

Alexander Watt 1789 - 1866



The Watt story really begins with Alexander Watt at Watermill farm near Fraserburgh. Before 1841 (the first census) and 1855 (when statutory records began in Scotland) there are only scanty parish records which are often inconclusive. Anyway they are only names and occasionally places. All supporting documents are in Photo files (*indicates supporting document). Sadly, in 2023, Watermill farm no longer exists. The town of Fraserburgh has been encroaching for years and the site is now an Asda car park.

Watermill farm 2007



We know from the first census in 1841* that Alexander Watt was living at Watermill farm in Fraserburgh parish aged 52. We don't know how long he had been there but Rebecca, Alexander's oldest daughter, was born in Tyrie parish in 1826 and not at Watermill. I have discovered that Watermill farm was leased to James Milne in 1831 (Aberdeen City tax records*) so he could not have been there for more than 10 years. On the next page of this document there is an Alexander Watt at Middletack farm in Rathen parish in 1831 but we can't be sure that this was him.

Watermill farm was part of a complex of mill, brewery and farm on the outskirts of Fraserburgh. It is very close to the north coast and may have been quite bleak in winter. The family lived there until 1911 - 1912. It is where Myra and her siblings were born and grew up.

Alexander was a tenant farmer as all the farmers were. The land was owned by Lord Saltoun of Philorth*.

From the census we know that in 1841* Alexander employed at least 5 agricultural labourers.

In 1851* he had 70 acres and employed 7 labourers. In 1861* he had 88 acres and employed 5 labourers. The house had 9 rooms with 1 or more windows. Alexander had definitely by 1841, the date of the first census, become middle class.

Watermill c. 1971

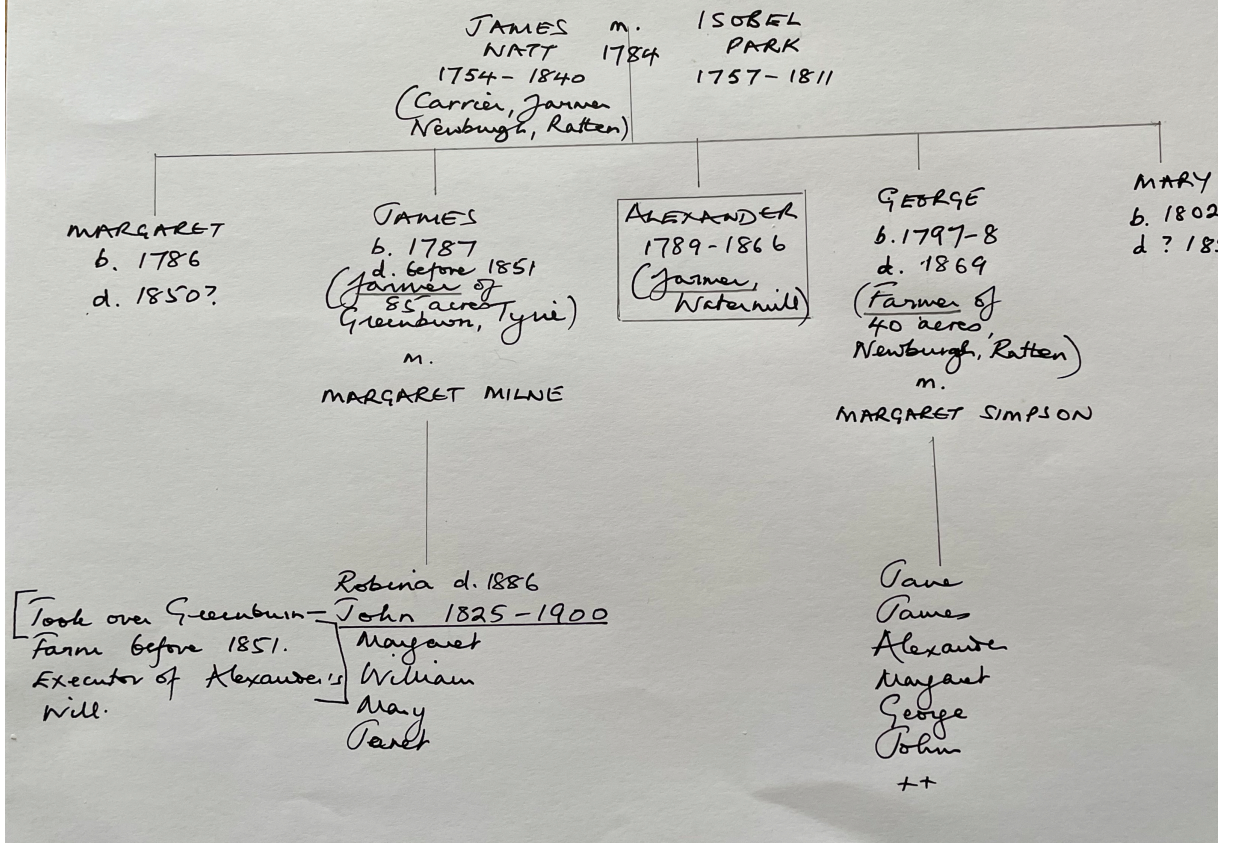


Alexander's death certificate of 1866* is a valuable source. Alexander's date of birth has been worked out from his death certificate and June's family tree* (from the Watt family bible) which showed he was born in 1789. The death certificate shows that his father was James Watt (farmer) and his mother was Isabella Park. James Watt was 34, a 'carrier' in Newburgh, a farm in Rathen parish, when he married Isobel Park in 1784 in Rathen (Rathen parish records*). Isabella was the second daughter of Alexander Park in Concraigs (Concraigs is a farm in Rathen parish). Alexander Park was born in 1716 in Rathen*, the son of George Park in Muirhead (not located yet). James Watt and Isabella Park are buried in Rathen*. So Rathen seems to be the parish that the Watts came from. It is marked on the map above with Newburgh, Concraigs, Middletack, Greenburn, Tyrie and Watermill.

From the Rathen parish register we know that Alexander had at least three siblings: Margaret born 1786,* James, born 1787*, and Mary, born 1802*. We know from Alexander's will* that he had another much younger brother, George, a farmer in Newburgh, Rathen, born in 1798, who was an executor of his will. The other family executor of his will was John Watt, his nephew. Alexander's older brother James died before 1851* and his son John took over the farm at Greenburn in Tyrie parish. From the census records* and death certificates* we know that James and George were definitely his brothers. It now appears that the three sons of James Watt were all tenant farmers, James at Greenburn in Tyrie parish, later taken over by his son John, Alexander at Watermill and George at Newburgh, Rathen, maybe taking over this farm when his father died. It seems likely that James Watt was a tenant farmer at Newburgh, Rathen. Leases were normally for 19 years and it seems possible that Alexander was a tenant at Middletack before moving to Watermill.

Interestingly my paternal grandmother Rosa Forbes (nee Barnet) also had ancestors from Rathen parish. Her great great grandfather Robert Knox 1719-1799 was a farmer at the Mains of Philorth (also on the map) and there are Knox and Barnet gravestones in Rathen churchyard. The Barnets must have known the Watts.

SIBLINGS OF ALEXANDER WATT



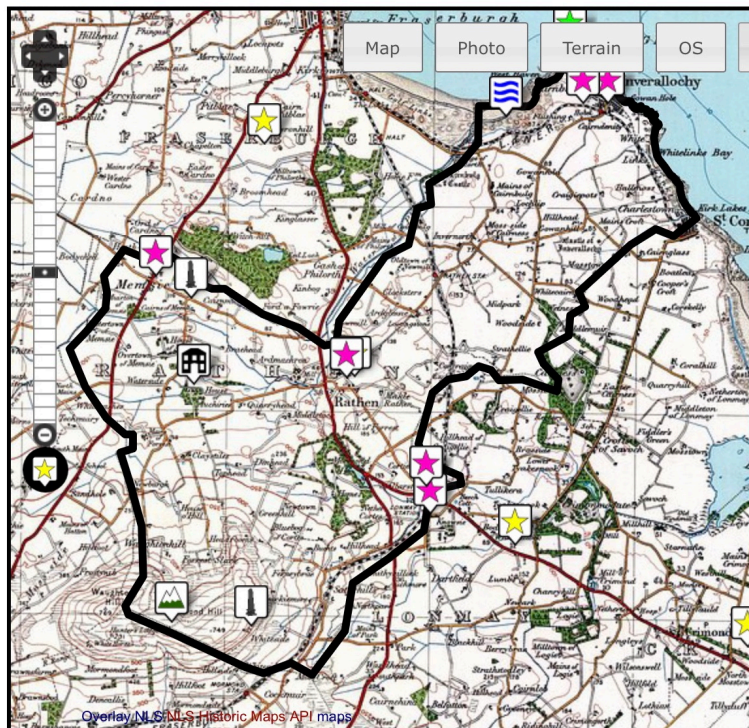
Newburgh farm



Greenburn farm

Rathen and Tyrie Parishes

Map of the Parish of Rathen in the Historical County of Aberdeen



A trip to the Fraserburgh area in 2023 has given me greater insight into farming life in the area. I now understand that the Watts did not come from the villages of Rathen and Tyrie but the parishes of Rathen and Tyrie.

There were only two villages in the parish of Rathen in the nineteenth century and they were the small fishing villages of Cairnbulg and Inverallochy with tightly packed houses close to the sea. The farming and fishing communities were quite separate. The parish was approximately 2 miles x 6 miles (see map) and Rathen was the centre of the farming community with an old Kirk and graveyard dating from the 13th century and a huge new church built in 1865 and a school. I could find only a few old buildings, two of which were presumably a manse and a school teacher's house. There were several grander houses in the parish (Cairnbulg Castle, Cortes House, Memsie house and Auchiries). Everybody else lived on a farm or croft. Farmers like Alexander and his brothers were all tenants of a few landlords who inherited the land.

Tyrie parish was similar except that William Forbes, a landowner, founded the planned village of New Pitsligo in 1787. It was a philanthropic scheme to provide housing for tradespeople, artisans and labourers. Tenants were given bare shells of houses with land on a 999 year lease.

Alexander Watt Marriages

1. **Mary Rettie** (named as Jessie Rettie on her daughter Rebecca's death certificate in 1901*). The Retties farmed at Coburty- also marked on the map. Mary's brother? was Arthur Rettie and his son was Joseph Rettie, another of Alexander's executors. June's family tree* shows that Alexander married Mary (born 1791) and had three children, Rebecca (born 1825), James (born 1828) and William (born 1831). June got this information from the Watt family bible. The census of 1841* shows Mary aged 50 and Rebecca aged 15, James aged 12, but no William. None of them appear in the census of 1851* which shows only Alexander Watt. From the gravestone in Tyrie (Gerrard's photo*) we can see that Mary died in 1844, aged 53, James died in 1850 aged 22 and William died in 1837, aged 6. Alexander and his second wife Isabella are also buried in Tyrie. **Rebecca** (1826-1901), the only surviving child of Alexander's first marriage, married Alexander Anderson in 1842* two years before her mother died and long before Alexander Watt remarried. She was just 16. Alexander Anderson is on the census for 1841 as an agricultural labourer at Watermill. Rebecca's death certificate of 1901* shows that she died at 76 of 'natural decay' and was living at Crimongorth, Crimond, near Fraserburgh. She was a widow and her husband Alexander had been a farmer. Her parents are given as Alexander Watt and Jessie Rettie which is either an error (Mary had died nearly 50 years earlier) or that was the name she was known by. She had a son called George who reported her death. The census of 1851* shows Alexander Anderson, 33, an agricultural labourer from Elginshire, Abernethy (now Nethy Bridge) and Rebekeah, 26, born Tyrie, living at 5 Lochpots road, Fraserburgh. They have a son called James (age illegible). The census of 1861* shows they are now living at 16

Lochpots road with their 5 sons, James, John, Alexander, Arthur and George. Alexander is now a farmer of 80 acres employing 4 labourers. By 1871* the family were living at 17 Lochpots road and Alexander was farming 96 acres with 4 labourers. In 1881* the family was living at Lochpots Farm House. In 1891 they were living at Crimongorth Farm, Crimond. The valuation roll of 1895-6 * shows that the tenants were Arthur, George and Andrew Anderson so presumably Alexander had died. Rebecca died here in 1901.

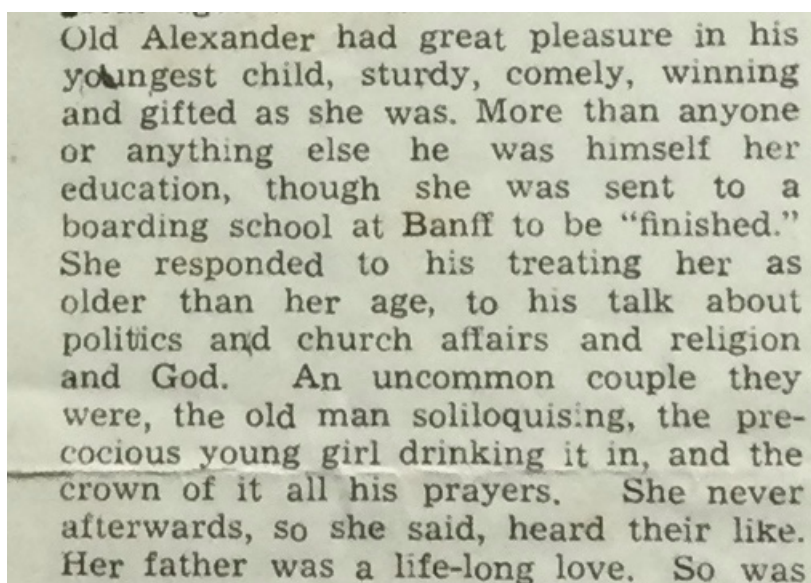
2. Alexander married **Isabella Mitchell** from St. Cyrus, Kincardineshire on November 23 1851 in Fetteresso.* She was 41 years his junior. According to Gerrard, Alexander's friend, James Mitchell, who ran the Watermill Brewery, introduced Alexander to his youngest sister. Isabella's parents were John Mitchell and Ann Mitchell (nee Caird)*. From Ann(e)'s death certificate* in 1877 we know that her parents were John Caird, farmer, and Elizabeth Caird (nee Mowatt). Ann(e) lived for some time after her husband's death with her son James Mitchell at Watermill Brewery (*census 1871).

In the census of 1861* Alexander and Isabella had three children, Isabella, John and Anne (Annie). Gerrard told me that there was a fourth child, Isabella's twin, George, who died aged 6*. When Alexander died in 1866 Isabella kept the farm going for her son John, then aged 12. Presumably when John married in 1881, Isabella went to live with her daughter Annie at 89 Saltoun Place, Fraserburgh, next door to her other daughter, Isabella (*census 1891). This is where she died in 1893 aged 63, of gangrene of the mouth 16 days and jaundice 6 days* . Isabella appears in a Murray family photo c. 1891 and here is another similar photo of her from her funeral. John Murray wrote in his aunt Annie's eulogy that Isabella was 'an aloof, capable and decided woman' and 'practical, watchful, taciturn and devoted'.



Isabella Watt (nee Mitchell)

John Murray's account of his aunt Annie (*see Isabella and the Murrays) gives some insight into his grandfather's character, his interests in politics and religion, and his special relationship with his youngest daughter, Annie:



Old Alexander had great pleasure in his youngest child, sturdy, comely, winning and gifted as she was. More than anyone or anything else he was himself her education, though she was sent to a boarding school at Banff to be "finished." She responded to his treating her as older than her age, to his talk about politics and church affairs and religion and God. An uncommon couple they were, the old man soliloquising, the precocious young girl drinking it in, and the crown of it all his prayers. She never afterwards, so she said, heard their like. Her father was a life-long love. So was

Alexander's will in 1866*, discovered recently, gives us further insights. His executors were his much younger brother, George Watt, farmer at Newburgh, Rathen, and his nephew, John Watt, farmer at Greenburn, Tyrie. Also Joseph Rettie, a nephew? of his first wife. There were legacies to daughter Rebecca Watt or Anderson £20 - limited to £20 as she had already received money- and £20 to daughter Margaret Watt or Brooke of Stewartfield, Old Deer (widow of John Brooke, wright in Stewartfield (now Stuartfield). I have been unable to find out anything about Margaret Watt or a previous marriage. To Margaret Martin - residing until recently at Watermill- he left £10. It is believed that she may have been an orphan taken in by the Watt family. It appears that everything else was left to his wife Isabella Mitchell for her lifetime as long as she didn't remarry! He actually left £3,143* which in today's money is £461,351! A lot as he didn't own any property.

The Statistical accounts of Scotland (a slight diversion)

available online (stataccscot.edina.ac.uk)

The Old Statistical accounts 1791- 1799 and New Statistical accounts 1834- 1845 were compiled and written by the ministers in each parish and give valuable insights into life in all the parishes of Scotland.

Rathen

The Reverend William Cumine writing in 1793 about Rathen says the population was 1730, with 401 in the fishing villages, and only 100 over 70. The main ailment was rheumatism now that most people had been inoculated against smallpox (except in the fishing villages where they refused). There were 10 different proprietors of whom two were resident. 3/4 of the population were real farmers growing oats, barley, turnips, peas, beans, kale and flax and using manure such as lime, shellsand and seaweed. There were only a few tradespeople and artisans. The poor, usually elderly or infirm, were helped by neighbours and the kirk from Sunday collections. He notes that the parish could support its own poor but for the vagrants after poor harvests in 1782 and 3.

The Rev. William Cock writing in 1840 for the New Statistical account says that there were now 2100 inhabitants in the parish of Rathen, nearly 1000 of whom lived in the two fishing villages (the herring fishing boom). The majority were employed in agriculture with 38 families in trade, manufacture or handcrafts. There was still a lot of uncultivated land (about 1/4). Some of the landowners ('heritors') had

planted trees. Several substantial farmhouses had been built lately with slate or tile roofs and there were threshing machines on the bigger farms. The farmers were using crop rotation and seaweed for fertiliser. There were new turnpike roads to Aberdeen and Peterhead but still only one parochial school in the parish.

Tyrie

Rev. William Fraser writing in 1793 also mentions rheumatism as the most common ailment which he attributed to not wearing flannel next to the skin and eating too many potatoes! In 1790 the population of Tyrie parish was 864 with 5 'heritors' (3 non resident). There were 42 farmers, 10 smaller farms, 110 sub tenants, 2 sheriff officers, and 18 weavers. The construction of New Pitsligo had begun with a new school teacher for the village.

Although there was still lots of uncultivated land, 40 years previously most of the land was uncultivated, with poor crops, poor farmhouses, no roads, and a lot of poverty. Since then lime had been used as fertiliser and experts from the south brought in to advise farmers. Commerce and manufacture were beginning to thrive.

He highlighted several issues, the main one being the 19 year leases given to farmers. He felt that the tenants needed longer leases in order to improve their farms, and that sub tenants only had six weeks' notice. He also wanted to see an end to the 'bondage days'. Secondly he warned against migration to America which was inevitable if there were not opportunities for young people. Thirdly, although the poor were kept by the parish, that charity should be bestowed privately and not expose the poor.

The unnamed minister in 1845 noted the huge improvement in agriculture in the last 20 years but again said that the duration of leases of 19 years was a obstacle to improvement. New Pitsligo was the only village in the parish which had a population of 1000.

The comments about leases are interesting and may help to explain why Alexander's son, John Watt. left Watermill in 1911.

