

About This Series of Newsletters

This is No. 7 in a series of newsletters with the aim of broadly sharing our common family history. The “focal family” is that of James Nisbet and Helen Nicol who resided at Kirkcudbright on the southwest coast of Scotland in the early 1800s, raising 13 children. This story is about that family and their descendants.

“Nisbet Trail” Trip Report

In this issue of Nisbet News, I had intended to finish telling the story of the Nisbets of Kirkcudbright with an overview of the life of William Nisbet (1816-1886). Instead, I’ve decided to put out this special edition reporting on a trip my wife and I took this past June, following what I have dubbed “The Nisbet Trail.” We visited over 20 sites in Scotland associated with Helen and James Nisbet and their children. I hope you find this interesting, and if you would like any help planning your own sojourn into Nisbet history, please do not hesitate to ask.

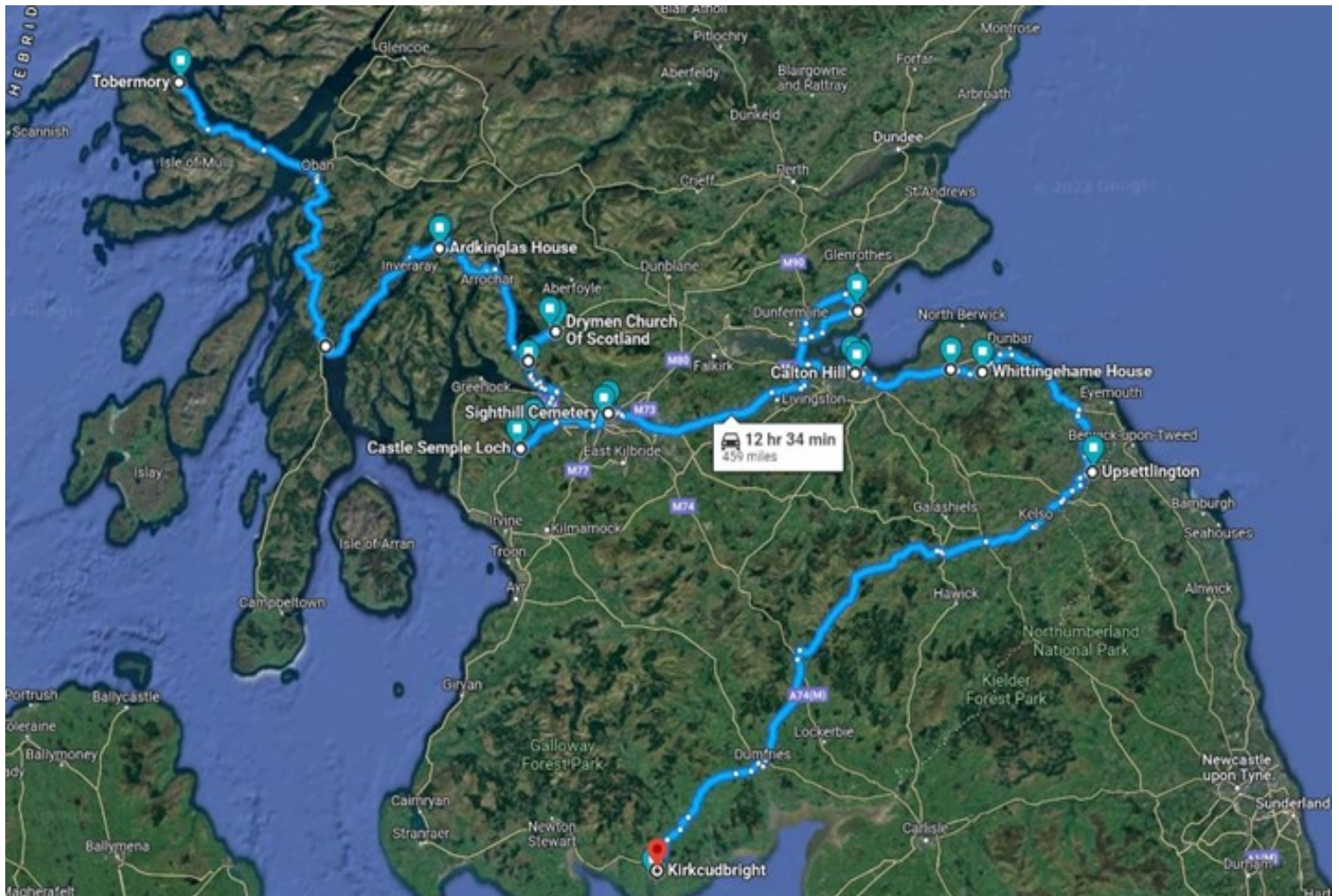
Trip Planning

I have been fortunate to visit Scotland many times, both during my business career and since retirement. It is a special

place to me, and my wife shares that sentiment. I vividly remember my first visit to the *auld* country, in 1984. It was a bitterly cold February day in Edinburgh and as the jet taxied to the terminal, I could see snow capping the surrounding low hills. As the cabin door opened, and I emerged onto the landing of the stairway (no heated jetways then!), I was struck full force by a chill wind off the Firth of Forth. Instantly, one singular thought entered my mind, “*I am home.*” And since then I have always felt at home in Scotland.

Our visit in 2022 was delayed two years by the pandemic, but this turned out to be fortunate. During that time I had discovered much about my Nisbet heritage and made contact with many distant cousins. This provided new grist for the trip planning and soon the concept of a Nisbet-focused itinerary emerged.

Reviewing the letters and other documents from my Nisbet archives, I made a list of place names mentioned in them; there were 22 in total. Next, I placed each location on Google Maps and connected them together with a logical route. The result was a meandering 450-mile path through the Central Belt and Lowlands of Scotland, starting in Tobermory on the Isle of Mull and ending at Kirkcudbright on the southwestern coast. Allowing for some long stopovers for



family history research, we allotted ourselves nine days for this journey.

Tobermory, Isle of Mull

After spending eight glorious days in the highland village of Dornoch, home of my Ross ancestors, Jody and I were well past our jet lag and prepared to begin our transition into the world of the Nisbets. It was now early June, and the weather was exceptionally cooperative as we drove southwest from Dornoch to our first stop, Henry Nisbet's home at Tobermory.

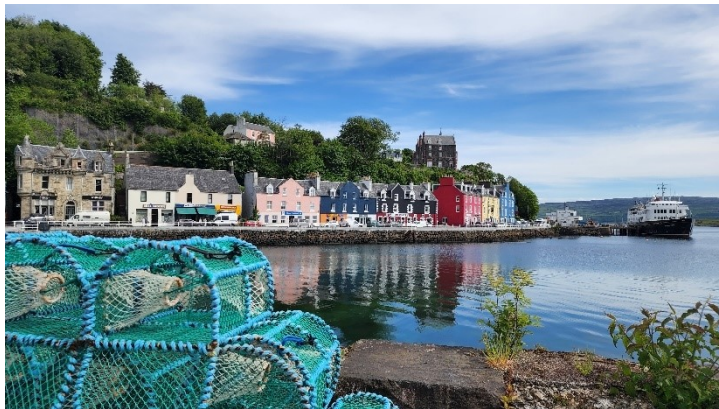
The Nisbets' eldest son James was the first to settle at Tobermory, around 1820, but it was his younger brother Henry who made it his lifelong home. Another brother, William, also spent about a year there while a teenager interning in his brother's law practice.

We crossed to the Isle of Mull by ferry from Lochaline on water that was as smooth as glass, arriving at Fishnish, a few miles south of Tobermory. It was a fine day in town, apparently the first in a long while as rain had prevailed the previous month according to the locals. We walked along the quayside and then up a steep winding road to where Henry had built his stately home in the 1840s, Erray Villa. It was immediately recognizable, and little changed from an 1868 snapshot handed down from Henry's brother William.

Although the driveway gate was closed, a neighbor said the owners were at home and encouraged us to unlatch the gate and approach the house, which we did, finding a woman enjoying the sunshine in a verdant garden. Once the woman shook off the cobwebs of her Sunday afternoon nap, she summoned her husband, and we had a most pleasant visit for the next hour or so. Paul and Judith (Lady Judith to be accurate and proper) had purchased the home a few years ago, renamed it Canongate, and launched a nonstop series of renovations, including a transformation of the gardens that would certainly have pleased Henry Nisbet. The couple was kind enough to invite us into the house, which seems largely unchanged in 180 years. It was quite moving to climb the same stairway that my ggg-grandmother used in her visits to her son and see the original windows that had been nailed shut when Henry's wife had gone insane (See Issue #5). We are grateful for Judith and Paul's hospitality (and the sip of local 21-year-old Ladaig scotch provided!).

We spent the next two nights at the imposing Glengorm Castle about 10 miles out of town, on the north coast of the island – highly recommended! The intervening day was dedicated to researching Henry Nisbet. In the morning we visited his gravesite with an impressive monument in the local cemetery; it was quite easy to find as Henry, a prominent citizen in his day, has a prime location with a fine long view to the east. In the afternoon, we spent several hours in the records room of the Mull Museum, with the archivist Georgia in attendance. She has several old letter books from Henry's law practice, and we found an original will of his brother James dated 1830. Also, we obtained more information on the source of rumors regarding a possible illegitimate child of Henry's. In 1840 he was accused of adultery and fathering a child by a woman who brought the complaint in a church proceeding. Apparently, he was found guilty of adultery, but he denied paternity of the child. This is recorded in notes on an index card written by an author preparing a book on Mull history. I

have not located the original records of this proceeding, so this remains on my "to-do" list.



The classic view of the Tobermory waterfront on the day we arrived



The grave of Henry Nisbet who died February 9, 1867



Glengorm Castle near Tobermory



Looking through Henry Nisbet's old letter books in the archives of the Mull Museum, Tobermory



1868 photograph of Erray Villa found among the effects of Henry's younger brother William. This was about one year after Henry's death and his grandson Henry Nisbet Pritchard had inherited the estate.



Erray Villa, recently renamed Canongate, as it appears in 2022

The Crinan Canal

Jody and I found the visit to Tobermory absolutely delightful, but we were ready to continue our Nisbet journey. Driving down the coast of Mull, we boarded the ferry at Craignure for the one hour crossing to Oban on the mainland. From there we drove south to the second stop on our itinerary, the Crinan Canal at Ardrishaig. The canal was mentioned in Helen's letters describing her travels from Glasgow to visit Henry, a multi-day journey then featuring steamers and horse-drawn canal boats.

We found the canal surprisingly little changed in the 200 years since its construction. Now, instead of commercial traffic, there is a steady stream of pleasure boats utilizing this cutoff that saves many miles of rough seas for those traveling



The Crinan Canal is now mainly used by coastal sailors

north from Glasgow. The operation of the locks, of which there are three in rapid succession at this south terminus of the canal, has been only partially modernized. The opening and closing of the lock gates is still done completely by hand – or by posterior I should say. As a bystander I was encouraged to pitch in and help move the huge timber levers that closed the gates. This was much fun and really brought home the history which my ancestors directly experienced.



The lock gates are still operated by "people power"

Ardkinglas Estate and Kilmorich Church

Our third stop was Ardkinglas Estate and the nearby Kilmorich Church. James Nisbet was employed at Ardkinglas as a gardener soon after his marriage to Helen Nicol in 1796. They lived there several years, and it is the birthplace of their first two children, James and John. The estate is located on the southern shore of Loch Fyne and the scenic drive from the canal at Lochgilphead takes you past the well-known Inverary Castle, seat of the Dukes of Argyll, chiefs of Clan Campbell.

The buildings of the original estate where James worked are long gone and replaced with more recent structures, but the gardens and woodlands remain. Unfortunately, on the day we visited, the grounds were not open for touring and time was too short for a walk through the woodlands. Kilmorich Church is a stone's throw from the entry to the estate and is very likely the place where young James and Helen worshipped and baptized their two sons. I was quite excited to see the church in such good condition, but disappointed to find the current structure was built in the early 1800s, after the Nisbets had moved to Kirkcudbright. We did not tarry long in this area, but it was gratifying to get a feel for the place the newlyweds made their first home.



The churchyard at Kilmorich, near Ardkinglas. The Nisbet family probably worshipped at this location, in an earlier structure.

Buchanan House, Loch Lomond

Our next stop on this long day, which began in Tobermory, would be Buchanan House. William Nisbet worked at Buchanan House in 1838-39 and in his autobiography noted that his father James had also been a gardener there in his own youth. The drive from Ardkinglas included a lovely stretch along Loch Lomond, the crown jewel of Scottish lakes. Spotify quickly found the “Bonnie Banks” song to play as we traveled along the shore.

When we arrived in the area, we were at first decoyed by the ruins of “Buchanan Castle,” which it turned out had been built in the 1890s, long after the Nisbets were employed there. In fact, the “Buchanan Auld House” had burned down in 1852 and about all that remains today is a golf course no doubt built on the grounds and gardens the Nisbets tended. Some restorers were working on one of the old buildings and gave us the detailed history. Since 1931, The National Trust for Scotland has been doing tremendous work to preserve old castles and other buildings throughout the country, but in reality only a fraction survive to today.



Restoration work on what might have been part of the old Buchanan House buildings



William Nisbet, and earlier his father James, may have passed through this arched opening during their daily duties at Buchanan House

Secession Church, Drymen

The nearby village of Drymen was where William attended church services 1838-39 and he notes in his autobiography that his minister “was a very excellent man and minister of Christ. I shall never forget his kindness, and that of his whole family to me.” Jody and I found the church quite easily as Drymen is a relatively compact village of 800. We walked the churchyard, noting the graves of folks who may have been members of

William’s congregation. We snapped some photos and made our way to the next stop in nearby Dumbarton.



The Secessionist Church in Drymen, built in 1771

Levenside, now named Strathleven House

In 1839 William was a gardener at Levenside for about 6 months, having left Buchanan House “in what may be called bad humor,” owing to an “irascible and at times a very unreasonable” boss. Levenside was owned by Glasgow merchant James Ewing and shortly after William’s tenure he changed the name to Strathleven House, which it retains today.

The drive to Strathleven from Drymen is only 20 minutes through beautiful farm fields and we arrived there a bit before 5pm. The timing was fortunate as the old manor house has been converted to offices and meeting space and was just closing for the evening. After explaining our interest to the property manager, she gave us a private tour of the facility, including the basement which William may have visited as a worker on the estate. The place is well restored and owned by a historic buildings trust who rents the space to local businesses.

Very little of the original gardens remain, but we were directed across the street to where the manor’s formal gardens had previously grown – now maintained as wild open space. We saw a number of old trees that could have dated to William’s time there.

Strathleven is noted as the home, until recently, of “The Bruce Tree,” rumored to have been planted by Robert the Bruce himself. The thousand-year-old oak was killed in 2004 by an act of vandalism. The wood was salvaged and crafted by local artisans into historic art displays. The oak tree must have been a massive presence and one can envision William reclining beneath it during his breaks.



Strathleven today, appearing much as it did in 1839 when William Nisbet knew it as Levenside



Strathleven's formal gardens, abandoned long ago, have been left to become wild open space enjoyed by local citizens

The visit to Strathleven concluded our touring for the day and we made our way into Glasgow during evening rush hour. Given the historical aspect of this journey, I had decided to book only castles for our stays, and in Glasgow we settled into the Sherbrooke Castle Hotel, located in a tony residential area on the south side of the city. It did not disappoint.

Castle Sempole and Kilbarchan

William Nisbet was employed as a flower gardener at Castle Sempole for two years beginning in 1839. He wrote: "Castle Sempole is a beautiful place, finely situated on the shores of a picturesque loch some two miles in length... the gardens were at this time among the finest in Scotland." On a rainy morning, 30 minutes southwest of Glasgow, we found what remains of Castle Sempole – which is not much. The impressive arched gateway leads only to empty farm fields and a few private homes. The manor house itself is long gone, though for hardy souls some ruins remain at the end of mile-long hike. The estate lands along the loch have been converted to a popular public park and we enjoyed watching stalwart Scottish children participating in a wet and blustery sailing class.



Among the few remains of Castle Sempole is its imposing entryway

From Castle Sempole Park, we drove along a back road to the village of Kilbarchan, 3.5 miles away. This was the site of the church William attended and it played a pivotal role in his life – it is where he met his future wife, Catherine Angus. We found the likely church, built in 1724, had been abandoned in favor of a larger 1900-era structure constructed next door. Both churches had been sold in 2018 to a private party and the larger one was being converted into apartment units. The developer plans to convert the older church into a single-family home.



Old Kilbarchan Church, where William Nisbet met his future wife, Catherine Angus

Park Estate, Inchinnan

After leaving Castle Sempole in November 1841, William was a gardener at Park Estate near Inchinnan. It had taken some sleuthing to determine that Park Estate, like so many others, is long gone. Only a short drive from Kilbarchan, its site has been enveloped by a suburban housing development. From satellite photos and contact with the local historical society, I was able to locate the last remnants of the vast estate's gardens and grounds. We found some old walls and a tree-lined path that had been the main driveway for the mansion – but little else. William only spent a few months here before he married Catherine and emigrated to America in March 1842.



All we found of the old Park Estate was the winding drive and an old stone wall

Renfrew Street, Glasgow

We next spent an entire day in Glasgow, where Helen Nicol Nisbet lived after moving from Kirkcudbright in 1840. She and her daughters lived at various addresses, but most time was spent in rented accommodations on Renfrew Street, especially No. 14. So that is where we began our day.

Unfortunately, in the intervening 180 years, this portion of the city has had a complete makeover and we found no remnants of the houses that had lined the street. Now, a five-story building housing a Holiday Inn sits at 14 Renfrew Street and the entire area is a commercial district. The same is true at 112 Renfrew St. where the houses have been replaced by a large monolithic Hilton Hotel. The address on Rose Street where Helen was living when she died is still a quiet road just off Renfrew, but No. 52 is now a large stone apartment

building. There is a small park across the street, and I imagined Helen might have visited it in those final months of her life. She died quite suddenly at the age of 77.



The current buildings at 14 Renfrew St. and 52 Rose St.
Addresses that figured heavily in the Helen Nicol Nisbet story

Sighthill Cemetery, Glasgow

That afternoon we set our sights on a challenge I'd been looking forward to for a long time. We headed across town to Sighthill Cemetery, where Helen, five of her daughters, a son-in-law, and two grandchildren were buried. Unlike many other cemeteries in Scotland, there are no current records documenting the gravesites contained within. I had managed to find the original records of the burial plot purchases, but they were of little help without a map to guide us. Finally, after much searching the internet, I found a map of the cemetery with numbered sections and by crosschecking with the plot purchase records I could deduce in which of the 13 sections the Nisbets were interred. There are tens of thousands of grave sites at Sighthill, however, and when we arrived at the cemetery the task of locating a specific gravesite appeared daunting. Many, possibly half, of the headstones seemed to be missing and of the remaining ones many had fallen face down on the ground or had weathered to the point where the writing was completely illegible.



Many of the headstones at Sighthill were missing, tipped over, or like this one evidently constructed of sandstone, which had weathered to the point where the inscription was completely unreadable

As Jody and I began our search of Section 13, at the southeast corner of the cemetery, it appeared our odds of finding an intact gravesite were slim. Back and forth we trudged in the damp ankle-length grass under gray skies that fortunately withheld their rain. We divided rows between us and followed a search pattern to ensure nothing would be missed. At about the 45-minute mark, with a rapidly dwindling portion of the section remaining, Jody called out that she had a Nisbet sighting. Sure enough, she had located a headstone

emblazoned with the name Henry Nisbet at the top! The gravesite is located at the base of a small rise, south of the entry drive, a couple of hundred yards from the gates.



The Nisbet gravestone in Sighthill Cemetery, Glasgow. Erected by Henry Nisbet in memory of his mother Helen Nicol Nisbet and four of his sisters



A soggy printout of a map I'd found online. The Nisbet gravesite was found at a location just to the left of the numeral "1" in the "13"

It was an exciting and poignant moment. I felt so fortunate that the stone Henry purchased in memory of his mother and sisters was of hard limestone and not the softer sandstone of some others which were weather-beaten and unreadable. Also, by a stroke of luck, it was not one of the many that had been tipped over or completely disappeared. The monument had come off its plinth, but it was standing upright and was quite readable through its patina of lichen and mold.

Upon reflection, I realize we may have been the first relatives to visit this gravesite in a long while, possibly 150 years. All of Helen's children had passed away or emigrated by 1868 and the last of her grandchildren emigrated from Scotland in 1879, leaving no descendants in her native land. In the early 1990s my father had tried to find Helen's gravesite but without luck, and I'm not sure it would have been possible without the internet. Jody and I spent a few silent moments at the gravesite, and then moved on to Section 12 where Mary Anna's husband Peter Ferguson had purchased a burial plot that by 1863 would be occupied by himself, Mary Anna, and two of their young children (See Issue#6). After a long hour searching every nook and cranny of Section 12, we gave up. Quite possibly their headstone was among the missing or damaged. More likely, given their poor financial position, they could not afford a lasting stone monument like the one Henry

erected for his mother. They may have had only an inexpensive wooden board, long since weathered and turned to dust.

Back at our hotel later that night I was doing some research on how to clean headstones (there are a lot of *wrong* ways!) and I came across a product called D/2 Biological Solution which has been specifically formulated for cemetery monuments, but also used on such national treasures at the White House. Over a period of weeks, it acts to kill lichen and molds without damaging the underlying stone. I also found a press release announcing that this USA product was recently introduced to the UK via a distributor, and by coincidence the distributor's address was a few blocks from our hotel. It was evening, and we would be on our way the next morning, but on a lark, I sent the distributor an email telling about finding my ggg-grandmother's grave and inquiring whether by any chance might I be able to pop over that night and pick up a bottle. It was a long shot, but you never know!

Thirty minutes later we got a call from the front desk saying they had a gentleman named Ivor Taylor on the phone and did I wish to speak with him? I took the call and a polite Scottish voice inquired as to whether I was the person who had sent a message about D/2. He said my story was so compelling that he just had to track me down and he offered to bring some of the product to our hotel – at 8:30 in the evening! Sure enough, about an hour later we were summoned to the lobby to meet Ivor and he handed me several sample-sized bottles of D/2. He was a sweetheart of a gentleman, having driven over 30 minutes across the city to meet us (he said the distributor's address nearby was just a mailing address). He gave me instructions on how to apply the product and said his goodbyes, turning down an offer of payment or a drink in the hotel bar on us.

The next morning was gray and damp as Jody and I made our way to a nearby Tesco and purchased a scrub brush and several liters of water. We were at the grave by 9am and set to, following the D/2 directions, applying the product and elbow grease in proportion. There was an immediate and distinct improvement in the appearance of the monument, but the real hope is that in the following weeks the lichens will die off and release their hold on the surface of the stone. We may need to visit again next year to find out!



Yours Truly scrubbing and applying the specially-delivered stone cleaning solution to the Nisbet monument

Jody had brought along some flowers left behind at our hotel after a wedding and we laid those at the foot of the stone and reluctantly said our goodbyes to Helen and her daughters.



The locale of Nisbet grave at Sighthill (center with white flowers)



HENRY NISBET ESQ
WRITER TOBERMORY
SACRED
TO THE MEMORY OF HIS MOTHER
HELEN NICOL
WIDOW OF MR JAMES NISBET
KIRKCUDBRIGHT
BORN 5TH MAY 1778 DIED 20TH FEB 1856
HIS SISTERS ALSO
MARGARET
BORN 31ST JAN 1803 DIED 28TH NOV 1854
ELIZABETH KATHERINE
BORN 17TH MAY 1818 DIED 23RD MARCH 1855
JANE WEDDERBURN
BORN 17TH MAY 1818 DIED 8TH MAY 1855
HELEN
WIFE OF MR JAMES HAMILTON
BORN 25TH AUG 1811 DIED 5TH JUN 1867

If You Are Going

I'd encourage any descendants of the Nisbets to make Sighthill Cemetery a stop on your Scotland itinerary. Though the grounds are in a state of neglect relative to other Scottish graveyards, mostly due to vandalism in the late 1900s, you will find the visit quite rewarding and a chance to pay respects to a central figure in our ancestry.

The cemetery was almost completely deserted during the hours we spent there, a lone dog walker the only other above-ground human we saw. The last burial in the cemetery was nearly 100 years ago and the vast majority are from the Victorian Era. Thus, many generations have passed, and the gravesites receive few visitors.

On to Haddington

Mid-morning we drove out through the gates of Sighthill and pointed the car towards the town of Haddington, in the heart of East Lothian about two hours away. Located in the gently rolling countryside east of Edinburgh, Haddington figures prominently in the Nisbet story as the birthplace of James Nisbet's father, also named James. The region is also where Helen Nicol's family had resided in her childhood. The birth family of "James Jr." (b. 1775), Helen's husband, is a mystery and represents a "brick wall" in efforts to push the family genealogy to earlier generations, so this was our focus.

I had an appointment with an archivist at the John Gray Centre in Haddington where the town records are stored, and we found them well prepared for our visit. The Centre is a highly professional and well-staffed facility acting as repository for old town council minutes, tax records, and court proceedings. We arrived about noon, but our search immediately took on a degree of urgency when we learned the archives closed 1-2pm for lunch and then closed for the rest of the week at 4pm. The staff had laid out books containing original town council minutes for the time period we were interested in, specifically 1775-1825.

From the writings of William Nisbet, we know that his paternal grandfather James "was a native of Haddingtonshire and died in the town of Haddington at a very advanced age, in which place he taught a school." Assuming the convention of the day, one can deduce that "James Jr." (William's father) was the first-born son of "James Sr.," meaning that James Sr. was likely a relatively young man at the time of his son's birth. If we assume James Sr. was 20-30 years old in 1775, and died at "a very advanced age," which could have been 60-75 years old in that era, then we arrive at a targeted search range for James Sr. with his birth in the 1745-1755 time period and death in the range of 1805-1830. Previous searches of church records have found no note of a James Nisbet who was born or died in these time periods in the Haddington region. Our hope was to find some mention of such a person in the town council minutes.

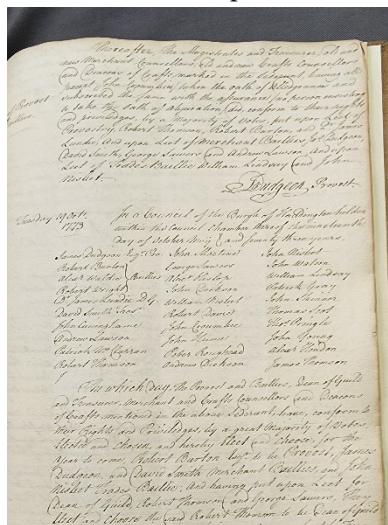
Jody and I dove into these centuries old books and quickly started coming across the name Nisbet on a frequent basis. There were clearly several Nisbet families who figured prominently in local politics, but no connection to our schoolteacher James Sr. could be found. Although the writing was fairly legible and the documents well-preserved, it was



Poring over old town council meeting minutes in Haddington.

slow going and we had barely made a dent in the books when the 1pm lunch break arrived. We took advantage of the intermission to drive out into the surrounding countryside and visit Whittinghame (see below).

Reconvening at 2pm, it became apparent that at the current pace we could only examine less than half of the many hundreds of pages of council minutes. A proper search would require several days, and the archives would be closed the following day, Friday. Knowing it might be years before we could return to Haddington, Jody and I launched into a different strategy; with her tuning the pages and me furiously snapping photos, we imaged the entirety of the two books page by page. We accumulated over 600 images, the final one bears a time stamp of 3:59pm, one minute before closing. The idea is that on some long winter evenings at home, I might go back and examine each page looking for a kernel of data that could shed light on this early generation of our Nisbet line. Will that ever happen? I have my doubts, but at least the images have been recorded and preserved.



Section of typical page from Haddington town council minutes. Though a number of Nisbets served as councilors over the years, we could not find any references that could be definitely tied to my ancestors

Whittinghame

In his early years as a gardener, William Nisbet worked at Whittinghame, the estate of Sir James Balfour. He states in his book that "My father's family belonged to the same quarter, and I learned some interesting particulars concerning them from people of the same name and race." Jody and I set out to visit Whittinghame, a few miles east of Haddington, but were deterred by a "Strictly Private" sign at the entrance. Instead, we hiked along a peripheral road and were able to catch a few

glimpses of the manor house through the trees. A number of the estate's outbuildings abut the surrounding lanes and we wondered which one may have been the "bothy" where young William lived with other single workmen. It was so quiet in the area we saw not one car or person in the 45 min. we were there.



The entrance to Whittinghame, "Strictly Private"



The fields surrounding Whittinghame

After our long day which started at the gravesite in Glasgow and ended with leaving the Haddington archives at 4pm, we checked into our next accommodations, the Carberry Tower Mansion House. Carberry is owned by a cousin of the late Queen Elizabeth II, and when the monarch was a young girl she visited it regularly. Now a high-end hotel and wedding venue, we were pleased to have been assigned a suite noted to be the former nursery where the young queen and her cousin stayed during their visits.



Carberry Tower Mansion House. Accommodation befitting a queen.

Lochend House and Calton Hill Cemetery

The next day, leaving Jody to enjoy the luxury of our accommodation, I set off to find some of the nearby places mentioned in the Nisbet writings. My first stop was Lochend House in eastern Edinburgh. This is quite possibly the birthplace of Helen Nicol in 1778 and her father John Nicol may have been employed there as gardener. According to the family records, Helen's lineage included a daughter of Sir George Warrender (1658-1721) who owned Lochend among other holdings.

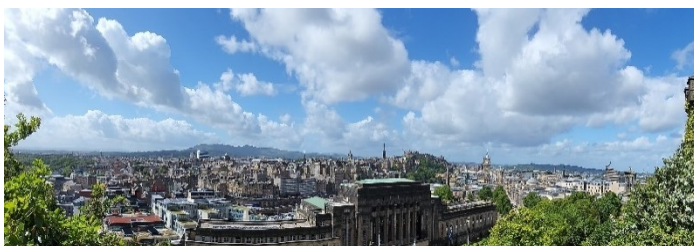
The city of Edinburgh has fully encompassed the once sprawling estate of Lochend, with only the manor house and a small lake remaining. The house had recently been renovated with the intention of conversion to a boutique hotel, but that plan had been thwarted by the pandemic. Instead, the city has contracted with the owners to use it as homeless housing.



Lochend House today, providing transitional housing to homeless. Helen Nicol's birthplace may have been nearby.

After snapping a few photos, I walked down to the small lake below the house. Now a public park with flocks of wild birds, it had once served as a water source for the surrounding community. It is said King James IV came there to hunt waterfowl in 1507, and it appeared to me he would have had no problem bagging his limit.

My next objective was to locate the grave of Helen's son James who died in 1849 and was buried at Calton Hill Cemetery. After parking on a lower road, I hiked to the top of Calton Hill to see the monuments there and take in the striking 360-degree view of Edinburgh. Far below, I could see what I



Exceptional view of Edinburgh from Calton Hill

thought was the cemetery, and I navigated towards it. Unfortunately, I learned later this was only the "New" Calton Hill Cemetery which was opened in the 1820s and the old cemetery was located around the base of the hill to the west. There were some headstones that dated to the late 1840s, so I searched for a Nisbet. Finding none, I hiked back up towards



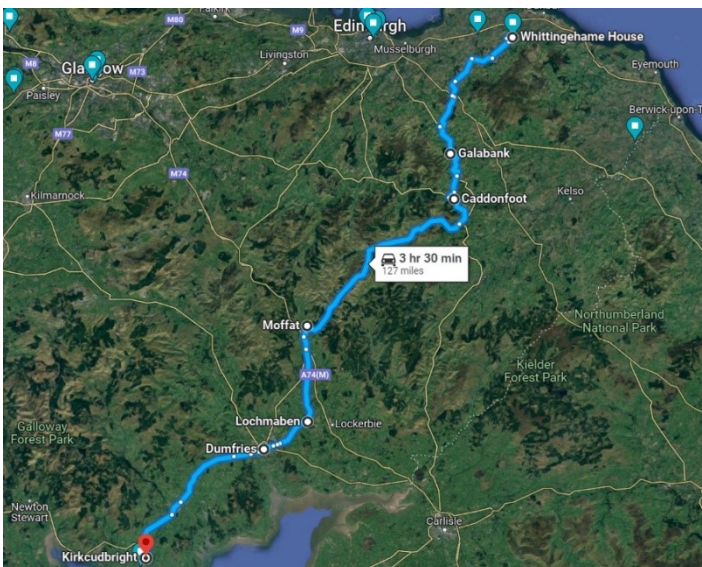
The New Calton Burial Ground where I could find no trace of Helen's son James and his wife Margaret

the smaller old cemetery, a route that took me near where I'd parked my car. Just as I arrived at that point, a local policeman was in the process of writing a parking ticket! I pleaded my case and explained that I'd not had any pocket change to feed the meter. With an eyeroll he flipped his book closed and sent me on my way. This unfortunately derailed my plan to visit the old cemetery, as once in the car I found myself locked in heavy traffic with no parking to be found.

Much of the day was now spent and it being a Friday afternoon the roads were getting densely packed. I had to forego the old graveyard and also a planned visit to nearby Warriston Cemetery where Helen's daughter Isabella and her husband David Wilson are buried. I did drive along a portion of the road named Lieth Walk where William Nisbet had worked in a plant nursery in 1835. It is the longest road in Edinburgh, running from the port at Lieth to the city center.

With time running short, a detour across the Firth of Forth to visit Kirkcaldy was also shunted to a future expedition. Abbotshall in Kirkcaldy is the burial site of Helen's parents and some of her siblings, and is the church where, at the age of 18, she married James Nisbet in 1796.

William's 130 Mile Walk in 1837



When he wrote his autobiography long after emigrating to America, William Nisbet recalled with great fondness a journey he undertook as a young man of 21. Upon leaving his job at

Whittinghame in November 1837, he walked 130 miles across Scotland to his widowed mother's home in Kirkcudbright. Based on the details in his book, I was able to construct an itinerary on Google Maps that closely matched his walking path and I found it was almost precisely the same 130-mile length he quoted.

Jody and I got an early start and would accomplish in five hours what 200 years ago took William 7-10 days. I won't spend a lot of time detailing the route here, but instead will summarize it with a few words and snapshots.



The Lammermuir Hills through which William walked look very probably as they did then – except for the windmills



It was easy to imagine William hiking across this windswept field of heather at the top of the Lammermuir Hills



Our route took us from Whittinghame to Galabank to Selkirk to Caddonfoot and up the Yarrow Water to this view of St. Mary's Loch. From these remote high valleys we descended to Moffat, then on to Dumfries and finally arrived at William's birthplace, Kirkcudbright

Kirkcudbright and Cally House

The final three days of our journey on The Nisbet Trail were dedicated to exploring the town of Kirkcudbright, St. Mary's Isle, and the surrounding area. We spent some time among the archives of the Stewarty Museum in Kirkcudbright but found few new references to the Nisbets (we'd visited this excellent little museum on a previous trip). The highlight of our stay was without a doubt our visit to the gardener's cottage on St. Mary's Isle, the home of Helen and James Nisbet for 33 years, and the birthplace of 11 of their 13 children.

The cottage is located about one mile down a single-track lane on the "Isle" which is actually a peninsula jutting southward into Kirkcudbright Bay.



We approached the cottage at about 3pm on this Saturday afternoon and were delighted when the door was answered by a woman who, upon hearing our story, immediately invited us in for tea and a look around. We learned her name is Jane Slater and she has been living in the cottage for over 46 years, leasing it from the current Earl of Selkirk. She is widowed now, but she arrived at the cottage in the mid-1970s as an adventurous young wife and proceeded to raise her children and numerous foster children in the same rustic home as Helen Nisbet a century and a half earlier.

Jane mentioned that periodically over the years, she has been visited by other Nisbet descendants curious to see the birthplace of their ancestors. She was quite gracious in showing us the entire interior of the house. I had brought along some sketches of the house and floorplan that William Nisbet had made, and we were amazed at how little had changed. A wall had been added here and a door moved there, but overall it was very nearly the same. It was quite moving to be at this place that I had become so familiar with while transcribing Helen Nicol Nisbet's letters and reading her son

William's book. I could imagine the scene of young Robert's death exactly as she had described it – Helen desperate but unable to provide comfort to her dying son – her husband standing in the doorway in silent agony – Robert's young siblings entering to each say a final goodbye to their brother.



The Gardener's Cottage on St. Mary's Isle. Largely unchanged in the 200 years since the Nisbets called it home.



An upstairs bedroom, possibly James and Helen's based on William's sketches.



I was intrigued by the layered patina on the walls of this portion of the cottage. Apparently it was the kitchen in the old days but is now a mostly unused storeroom. Jane lives alone in a small portion of the cottage while nature takes its toll on the rest. In many ways we were fortunate the place had not changed hands in nearly half a century and has not been extensively renovated, which would have destroyed many of the original elements that still show through.

Jane toured us through the walled garden behind the cottage, where James tended vegetables harvested for Lord Selkirk's table as well as his own family. She was most hospitable and accommodating, even volunteering to move her car out of the driveway so I could snap a photo without that bit of modernity in it. After the trip, I sent Jane a personal copy of the Helen Nicol Nisbet book as a token of our thanks for hosting these unexpected Americans.



The rear elevation of the cottage taken from the center of the walled garden. The door center right was added by Jane, converting one of the windows and providing direct access to the garden

During our time in the Kirkcudbright area we stayed at the Cally Palace Hotel in nearby Gatehouse of Fleet. This grand old manor has been turned into a hotel – one with its own 18-hole golf course! Although we enjoyed a nice Sunday morning round and had the course entirely to ourselves, the reason I chose this accommodation was the connection to the Nisbet family. William Nisbet's older brother John served as head gardener for the owner in the late 1820s. John, who was held in awe by young William, met an early end when he died in Caledon, Ireland in 1831.

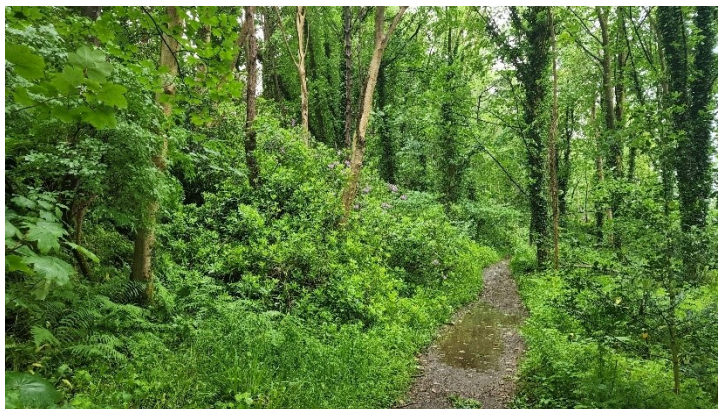
Now called Cally Palace, the house and grounds are impressive, and upon entering one feels as if you have been transported back 50 years or more. The utmost in British formality attracts a well-seasoned clientele – in our 60s, Jody and I appeared to be among the youngest of the guests at breakfast and dinner. On the plus side, the place was dead quiet after 9pm and very conducive to a good night's sleep.



Out for a game of golf at Cally Palace Hotel, where John Nisbet tended the gardens 190 years ago

St. Mary's Isle Nature Walk

On our last full day in Scotland, we returned to St. Mary's Isle and took a stroll along the shoreline. We followed the same path Douglas Nisbet had documented in his travel diary when he returned home from Charleston for a visit in 1851. A copy of the pertinent portion of that diary is available at the Stewartry Museum and should be required reading for any Nisbet descendant visiting the area.



The trail along the shore on St. Mary's Ilse features views of the bay, remnants of the old boathouse, and thick forest with flowering rhododendrons that are probably from the same stock tended by James Nisbet while gardener there 200 years ago

It was a rainy afternoon and though we had enjoyed every one of our 18 days in Scotland, we were ready to start for home. So we abbreviated our walk when the path narrowed and the wet undergrowth closed in, returning to Cally on the most circuitous and scenic roads we could find.

The next morning we were out of the hotel early for the two-hour drive to Glasgow to catch our flight back to the USA. After immersing ourselves in the Nisbet story for over a week, it felt as though we were resurfacing into modern times. Although each day we had accessed technologies which the early Nisbets would have found unimaginable – electric power, cars, telephones, computers, jet airplanes – this journey had enabled us to visualize the lives our ancestors had led. We saw the surrounding countryside that meant so much to them, much of it little changed since. We had seen where they had lived, worked, loved, and died.

Now, nearly six months later, memories of this adventure are still vivid in our minds. And small mementos have been added to the Nisbet archives – a bit of slate fallen from the roof of the old church in Kilbarchan, a shell from the shore at St. Mary's Isle. This tour has made our family history tangible and has whetted our appetite for more – we have already made plans to return next year!

Are You Going?

If you've labored through this entire travelogue, then quite possibly you have caught the bug and will want to plan your own family history tour. If so, please don't hesitate to contact me and I'll provide any advice that I can. Travel safe.