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## STONE MASONRY ----- A DYING CRAFT?

ANDREW CAIRNCROSS'S family have been Border stonemasons for over 150 years. This talk was broadcast from Scotland in the series "From Father to Son".

"I am a journeyman mason in Jedburgh, and have worked there nearly all my life, but my trade has taken me to many parts of the country, including the north of England. My father was a mason: there have been Cairncrosses in the building trade for a hundred and fifty years past at least. I can trace my family back to a mason named Hugh Cairncross who was living in 1767, and there were a lot of Cairncrosses in Edinburgh about that time who were in the building trade. There was a James Cairncross who was a slater and lived in Stevenlaw's Close at the time Robert Burns paid his first visit to the City, and there was a Hugh Cairncross, architect, who lived in a house in the College, and George Cairncross, another architect. There was a lot of building going on in Edinburgh in those days, when they were making the New Town, and no doubt they all had a hand in it.

### Bridge

That Hugh Cairncross who was living in 1804 would likely be the builder of that name who built the big stone bridge that carries the main road from Ayr to Maybole, over the river Doon. I have a copy of his estimate for the work, dated 'Edinburgh, 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 1796'. Yon's a fine bridge and still as good as new. Hugh Cairncross's charge for the work was £969. I doubt you'd not get a bridge like it built today for twenty times that sum.

### Monument

There was a Cairncross in those days connected with Jedburgh, too. A few miles from the town, at Penielheugh, the sixth Marquis of Lothian had a great monument built to commemorate the battle of Waterloo in 1815, and there's a tradition that it was built by a Cairncross – perhaps Hugh again. However, the Penielheugh monument was not built as soundly as the Doon Bridge, for it fell down afterwards owing to its being built solid. The present monument is a hundred and fifty feet high, with spiral steps to the top, where you can get a grand view of the border country. In those days the masons had cuddies to take them to their work. Their working days were long; they wrought ten hours a day, and sometimes longer, five days a week, and on Saturdays to four o'clock in the afternoon. The labourers had only nine or ten shillings a week in wages. When their work took them far into the country, they had to lodge; so a small bag of meal was slung across the cuddies back, and was their principal food for the whole week.

## **Father and his Brother**

My father was born in 1844. He and his brother were both masons. It was a great trade in those days. There were five quarries working in the district, where there is not one working today, for it is all brick work now and there were masons, hewers, and labourers all busy, besides the other trades in the building line. Of course in those days all the work in the building trade was done by hand. You did not get doors and windows made by machinery then. A job sometimes lasted for one to two years. Houses were built of dressed stone instead of artificial stone and brick, and I think they were better and bonnier to look at. Naturally, there were a great many men employed in the building trade. I have heard my father say that he has seen fifty pair of horse and carts leave Jedburgh market square early in the morning to go over the Carterbar to the English side to bring coal and lime into the town.

## **Other work**

In the wintertime when the building was stopped owing to bad weather, the masons had various trades apart from building to keep them in work and earn their living. Some of them cleaned and mended clocks. Others used to make slippers. They took the slippers to various fairs held in the district and used to barter them for things they needed; for very little money changed hands then. One of the stories handed down, which my father told me, was about a mason who had made a large number of slippers, and when he started to pair them he found that he had made them all for the one foot. He was so angry that he threw his hammer up in the air and cried out, "Hammer come down and fell me!" Aye, but he dodged the hammer as it fell.

## **Ice was 9 inches thick**

I have heard my father tell of one long and severe winter, I think it was in 1879. One morning at the end of October he was going to his work a short distance out of the town. The farm servants were preparing to lift the potatoes in a field at a farm place called Ludhope. The workers were still busy when he was coming home at night, and he minded how a light breeze was blowing the dust along the road. Next morning it started to snow, and as time went on it got worse, and then came a terrible frost, so severe that the ice on the rivers and ponds was nine inches thick. The masons and other outdoor workers in the building trade were idle more than five months that winter and couldn't start work until the beginning of April the following year. Yet, strange to say, the potatoes that were not lifted and had been in the ground all that time were none the worse when they were taken up. The deep covering of snow had protected them.

## **Market Square**

On Saturday evenings in the summer time, when their work was done, the masons used to gather in the market square and talk about the news of the day and discuss any subject that was important to them. They aye wore their working clothes; a clean apron, a white jacket and moleskin trousers, that was the dress that they went to work in on the Monday morning. I am speaking of the time when my father was a young lad – in the fifties or sixties of last century. There have been great changes since those days. Even when I started to serve my time as an apprentice mason, there would have been fifty or

sixty journeymen masons in the town of Jeddart; now there is only about half a dozen of us left. There were many masons employed then in the building of farm steadings and other farm buildings, as well as houses, and there were the hewers who supplied them with dressed stone, and the jobbing masons who did all kinds of work in the trade such as building grates in fireplaces. All buildings at that time were done with lime, but now cement has taken its place. When the building trade got very slack, many of the masons went and built dry stone dykes around the farmers' fields. They were not paid by the hour, they took it on contract at so much per rood. Though the working hours were long there was always some worthy in the squad who made the time pass. There was one man had a joke played on him one day. His mates made him believe that he had got a fortune left him. So on the way home, when he had to pass over a bridge, he suddenly threw his tools over it into the water, shouting, "Nae mare mason work for me!" When he found out he had been hoaxed, he had to go into the water and get them out and start to mason again.

### **Apprentices**

The journeyman masons at that time, especially the older ones, took a great interest in the work of the apprentice masons, so that when they became journeymen they would be good craftsmen. If the apprentice was caught doing any jerry-building he would find it at his feet knocked down with a hammer. I have got this treatment myself when I was serving my time, to teach me a lesson. The Border masons at that time were famed for their good work, especially in building in whinstone, and they took a pride in keeping all they did up to their own standard, and seeing that the young apprentices learned it too.

### **Rise at 5 o'clock**

Some of the changes since these days have been for the better. There are no cuddies now – and very little walking. I can mind of the time when my father and I had to rise at five o'clock in the morning to be out at our work in the country in time to start at seven o'clock, and we had five or six miles to walk to get there. Nowadays, men get taken to their work in cars for a job in the county. Hours of work are no nearly so long, and wages, of course are far better.

### **Monument work**

For a number of years I was employed in Ancient Monument work on the Border Abbeys, first under the late Sir Rowland Anderson and later with the Office of Works. I never wrought for Sir Rowland other than the old buildings, and I know he took a great interest in the Ancient Monuments. If you did anything out of place he would soon let you know about it. He did admire the bold Norman work at Jedburgh Abbey and used to say how well every detail fitted into the masonry, it was so well balanced.

### **There's towers and there's towers.**

When I wrought for the Office of Works, I had a chance to study the work of the older school of masons. I mind that when I was underpinning the Norman cluster piers at Jedburgh Abbey, I found that their foundations were only about a barrow-load of cobblestones to the square yard. The old hands must have had great faith in mother

earth. Now, in the New Anglican Cathedral at Liverpool, the foundations for the main piers are carried down to a depth of fifty four feet below the ground level, forty five feet square at the bottom and gradually diminishing to twenty five feet at the ground level.

Of course, the tower is very much larger than the one in Jedburgh Abbey, but there's a great difference in the method of foundation. Again, the beds of the ashlar on some parts of the Abbey are so tight that you can hardly stick the point of a pocketknife into them. The result is that in time, when the heavy building settles down, the face of the stone bursts in many places. Now when I was at the Cathedral at Liverpool on a visit I saw that the bed between the ashlar inside the church was perhaps half an inch thick so that it will escape what is apt to take place in older buildings.

## **Craftsmen**

There are still craftsmen at the present day that keep up a high standard; they can do a good job when it is wanted. But it is very seldom now that a chance to do so comes their way. When I speak about a good craftsman, I mean the lad that finished his time before 1914. He got a chance to be a good mason. He was taught to hew and to build, and could go about the scaffold and lift anything he wanted. He had other kinds of skills too. I have seen nearly a dozen of hewers and others engaged in the monumental trade, hewing freestone tombstones, lettering them and making them all ready for erection. That is a thing of the past now. There are very few freestone tombstones erected in these days; they are all marble or granite, and they come ready to put up. In my father's time quite a number of masons could do all these things, and I, following on after him, can hew and build and letter all kinds of tombstones. But the lad who has served his apprenticeship since the war has never got the same chance. He has had to learn his trade at what I would call a "jerry period", for there has been jerry-building going on for several years on the Borders, just as in other places.

There are far more bricks used now than when I started to serve my time as a mason, specially in all the new housing schemes, where the houses are built of brick, especially at the back, and plastered and rough cast. It is only the fronts that are made of dressed stone, and that is not enough to keep many masons employed. With all this brickwork, a lad nowadays doesn't get the same chance to serve his time as an apprentice of the older school did. There is no scope for him; and unless there is a change for the better – I mean more building like what was done before 1914 – our trade, as far as the Borders are concerned, will soon be a lost craft.