

**THE LATE JAMES K. BELL** – founder and honorary president of Dornoch Heritage Society

Recollections by Struan Robertson.

One day, shortly after our arrival in Dornoch, into my life walked Jimmy Bell, who took me away for a car-run up the lower Evelix Valley. This was to be the start of many repeated forays into the hinterland of Dornoch to visit ancient monuments, to measure them out, to photograph anything of interest and to discuss the amazing flora and fauna of both woods and moorland. Of course, upon return home to a cup of coffee and a soak in a warm bath, while memories were fresh in the mind, I committed our findings to paper in drawing form. Here I was almighty grateful that I had attended the after-school lessons in technical drawing, in Glasgow, which had kept me beyond the time of the normal train, which threw teatime and homework out of the timetable and eventually a much later time to bed, all of which decided my parents that this drawing class had to cease! A great sadness: it was a discipline I learned to enjoy, and which now came in extremely useful in rendering drawing after drawing to Jimmy for his Heritage Society collection.

Jimmy was at once the kindest and most interesting of companions. His profound and widespread knowledge of Nature, flora, birds, archaeology and geology, as well as a tract's history and its rural industrial significance gave our rambles a wealth of happy learning and understanding. His love for the countryside and its beauty in all weathers relit the joys of the Lanarkshire woods, fields, farms and moors of my youth. And what a bonus! Jimmy was a Lanarkshire man like myself, so we had a lot in common. And what sharings of memories and experiences of Scotland's most industrial, yet beautiful, county were kindled. Jimmy knew all the most interesting places to visit. First of all, the old family croft of Achosnich on the north bank of the Evelix and the terribly lonely Strath Ach A Vaich homestead far up the valley of that name. Then further afield there was not a hut circle, shieling, standing stone, croft or enclosure that we did not view, photograph, measure up and draw, insofar as I am aware.

We discussed everything and anything. Why, for example, the upper and lower Evelix Valley settlements are two totally unconnected areas with separate populations with but one old, disused track traversing the narrow, boggy, glacial valley of the Evelix from the lower end of Loch

an Lagain to Achormlarie. We walked the length of the new Forestry road from Achormlarie to Loch Buidhe with its glorious evening view through sunlit hills to the far west of the county. We saw ancient pine forest tree stumps and roots hard as stone in sections of the road through peat banks. We saw divers on Loch Beinn Dombhnaill and a moorland owl, in the daylight, quartering the heather in search of prey. We discovered at Puill Fhraoch settlement on the old track to Loch Laro a wonderfully preserved corn-drying kiln, with two entrance doors and a kiln with two stokeholes, all intact. We reported it to the late Mrs Durham of Scottish Heritage who, in turn, reported it to her Department Boss as of her own finding! Jimmy would not have liked my mentioning this, but the pre-history sciences, the world over, are sadly rife of such petty irritations as the theft of findings and discoveries.

Then, nearer to home, the amazing colony of hut circles and enclosures in the area of Camore Woods, more than 30 of them, described in the Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments and Constructions of Sutherland of 1911 (Price six shillings!). To these we added one or two more not previously discovered. All of these we measured, photographed and drew for Jimmy's collection for the Dornoch Heritage Society that he conceived, floated and carried to Honorary Presidency.

All the time we would be discussing what we saw and what we thought of it, who might have lived there, the families long gone overseas. Sutherland's grand- and great-grandchildren visited Dornoch and wanted to know more about their forebears and the crofts they had worked. Rarely indeed did they ever leave Jimmy's house without the details they sought!

Then one wonderful day, Jimmy was given a whole day's use of the civil engineering team who built the Mound road bridge to professionally survey any of the historic areas that he had felt of most importance! He chose the Cnoc Gargh-Airigh settlement near Loch Laro, north of Bonar Bridge, and a whole day was spent up in the hills near this source of the River Evelix. Using all modern laser surveying equipment the resultant drawing was exact to within a fraction

of a millimetre. When it was finally turned out, great was our pleasure in this, for it showed that our own foot-slogging, hill-scrabbling, peat-bog-sloshing elementary and untutored survey was not so far short of the professional job for accuracy! A wonderful thrill for us both and a real uplift in confidence in the empirical techniques we had evolved to do so!

Later there was the building of the Dornoch Firth road bridge 1989-91, the first big "cast-push, incremental launched" bridge in Britain: Christiani & Nielsen of Holland and Morrison Construction of Tain's successful joint venture into what had been for over a century considered quite impossible. Jimmy Bell immediately got in contact through Mr Ted Murdoch of Messrs Crouch & Hogg, resident engineers, and secured permits for Dornoch Heritage Society to visit and inspect the works. This was used several times, inspecting the construction "factory" on the Ross-shire side and the hydraulic rams that pushed the "increments" of construction, week by week, across the tops of the pre-constructed pillars towards the north shore. Trips were even made in the construction motor launches and tugs out to see the building of these pillars and the construction platforms, all of which was a marvellously interesting experience. The bridge was opened by Her Majesty the Queen Mother on Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> August 1991. It is 900 metres long a deck level and estimated to weigh some 16,000 tons.

Jimmy then managed to arrange a visit by the Area Archaeologist from Inverness to have a look at some of the Camore Wood's bigger hut circles and the enigmatic Jarl Sigurd's so-called "grave" on the Sydera field just west of Sydera Woods. The site is thought possibly to have been the Jarl's grave from descriptions in The Orkneyinga Saga. The Area Archaeologist was, of course, interested, but entirely negative in almost all comment!

Annual displays of the Society's work, usually in the Council Chamber, caused quite a lot of local and tourist interest - sufficient indeed to generate thoughts about premises for permanent display: in other words, a Dornoch Museum. My daughter, Anthea, was instrumental in securing several professional display units at a much-reduced price, due to some trivial transport damage. They were a very great help.

Slowly these happy and thoroughly enjoyable excursions into the countryside began to become less and less often, and shorter and shorter, as Jimmy began to suffer the indignity

of advancing age. Recurrent trouble with his eyes dimmed his vision to just short of blindness and his vibrant and vital general health deteriorated. The almost nightly visits to my home to chat and examine drawings under production thinned out and finally stopped as he became weak with visits to Raigmore commanding more of his time. He bore these increasing constraints with amazing fortitude, even until he slipped away, a very brave and uncomplaining man.

Jimmy had thus become my closest friend in the North and we had tremendous rapport one with another. I remember only one difference of opinion in our twenty years of friendship, actually over the Dornoch Heritage Society Collection Cataloguing, and I was so sorry over that. However, as an extremely happy result, it was accepted by both younger and more experienced members.

Jimmy was a gracious gentleman; kindly to a degree, tolerant, deeply interested, a wonderfully widely read person and a great teacher. He always had time to listen to any problem or project and to give of the soundest advice. His great interest in poetry was the basis of many a friendship and to listen to his wide memory of verse and to watch the sparkle in his eyes as he quoted was very pleasant and fraught with admiration at his tremendous memory. To have conceived the idea of a Dornoch Heritage Society, to have gathered the interest of so great a number of members and to have carried the young Society from strength to strength is perhaps the best memorial to a man of his calibre. The very first meeting was in the West Church Hall when, I understand, the new members were all asked to bring an antique for display and discussion of merit! Jimmy walked into my life at a most needed time, as I retired to Dornoch with absolutely nothing in my mind to do. He filled my emptiness of being with the most marvellous vistas of countryside, pre-history and modern history, of people past and present, of Nature and modern progress and with the urge to record at least some of it in a manner I never thought possible of myself. He was a wonderful friend.