

VITAL CONNECTIONS: HISTORICAL SURVEY

Before the 18th century, there are few maps showing how land-use in the Alyth Burn catchment has evolved over time. Even after that point, it is difficult to give more than a broad-brush impression of how land-use has changed, although significant large-scale trends can be identified from a survey of historical maps, particularly in the later 19th century.

Main sectors of the catchment

To understand the changes that can be identified, it is helpful to divide the catchment into four main sectors (Figure 1).



Figure 1: four main sectors of Alyth Burn catchment (base map source: National Archives; reproduced under licence - <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/version/3/>)

- Drumderg/Tullymurdoch - comprising most of the upper third of the catchment; upland and hilly terrain generally receiving the bulk of the rainfall;
- Bamff/Tullyfergus - comprising less than a quarter of the catchment; shorter and more constricted where the Burn prepares to enter the gorge of the Den O'Alyth; more sheltered than the up-stream sector but still hilly;
- Alyth Hill/Johnshill - comprising a little over one quarter of the catchment and including the gorge of the Den O'Alyth; less hilly, generally south-facing doorway to the lowland;
- Alyth town/Pitcrocknie - comprising around one sixth of the catchment; flatter valley floor nestled beneath Alyth Hill.

Before the 18th century

Despite having been a human settlement since at least the 6th century (when it is thought the first church was built on the site of what is now the Alyth Arches), Alyth is not recorded by name until a 12th-century royal charter. James III of Scotland granted Alyth the status of Burgh of Barony by royal charter in 1488, entitled to stage markets and fairs.

For many centuries, therefore, Alyth was an important market town and entrepôt on long-established drove roads by which Highland farmers brought their sheep and cattle to lowland markets. The 17th-century stone Packhorse Bridge still stands in the middle of the town, later joined by two other stone bridges for wheeled traffic, emphasising the settlement's importance as a river-crossing. Clearly, much of the Alyth Burn catchment was probably devoted to pastoral, stock-rearing activity with Alyth as a crossing point and trading centre.

As far as is known, Alyth's first appearances on topographical maps are on hand-drawn charts by Timothy Pont sometime around 1590, Robert Gordon about 1640, and John Adair in 1683.

Pont¹ incorrectly shows the Burn rising at the foot of "Month-Blair" (presumably the modern Mount Blair) and flowing down with numerous tributaries past many small settlements to "Elicht" (Alyth). Its further course seems confused: a channel drawn to the Isla confluence at "Quich" (Queich) seems to have been superseded by another doubling back twice and entering the Isla at "Aberbothry" (Aberbothrie).

Significantly, most of the settlement names on Pont's map are still extant on modern maps (though often with different spellings), and more or less in roughly similar locations relative to one another, e.g. "Tullamurdoch" (Tullymurdoch), Tullyfergus and Bamff. There is no attempt to show topography or land-use, though the map does show "Milton of Foyell" (now Mill of Fyal), illustrating Alyth Burn's role as a power-source for hundreds of years.

Gordon's map², dating some 50 years after Pont, is the first to show the topography around Alyth, although in a fairly sketchy way. Hilly country lies north and northwest of "Kirk of Elicht", with the Burn incorrectly flowing south of the hills. "Hillak" (Hillock), "Crewchies" (Creuchies) and "Banff" (Bamff) are all shown to the north of the Burn, whereas in fact the Burn flows between the latter two.

Half a century later, John Adair's map³ is slightly more realistic, showing "Eliot" nestled beneath its hill, along with "Bamfe" (Bamff) to the northwest and Tullyfergus to the west. Alyth Burn is plotted only cursorily (and incorrectly) as a small stream rising in the hills near Bamff. There is slightly more topographical information than on Pont or Gordon, with woods shown near Queich and what appears to be heath or possibly marsh south of Alyth.

The 18th century - serious mapping starts

The first real attempt at a topographical representation of the Alyth Burn catchment comes around 1750 on William Roy's Military Survey of Scotland (Figure 2)⁴. This shows "Eleth" and a number of smaller settlements or steadings to the north and northeast. There are indications of woods and what appear to be areas of arable land around Alyth and downstream towards Queich, but only on the north side of the Burn. The meanders of the Burn are shown in some detail but upstream of

¹ <https://maps.nls.uk/rec/290> and <https://maps.nls.uk/rec/291>

² <https://maps.nls.uk/joins/gordon06.html>

³ <https://maps.nls.uk/rec/74>

⁴ <https://maps.nls.uk/roy/>



Figure 2: Roy's Military Survey of Scotland 1747-1755

the town there are no settlements or land uses indicated, and the whole area seems to be marked as heathland or perhaps moss. Incorrectly, the Burn is shown as originating just north of Mill of Fyal, with a separate stream shown flowing southwest from "Tullymurdy" (presumably Tullymurdoch) down to the Ericht above Blairgowrie.

Some 40 years later, James Stobie published a much more detailed map (Figure 3)⁵, showing a more accurate course of the Burn as well as more than 40 individual settlements or steadings throughout the valley. No specific land-use is indicated, though the presence of so many settlements suggests fairly intensive arable farming.

This map is the first to show the Den O'Alyth as an area of dense woodland, in addition to the parklands around Bamff and some woodland on the southeast slopes of Alyth Hill near Whiteside. The map also records at least four mills along the course of the Burn, confirming its continued importance as a source of power for agricultural and industrial activities.



Figure 3: James Stobie, *The Counties of Perth and Clackmannan*, 1783

⁵ <https://maps.nls.uk/joins/7322.html>

The 19th century and beyond - change accelerates

Only 70 or so years after Stobie, the Ordnance Survey published its first maps of Scotland, allowing us to observe the major transformations beginning to happen in settlement distribution and land-use. Alongside the maps, drawn at various scales for almost all the country, the Ordnance Survey also published highly detailed Name Books for each county listing place-names and land-use for nearly all fields and enclosures in each parish. The maps and the Name Books together present a snapshot of the landscape as it was in the middle of the 19th century, which can be compared with Stobie's map of the late-18th century and satellite imagery of the present day to show the evolution of land-use in the Alyth Burn catchment over the last 200 or more years.

The two most significant changes are the disappearance of most of the dozens of settlements that once dotted the valley upstream from Alyth, leaving only ruins or no trace at all; and the massive shift in land-use from arable to pasture and forestry, especially in the upland area. Despite this, comparison of the mid-19th-century OS 1:2,500 maps (25 inches to the mile) with modern satellite imagery shows that almost all the old field boundaries have remained in place. There have been no major natural changes in the course of the Burn, but there has been significant realignment in parts of the lower reaches, and some tributary streams have been diverted and/or culverted.

Drumderg/Tullymurdoch - upland sector

Stobie records more than a dozen steadings in 1783 (Figure 4), but just 80 years later the Ordnance Survey (Figure 5) shows only three - Craighead, Rannagulzion and Tullymurdoch. Many of the rest have vanished or are in ruins, and some survive as agricultural sheds or areas of hard-standing. Tullymurdoch Mill and another mill just to the north recorded by Stobie are also missing from the



Figure 4: James Stobie, 1783



Figure 5: OS 1-inch, 1860s

OS maps.

Analysis of the Perthshire OS Name Books 1859-1862⁶ and comparison with modern satellite imagery (Figure 6) shows that over the last 150 years or so, the amount of arable land in this sector has declined by more than 90%, and that of pasture by more than 50%. The spread of forestry during the 20th century accounts for most of this change, with the area planted to trees expanding more than 10-fold from under 200 acres to well over 2000 acres. In addition, windfarms now occupy dozens of acres of the Drumderg/Tullymurdoch sector.



Figure 6: aerial view of Drumderg/Tullymurdoch sector today

⁶ <https://scotlandspplaces.gov.uk/digital-volumes/ordnance-survey-name-books/perthshire-os-name-books-1859-1862/perthshire-volume-05>

Bamff/Tullyfergus - transition sector

In the upper-central sector of the catchment - the Bamff/Tullyfergus area - it's a similar story, with Stobie recording more than a dozen steadings in 1783 (Figure 7) but only five remaining by the time the OS surveyed the area in about 1860 (Figure 8). As before, the other seven have vanished or only visible as ruins on modern satellite imagery. The mill near Fyal is still there, possibly



Figure 7: James Stobie, 1783



Figure 8: OS 1-inch, 1860s

surviving on business that formerly went to the Tullymurdoch mills.

Land-use changes in this sector since the mid-19th century differ from those further upstream: arable land has declined by more than 80%, but pasture has increased by almost 20% while forestry and woodland has increased from just over 100 acres to around 1000 acres today. A

windfarm now occupies much of the southwest portion of the sector. The corn-mill and of Fyal have ceased to operate and are now private dwellings.



Figure 9: aerial view of Bamff/Tullyfergus sector today

Alyth Hill/Johnshill - on the threshold of the Lowlands

In the area of Alyth Hill/Johnshill, where the Burn flows down from the uplands towards the valley floor, we see a similar picture of disappearing settlements and extensive land-use changes.

Between Stobie in 1783 (Figure 10) and the OS in the 1860s (Figure 11), some steadings north of the Burn on the slopes of Alyth Hill have vanished; one or two seem to have changed name or

shifted location slightly. The Den O'Alyth woods are clearly shown on Stobie's map but seem to have shrunk slightly (especially on the south bank of the Burn) by the time of the OS map and Name Books. The Alyth-Bamff road has been realigned closer to the bank of the Burn instead of climbing over the shoulder of Alyth Hill past Whiteside. Finally, there is still a mill at the Bridge of



Figure 10: James Stobie, 1783

Tully on the OS map (although it is not recorded by Stobie).

Looking at land-use changes since the mid-19th century (Figure 12), trends in the upstream sector are replicated here, with arable land down 60% and pasture up by 50%. Woodland cover has also increased, especially on the western and southwestern slopes of Alyth Hill.



Figure 11: OS 1-inch, 1860s

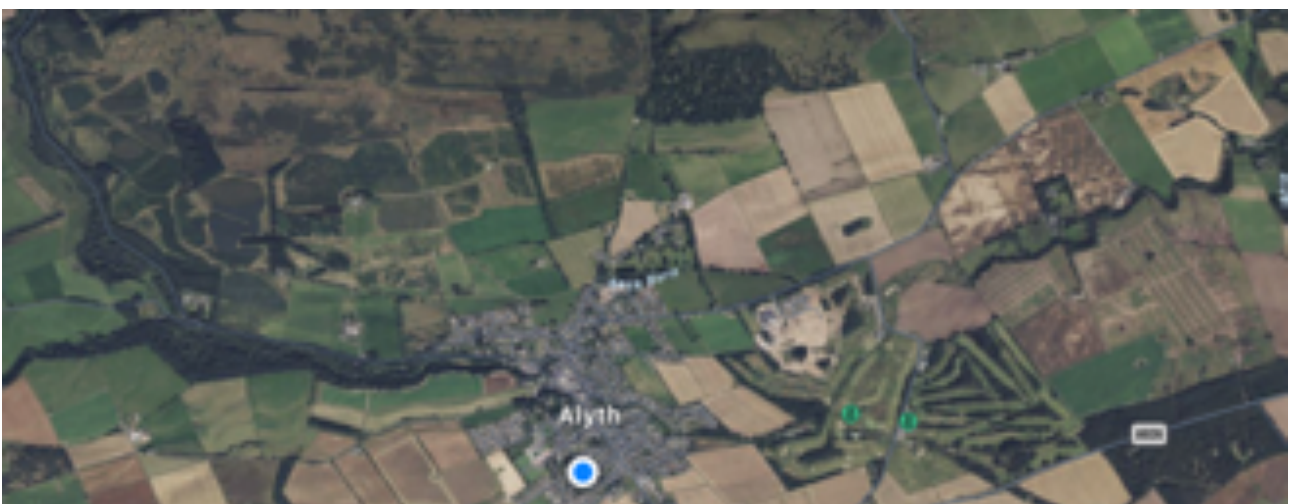


Figure 12: aerial view of Alyth Hill/Johnshill sector today

Town/Pitcrocknie - valley floor

In the downstream sector, from the town of Alyth to the Burn's confluence with the River Isla at Inverqueich, we see land-use changes every bit as significant as in the upstream sectors. Between Stobie in 1783 (Figure 13) and the Ordnance Survey in the mid-19th century (Figure 14), a number of steadings seem to have either changed their name or disappeared, especially on the northern side of the Burn. Some roads or tracks appear to have been realigned and there are a few new ones (or at least ones that are mapped for the first time).



Figure 13: James Stobie, 1783



Figure 14: OS 1-inch, 1860s

Most noticeably, the course of the Burn itself through this sector has seen major changes. Between Springbank, on the south-eastern edge of Alyth, and the Pitcrocknie steading, a sequence of meanders has been eliminated and the Burn has been canalised for around three quarters of a mile, apparently to facilitate the construction of the railway line into Alyth (opened in 1861).



Figure 15: aerial view of Alyth Hill/Johnshill sector today

In the last 150 years, the pace of urbanisation continued, with some 350 acres of former agricultural land gone to the expansion of the town, and especially the new Pitcrocknie satellite village to the east (Figure 15). The OS maps of around 1860 show a corn mill at Millhaugh, a 'plash' mill (part of the textile works on the southern bank near the Pack Bridge), and a woollen mill on Mill Street all relying on the Burn as a source of power. Today, all three mills plus a gas works next to the woollen mill have long since disappeared.

Across the Town/Pitcrocknie sector as a whole, the area of arable land is down 50% from its mid-19th century figure, while pasture land has increased by more than 200%, echoing trends seen in the upstream sectors. The expansion of the town along with the construction of the railway and sewage works have contributed to a 90% fall in the area of woodland and heath in this sector.