

Tam's Road and Leezie's Pool

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The old Ayrshire road-system has been almost completely superseded and the process was well advanced when the Armstrongs made their map in 1775. The old roads did not follow the most direct route between towns and villages, but wandered from one inhabited place, including farms, to another. Of the roads leading south from Ayr, only the Dalmellington Road and the road from Sandgate to the Low Bridge of Doon are relatively unchanged.

The more important roads (to Burnsians) which lay between them, in Burns's Alloway and Mount Oliphant days, have all but disappeared. New roads, like the Low Road to Maybole, radiate from Ayr like the spokes of a wheel, with cross-roads, one of which was made by William Burns himself, intersecting them at right angles. To these the farms have made new farm-roads; big new (18th century) estates, Belleisle, Rozelle, Doonholm, Castlehill, have enclosed parts of the old roads; and the railway has further complicated matters with its embankments, tunnels and bridges. The extension of the town in recent years has all but completed the obliteration.

However, with patience, something can be done. Between the Dalmellington Road and the Doonfoot Road, there were three roads important to the Burns family. These were the road from Ayr to Alloway Kirk and the Old Bridge of Doon; the road from Ayr to the Mote of Alloway and Dalrymple; and the Wrack Road, which also led to Dalrymple by way of Mount Oliphant.

The first of these is described by Burns in "Tam o' Shanter," but Tam did not leave Ayr by it. He picked it up somewhere beyond Slaphouse. The road from Ayr to Alloway Kirk branched off the Dalmellington Road, which was a turnpike road, down the line of Inverkar Road and Chalmers Road and followed the present line to Slaphouse. Tam, however, was mounted, "weel mounted," and would not take this round-about route; he would take the Cow Vennel (Alloway Street) or Foul Vennel (Carrick Street) on to the Burrowfield and that is what Burns says he did:

"Tam skelpit on thro' dub an' mire."

The Burrowfield began along a line from the Townhead by Dalblair Road and Fullarton Street to the sea, and it takes a considerable effort of the imagination to recover the lost landscape. The Burrowfield included, to the east, the Burrow Muir and nearer the sea the Town's Common, Common Isle and Brae. The lands of the Barony of Alloway, also held by the Town, began at the Curtecan Burn. There was no line of demarcation between the Muir and the Common but, about the line of the present railway, sand-dunes, whins and rough grazing gave way to turf, whins and thorns. Silver birches and alders grew along the smaller water-courses, but almost the only forest trees were on the banks of the Ayr and the Doon. Tam's route lay across the Town's Common to the Curtecan Burn and thereafter on the lands of the Barony of Alloway. The sand dunes which are preserved in Prestwick Golf Course convey the best idea of this desolate region, as it was until late in the 18th century. Hills of sand almost covered the whole area from Ayr to Alloway, and the shape of some of these old dunes, now grass-covered, can still be seen in the south-east corner of the Low Green and the south-east corner of the Old Racecourse. Two centuries of improvement, cultivation, sowing, planting and building, have all but eradicated the Ayr sand-dunes, but they persist, or are in process of reforming, along the front, near Seafield.

Three burns ran through the wilderness. The Black Burn rose in Corsehill, crossed what is now the north end of the Old Racecourse and went down to the sea along the line of Seafield Road; as it still does, in a drain. The Curtecan or Slaphouse Burn, the only one above ground today, and much the most considerable, has been tampered with higher up and lower down, but not at the point where it flows into Burns's narrative. Lastly, the Sergeant's Burn (also piped, now) rose in Clochranshill, flowed through what is now the playground of Alloway School, across the present Monument Road, into the duck-pond of Greenfield farm (no more) and then along the south side of what is now Greenfield Avenue, across and back across, and winding about till it flowed into the Doon, near Dykehead (Alloway Mill).

The Curtecan is mentioned in the line, "By this time he was cross the ford," and the fact that Tam crossed it by a ford is most interesting. The ford cannot apply to the Black Burn or the Sergeant's Burn, neither of which was of any size. It must apply to the Curtecan.

On Timothy Pont's seventeenth century map, there are no fewer than three bridges over the Curtecan, one high up, one near Slaphouse and one at the Bridge House (on Doonfoot Road, near where it crosses the Curtecan today). The one on Tam's road home was a stockbridge, and is referred to in documents relating to the

Roup of the Alloway Lands in 1754. On June 7, 1756, the Ayr Town Council Minutes record a payment to John Donald, Mason in Ayr, for building a bridge over the Slaphouse Burn, nigh the Slaphouse, while on June 29, 1757, it is noted that John McClure, the late tenant of Slaphouse, is claiming that to build the bridge the Magistrates and Council of Ayr made a road through his grass and corn in the summer of 1755, so that materials might be led to the said bridge conveniently; he wants thirty pounds Scots (fifty shillings sterling) in compensation, and is to be paid twenty.

We are therefore faced with the situation that on the line of the old road there was a stockbridge even in the seventeenth century and on the line of the new road marked out in 1754 there was another bridge four years before Burns was born. If Tam crossed the Curtecan by a ford, he cannot have been on the road from Ayr to Alloway Kirk.

However, we must not be too precise here, for Burns was certainly pushing his story back in time, and for a definite purpose. The first version of "Tam o' Shanter" is in a letter to Captain Grose, dated June, 1790. It is the Douglas Graham of Shanter story and, if Dr. Charles Rogers is to be believed, should belong to the same year as Armstrongs' map, which does not show the old road at all, since the new one (Monument Road) was then in use. The legend is that Burns and William Niven were sheltering from a storm at Shanter farm and the rantings of Mrs. Graham, the original "sulky, sullen dame," stuck in the poet's memory. The testimony of Mr. James Tennant, great-grandson of "Auld Glenconner" takes the story back yet further. A highland bullock, he says, strayed into Alloway Kirk and was taken for the Deil by some woman-body. Robert Burns was "a boy of perhaps eight or ten" at the time, which would place the incident in the period 1767-69, when the family was at Mount Oliphant, though William Burns did not sell the cottage till 1781. Gilbert Burns says that when his father feued his little property near Alloway Kirk, the wall of the churchyard had gone to ruin and cattle had free liberty of pasture in it. His father took the lead in having the cemetery enclosed with a wall. Now, at the Alloway Sale, Elias Cathcart, merchant in Ayr, acquired the Alloway Nethercrofts and Kirkcrofts, except the Kirk and Kirkyard (which the town retained) but with the "benefit" to Elias of the grass of the kirkyard. William Burns may have used the stirk incident to persuade the Town Council to withdraw this privilege. "Hence," says Gilbert, "he came to consider it as his burial-place, and we learned that reverence for it people generally have for the burial place of their ancestors."

Gilbert also declares that Burns, at Ellisland, asked Captain Grose to make him a sketch of Alloway Kirk, because it was the burial place of his father. Grose, whose interest was in ruined buildings ("Antiquities") agreed, provided Robert would supply a witch-story to be printed along with it. When Grose arrived, he must have been rather surprised, for Alloway Kirk was not in the strict sense of the word a ruined building. It had been built in the 16th century and remained in use as a Kirk till 1691 and occasionally thereafter for some time, though not after 1740. From then on, at least till 1752, it was used as a school and Mr. David Tennant, the Latin Schoolmaster in Ayr, was educated there for one year (all the education he had). By 1766 it was leaking and draughty, and Mr. Campbell's school, which Burns attended for a few months before his father and others engaged John Murdoch to teach their children, was held at Alloway Mill.

Grose did make a sketch of the Kirk, and published it (with "Tam o' Shanter") in his "Antiquities of Scotland." He shows some roof-timbers still in place. The Kirk, however, may have been completely roofed by then, 1789, for in 1786 the Council granted £15 to put a new roof on it in order to convert it into a school or meeting place. If this was done, Grose must have exercised his imagination and drawn it as Burns remembered it, or worse. He also turned it back to front to show Carrick Hills behind the wall which is seen from the Carrick Hills side.

Burns allowed himself equal latitude. The poem was a joke shared by two friends, both of whom were interested in old things. Burns preferred the Auld Brig to the New, regarded "Pict-built" as a compliment when applied to buildings and put draught-oxen into "The Lea Rig." Grose ignored the fine Adam front of Dalquharra to sketch the venerable but undistinguished rear.

The omissions in "Tam o' Shanter" are also interesting. Tam must have passed the town gibbet, the traditional site of which is in the grounds of "The Knowe," Midton Road, and St. Leonard's Chapel, a genuine ghaist-allurin' edifice near the corner of Chapelpark Road, but the "murderer's banes in gibbet-airns" were saved up for the climax and there was no room in the poem for more than one ruined church.

The road from Ayr to Alloway Kirk is, nevertheless, authentic and Tam must have joined it somewhere on his midnight journey. The likeliest place is the Meikle Stane, which according to local tradition was about ninety yards south of the Monument Road entrance to Belleisle. This would be roughly two miles from Ayr and at or near the point where the road to Alloway Mote and the Road to Alloway Kirk separated. Tam's road had been running

parallel to the Monument Road behind the belt of trees which actually belong to Rozelle though they are on the Belleisle side of the present road. It now turned half-right and passed the foot of the property feued by William Burns.

A reliable check point can be found in the account of a dispute between Dr. Robert Auld, the Second Charge Minister of Ayr and the Town Council. When Alloway Kirk was closed in 1691 its congregation and glebe were allocated to the minister of the Second Charge. Dr. Auld said that there had been a manse in Alloway and that he should be provided with one in Ayr, and in 1821 testimony was given by a number of octogenarian witnesses that there was once a small, one-storey house, a but-and-ben, thatched with bent grass and known as the Old Manse. Janet Lauchlane (84) who had lived in it said it "stood near the back of where Burns's cottage now stands and on the right hand side of the road going from Ayr to Alloway Kirk, the lands being then all uninclosed and uncultivated." John Malcolm, a herd, testified that it stood "below Captain Thomson's house (Northpark) about as far as from the Cross of Ayr to the Queen's Head Tavern." The Queen's Head was at the first bend in the High Street, a distance from the Cross of about a hundred and seventy yards. The line was "down a brae past a water-ga where there is now a ditch, and in one of the fields or enclosures possessed by Captain Thomson." The ditch can still be seen.

That is to say the cottage in question stood roughly where the Wrightfield Cottages stand today and the road passed between it and the seven acres feued to William Burns by Dr. Campbell. William Burns built his cottage three years before the husband of another witness, Margaret MacMurtrie, built Northpark. Margaret (88) had never heard of the Old Manse, which was decided not to be a manse after all, though it was used as a robing-room for the ministers when they inspected the school in the Kirk. It can be traced down to the time when William Burns started to build his cottage but not after that. Another interesting omission!

Yet another is Greenfield Avenue, which was made by William Burns, then lodging at Doonside Mill (the Dutch Mill), "from the road leading from Bridge House to Dykehead of Alloway" (Doonfoot Road) "at the Sergeant's Burn, to the road leading from Slaphouse to the Bridge of Doon" (the old road, now replaced by Monument Road). He was then, as his son says, "A cotter howkin' in a sheugh," for he put the Sergeant's Burn into a culvert. On June 7, 1756, the Town Council Minutes record a payment to him for this work of twelve pounds ten shillings sterling, an instalment of the contract price of £50. It is clear from the omission of any reference to this road just what Burns is doing to the landscape in adapting it for Tam's ride home.

The next good landmark is the cairn, still to be seen in Cambusdoon and now marked by a huge old ash-tree, surrounded by a light iron railing. It probably lay some distance to the right of Tam's road. The poem itself now becomes important evidence. On the new road we come to the Kirk before the Doon; Tam, on the old road, came first to the high wooded bank of the river.

"Before him, Doon pours all its floods,
The doubling storm roars through the woods;
Kirk Alloway is drawing nigh . . ."

Kate's anxiety for Tam was justified. Had his horse stumbled here, he might well have been found, deep-drowned in Doon.

And so we have arrived at :

"The thorn aboon the well,
Where Mungo's mither hanged hersell,"

or, if not the thorn at least at Mungo's Well, a stone-encircled spring near the river's edge. The suicide of St. Mungo's mother is, of course, a Burns extravagance.

Tam then passed the Kirk on the south side, which is the only side from which it is possible to see "the winnock bunker in the east," fled from the witches across the new road and down to the Auld Brig o' Doon, where Burns leaves him, rather a long way from Kirkoswald.

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The whins and the cairn appear in another of Burns's major works, "Halloween".

"A wanton widow Leezie was
As cantie as a kittlin;
But, och! that nicht, amang the shaws,
She got a fearfu' settlin'!
She thro' the whins, an' by the cairn,
An' owre the hill gaed scievin',
Where three Lairds' lan's met at a burn,
To dip her left sark-sleeve in,
Was bent that night."

Leezie's purpose was to wet her left sleeve in the burn, take it home and hang it up to dry: and then watch till midnight, when she might reasonably expect the apparition of her next husband to turn the sleeve. Unfortunately an "outler quey"—an out-lying

young cow—or the Deil in the shape of one (compare the Deil in the Kirk and Hornie) started up among the bracken and she fell into the pool.

"Halloween", despite the mention of Colean (Culzean) and some other Kirkoswald names, is closely tied to Mount Oliphant. It is set

"Amang the bony, winding banks
Where Doon rins, wimpling clear,"

and to clinch the matter, Burns puts himself into the poem, as "Rab" and "Rob" in association with "Nell" or "Nellie," who can only be Nellie Kilpatrick, "Handsome Nell", to whom Burns wrote his first love-song in his fifteenth year.

It is natural, therefore, to look for the burn in the neighbourhood of Mount Oliphant; and there it is, Riddicks Moss Burn—lower down Stock-bridge Burn, one of the head-streams of the Curtecan or Slaphouse Burn. It rises a mile or two higher up, near Loch Fergus, takes a southerly sweep through Mount Oliphant, turns west, then north along the new (Low) Maybole Road, and finally north-east to join the Glengall Burn.

There is a pool where three Lairds' lan's met—Mount Oliphant (Doonholm), Broomberry (Rozelle) and Pleasantfield. Moreover, a few yards from this spot there stood at least until the 1850 Ordnance Survey, the lime-kiln into which Merran threw the "blue-clue," a length of blue wool, which "something" held. Nearby was the quarry, from which the limestone was taken to be burned in the kiln, now a deep and dangerous water-hole into which the Pleasantfield Burn has found its way. This same blue-grey limestone crops out in the Mount Oliphant Burn, forming the miniature "rocky scaur" and there is a big hazel which may well be two hundred years old.

"Whyles owre a linn the burnie plays,
As thro' the glen it wimpl't;
Whyles round a rocky scaur it strays;
Whyles in a wiel it dimpl't;
Whyles glitter'd to the nightly rays
Wi' bickering, dancing dazzle;
Whyles cookit underneath the braes,
Below the spreading hazle,
Unseen that night."

When William Burns took Mount Oliphant, it was "a farm of his own improving" and it was a long way from a good road. There were two roads of which the Burns family could make some use. One was the road from Ayr to the Mote of Alloway and Dalrymple, which parted from Tam's road at or near the Meikle Stane, ran through Clochranhill and then on a line marked by three huge old firs that stand in the field to the south of Doonholm Road. The Mote of Alloway is an old earth-work, hollowed out on top and covered with trees. It stands just inside the entrance to Doonholm, on the right hand side, and the big loop made by the Doon northward is immediately below it. The road can be seen in the wood behind the lodge and felt by the plough in the field beyond. It ran across the corner to link with the Barrhill farm-road, still in use, and on to Carcluie in an abandoned but still usable state.

The other road from Ayr was the Wrack Road, which went up beside the Black Burn, up Chapelpark Road and Ewanfield Road, across the corner by Finnickland, now the "Noah's Ark" Kennels, and over to the area now called Prospect Hill. It then ran on a line marked by a string of present-day farm-houses, Kincaidston, Laigh Glengall, High Glengall, Laigh Corton, High Corton, Mount Oliphant, Pleasantfield, Carcluie. These two roads are shown on Armstrongs' map.

Leezie did not use either of them for she went "by the cairn," which means that she also went by the Kirk. She must have gone past the Brig to Doonside Mill (Dutch Mill) and followed the path up-river to the Mote of Alloway.

There yet another road was available to her. Beside, or perhaps actually in, the Broomberry limestone quarry there was an outcrop of coal which "the Cortons" (*i.e.* the rentallers in that region) were entitled to work in exchange for a payment of eighty carts of coal each year to the Provost and Magistrates of Ayr; for the loss of which privilege the Council compensated the magistrates after the sale. No doubt the lime-stone and kiln were also communal. A coal-road (cart-road) ran from the Mote of Alloway to the stockbridge over the Corton Burn, up to Laigh Corton, South Corton and Broomberry, passing the very pool Leezie had in mind. Being a country woman, she preferred to "srieve" up the hill direct; or perhaps Burns preferred that. He could not have a coal-road or a coal-pit in "Halloween," though in "The Twa Dogs" he mentions both the quarry—"Baring a quarry an' sic like"—and the tax in coal:

"Our Laird gets in his racked rents,
His coals, his kain, and a' his stents."

In "Halloween", as in "Tam o' Shanter", Burns was deliberately creating an old-world atmosphere. To do so he selected certain features of the Ayrshire landscape known to him, and these he combined to make a landscape that had never really existed but which he moulded to his own needs and requirements.

