



# Holmehill

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## Memories of Holmehill

*an oral history*





# Memories of Holmehill



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## *Credits*

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### **Editors:**

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# History



## *Legal Deed*

*1 Grace Glen or Donaldson,....for certain good causes and considerations but without any price ...do hereby Dispone to Provost, Magistrates and Councillors of the Burgh of Dunblane... all and whole of that park....  
[the Hielanmans]*

28<sup>th</sup> May 1941



*It ...[had previously been] suggested that the Town Council should consider taking over the park at this point as a recreational field for the children of the adjoining Housing Schemes.*

Burgh of Dunblane Minutes approved 14<sup>th</sup> May 1940

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## *Personal Memories*

*It was common knowledge that the Hielanmans land was given to the people of Dunblane*

*Bob G.*

***That's correct.***

*Willie W.*

*Ever since we settled in Dunblane in 1971 I have wondered about the history of Holmehill. It has always seemed obvious to me that Holmehill, with its superb views and strong defensive position, must have played a significant part in the early history of Dunblane.*

*Initially , I imagined Holmehill being a fort within which St. Blane's monastery was built with its beehive hermitic cells for the monks and a small wooden church. After some time, however, I became sceptical about this picture. Was a monastery compatible with a fort? How many monasteries in Dark Age Scotland were located in forts? Very few if any! Then I thought that Holmehill might have been a Pictish fort with Ramoyle being the civilian quarter outside the fort but I have found no evidence to support this view.*

*Latterly, I have wondered if Holmehill was part of Rome's First Frontier built in the first century AD, which ran from the Tay along the Gask Ridge through Ardoch petering out at Greenloaning and Glenbank in Dunblane. Nobody knows the route followed by the Frontier south from Glenbank but Holmehill is close by and is an obvious site for a signal station as the defensive barrier proceeded to the Forth.*

*Bill I.*



*My father was a timber merchant from Bridge of Allan - Gordon and Allan Timber Merchants , We had a sawmill at Causewayhead. There was an "understanding" that local firms did particular estates. We did Kippenross. We used to do the trees on Holmehill on Saturdays so it didn't interfere with our main jobs. Holmehill was comparatively small you see. The trees were mainly beech with a sprinkling of oak. Cutting trees was a skilled job. You cut a "v" shape and then stood in front to see which way the tree was leaning. You cut with an axe but then there were two men on each end of a big saw.... It could take a day to get a big tree down. It was good pocket money for me. It was a skilled craftsman's job but as a boy I was very strong and very agile. I used to climb up and put rope round the limbs that needed felling so the limbs didn't crash to the ground. After the war we got the jute and steel ropes from the Clyde shipyards.*

*Bob G.*



## WWII

In the war Dunblane Hydro was a place where wounded soldiers were brought. There were two local ambulance drivers, Willie Mackrell and Lady Betty Muir. The North wing of the Hydro was badly damaged by fire.... About 1947. I worked as a plasterer at the Hydro.....I mind standing up on the Hielanmans watching the Fire Brigade. There two or three of them. The fire went right up to the top of the building.

*Willie W*





## Mrs Donaldson and the "Big Hoose....."

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I used to work up there when I was an apprentice plasterer. We used to do the plasterwork for Mr Fraser the builders. That was in 1951 I started. In those days you couldn't start an apprenticeship until you were sixteen so I worked for a year at Ashfield Mill until I could start. There was a lot of fancy cornice work in the 'big house'.

I met Mrs Donaldson - very nice woman- no airs and graces about her. She used to call me "wee Willie". She had three Irish Wolfhounds which she used to walk on the grounds of Holmehill House.- Great natured dogs they were... She did a lot of good deeds. Whenever you worked at the house you always got your cups of tea and homemade cake. Also when you finished the job she always gave us a tip. I got half a crown. That was a lot in days when wages were ten shillings a week. I tell you I thought that I was in Heaven when I got that. Mrs Donaldson also let my Auntie Bunty live in the lodge house until she [Aunty B.] died.

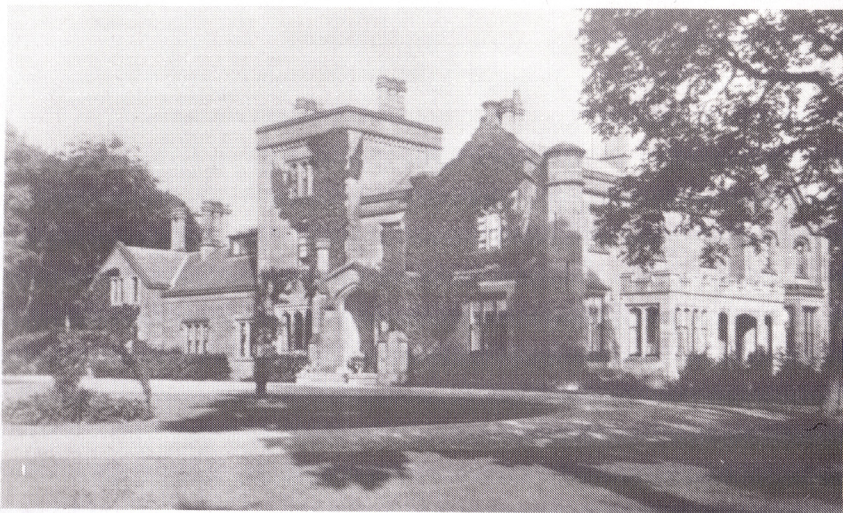
She was great for good deeds, Mrs Donaldson. She held garden fêtes in the grounds- lovely grounds. I helped put out the tables and parasols for fêtes and tea parties for friends. I remember her hosting events for the Guides in the fifties I think...

And also of course she gifted the Hielanmans to the people of Dunblane. I mind Alanby Bayne told me that as a child.

I remember the gardens. The gardeners were Mr Crawford, Mr Willie Mackrell and Jimmy McCallum. The gardens were the most beautiful gardens ever, it seems. They contained everything in the vegetable lines. They grew their own tomatoes and had delicious apples - Orange Pippins and Macintosh Reds. We used to plunder them, my pal Roy Wilson and I. He's away down in England now. There were big greenhouses there too, full of grapes but we couldn't get in there- it was locked!

*Willie W.*





**87. Holmehill House in its hey day about 1926. Built in 1820 by the architect William Stirling on the site of St. Blanes 7th cent. community inside an old Dun, or hill fort, it was a superb example of early Victorian architecture. Latterly it was owned by the Templetons of carpet fame, and then by Mrs. Donaldson of the shipping line family until her death in 1967.**

*Mum was a char lady for Mrs Donaldson in the early nineteen fifties. I used to go with her and play in the garden of the big house. It was a grand house. I only remember the hall. It was parquet flooring and was shiny –like an ice rink. I had a little tricycle and mum used to pull me up the hill with a rope... when she went to work,*

*Mrs Donaldson had a big black Daimler car in the 1950s. She also had a chauffeur to drive her. He used to let me sit on his knee and I'd pretend to drive. I remember the driveway lined with trees; it was narrow just like it is now....*

*Mrs Donaldson was connected with the Guides in 1954 or 1955 (I think) she opened her grounds to let the Guides have a fete there...*

*We used to play in the sandy hole on the Hielanmans. To us it seemed like an enormous volcano. We played with our Dinky cars.*

*There was our wash-house on the Hielanmans near the Sandy Pits. Dad would get up early to light a fire under the boiler like a steam engine.*

*We would just run out to play and take our toys - sometimes in the middle of Ramoyle (there were hardly any cars then) sometimes just adventuring up on the Hielanmans. I used to just go out to play from the age of two. Things were safe then. Ramoyle was just like a big community*

*Mike D.*





# The Seasons

## Spring

*The children used to roll their eggs down the hill at Easter time. Families would go out . It was a family occasion. Little kids— ages three, four and five— used to play on the hill. They played in the Sandy Hole and made sandcastles.. The hill is full of sand. They were within calling distance of their mothers who could see them from the gardens – no worries about strangers then . Bob G.*



I remember the big brown wooden gates that were the entrance into the gardens off Smithy Loan, more or less opposite the Smiddy. From there you could walk through the gateway in the potting sheds to the vegetable garden on the ground where Holmehill Court houses now stand, at the back of the library.

It seemed to me as a child quite a fancy building for a simple potting shed. Ewing W.

When we came back from school and after we'd had dinner we used to go out to play. We would all play football on the Hielanmans on the bit we called the "the flat". We used to go up on the Hielanmans looking for crows' eggs. There was a fine rookery up there.

*Willie W.*

*In May we gather pignuts. My daughter uses the hill more than me. She likes it because she can run... run free, she's safe.... She can climb trees, build hides, look for deer and rabbits. She can collect dog sorrel for flavouring fish when I'm cooking.....*

*Andrea P*



# Summer

*It's a good community space. I remember playing rounders on the Hielanmans on hot summer days. In the late 1990s we used to play gigantic games of rounders on the Hielanmans.*

*Children from five to sixty-five would gather spontaneously and we would divide into two teams. The bat- a genuine, solid ash Louisville Slugger- was*

*bigger than some of the kids, but all would wield it with equal energy. Everyone soon learned to duck when the Slugger was enthusiastically cast aside by the batter who successfully connected with the ball and rushed to make their "home run" Surprisingly skilled players of all sizes emerged- from dads who "could have gone professional you know", through teens who were determined to catch them out, to toddlers proving they could match the old yins. The sun shone (continuously it seems, with hindsight), the scores mounted and the balls vanished into the undergrowth.*

*Time passes and the children have grown up and moved on. Communal baseball has been replaced by more ambitious pursuits. Meanwhile the parents are too bashful to play on their own, so the Slugger was sent to the charity shop. Then last year when the Council came and mowed down all the bushes up there, I found no fewer than eleven decaying and moth eaten tennis balls.*

*The memories, though remain as fresh and vibrant as ever. . . .*

*Gerard H.*

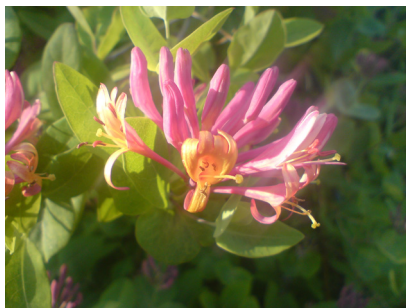


*We used to play up the hill in the summer- not games as such - anything- scooping out the sand out of the sandy hole and examining it. We didn't make anything in particular as such.... Just noise!*

*Eddie B.*

Granny Flaws used to take us up there on Holmehill to play. She lived in Ramoyle. We use to have picnics and meet folk up there. We used to take raspberry wine and pancakes. I remember - with Granny Flaws you didn't have to make round pancakes... You could make them whatever shape you wanted over an open fire; you could make snakes or people pancakes. We used to dip them in honey to eat them. If it was a snake shape you could get it right into the honey- Always good. Delicious- something special about your granny's cooking. We spent most of our summers at Granny Flaws in Ramoyle. We used to play in the Laighhills or up in the Hielanmans park at Holmehill. In fact Holmehill was often a dropping off place while granny went to the Co-op. In those days there were stumps where the house used to be and we used to run about and play "King of the Castle" In those days too it was safe enough to let your kids play anywhere. We knew when to go back home because of the cathedral clock.

*Irene F*



*I play tennis with my friend Sarah on the Hielanmans every summer.*

*I enjoyed walking with my class upon Holmehill. It's like a wonderful giant playground. Eliza T*



# Autumn

We used to walk back through there. Stakis used to let the children of Dunblane use the Hydro [pool] on Monday nights. We used to play "Hide and Seek" amongst the trees... Fun.....  
*Irene F*

*Good trees for conkers. In the autumn conkers was a great sport.*

*Bob G.*



In November there used to be a big bonfire up there - right up on top of the Hielanmans. We had bonfires that I remember from the nineteen forties and fifties. We used to go round the doors collecting stuff with bogies. We made a guy for the top. Everyone helped - all the children in the Bogside and Backcroft area. Sometimes we used to get lipped. There was fierce competition between the Rylands and George Street gangs as to whose bonfire was the biggest and whose could still be there on bonfire night. There were about twenty of us altogether; three Gordons, three Browns and three Weirs....*Willie W.*



# Winter

*We used to run and play up there in the winter. Sledging and stuff. The snow lasted longer then ... in the thirties you know...*

*Eddie B.*

*In the winter there was sledging.... You could take the sledges up to the high wall and get a great run- lots of different angles left and right. Just like the thrill of skateboarding today.*

*Bob G.*

I have a memory of David and I sliding down the grassy hill in the snow...Because we were so heavy we flew down the hill and up the other side!

*Mary T.*

*The "bogside kids" had a bonfire on the flat area of what is now Scottish Woodlands. They stored their stuff for the bonfire in the old air -raid shelter. They spent ages collecting stuff. We didn't have fireworks there though. We had family fireworks down Laighhills lane at Mr Finlaysons.*

*Mike D.*



I remember winter-times in the nineteen sixties. All the roads had to get salted. My neighbour use to get up at four o' clock in the morning to do this. We used to sledge down the hill from the top down to Bogside and see who was the fastest. We made a little bump at the bottom near where the garages are now. You had to really hold on tight to prevent yourself falling off. Showed whether you were any good or not. There were no cars then which was just as

well because it was fast. You were really going something down that hill. Fun..... but my legs got scraped. My mother rubbed cream on my legs 'cos they were all scabby.

Winters then in the thirties and forties were colder - more severe than now.



*Willie W.*





# Wildlife

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*We moved from central Edinburgh to Dunblane because we wanted to bring our family closer to nature. Soon after moving to our cottage in Ramoyle we heard the sound of owls coming from Holmehill and we realised that we now lived next to a very special place for nature. We are delighted by the sight of buzzards wheeling overhead, the sound of woodpeckers drumming and the spectacular rookery. We also get lots of lovely birds coming down to our garden feeders, including siskins and a flock of long-tailed tits.*

*In May 2008 we went on an early-morning guided walk and we were treated to the dawn chorus on Holmehill. We learned more about the tremendous variety of bird-life there including more usual species like whitethroat, chuff-chaff and willow warbler- all on our doorstep.*

*Malky, Janet and Maisie McL.*

I remember running, running around in the meadow and watching the deer.

*Rowan W.*

My first memory of Holmehill would be as the backdrop to my primary school days in the Braeport. All I knew of it was that there was a big house that was hidden in the trees and a small old lady was driven in and out by her chauffeur in what we thought must have been a Rolls –Royce. We lived on the other side of town so we didn't have any reason to go in.

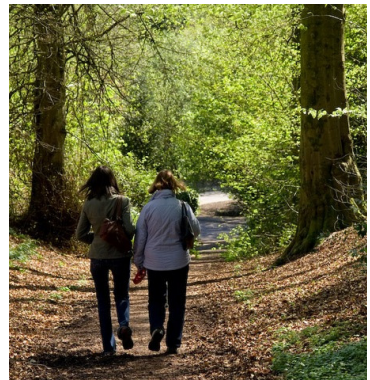
I suppose my last memory of Holmehill as such, i.e. before the houses in Smithy Loan were built on the parkland policies, was when I was asked to take some photographs of exotic sounding sheep – Jacobs sheep. The field used to be used to graze cattle and sheep. I climbed over the wall at Smithy Loan to find no sheep in sight. I wandered down towards the old vegetable gardens with their wonderful greenhouses, potting sheds and lovely photogenic gates, then sadly in a dilapidated state. Holmehill Court now stands on this site. ...





Here I found the sheep were resting with their lambs in the shelter. I managed to get a few photographs before realising I was being followed. It was not a sheep. It was obviously a large ram which somehow got me cornered against a high wall. He was very friendly and allowed me to pat him on the head but every time I tried to escape he would take one step back and butt me with his hard skull. Eventually I managed to get over the wall, bruised but safe. And the photos turned out fine as well. The things you have to do for art!!!

*Ewing W.*





# A Community Asset

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*My husband, the Rev. John Gray thought the hill a great asset to the cathedral. He spoke to Stakis about the proposed building and said it was a bad thing for the community and the cathedral.*

*Sheila G.*

*When I helped with the Guides we used to go up and play games and enjoy mini adventures!*

*Kate*

*Holmehill is a wonderful green space for the whole community! I regularly run through it and it formed the centre of our orienteering map for our special wedding day event in April this year (2008).*

*Brad.C.*

It's a quiet haven- A sanctuary in the City, It is good for the soul just walking on the earth - not pavements. We need more quiet places and we are lucky to have it. Such an asset for the community!

*John S.*

*I was a cub leader in the 1980s. I had three boys in the Cubs and I remember taking the Cub pack and having sausage sizzles and playing adventure games up on Holmehill. You could imagine the old house - it was like a secret garden. - I remember nature games too. It was quite wild up there. We would collect things. There were lots of berries and beech nuts; there were a lot of beech trees. My daughter who was in the Girl Guides also recollects going up on the hill for sausage sizzles. We used to take the children up there too when I worked at the Braeport playgroup in the 1980s. We only went about halfway up though because the children were only little. It's nice to have a green space in the middle of the town that is not cultivated. It is good for wildlife and the environment.*

*Mary McK.*

*It's a good place for a quiet walk away from the traffic and the hurly-burly.*

*Magnus*





One of my best memories of being on Holmehill was when me and my friend Rowan took Rosie the dog for a walk. We got stuck in barbed wire – trees everywhere- wild!

*Eliza T.*



Holmehill has delighted me for over twenty years- and I'm sad to see the state it's now in with fly tipping and coarse weeds invading. When I first saw the hill,



part of it was actually a flower meadow. I've walked literally every part of it observing nature and collecting wild berries, edible leaves and fungi- fallen branches too ended up in my fire! It's a magical place, truly magical.

*Steve McG.*



*Most of what I remember dates from the time I was on the Town Council. The land at Bogside was part of the park of Holmehill; it was given to Dunblane Town Council for the people of Dunblane. This was common knowledge in the Council. We treated it as unoccupied land - as recreational land. In fact our kids had the most use of it. In the 1960s we quite often went for a walk round the hill, even when it was occupied by Mrs Donaldson. We used to take our dogs...*



*After Reo Stakis bought the place the provost of Dunblane and I, we began to consider what Reo wanted Holmehill for... (He had built himself a dwelling-house in the Hydro grounds) I became friendly with Jim McLeod, the Band and Entertainment Director up at the Hydro. He and Reo became very good friends.*

*As I had become increasingly concerned, I said to Jim that it would be good to arrange a meeting to discuss Reo's plans.*

*I always remember that at that meeting Reo said that he had bought Holmehill to preserve the lovely view of the trees when he looked out from the window of his office at the Hydro. He always wanted it to be there and he didn't want anyone else to spoil it. He actually intended to stay in Dunblane but his wife wanted to stay in Glasgow so he didn't rebuild the house on Holmehill- he allowed it to be knocked down.*

*At an official meeting between myself, Provost Matheson, Jim McLeod and Reo we talked about the future. Reo said that he would eventually like to hand over Holmehill to the Town Council. He said he wanted it to be the Reo Stakis Memorial Park. I always thought Reo intended to keep this promise- When he did sell land it was in Smiddy Loan where he could still see the beautiful view from the Hydro.*

*John S*



# A Very Magical Space

## The Dragon Tree: A Story

Once upon a time, there was a little girl called Maeve, and one day when she was walking on Holmehill with her mother she saw a tree. That tree, she thought, looked like a dragon!. So she said to her mother, "Mum doesn't that tree look like a dragon." Mum said:

"Of course darling it looks just like a dragon." So the little girl bounced up and down shouting "the dragon tree, the dragon tree." That night the little girl had a dream, a dream that she wished would come true.

Now, who wants to know what Maeve's dream was? She went to the dragon tree and it came alive! She jumped onto the dragon's back and soared away while her mum was not looking. She was very happy that her mum did not see. Whilst they were looking down they saw a deer on the ground, in a field on Holmehill, beside the Quaker Meeting House. And the deer saw them and leapt so high that he landed on the dragon's back! But after a while the dragon got tired and decided to land.. When he was about to land, Maeve said,



"Hey dragon! Look at that tree! It looks like it has a seat on it, land there!"

But whilst pointing, the girl fell off and landed on the seat too.

There was a big voice, calling;

"MAEVE WHERE ARE YOU?"

And Maeve suddenly realised it was her mum calling. Then the dragon, the deer and the girl called Maeve saw a person called Veronica.

Veronica said that she knew why Maeve's mum was calling. It was because she didn't know where Maeve was...

So.... Maeve jumped on the dragon's back and the deer jumped too and the dragon flew high into the sky, over the trees . After five minutes he dropped down to let the deer off and it landed and bounded off into its field, Then the dragon flew off again into the sky and soon landed at the place where Maeve's mother was searching for her..

Then ... the dragon winked and turned back into the dragon tree.. Maeve never told her mum about that night. But, do you know, it was not actually a dream! She actually did wake up and do all that stuff and whenever she has friends over she asks them if they want to go on an adventure and most of the time they say YES!.



For me going onto Holmehill with Maeve is full of magic; the trees have personalities and need to be greeted and played with. Spotting a deer is the source of many a story, collecting brambles becomes an adventure...

Veronica H. & Maeve T.



And so present memories pay tribute to our wonderful community asset. The recollections in this booklet have been collected from people who remember as far back as the 1930s; they go up to the present day and are preserved for future generations who will in turn form memories of their own. If you would like to contribute to this ongoing process please contact 07948 405074



If you would like to find out more about the history of Holmehill or Holmehill Community Buyout, visit our website:

[www.holmehill.org](http://www.holmehill.org)

Whilst every attempt has been made to contact the owners of the photograph of Holmehill House used in this booklet, taken from McKerracher, 1990, "Dunblane", Publisher, unfortunately this has been unsuccessful.

## **Holmehill - *the greenheart of Dunblane***

Holmehill Community Buyout is a local community group based in Dunblane Scotland. Its aims are:

- to buy Holmehill for use by the community of Dunblane
- to ensure that the protection presently afforded to Holmehill is maintained
- to ensure the sustainable development of Holmehill

Holmehill Community Buyout is the campaigning name of Holmehill Ltd (Scottish Charity No SC 036988). Holmehill Ltd is a company registered in Scotland No 279947

