

Acrehead or Acreheads of Bavelaw¹ and the Middle Third of Wester Bavelaw

History of the lands and tenants²

William Guthrie is the only known resident of Acrehead but the history starts with Alexander Sheills (born pre.1684) who first appears in the Scott family estate records in 1704 when he shared the tenancy of the Cruiklaw with James Thomson. Bavelaw lands at that date were still being farmed as infield (kept in constant crop) and outfield (used for grazing and occasional cropping) but the practice of subdividing estates into separate farms managed by relatively wealthy tenants was already underway (*Scottish Farming in the Eighteenth Century*, James E Handley, 1953, 49, 50) and by 1721 Alexander Sheills was sole tenant of the Middle Third of Wester Bavelaw. Sadly he died that year leaving spouse Jean Moss and children William, Joseph, Isobel and Janet (all in their minority) with a large farm to run. An idea of its size and quality can be gained from the inventory taken in 1728 (NAS GD1/629/3) which assigned a total value of £1507.10.08 on the moveable assets (animals and crops) at that date and although the valuation was probably in Scots rather than English Pounds it was nonetheless a comfortably wealthy farm. But the management of an 18th century farm turned out to be more than Jean Moss could undertake by herself. Despite assistance from neighbours (one of whom helped her out with a payment of £30 towards the rent) it was October 1722 before her 1721 dues were discharged by the landowner William Scott of Bavelaw (NAS GD1/629/1). William Scott 2nd son of Charles Scott (4th laird of Bavelaw) inherited the estate from his brother John in 1703 and held it until his death in 1740/41. His willingness to accept such delayed payments indicates he was a landowner concerned for the well being of his tenants and doing his best to help out.

The next 2 or 3 years must have gone well but by 1726 Jean Moss was struggling again. The 1725 rent was paid in three portions and not cleared until September 1726 while the 1726 rent, paid in two portions, was only completed in August 1727 (NAS GD1/629/2) after she had married her second husband, neighbour William Guthrie of **Acreheads of Bavelaw** - the site whose foundations we have been surveying on behalf of Scotland's Rural Past.

This marriage combined the resources of both farms and gave Jean Moss help managing the land until her sons were old enough to play their full part but it had serious legal consequences for her

¹ NMRS number NT16SE 6 'Wester Bavelaw'

² By SRP Pentland Hills, March 2010 (www.scotlandsruralpast.org.uk)

children. Although Jean kept her portion as Alexander's widow his moveable goods and stock would pass into the care of her new husband and the children, still in their minority, would have lost their claim to it. By her new marriage therefore she was effectively disinheriting them. However William Guthrie, in an act of astonishing generosity agreed to make future provision for the four children and in 1728 he and Jean Moss had a legal contract drawn up allowing the children to claim an equal division of Alexander Sheills' moveables at a value agreed on that date (NAS GD1/629/3). Guthrie would benefit from taking over the management of the Middle Third of Wester Bavelaw but the agreement demonstrates remarkable confidence in his own abilities as a farmer. It is also clear that he and Jean Moss were fully aware of legal conventions and had access to lawyers even though they may have had little more than a rudimentary education since Jean Moss could not write her name and William Guthrie's awkward and ill-formed signature suggests his literary skills were limited. Notably, however Alexander Sheills had apparently invested in high quality education for all his children. His eldest daughter Isobel signed documents with her initials while son William signed with a well formed confident hand and was very likely able to both read and write with ease. He married Guthrie's daughter Elizabeth in 1744 and over the next 10 years all the other children gradually received their portions and married locally: Isobel Sheills to William Thomson tenant at Little Vantage, Janet Sheills to James White tenant in the Boag, Katherine Guthrie to John Clarkson, Magdalen Guthrie to John Glasgow a tenant in W Calder and after her father's death Agnes Guthrie to David Gairdner at Haggishall near Liston Sheills.

The marriages of his children gave William Guthrie of Acrehead a network of links with prominent tenant families across the Bavelaw estate and beyond and although he was not a landowner he must have held considerable local status so his relationship with the Scotts of Bavelaw, his landlords, must have been an interesting one. In November 1743 Guthrie's tack for the Middle Third of Wester Bavelaw came due for renewal with Lawrence Scott acting on behalf of his nephew William Scott of Bavelaw who inherited the estate after the death of his father. The renewal process was a long drawn out one and although the entry date was Martinmas (11th November) 1743 the agreement was not finally signed until 13th January 1744 (NAS GD1/629/8). The new tack ran for 13 years and included a provision that it covered not just William Guthrie's lifetime but that of his wife and children, a necessary safeguard since he died just four years later in 1748.

It is not known whether Acrehead farm became redundant after Guthrie's death or continued to be worked as part of Wester Bavelaw since it is not mentioned again after his daughter's 1749 marriage. However on 30 March 1757 William Sheills renewed his tenancy of the Middle Third of

Wester Bavelaw for three years starting from Martinmas 1756 (NAS GD1/629/16) and again in 1769 for a further 14 years (NAS GD1/629/17). This included use of the limestone quarry and shows that agricultural improvements had started on the estate. But it was also the end of the Sheills family's long occupation of this farm because in 1773 the tenancy agreement between Sir Charles Scott (who inherited Bavelaw in 1755) and William Shiells (probably son) was for a completely different farm – a new venture at **Threipmuir** (NAS GD1/629/18) on common grazing lands that had just been allocated to the Scott family.

By 1772 Sir Charles had completed a comprehensive range of estate Improvements. A new steading was built for Wester Bavelaw and there is no further mention of the Middle Third. The steading at Redford Bridge on the N side of the Bavelaw Burn was probably intended to replace Acrehead although the reference to Acrehead on Armstrong's 1773 map suggests it was still inhabited and the RCAHMS aerial photograph shows the rigs stop short of the house and yards. However the proximity of some rigs to the E end of the building suggests that ploughing may have continued after an abandonment of the house.

There is also considerable disturbance at the SE end of the ditched hollow or trackway that runs NW/SE across the S face of the farm although this disturbance could be relatively modern or if the hollow way were a track there may have been a gap here to allow livestock access to the moorland. The track would have fallen out of use when the new avenue across the Bavelaw Burn at Redford was created and Armstrong's map of 1773 depicts this new layout. Any plough damage would therefore have occurred between then and the creation of new shelter belts and parklands which, as shown on Kirkwood's 1812-1814 map, extend across the rigs. The conversion of the arable fields into parkland must have taken place by this date and the site of Acrehead had been absorbed into a landscape that appears to have remained unchanged up to the present day.