

## Threipmuir Farm History

By SRP Pentland Hills, March 2010<sup>1</sup>

Charters record that by the thirteenth century the grazing lands (including Threipmuir) along the north slopes of the Pentland Hills between Harperrig and Clubbiedean were shared in common between several barony estates. In 1280 a meeting was held at St Catherines in the Hopes (a thirteenth century chapel built by the Sinclairs now beneath the waters of Glencorse Reservoir) between estate stewards and tenants of two main landlords, the king, Alexander III, and the Lord of Brad or Braid to settle an argument involving historic land use around Bavelaw (Bavelay) ('Calendar of Documents relating to Scotland preserved in Her Majesty's Public Record office, London, 1888' (CDS), Ed Joseph Bain, HM Register House, Edinburgh, Vol 4 1357-1509 Addenda 1221-1435: 356 no.1762). The problem was straying animals presumably eating crops or grass reserved for valuable winter feed so much of this area must have been unenclosed although perhaps with fenced park lands nearby. Threipmuir, whose name means "debatable muir" (Stuart Harris, 'The Place Names of Edinburgh. Their Origins and History' (London: Steve Savage Publishers, 2002), p555), remained open common until 1769 and many of the farms represented at this meeting still appear on maps today.

The origins of Threipmuir Farm itself lie with two pre-Improvement farms on the Bavelaw/Malleny estate: Acrehead of Bavelaw, the grassed over foundations of which are still visible in the parklands of Bavelaw Castle, and the middle third of Wester Bavelaw. In 1759 Charles Scott, proprietor of Bavelaw, renewed the tack of the middle third of Wester Bavelaw for 14 years to William Sheills (NAS GD1/629/17). William's father Alexander Sheills, a tenant on the estate since at least 1704, had died while his son was still in his minority but the family were able to continue their tenancy thanks to assistance given to them by neighbour William Guthrie of Acrehead. William Sheills eventually married Guthrie's daughter Elizabeth and their son was still farming at Bavelaw in 1773 when Sir Charles Scott offered him the tack for a new farm at Threipmuir (NAS GD1/629/18) of one hundred and forty acres.

Sir Charles was probably embarking on a period of land improvement and estate expansion utilising the latest scientific methods of crop rotation, manuring and liming to open up areas of muirland previously only used as rough pasture. The limestone used for soil improvement was extracted from a huge outcrop located on his Bavelaw estate. Threipmuir was a new venture so the annual

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<sup>1</sup> Scotland's Rural Past ([www.scotlandsruralpast.org.uk](http://www.scotlandsruralpast.org.uk))

rent was set on a sliding scale over nineteen years based on the assumption of its success. Eight pounds was required for the first year rising to thirty five pounds annually at the end of ten years. In case of failure however an option was included to allow him "to renounce this Tack and their possession of the foresaid lands either at the end of the first five or the first Ten years". The 1773 agreement included meticulous directions governing cultivation techniques as a strict condition of the tenancy "This method of breaking up and cropping the ground shall be observed by William Sheills during the whole currency of the present Tack". It also included an agreement by Charles Scott to build a farmhouse as accommodation for William Sheills and his family and this is almost certainly the steading whose ruins exist today.

"The said William Shiells hereby binds and obliges him to plough or Break up no part or Quantity of the foresaid Muir without first limeing the same sufficiently at the rate of Fifty Bolls upon each acre and that he shall take no more than five successive crops of the said grounds or any part of thereof after the same shall be broke up in manner foresaid. And that after taking five crops after the first limeing he is obliged to keep the same in ley for four years and when the said ground or any part thereof shall be a Second time broke up that no more than three crops shall be taken off the same and it shall then be left in ley or Grass for 3 years following unless sufficiently dunged in which case 3 crops more may be taken after such dunging and the ground then to be left 3 years in ley or Grass. This method of breaking up and cropping the ground shall be observed by William Sheills during the whole currency of the present Tack" (NAS GD1/629/18).

It is interesting that Sir Charles does not stipulate a rotation of specific crops, instead his great concern is to allow the ground to stand in 'ley' or allow it to rest, rather than keeping it in continuous cultivation as was common practice at the time due to the considerable reluctance of Scottish farmers to leave a field uncultivated (see "Scottish Farming in the Eighteenth Century" James E Handley 1953).

In 1774 Charles Scott created other sub-tack contracts to William Gray, tenant in Buteland, of a field of muir ground near Bavelaw and to George Somervel and son, James, tenants in Bavelaw Miln, of the muir ground called Malleny Rig part of the Muir of Balerno (NAS ref.GD1/629/20-21). The land that William Gray was given is occupied today by the two farms of West and East Rig. The now ruinous Redford Farm Steading (SAM3953 NT 1645 6350) also dates to this period and the massive size of the barn at Redford is probably a measure of how optimistic Sir Charles was of good returns from his Improvements.

At Threipmuir the buildings are much smaller in scale than those of Redford but it was ultimately a successful venture as can be judged by the many improvements made to the farm following its initial establishment. The barn's opposing doors show that it was originally built for hand threshing but later the door in the west wall was blocked and a horse mill built - a semi-circular feature whose foundations are still visible. Although the mill at Threipmuir Farm can only have been a small one, probably driven by a single horse, it indicates the farm was productive enough to merit investment in new technology following their appearance in 1788.

The Sheills family continued to farm Threipmuir for a further 75 years and rental payments are recorded from 1785 through to 1827 (NAS GD1/629/23). Joseph Sheills renewed the tenancy of Threipmuir with Lieut. General Thomas Scott of Malleny from 1807 at an annual rent of forty five pounds sterling (NAS GD1/629/24) while John Sheills took on the tenancy of nearby Ramslacks renewing it in 1805 at the same annual rent (NAS GD1/629/25). Both tenancies still included the additional kain (tax) payment to Thomas Scott at Malleny of "six good and sufficient kain hens and two coal carriages of fourteen hundred weight each" or a cash payment of three shillings for each hen and six shillings per coal carriage. The value of land at that time seems to have been ten shillings per acre since this was the deduction of rent allowed to both Joseph and John if land was taken back by the landowner for mills or road making operations. Sadly in 1815 Ramslacks has a tragic story attached to it when the wife of John Melrose a poor tailor, resident in Ramslacks, died in a snowstorm at Westside Farm while walking back home after visiting her family in Peebles (Edinburgh Annual Register 1815 April 16 p.xxxi). This suggests, however, that Ramslacks was no longer being worked as a farm and by 1828 the land had been subset for tillage by the Sheills family (NAS GD1/629/27). Although shown as roofed on a map of 1843 (NAS RHP473, Johnson, W & AK Plan of Threipmuir and Harlaw Reservoirs on Bavelaw Burn), Ramslacks is a ruin on the 1st ed OS map of 1853 and today is no longer visible.

When Lieutenant General Thomas Scott of Malleny renewed the tenancy of Threipmuir in 1825 (NAS GD1/629/26) John and Joseph Sheills were working the farm as joint tenants perhaps subdividing the house to accommodate two separate families. The annual rent was set at only twenty seven pounds Sterling and since land values do not appear to have changed a substantial portion of Threipmuir Farm must have been taken out of agricultural use presumably through land purchase by the Water Company for reservoir construction. It is interesting to note that even at this late date kain and carriage payments were still being required from tenants.

The Sheills family were still at Threipmuir in 1841 when the census enumerators recorded:

William SHIELS age 35, farmer, born Midlothian c.1806

Margaret SHIELS age 35, born Midlothian c.1806

Elizabeth SHIELS age 60, born Midlothian c.1781

and James THOMPSON age 15, Ag Lab, born Midlothian sleeping in the stables.

At this date the farm was listed as a residence with stables and one uninhabited building, presumably the eastern outhouse, since the barn was still roofed in the 1st Ed OS map of 1852/3. The horse mill however is unroofed and the barn had probably been converted either to stables or possibly a dairy since William Sheills is listed as a Dairyman in the 1851 census. By that date however he had moved to Deanpark Farm with wife Margaret and daughter Helen from where in 1848 he made an offer for Madressa Farm (NAS GD1/629/28).

William Turner and family took over the 160 acres of Threipmuir Farm between the 1841 and 1851 censuses, and the 1851 census shows he was employing 4 labourers at that time. The farm house at this date seems to have been rather run-down, described in the OS Name Book (1851-53) as "An old farm house in ... a very ruinous and delapidated state". Despite this the family were still there in 1861 but by now the farm had been reduced to 100 acres and only employed 1 man and 2 boys. Sometime after this date it seems Threipmuir ceased to be a farm in its own right and its land was probably absorbed by another tenancy, perhaps Mid-Kinleith, and worked from there. By 1871 the house was a Shepherd's residence while a nearby cottage (perhaps NT 1874 6412) was occupied by a Pond keeper and his family. The house was still occupied by a Shepherd in 1881 indicating the continuing importance of sheep in this area but in 1891 there is no record of Threipmuir farm at all and the OS 2nd edition map of 1893 depicts it as unroofed and derelict. This was probably due to the expansion of Threipmuir reservoir around this time - the 1891 census contains entries for the Threipmuir Huts which were home to 50 or 60 mainly Irish labourers and their families. The whereabouts of these huts is not known but there is sufficient land between the farm and the reservoir shoreline for a collection of small houses to have been erected and to have vanished without trace today.

By 1901 the house had been refurbished with a new roof and was described as having at least two rooms with one or more windows. It was occupied by a Shepherd, an elderly widower with a housekeeper and the whole southern range is shown roofed on the 3rd edition OS map of 1912 although both outhouses were now in ruins. A postcard view stamped 1914 reveals that the central portion of the front wall of the long single storey range was whitewashed or painted, suggesting that

this section comprised the dwelling quarters and the two unpainted sections at either end were being used for storage. The house continued occupied throughout the 1920s and 1930s and there is a reference in “Our District: The Historical Background to Currie and Ratho Parishes”, John Tweedie and Cyril Jones (Currie District Council 1975 pp.49-50) describing how “a horse & lorry belonging to the Co-operative Society, Juniper Green, used to deliver “messages” and paraffin every Thursday to Threipmuir and Craigentarie”. By 1934 it was under the tenancy of the father of the present farmer Alexander Fleming who currently farms it from West Kinleith.