

The Lace Industry of New Pitsligo

It is not common knowledge that for over 170 years exquisite lace has been made in New Pitsligo in the heart of Aberdeenshire which once boasted an International market.

New Pitsligo, which had been created by Sir William Forbes of Monymusk in the late 18th century in response to the need to the spinning of flax grown in the area, had houses built to accommodate the looms for the cottage industry. Evolution of machinery killed the hand based methods and the male workers went to work mainly on the land as fee'd servants, as the poor law then in operation obliged them to live apart from their families, or in the five granite quarries that encircled the village. Occupation for women and girls left at home whilst their men folk, brothers, fathers and husbands worked out of the village proved very problematical.

The Revd William Webster who came in 1841 to New Pitsligo to the charge of St John' Evangelist, resolved to promote not only the moral and spiritual well-being of the village but also to find a resolution to the poverty of the unemployed women and girls. If they knitted a coarse type of stocking they could make a few shillings per week but lace making was to treble that, many household becoming entirely dependent on the industry.

Webster discovered that a few of the elderly women of the village occupied their time by thread weaving making a coarse form of lace. A Huntly lace-maker called Margaret Scott came to the village when she married her village shoemaker husband John Hall. At the suggestion of Revd Webster, Mrs Hall began to



St John the Evangelist Episcopal Church built 1871 of granite from the local quarries

teach the women the basics of lace making. Mrs Webster also took an interest and the project took off. Webster dared not advertise the industry mission too much in case the 'workers' couldn't keep up. He needn't have troubled himself, with determination the Aberdeenshire lasses rose to the event and produced yards of the finished bobbin lace which it was said rivalled the famous 'Honiton' variety. They even reproduced the famous Valenciennes lace exactly, making it indistinguishable from the real thing. The population of the village was about 2,000 in 1895 and about 10% were classified as lace-makers in the Census of the decade. Royal patronage came to the industry, Queen Victoria placing a large order and a dress for Princes Royal was made using yards of lace.

Regrettably cheaper foreign lace particularly from Spain flooded the market and in a market crash typical of many current day business catastrophes, orders fell away and it gradually ceased as a large scale entity. There are still lace makers in New Pitsligo today, proud of their long tradition of quality lace making.

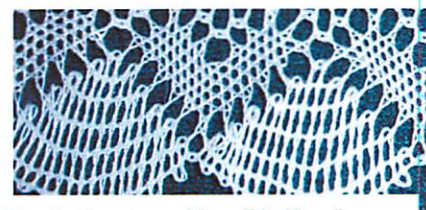
Revd William Webster was a remarkable man. As leader amongst educationists he was far sighted, instanced by the creation of the Day Schools at New Pitsligo which he established in 1849 when not many other church schools



A picture of a lady sitting at her cottage door with her cushion on her knee making her lace

were in existence in Scotland. He was elevated as Dean of the Diocese in 1887 in succession to Dean Alexander Walker. Dean Webster also managed a lending library in the village, a Savings Bank and was President of the local Horticultural Society holding office in these posts for nearly all his Incumbent life. A clothing club had been established by Lady Harriet Stuart Forbes and on her death continued for the later 30 years of his life by the Dean and his wife. He was also Chaplain to the Masonic Brotherhood ever since the constitution of a Lodge in New Pitsligo.

As a further post-script, Margaret Hall's husband was related to the 'Buchan Loon' who was to become Bishop of Aberdeen & Orkney, Right Revd Herbert William Hall, who was bishop 1943-1955.



Typical pattern New Pitsligo Lace

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