

BANFFSHIRE CLEARANCES AND LOST SETTLEMENTS
Summary of talk given to Portsoy Salmon Bothy Family History Group
by John R. Barrett on 6th March 2010

While many dramatic and harrowing accounts have been recorded about forced evictions in the Highland Clearances, the quiet revolution in agriculture which began during the second half of the 18th century resulted in clearances in Banffshire also.

Estate records and maps provide us with evidence that in the late 18th century the Banffshire countryside supported a much larger population than it does today and the modern landscape is relatively empty in comparison. A typical settlement was a farm township ('farmtoun') consisting of 5 – 6 households living in a cluster of turf houses, surrounded by land which was farmed in common. Illustrations were provided, contrasting historic maps with modern photos in which no trace can be seen of the buildings which once existed.

Until about 1780 rentals were generally paid in kind to landlords, often in the form of produce such as capons, geese, peats or grain, any surplus being sold at market to generate cash income, although landlords could also demand payment in the form of labour. At this time written rental agreements were a rarity and consequently few tenants had any legal right of tenure.

By the late 18th century ancient defensive tower houses had outlived their usefulness and many lairds were aspiring to modern mansions in the classical style. This new lifestyle relied on a ready flow of cash to finance it and it was for this reason that landlords gradually moved to a purely monetary system of collecting rents.

Using the authority of the Sheriff Courts, landowners were able to request tenants to vacate their holdings with just six months' notice. Surprisingly, this measure met with little resistance in Banffshire, in part because people were accustomed to frequent changes of tenancies, but also because attractive alternatives were offered in the form of new homes in planned towns and villages where those displaced could specialise as tradesmen (e.g. weavers, coopers & blacksmiths). In some cases (e.g. Cullen) these new settlements were created in new locations, often a little further away from the laird's mansion. New industries such as textiles were also established during the same period, which was characterised by large-scale migration from the countryside to the new urban centres.

In the countryside, crofters were encouraged to move from the old turf dwellings to stone built houses, constructed by land proprietors, who provided incentives to adopt more efficient farming techniques, e.g. crop rotation. The result was a gradual change in the landscape, with fewer houses, new roads and the creation of rectilinear fields, with the old townships being ploughed out.

This period also saw investment by landowners in improved harbour facilities and the establishment of new fishing ports, offering another source of income to those cleared from the rural hinterland. Revenue could be maximised through provision of housing and boats, which fishermen were obliged to rent from the lairds.

Today there is evidence of pre-clearance townships in upland areas and some of these sites have been the subject of survey work as part of the Scotlands Rural Past project. Typical features of townships include:

- Sites bordered by trees (planted by the laird);
- Houses with stone footings and roofs thatched with peat taken from local moorland;
- A kiln (usually with a turf roof) for drying grain;
- A still-house, often located near a stream: a means of generating additional cash.

Where no foundations are in existence, the presence of old settlements is often indicated by the name 'Kirkton', such as in Kirkton of Rothiemay. A solitary church standing on its own in the countryside is a strong clue that the surrounding land has been cleared, especially when a castle site lies nearby.

Publications by David Barrett include the following titles:

Mr James Allan: the journey of a lifetime
Broken Sword

Elgin's Love-gift: civil war in Scotland and the depositions of 1646 (*co-authored with Alastair Mitchell*)

The Whitestone Stories

Discovering Your Family Tree *(co-authored with David Iredale)*

Discovering Your Old House *(co-authored with David Iredale)*

Discovering Local History *(co-authored with David Iredale)*

Discovering Old Handwriting *(co-authored with David Iredale)*