

"Roond About Birsay"

News for and by the people of Birsay



Autumn 2008

Issue 33

Editorial

Well, that's another summer just about gone so its time to attempt another edition of "Roond About Birsay." The weather seems to be the topic I always start with but then I suppose the weather is one of the most important things in a farming district like Birsay. This year seems to have consisted of a month of rain and a month of dry weather time about but at least we haven't had as much rain as they have been getting in the south. Oh well, I always say there's more room for it in the south and maybe they won't need their usual hose pipe bans.

Thanks once more to those who sent me contributions for the newsletter. Keep up the good work.

Johnny Johnston - Editor etc.

Birsay Community Council

I was having a look at what I wrote in the last issue and there have been a few things following on from there.

The observant among you will have noticed that the Whalebone is once more in his old position out on the point. Thanks to Kenny Ross and his helpers who repaired and strengthened him. We then replanted him and watered him in with a drop or two of Highland Park to make sure he will take root.

The Twatt Kirk has now been sold, as has the Quoyloo one I believe, so all services will now be held in Harray until the new Kirk is built. The sale of the Twatt Kirk also meant the closure of the Post Office. I noticed that Post Office Ltd., who run the sub offices, tried to say it was a temporary closure brought about by the sale of the Kirk but I fear it would have been a victim of the round of sub office closures which were taking place at that time. The Dounby office is also closed at the moment but it will be open again by the time you are reading this although in the other end of the building and under new management.

We are still trying to get some new kerbing in place at the St. Magnus Kirk to tidy up the edge of the road but it is taking a while. The steps from the small gate at the shore side have been repaired and are now much safer to use.

Finally, the Public Meeting to find a new member for our Community Council will be held at our next meeting on 13th November so if anyone fancies the job, come along to the meeting.

Johnny Johnston - Chairman.

25 YEARS OF BIRSAY CHURCH FLOWER CLUB

Yes, the Club was started 25 years ago on 21 June 1983 when a small group of enthusiasts got together in the Twatt Church Hall. And now, 25 years later the Club has around 20 members who meet regularly to share their passion for flower arranging.

Anniversary Celebrations

On 3 June 2008, members of the Birsay Church Flower Club celebrated the 25th anniversary with a dinner in the West End Hotel, Kirkwall. They were delighted to be joined by two founder members - James Taylor, the first president and Pam Hay, a committee member. James Taylor and Renee Isbister, the current president, cut the cake, and after a delicious meal, James proposed the toast to the Club.

Celebrations continued on 20 June when Birsay members were joined by members from the other four clubs - Stromness, Orphir, Firth and Kirkwall - for a workshop on the theme "Celebrations". A glass of wine and a piece of birthday cake put the 36 members and guests in the right mood to create arrangements celebrating everything from a golden wedding to a birthday for a two year old, with, of course, many silver anniversaries there as well. A delicious supper to which all Birsay members had supplied a "plate" was enjoyed. Then the raffle with prizes donated by the visiting clubs and many well wishers was drawn. Esther Slater, Firth Club, who had been the first ever demonstrator at the Birsay Club, proposed the vote of thanks at the end of a very happy evening.

A Year of Flower Arranging

These celebrations were just the culmination of what has been a very active year for the Club. Monthly meetings were held with everyone participating in the workshops led by different members at each. While obviously sad to leave the Twatt Church where the Club had started, the move to The Dounby Centre in February has worked well, members enjoying the bright, airy, warm atmosphere.

July 2007 - a visit was made to Deerness, to the gardens of Hazel Foubister and Evelyn Irvine, with supper afterwards at the Commodore Hotel in Holm.

August 2007 - Yvonne Paice introduced us to the delights of "Greensleeves" with an arrangement depicting a lady consisting of satin, sisal, flowers and foliage. Many and varied were the green arrangements which followed.

September 2007 - Back to Basics with Bertha Mainland gave everyone the chance to think again about Big Pink Stones Rolling Constantly Down Hill (balance, proportion, scale, rhythm, contrast, dominance and harmony).

October 2007 - Christine Harcus was our guest and after asking everyone to start by considering the shape or outline they would choose, she gave much helpful and tactful advice on creating the arrangements.

November 2007 - the two Margaret Heddles delighted us with a superb demonstration of "Christmas Tree Alternatives". There was a sales table and special supper in honour of the guests. The Twatt Church was decorated for Christmas, the theme of the window arrangements being "candles". Renee, Marjorie and Yvonne entertained at the Sandwick WRI.

January 2008 - In the Bleak Midwinter, led by Pat Kirkpatrick developed the theme of winter with the promise of spring.

February 2008 - in the absence of Renee due to injury, Bertha led the workshop on "Cascade".

March 2008 - Jean Harvey and Bertha Mainland visited the Costa SWRI and then at the March meeting Jean took a workshop entitled "Golden Showers".

April 2008 - we were pleased to welcome Renee back to the Club. The up-to-the-minute title of "Five a Day" was the brainchild of Cindy Miller who helped us create a stunning display with vegetables, fruit and a few flowers.

May 2008 - again this month was chosen for the ever popular Plant Sale/Swap Shop. Then Marjorie Welsh and Yvonne Paice introduced us to some of the innovative ideas they had learnt at the workshop in "Blackpool - Again!!!!"

So if you feel like joining us for fun, friendship and flower arranging, we will be happy to welcome you - the third Tuesday of every month.

Bertha Mainland

Dounby Centre

The Dounby Centre Committee have had a very successful year helping the Centre Coordinator- Inga Craigie - in her new format as the primary "Mover and Shaker" in the Dounby Centre. The Committee now functions as a Charity only, providing goods and services as required.

The highlight of this year was that we managed to supply the Centre [and School] with a new £40,000.00 MiniBus which incorporates disabled access and holds more people - the third time we have managed this! Keeping the Bus on the road requires a lot effort on the Committee's part - so far we have been able to do this with a lot of local support from Birsay, Sandwick and Harray Communities.

The other parts of the Committee's work are of a more mundane nature, providing new tables and Youth Club equipment etc. As we move forward and money gets tighter, the Committee will be a very necessary supplier of funds via Grants to the Dounby Centre[and School]. The Centre's work, which encompasses the whole Community from Babies to Senior Citizens, mean that Grant Applications seldom fail. This fact alone means that the work of the Dounby Centre Committee will be vital to the Centre[and School] in the future.**Malcolm I A Beaton [Chairman-Dounby Centre Committee]**



Kalvin is dressing up in monster feet!



Connor is playing in the sand and water.

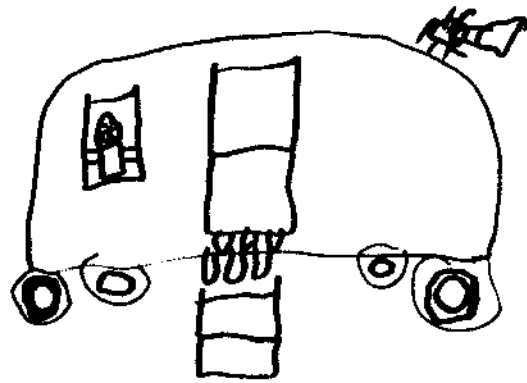


Lucy likes playing outside.

The new intake in Class 1 at Dounby Community School have been very busy...



Lianne like to play in the house.



Chloe is getting a book from the library van.



Carmen is gardening.



Amy is hanging on the wall bars!

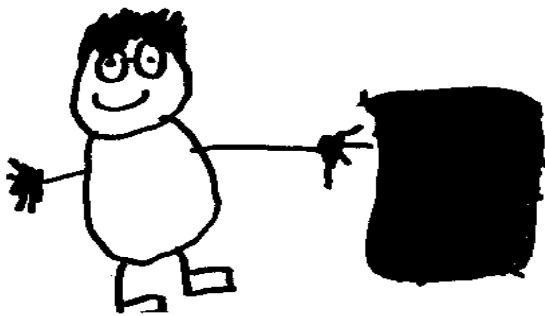


Lauren is visiting the library van.



Dyahn is falling over on the grass.

...here are some of the things they have enjoyed doing at school.



Robert likes to play at the sand table.



Magnus tried on the monster feet.

Holly is playing with Annie.



Gregor likes to play in the sand.



Tom is playing in the sand and water.

Birsay Heritage Trust

BIRSAY HERITAGE TO GROW

While BHT has a broad remit, it is usually thought of as a few enthusiasts operating the Barony Mill, and that's that. True, the Mill is a source of community pride, and beremeal is a most welcome treat, yet the Trustees have always held the vision that all aspects of our heritage should be encouraged and that more folk should become involved. As earlier Newsletters have told, BHT was handed the task of conserving and developing the Twatt aerodrome, and an assessment is underway. This is timely, as there is an awaking interest in Orkney's World War defence remains - physical reminders of Orkney's critical role in both wars. Julie Gibson at Orkney College is organising a fact-finding survey of these remains, and on behalf of BHT, I would like your help in collecting information of sites in the Birsay area. Searchlight bases, radar or lookout points, decoy aerodromes, hut, house and dumps, any and all sorts of things and the stories that bring them alive are grist for the mill. After the kye are taken in I would like to listen to anyone willing to share recollections with me. If you would like to help, please call Frank Zabriskie at 721 293.

BARONY MILLS

Excellent summer. The number of tourists excluding bus loads has increased, and beremeal sales have been strong - so strong we will run out before the end of September. If the water supply from the loch is sufficient, we will begin milling. All our corn is now harvested and in the Mill, over 11 tons of it, and the quality looks good.

Barony Mills was represented at this year's Science Festival. Keith Johnson and Rae Phillips described the milling operation. Dr. Peter Martin presented a fact filled talk about the types of cereal grains grown in Orkney and the striking changes in the amounts and uses of these. Food consultant Liz Ashworth praised the quality of the oatmeal that Rae had ground for the College's cooking experiments, saying it was the finest she had used. The results were available for tasting, and new recipes using beremeal and oatmeal were excellent. Have you tried Bob Nelson's Birsay Bay Tearoom 6B biscuits? You'll be pleased, I am sure.

Frank Zabriskie - Secretary

Birsay, Harray and Sandwick Churches

Old and Young

A story by Richard Adams

Old age is cunning, creeping up on you when you're not looking, and suddenly staring you in the face one morning from the bathroom mirror. "God," I said, "I look like a hundred and four."
"Rubbish," said God.

"You here again?" I said. "Whyn't you wait till I'm more awake?"
"Thought you needed cheering up," he said. "You're not old. You're not even forty."
"I'm well on the way to senility," I said. "Just look at these bags under my eyes."
"Wash your face," said God. "Shave that stubble off. You'll feel years younger."
"That's just renovating the surface," I said. "My problem's deep down."
"Go on," said God. "You're just feeling sorry for yourself. Wait'll you get to my age."
"I'll wait," I said, and rinsed the razor.

After breakfast he was there again, waiting at the door while I heaved my coat on.

"I'll walk up with you," he said. "Sharp frost last night." We passed front gardens full of wilting dahlias.

"They look like I feel," I said.

"Just Monday morning," said God. "You'll be all right once you get to work and get stuck in."

"That's just the trouble," I said. "The very thought of it wears me out. It's all getting up, working, and going to bed again. Where's the joy in that? Is that the prospect for another thirty years? No wonder I feel old."

We stopped at the school gate.

"See you later then," I said.

"I thought I might come in this morning," he said. "Have a look round."

"Sure," I said. As if I could have kept him out anyway. Not that I was always aware of his presence.

"You'll have things to do," he said. "I'll just wander around the classrooms." He padded down the long bleak corridor and disappeared into Room Two. I put the lights on and went into the office to start unwrapping the papers and parcels of daily routine, then into my classroom, chalky and sunless.

"Mornin' Sir."

It was Kevin, red-cheeked from the cold air, plump and bustling with a bag full of bubble-gum, football cards, and a toy mechanical digger to show me.

His delight was infectious. Sonya caught some of it as she came in.

"Cor, that's nice, Kevin. Let's have a go."

She wheeled the digger along the desk top, scooping up a piece of chalk. In ones and twos the rest drifted in, sharing their stories, news, jokes and new toys. When the bell went we settled down to sums and writing.

So the day passed, full of questions and answers - well, many questions, *some* answers. Involved in the children's enquiries, I found here and there, an answer or two of my own.

I met God in the playground at the end of the day.

"Thought you were going to be around." I said. "Haven't seen you all day."

"Really?" he said. "Feeling better?"

"Yes," I said. "Funny how the day brightens when the kids start coming in."

"Youth is infectious," said God.

"Isn't old age?" I said.

"Yes," he answered, "But not when I'm around."

"All in the mind, is it?" I said.

"And in the heart," he said.

I hope you enjoyed this story as much as I did. When God is around, age becomes non infectious, youth, new life is what God has in store for us. What a promise!

The last two Sundays saw us close the Quoyloo and the Twatt Church as both buildings would need a great deal of money spent on them to bring them up to modern standards, sums we can not afford. From now on all worship will take place in the Harray Kirk until we have built our new church in Dounby and reached the next milestone for the congregation of Birsay, Harray and Sandwick.

Some of you may have seen the draft plans at the Dounby Show or the County Show. Some of you have put comments into the comment book and we are now in the process of adapting the plans taking them into account. Then the plans need to pass through Presbytery and 121 (Church Headquarter) Committees, get OIC planning consent and then make sure that the funding is in place. As you can imagine this will take some time and energy to progress.

But it is exciting. This may be a sad good-bye of old beloved buildings but it is also a chance to breath new life into the church and build up something new. So come along and take your place in this process. You are most welcome. Let's make sure there is an active place of worship, a congregation seeking God's presence and sharing His love at the centre of our communities.

Sunday Service 11am in St Michael's Church, Harray

Sunday Club meets at the same time during term time.

Questions about how to join the church, baptisms, weddings, funerals or any other inquiries to

Andrea Price 771803

Birsay, Harray & Sandwick Church Sunday Club

The annual outing for the Children of the Sunday Club this year was a joint event with the children of Hoy & Walls Church. A day was planned for beach activities in Hoy but the weather on the day was not favourable, therefore plans had to be changed the day before the event.

On a rainy, Saturday morning in June, 12 children and 7 adults travelled to Lyness from Houton, Orphir on the ferry. They were met by the “Hills of Hoy” mini bus which took them to the YM Hall in Longhope.

The group were welcomed by the children and adults of Hoy & Walls Church, and then the children from both Sunday Clubs were mixed into 4 groups. There were 4 tables round the hall depicting the 4 seasons, spring, summer, autumn and winter. The groups were allocated a table to start from and then moved round the tables in turn making crafts of the season at each point.

Spring-----planting flowers in plant pots

Summer-----decorating C.D's with shells

Autumn-----making a harvest mouse

Winter-----making birdfeeders

Parachute games followed these activities and then there was a lunch break.

After lunch, the weather improved a little and the children went outside for a treasure hunt round the Church .

Once inside again, the children worked in groups making a seasonal frieze at each of the 4 tables. They produced 4 lovely pictures in collage work which were pinned on the wall and photographs taken.

Children and adults gathered together at the end for juice and biscuits. Everyone agreed it was a great day and new friendships were made. The event proved how fun and friendship can be enjoyed even if the weather is not favourable to the outing's plans.

Our group left on the bus thanking and cheering our new friends in Hoy & Walls. The ferry took everyone back to Houton and then onwards by cars to home.

We hope to return the hospitality in the spring of next year by inviting the children and adults of Hoy & Walls to share a day with Birsay, Harray & Sandwick Church.

Clair Newton

The St. Magnus Church Birsay Trust

Book-Launch

The main event of the last few months has without question been the launch of "Willie's World - 1959" on 18th June.

Birsay looked its best in the sunshine and people came from all over Orkney to buy a copy of the book and have it signed by Gregor Lamb. We had no idea how many to expect and Gregor was astonished to see the number of people in the church. Michael Moar has given us a wonderful photograph which shows people queuing right out of the door of the church. Gregor had never experienced a book-signing like it and by the end of the afternoon we had sold about 200 copies. Sales have continued to be very high and up to the time of writing we have sold about 750 copies, an amazing number in such a short time.

All the feedback has been very positive; the book has brought back many memories to Orcadians of an older generation and given a better understanding of an earlier period to younger readers.

The book would make an ideal Christmas present for Orcadians living "doon sooth" or abroad. It's on sale in bookshops in Kirkwall and Stromness but if you live in Birsay you can buy your copy at the Palace Stores. It's more permanent than a calendar....

Christmas

Just before Christmas we will again be having an evening of carol-singing in the kirk. For some years now we have held our Christmas event on the Monday before Christmas; this year the date will be 22nd December and it will be at 7 o'clock so that you will still have time to write those last-minute cards when you get home. This year we hope to have the added attraction of the Song Shop Choir, or at least a group from the choir.

St. Magnus Festival

Less than a week after the book launch, the St. Magnus Festival used the kirk as the venue for one of its concerts. It was sold out, as usual, and we had a most appreciative postcard a few days later from a member of the audience, thanking us for the "tea and kindness" which had "made the Festival visit to St. Magnus such a delight." We would like to thank all those who made sandwiches or cakes and those who helped with the serving on the day of the concert. The broadcast of the concert on 4th July included an interview with the French horn player, Richard Watkins, down on the beach in competition with the seals. He particularly mentioned the "beautiful setting."

Visitors

Our visitors this summer have included Heather Jensen from California, a granddaughter of Rev. Joseph and Mrs Loveday McPherson, who were here from 1900 to 1906. This was her third visit, previous visits having been in 1997 and 2002, and she plans to come back again with her sister, who was unable to travel this year because of a leg injury.

The kirk was also visited by Rev Peter Gordon, a cousin of the late Rev Sylvester Skinner.

It has been noticeable that, unlike recent years, there have been very few visitors in the early morning and late evening. Very few busses come into the village now unless their tour is organised from Germany or Oxford or Edinburgh, in which case they make a point of visiting the kirk. Perhaps that's one of the reasons why we get comments like "a hidden treasure" in the visitors book.

Science Festival

A Countrywoman's Diary on the opening evening of the Orkney Science Festival introduced many, and re-introduced others, to the writings of Bessie Skea, better known as Countrywoman, whose articles in "the Orkney Herald" began 50 years ago. Her talent for describing the flora and fauna of Orkney is unmatched, and the readers did full justice to her work. It is to be repeated in Harray on 24th October in aid of the RNLI so, if you missed it in Birsay, it's worth going a bit further.

Willie's World - 1959 - Again!

Howie Firth has suggested that next year we should base our Orkney Science Festival event on "Willie's World - 1959." Because of the topics touched on, that should leave plenty of scope. Mentioned in the book are the "Orkney Nights" held at the Community Centre, concerts featuring Orkney material and Orkney performers. While we know the kind of items that made up the programme, I would be interested to hear from anyone who has precise memories of songs, music, sketches..... **Bertie Harvey - Secretary**

WHEN EVENING SHADOWS FALL

*'Day is done, gone the sun,
From the sea, from the hills, from the sky,
All is well, safely rest, God is nigh.'*

Some years ago, I was given several old 78rpm Orkney records. One of them was of two 1950 recordings by the 1st Stromness Girl Guides, called, 'Now on Land and Sea Descending' - side 1, and 'Where e'er You Walk' on the reverse. The conductor was Delille M. M. Porter and the accompanist was Miss M. McGuffie (who was my French teacher at Stromness Academy). Most 78s were 10" in diameter but this one was 12" across. Towards the end of side one, there is a small gap in the music and then they sing the short verse at the top of the page. This, I have been told, was called 'TAPS' and was always sung by the Guides at the end of each day's activities. The tune was part of the 'Last Post'.

About eight or nine years ago, I visited the Stromness Eventide Club with a box of curios from my 'museum' to speak about. They were having a meal at the Academy and once this was past I had to entertain them for an hour. As well as the 'owld bruck', I had taken down a record-player and played several old Orkney 78s, including the one mentioned above. I discovered that the two young girls serving the food were actually Girl Guides so, when time was up at five o'clock, it seemed very appropriate when they sang their version of 'TAPS', which is still very similar to the one on the record.

On the road home from Stromness that day, it came into my mind that this was the way everyone closed their day in years gone past. When the day's toil was over, the Guid Book was taken down; prayers of thanksgiving were said and, if there was music in the family, a hymn would be sung.

As a teenager, in the mid to late 1950s, I often helped my grandmother dig her garden at Sunnybrae. She had always managed the digging herself but then, aged about 85, she needed some assistance. I went over in the evenings and, at nine o'clock, she would come out and tell me that it was time to stop. Her eldest sister Robina lived with her, and I knew that they went to bed at 9.30 each evening. The last fifteen to twenty minutes were spent reading passages from the Bible, time about. I can still see them both in my mind's eye, sitting at each side of the stove with the open Bibles on their laps.

Robina sat in an old Orkney chair that had seen better days. A piece of galvanised mill-hoop had been fixed around the back, near the top, to hold it together. The foremost part of both arms was worn thin, and a piece of Elastoplast had been stuck over a protruding screw-head on the one. My grandmother sat in a hard-backed chair of the type that was found in most folk's best rooms at the time. It did have a couple of arm-rests, but the only other comfort was a thin cushion. Robina had been quite bent all the time I knew her, whereas my grandmother was tall and erect until the end of her days. I often wondered if this was attributed to the chair in which she sat.

As a boy, I attended Sunday School in Dounby under the Reverend G. F. Cox, who was the minister in Harray at the time. We always had a passage out of the Bible to learn off by heart for the following Sunday. I found this quite easy at the time and this surely impressed the minister, because he came to our house to ask my parents if they would consider putting me in for the 'Ministry'. I suppose it was an honour that he thought this, but other events shaped my life and I eventually went down a different road. I did become a 'carpenter', though, and I suppose my main life's work was a 'ministry' of sorts as I did 'preach' to the 'unconverted' for the best part of thirty years!

I can still recite The Lord's Prayer in French, as it was taught to us by Miss McGuffie (I was surely a favourite of hers, as she sent me to Rae's for her papers and to Stockan's for her bread on a Friday afternoon). Another thing that is seldom heard nowadays is grace being said before meals. My father always said grace, but I have no idea what he said, as I think it was in Latin. Grace was also said in the school dining-rooms, in the days when pupils had to be seated before meals were served. We have to accept that we live in an ever-changing world, and the one we remember from our childhood will never return. The evening shadows will, indeed, eventually creep over all of us.

(Harold Esson)

ORKNEY IN THE 19th CENTURY

The following extract has been reproduced from *'The Transactions of The Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland'* and was written by Robert Oliphant Pringle in 1871:

Climate

'Many persons who are unacquainted with Orkney imagine, from the high northern latitude of the islands, that the climate, more especially during winter, must be very severe. This, however, is not the case. The Gulf-Stream, which runs direct to Orkney, and leaves on the shores seeds and other productions of the West Indies, raises the temperature of the surrounding ocean, and thus frost and snow rarely occur for any lengthened period.

Population

'The population of the Orkney Islands in 1831 was 28,047; in 1861, it had increased to 33,395; but in 1871 it was 31,241, being a decrease of 2154 persons in the last ten years.

'The majority of the Orcadians show evident tokens of their Scandinavian origin, especially in the North Isles; and the whole of Orkney teems with names of families and places derived from the same source. Although it is many years since the Norse language died out in Orkney, there are still many words or phrases in daily use which have come down from the time when Norse was the spoken language of Orkney. Gaelic has never been spoken by the people of Orkney.

'The people possess a courteous, kindly, cheerful disposition, and are quiet and moral in their habits. A police force, consisting of a superintendent and two constables, lead an easy life among the thirty-one thousand peaceable inhabitants. The county jail in Kirkwall is usually, for most of the year, 'a house to let', and as it is both an old and an ugly building, which interferes very much with the view of the west front of the grand old Cathedral of St Magnus - the glory of Orkney - it is to be hoped it will soon be swept away.

'The principal offenders against the public peace in Orkney appear to be tramps from the south - or '*land-loupers*' as they are used to be called in Orcadian phraseology - who occasionally allow '*the maut to get above the meal*', and so become pugnacious. One marked evidence of the moral character of the Orkney people is the low place which the county occupies in certain disreputable statistics, published from time to time by the Registrar General.

'Emigration to the colonies has never proceeded to so great an extent from Orkney as it has done from other parts of Scotland. The Hudson's Bay Company have, however, for many years obtained their staff of labourers, tradesmen, clerks &c., chiefly from Orkney. Young men trained to business or as tradesmen in Orkney naturally seek a wider field of labour in the south; and as there is little employment in Orkney for young women, save in agriculture, since the cessation of straw-plait manufacture, numbers of girls go south annually, where they readily find situations as domestic servants, being much esteemed in that capacity for their honesty and good moral character.'

(Harold Esson)

MUCK SPREADING

Some readers may have noticed the unusual Muck Spreader that I had in the Orkney Vintage Club display at the Dounby Show this year. It mounted on the three point linkage behind the tractor and made easy work of one of the least liked jobs on the farm - spreading roos o' dung. My machine was last used by Hector Spence of Bigging in Beaquoyside.

On seeing this machine, our postman and esteemed editor of this publication, Johnny Johnston, was able to say that they had a similar piece of equipment in Wyre, where he was born and brought up. It was called a 'Fork'.

(Harold Esson)

