

**TIBBIE
SHIELDS
HISTORY**

TIBBIE SHIEL AND THE INN AT ST. MARY'S LOCH

by W. A. J. Prevost

Walter Shiel, an 'agricultural labourer', and Mary Grieve his wife are recorded in 1780 as being 'indwellers at Thirlstane Mill' where their eldest daughter Mary was born. Walter spent all his working life in Ettrick and was once again in Thirlstane when his second daughter 'Isobel' was baptized in the parish kirk on 22 November 1783. They had eight children for which see the appendix.

Isobel or Isabella¹ who was better known as Tibbie, spent her early life in the service of Margaret Laidlaw or Hogg at Ettrick Hall a short distance from Ettrick kirk. Margaret was the mother of James, the Ettrick Shepherd, and in this way began the lasting friendship between the Shepherd and Tibbie. She once said that James Hogg had courted her but never came to the point, and this left her free to marry in November 1806 a man from Westmorland named Robert Richardson, 'moleman at Longshawburn in Eskdalemoor'.² He was one of those 'mowdiemen' who, like the Taylors in Moffat, had been enticed by certain landlords to come to Scotland,³ and Richardson worked for the Napiers on their estate.

Tibbie mothered seven children. They were born in various places as shown in the appendix. The youngest, a girl called Dorothy, was born in 1820 in a cottage on Chapelhope at the head of the Loch of the Lowes. They were then badly housed and in 1823 they became tenants of St. Mary's Cottage which Lord Napier had had built on some level ground between the now abandoned road to Tushielaw and the southernmost shore of St. Mary's Loch, and standing at about 800 ft. above sea level.

The cottage was like many others of its kind.⁴ It still survives with its two apartments on the ground floor⁵ which were then separated by a small apartment opposite the front door. The attic story with sky-lights was reached by a ladder through a hatchway in the kitchen ceiling. The interior walls are 15 ft. wide and 36 ft. long and were originally covered with a thatch roof.⁶ It is shown in the Valuation Roll as being in the parish of Yarrow, together with Bowerhope on St. Mary's Loch and Crosscleuch east of the Loch of the Lowes. Henderland is also in Yarrow to which parish it was transferred from Megget and Lyne in 1891. The Rodono, Hogg's Monument and Chapelhope are in Ettrick.

This is a lovely part of Scotland which has been described many times in verse⁷ and prose,⁸ and it was here that the Richardsons set up house. They were then able to appreciate the comfort of their new home which Richardson was not to enjoy for long. He died after a short illness on 1 March 1824 and was buried in Ettrick on the occasion of one of the severest snow-storms ever seen in Yarrow. It was a terrible task for the bearers who carried the coffin up the Captain's

1. Death certificate of Isabella Richardson.

2. Register of Proclamations, Ettrick, 7 Nov. 1806.

3. John Mactaggart, *The Scottish Gallovidian Encyclopedia*, 2nd Edition (1876), 351.

4. Dr Singer, *View of Agriculture* . . . (1812), 97.

5. 'A comfortable cot of two apartments,' William Keddie, *Moffat* (1854), 49.

6. 'A kitchen, a small bedroom and bed closet,' *The Fishing Gazette*, 17 Sept. 1898.

7. Professor John Wilson, *Noctes Ambrosianae* (1888), 44. [Wilson]

8. See Rev. R. Borland, *Yarrow, its poets and poetry*, 2nd Edition, (1908).

8. Veitch, *History and Poetry of the Scottish Border*, 2nd Edition, (1893).

Bridle Path by Riskenhope,⁹ across 'The Slunk'¹⁰ at 1800 ft. and thence down the 'Kirk Road' to the burial ground on the 800 ft. contour.

Tibbie was left responsible for her family of three boys and three girls and she planned to make a living by providing accommodation for anglers who resorted to St. Mary's Loch which then 'abounded in fish' as did the other lochs and burns. She set aside for guests an attic room which had two press beds,¹¹ and in this venture she was helped by Robert Chambers the publisher who in 1827 wrote in *The Picture of Scotland*¹² that the widow Richardson was letting the spare room of her small neat house for any length of time for a small rent. She could provide her guests with food and it was all truly delightful. Her old friend and neighbour James Hogg¹³ also recommended Tibbie to his friends among whom was a young Edinburgh student, and so it happened that on 10 July 1828 Thomas Tod Stoddart,¹⁴ John Wilson and two other students walked over from Innerleithen by Traquair to stay in Tibbie's little cottage.¹⁵ They ate their own trout, supplemented with bacon and mutton chops, scones and butter, and from that beginning 'the small neat house' was to become famous.

Thomas Stoddart was a dedicated angler who wrote books on the art of angling and on his angling reminiscences. He became a frequent visitor to Tibbie's when he fished with Hogg on Yarrow, St. Mary's Loch and Loch Skene.¹⁶ He has described a great day when they fished down the Winterhope burn and Megget, and 'the creel-fuls we respectively emptied out on arrival at Henderland . . . would have astonished even a Tweedside adept.' On another days fishing, at the foot of Megget close to where it enters the loch, he killed three panniers-ful of trout, each containing a stone weight and upwards; and to show how well stocked were the waters in those days Stoddart had seen 40 or 50 lbs. weight of trout caught out of St. Mary's Loch in three or four hours by a Scotchman from Moffat fishing with an 'otter' or 'lath', the use of which has now been made illegal.¹⁷

John Wilson, one of Stoddart's companions on his first visit, was the son of John Wilson, Professor of Moral Philosophy at Edinburgh University. The father was also a keen angler and in 1829 stayed at the cottage and struck up a friendship with Tibbie on the spot and afterwards paid her many a visit.¹⁸ He also stayed at Birkhill where the legendary Jenny Broadfoot was wont to point out to visitors the box bed in which the professor slept. Thirlestane, the home of the Napiers, was another of his haunts, and a favourite port of call was Altrive Lake or perhaps Mount Benger, the home of his friend the Ettrick Shepherd. Wilson knew the district well and on one occasion, in June 1815, he fished all the way from Traquair Knowes to Altrive where he surprised Hogg in his cottage bottling whisky,¹⁹ and this was one way of getting there since there was then no public

9. *The Daily Review*, Monday 29 July 1878.

10. Slunk, a mire, a quagmire.

11. T. T. Stoddart, *Angling Songs*, with a memoir by Anna Stoddart (1889), 39.

12. R. Chambers, *The Picture of Scotland* (1827), i, 167.

13. Hogg in 1817 went to settle permanently at Altrive. In 1820 he took a disastrous 9 year lease of Mount Benger.

14. T. T. Stoddart, *An Angler's rambles and angling songs* (1866), 202.

15. T. T. Stoddart, *Angling Songs*, op. cit., 37.

16. T. T. Stoddart, *Songs of the Season* (1881), xxv.

17. T. T. Stoddart, *The Anglers Companion*, 2nd Edition (1853), 201.

18. T. T. Stoddart, *Angling Songs*, op. cit., 41.

19. Mrs Mary Gordon, *Christopher North* (1879), 133.

transport. Hogg wrote to his publishers in Glasgow that the way to get to him was 'by the Peebles coach which during the summer months runs to Innerleithen and from that you must foot it or hire a gig to Altrive'.²⁰

Tibbie had been given permission to make the cottage an inn on condition that she sold neither wine nor spirits, but patrons could bring their own whisky and she provided hot water, sugar and spoons.²¹ It may have been about this time that the widow Richardson resumed her maiden name of Shiel, a practice said to have been far from uncommon among the humble population of the Border uplands.²² A hundred and fifty years or more ago there were many variations in the spelling of a name and so it was with Tibbie. Spelt Sheal, Sheall, Sheil or Shiels the name was finally and officially recognised as Shiel, but there is ample evidence to show that in the middle of the last century she was sometimes referred to as Shiels. She herself once said that "folk a' ken me best as Tibbie Shiels, and I dare-say, when I am dead and gone, this place here will still be ca'ed Tibbie Shiels's."²³

The friendship of Tibbie, Hogg and Wilson to some extent inspired the professor's writings in *Blackwood's Magazine* of which he was editor. In 1828, in the March number of *Maga*, he contributed his first *Noctes Ambrosianae* which were continued, with occasional intervals, until the issue of February 1835. These articles enjoyed an amazing popularity, being read by all classes throughout the United Kingdom. They could be called conversation pieces in which the chief characters were Wilson himself as Christopher North, James Hogg as The Shepherd, and Robert Sym the author's uncle as Tickler. These characters and others were supposed to meet in Ambrose's Tavern in West Register Street in Edinburgh²⁴ and hence *Noctes Ambrosianae*, nights at Ambrose's, which were not orgies as some people might have thought. Indeed The Shepherd was at pains to point this out when he asked Christopher North to declare in *Maga* whether or not he ever saw him once the worse for drink.²⁵ Furthermore it seems that Hogg had had many pressing entreaties to admit ladies to the parties at Ambrose's which one can rest assured must have been well behaved.²⁶

The *Noctes* have been too often reviewed to need any comment. However it must be said that Wilson's 'reproduction of the Selkirkshire dialect is perfect',²⁷ and when reading what The Shepherd has to say in his parts one can almost hear him speaking in the old broad Border Doric. Though Wilson was the author it seems that Blackwoods may have compensated Hogg for figuring in the articles, for in a letter to the publishers Hogg once wrote that he had 'received £10 for every *Noctes*' and then went on to say that "I am certain that Wilson writes these inimitable articles solely for the generous purpose of assisting in the support and education of my family."²⁸ There had been an occasion when Blackwoods had asked Hogg about sending something for the *Noctes* to which he replied in a

MS 807 f 19. [MS] 20. Letter Edinburgh 11 Feb. 1833. Hogg to Messrs Blackie & Co., Glasgow. National Library of Scotland.

21. Stoddart, *Angling Songs* op cit., 39, 41.

22. *Scotsman*, Monday 29 July 1878.

23. Miss Helen Jane Russell, *Recollections of a Roxburghshire Woman* (c 1900), 16.

24. Cassell's *Old and New Edinburgh*, in 6 vols, (1885), ii, 171

25. Wilson, op. cit., 309.

26. Letter 25 May 1827. James Hogg, Mount Benger to Mm. Blackwood, Edinburgh, MS 4019. f. 191.

27. Miss Russell op. cit., 15.

28. Letter 28 Feb 1835, Altrive. Hogg to Blackwoods, MS 4040, A-K, f 287.

letter from Altrive Lake that 'there just is no man alive can write a genuine *Noctes* but Wilson,'²⁹ This was true, for Wilson's wit and brilliance coupled with a love of the country is evident in his incomparable and beautiful stray descriptions of Yarrow and of life there 150 years ago. His often quoted *Tibbie's Cottage at St. Mary's Loch* is one of his gems.³⁰

One of the professor's correspondents and an intimate friend of the Shepherd was Alexander Laidlaw of Bowerhope³¹ who in January 1835 wrote this newsy letter to Wilson in Edinburgh.³² 'Mrs Richardson has been almost dead but is now happily recovered'³³ . . . Our friend the poet is very well this season . . . He got a prime Grew³⁴ frae Willie Aitchison but she is something like himself, fonder of sport than mischief, for she trys a race with the bares very readily and generally beats them, but she seems to think that this department of the sport is all she is bound to perform.' He adds that with the help of his collies Hogg managed to bag a few and Laidlaw ends with the suggestion that this story would do for one of his articles. It has a sad ending for though the Shepherd was able to shoot, course and fish his days were numbered and on 21 November the Scotsman announced that 'this celebrated Scottish poet lies dangerously ill at his residence at Altrive . . . and but small hope of his recovery.' He was nursed for four weeks by his old friend Tibbie Shiel and died on 21 November 1835, 'a genuine Scotsman and a man passionately attached to his country,'³⁵ and as his son James has told us, 'St. Mary's Loch above all others was the spot where he loved most to wander. Every day, summer and winter, he got a glimpse of it.'³⁶

As soon as he had heard the news Professor Wilson and his two sons John and Blair came down from Edinburgh to Altrive and at the funeral in Etrick kirkyard he and 'Wee Jamie,' Hogg's only son, 'laid the head in the grave.' Wilson never wrote another *Noctes*.³⁷

It is said that in the early days of Tibbie Shiels Inn remarkable gatherings took place in that humble cottage of which no record was ever kept. Tibbie was of course providing sleeping accommodation for men and catered for parties like the one organised by Professor Wilson who asked some of his students to meet him at 'Tibby Shiels's' where they could wander the day with him 'to enjoy the first gentle embrace of spring in some solitary spot.'³⁸ It is puzzling how she managed but as time went on she made various improvements and additions to the but and ben so that by the 1860's the plan of the interior may have been something like this.

The room to the right of the front door was the kitchen where there was a huge fireplace with two sweets, two double box beds with shutters, one of which

29. Letter 22 June 1834, Altrive Lake. Hogg to Blackwoods. MS 4039, H-Z, f 30.

30. Wilson, *op. cit.*, 43.

31. See Rev. James Russell, *Reminiscences of Yarrow* (1894), 80.

32. MS 4041, f 1.

33. On another occasion Tibbie was again very ill. She said good-bye to all her friends and gave away all her clothes. She recovered and lived for another 15 years.

34. Grew, a greyhound. William Aitchison, Esq., of Menzion — a loved friend of the Shepherd.

35. *Edinburgh Evening Courant*, Thursday 21 Nov. 1835.

36. Letter 7 Nov. 1860. Sydney, Australia, from James Hogg junior, in Alexander Laidlaw's book of newspaper cuttings. James had emigrated to Australia where he landed in 1860. MS 228.

37. Mrs Garden, *Memorials of James Hogg* (1885), 327 et seq. In a letter 12 Dec. 1835, Bowerhope, Alexander Laidlaw describes Hogg's last illness, his death and funeral.

38. Mrs Mary Gordon *op. cit.*, 246.

with Tibbie's grandfather-clock and chair is shown in an illustration in William Steven's *Yarrow*.³⁹ The room to the left, which is now a public bar, was divided by two double box beds with curtains, the other part containing a double and a single box bed. A staircase in the space between the two downstairs rooms did away with the ladder and hatchway in the kitchen and this was certainly a great improvement. Above the kitchen an attic bedroom had been fitted up with two double box beds and three single box beds with surtains, while a small room above the bar had two single box beds, also with curtains. There were useful bits of furniture distributed around the house.

The kitchen by itself was quite inadequate to cope with an influx of visitors and Tibbie added an extension to the back of the cottage and at some later date she built an annex at the kitchen end of the house where she could cater for parties and functions such as the annual meeting of the St. Mary's Curling Club. Nine members foregathered there in March 1868 with Robert Mitchell of Kirkstead in the chair when they 'partook of a sumptuous dinner'.⁴⁰

This jigsaw puzzle provided sleeping quarters for 13 male guests and beds for Tibbie and her staff. For obvious reasons she would only take men but there was one occasion when a guest recorded that he had stayed in the inn for a weekend in June 1870 and had found a large company staying there. "Owing to a young lady occupying the upper flat of the house we had to sleep at Corse Cleuch. No less than sixteen of us sat down to breakfast (sic) on Saturday night and fourteen on Sunday." Nevertheless this was luxury compared to the occasions when Tibbie sometimes had as many as five-and-thirty in a night, and William Chambers the publisher asked her if that was true. "That's only about the twalt o' August when the shooters come up among the hills. After a' the beds are filled they just lie on the floor or onygate. We do what we can to make them comfortable."⁴¹

"We" in this connection meant Tibbie herself, her son Wullie, a housekeeper, a cook and a scullery maid, one of whom was responsible for cooking the mutton chops which were a speciality of the house and another baked the scones which were often highly commended.⁴² In addition there may have been occasional help from outside and there was a groom who slept in a small apartment off the harness room at the stables. How they coped is another matter and when one looks at the old cottage one cannot but marvel how 13 men were housed, fed and cared for, and how someone could say that "it was very comfortable and one of the cheapest places he had ever put up in."⁴³

Tibbie was a notable woman and a very capable person about whom much has been written. She kept an orderly house and her friend Dr Russell, the minister of Yarrow, wrote that 'a quiet, almost queenly dignity of manner checked any flippancy and familiarity of speech or impropriety of conduct.'⁴⁴ One of her guests who had experienced most hospitable treatment at her hands recorded that 'Mrs Richardson is less a landlady than the lady of the house, and knowledge of her

39. Rev. William Steven, *Yarrow* (1916), 96.

40. Mrs Richardson's Visitors Book (*V.B.*)

41. *Scotsman* op. cit.

42. *V.B.* 21 July 1867, and see *V.B.* 9 Nov 1891 when Wullie Richardson was landlord.

43. *V.B.* 5 May 1879.

44. Rev. James Russell, op. cit., 203, 206.

tends much to remove the wonder with which we first hear that she was the friend as well as hostess of men like Professor Wilson and the Lord Provost of Edinburgh.⁴⁵ She had many friends and her visitors books provide copious proof.

West and East and South and North
As this little book reveals.
Yearly come the pilgrims forth
To the shrine of Tibbie Shiels.⁴⁶

It would be a mammoth task listing all the names of distinguished and well-known men and women who were either guests or excursionists at St. Mary's Cottage, but mention may be made of Professor Aytoun from Edinburgh, one of the four students who were Tibbie's first guests, who stayed there for three nights with his wife in September 1851. Then there was the Rev. James Russell who was a regular visitor,⁴⁷ and on one fine day in August 1877 thirty two people on the Yarrow and Ettrick Picnic enjoyed themselves 'to their hearts content and afterwards adjourned to Tibbie's and had refreshment of tea and other substantial.'⁴⁸

Many people with names well-known in Moffat made the pilgrimage and Anne J. Hope Johnstone from Raehills⁴⁹ and John J. Hope Johnstone from Moffat were there in 1848. Her signature appears in 1877 when in company with a friend, 'en route from Thirlestane Castle, they called to pay their respects to Mrs Richardson.'⁵⁰

Anne's visit to Ettrick was at the invitation of her cousin Elizabeth who in 1816 had married William John, Lord Napier of Merchiston and a captain in the Royal Navy.⁵¹ It was surely this Napier who used the Captain's Bridle Path when riding over from Thirlestane to enjoy a day's outing at St. Mary's Loch. He was not the only member of that family to do so and between 1849 and 1852 his daughter Ellinor, his son Francis, and Lady Anne his wife called to see Tibbie many times. Lord Francis was fishing for pike with some success and on one occasion netted one weighing 10 lbs.

Finally, a most important person was there at the Lochs on the important occasion of the Inauguration of the Hogg Monument in June 1860. Harriet, the Ettrick Shepherd's daughter, was staying in Moffat that summer and was able to attend the ceremony which she afterwards described.⁵² 'On entering the little town on our way to St. Mary's we were amazed to find it like a Sabbath day. The shops were all shut and the place deserted while up the pass of Moffatdale streamed multitudes of people of all classes, every conveyance and every animal of whatever description that could be persuaded to go the length of St. Mary's

45. *V.B.* 11 Oct. 1866. This was William Chambers, the publisher, and brother of Robert. He stayed there 5 July 1868 with his wife and Robert junior.

46. *V.B.* July 1871.

47. *V.B.* July 1848, July 1849, Sept. 1850, April 1852 etc.

48. *V.B.* 10 Aug. 1877.

49. Anne was born in 1817, the daughter of John James Hope-Johnstone of Annandale (1796-1876). She died unmarried 15 Sept. 1896. Sir William Fraser, *The Annandale Book* . . . i, 410, and ii, CCCXXVIII, generation XXIV.

50. *V.B.* 17 Sept. 1877. She was then living in Marchbank Wood in Kirkpatrick-Juxta.

51. Elizabeth, b 1794, daughter of James, third Earl of Hopetoun. She died 1883, William, Lord Napier, b 1786 and d 1834. *Scots Peerage*.

52. Harriet's 'Answers to Mr Gibbons's queries' with information about the Shepherd's descendants. MS 1869 f 101-105.



Plate No. XV
Tibbie Shiel

(photo A. R. Edwards, Selkirk)



Plate No. XVI
'Saint Mary's Cottage' c. 1890 — see p. 178

(photo Weir of Moffat)

7
6. 759/2

Drumfries Mercury;

Containing an Account of the most Remarkable

OCCURRENCES

Both Foreign and Domestic.

Being an Impartial Abstract of what is Material in the London and Edinburgh Prints &c. To which the Names of the Kingdoms, Provinces, Dukedoms, &c. in which the several Places therein mentioned by, are added, according to the best Gazetteer.

From MONDAY May 6 to MONDAY May 6, 1771.



D. R. U. M. F. R. I. B. S.
Printed by ROBERT RAE and Sold by Him at his Shop at the Sign of the Hand and Bible on the East side of the Street a little below the Fish-Cross, at his Printing-House in the Kirk-yard and at Mrs. Lawson's Coffee-House above the Cross. At which Places Subscriptions and Advertisements are taken in.

Plate No. XVII

Title page of No. 18 of the Drumfries Mercury — see Addenda.

"This scrap of paper (No. 12) gives a distinct . . . claim to Dumfries being the first town, apart from Edinburgh, to print a newspaper in Scotland". Published by permission of trustees of National Library of Scotland.

near there, and every shepherd from far or near seemed to have left his flocks for a day to do honour to the memory of him they loved so well.'

This extraordinary demonstration by men and women from all parts of the country has since rarely been equalled but when Tibbie died in her ninety sixth year the loss of a great personality was felt by everyone. For over fifty years she had been mistress of Tibbie Shiels and one of the celebrities of the Forest. Elizabeth, now the Dowager Lady Napier, wrote on July 24th 1878 from Thirlestane to Wullie Richardson that 'it was indeed sorrowful news to hear last night that my dear old friend had passed away . . . Dear Tibbie, she was one of my earliest friends and I believe the only one that has survived to the present time . . .'⁵³

The funeral took place on the following Saturday when the service at St. Mary's Cottage was taken by Tibbie's old friend Dr James Russell. The inn yard was crammed full with horses and traps and men on foot who followed the hearse up the Tushielaw road. The line of followers stretched all the way from the inn to past the Craggy Sike, a distance of fully half a mile, and when it reached the kirk many of the mourners had to stand outside. After it was all over Cuthbertson of the Daily Review was in the inn and there wrote in the visitor's book this in memoriam.

'The old tenant of this cottage "Tibbie Shiel" now rests in the secluded churchyard at Ettrick. The deceased was followed to her grave by all the farmers and shepherds for many miles araround, a worthy tribute to the memory of a true Scotchwoman.'⁵⁴

For photographs of Tibbie Shiel and of St. Mary's Cottage see plates numbered XV and XVI

Line 2 of last para before Appendix should read
'Isabella Melrose, housekeeper, is seated...'

APPENDIX WITH PEDIGREE CHART.

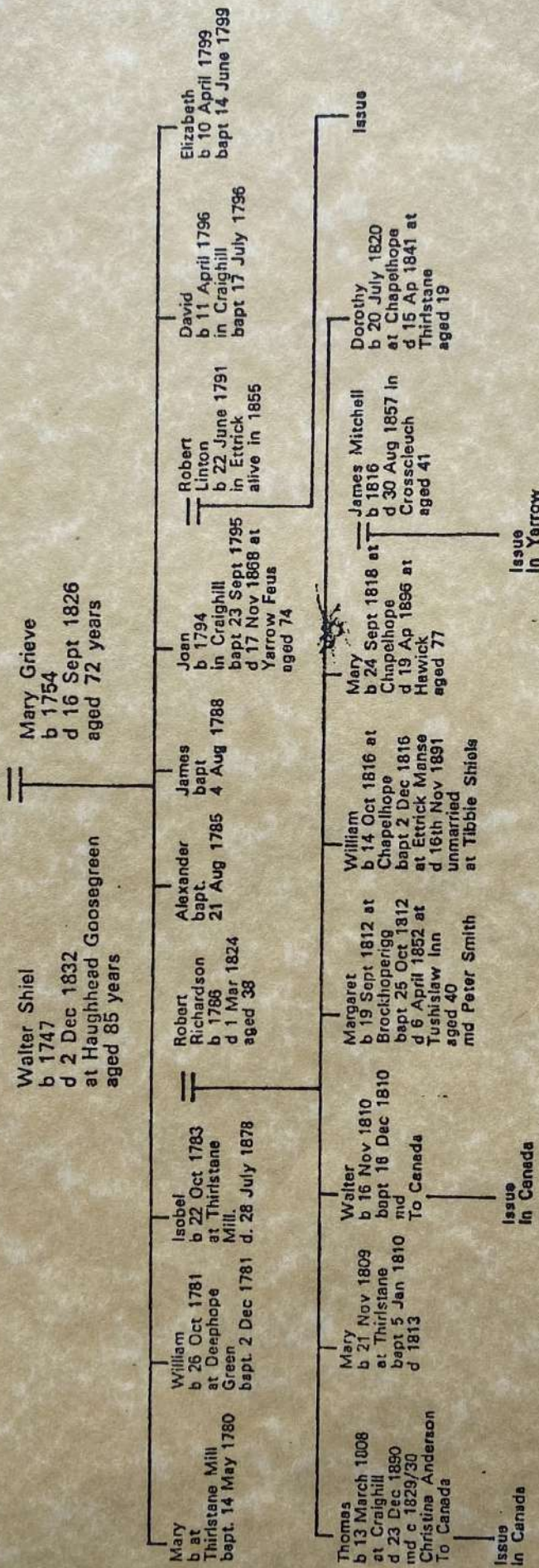
A glance at the pedigree chart will show that Thomas and Walter of the third generation emigrated to Canada. Contact has been lost with the descendants of Walter but there is now living at 696 Golden Avenue, Ottawa, a great-grandson of Thomas, Dr Horace J. Richardson, M.D., who has now retired. He has done considerable research on the Canadian descendants of Tibbie Shiel.

Descendants of Mary who married James Mitchell in Crosscleuch are still in Yarrow. Their great-grandson James (b 1924) is a well-known sheep farmer in Henderland which he works with his son James Mitchell junior.

Finally, descendants of Joan, Tibbie's sister who on 21 August 1827 married Robert Linton, continued the association of the family with Tibbie Shiels. Her grand-daughter Helen Linton from Walkerburn had been housekeeper for a time to Tibbie and Wullie. She married James Scott (1854-1932) and when Wullie died the Scotts decided to carry on the business. An entry in the visitor's book of 3 April 1892 shows that the inn was then functioning and another entry for 4 June that same year refers to "our first tea with Mrs Scott." The connection of the Scotts with the place came to an end in 1945. Christina Combe (1881-1970), the widow of Adam Scott (1884-1922), took over the place in 1922, assisted by her daughter Tibbie, now Mrs Isabella Shaw of Pentlands, Drummore, in the Mull of Galloway.

53. Letter in possession of James Mitchell of Henderland.

54. V.B. 28 July 1878. Tibbie died 23 July 1878. The day after the funeral was the fourth Sunday in the month [July] when Dr Russell preached the funeral sermon at St. Mary's churchyard on the occasion of the Blanket Preaching. See his *Reminiscences*, 201-208.



Pedigree chart of Tibbie Shiel

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