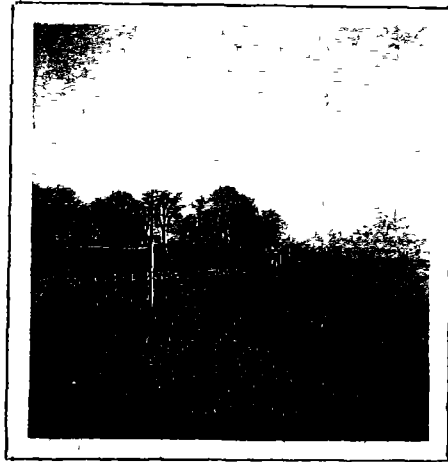


# *Contin*

*60 to 70  
years ago*





**Only one road to Strathpeffer and no busy traffic in those far off days**



*Notes for a talk*

*to the WRI*

*1996*

*by*

*Ken Cumming*

*(Organist at Contin Church for 54 years)*

## *Contin 60/70 years ago (1996)*

Coul Estate, home of the Mackenzies, was the hub of the area 60-70 years ago. Coul House itself was sub-let to Lt-Col Forbes-Robertson and family, who had their own entourage of staff: - Cook: Mrs Forbes, mother of Sybil whom some local people still remember; Butler: Mr Cecil; Chauffer: K Cumming, my father; with various housemaids, nannies, etc, to look after their children Anne, Jean and Kenneth Hugh. There were the two shooting lodges; Craigdarroch now an hotel; and Kinellan, where Sir Robert used to holiday for many years with his uncle, Canon A.A.D. Mackenzie, a former provost of St Andrew's Cathedral, Inverness. The two gate lodges, East and West, plus Mid Lodge, made up the immediate environment of the estate. The 8 farms were all tenanted.

There were several estate gardeners still employed: Mr Stephen, who lived in the Garden House; Dave Munro, West Lodge; Willie Munro (the Badger), East Lodge / Two gamekeepers: Mr Anderson, who resided at Aultnabreac, Craigdarroch and Mr Ledingham, Mid Lodge / Estate Forester/Sawmiller: Mr K Matheson (Kenny Flutie), who lived at Achilty; and Walter Mackay, estate handyman, who lived at 'the Cottage'. Mr Hugh Noble was the factor and resided at Contin Mains (his brother Tom was factor at Castle Leod).

A number of retired Coul House staff resided in the village e.g. John McVinish, coachman, and his sister who had been on the household staff, lived at the Heights of Kinnahaird; the three Misses Macdonald (Jeanie, Teenie, Katie) at Coul Cottage, Strathpeffer Road.

Coul House was commandeered by the military at the outbreak of War and became the residence for many of the officers of various regiments and nationalities who were stationed in the village. The whole area between the house and Mrs Benkowski's bungalow was filled with Nissen huts as billets for the 'other' ranks.

The village, in these early days, revolved round the estate. Each farm had its own workers, who lived in cottages on the farm - now either empty, sold as private residences, or retained and modernised for employees or holiday homes.

The village Post Office was run by a charming lady, Mrs Bethune, from a porch extension to her front door at Millbrae, the present home of Mr & Mrs F Bartlett. In those days Contin had its own Telephone Exchange situated in Mrs Bethune's living room, where many a call was manually 'switched through'. I can visualise the exchange console with its rows of dangling cables and metal leads for plugging into the various appropriate holes. A handle turned, a bell rang in someone's house, and another call went down the line! Talking of lines - we had telephone lines all along the road-sides in those days, with many pairs of wires carrying calls hither and thither. I may add, in passing, that they were ideal targets for naughty boys with strings of conkers in the

autumn. I am sure many of you will remember the telephone linesmen in their little green vans with ladder on top. Few homes in these days had a telephone - it was the age of the telegram, and after school I would receive an SOS from Mrs Bethune to deliver a telegram to Tarvie, Comrie, Rogie, Coul, Tor Finlay, or anywhere local. Sometimes it was good news, sometimes bad. I, as a youngster, could only gauge by the attitude of the recipient. Sometimes there was a reply paid for, when I had to take the message back to Mrs Bethune, who sent it down the line for delivery elsewhere.

We had our own Postman, Willie Macleod, in those far-off days. He, a widower, resided, with his two sons and two daughters, in the cottage next to the garage. His round, all the way to Little Scatwell, was undertaken daily on a bike; hail, rain or shine. An interesting sound of that time was Mr Macleod calling the family home to bed on a bright summer evening with a few blasts on his whistle, from beside the large tree where Tigh-na-bruaich now stands. Next to the Post Office at Millbrae stood the only thatched cottage in the village now long gone and replaced by another little cottage recently updated and modernised.

Beside it was the Estate Workshop (Fradon). This was strictly out of bounds. Then, on the other side of the Manse road, where three new houses now stand, was the Estate Sawmill. The mill was water-driven, and the mill lead with its sluice-gates, etc, is slowly vanishing. The sawmill was the domain of the estate Forester/Sawmiller, K Matheson (Kenny Flutie), who did not really welcome small urchins near his dangerous saws and stacks of timber awaiting cutting. I recall us being able to get into the yard and play in the sawdust under the mill by crossing the dried-up mill lead in summer. K Matheson was assisted by Walter Mackay, Estate Handyman, who lived in the first house of the block of four as we travel along towards the Hall. Walter was a great guy and, as children, we spent many happy hours with him in his horse and cart.

Walter's house was originally the Village Jail. My old home comes next - originally the Village Pub (hence its double doors). House number three, Roselea, was the original School House, in my youth the home of brother and sister John and Bella Fraser. Number four in the row - the original Village School - was, and still is, the home of the Rose family where Miss Mary Rose still resides at 97 years young. The Roses had a very busy sawmilling business at Achilty. The sawmill was a major employer in those days, for in addition to millers, there were fellers, draggers, and carters employed. The mill produced bobbins for the jute industry in Dundee, in addition to dressed timber, for builders and cabinetmakers, from the finest oaks and beeches to soft wood for flooring, fencing, etc, plus a busy trade in birch for firewood.

Now we come to the Village Hall in which we meet, gifted to the community by Sir Arthur Mackenzie, whose portrait, with that of his son, Sir Robert, used to grace the gable wall above the stage. I remember being put in my place, many years ago, when I wanted the portraits removed for the performance of a concert and plays. The hall was used for diverse functions down the years. As a boy I can remember playing in it

while Willie Munro, Coul Cottages (father of the late Trixie, grandfather of Billy Bartlett's wife, Orrin Bridge) cleaned; fetched buckets of coal to fire the great brazier heater which provided the only heat in those days; filled and trimmed the wicks of the paraffin lamps; and set out chairs and tables for Whist Drives. Benches were set out every second Saturday for Free Church afternoon service on the Sunday. On the alternate Sundays the service was held in Jamestown Free Church. It was a most unusual sight on a Sunday afternoon to see the Free Church congregation gather with their 'Sunday Step'. It took 10 minutes or longer for the McVinish and Macdonald sisters to walk from the crest of the brae at Preas Marie to the Hall - normally a 3 minute walk. Similarly the Noble family came in stately procession from Contin Mains and the Rose family trooped out in single file from next door.

To return to the Hall - the WRI met here, ran concerts and provided us children with excellent Christmas parties; the Recreation Club met for all sorts of table games; dances were held periodically with various bands providing the music; concerts were also held for the troops during the war, and, if space was available, we were allowed to attend - in fact I recall an Ensa party entertaining in the Hall, and another night when a concert party failed to turn up and we had barrack room songs from the back row!! Also during the war the Hall was one of the meeting-places for the Home Guard. It became, too, a jam 'factory' for war and welcome-home funds. I well remember a troupe of ladies with Primus/Valor stoves, paraffin, jam pans, jars, fruit and sugar descend upon the Hall and set to work.

Next to the Hall we had the sheep fanks and dipper - used by a number of the estate farms and crofts and a source of interest and excitement for young folk. Across the road we have Contin Mains farmhouse with the former Estate Office bridging on to the farm buildings. Here the Noble family lived - Hugh (factor) and Mrs Noble with son Andrew (Bo-Bo as he was known). 'Bo-Bo' was mentally retarded and spent most of his days sitting on the garden wall watching the world go by and singing at the top of his voice "Daisy! Daisy!", or "Clementine".

Mr Noble's brother, John, also lived here and ran Contin Mains principally as a sheep farm until the war began, then it was general farming and we used to watch the Department of Agriculture tractors arrive to do ploughing and reaping. Then the travelling threshing mill would arrive in late autumn. Potato planting/lifting was another pursuit in which we children became involved. I can recall happy scenes from busy fields with children, prisoners-of-war from Brahan Camp, Mrs Smith, Glebe Cottage, all sitting having afternoon tea, which Mrs Noble and Bo-Bo had carried out to the field to us, while Mrs Smith serenaded the POWs with "Lily of Marlene" before work resumed. 7/- per day was the wage, and I remember working at Contin, Comrie, Tor Achilty and Easter Moy - you couldn't catch them all!

Across the road from the farm are the farm cottages by the garage. As I mentioned earlier the cottage next to the garage was home to the local postman. In the middle

cottage, some 60 years ago, lived 'Granny Donald' ie Mr & Mrs A MacDonald and family - mother of Duncan Macdonald, Heights of Kinnahaird. 'Granny Donald', as she was affectionately known, was the local midwife, who was responsible for seeing me into the world at Oakview, 63 years ago on 10<sup>th</sup> April. This house had many changes of tenant down the years after the Macdonalds moved. The Bothy, at the hall end of the block, was home to Dan Harkin and, as youngsters, we used to gather round Dan's fireside and listen to many a good story. Dan was an Irishman who worked on Contin Mains during wartime and after.

Now we come to the Garage/Smiddy. Garage business was minimal in those far-off days as there would have been only half-a-dozen cars in the entire community - one at each farm, the manse, Rose the timber-merchant, and a couple of taxis at the garage. Coul House had its own vehicles, dependant on the residents. The Smiddy was a busy place where all the farmhorses were brought regularly to be shod. The blacksmiths, if not actually shoeing, were busy manufacturing more, which hung from the Smiddy rafters ranged in sizes like a cobbler's shop. Iron gates were also made and repaired as were socks for ploughs. Many interesting things were hammered into shape on the anvil. A glowing furnace, hammers clanging, sparks flying and the smell of burning hooves made the Smiddy a place to linger on the way to and from school. Regular weekly sorties had to be made to the garage for paraffin for lamps, heaters and cookers, also to have wet batteries, which powered the radio, charged or to purchase dry batteries for radios or torches. Mr Smith worked there, assisted by Jimmy MacBeath who was also a blacksmith. If they were both away with taxis, or shoeing hill ponies at some shooting lodge, then Mrs Smith was able to dispense petrol to the few passing customers or to supply paraffin, etc to the locals - sometimes not too happily if she was in the middle of baking or preparing a meal!

There were no properties in the fields between the Garage house and the school - this was the Smithy Croft. There was West Lodge, at the entrance to Coul House. Here lived Dave Munro and his family - a gardener on the estate prior to the war. During wartime the family grew as Mrs Munro's niece and nephews were evacuated from London and attended Contin School with us - one, Harold Pridmore, has now retired to Marybank.

The school, at that time, consisted of two rooms presided over by Miss McLean (Kate) in the wee room and Aulay McLeod (Fat Aulay) in the big room. These two very capable people taught us everything - Reading / Writing / Arithmetic / Art / Music / Gym / Sewing / Gardening and, as some of the pupils did not proceed to Secondary School, Science was taught to senior pupils. Memory work was very important in those days - poetry, Bible passages, Psalms, Catechism all learnt by heart. The school roll would have been similar to today. We had one girl - Catherine Ross - and seven boys in our class - K Tolmie, D Fraser, H Sinclair, B Grant, Robert Cecil, Melvin Wood and myself, with others who came and went. There was no canteen in those days, only a great brown enamel kettle boiled on the open classroom fire to make the cocoa for lunchtime

for those who came from the outlying farms, who brought their own 'piece' with them. The rest of us ran home and back in the 20-30 minutes break, and had a snack. With no lights in the school, work had to be completed in daylight. Slates and slate pencils were the order of the day, ink work only a week or two before the Qualifying Exam. Flush toilets were at the bottom of the yard. A coal fire, surrounded by sodden footwear, was the only heat supply, and the ashpit was also in the school yard - a pongy, healthy place - we all survived! The outdoor shelter, I seem to remember, was shared with the hens, certainly with large quantities of scrap paper, tyres, etc, all for the War Effort.

All sorts of games were played - Shinty, Scotch and English, Soldiers - this latter was quite obvious and natural as we children watched the troops each day as they marched off on manoeuvres or to the rifle range at Tor Achilty. We watched Bren gun carriers rumble by, amphibious craft - DUCKS - heading for Loch Achilty to practise landing. The most memorable was the Norwegian Army with their horses, which were stabled in the present horse-jumping field and in the wood. The foundations of some of the stables are still in evidence. We watched from the playground as the horses were broken in and trained to pull buggies, gun-carriages, etc on Fairyknowe. In passing, I must mention the spectacle as the officers rode out to dinner in a gleaming coach drawn by four superb horses. Dinner was at Brahan Castle, where another part of the fighting force was undergoing training. It is also worthy of note that King Haakon and Crown Prince Olaf of Norway took the salute at our War Memorial as all their troops marched past.

School was a very different place in those days - no PTA or School Board, no days off for In-service training; the usual holidays - the only 'scive' was when the nurse came with the 'bug comb' - Nitty Norah, the hair explorer! The visit of the school dentist was unreal, what with his pan of boiling water on the open fire for sterilising instruments, plus his wooden leg clumping round the room - not a friendly sight. Aulay McLeod occasionally left the room for a cigarette - or maybe a little tippie! - but the large bookcase opposite the fire acted as an excellent mirror in which he could observe the on-goings from the outer door. Woe betide any unsuspecting pupil observed up to no good! Down below the school at Riverside (Nancy's house) lived the Misses Matheson - Jessie, a retired teacher, and Maggie who ran a home drapery supplied by brother George from Glasgow.

In the house next the river lived an old blind lady, while in Rose Croft lived "Porridge" whose name is long forgotten and, after him, the Grandison family for a short time before they moved to Newton Villa, Strathpeffer. Further west in the house below the road lived Miss Cunningham. Later the house was occupied by J McBeath (Blacksmith) and his family.

On Fairyknowe lived Mrs Matheson (sister of Mrs Bethune, Post Office) a rather austere lady in black as I remember her, with the new Tolmie bungalow beyond. No



TorView in those days! - just the road to Rogie, down which used to ride three girls on horseback from Rogie Farm to school - Anne, Ishbel Gertrude, and Donella Grant, who were cousins of the Grants, Garbat. There was also an old couple, Mr & Mrs McQueen living in a croft near Rogie, whose home was burnt down maybe 50 years ago.

Going west from the school, across Achilty Bridge, on the right, we have the house (Bridgend) occupied by K Matheson, the old Estate forester, and, beyond the entrance to Achilty Farm, the other little cottage which, for a period, was occupied by Simon and Mrs Ramsay. Mrs Ramsay died recently, in her 90s, in Ravenscroft.

Tor Achilty, as far as I remember, was the home of the Fraser family, although Mrs Murray, Broompark, was a daughter of the previous tenants, the Macraes. Mrs Murray visited the school as an invigilator for the Qualifying Exam.

Four cottages were occupied on Tor Achilty in those days, one of which is now an implement shed. In one of the two which are now holiday homes lived the Bartlett family. Son, Sandy, is still a resident in Torview. The fourth little house above where Larchfield now stands has disappeared. In it lived the Mackenzie family. I remember Miss Anne, who retired home from London, and her sister, Martha, who lived in another little cottage long gone at this end of Loch Achilty where Mrs Quinn lived recently.

Achilty Hotel, one of the old Coaching Inns, was run by Mr & Mrs R Mackay and was the only licensed premises in the locality. Mr Mackay, in addition to being 'Mine Host', was also a farmer.

In the oak wood, on the right going west after passing the Hotel, sat the sawmill mentioned earlier, run by the Rose family. It was destroyed in a spectacular fire.

At Craigdarroch, opposite the entrance to the Lodge, stood the row of four small cottages, set in a fir wood, with neat picturesque little garden plots at their front doors. These cottages were for the widows of Estate workers whose husbands had died in estate service. There lived the Ross family, the Hannah family, Granny Robertson and her grandson Sandy.

Craigdarroch Lodge was home to the Lumber Jills during the war. That hard-working band of ladies felled timber and hauled it off the hillside by horse for shipment for the war effort. One of these young ladies, Cathie McDonnell, married John, son of Rose, timber merchant, and is now a widow living in retirement in Glenurquhart, having set up the shop in Contin, first in a hut above Riverside and later where it now stands.

Another familiar figure in those days was Miss Annie Maclean, caretaker at Craigdarroch Lodge, cycling to the Post Office on her enormous high-framed bike. She was nicknamed 'Foxy' because she always wore a fox-fur collar. Miss Maclean retired

to the cottage end of the steading/garage block at Loch Achilty - now converted to a dwelling.

Altnabreac (now Mrs Leighton's) was the home of the Estate gamekeeper, and at the top of the hill above Tor Finlay was the home of the Macrae family shared during the war with Mrs Macrae's sister, Mrs McDougall and her daughters, Margaret and Sheena, who were evacuated from Clydebank. Margaret and Sheena attended Contin School and Margaret trudged up and down that hill daily for many years to work as a secretary with Sir Alexander Gibbs at Craigdarroch and then Hydro Electric in Dingwall.

Across the top of the hill at Tarvie was a collection of small crofts where lived many old 'worthies' with glorious nicknames - Sandy 'Lowrie' Cameron, Duncan 'Lexie' Macdonald, 'Hughac the Pinch' Mackenzie (father of Alasdair), Roddie Danny Cameron and the Grant family of Duncan, John and sister. To all of these homes I delivered telegrams 50 years ago.

Which takes me back to the village where we began. On the island stands the Church, where I was taken as a boy and attended Sunday School with Maggie Aitken, daughter of the minister, as our teacher. Sunday School parties in the Manse, in these days, were quite marvellous events. I spoke about the members of the congregation in a sermon last year so I will say no more about the Church except that my early connection has been maintained down the years. In the Glebe cottage lived the McFarquhar family. Mr McFarquhar was Church Officer and Beadle. He worked at Garve Station and the family eventually moved to Garve. Mrs Smith and her daughter, Cathy, (the late Mrs Bill Rose) were the next residents and I have many happy memories of Mrs Smith over the many years which followed, and our work in the Church.

To the east of Contin village is Kinnahaird Farm where the Munro family lived and worked for many years, retiring recently to Strathpeffer. Brother-in-law, Duncan McRae, was a farm griever. Below the road at Bruaich were three farm houses where, as children, we used to play with John and Sandy Mackenzie, sons of Gregor Mackenzie.

In the field adjacent, between Contin and Kinnahaird - the Dall - was the well-worn cycle track where Sandy Bartlett (Snr) practised for his many Games competitions - 7½ x round the track equalled 1 mile.

Along the road to the east, stood the five Hill Cottages now converted to two modern dwellings, and just beyond is the burn which is the Parish Boundary. Dealings with further east were minimal, although as boys, we used to cycle to Marybank for Boys' Brigade.

To complete our tour around Old Contin let us make our way back up to Coul, via the farm road. First, on the right, we come to the two farm cottages where lived Mr & Mrs

McBeath, whose three sons, Danny, Robbie and Sandy all worked on Coul Mains for Mr Archie McQueen, father of Mrs Benkowski and Mrs Williams. Across the farm road, at the corner, was the start of the Army Camp. The hut right beside the road at the corner was the Naafi where we children used to go for biscuits, buns, etc, much more exciting than any we ever got at home!

The farm, as I have said, was run by Mr McQueen who lived in the house latterly occupied by Mr Holt. Across the archway was the dairy. Mr McQueen did a daily delivery of milk - all customers attending with enamel or aluminium pail into which a pint was measured from the churn. There was always a flock of UNfriendly geese at Coul, and, for a while, a most aggressive Billy Goat. It was a rather dangerous place to pass by! In the upstairs flat above the dairy and garages lived the Cecil family. Mr Cecil, as I mentioned earlier, was butler in Coul House. At the rear of the steading buildings was a bothy occupied by Jock Campbell, the shepherd.

Next comes Coul Gardens with the garden house beyond where lived Mr Steven and family. The garden was a wonderful place with central pathway from Coul steading to gardener's house lined on either side with excellent-fruiting apple trees. At the mid-point of the path was the sundial with paths going off at 90° dividing the whole garden into 4 main sections. Along half the south and east facing garden wall were all glasshouses where we used to purchase tomatoes. Great beds of strawberries were laid out in front of the glasshouses, where we used to pick and buy our own in season. There were rows of Cordon Pear trees, cherry trees and greengage ones on the rest of the south-facing wall. Currant bushes with lush black, red and white currants, also plums of varying varieties grew there too, not to mention shrubs, herbaceous and bulb gardens. If you have seen the banks at the front of Coul House in bloom in the Springtime that will give some idea of the quantity and variety of lilies. Alas, all those in the garden were eaten by pigs, when a post-war owner chose to use it for a slightly different purpose from that for which it was originally intended.

Mid Lodge was the home of Mr Ledingham, Gamekeeper, and East Lodge the home of 'Willie the Badger', another gardener.

That, then, was the Contin where I grew up - small in comparison with today's additional housing but in those days the population was all centred on the farms and Estate. We were not a dormitory village for commuter workers as is becoming the trend today.

When we had reached the Qualifying Class and had a bicycle we older children carried out the Flag-day collections in the outbacks - Jamestown, Little Scatwell, etc (Lifeboats, Alexandra Rose Day, Poppy Day). There we met a variety of different people, some interested in who we were, but really strangers to us. Both of those outposts were another world. People in Jamestown mostly associated with Strathpeffer although they lived in the Parish of Contin. One exception was Miss

Lizzie Allan who, with Miss Aitken, the Manse, and Miss Paterson, teacher in Marybank, were WRI and Drama enthusiasts entertaining frequently in this hall.

Little Scatwell was another self-contained Estate unit, the home of the Mathesons. He was a good violinist and I recall him playing here at concerts. Little Scatwell had their own chauffeur and gardener.

Also at that remote end of the district we had the Conon Falls Power Station. This was the Ross-shire Electricity Supply Company's station which preceded the Hydro-Electric Board by many years, commencing generation in 1926. The station was  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile upstream from the present Luichart Power Station and the dam was only 3 feet high. Here, too, we called on our Flag-day excursions. Duncan Macdonald, now retired at Heights of Kinnahaird, began his career in the Electricity industry in that station in the 30's, when there were two 500 kw sets producing power for lighting. Electric cookers, fridges, fires, heaters, hair-driers, blankets, etc had not arrived. We had no electricity in the village in those days but power was exported to Dingwall and Easter Ross on a line over the hill through Tarvie and the Raven's Rock - a line dismantled many years ago. In 1934 the pylon line was built from the Station along the back of Tor Achilty to the site of the present Torachilty Power Station and, thence, to Beauly and Inverness on 'H' double poles. These same pylons and poles are still in use today 60+ years on. If I had 1p for every unit carried on these lines down the years I would be richer than any Lottery millionaire.

This, then, was the Contin in which I grew up - a village which I loved then and still love today.