

The Enclosure of the Town's Common of Ayr

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The sport of horse-racing was probably the immediate cause of the enclosure of the Town's Common of Ayr; that and the drive and initiative of John Ballantine of Castlehill, the Provost of the day.

In 1770 the Town Council was approached by a committee of local "noblemen" comprising "the Stewards of the Races," with a suggestion that they should be granted leave to form a racecourse on the Common to the south of the Town. To this the Town Council agreed and still comparatively wealthy from the proceeds of the feuing of the Barony Lands voted a sum of £50 stg. towards the cost.¹ Prior to this date horse races had been run "on the sands," but it is uncertain whether this expression referred to the shore between high and low water mark or to that section of the Common now known as the Low Green. So far as is known there are no written records.

The racecourse was popular and in January 1787 the Town Council approved a Minute of a Meeting held on the 18th of the month between the Senior Bailie, John Murdoch, the Dean of Guild, John Ballantine and Councillor Hugh Hamilton on the one part and a number of noblemen and gentlemen representing those interested in the race meetings on the other. This Minute was to the effect that the joint committee having inspected the Common were of opinion that a stand or viewhouse should be built on the Common on the west side of the road from Ayr to the New Bridge of Doon² on the south side of the entry to the new house belonging to Colonel McKenzie. (This house occupied the site of the present Seafeld Hospital.)

The Town Council contributed Ten guineas stg. toward the cost and made a number of conditions including one by which the house would revert to the Town along with the site if racing were ever abandoned.³ Opportunity was also taken to put on

1. Town Council Minute, 31/10/1770.

2. The New Bridge was built by the Earl of Cassillis in 1772.

3. The viewhouse reverted to the Town in 1907, when the Western Meeting removed to the new Racecourse.

record that the racecourse on the Common was to remain there only at the Town Council's pleasure. Racing would be held to continue so long as there was run annually a subscription race of £50 stg. or a King's Plate.⁴

At the same time the same committee of the Council gave as their opinion that the Common inside the racecourse should be enclosed by a dry-stane dyke and that the whins should be rooted out. The opinion was received favourably by the Town Council and instructions were given to advertise for a contractor to build the dyke.

Nothing more is heard of the project until 2nd April 1788, when it was decided that a dyke of stone and lime should be built round the outside of the racecourse. Already part of the perimeter had been enclosed by the boundary dykes of the enclosures to the south—Bridgehouse and Slaphouse—although part of these were still to be completed. These dykes ran from the high road at Bridgehouse by the south and east as far round as Dalrymple's Meadow. The Town Council therefore resolved to build a dyke from Bridgehouse along the western boundary, *i.e.*, the line of the high road and then eastward to join up with the northern end of the eastern boundary dyke at Dalrymple's Meadow. To defray the expense the Council resolved to sell off certain odd pieces of land, *viz.* :—

- (1) A stripe of ground alongside the high road to the south of the Grand Stand, excepting a part thereof reserved for carriages and tents at the time of the races. Extent half-an-acre.
- (2) The west (south-west) corner adjoining Bridgehouse. Extent upwards of two acres.
- (3) The corner near Saint Leonard's Chapel. Extent three roods.
- (4) The stripe of ground on the east side of the road from the Townhead to the Old Bridge of Doon. Extent about four acres.
- (5) The Common Isle, *i.e.*, a piece of ground between present-day Seafeld and Cunning Park.

Details of the sales are given below.

As the roads passing through the Common would be stopped up by the dykes it was decided that a new road would be made

to run from Blackburn along the north and east boundaries of the enclosure until near St. Leonard's Chapel it joined the wrack road which ran along the boundary of Lady Crawford's Lands (Slaphouse).

This wrack road was one which traversed the Common and joined up with the high road to the Old Bridge of Doon. The line of the proposed new road was, therefore, that of the present Racecourse View, the old wrack road running along what is now Chapel Park Road.

The area to be enclosed would amount to Fifty acres Scots measure, *i.e.*, Sixty-three Imperial acres, and when it was cleared of whins and the ground "improved" in accordance with the Town Council's directions it would make an excellent pasture for the Town's milk-kye, for each of which there would be paid a reasonable grass mail to the Town.⁵

News of the Council's intention was soon current, and it is not surprising that on 16th April a letter was received from Wm. Stewart, Convener of the Trades of Ayr, enquiring as to "the motives of the Magistrates in disposing of any part" of the Common. The Town Council arranged to exhibit the Minute of the meeting at which the decisions were taken and this apparently allayed the fears of the Trades.⁶

On 7th May 1788, Alexander Stevens, who was in the process of building the first New Bridge over the Ayr, tendered an estimate for "a dyke of five feet high" to be built of stone and lime, and his tender was accepted. The work was put in hand at once.

In due course the dyke was completed but no further reference is found in the Council Minute Book until late in 1791, when William Dunn, a Vintner in Ayr, offered to take a lease of the enclosed Common. The Council gave the matter their consideration but decided that while a tack was desirable, it should be advertised so as to give all the townspeople an opportunity to offer.⁷ The successful offerers were the Corporate Trades of Ayr who obtained a five years lease, the first year free of rent and the remaining four years at 10/- per acre. The terms of the lease are interesting and worth relating in detail :—⁸

1st Year of Lease	Rent Free.
2nd to 5th Year	Rent 10/- Stg. per acre.

5. Town Council Minute, 2/4/1788.

6. Town Council Minute, 16/4/1788.

7. Town Council Minute, 21/12/1791.

8. Town Council Minute, 1/2/1792.

4. Town Council Minute, 21/2/1772.

The Tacksmen were obliged during the first and second years of the lease to reduce the surface of the land into an even and regular state fit for ploughing, by digging away the heights and filling in the hollows.

The rotation of crops was to be one crop of potatoes, two crops of oats, and one crop of bier. In the fourth year there was to be sown alone with the bier three bushels of rye grass, with six pounds of red clover and three pounds of white clover per acre. Also the land was to be manured with sixty "sufficient carts of dung" per acre.

In the fifth and last year of the lease the grass crop was to be cut only once and thereafter grazed until Martinmas when the lease expired.

The hills in the south and south-west of the enclosure were reserved to the Town Council for planting or otherwise as they saw fit, and the race-track was reserved for the races as in time past. No carts were permitted on the race-track.

Cattle were excluded from the pasture until after the harvest and persons either on foot or on horseback were forbidden to trespass among the crops. The right of working coal was reserved to the Town Council subject to compensation for surface damage. The Town undertook to lay a main drain through the land for carrying off water.

With the enclosure of the Racecourse the south-west part of the Burrowfield took on its modern shape. As already mentioned, the southern boundary of the enclosure marched with the lands of Bridgehouse and Slaphouse, which in turn had the Curteeen Burn as their southern boundary. South of that, again, lay the Netherton of Alloway which had been feued off in lots in 1754. Between Bridgehouse and the Racecourse dyke was the small parcel of 2 acres feued to Robert Aiken. On this site was built a cottage which in later years was occupied by the Misses Begg, nieces of Robert Burns. Slaphouse still stands, but both Bridgehouse and the cottage have been demolished.

The land north of the Racecourse was partly enclosed. We know of Windyhall, Dalrymple's Meadow, and other enclosures. Although the Town had started to expand southwards there was a fairly extensive area between the Racecourse and the enclosure of Barns, the southern boundary of which was approximately the modern Miller Road. The Minute of 2nd April, 1788, refers to twenty-seven acres . . . which should be enclosed in two lots . . . that between the Common and John Campbell's house for pasture and . . . between Campbell's house and Barns for cultivation.

The distance between the boundaries of the Common and that of Barns was approximately one thousand yards. The depth of these lots would, therefore, be about 170 to 200 yards, depending on the area enclosed with John Campbell's house. (The twenty-seven acres referred to would equal thirty-three imperial acres.)

It is not known whether this plan was carried out. It might well be that the lands in question which included the Mid Sands were feued off in lots to individuals. Certainly they became the sites of the mansions in Racecourse Road during the following century.

It will be recalled that "the stripe of land" on the east side of the high road to the Old Bridge of Doon was one of the areas which was sold to meet the cost of the new dyke. The "stripe" extended to 4 acres Scots or about 5 acres imperial, but unfortunately the length of the stripe is not mentioned. It is thought that it would be about 800 yards. If this is correct it would be about 30 yards in depth.

What is of more interest, however, is that this stripe marched with the west boundary of the lands of Castlehill and Crausland, and, needless to say, it was purchased by the proprietor of these lands, Provost John Ballantine. The sale of this land would interfere with the horse market and plans were made to acquire an alternative site from Patrick McNeight of Barns. Provost Ballantine, however, offered part of "his park" as an alternative and this was accepted. The value of this piece of ground and that of another piece of 3 roods at the washing green which the Town also accepted from the Provost were set off against the price offered for the stripe, *i.e.*, £200—and presumably the bargain pleased all concerned. The Provost's "Park" became Beresford Park and the 3 roods at the washing green would later become part of Wellington Square.

In the article on the Roup of the Barony of Alloway, it is stated that the year 1754 marked the beginning of the modern Burgh. In the ensuing forty years, *i.e.*, during the life-time of Robert Burns, this modernisation gathered impetus and by the time of the Poet's death the Town was poised on the threshold of important developments which had been made possible by the far-sightedness of the men whom the Auld Brig described so scathingly as "three-parts made by tailors and by barbers." Of these John Ballantine was a worthy leader and there is no doubt that modern Ayr owes much to him.

Without his new Bridge the Town would have strangled and without its Old Racecourse it is questionable if it would have

developed as it did. Certainly the town houses of the gentry would not have graced the Miller Road area without the rendezvous of fashion that the Western Meeting provided, and certainly the beautiful development of the southern outskirts could not have taken place without the Roup of the Barony lands.

The speed of these developments was remarkable, and it is rather amazing to think that within a life-time Burns's expression of affection "Auld Ayr" had become true in fact. The Town of his boyhood memories had become literally a thing of the past.

**Details of the Roup of the Town's Common as reported
to a Meeting of Town Council held on 12th May 1788.**

<i>Lot.</i>	<i>Extent.</i>	<i>Price Per Acre.</i>	<i>Realised.</i>	<i>Feu- Duty.</i>
1. Stripe of Land on West side of high road to New Bridge of Doon	$\frac{1}{2}$ acre.	—	—	—
2. Common Isle	—	—	£125 stg.	5/-
3. Corner at Bridgehouse	2 acres.	£25 stg.	£50 stg.	2/-
4. Corner at St. Leonard's Chapel	3 acres.	£40 stg.	£30 stg.	1/-
5. Stripe of Land on East side of high road to Old Bridge of Doon	4 acres.	£50 stg.	£200 stg.	5/-
			<u>£405 stg.</u>	<u>13/-</u>

No reference is made to the sale of Lot No. 1. It lay alongside the Common Isle and it is possible that the two lots were sold as one. It would appear to have been an attractive building site.

No extent is apportioned to the Common Isle. There appears to have been some doubt as to its exact boundaries. A special committee was appointed in 1783 to inspect it and define the boundaries but no report to the Council has been traced. Two years later the Council decided to "redeem the Common Isle" and this was done at a cost of £500 Scots. The intention then was to "sell" it, but the "sale" was delayed until 1788 when, as may be seen, a grassum of £125 stg. was received.