Electric Scotland's Weekly Newsletter for April 10th, 2015

To see what we've added to the Electric Scotland site view our What's New page at:
http://www.electricscotland.com/whatsnew.htm

To see what we've added to the Electric Canadian site view our What's New page at:
http://www.electriccanadian.com/whatsnew.htm

For the latest news from Scotland see our ScotNews feed at:
http://www.electricscotland.com/

Electric Scotland News

I note with interest that there has been a new discovery of oil some 2 miles from Gatwick Airport in England. Estimates have suggested some 100 billion barrels may be available although they also suggest that only 15% of that might be recoverable by traditional drilling methods. Over some 40 years around 42 billion barrels have been extracted from the North Sea in Scottish waters.

This tends to suggest that as North Sea Oil starts to wane England will be picking up the difference and then further it will be like the next North Sea Oil boom. From an economic stand point it shows the strength of the UK economy in that it is robust even with the downward spiral in oil prices. Scotland is much more exposed when it comes to oil prices. I am sure this will factor into the debate over Independence in the years ahead.

On a personal note.

I took the long Easter weekend off and spent it with friends in Toronto. Had a great time and over ate meaning I ate that much I had to spend the next day not eating as I was so full. Alex is one of Nola's sons in law and a top Toronto chef with his own company, Cinq Foods, that do high end banquets and catering for many corporate companies and banks.

When I got back I got a phone call from Gary telling me he has now the final proof for the history of the Stars and Stripes flag and the American Great Seal. He's sending me a copy of his official report which I'll be posting on the site this coming Saturday. On the Monday after he will be giving a talk to the Grand Lodge in Pennsylvania where media will be present where he will reveal these findings for the first time to the public. So one way or another a great scoop for us!!!

Electric Canadian

Red River Women

On the trail of the murdered and missing - why have so many of Winnipeg's Aboriginal women and girls been killed? The BBC did a major investigation and its findings can be read at:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-dc75304f-e77c-4125-aacf-83e7714a5840

Electric Scotland

"Select Writings of Robert Chamber's Popular Rhymes of Scotland" (1847). I'm starting to add this book to his page and have now added the first ten sections. Added the final three chapters this week to complete this book.

You can read this towards the foot of the page at
http://www.electricscotland.com/history/other/chambers_robert.htm

Renfrewshire

By Frederick Mort (1912).

Added Chapter 10. The People—Race, Language, Population

You can find this book on our current Renfrew page at:
http://www.electricscotland.com/history/renfrew/

A Tour in Sutherlandshire
With extracts from the field-books of a Sportsman and Naturalist by Charles St. John, Esq. in two volumes 2nd Edition (1884).

We are now up to Chapter VI of this book.

You can read this book at http://www.electricscotland.com/history/sutherland/index.htm

Poems from John Henderson
John sent us in a new poem, Winter an' Spring, which you can read at:
http://www.electricscotland.com/poetry/doggerel572.htm

The Scottish Historical Review
Added Volumes 11 and 13.

Volume 11 includes, Letters of the Papal Legate in Scotland, 1543. By R. K. Hannay. With translation of the Letters, and Note by the Rev. Father Pollen, S.J. The Last Days, Death, and Funeral of Patrick, First Earl of Marchmont, Ex-Chancellor of Scotland. By Sir James Balfour Paul. Medieval Education at Carlisle. By the Rev. Dr. James Wilson. 'The Savage Man.' By C. H. Firth. With Illustration. The Lollard Knights. By W. T. Waugh. Intellectual Influences of Scotland on the Continent. By Professor Hume Brown. William Barclay. By David Baird Smith. Scotstarvet's 'Trew Relation of the Principall Affaires concerning the State.' With Introductory Note by George Neilson. Some Sources of the Tales of the Thrie Priests of Peebles. By T. D. Robb. The Battle of Bannockburn. By the Right Hon. Sir Herbert Maxwell, Bart. With two plans. The Principals of the University of Glasgow before the Reformation. By the Rev. Professor James Cooper, D.D. Early University Institutions at St. Andrews and Glasgow: a Comparative Study. By R. K. Hannay. David Laing, Antiquary and Bibliographer. By David Murray, LL.D. Layamon's Knowledge of Runic Inscriptions. By Albert S. Cook, Yale University. Narrative of a Journey from Edinburgh to Dresden in 1814. By William Anderson. Some Darien Letters, by Lieutenant Robert Turnbull With notes by J. J. Spencer. Reviews of Books. Notes and Replies.

Volume 13 includes, The Visitation of St. Andrews University in 1690. By R. K. Hannay. The Theory of the Scottish Burgh. By Adolphus Ballard. An Aberdeen Professor of the Eighteenth Century. By J. G. Burnett. Andrew Symson: Preacher, Printer and Poet. By Rev. W. J. Couper. Parliamentary Representation in Scotland: The Lords of the Articles. By Professor R. S. Rait. Reviews of Books.

You can get to these at: http://www.electricscotland.com/books/pdf/review/index.htm

Clan Munro Australia
Got in their April 2015 newsletter which you can view at:
http://www.electricscotland.com/familytree/newsletters/munro/index.htm

The Sub
Being the Autobiography of David Munro, Sub-Lieutenant, Royal Navy.

This is the first book I have found which includes an account of the training given to a member of the Royal Navy. You can read this at http://www.electricscotland.com/history/scotreg/sub.pdf

A Highland Haven
I've added this wild life documentary to our Nature page at:
http://www.electricscotland.com/nature/index.htm

THE STORY

Heather

When God first made the world, He looked at the bare and barren hillsides and thought how nice it would be to cover them with some kind of beautiful tree or flower. So he turned to the Giant Oak, the biggest and strongest of all of the trees he had made, and asked him if he would be willing to go up to the bare hills to help make them look more attractive. But the oak explained that he needed a good depth of soil in order to grow and that the hillsides would be far too rocky for him to take root.

So God left the oak tree and turned to the honeysuckle with its lovely yellow flower and beautiful sweet fragrance. He asked the

honeysuckle if she would care to grow on the hillsides and spread her beauty and fragrance amongst the barren slopes. But the honeysuckle explained that she needed a wall or a fence or even another plant to grow against, and for that reason, it would be quite impossible for her to grow in the hills.

So God then turned to one of the sweetest and most beautiful of all the flowers - the rose. God asked the rose if she would care to grace the rugged highlands with her splendour. But the rose explained that the wind and the rain and the cold on the hills would destroy her, and so she would not be able to grow on the hills.

Disappointed with the oak, the honeysuckle and the rose, God turned away. At length, he came across a small, low lying, green shrub with a flower of tiny petals -some purple and some white. It was a heather.

God asked the heather the same question that he'd asked the others. "Will you go and grow upon the hillsides to make them more beautiful?"

The heather thought about the poor soil, the wind and the rain - and wasn't very sure that she could do a good job. But turning to God she replied that if he wanted her to do it, she would certainly give it a try.

God was very pleased.

He was so pleased in fact that he decided to give the heather some gifts as a reward for her willingness to do as he had asked.

Firstly he gave her the strength of the oak tree - the bark of the heather is the strongest of any tree or shrub in the whole world.

Next he gave her the fragrance of the honeysuckle - a fragrance which is frequently used to gently perfume soaps and potpouris.

Finally he gave her the sweetness of the rose - so much so that heather is one of the bees favourite flowers. And to this day, heather is renowned especially for these three God given gifts.

As one of the most common and readily available resources in the countryside, Heather has always played an important role in the traditional construction of buildings, particularly in areas such as the Hebridean Islands where construction was strictly determined by the availability of natural materials and their proximity to the proposed site. As a result, heather was used to build many dwelling houses, churches and farmhouses. From walls and thatching to the ropes and pegs which actually held the building together, Heather proves its versatility once again.

Thatching with Heather was carried out in areas as far apart as Shetland in the North and the Island of Arran in the South West. Buildings which were Heather Theekit - (thatched with Heather), were generally a better class than those which were thatched with straw. The old Blackhouses of Lewis for instance which were thatched with straw and constructed without a chimney or smoke hole, so as to impregnate the straw with soot for future use as a fertilizer in the fields were, despite being the possible forerunners of our present day recycling philosophy, unpopular as they had to be replaced annually.

A Heather roof however, according to J. Smith in the 'General View of Agriculture of Argyll (1798), will last 100 years. He tells us that, "Heather roofs are more suited to Farmhouses, as they, along with our ordinary timber, can be had for a trifle, last almost as long as slates and give less trouble in repairs.... It is astonishing that, in a country in which Heather abounds, these roofs are not more common. They are indeed heavier than straw roofs; but by making them a little steeper, and placing the couples a little nearer than ordinary roofs, most of the weight will be thrown on the walls, which, if made as they ought to be, of stone and lime, will not feel the burden. It makes a neat warm and durable roof."

The thatching of these roofs was done by a 'heatherer' and various methods of construction have been recorded. One method however, which was perhaps in most common use was to make a covering of divots (thin sods pared off by a spade made specifically for that purpose) above the wooden framework. Over that was then spread a thin coat of thatch which was then fastened down by straw or heather ropes, crossed through each other in a net-like fashion, and with stones suspended.

Heather divots would frequently be used to cover the crofters byre and stable roofs and quite often the crofter's own cottages too. But most often, they were used for covering potato and turnip pits in winter. The divots were clean and warm, and at the same time, provided better ventilation than grass sods. Using the heather divots in this way, laid on like slates, heather side down, there was no danger of the crops sweating and rotting.

The heather-thatched shielings of Glen Lyon between 1837 and 1841, were described by Duncan Campbell in his book, 'Reminices of an Octogenarian Highlander', as not much to look at on the outside, but rather substantial and roomy on the inside. Built of stone, thatched with heather and well constructed for dairy purposes, recesses, or rather cupboards, were built into the thick walls with flags for shelves on which milk vessels were placed. Planks were placed at intervals across the building from one top of the side wall to the other. And it was here that the cheeses, partly taken out of their presses, were placed to harden and become partially smoked with

the reek of the peats and the remains of the heather stalks which had been burnt to the ground the year before.

In ancient times, Churches too were generally thatched with heather.

The roots of heather served as effective nails and pegs - used especially for hanging slates. But it was the small twigs of heather, trimmed and shaped with a knife which were used to peg down the heather divots in the thatch. Once pegged down, a thick fringe of heather was arranged to project under the lowest layer of divots in order to carry rainwater drips away from the roof, clear of the walls. If however the house did let in water, fesgar, a facing of straw or heather, would be fastened with boards around the outside of the house. (Fesgar is also referred to as a strengthening rim for straw or heather baskets.)

Walls were constructed of Heather-An-Dub (Heather and daub, sometimes spelt dab) which was a combination of heather with mud or clay. Built with an inner and outer skin of stone, the walls had a central core of heather divots. There were many types of resulting buildings. Basket Houses for instance on the island of Mull were constructed by wattling together heather and branches of wood. And in Strathspey, it has been recorded that heather brushwood was used (in conjunction with wild juniper) in cavity walls of houses to act as insulation and soundproofing. And talking of insulation, it has also been used by hill people as insulation against the cold by packing it down trousers and inside jumpers!!!

ROPES AND LADDER: The Skara Brae excavation in Orkney revealed a prehistoric village dating back to around 2000BC. Amongst primitive tools and animal bones they discovered Seomain fraoich - Heather rope.

Seomain fraoich was made from long stems of the Heather plant, pulled and woven by hand, and used for a variety of purposes - from holding down thatch to securing fishing boats. It was even used in Harris to gather in the seaweed for the production of kelp which, in turn, yielded iodine essential to the manufacture of glass.

In the Helmsdale area ladders made from heather ropes, bound together and swung over the cliffs, were used to give direct access to the shore.

Inside The Home

Even to the present day, crofters and farmers rely upon heather as an abundant and efficient fuel for their fires - with the part which is most generally burnt coming from the top layer of the peat bog. Once cut, stacked and dried it was used for heating the dwelling place, cooking, drying (especially for drying corn before it went to the mill), brewing and baking. The small heather stems were also used as they were found to make excellent ‘kindlers’ for starting the fire. The crofters even found a use for ‘Heather Birns’ burnt heather - using the short, charred stalks of the plant as writing instruments!

The Skara Brae excavation in Orkney revealed evidence of beds in the form of stone boxes, lined with either heather or straw and dating as far back as 2000 BC. The original heather beds!

Obviously these beds were developed over the years with crofters gradually perfecting their construction techniques using only the longest, straightest and finest stalks of the young heath. These stalks would be pulled at their highest in bloom and fragrance, with as little root as possible. Once they had been left to dry for a few hours to evaporate any dew or accidental moisture, they would be placed together as thickly and closely as possible, with their tops arranged uppermost. Inclining a little towards the head of the bed - which was generally against a wall, the stalks would be held together at the sides and foot of the bed by logs of wood which had been cut to appropriate lengths.

Even an outdoor heather bed has its merits!

And just in case you were wondering about the support afforded by a heather bed, you might be interested to note that, according to Mr R. Oldale, Kilchrenan, Argyll, the anvils below the huge drop hammers in the Sheffield Steel forges were sited on beds of heather. These heather beds were apparently sufficiently well cushioned so as to absorb the tremendous impact delivered by the hammers and thus prevented the anvils from fracturing!

Inside the croft, heather had many practical uses - from baskets and brushes to pot scrubbers and doormats.

Heather brooms were made from the long heather stems which were gathered in spring when they were at their most pliable. These would then be bunched together and guilloteened to form a trim broom.

Many types of besoms and brooms were made in this way, and the art of brush making became a small, rural craft industry. Types of brushes and besoms varied, depending on locality, and were sold roundabouts by Heather Jennys and Heather Jocks (the nicknames for the men and women who sold heather goods). Indeed a great trade was long practised in the making of heather goods as, until around 1860, there were few modern brushes to be found on an ordinary farm.

A Curing Heather Cow was the term used to descibe a broom made of heather twigs whilst a Heather Range(r)/ Reenge - sometimes referred to in Orkney as a Heather Scratter -was the name given to a bunch of straight heather stems cut to equal lengths and bound firmly together for use as a pot scrubber or for brushing the flue of a chimney. In-fact, to this day, Chimney Cleaners in Lewis still use bunches of heather tied to to the end of ropes as they insist that it is the only way to get the job done properly.

Heather doormats were also common in the croft. Mats would be specially made for the kitchen using long, thin heather stems. They would be woven in many different patterns with the bottom side rough where the clipped ends were concealed and the upper side smooth. In Islay, these mats which were woven from young heather were known as ‘peallagan’.

Baskets were made all over the highlands and had many uses round the croft. Using long heather stems, they were made either to be carried on the human back or as pack saddles which were carried by horses. They were also hung on walls for storage. The Saalt (Salt) cuddle from Shetland, is just one example of such a basket which was hung beside the fire and used to keep salt dry.

Of course there were many other different types of basket each with a specific role. The Mudag (Wool Basket) for instance, was specially made to hold wool before carding, and the Maisie - a large meshed panier of bent rope or heather, was used for carrying sheaves and peats.

In Orkney, one particular form of basket was called a ‘Heather Cubby'. These baskets were made in various forms but the most common one was woven from long, fine, straight heather stalks, not rough or crinkly, and was used for carrying turnips from the shed to the byre for the cattle. Carried on the back, they were also used to bring peats inside from the stack. Another type of basket was the ‘Sea Cubby’ - so called because it was specially used to carry home fish. Other baskets including the Heather Caissie (from Orkney) and the Heather Wuddie/Widdie were made to hold fish, fishing line and bait. Even the lobsters of the Hebrides which were sent to London where they were in great demand, travelled packed in heather.

Examples of these and other utensils can all be seen at the Highland Folk Museum at Kingussie.

Abundant and readily available, heather, with its twiggy nature and durable characteristics - even in bog conditions, was often used in the making of roads, tracks and footpaths. It was mainly laid as an intermediate layer between a base of brushwood and a surface of gravel. And it was this method, which was reportedly used, in laying tracks across Rannoch moor.

In Mediaeval times, the otherwise useless parts of a sheep’s fleece, known as ‘daggings’, were laid and mixed with heather to form footpaths across the heath. This ancient practice is currently experiencing a revival, with daggings by the hundred-weight being airlifted by the RAF to reinforce foundations along the popular walkways of the Cairngorms.

Depending on the drainage, lighter soils can be prone to ‘silt up’. To avoid this happening, the tops of old heather would be placed in the bottom of a trench to act as a field drain. Another way in which heather was useful as a ‘conservation method’ was in the production of stabilising banks. These banks, in conjunction with planting marram grass, would be made from long heather twigs and used to stabilise dunes - a method employed, particularly in Holland. Used for protecting sheep and other animals in the winter months, sectioning them off into particular areas, fences would be made from the longest, most supple stems of rank heather, intertwined between stakes and posts.

Heather branches were very often used to make walking sticks, particularly in Colonsay where the rich peaty soil on the east of the island made ideal growing conditions. Two such specimens were sent to Edinburgh University. One branch was measured at 6ft. whilst the other was a mere 4ft. in height!

Salmon Fishing

Heather was often burned as a fuel for cooking and heating. But it was also used for lighting - Salmon Lighting that is. The following extract from ‘Days and Nights of Salmon Fishing in the Tweed’ by William Scrope, descibes how heather was used in an age old technique for catching salmon.

"We went to the barn and tied up twae heather lights frae a bunch or twae which I had gead the miller lad to dry in the kiln ten days before. They may talk o’ ruffles and birk bark baith, but gie me a good heather light, weel dried on the kiln for a throat o’ the Queed."

Bunches of heather which had been thoroughly dried were placed inside a special basket-like carrying device. Once set alight, this ‘heather torch’ would be held at the water’s edge where the flickering flames and lights would attract the fish from the low water, (known as ‘burning the water’). The salmon would approach the lights, whereupon they would be speared by a five barbed, long handled fork, called a "leister". This method of fishing was legal at the time.

Raising the Sails

A story, taken from a book by John Mowat, tells of another rather ingenious way in which heather was used by James Bremmner - a

famous ship builder and harbour engineer who was born in the Parish of Wick in 1784.

"The brig Isabella of Sunderland was driven on the sands of Dunnet in a storm, and was held fast in the quick sand. Trenches were dug with a view to floating her, but every becoming tide refilled them. Mr Bremmner was a little puzzled and, turning to his foreman said, "John have ye no plan?"

On receiving an answer to the negative, he sharply replied, "Then awa to the hill and poo heather!" Not knowing to what purpose this was meant, the man quietly submitted and was soon reinforced by a number of women and children from the neighbourhood, organised for the same purpose. On the tide receding, he built up the sides of the trenches with the heather, a plan which effectually prevented them from filling in again. Anchors were put out astern and as the tide flowed, he summoned the whole neighbourhood to pull the vessel off with tackles. The Isabella soon slipped into the water"

From Floor Tiles to Jewellery

Shortly after the second World War, a restriction on the use of wood was initiated. Ground level houses were unable to have the normal timber floor boards and were mainly constructed of concrete or stone. But these floors were hard and cold underfoot, and they had no ‘give’. So, in answer to this problem, a small factory employing three to four people, was set up at the side of Loch Lomond, in Dumbartonshire. The factory then set about the production of floor tiles made from the woody heather stem. The resultant tiles were extremely hard wearing and lasted a good length of time.

The tiles were made by compressing the heather stems together into blocks using a special bonding agent. Then they were cut transversely, producing the resultant floor tile.

When eventually restrictions on the use of timber were relaxed, and normal building techniques resumed, production of the heather floor began to dwindle as it proved too expensive to produce.

However the basic technique which had been developed by this small factory of compressing the heather stems was essentially a good one, and was put to a more cost effective use by the jewellery industry.

Initially small blocks were recessed into wood and staghorn to form brooches and pendants. Then a method of dying the stems was developed which resulted in more colourful and interesting jewellery. In time, the small craft workshop became more and more sophisticated in techniques, design, production and marketing.

Paint Colourings and Dyes

Born in 1772, Dugald Carmichael, a little-known botanist returned to his native Scotland after a lifetime of exploring the world in search of new plants. Dugald’s other great love, besides botany, was painting. But he had great difficulty finding the exact colours he required, so he started to use the natural pigments from plants to colour his paints. And it was to the tops of the heath that he turned to for the colour yellow.

Of course the art of using natural pigments for colouring has been around for centuries with crofters relying on the heather to dye their wool and cloth.

A Traditional Recipe for the Dying of Wool

Gather the tops of the (Barr An Fhraoich) Heather. Gather when they are young and green, and growing in a shady place. Place a layer of wool and heather alternately on the bottom of the pot until the pot is filled. Then add as much water as the pot will hold. Put on the fire to boil, but do not allow to boil dry. The wool will dye a lovely yellow colour which is a good basis for green when indigo is added. If a moss green is require, add gall apples and iron mordant towards the end of dying. Purple and brown tints can be obtained by using old heather tops.

If wanted for winter use, the tips of the heather plant should be picked just before they come into flower. If it is to be used fresh, it can be gathered as long as the flower is in bloom.

The resultant dye is a mordant dye which means the fibre requires special preparation before it can absorb the colour. The treatment is 4oz alum and 2oz cream of tartar to every 1 lb of wool.

A Taste of Heather

HEATHER ALE - A Galloway Legend

From the bonny bells of heather,

They brewed a drink Lang Syne
Was sweeter far than honey
Was stronger far than wine.

R.L. Stevenson

Heather has been used over the years to flavour many different foods and drinks. Little is actually known about the early beverages of Scotland. However, many tales are told of brewing ales and wines from heather flowers. One such brew was known as Heather Crap Ale.

TRADITIONAL RECIPE FOR HEATHER ALE
Ingredients: Heather, hops, barm, syrup, ginger and water. 'Crop the heather when it is in full bloom, enough to fill a large pot. Cover the croppings with water and set to boil for one hour Then strain into a clean tub. Measure the liquid and for every dozen bottles add one ounce of ground ginger, half an ounce of hops and one pound of golden syrup. Bring to the boil again and simmer for 20 minutes. Strain into a clean cask. Let it stand until milk-warm and then add a teacupful of good barm. Cover with a coarse cloth and let it stand till next day Skim carefully and pour the liquid gently into a clean tub so that the barm is left at the bottom of the cask. Bottle and cork tightly The ale will be ready for use in 2 or 3 days and makes a very refreshing and wholesome drink as there is a good deal of spirit in heather'

As recently as 1993, an Alloa brewery went into production of Heather Ale using an ancient recipe.

TRADITIONAL RECIPE FOR HEATHER WINE.
1 ½lbs. Heather Tips (in full bloom)
1 Gallon water
3-4 lbs. Sugar (according to sweetness desired)
2 Lemons
2 Oranges
1 teasp. dried yeast
1 teasp. yeast nutrient.

Cover heather with the water and boil for one hour. Strain off liquid and measure. Restore to one gallon, and add sugar. Stir until completely dissolved. When the temperature drops to 70F, add yeast and nutrient. Leave for 14 days. Then strain into fermentation jar, and when fermentation ceases, strain and bottle. Keep for at least six months!

HEATHER TEA
Gather the flowering heather and after breaking off the hard woody pieces, spread it in a cool open space and leave for approximately 12 - 16 hours. This should, in theory, allow a slight wither to take place - but with heather having a hard leaf, this is not too noticeable.

Put the heather into a liquidiser and bruise and break-up the heather as much as possible. After this spread thinly in a cool place and leave for a minimum of 3 hours to allow a ferment to take place. This should be apparent from a darkening of the mash. After this, put into an oven, temperature 200-250F until the heather is dry and crisp. The tea retains its misty mauve colour and looks attractive. Used on its own, the product gives a thin liquor. Mixed in equal parts with ordinary tea however, it gives a much stronger flavoursome brew. This is a proper tea - not herbs masquerading as tea.

Tinkers Tea

Trout fishermen having a day on the loch use the following method to make tea - they fill the kettle with loch water and take it to the shore, a sprig of heather and tea is then deposited in the kettle. Next, set old dry heather under and make a mountain of heather over the kettle and ignite. By the time it has burnt out the tea is ready and has a heathery flavour. This method was described to me by Mr George Sproat, 4 Rockfleld Road, Tobermory, Isle of Mull.

On the Isle of Skye they had a very simple remedy for tea which had been ruined by smoke from the fire. The solution - a sprig of heather simply placed in the cup!

Heather Whisky

It is said that some of the finest brands of whisky derive some of their most delicate flavours from the heather.

At the Highland Park Distillery, in Kirkwall, Orkney, there was a peculiarly shaped timber building, referred to as the 'Heather House'. This was where heather, which had been gathered in the month of July when the plant was in full bloom, was stored. Carefully cut off near the root, and tied into small faggots of about a dozen branches each, the heather was used on the peat fire to help dry the malt

and impart a delicate flavour which, was claimed, to give Highland Park Distillery its unique taste.

It is interesting to note that in former times the wooden containers for fermentation, known in whisky distilleries as ‘washbacks’, would be cleaned using heather besoms. And when new stills were installed, bundles of heather would be placed in the water and boiled in order to sweeten the still before the first distillation took place.

In the nineteenth century and possibly even earlier, illicit stills were used to make whisky - in broad daylight. The crofters were able to do this because, by gathering up and using old stumps of burnt heather, they could make a fire without smoke, and so not raise suspicion!

Heather Honey

There is no other honey quite like heather honey.

Quite different even physically from all other honeys, pure heather honey is sought after by the epicure and commands a high price. Bright golden brown with a pronounced and characteristic flavour, the harvest of heather honey is the premier honey crop in this country.

In some respects, gathering the honey from heather is easier than gathering honey from any other flower source. There is little likelihood of bees swarming when taken to the heather, routine inspection of the hives can be dispensed with and the expectation of a good harvest is reasonably certain - dependent on good weather and no early frosts.

Transportation of the hives to the heather moors is generally undertaken between the end of July and the 12th of August, although this can vary according to the season. However it is advisable to try to catch the best of the Bell Heather and Cross Leaved Heath Crops when they are in the first flush of bloom. Transportation of the bees is best carried out either in the cool of the evening or the early hours of morning. This reduces losses by suffocation.

Due to the flowering structure of the heather plants, where there are numerous flowers on spikes, close to one another in vast expanses of bloom, a considerable amount of honey can be collected in a comparatively short time. Being bell-shaped, the flower is easily entered with the nectar readily available to the visiting bee. The corolla tubes of these small flowers are approximately 2-3mm long with the nectar being concealed at the flowers base. This is easily sought out and collected by the honey bee’s spoon-tipped tongue which is approximately 6mm long. The nectar is converted to honey by the bees themselves.

Bell Heather honey is a thinner honey with a port wine colour and a strong characteristic flavour, whilst Cross Leaved Heath Honey is much thinner and lighter in colour.

Weather Predictions

Even predictions in the weather have been associated with heather. It is said, in Scotland, that an extremely rich blossom on the heather during August and September, is followed by severe weather in winter. Whilst another widely held belief, particularly throughout the south of the country and the Cheviot range, is that the buming of the heather ‘doth draw doon the rain’!

Plant Badges of the Clans

As already mentioned, Heather can be used, in conjunction with deerhorn, silver and pewter, to make colourful and effective jewellery. But another important decorative use for heather was as a plant badge of the clans. This was used long before the tradition of heraldic badges with the appropriate chiefs crest, straps, buckles and mottos.

Referred to as ‘Heather Taps’, these natural plant badges were worn by the Highlanders in the seventeenth century, if not before, and were placed behind the crest in the bonnet. Heather (Fraoch) was the emblem of the clans MacAlister, MacDonell, Shaw, Farquharson, Maclntyre and Mac Donald, with white heather (Fraoch Geal) pertaining to MacPherson.

It is said that the chiefs of the clan Donald carried into battle, as an emblem of their race, a bunch of wild heather hung from the point of a quivering spear.

Another way in which heather was used decoratively was in the form of dirk handles. Made from the stems and roots of the plant and carved deeply in Celtic designs these were worn on kilts around the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Healing Properties of Heather

The healing properties of heather have been recorded as far back as the middle ages, with books on other herbs and their uses dating even further back to the seventh century.

A German book, written in 1565, describes the famous doctor Paulus Aegineta as using the flowers, leaves and stems to heal all types of sores including ulcers - both internally and externally.

Fuchs wrote in 1543 that the healing effect of the plant could ease insect bites. Whilst Matthioulos, who lived round about the same time, used the plant in drug form to heal snake bites, eye infections, infections of the spleen and in preventing the formation of stones in internal organs.

Nicolas Alexandre, a Benedictine monk, wrote that boiling heather stems and drinking the liquid for thirty consecutive days, morning and evening, was sufficient to dissolve kidney stones. He added, that the patient should also bathe in the Heather water.

Heather has even been found to help nursing mothers produce more milk. Schelenz wrote in 1914 that Heather was a household remedy for all sorts of illnesses and complaints. However by the turn of the century, heather, in medical terms was generally associated with the prevention and treatment of stones in the bladder and kidney area.

Since 1930, Heather, referred to by the medical profession as Herba Callunae, has been acknowledged by many doctors and chemists as effective against arthritis, spleen complaints, formation of stones, stomach and back ache, even paralysis and tuberculosis. This remarkable plant, which is quite safe for use by diabetics, is also known to be good for sore throats, gout, catarrh and coughs. Some say it even cleanses the blood getting rid of exzema and fevers.

Medical herbalists, to this day, use Calluna vulgaris in the treatment of certain disorders. Containing tannin and several other components, it is used particularly in the treatment of cystitis (bladder infection), as its action is diuretic and antimicrobial.

In the mountain regions of Europe the plant is still used to make a linement for arthritis and rheumatism by softening the herb in alcohol.

Honey for Hay Fever

Pure Heather Honey is recommended for hay fever sufferers.

Heather was not only associated with curing illnesses - it was, according to the Scots National Dictionary, also used figuratively, to describe ailments and other peculiarities common to country folk. HEATHER ILL This was the description used to describe constipation of the bowels. HEATHER LAMPA springy step common among people accustomed to walking over heathery ground. The term ‘heather lamping’, refers to lifting feet high when walking - sometimes called a ‘heather step’. Walking with a step high and wide was described as walking with ‘heather legs’. HEATHER HEADED Sometimes referred to as ‘heather heidit’, this is the description given to someone with a rather dishevelled head of hair - and indicates a rustic or country background. HEATHER GOOSE This was the term used to descibe a dolt or ninny. HEATHER PIKER This term was a contemptuous epithet for a person living in a poverty stricken or miserly way. HEATHER WIGHT The name given to a Highlander. HEATHER LOWPER A hill dweller, countryman — known as a Heather-Stopper in Perth. HETHER MAN, HATHER A heather seller. Also found purporting to be a term in free masonry.

A Heather Garden

As a plant with so many advantages for the present day gardener, it will come as no surprise to find that Heathers are more popular than ever! Providing colour all year round with foliage and flower, heathers are evergreen and will thrive for many years. Inexpensive to purchase and relatively easy to grow, heathers, once established, will provide a weed free garden which requires the minimum of maintenance.

Easy to propagate, heathers are also relatively free from diseases and pests. Small wonder then, that landscape projects large and small, from industrial sites and motorways to housing developments and car parks, make great use of this plant.

Until recently little scientific work has actually been carried out on the hybridisation of heathers, but yet, hundreds of different cultivars are now available from specialist nurseries. Many of these cultivars have been found in the wild as ‘chance’ seedlings, perpetuated by vegetative propagation. Other cultivars arrive as ‘chance’ seedlings in nurseries - as sports or mutations in gardens. Each with their own distinctive qualities.

For instance, plants brought back from the remote island group of St. Kilda, (approximately 50 miles west of the Outer Hebrides and 100 miles from the mainland), are extremely dwarf and spreading. They remain so even in cultivation, their characteristics having been developed to cope with the extreme exposure experienced on the islands.

Cultivars discovered quite by chance include one which was found growing as a sprig on Calluna ‘County Wicklow’. ‘County Wicklow’ has double pink flowers, but this cultivar had double white flowers. The sprig, found in a garden in Argyll, has since been propagated successfully and is now catalogued under the name Kinlochruel. (A selection of cultivars are listed towards the end of this section.)

The heather gardener has many cultivars to choose from and one glance at the photographs in this page should help to convince even the most reluctant gardener that, together with a few conifers and shrubs, an attractive and easily maintained garden can be easily achieved.

The Heather Society

Founded in 1963, to assist in the advancement of horticulture, and in particular, the improvement of, and research into the growing of heaths, heathers and associated plants.

It publishes a Year Book and three Bulletins annually to keep members up to date. It maintains a slide library, provides free technical advice and arranges local and an annual national conference.

For details of membership contact: Mrs A. Small, Administrator, Denbeigh, All Saints Road, Creeting St. Mary, IPSWICH, SUFFOLK 1P6 8PJ.

Affiliated Societies

North American Heather Society. Secretary: Walter H. Wornick, Highland View, P0. Box 101, Aistead, New Hampshire 03602, U.S.A.

Nederlandse Heldevereniging ‘Erlcultura’. Secretary: Mr. J. Dahm, Esdoornstraat 54, 6681 ZM Bemmel, Netherlands.

Gesellschatt der Heldefreunde. Chairman: Fritz Kircher, Tangstedter Landstrasse 276, 2000 Hamburg 62, Germany.

See our page at http://www.electricscotland.com/gardening/heather.htm for even more information and pictures.

And that's it for this week and hope you all enjoy your weekend.

Alastair