

WOODS, FORESTS, AND ESTATES

OF

PERTHSHIRE

WITH

Sketches of the Principal Families in the County.

BY

THOMAS HUNTER,

EDITOR "PERTHSHIRE CONSTITUTIONAL AND JOURNAL."

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IX.—METHVEN.

Methven Wood a Lurking-Place of Wallace—The Battle of Methven Wood—The Castle—Walk through the Ancient Wood—An Enormous Beech—The Plantations—History of the Property—The First Extensive Planter—Remarkable Trees—The Pepperwell Oak—Ancient Church of Methven—The Bell Tree—The Black Italian Poplar at Tippermalla.

METHVEN WOOD, like Birnam and other ancient forests in Perthshire, is inseparably mixed up with the history of Scotland. Methven is mentioned in the chronicles of the country as far back as 972, when the Thane of Methven appears to have been a person of considerable importance. When sorely pressed by his foes, Wallace is said to have found a safe lurking-place in the wood of Methven. After hiding for some time in the wood, he is said to have come to Perth under the assumed name of Malcolmson, and passed himself off as a borderer who had come north in search of employment. It was to Methven Wood that he returned after reconnoitring the city, and it was from there that he emerged to attack the English on their way to strengthen Kinclaven Castle. The great Scottish patriot, when in Perth under the assumed name of Malcolmson, ascertained that it was the intention of the English to send a reinforcement of ninety horsemen to Kinclaven Castle. Immediately on gaining this intelligence, he ceased to solicit employment from the burghers, and hastened to his confederates in Methven Wood, and made preparations for waylaying the force as it proceeded northwards along the banks of the Tay. This they were successful in doing, killing sixty out of the ninety soldiers, —the commander of Kinclaven Castle, Sir James Butler, falling by the hand of Wallace himself. The defeat of the English was observed from the battlements of the castle, whither the survivors fled, but so close was the pursuit that Wallace and

his comrades entered the castle along with the discomfited horsemen before the drawbridge could be raised. All the English within the castle were put to the sword, with the exception of some women and children and two priests. The Scottish patriots remained within the castle for seven days, during which they carried off a large quantity of plunder, which they hid in the neighbouring forest of Shortwood Shaw. They afterwards burned the castle to the ground; but before effecting their escape, they were attacked by a large body of English, numbering about one thousand men, under the command of Sir John Butler, son of the governor of the castle whom Wallace had slain. As Wallace had only about sixty men with him altogether, the English felt pretty certain of his capture. Their attacks, however, were met with the invincible firmness characteristic of Wallace and his friends, and the English were ultimately repulsed with heavy loss, several of the Scots having also fallen during the conflict. After a short cessation of hostilities, the English were about to make a most resolute attack upon the position of the patriots, when Wallace and his friends succeeded in effecting their escape to Cargill Wood. The English made an ineffectual search for the booty carried away from the demolished castle, and afterwards returned to Perth. The Scots returned to Shortwood Shaw a couple of days after the battle, and carried off their treasure to the almost inaccessible Wood of Methven.

Methven Wood, however, is best known in history by the battle which was fought within the wood itself between the Scots under Bruce and the English under the Earl of Pembroke, and which was fought in 1306. After having ravished Galloway, Bruce marched to Perth, which was then strongly fortified, and where the Earl of Pembroke lay with a fairly large force. On arriving at the "Fair City," and finding the English army shut up within the walls, Bruce, in accordance with the chivalrous style of the age, sent a challenge to the Earl to come out and try his fortune in single combat. Pembroke replied that the day was too far spent, but that he would test his prowess against the Scottish monarch next morning. Bruce thereupon retired and encamped in Methven Wood. But the

Scots were not allowed to enjoy repose for any length of time. Shortly after they had pitched their camp, and whilst the soldiers were cooking their suppers, or were dispersed in foraging parties, an alarm was raised that the enemy was upon them. The alarm had hardly spread over the camp when the Earl of Pembroke, whose army outnumbered the Scots by 1500 men, burst in upon the weary soldiers of Bruce almost before they had time to arm. They made, however, a most determined resistance, Bruce slaying the horse of the Earl of Pembroke at the first onset. Notwithstanding their stubborn valour, the Scots could make no impression upon the superior forces of the English, and the battle was from the first almost a rout. Bruce was thrice unhorsed, and once was so nearly taken that Sir Philip de Mowbray shouted that he had captured the now-made King, when Sir Christopher Seton felled the Englishman to the earth, and rescued his master. Some of the best and bravest of the Scottish knights fell into the hands of the enemy, but Bruce himself, his brother, Edward Bruce, the Earl of Athole, Sir James Douglas, &c., with 500 men, effected their retreat into the fastnesses of Athole, where they suffered the miseries of outlawry.

The Castle of Methven, surrounded as it is by so many historic scenes, is an edifice of great interest. It is believed that there has been a castle upon this site for a thousand years; and the present building, a fine old baronial residence, has been in existence for two centuries. Large additions have been made to it at intervals, and it is now as commodious as it is picturesque. The present laird, Mr William Smythe, the respected Convener of the County, has improved the castle very considerably, covering it with a new roof, and modernising it in several respects. He has also increased the amenity of the ancient edifice by enlarging the grounds to four times what they were when he came into possession, planting a large number of valuable trees, and building an extensive range of glass erections in the gardens adjoining. The castle stands upon a commanding eminence between the villages of Methven and Almondbank, and looks down upon a prospect that is both extensive and enchanting. Standing upon the terrace on the

south front, the eye rests upon the fertile valley invaded by the Crieff and Methven Railway, wanders over the dark expansive Wood of Dupplin, with the bare, treeless Ochils in the distance. A little to the left, we obtain glimpses of the Fife Lomonds. From the east front the view stretches away to the pine-clad Hill of Kinnoull; and from the south front we obtain a magnificent sight of Ben Vorlich through a vista of singular beauty.

Leaving the Castle our steps are naturally directed to the historical Wood of Methven, the scene of bloody conflicts, and where doubtless lie the remains of many of our forefathers who died for the liberation of their country from the tyranny of Edward. The ancient Wood of Methven comprises about 200 acres, chiefly oak coppice, and is almost as dense as it would be in the days of Wallace and Bruce. It has been a wood from time immemorial, and, although there are not many trees which can be said to be of a very great age, still there are several that have survived the vicissitudes of a few centuries. The wood lies along the western bank of the Almond, and several fine views are obtained of the surrounding country, and the gurgling river, flowing onwards to the Tay. In some places, we look sheer down upon the river from a height of nearly 200 feet. No respectable person is interfered with in walking through the woods, and the proprietor has very considerably cut away some of the shrubbery which hid the finer prospects, and provided seats for the more comfortable enjoyment of the scenery. Proceeding along the walk at the top of the cliff skirting the banks of the Almond, we suddenly meet with a monster beech, ranking amongst the largest in the country. It is believed to be about 600 years old, and may have been a large tree when the Battle of Methven Wood was fought. One almost instinctively lifts his hat on coming across such a venerable monarch of the forest. Who can recount what has transpired within its protracted lifetime? How many generations of mankind have lived and died since it first sprung up in that quiet spot by the side of the classic stream on whose banks Oasian sleeps? How many storms has it weathered? Has it any history beyond its general association with the bloody

struggles which took place around it? If so, it must remain a sealed book for ever. The tree strikes one all the more forcibly that it confronts him unexpectedly. The walk on the summit of the cliff is not fringed with trees remarkable for their size—coppice-wood and young trees generally predominating on both sides. We therefore walk leisurely along the footpath without the slightest expectation of seeing anything noteworthy for some little time, but a sharp turn to the right, and a few steps onwards, brings us instantly to a standstill, in mute admiration of the gigantic vegetable wonder before us. The tree has every appearance of being over 100 feet in height, overtopping by far many immense trees in the neighbourhood. At one foot from the ground, it girths 21 feet 10 inches, and at 5 feet from the ground, it girths 14 feet 9 inches. It has a splendid bole of 20 feet, and divides into five great limbs, each of which would be a large tree by itself. As yet it shows no signs of decrepitude, but seems to be endowed with perpetual youth, the whole tree being in luxuriant health and foliage. It is, unfortunately, closed in to a large extent with coppice-wood, and its huge proportions are not, therefore, shown to the best advantage; but this obstruction may, in course of time, be removed, and the giant displayed in all his beauty. Almost opposite the beech to which we have been referring is a very fine oak, girthing 11 feet 10 inches at 1 foot from the ground, and 8 feet 9 inches at 5 feet from the ground, with a bole of 30 feet. Close by the banks of the river is a beautiful sycamore, 11 feet 6 inches at 1 foot from the ground, and 9 feet 1 inch at 5 feet from the ground. The bole is about 20 feet and the branches spread far over the river. Excellent roads and footpaths have been constructed through the ancient wood, and indeed over the whole of the property, and at every turn one sees something to admire. Here we meet with a huge giant or an interesting young tree, and there we pause to admire the far-stretching view of river, valley, and mountain that is ever opening before our eyes. Although the ancient Wood of Methven proper only comprises about 200 acres, this is by no means the whole extent of the wood upon the property. The plantations altogether consist of between 900 and 1000 acres, apart from the timber in the

neighbourhood of the Castle, of which we have yet to speak, and which includes a good many trees between 200 and 300 years of age. The great proportion of the wood was planted within the past century, although planting has been systematically going on since the property passed into the hands of the Smythe family in 1664. The property was purchased in that year by Patrick Smythe of Braco from Charles, the last Duke of Lennox, who died without issue in 1672, and whose honours, of which the Methven peerage was one, fell to Charles II., his nearest male heir, the King's great-grandfather and the Duke's great-grandfather having been brothers. The great-grandson of the first proprietor and father of the present proprietor has the honour of carrying out the most important of the planting operations. This was Mr David Smythe, who was educated for the Bar, and who sat as a Lord of Session with the title of Lord Methven, from 1793 to 1806. Most of the plantations were laid down between 1772 and 1800, but they have been extended at intervals up to the present, the blanks being also filled up as they occurred. Part of the woods formerly belonged to the Lynedoch property, and was transferred to the Methven estate by excambion.

Continuing our walk through the ancient woods, we come across some very fine timber at the north end, chiefly planted by Lord Methven, and somewhere about 100 years of age. The timber is principally beech, but is well mixed with larch, oak, and Scots fir. There are, throughout the entire wood, many fine specimens of Scots fir and larch. One of the former, taken at random, girths 9 ft. 11 in. at 1 foot from the ground, and 8 ft. 4 in. at 5 feet, with a clear stem of fully 30 feet. Another close beside it girths 8 ft. 9 in. at 1 foot from the ground, and 7 ft. 10 in. at 5 feet. A larch, also taken at random, girths 10 ft. 4 in. immediately above the swell, and 8 ft. 4 in. at 5 feet from the ground. A Spanish chestnut in the back woodlands, standing upon the top of an earth fence, girths 9 feet at the narrowest part of the bole. An elm in the Cow Park girths 11 ft. 9 in. at 1 foot from the ground, and 10 ft. 9 in. at 5 feet. At the back of the garden, there is an oak girthing 10 ft. 9 in. at 1 foot from the ground, and 9 ft. 6 in. at 5 feet. There are also a large number of very fine beech trees behind the garden.

After the Queen's death Lord Methven married again and had a son, the second Lord Methven. This Lord Methven married a daughter of Patrick, Lord Ruthven. He was killed by a cannon ball from the Castle of Edinburgh in 1572. He left a son, the third Lord Methven, who died without issue. The lands and title of Methven then lapsed to the Crown.

It is curious that four noble persons seem to have taken their titles from Methven.

First, there were the Stewarts of the Evandale line.

Second, it seems that the title was given by Charles II. to Charles Lennox, his illegitimate son. For one of the titles of the present Duke of Richmond and Gordon is Lord Methuen (or Methven) of Tarbolton. Now Tarbolton was certainly one of the titles of the Dukes of Lennox who owned Methven from 1584-1664, and it looks as if both titles—Methven and Tarbolton—had been bestowed by Charles II. on his son, with the Dukedom. They may somehow have been confounded by some subsequent editor of "The Peerage" into Methuen of Tarbolton.

Thirdly, the title of the present Lord Methuen is certainly derived from one Paul de Methuen, a prominent reformer, who fled from Scotland to the Court of Queen Elizabeth, and eventually founded a family in Wiltshire. It seems probable that the Methuen from which Paul took his name was Methven, for there is no other place in Scotland of the same name. Therefore, we may reasonably conclude that that great gentleman and gallant soldier, the present Lord Methuen, takes his title from Methven.

Fourthly, my grandfather, who was a Lord of Session, took the title of Lord Methven, a title which, of course, died with him.

In 1584 the lands of Methven were granted to the Dukes of Lennox, who held them till 1664, when they were bought by Patrick Smyth of Braco, in whose family they remained till recent years, and some part of them still remains.

The Smyths of Braco and Methven appear to have been a douce, respectable and law-abiding race.*

I have been reading lately the most interesting and instructive record of the Moncreiffes of Moncreiffe, which Mr. William Moncreiffe has lately compiled. The Smyths and the Moncreiffes have been closely related at many periods of their history. There is a striking contrast between the two families.

* Their motto "MEDIIS TRANQUILLUS IN UNDIS" is descriptive of their nature.

is appropriately named "The Simla Walk." Many of the trees are magnificent specimens for their age, and are all in fine health. They are planted 12 feet apart. Several of the trees raised from the same seed are planted out in the woods, and are also doing well. In the immediate neighbourhood there are some very good specimens of *Washingtonia gigantea*, planted fourteen years ago, nine seeds having been sent by a friend in California, of which seven have lived to become very promising trees. One of these girths 6 feet 1 inch at 1 foot from the ground, and 4 feet 6 inches at 5 feet, the height being about 50 feet. Close beside this *Washingtonia* is a very old holly. It girths 6 feet 5 inches at the narrowest part,—being 1 foot from the ground,—has a great spread of branches, and is in fine health. There is no appreciable difference upon this tree within the memory of the oldest people in the locality, and it is believed to be fully 200 years of age. Amongst the other noteworthy specimens surrounding the two latter trees, mention may be made of *Picea italica*, *Picea Nordmanniana*, *Abies Hocherii*, *Abies Pattonii*, *Picea macrocarpa*, the fern-leaf beech, and tulip tree, all of which are remarkably good specimens. Still keeping by the west of the Castle, we come to a fine clump of trees several centuries old. There is a cedar of Lebanon, about 100 years old, girthing 9 feet 2 inches at 1 foot from the ground, and 5 feet 9 inches at 5 feet. There are several fine spruce trees about 120 years of age, with a growth representing 1 foot for each year. One of these girths 9 feet 4 inches at 1 foot from the ground, and 7 feet 4 inches at 5 feet; and another girths 9 feet 9 inches at 1 foot, and 5 feet 1 inch at 5 feet. There are also several remarkably good Spanish chestnuts. One of the largest of these girths 14 feet 6 inches at 1 foot from the ground, and 11 feet 10 inches at 5 feet, with a beautiful bole of 25 feet. Another girths 14 feet 2 inches at 1 foot from the ground, and 10 feet 10 inches at 5 feet, and has an equally good bole. The following trees are all in the same neighbourhood, and their measurements also deserve to be recorded:—An elm, 16 feet 8 inches at 1 foot from the ground, and 13 feet 4 inches at 5 feet; a sycamore, 11 feet 10 inches immediately above the swell of the roots, and 6 feet 3 inches at 5 feet, with a bole of 20 feet;

a horse chestnut, 11 feet above the swall, and 6 feet at 5 feet from the ground; an ash, 18 feet at 1 foot from the ground, and 13 feet 5 inches at 5 feet, with a clear stem of 30 feet, and an entire height of about 100 feet; and a beech girthing 18 feet 5 inches at 1 foot from the ground, and 13 feet 3 inches at 5 feet, with a bole of 20 feet. At the east front of the Castle there is also a very good specimen of *Abies Morinda*, although it was considerably destroyed during the winter of 1879. There is also a wonderfully good Lucombe oak.

There are still three remarkable trees to be noticed, and these are by no means the least interesting. The first we shall notice is the celebrated Pepperwell oak, in the park in front of the Castle, and so called from its proximity to a refreshing spring bearing the aromatic name by which the tree is designated. Special reference is made to this tree in the New Statistical Account of the parish, where it is described as "a tree of great picturesque beauty, and contains 700 cubic feet of wood; the trunk measures $17\frac{1}{2}$ feet in circumference at 3 feet above the ground; and its branches cover a space of 98 feet in diameter. It has attained an increase of girth of three feet since the year 1796. In the year 1722, 100 merks Scots were offered for this tree; and tradition reports that there is a stone in the heart of it, but, like the Golenos oak, it must be cut up to ascertain this." In 1867, the tree girthed 21 feet 7 inches at 1 foot from the ground, and 19 feet at 6 feet. The tree has grown very considerably since the publication of the Statistical Account, and even since 1867. At 1 foot from the ground it now girths no less than 23 feet, and at the narrowest part, or about 5 feet from the ground, it has a girth of 19 feet 5 inches, being 2 feet more than at the date of the publication of the New Statistical Account (1837), when it was measured at 3 feet above the ground. The tree is growing by the side of a steep bank, so that the size of the bole is somewhat irregular. On the upper side the bole measures about 8 feet, but on the lower side it has a height of 10 or 12 feet. Four immense main limbs start from the bole, and a fifth was broken off some years ago. The tree is altogether about 80 feet in height, and is in every respect a noble specimen of the "brave old oak." It is

known to be over 400 years old at least. The second of the trees to which we have just referred is an ash, known as the "Bell Tree," in the village churchyard, so called, we presume, from the bell of the ancient church having at one time been suspended from its branches. Its age is unknown, but it is highly probable that it was planted at the time the ancient church was built, about the year 1433, when Walter Stewart, Earl of Athole, then proprietor of the barony of Methven, formed the church of the barony into a Collegiate Church, which it continued to be down to the Reformation. Part of this old church is still standing; and up till now, although it will not continue to be so any longer, it has been used as a burying-place by the Methven family. The portion of the old edifice still standing is the aisle, on one of the walls of which there is a stone showing its connection with royalty. The stone has the Royal Lion of Scotland sculptured upon it, with the crown above, and some Saxon inscription below, but the letters are so worn by age as to be completely illegible. It is believed that this portion of the ancient building was erected either by Margaret, the Queen Dowager of James IV., and eldest daughter of Henry VII. of England, when she resided at Methven Castle, or, as is perhaps more probable, by Walter Stewart, Earl of Athole, who endowed the church with lands and tithes. Being a son of Robert II., he was also a member of the Royal Family, and entitled to place the emblems of royalty upon the building erected under his patronage. Supposing the "Bell Tree" to be planted about the time of the building of the old church, this would make it about 450 years of age, which it has every appearance of being. The New Statistical Account says that "at 3½ feet above the surface of the ground, this tree measured 20 feet in circumference, and it contains in all 380 cubic feet of timber. Forty years ago, it exhibited a magnificent top, but wearied, as it were, of its former pliancy, it now chooses rather to break than bow, and yearly it does homage to the soil which nourishes it, by surrendering a portion of its withered branches." The tree has continued to decay since this measurement was taken, and, although it still gives birth to luxuriant foliage, it has an aged and decrepit appearance. It may, however, still

five for several generations, but Ichabod is written upon its venerable head. At Tippermallo there is another remarkable tree, also in its dotage—a black Italian poplar. It is not nearly so old as the other two above referred to, having been planted in 1776. It is, however, a very large specimen of this variety, although recent storms have lessened its dimensions. In 1836, it girthed $11\frac{1}{2}$ feet at 3 feet from the ground, and had 300 cubic feet in solid contents. It now girths 20 feet 7 inches at the base; 17 feet 10 inches at 2 feet from the ground; and 15 feet 9 inches at 5 feet.

Although we have presented a pretty extensive catalogue of remarkable trees upon the Methven property, we have far from exhausted the list. It is quite possible even that we have not included the largest specimens of some of the varieties, as a great many huge trees are to be met with nearly similar in size. However, the measurements we have given may be taken as fair specimens of a countless number of trees remarkable for their size and symmetry, and which are not only a great ornament to the country round the ancient and picturesque Castle of Methven, but are of considerable pecuniary value.