

Extracts from a thesis submitted for the degree of M.D.

In 1895 by Robert Haldane Cook M.B. C.M Portlethen ..

The writer has been absolutely the sole medical attendant of this community " Portlethen " for the past two and a half years..

SITUATION ..

Portlethen , triangular in shape with base to the sea.

First house 100 ft. last house 150 ft. above sea level.

Houses in rows across the slope , nearly all joined together , 40 ft. to 90 ft. between rows, sometimes small garden plots and occasionally a wooden hut in which fish were smoked . 67 houses 6 vacant .

Streets rudimentary , October to April simply mud with stones of various sizes sticking through .

The back wall of a row of houses rises out of a ditch one to six feet in depth . Rain water gathers in these and remains for a considerable time gradually sinking in to the ground .

Each house has it's own midden into which all refuse including water is poured , most of the middens are

between the rows so that the water gravitates into the ditches at the back of the next row of houses . Most household water is just thrown out of the door..

Drainage .. (Primitive) .

Main drain of stone and lime six feet from surface , good working order , Into this open three inch opens channels from between rows of houses ,some have branders and some a hole where they join the main drain .Drain on north side of village 12 inches below surface , built with lime , frequently choked .

Drains discharge separately 20 yards in front of the first row of houses 95 ft. from Sea level over a grassy cliff.

SOIL.

Clayey with patches of gravel .

TEMPERATURE .

Mean Annual 45 degrees Far.

Summer mean 58 degrees F.

Winter 37 degrees F

Rainfall 32.5 inches 193 wet days on ave.

WIND.

Village has no shelter , more winds off the sea than land.

PRIVIES AND MIDDENS .

Men deposit their excrement all around the outskirts of the village according to where their houses are situated. Result , the immediate vicinity is in a disgusting state .Women follow the example of men , children are even less fastidious .

The middens which contain household refuse and fish offal etc. are emptied by farmers who come “ at their convenience “ so that quite often the middens are overflowing . Some of the men pay almost all of their rent from the produce of the middens .

WATER.

Supply plentiful and good cistern at top of village 4 pumps.

Except where drunken thriftless habits prevail , the interiors of the houses are marvels of cleanliness especially when one considers the state of things outside.Three times a year everything is taken outside and cleaned in a most thorough manner and interior treated with soap and water or whitewash. Woodwork

in the better houses left unpainted and scrubbed with soft soap and sand which gives a beautiful polish. Even the rafters are so treated .

Once a week houses are cleaned and every other day the fireplace is whitewashed.

The outside are frequently white washed . A small minority are as remarkable for filth as the majority for cleanliness ..

Houses are mostly old and thatched, newer ones being slated and rather larger .

All are very draughty , no porches , often the door has to stay open to make the fire draw.

Two rooms – But and Ben with loft above where nets and oars are kept .

Family live and work in the But and Ben – clean fish , bait lines except in summer . In many they smoke fish in a large open chimney at the side of the ordinary one. Some have smoke houses . Newer houses , many have but end floor of wood. But in most cases the floor is earthen .

One Box bed in but end , In ben end always a wooden floor with 1 to 3 box beds. This is principal sleeping room and always used for “ lying in room “.

Personal Cleanliness ..

Men and women clean and tidy “ market depends on their appearance as well as their fish ..

Light and Firing .

About 30 years since last Crusie”fish oil and rush pith “ was burnt , now good paraffin lamps and occasional Candles ..

Peat is the universal fuel . From peat moss 1 mile away, peat burned on an open hearth stone above which is a large chimney occupying one third of the house . Coal seldom used .

Clothing .

Fisherfolk wear more clothing than ordinary people.

Men, always flannel to skin , above that 2 or 3 ordinary shirts , then distinctive fisher garment – the surcoat “ A shirt of coarse blue serge which opens all the way down front. Thick flannel drawers , trousers of blue heavy cloth .

AT SEA.

Long waterproof leather boots reaching hips , double breasted waistcoat with sleeves of material similar to trousers , they always discard this garment when rowing , but put it on again when sailing.

One or two old men - in the fashion of their youth- instead of flannel drawers have tailor made knee britches of blue cloth . In warm weather leave off trousers and go about in breeches..

WOMEN.

White cotton chemise .

Stays

2 or more jackets of cloth

A knitted jacket

Small shawl around neck and shoulders

In cold weather,another shawl around head

Non wear drawers of any kind

White flannel petticoat

2 or 3 skirts of heavy blue serge

Top skirt usually “ kilted “

CHILDREN.

Much the same as adults , but a growing tendency to use ready made clothing , which is inferior to blue serge and cloth of older people . On Sunday younger people “men and especially young girls “ wear clothes similar to neighbours in the country side , but after morning service, resume their distinctive clothing

FOOD.

Five months at fishing banks and Herring fishing , men live on loaf bread and oatcakes , weekends generally come home and are better cared for. Rest of year – large quantities of small fish and potatoes , some butcher meat and Farinaceous “ food rich in starch “

Food. Many drink cocoa and coffee as well as tea , they are not abstermious (excuse me as I reach again for my dictionary) should be abstemious . Sparing in eating and drinking.), women bring home pint of rum or whisky 1 or 2 times a week . (Women keep the purses) A shop in the village sells Porter and Ale trade is brisk .

EDUCATION .

Facilities for home study is not good , cleaning and baiting is evening work , children are required to help. Children are intelligent and do as well in Exams as other children .

PHYSIQUE .

The inhabitants of Portlethen village are of a quite a superior , most of the women are decidedly above the average height , while no less than seventeen of the men are 6 feet and over , one man being 6ft. 6 inches .

They are well developed and possess splendid constitutions , as one would expect from the nature of their calling .The women as a rule have very roomy pelvis being no doubt partly hereditary and partly to the fact that they are accustomed to carry from early girlhood onwards , heavy burdens in their creels which rest on the sacrum . They carry the fish from the harbour to the houses up a very steep hill and from the village to the railway station . Many of them carry a years supply of peats from the moss in their creels .It is no uncommon thing for a young girl to carry a creel weighing half a cwt. Or more . The fact remains that their confinements are usually easy , instrumental aid being seldom required .

MARRIAGE.

Most of the young men marry between the ages of 22 and 25 , their wives usually being one or two years younger . There is one batchelor over the age of 70 , all the ithers being under 30 and not likely to remain long unmarried. But there are a number of unmarried women of more than 30 years. Anti nuptial cohabitation is almost invariable , and about half of the wedded couple begin married life with one or two and very occasionally three children . But such a thing as loose immorality is unknown in the village , the father and the mother always marry sooner or later . There is only one inhabitant of over 5 years of age whose parents were unmarried and this was owing to the father being drowned at sea Thus it will be seen that the morality is at a much higher level than in either town or country. Perhaps the explanation lies to a certain extent in the fact that children are more or less a course of gain to a fisher. The sons go to sea with their father , allowing him to take a larger share in a boat , and consequently get a larger share of fish , while the daughters help to clean and sell them . Neither sons or daughters are paid for their services . Many of the younger married couples have to employ a

servant to help them . The first child is frequently born to parents who are under 20 years of age .In spite of this the families are not large and last census the number of inmates per house average only 5, a family of 7 or 8 are considered a big one .

INTER MARRIAGE .

Marriage between cousins is a custom which has been handed down from father to son . There are at present no less than 9 first cousins married to each other , while one couple are first cousins on both sides . That is the woman's father is the man's uncle , and the Man's mother is the woman's aunt . This represents almost one fifth of the married couples , many have the idea that it is not fair or proper to get a wife elsewhere while a cousin remains unmarried. This custom of inter marriage has gone on for ages , and as there is no importation of men (every man in the village was born here) the only new blood that enters the community is when a man takes a wife from another fishing village . Thus it will be readily understood that the majority of the inhabitants are blood relations to one another

The population of the village of Portlethen is a wonderfully healthy one in spite of its unsanitary conditions , and in spite of the extent of inter marriage amongst its inhabitants .Their ailments are neither remarkable nor characteristic , in fact sickness is a more or less un common event. The population for the last two and a half years has stood about 340, during this time there have been 12 deaths , three less than 2 years 1 less than 7 years , 3 under 70 years and 5 over 70 years.

When any of the old folk fall ill , medical aid is usually sought , but the all important point seems to be “ Is the illness likely to be fatal ?) Medicines and even food are not properly administered with anything like regularity . Sometimes a hopeful prognosis is received with distinct disfavour . This is to be wondered at , as at ordinary times there is no lack of affection in the members of a family for their parents ..

TEMPERAMENT .

Mixture , phlegmatic , nervous .

In trouble sickness ? show fortitude and calm , but trivial accidents cause childish excitement , cowards in

the dark ,never go any distance at night alone ,Terror of Horses Dogs , guns.

Belief in Supernatural , sight or mention of various animals will turn a man from a day's fishing . Insanity is uncommon, brain clear to the last. One woman slightly weak minded age 40 years , one boy age 12 paralysed since infancy.

OZONE

The village is situated on a slope facing the sea , with an exposure to the South East by South , thus getting it's full share of Sunlight , there is no shelter in any direction from the wind and every breeze which blows has full access to the village . By it's close proximity to the sea the village gets the benefit of the land and sea breezes which are constantly setting one way or the other , owing to the difference in temperature of the sea and the land crust . These sea breezes are laden with ozone ,and are free from dust and germs , and here , there are more breezes off the sea than off the land . Again owing to the faulty construction of the middens , the refuse soon loses a great part of it's water , and this allows the ozone to have better access

to the refuse , the organic matter of which it powerfully oxidises .

Another important factor is to be found in the huge swarm of rats which inhabit the Peat stacks and the middens , and which eat large quantities of garbage . The writer has seen as many as three dozen turned out of a peat stack .

The houses are not close or stuffy , and the rooms being large and draughty with a capacious chimney , but then the inmates are warmly clad , and have no idea of taking off any of their garments on entering a house , the men not even removing their hats . Their notable cleanliness in the house and in their persons is greatly in their favour . That there is no pre disposition to Tuberculosis may be safely attributed to the stock being non-tubercular and having been kept so by a series of inter marriages , while the arduous nature of their calling , and their exposure to all sorts of weather , naturally tends to harden the already robust constitution of the men . We find the children are born to parents in their very prime are better able to ward off disease. Their water supply is good and taken as a whole , there food is better than that of the average workman .

Thus in a case in which the supposed evil effects of inter marriage ought to be intensified by the unsanitary conditions of the village , there is to be found to be a population with an abnormally low death rate , especially well developed physique , a high average of duration of life and a remarkable freedom from constitutional disease of any kind , against the sanitary disadvantages of situation ,mode of life ,and meteorological conditions , these two sets of forces thus neutralising each other , the fact remains that we have a case in which extreme is un accompanied by any evil effects with which it is usually credited

I HAVE EXTRACTED THE FOLLOWING MEDICAL INFORMATION FROM .

THE DAY BOOK 1840 TO 1869(29 YEARS) WRITTEN BY THE REV. WILLIAM LAW MINISTER OF Portlethen CHURCH

DEATHS BY AGE .

Up to 5 years	90. Typhus ,consumption ,small pox .
Total	90. Measles, croup, scarlet fever,etc.

6 to 10 years 16

11 to 20 years 25

21 to 30 years 21

31 to 40 years 18

41 to 50 years 17

51 to 60 years 22

Total 119 .

61 to 80 years 60

81 years plus 51

Total 111.....

Of the 320 cases , app. one third having reached the age 60 disproves the thought that in the past people did NOT live to a great age .