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“ MISS GIBB REMEMBERS ”

The story of the Gibb Family of The Grove

This is the story of a holiday house which became a home; and of the English family who became benefactors of the Manx Nation.

Duncan Gibb was born in Greenock on the 19th April, 1792, son of William Gibb and Catherine Smith. He was probably one of the younger children, his parents having been married eleven years by that time. Practically nothing is known of the family. We know there were brothers and/or sisters because much later a beloved niece was unwittingly associated in actions which inflicted misfortune upon Duncan.

By the time the boy was 13, the Battle of Trafalgar had been fought and won, and a state of siege suddenly yielded to the freedom of the seas. Two years later slavery was abolished “in the teeth of vigorous opposition from the merchants of Liverpool”, who were nevertheless rewarded by an unprecedented trade boom originating in the discoveries of Watt and Arkwright.

Liverpool's prosperity beckoned adventurous young Scots, and Duncan Gibb made his way thither probably about the same time as another young man, William Laird, who set up an engineering works in Birkenhead. Despite hostilities with America in 1812, Liverpool prospered and Gibb with it.

Sometime before 1820 he became agent for the shipowners Pollock, Gilmour & Co.

“He was still a young man when, as their agent and upon their business, he was shipwrecked...” off the shores of the North-West Atlantic. This shipwreck is important in establishing the reliability of his grand-daughter's memory over 150 years later. This, and the story about Samuel Cunard as recounted by Miss Janet Gibb in 1973 are closely paralleled in the printed record of Liverpool shipping history.

Janet had him trapped in the ice off Greenland and rescued by Eskimos. Liverpool locates the wreck on Newfoundland, and the rescuers are a tribe of Indians. Both stories record many dead; survival due to barrels of apples washed ashore; and to the persistent dreams of an Eskimo (Indian) woman who had a vision of foreigners in distress. They were taken off by a British man-of-war, a half-section model of which hangs in the Hall of The Grove. For the rest of his life Duncan sent yearly presents to the tribe concerned in the rescue, and preserved the ship's ensign which is still in The Grove.

Of passing interest is a comment by a visitor to the new Museum last summer. The man-of-war, he said, must have been built pre-Trafalgar since Lord Nelson had written a paper, adopted by the Admiralty, on the need for changes to strengthen the bowsprit by a different arrangement of bob-stays. There is nothing inconsistent in supposing a vessel built with an eye to the final naval victory, being still in service some 15 years later as guardship in the North Atlantic.

By 1821 Duncan was in business on his own account as well as conducting a very large and lucrative business for Pollock, Gilmour & Co. The Liverpool Directory describes him as "Merchant. Counting House at 20, Water Street, residence 35, Great George Street". The shipping registers record him as owner of the interestingly named *Sir Howard Douglas*, built 1814 (possibly purchased by Gibb around 1818) and of the Brigs *Industry* 183 tons and *Commerce* 168 tons.

From 1825 onwards he was building at the rate of two ships a year and almost certainly trading with Quebec and Nova Scotia as principal destinations. By 1830 he was "the most advanced and probably the largest shipowner of his time". If all were still afloat, his fleet by now numbered thirteen.

By 1830 he was also a very prominent citizen, a friend of Canning and Huskisson, a staunch Tory and a guest at the opening by the Duke of Wellington of the Manchester-Liverpool Railway in September of that year. The occasion was marred during a stop to refill with water at a place called Parkside, when during the introductions to the Duke, Huskisson was run over by Stephenson's *Rocket* which was showing off her paces on a neighbouring line.

With his financial and civic position secured, what more natural that being 38 years of age, Duncan should seek to marry? And that his local eminence should make him a suitable husband for one of "the two most beautiful girls in Liverpool". The elder was named Mary; but Duncan married the younger, Janet, at St. Phillips, Liverpool on 15th June, 1830. She was just 21.



JANET BLAKE BEFORE HER MARRIAGE IN 1830

Her surname was Blake. The family was descended from a younger son of Admiral Blake of Van Tromp's broom fame. Though settled in Liverpool, the Blakes also had interests in a soap works in Bristol. Her father, James Blake, was a widower. He had been a ship's surgeon. He had retired from the sea at about 40 and married one Elizabeth Clare, by whom he had four children. Three survived: Mary and Janet and the youngest, born 1811, a son called James.

Duncan was making a "good marriage". The Blakes possessed their own crested silver. Their portraits adorned the walls and were later to hang in the dining room of The Grove. Over the fireplace, James Blake and his eldest grand-daughter Elizabeth. To the right, his mother-in-law Mrs. Clare. To the right again Mary wearing the chain and Janet, about to become Mrs. Gibb, wearing the locket.

Duncan was spurred to have his portrait painted. To put it mildly, it was somewhat undistinguished. "Granny said it was a bad likeness, and wouldn't have it in the house."

To match his new status, Duncan (whom we shall henceforth call Grandpapa) bought a house in the more fashionable Upper Parliament Street at the corner of Windsor Street "where the Toxteth Free Library now stands".

It was a house of some size: stables at the rear housing cows to provide milk during the winter. When in due course, the family moved to the Isle of Man for the summer, the cows went to pasture in Cheshire.

Seventeen years older than his bride; her family Liverpool based, his own far away in Greenock; Duncan must have gladly accepted absorption into the Blake circle. It was to stamp Blake tradition upon his children, and ultimately to witness many of the Blake possessions finding their home at The Grove.

Mary Blake got married too. Her husband the Reverend Ralph, was a Minister at Inverkeithing. He died very young. She had no children, and in the early 1850's joined her sister and brother-in-law at Upper Parliament Street. Since Janet now had a daughter called Mary, the widowed Mrs. Ralph was henceforth always known as "Aunt Ralph".

Grandpapa Duncan was by this time "really very wealthy". Whereas hitherto he had traded mostly with North America, he began to launch out into the Southern (Confederate) States, Africa and, somewhat later, the Far East. He had suspended building during

the excitements of marriage, but by 1834 he resumed. His first new ship was called *Blake* as a tribute to his new relations. She was followed in the same year by the *John Macadam* of 271 tons, built for the Liverpool/Montreal trade. Then in 1835 by the *Tory* of 608 tons for the Georgian cotton trade ex Savannah. Five others followed until in 1840 is recorded the first of his Quebec purchases. His aim was to launch the largest ship of the day. Four such were so much larger than usual as to cause the people of Liverpool "to line the docks to see them go by". The 1840 vessel built in Quebec was a Barque of 674 tons, 131 feet overall, 28½ feet beam, destined for the Liverpool Alabama trade. Grandpapa vented his Tory wrath on the Whig Establishment by calling her *Lady Flora Hastings* after the unfortunate unmarried Lady-in-Waiting to the young Queen Victoria who the year before had been diagnosed as pregnant by the Queen's doctor, Sir James Clark.

She was dismissed from the Court; but shortly afterwards died of a tumour amidst a storm of protest at the Whig Government's attempt to hush the matter up.

Two daughters had been born in 1831 and 1833. In November 1834 an election was brewing in Liverpool. The Gibbs had a remarkable soldier staying with them whose life occupies a good many pages in the Dictionary of National Biography. "Granny's" third child was due and arrived before General Sir Howard Douglas left. It was another girl. "What are you going to call her?" he asked. "Janet after her Mother" replied Grandpapa. "Call her Janet Douglas after me" was the reply. Thus Granny's third child like Grandpapa's first ship, commemorate the General. Hence too the General's portrait, which hangs in the best bedroom.

Yet another daughter, Mary, arrived 13 months later and then a lull of three years before an heir, called Duncan after his Father, was born on 9th July, 1839.

The year before Grandpapa had been impulsive. He had long wanted to inspect the 20 years old Point of Ayre lighthouse, and accompanied a friend who was going to the Isle of Man on business. On the way back from Bride, at the head of Sandy Road, they saw a small bungalow for sale. Grandpapa stopped the gig: went in, and emerged the owner! It was he explained "a very nice place to send my wife and children for the summer. Liverpool is not good for them". Granny was not very pleased but said "I've been happy in this large mansion: I can be happy in a cottage".