the Trust to embrace the idea of installing the very last street allowed under the 1802 Act.

Archibald Finnie was an astute businessman who took the coal mining business which his father had created about 1836 to international sales levels and drove it to greater heights by opening new mines. Archibald Finnie and Son eventually became the Duke of Portland’s coal manager and sole leasee of the Duke’s coal mines in Ayrshire on 5 August 1848. (Shipping and Mercantile Gazette 8th August 1848, reports that the new pits are producing coal superior to any hitherto shipped). In effect this meant that Archibald Finnie and Son controlled all the Duke’s exports from Troon, Irvine and Ardrossan Harbours. They also had at least one steamer sailing between Dublin and Ardrossan carrying coal. According to Lloyds List this steamer

was called the *Archibald Finnie*. This vessel was wrecked in a collision with another vessel and split in two in July 1893 with the deaths of seven of the crew. The collision was held to be the fault of the captain of the other vessel.



Archibald Finnie from the collection of the Dick Institute in Kilmarnock¹

Archibald's father had been a second son who had to make his own way in the world. He had four other brothers William, James, Robert and John who were also making their own way, in an entirely different market as merchants for Finnie Bros in Lisbon in Portugal. Finnie Bros are described in the Rothschild Archives as follows –

A company based in Rio de Janeiro acting as an accepting house and discharging bills of exchange. They kept Rothschilds informed of business in imports and rates of exchange, and also on the commodity markets, quoting prices

¹ Chris Hawskworth used this portrait in his article in the Spring edition of 2011 stating it was "Archibald Finnie, Provost of Kilmarnock 1837-1840" I have used the term Archibald Finnie of Springhill for the son of the man featured in the portrait. His son Archibald marries Margaret Guthrie in 3 August 1847 and the construction of Springhill house would commence around that date certainly by the census of 1851 when we see their first child has been born also an Archibald. Archibald Finnie of Springhill was the Finnie who collaborated with his Uncle John Finnie to get the funding for John Finnie Street and when he dies he goes to his cottage in Troon "Diamond Cottage" as he is dying of cancer of the face as a blemish he has had for 20 years had turned cancerous. I suggest that was probably a reason why Archibald Finnie of Springhill did not sit for a portrait.

of sugar, specie, coffee, hides, advising of the demand for and availability of them, and supplying details of relevant crops. They also gave NMR (Rothschilds) the price of freights to Europe and government stock. Included in the letters are accounts of local politics and social unrest.

Date: 1834-1847

After Napoleon's invasion of Portugal in 1807 the Portuguese Royal family fled with the entire apparatus of government and court life to Brazil. There was some encouragement in this venture from Britain as Portugal was practically Britain's only ally in Europe following Napoleon's success in strangling trade with Britain by conquering most European nations. Of course, Napoleon famously declared that England was "a nation of shopkeepers".

With British help and encouragement the Portuguese set sail with forty ships to establish their Royal Family, government and courtiers in Rio de Janeiro which was then the capital of their colony Brazil. So for a time Brazil became headquarters of the Portuguese Empire with its capital being Rio de Janeiro. Britain was very interested in not losing the Portuguese as a trading partner and therefore heading the Portuguese fleet was another smaller fleet of British warships to stave off possible attacks by Napoleon and ensure safe passage of their precious people and wealth of a nation in their holds.

Britain got a good deal in trade for their assistance and all friendly countries were encouraged to transfer their trade with the Portuguese in 1810 to Brazil. This was the time when John Finnie set sail from London to join Robert, his brother who with other family help established the Finnie Bros branch in Rio de Janeiro. Then after Waterloo and the final defeat of Napoleon, the Portuguese soon (some sources claim they also had branches of Finnie Bros in Australia and Canada) returned to Portugal and Finnie Bros also returned to Portugal while still maintaining Finnie Bros in Rio Janeiro in Brazil.

Meantime back in Kilmarnock sometime after Waterloo 1815 Archibald Finnie of Braeside the Provost of Kilmarnock from 1837 to 1840 sat for the only known Finnie Portrait by Kilmarnock artist James Tannock of international fame.

Finnie was to take his branch of the family into coal. In 1830 he built Springhill House in Kilmarnock a fine Georgian mansion house as his family home. This building is now a care home. Springhill House is described in the Ordnance Survey name books c1856 as follows –

An elegant mansion, three Storeys high, pleasantly situated about five chains off St. Marnock Street, the out offices which are some distance from the mansion are two storeys, and in excellent repair, the pleasure grounds and gardens are very extensive and exhibit great taste, the Park in front is beautifully ornamented with clumps of trees, and is surrounded by a winding avenue, pleasantly shaded with mixed wood; the

entrance to the mansion is from St. Marnock Street, by a neat avenue, profusely ornamented with flowers and evergreens on either side, the property and residence of Archibald Finnie Esq.

<https://scotlandsplaces.gov.uk/digital-volumes/ordnance-survey-name-books/ayrshire-os-name-books-1855-1857/ayrshire-volume-35/37>

About 1836 Archibald Finnie had acquired his first tack (lease) at Fergushill Mine in Kilwinning (see Chris Hawksworth in his extremely useful writing in the Spring 2011 Ayrshire Notes Number 41 entitled “Archibald Finnie and Son Coalmasters” available as a free download on the internet with many more Ayrshire Notes). Previously the Finnies were traditionally involved in shaping iron, selling Iron products and also moulding iron. Finnie’s predecessors were mainly hammermen, blacksmiths, ironmongers who had eventually shares in Kilmarnock Iron Foundry. When grandfather Finnie died in 1826 he described himself in his will as a senior ironmonger although he had started off as a hammerman graduating to a blacksmith and then a partner with two others in Kilmarnock’s first foundry, some say he started the engineering industry in Kilmarnock. Prior to his death in 1823 the company of Archibald Finnie and Son was dissolved according to the notice in the Edinburgh Gazette on 30th May 1823 by mutual consent and all debts were to be settled by Archibald Finnie, junior.

Archibald Finnie of Springhill House had been contacted by the Society of Kilmarnock Farmers who had asked him to find them a site in 1861 for their proposed Corn Exchange. He persuaded them to form a joint stock company and the shares sold quickly. The site he found for them was on the Low Green in front of Kilmarnock Academy which had been built there 54 years previously in 1807.

This site was particularly suitable as it afforded a grand vista, when built, for pedestrians and people in carriages travelling south up the new Duke Street towards London Road . The Corn Exchange would provide a grand focal point for people travelling towards London Road. Over the years several council departments had been sited on the Low Green in front of the Academy as well as other housing which by this time looked rather unsightly.

According to the 1871 census Archibald Finnie of Springhill was a Justice of the Peace, landowner and iron and coal merchant employing about 1000 men. This was a marked increase to the number he employed in the 1851 census where it is stated he employed 6-700 men. At that time he is also recorded in the census as provost of Kilmarnock.

With his links to the public and private sector Archibald Finnie was able to get the Dean of Guild (as planning authority was

called then) and the council with the understanding that most of the council activities already on the site would find a home in the new grand classical building in red Ballochmyle sandstone. The town council of course made a contribution.

Following the clearance of the site for the building of the Corn Exchange, Finnie proved to be its major shareholder and at a shareholder meeting he was elected as the first Chairman of the Kilmarnock Corn Exchange Trust to much acclaim. This was a post he was to hold for at least 10 years prior to his death in 1876.

The strange timing of the decision to go for the last new street which would become John Finnie Street related in the main to the Trust's running out of time but may also have been due to the recent successful opening of Duke Street. The team used for Duke Street was used again for the new street the architect being William Railton and civil engineer Robert Blackwood. So although they had the plans ready for the new street, clearly, they did not have funds to pay for it.

However Archibald Finnie of Springhill House who was Chair of the Kilmarnock Town Improvement Trustees, and in the last year of his provostship (1861) was full of drive and determination and luckily he had a wealthy uncle John Finnie who had made his money overseas as a merchant in a variety of

goods, trusted by others with state of the market and politics and a developed knowledge in banking activities in Brazil and especially Rio de Janeiro, for some 30-35 years. At the height of his achievement he became an agent for Rothschilds in South America as shown in Rothschilds Archives. He returned to Britain buying Bowden Lodge Cheshire about eight miles from Manchester where he probably continued to work as a merchant specialising in cloth in the heart of the textile manufacturing part of Britain where he could look after Finnie interests.

John Finnie, and was his father's youngest son, a native of Kilmarnock who had left for London in 1807 (just about the time Napoleon invaded Portugal and the Portuguese Royal family fled to Brazil) for training in all aspects of becoming a merchant in an Counting House in London probably initially as a merchantile clerk. Three years later John Finnie set sail sometime in 1810 for Rio de Janeiro. This would have been an arduous journey by sail in order to join his brother (7 years older) Robert who was senior partner of Finnie Bros.

John would be the Junior partner. John was never to return to his native town except on visits. Once he became successful he was also known to be generous with his money freely giving to good causes. The total cost for John Finnie Street was £8000 (excluding buildings) and elsewhere he had given £23,000 to endow a church in South Kensington London which he never

visited and also gifts to his church's pension fund and a church college and at this time he donated to many Kilmarnock causes including a subscription to the Fever hospital on Mount Pleasance which looked down on Portland Street/Wellington street. In his will he left £1000 to Ayrshire Lifeboats at Troon where two of his brothers had seaside houses.

I am sure he alleviated the town's plight when he sent a letter to his nephew, Archibald Finnie of Springhill House, no longer the Provost, to be presented to the next meeting of the Trustees in June 1863.

Archibald was still an active member of the Town Trustees for the Improvement of Kilmarnock and by 1863 he was chairman and major shareholder of Kilmarnock's Corn Exchange which commanded a grand site at the top of the recently completed Duke Street (At the time considered to be "One of The finest Street in Kilmarnock"). Archibald Finnie of Springhill read out his uncle's letter to the Trustees Meeting in June 1863 which amazingly offered to underwrite the total costs of putting in the full unnamed street and he guaranteed the Trustees against pecuniary loss. Additionally John Finnie had solved a problem the Trustees had in getting the laying out of the street started. Near the beginning of the proposed street there was a house, Langlands House, which for some reason the Trustees could not acquire. John arranged to buy this property and his agents completed the deal and got his nephew

Archibald Finnie to present the title deeds to the Trustees, urging them to proceed quickly with the new street and not to waste any more time. So elated were the Trustees in receiving John's offer they immediately appointed him as a fellow Trustee and sent him a sincere letter thanking him for his kind offer.

No decision had been made as yet to name the street. It was to take well over a year to get a name for the new street right up to the opening day on 26 October 1864 when an opening ceremony was booked in what was the premier hotel in Kilmarnock, The George, Portland Street and many invitations sent to dignitaries the "Good and the Great".

A meeting was held on the morning of the opening of the new street by the Trustees and after much deliberations they decided to call the Street "John Finnie Street".

As the Trustees did not have to borrow any money for John Finnie Street there was no pressure to sell the plots so they could "balance the books". This was not the case in the creation of the earlier street, Duke Street and all other Improvements, since the 1802 Act was enacted. The decision on which stone to use for the new buildings in John Finnie Street from the opening day 26 October 1864 appears to have been the same as the policy for Duke Street — Dean Quarry grey sandstone. It

would take until about 1873 before a policy of only using Ballochmyle red sandstone for buildings in John Finnie Street which could only happen when the Burgh got a new Act of Parliament in 1871. Therefore although the new street was open for business in October 1864 there was little sign of buildings going up. Valuations rolls come out every year following the Rating and Valuation (Scotland) Act of 1855. 1865 was the first year relevant for John Finnie Street with two entries relating to John Finnie Street. This entry was for house and office with Proprietor Hugh Stevens Toy Merchant Kilmarnock and he was the Occupier. His old toy warehouse had been in the line of the projected John Finnie Street so he had accepted compensation and here he is with new premises in John Finnie Street. At this stage because of the few buildings in the street it had not been numbered. I have no way of judging where it was in John Finnie Street.

The other proprietor was Town of Kilmarnock Town of Improvement Trustees which probably was eager to sell many plots on the street but initially was prepared to rent with ground on three plots of land on offer and two Tenant Occupiers (1) A M Samson Timber Merchant, (2) John Peden &co Coachbuilders – in 1880 this Tenant became a Proprietor as he would build a red sandstone building known locally as "Peden's Building". The next document to give information on early John Finnie Street is the Kilmarnock Post Office Directory 1868. (but like all post office Directories it does not indicate who is a proprietor and who is a tenant). There we have

an increase of buildings as follows (1) A and L C Clark Export Boot and Shoe Manufactures who did not settle in John Finnie Street and combined with another Manufacturer to form the mighty Saxone providing many jobs in Kilmarnock and District and throughout the world especially Brazil at their purpose built site in Titchfield Street Kilmarnock where the Galleon Leisure Centre is now located. Next we have a Pharmacist who was also one of the Town's first Dentists (2) J Dunlop Dentists (you did not need qualifications to practice dentistry in those days). His address is shown as 1 Portland Road which happens to be the corner of John Finnie Street and it also has an entrance in John Finnie Street. There is still a Dental Practice called Corner Dental Practice and you will be pleased to know that all the Dentists are now qualified. Another interesting feature of this building is that is still grey sandstone probably from Dean Quarry.

If you look at the Ordnance Survey Map of 1857 you will see that the Old Sheriff Court House and the Dentists which are on opposite corners at the foot of John Finnie Street. In 1857 there also seemed to be a Bank Street and that street probably never had a planning policy that all buildings should be in red sandstone from Ballochmyle. That may be the reason that the grey sandstone is still prevalent in certain buildings now at the foot of John Finnie Street. Indeed a locksmith in that vicinity in recent times asked for permission to build a new building and he was told by the Planning Authority the stone would have to be grey sandstone. We revisit the prevalence of grey

sandstone in a building which is now at 25-27 John Finnie Street when we look at Post Office Directory for Kilmarnock 1872. The next entry in the 1868 Directory is (3) Bruce Findlay Howie Photographers probably one of the earliest photographers using the old glass plates with long exposure times. This was followed by (3) Alexander Morton and Son Cutlers Engineers Machine Makers Opticians and Telescope makers. This was the son of the clever inventor Thomas Morton who built a early carpet machine which revolutionised carpet production in Kilmarnock and enabled him to corner the market for his machines including maintenance and repair and he was also an inventor of telescopes and built his own observatory in Morton Place mainly stocked with his own telescopes. The shop would be a great asset to Kilmarnock so his son probably was an engineer just like his father.

I have an advert advertising “Alexander Morton and Son” for the entry but strangely still it has no number on John Finnie Street. The shop/workshop was not long in the Street and but it was still there by the by next Valuation Roll 1875/76 and this time again as a tenant and for the first time as a Proprietor there. Still in 1868 the next entry is (4) Misses Patrick Ladies Seminary, there many private schools right up until the Parliamentary Act in Scotland 1872 which made elementary school attendance compulsory. Finally, we have (5) Samsons Timber Yard.

Onwards we look at the next Post Office Directory 1872 and (1) Hugh Stevens appears again in John Finnie Street (which means he has been a proprietor there for at least from 1865 to 1872). Next is the Timber Yard run by (2) A C W Samson which has also been there 7 years. Then we have again (3) Alexander Morton and Son Cutlers, Engineers, Machine Makers, Opticians, Telescope Makers, and Nautical instrument makers (4) James Wyllie, Coachbuilder (5) JR and J Wilson Potato Dealers (6) John Neil Smith (7) George Foster Tailor (8) Mrs John Paterson, George Younger Classical piano Teacher at Mrs Patersons and we meet again (9) Mr James Bruce the photographer who seems to be on his own. So about 10 people against 6 in 1868. This is 8 years since John Finnie Street was laid out and it was a much longer street than Duke Street. The last named street was all but completed with large Classical buildings within 2 years and only two gaps at the end of the street which were filled within 15 years.

I was at that time looking at the Kilmarnock Town Improvement Trust with an archivist at Burn's Monument Centre Kay Park Kilmarnock. I had noted down a item for more research. It involved John Finnie who was in Kilmarnock (he normally lived in Bowden Lodge Cheshire about 8 miles from Manchester, so he would be an infrequent visitor to Kilmarnock although there would be easier travel as the age of steam trains was upon us). John Finnie would be still a Trustee being aged 79 and living temporarily in the area with his nephew Archibald Finnie of Springhill. He also had contact with a tailor who had

a shop in King Street who wanted to build premises in John Finnie Street and move from 93 Kings Street now occupied by Vodaphone. John got him a plot, planning permission through the Dean of Guild Court. It was built on the choice of stone then Dean Quarry grey sandstone. The tailor had two up and two ground level, those above were houses or work rooms and two on the ground were shops. All four sections are still there today on the West side of John Finnie Street and wedged between Laigh Kirk Mission Hall and Evangelical Central Church and both these are built of what became the traditional stone at that time, red sandstone, so the George Foster premises would eventually “stick out like a sore thumb” and it still does, I can only think this building got protection of the Council at the time as someone knew its connection to John Finnie.

In the census of 1871 you can see George 33, with his wife Elizabeth, 32. His occupation was a Draper and Clothier employing five men, 1 woman and three boys. They have seven children and a servant. Sadly George Foster was to die of consumption on 7 March 1874 age 36. He had been suffering of consumption for Two Years. His wife would continue working as a dressmaker and her daughter Catherine who is only 10 in 1871 eventually worked in her own workshop as a dressmaker in the same building.

In the valuation roll we now look at 1875/76 where the number of buildings are growing in John Finnie Street and the decision

to build any new building in Ballochmyle red sandstone has been made by the Council probably after they had received the new Municipal Extension Act in 1871 which gave the burgh an additional 10 councillors and many new powers including the ability to raise funds. This Act acknowledges the fact that the population had grown from 8079 in 1802 and since the “Old” Act to 24,071 in 1871. This was an additional 16,992 people requiring a more modern council. Within the Act there would be powers to continue to improve the town with the old Trustees being swept away with a new Committee called “Streets Committee for the Improvement of Kilmarnock” (The Police Commissioners who had much to do with applying for the new Act did not realise that they also would be swept aside by the new Act but the Trustees had to remind them that they also would be swept away along with other Departments).

So on the last working day of 1870 the Trustees for the Kilmarnock Town Improvement handed their files and papers and money to the new Streets Committee according to the Minutes of Kilmarnock Town improvement Trust. (see Ayrshire Archives at Burn’s Monument Centre Kay Park Kilmarnock). So, although, it was the Trustees who laid out John Finnie Street and installed some buildings in the traditional grey sandstone it fell to the “Streets Committee” to sell the majority of vacant plots in the street and pioneer the red sandstone format from Ballochmyle. There is growing evidence that the Trustees passed some ground and plots which were not required for the laying out of John Finnie Street to

John Finnie who duly passed these plots onto his nephew, Archibald Finnie of Springhill House who was the first to build and open a Ballochmyle red sandstone building as his Offices, Accounting House and Stables at 50-51 John Finnie Street in 1874 and maybe he had a free plot and possibly money from John Finnie which would assist and possibly pay for his new building which he transferred from Braefoot. The Brae in question being “ Tankard Hall” Brae , behind the town Hall beside the river in an area at one time known as “Finnie’s Land”. In the next year, John Finnie died on 26 July 1875 aged 85 and in his will he left at least £84,000 to his relations and friends including £11,000 to his nephew Archibald Finnie and family at Springhill House Kilmarnock. (£5000 to his nephew Archibald Finnie £2000 to his great nephew also Archibald and £1000 to each of his four great nieces Mary Ann, Helena, Jean and Margaret).

The Finnies were also benefactors of Dundonald Parish Church which contains a Finnie Memorial Window which is inscribed as follows *“To the Glory of God and in memory of Archibald Finnie of Springhill and Grange who died 11th August 1876 and of Margaret Monteath Guthrie his wife who died 4th June 1890 and of their sons Archibald who died 10th August 1883 and John Guthrie who died 25th October 1865. Erected by their daughters Maryann Jean and Margaret, January 1906.”*

The dates of the three Archibald Finnies are summarised below

The "first" Archibald Finnie born 23 March 1846-20 January 1826 was regarded as the " Father of them all".

Archibald Finnie 1783 – 1843

Archibald Finnie 1813 - 1876

Archibald Finnie 1852 - 10 Aug 1883

Kilmarnock Carpet Weavers in America

By Barbara Graham

There cannot be many Scots who do not have some relatives abroad. For centuries individual Scots have gone abroad to pursue study, trade, religion or military affairs. It was only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, however, that mass migration occurred, as Scots left their native land to swell the growing populations of the British Empire's colonies and the United States of America.

The personal stories of migrants are full of interest, but to Ayrshire people one of the most fascinating episodes was the settlement of a little colony of Kilmarnock carpet weavers in the new town of Thompsonville, Connecticut, in the late 1820s.

Kilmarnock's Carpet Industry

The origins of this story lie in the 18th century. Carpet weaving is said to have been introduced to Kilmarnock from Dalkeith in 1728 by Charlotte Maria Gardiner, a relative of the fourth Earl of Kilmarnock.² She had married the Reverend Willian Wright, a minister in Kilmarnock, in 1720 and after his death she married the Reverend Laurence Hill in Kilmarnock.³

² Loch, D., *Essays on the Trade, Commerce, Manufactures and Fisheries of Scotland*, vol. 2, 1778

³ Genealogy of Charlotte Maria Gardiner, <https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Gardiner-3048>

Although the town had a long established history of woollen manufactures by the 1720s, there was apparently no carpet manufacture before Charlotte Maria brought carpet spinners and weavers to Kilmarnock.⁴

In 1733 the prominence of Kilmarnock's textiles industry was noted in "*The Interest of Scotland considered; or, Reasons for Improving the Fisheries and Linen Manufacture of Scotland*" by Patrick Lindsay, Lord Provost of Edinburgh. Presumably carpets were soon added to the Kilmarnock products which he listed:

*"At Kilmarnock are made of our own wool low-priced serges, known by the name of that place where they are made. These are partly for home consumpt, and partly for the markets of Holland; and, by the help of a little care and encouragement, burying crapes, at least those of a low price, might also be made there for home consumpt."*⁵

Even by 1735, when the first carpet factory in Kidderminster, a name synonymous with carpets, was established, the quality of Kilmarnock carpets had more than a local reputation. On the recommendation of the Earl of Kilmarnock, the Lord Justice

⁴ Hood, John, *Two Hundred and Fifty Years of Carpets*, in *Aspects of Local History*, vol. 2, Kilmarnock and District History Group, at <https://www.kilmarnockhistory.co.uk/cm-content/files/Aspects%20of%20Local%20History.pdf>

⁵ The Industries of Scotland - Woollen Manufacturers, at <https://electricScotland.com/history/industrial/industry9.htm>

Clerk, Lord Milton, ordered “Six Yards of . . . Rug”.⁶

Early in the second half of the 18th century the carpet industry in Kilmarnock was operating on a progressive commercial basis, with the firm of Wilson, Gregory and Company building up sound expertise in both the manufacture and marketing of carpets, blankets and various types of cloth.⁷

In 1766 William Gregory, the son of one of the partners of Wilson, Gregory and Company, launched into a new venture when he emigrated to Virginia. There he carried on business in partnership with another Kilmarnock man, William Glen, whose family also dealt in woollen manufactures.⁸ It is likely that Gregory and Glen acted as agents in America for the sale and distribution of goods manufactured in Kilmarnock.

Trade with Virginia was by no means new. Despite the theoretical confinement of exporting privileges to royal burghs, Kilmarnock traders were said to have sent exports to Virginia before 1700.⁹ By the 1740s the port of Ayr was doing a steady trade in the re-export of tobacco from Virginia to France and Norway. In return Ayrshire merchants sent to America shipments of household goods and many kinds of textiles,

⁶ Letter of Lord Kilmarnock to Lord Milton, October 1735, Saltoun Mss SC59, f.65

⁷ Mackay, Archibald, *The History of Kilmarnock*, 5th edition, Kilmarnock, 1909, p. 111

⁸ Obituary of Miss Susan Thompson, *The Kilmarnock Standard*, 29 September 1902

⁹ Acts of Parliament of Scotland, vol. X, p. 137. Cited in Smout, T.C., *Scottish Trade on the Eve of the Union*, Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh, 1963, p. 176

sometimes including rugs.¹⁰

If life in Virginia had continued on an even keel, William Gregory might have settled permanently in America, but in the 1770s the American War of Independence wrenched the thirteen colonies from British control. During and after the war many British settlers left America and migrated to the still loyal territory known as British North America (now Canada). Gregory, however, returned to his home town.

Before long he became a partner in the new firm of Gregory, Thomson and Company, carpet manufacturers, in premises previously occupied by his father's firm, Wilson, Gregory and Company. Once established in this firm, he married a daughter of Glasgow bookseller, John Smith, and settled into the role of a leading figure in Kilmarnock business and civic circles.

The American links were not entirely broken, however, and in 1805 Gregory's son, William, at the age of 16 emigrated to Virginia, where he eventually settled in Alexandria and engaged successfully in the carpet industry. By 1817 his brothers, Alexander and James, had joined him to seek their fortunes in America.¹¹

¹⁰ Ayr Outport Records, CE76, Ayrshire Archives

¹¹ Gregory Thomson Papers

Article in *The Kilmarnock Standard*, 29 September 1902

In the early years of the 19th century the American carpet industry was in its infancy. In order to protect its manufacturers from foreign competitors, in the 1820s the U.S. Congress levied high tariffs on imported carpets and other products.

The climate was then right for American entrepreneurs to invest in new ventures in order to improve the quality of local manufactures.¹²

One such entrepreneur was Orrin Thompson, who was born in 1788 in Suffield, Connecticut, and grew up in the nearby small town of Enfield, where his father was a trader and land speculator. By the age of 26 Orrin had his own small business in Enfield, but his ambition outgrew his home town. In 1821 he moved to New York, where he was employed by the firm of Austin and Andrews. Two years later he bought Austin's shares and became a partner in Andrews, Thompson and Company. A third partner, James Elnathan Smith, travelled to Europe to select and despatch rugs to New York. The market for these quality goods was insatiable and the firm's business increased fivefold within a few years.¹³

The finance to expand American carpet manufacture was

¹² Patten, Randall, A History of the U.S. Carpet Industry, Economic History Association at <https://eh.net/encyclopedia/a-history-of-the-u-s-carpet-industry/>

Alden, J.R., Pioneer America, Hutchinson, London, 1966, pp. 176 and 181

¹³ Ewing, J. and Norton, N., *Broadlooms and Businessmen*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1955, p.37

available, but the missing ingredient was skilled labour. For this Orrin Thompson looked across the Atlantic Ocean to centres of excellence. One company from which Thompson's firm had imported carpets was Gregory Thomson and Co. in Kilmarnock. The number of carpet looms in Kilmarnock had grown by leaps and bounds, from over 100 in 1811 to 260 in 1822 and 350 by 1827.

The value of carpets produced annually had risen from £21,400 in 1791 to over £100,000 in the mid-1820s. This rapid expansion was facilitated by inventions such as Thomas Morton's barrel carpet loom (1811) and its later modifications for the production of more luxurious three-ply carpets (1821 and 1827).¹⁴ Such was Morton's fame that the Russian Tsar invited him to set up a carpet factory in Russia, an offer which Morton declined.¹⁵ Gregory Thomson and Company moved with the times. In 1821 they erected a twist mill in which nine women could produce as much as 150 spinners by hand. Such innovations enabled the company to turn out prize winning performances, which were no doubt noted with interest by the enterprising Orrin Thompson.¹⁶

A New Company in America

In 1828 Andrews, Thompson and Company arranged a contract

¹⁴ Whatley, Christopher, *The Process of Industrialisation in Ayrshire*, unpublished thesis, University of Strathclyde, 1975

¹⁵ Beattie, Frank, *Thomas Morton and His Telescopes*, in Kilmarnock and District History Group Newsletter 33, February 1978

¹⁶ Whatley, C. op.cit.

with Gregory, Thomson and Company to help with establishing a new venture, which became known as the Thompsonville Carpet Manufacturing Company. The original plan was for yarn spun in Kilmarnock to be exported to America and woven into carpets by the new firm. Gregory, Thomson and Company also contracted to send carpet looms and skilled workers.

The first priority was to find a suitable site for new premises. Orrin Thompson's relative, Seth, was authorised to find a location with sufficient water power for a factory. A site was bought cheaply beside a waterfall on the Freshwater Brook near the Thompsons' home town of Enfield. A Massachusetts firm was engaged to build a stone dam on the river, with the optimistic date of August 1828 being set for completion of the work.

By the time that the work had progressed thus far, it had been decided that it would be unwise to split the spinning and weaving processes, a decision which expanded the scope of the American venture. In the summer of 1828, therefore, Gregory sent spinning equipment as well as carpet looms in order to integrate the entire manufacturing process.

That summer must have been a time of high excitement in Kilmarnock for the weavers who had decided to take a gamble on a new life in America. In the first year twenty weavers contracted to work for the Thompsonville company for two years at the same wage paid to "*other weavers in their employ, or the usual price paid in the country for Weaving*". The money

for their passage was forwarded by the company on the understanding that it would be deducted from their wages in weekly instalments.¹⁷

When James Smith Gregory crossed the Atlantic in 1817 his fare as a steerage passenger was 12 guineas¹⁸ but by the late 1820s an increase in the emigrant trade had brought prices down, with the result that the Kilmarnock migrants of 1828 probably paid around £4.¹⁹ They probably had to take food supplies, for, although after 1815 emigrant ships were required by law to carry provisions, these were often of poor quality and were sometimes sold at exorbitant prices by unscrupulous captains to helpless migrants when their own supplies were exhausted.²⁰

The weavers' expectations of the voyage and of their destination must have been vague. It is unlikely that many of them had relatives in America, as it was only in 1824, partly in answer to serious unemployment in Britain, that British laws prohibiting the emigration of skilled workers and the export of machinery had been repealed.²¹

No details of their journey are known, but they probably left from Greenock in August 1828. In the summer the passage should not have taken more than the minimum of six weeks. In

¹⁷ Ewing and Norton, *op.cit.*, pp. 37-38

¹⁸ Gregory Thomson Papers, 1817

¹⁹ Coleman, T., *Passage to America*, Pimlico, London, 1972, pp. 22-23

Jones, Maldwyn, *Destination America*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1976, p. 26

²⁰ Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 32

²¹ Ashton, T.S., *The Industrial Revolution*, Oxford University Press, London, 1972 edition, p. 100

seasons of bad weather voyages could last as long as three months in the sailing vessels used for the migrant trade at this date.

Six weeks must have been long enough to spend in the cramped, insanitary quarters allocated to steerage passengers. In these primitive conditions scrupulous hygiene was impossible and this, added to insufficient food rations, made passengers a sitting target for epidemics of dysentery, cholera and typhus. Even if migrants were fortunate enough to sail in a ship which remained free of such diseases, seasickness could make the voyage an experience of unforgettable misery.²²

Fortunately, the Kilmarnock contingent arrived without mishap in New York in late September or early October. They must have been glad to be met by Seth Thompson, who escorted them to Thompsonville. On arriving there, however, it was disappointing to find that not only was the dam not completed and the factory not yet built, nor the land cleared of old buildings, but of more immediate importance was the fact that no dwelling houses for the workers had been erected. As a temporary arrangement they found cheap lodgings in three riverside taverns which catered for boatmen.

Before the weavers could begin the work for which they had been engaged, they had to turn their hands to construction work. They worked on completion of the dam, which was achieved by December. Old buildings on the site had to be

²² Coleman, *op. cit.*, chapter 7
Jones, *op. cit.*, chapter 2

demolished and cleared away before the factory could be built. Foundations were dug for rows of tenements for textile workers. The first houses were known as “Scotch Row”, with further rows following on Mutton Hill.²³

Two of the men who worked so hard on this project were Alexander and James Mitchell, who had emigrated to America a few years earlier and had been working in New York. Alexander and perhaps also James had been apprenticed to Thomas Morton in Kilmarnock and were experts on barrel carpet looms. Apprenticed to them was John Brough, while John Eastman, who, like the Mitchells, was described as a “machinist”, also doubled as a smith. All processes in the carpet industry were represented in the pioneer group. John Angus was a spinner, William Anderson was a dyer and James Reid, John Tannahill, Robert Dow, James Learmont, Matthew Mair and others were weavers.²⁴

By the spring of 1829 the most important building of the complex was ready. This was the White Mill, a three storey building, through the basement of which the Brook ran to power the mill. This was an attractive building, more like a church than a factory, painted white and crowned with a cupola and a bell.²⁵

²³ Letters to *Enfield Press*, 12 September, 1882 et seq.

²⁴ Memoirs of John Hutchinson, reference in a file on “*Carpet Trade in America*”, Local History Collection, Burns Monument Centre, Kilmarnock

²⁵ Ewing and Norton, op. cit., p. 38

As Connecticut's bleak winter passed and their new home began to take shape, the migrants' spirits must have risen with hope for the future. Later in the year there was a joyful reunion with a new contingent of Kilmarnock immigrants. These included Robert Thomson, John Gray, Ewen and Robert McChristie, James Anderson, Matthew Brown, Charles Stewart, David Galt, James Logan, John Bain, William Hamilton, William Weir, Alexander Meikle, Thomas Smith, James Ronalds and others with their families.²⁶

With Robert Thomson came his wife, Mary, daughter of William Gregory Senior, and their young family. He had owned a carpet factory in Nelson Street and when he emigrated, several of his employees went with him. This suggests that business in Kilmarnock may have been at a low ebb, thus encouraging so many families to seek a new future in America.²⁷

Problems at Thompsonville

Prospects were promising at first and Thomson became Superintendent of the new factory. Life did not run smoothly, however, and in 1831, "*after two dissension-wracked years*", Thomson resigned and moved from Thompsonville with some of his former employees. They moved to New Jersey where Thomson later established his own carpet factory.²⁸

²⁶ John Hutchinson's Memoirs

²⁷ *The Kilmarnock Standard*, 29 September 1902

²⁸ *Ibid.* ; Ewing and Norton, *op. cit.*, p. 38

The reason for unhappy industrial relations at the factory is not clear. Tension may have arisen after recruitment of local people as spinners and English weavers. These weavers may have come from Kidderminster, where there had been a strike of 2,000 weavers, lasting for five months in 1828, led by William Charlton, a Chartist. The cause of the strike was a proposed reduction in wages. Following their unsuccessful strike, the Kidderminster weavers may have been eager to emigrate with the hope of better wages elsewhere.²⁹

Although there is no firm evidence that the mixing of Scots and English weavers caused a breakdown in relations, it cannot have been easy for managers to make the two groups work as a team. Many English weavers were accustomed to arranging their own working hours, whereas the Kilmarnock weavers had been disciplined to regular hours.³⁰

There were other difficulties in the early years of the settlement. On 30 June 1834 an old flour mill which was used as a dye house was destroyed by fire, with the loss of all its contents. The combined efforts of local farmers and villagers, working as a human chain to pass buckets of water, managed to save a nearby store-house, although its roof and some contents of dyed yarn were damaged. The irony of the situation was that a new fire-engine hose was available, but there was neither equipment nor trained men to operate it, and so it lay unused while leaping flames illuminated a scene of frantic activity as buckets passed

²⁹ Kidderminster Carpet Weavers. Sourced at http://billdraper.net/html/body_allen_and_biggs_families.html.

³⁰ Bartlett, J.N., *Carpeting the Millions*, John Donald Publishers, Edinburgh, 1978, pp. 15-17

from hand to hand.

Despite these losses, 1834 proved to be a successful year. Orders came in and customers went away satisfied and ready to make recommendations to other potential purchasers. The key to the company's success was that, thanks to its links with Britain, it was able to keep in the forefront of fashion. Its agent in Europe sent details of new patterns as soon as they came from the looms of Kilmarnock and Kidderminster, so that the Thompsonville factory could have its latest products on the market before their competitors' imports arrived. Orrin Thompson was therefore delighted with the firm's accounts for 1834. As a token of the company's gratitude, gold watches, each worth \$125, were presented to three factory officials at a ceremony in September 1835. By then Thompsonville Carpet Manufacturing Company was well and truly launched.³¹

Life in Thompsonville

What was life like for Kilmarnock immigrants in Thompsonville? Looking back at the end of a long life, John Hutchinson gave the following description of his early days there:

“Thompsonville ...was a wee Kilmarnock, an anomaly in its earlier years – a Scottish village in the heart of the state of Connecticut. There the songs of Burns and Tannahill were heard in the true vernacular by the banks of the river,

³¹ Articles in *Enfield Press*, 1882

*commingling with the ripple of its waters, and there were men in that community who brought more than the songs of Ayrshire with them. They brought their proverbial thrift, their intelligence, their sterling integrity and the sturdy independence of their sires. And more still, they did not leave behind them the devotional exercises once so general among the Scottish peasantry and artisans.”*³²

The religion which the immigrants brought with them was Presbyterian. In writing home from Washington to his sister in Kilmarnock in 1824 (before the arrival of the Kilmarnock workers), James Smith Gregory remarked:

“You don’t know ... how very different in appearance the Sundays are here than with you. Although people attend church, yet in fine weather everyone walking about our streets present to our view as many people, but not the bustle we have through the week; many who are confined through the week to their business take a ride to the country either on purpose to see their friends and relations or to snuff the cooler air, frequently both.

“We have a steamboat running between this and Alex(andria) which takes down in one hour. I have frequently gone down on a Sunday when there would be upwards of 200 passengers. The steamboat gets down in time to allow those so disposed to attend church.

“I want to show you that a person is (in) no dread here of

³² John Hutchinson’s Memoirs

*hearing the malicious and spiteful remarks of some Blue Stocking Fanatick or Enthusiast as it is with you. We have the examples of our Ministers here who we see during the summer evenings in the fields and commons, inhaling the refreshing breeze and musing on the events of the day.”*³³

This was not a description of riotous living on the Sabbath, but perhaps in a Scottish enclave such as Thompsonville a less liberal attitude to Sunday observance may have prevailed in the settlement's early years.

In the old Presbyterian tradition, they did not celebrate Christmas Day with a holiday and they wanted “*no new forms*”.³⁴

The immigrants had not brought a minister with them, but by 1831 they had acquired the services of an Anti-Burgher minister from Brechin, who had been disappointed in his hope of finding a charge in Nova Scotia.

Robert Thomson took pity on “*this poor thing*”, as Mary Thomson described him, and took him into his home on the understanding that he would preach on Sundays and teach the village's 27 children of school age until May, when the weather would be fine enough for the villagers to attend the Enfield

³³ Gregory Thomson Papers, 1824

³⁴ Article in *Enfield Press*, 1882

Sunday “*meeting*” and for the children to go to school there.

The community pooled their resources to pay him a small wage, which he did his best to earn, as he taught an evening class in addition to his other duties and gave the Thomson children extra tuition in return for his board and lodging. Although there was no proper school built until 1834, another building was used earlier for this purpose. The Brechin minister also used this as a makeshift church, which must have been better than the “*bailing house*” where he had first preached.

After his disheartening experience in Nova Scotia, it must have been gratifying to preach to “*crowded houses of Yankies and a number of Scotch*”.³⁵

It seems that Thompsonville had a Congregational church before a Presbyterian church was established and some Scots attended that church.

In 1839, however, more than 30 Scots withdrew from the Congregational church in order to join “*a Presbyterian church in Thompsonville which it is expected will soon be formed in that village in the Providence of God*”.³⁶

³⁵ Letter of Mary Thomson to her sister, January-March, 1831, Gregory Thomson Papers

³⁶ Notes by Kenyon, M. N., 13, in a file on “Carpet Trade in America”, Local History Collection, Burns Monument Centre, Kilmarnock

Strict though they were in their religious observance, the Scots did unbend at times. Though they did not celebrate the Fourth of July, they feasted on turkey at Thanksgiving and revelled in true Scots style at Hogmanay, observing in the heart of Connecticut their old customs of first-footing and abundant hospitality to mark New Year's Day.³⁷

Such a celebration must have been a welcome diversion in the depths of a Connecticut winter when, according to Mary Thomson, "*the very breath on the blankets are froze ... water will freeze within a yard of the fire*".

Equally trying were American summers, when "*we were like to melt*".³⁸

Mary Thomson's correspondence is a fund of information on the everyday life of immigrants in the America of the 1830s. Judging by her caustic remarks on "*America, where everything is so good*", she sometimes felt that migrants were being lured by false promises:

*"For all the fine things that was to be got for almost nothing, I have seen none of them as yet – it must be somewhere else in America."*³⁹

³⁷ Article in *Enfield Press*, 1882

³⁸ Mary Thomson's letters, 1831 and 1834, Gregory Thomson Papers

³⁹ *Ibid.*

For years she and her husband felt painfully homesick. Robert could not bring himself to read letters from home and confessed, "*I never feel smart (as the Yankees say) for a day or two after receiving home letters*".

Mary enjoyed some things in America (such as squashes and pumpkins) and once her husband moved the family to New Jersey, she became more settled, but there were many small home comforts which she missed. Green vegetables were not available and Mary complained to her sister in 1831 that she had not seen an orange since she came to America and lemons were a rarity. Once settled in New Jersey, she asked for roots of tulips, auriculas and anemones to be sent from home, in return for which she sent roots of American plants, such as Solomon's seal.

Parts of her letters read like shopping lists. The cost of dress materials in America was so high and the quality often so poor that it was better to ask for material to be sent from Kilmarnock to make dresses for her daughters and for clothes for herself from her former dressmaker, who was assured that her client had not grown any stouter since she left home. Even small items such as tablecloths, needles, pins and dressing combs were on her list of requirements from Kilmarnock.

The arrival of a parcel from home must have provided a minor

excitement in what Mrs Thomson described as “*a dull, monotonous sort of life*”. In Thompsonville she complained of meeting little company and she was scathing of the manners of Americans since the occasion when she had sent the children to Enfield “*to ask a few Miss (sic) for a party on (Robert’s) birthnight ... it turned out a wet afternoon and none came or sent any apology. They are not the best bred folks I have seen.*”

Apart from their bad manners, she faulted the Americans for their lack of genteel accomplishments. Dancing was “*thought nothing of here*” and none of the young ladies had ever been taught to dance. Apparently they did not occupy themselves with fine embroidery either, for in 1838, by which time Mary Thomson had been away from Kilmarnock for nine years, she did not understand her sister’s reference to her “*tambours*” and her work on “*a full-blown carnation*”. Obviously, the art of Ayrshire embroidery had not been as well advanced before Mary left Kilmarnock.

While in Thompsonville Mary had a Negro washer woman, but when her husband was struggling to set up a new business in New Jersey, she had no domestic help, but by then her eldest daughter was able to help with baking, washing and ironing, although when their water supply ran low in summer, they had to send washing to a washer woman as the nearest water was too far away for them to be able to carry much home.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Mary Thomson’s letters, 1834, Gregory Thomson Papers

As her husband's business began to prosper, Mary became more settled. Her brother, James Smith Gregory, retired to Kilmarnock sometime after the American Civil War in the 1860s. Mary Thomson's daughter, Susan, went to keep house for him. In later years, Susan was joined in the family's Nelson Street residence by her brother, William Gregory Thomson, after his business career in New York. Mary Thomson died in New Jersey at the age of 90. To the last she retained vivid memories of the Kilmarnock of her youth. ⁴¹

Americans often look back on their ancestors with pride, but surely the town which sent out people of such talent and moral character as the Thompsonville spinners and weavers can feel a justifiable sense of satisfaction at having raised them.

This article (with a few small additions and corrections now) appeared in Kilmarnock and District History Group's Kilmarnock - Aspects of Local History vol. 1)

⁴¹ Obituary of Susan Thomson, *The Kilmarnock Standard*, 29 September 1902

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