

## The Moffat Ram



William Colvin was born at Johnstone, where his father, Robert, had been minister for more than forty-three years. A grandiose headstone in Johnstone kirkyard reminds visitors of his devotion to that parish. William chose not to follow in his father's footsteps. Instead, together with a partner, James Simpson Stevenson, he founded the Colvin Iron Company in Glasgow. He lived in Glasgow until 1857 when he bought Craigielslands House at Beattock from the Younger family. A sasine (deed) registered on 12th November 1857 records:

*William Colvin, merchant in Glasgow, became the owner of half of the three-pound land of Kellobank known as Knockhill and the other half known as North Kellobank, and the two-merk land of Over and Nether Craigieland and Canty Know on disposition by William Younger, brewer, of Edinburgh.*

The 1861 census shows that he lived at Craigielslands with his unmarried sister, Jessie. It records his ownership of the 500 acres of land, and describes his occupation as 'merchant, iron dealer and landlord'. The census also shows that a cook, a lady's maid, a house maid, a laundry maid and a dairy maid lived there too.

Colvin appears to have had a generous nature. In 1861 he donated prizes to Moffat Academy. The following year he contributed twenty-five pounds to the Lancashire Relief Fund. The American Civil War had begun to affect the supply of raw cotton at this time. As a result, mills closed down, several thousand workers lost their jobs, and the rate-payers could not support them. However, Colvin is best remembered locally for the drinking fountain he gave to the people of Moffat. The Police Commissioners' Minute Book records show that on 9th August 1875

*There was read an application by Messrs Proudfoot and Campbell asking liberty to erect a hoarding twenty feet square round the place where the fountain presented by W. Colvin is to be erected. ....It was reported by the Senior Magistrate that the site fixed upon by Mr Colvin, along with himself, Mr Hope-Johnstone, & Dr Maciver, was in the High Street opposite the ground above the Bath buildings. The meeting approved the site as thus fixed.*

This site at the northern end of Moffat High Street was gifted to the town by Captain Hope-Johnstone, the largest land-owner in the district, and a friend of William Colvin.

Colvin decided that a black-faced ram should cap his gift and chose the eminent sculptor, William Brodie of Edinburgh, to cast a bronze to top the red sandstone edifice. Moffat's sheep

market was a feature of regional life of the time so it was an appropriate choice. In due course the bronze was modelled on a prize-winning ram from Kingledores Farm, just north of the Crook Inn (now on the A701) some eighteen miles from Moffat.

The sculptor, Brodie, was born in Banff in 1815 but his family soon moved to Aberdeen where he was educated and later indentured as an apprentice plumber and gas fitter. Later he earned his living as a plumber. His hobby, and source of great delight, was modelling with wax and clay, and his life changed in 1846 after he exhibited several wax portrait medallions. His talent was noticed by the historian John Hill Burton and by Sheriff Watson of Aberdeen, who became his first patron. With financial backing, William Colvin entered the Trustees School of Design in Edinburgh. He followed a four year course, during which he won the school's major prize in 1848. After graduation, a Glasgow merchant, James Buchanan, sponsored him to spend two years studying sculpture in Rome. Thereafter his life was devoted to sculpture, especially busts. He became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and was its secretary between 1876 and 1881. His work includes a memorial to the 71st Highland Light Infantry in Glasgow cathedral, a statue of Thomas Graham in George Square in the same city, a statue of Prince Albert for Perth, the well-known statue of Edinburgh's Greyfriars Bobby, and the sculpture of Amy Robsart on the Scott Monument in Princes Street.

Colvin was delighted with the design Brodie proposed, and was sure it would greatly enhance his fountain. Not only would local people be able to quench their thirst, but provision was made for horses and dogs. The water from the Granton Spring, some three miles to the north of Moffat, was already piped down to the town, so there was no problem with supply.

Sadly, Colvin was too ill to attend the opening ceremony on 26th November 1875, having suffered from ulcers for many years. The death register of Kirkpatrick Juxta lists '*strumosus* (tubercular) *ulcers 14 years, ascites* (watery accumulations in the abdomen) *1 month, and diarrhoea 14 days*' as the cause of death. He was buried in Kirkpatrick Juxta kirkyard, the grave marked by an obelisk erected by his brother, the Reverend Robert Colvil.

*The Dumfries and Galloway Standard* reported upon the unveiling ceremony:

*Martinmas Friday, always a big day in Moffat, was yesterday of special importance, and is likely to be associated with pleasant recollections in the burgh for some time to come, as on it was formally presented to the town the handsome drinking fountain which Mr Colvin, the generous laird of Craigiellands, has erected in the leading thoroughfare. The work occupies a site in the centre of the spacious High Street, a few yards further up than the Baths. The conception of the design is due to the donor himself, and the structure certainly presents a most unique, and not inappropriate, appearance. The main portion of it consist of huge blocks of Corncockle freestone almost wholly innocent of the chisel. Square the base, where each side measures ten feet, the structure gradually assumes a more rounded form as it tapers towards the summit, where it ends in an immense stone weighing about two tons.*

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*A few feet from the base are placed four basins of Peterhead granite into which a constant stream of water is poured from a pipe in a projecting ledge of rock.*

*Beside each of these basins a massive bronze drinking cup is suspended by a chain of the same metal; and from them the water is conveyed by other pipes to smaller basins hollowed in the sandstone at the bottom of the structure, intended for the benefit of the canine race.*

*The base is girded by long blocks of Ratho whinstone, with corner stones of the same. But the chief feature, as it is the crowning ornament, of the structure is the massive bronze ram (a half size larger than life) which surmounts the whole. It is a magnificent animal of the black-faced breed, with fine horns. The figure, which faces south-west with its forefeet on a slightly raised level, weighs between 22 and 23 cwt, and presents a noble picture of the animal at home on his mountain soil. Of the work, we need say no more than it was designed by Mr Brodie, R.S.A., Edinburgh; that the ram was cast by Messrs Young and Barton, Leith Walk; and that the erection was carried out by Mr M'Ewan of Edinburgh. On the northern side, this simple intimation is plainly engraved on the freestone: **A gift to the town of Moffat from William Colvin of Craighielands 1875.** The west side bears the artist's name.*

*The inauguration took place at half-past one yesterday afternoon when, notwithstanding the extreme coldness of the day and occasional light snow showers, a large assembly witnessed the proceedings in the open air. The ram was unveiled shortly before the ceremony took place, and the Volunteer Band paraded the town for some time previously. Provost Wilson intimated that he had received a letter from Mr Colvin, expressing regret that the inclemency of the weather, combined with the state of his health, prevented him from being present.*

*The Rev. Dr Colvin of Cramond, brother of the donor, then read a communication from the donor asking the burgh to accept the gift, and apologising for the unavoidable delay which had occurred. He had at first hoped to have the fountain ready last Christmas, but the altering of his original intention to have the ram cut in marble necessitated delay, and he had also been disappointed in his hope to have it ready for presentation during the summer months. He added, it would be too much to expect that the fountain will please the taste of everyone; it is so different to the ordinary style of such structures in this country. But I thought a black-faced ram on the top of a Corncockle rock would not be an inappropriate ornament to this handsome street, situated as it is in the very centre of a pastoral district, so deservedly famous for the breeding of first class animals (Loud cheers).*

*Provost Wilson replied, accepting the gift in the name of the community, referring in felicitous terms to Mr Colvin's prosperous commercial career; to the fact that his father was long the respected minister of Johnstone; to the many reasons they had to appreciate him as a landed proprietor, a country gentleman and a neighbour, and to which he had this day added one that eclipsed all the others. He concluded, amid loud cheers, by drinking in the water of the fountain, to the long life, health, and happiness of Mr Colvin.*

*Baillie Russell followed, remarking that Mr Colvin had set a very worthy example which other proprietors, who had a larger stake in the district, might very well imitate, and referring to the slumbering project for a new town clock as one which might receive an*  
impetus from the day's proceedings.

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*The Rev. Dr Macvicar spoke in laudatory terms of Mr Colvin, extolling the purity of Moffat water and reminded the company that this was a great cause for thankfulness. At the request of Captain Hope-Johnstone of Capelgill, three cheers were given for the Provost.*

*A numerous company of gentlemen, under the presidency of Captain Johnstone, afterwards partook of cake and wine in the Annandale Arms, and toasted appropriate sentiments.*

*November 27th 1875*

The bronze ram standing over the fountain appears to have no ears and, after William Brodie died in the same year as William Colvin, a story soon spread that he had committed suicide because of this omission. Miss Isabella Shaw writes, recalling her grandfather's description of the opening ceremony,

*My family had the Tibbie Shiels Inn at St Mary's Loch, and as a girl I remember my grandfather, James Scott, telling me that he was at the unveiling of the ram statue and fountain. As it was unveiled a lady standing nearby cried out, "It has no lugs!" and, sure enough, she was right. According to my grandfather the sculptor went off to walk in the Moffat Water hills, no doubt to think things out, and never returned. It was suggested he fell over at the Grey Mare's Tail either accidentally or deliberately.*

However, since the cause of the sculptor's death some six years later was '*softening and dilation of the heart, anascarsa, and oedema of the lungs*', there is not a word of truth in the tale.

In 2001 Jean Cockayne asked, at a meeting of the community council, whether the fountain might be restored to working order. The matter was referred to local councillor, William Lockhart, who arranged for the Department for Environmental Health to consider the feasibility of such a project. The Divisional Environmental Health Officer met with the community council later in the year, only to advise it that there was no possibility of the fountain being restored to provide drinking water. However, he suggested that it should become an ornamental fountain.

The Colvin fountain was surveyed and the assistance of Historic Scotland was sought as repair was necessary. The resultant report estimated that the cost of restoration and other associated works necessary would be fifty thousand pounds. Despite this, the community council decided to proceed. A committee was established to supervise the project and a sub-committee looking into possible work in detail recommended that, in addition to repair and restoration of the plinth and statue, the fountain should function ornamentally and be protected by a low railing. Floodlighting should be provided and, if possible, Moffat Museum should mount a display focusing upon it.

Fund-raising began in earnest at the end of a year the residents of Moffat had amassed £8,300. This, together with support from local businesses, the Lottery Heritage Fund, Historic Scotland, Dumfries and Galloway Council, and the Co-operative Society's Community Fund, meant that work could proceed. Renovation began in December 2003 and the restored Colvin fountain was unveiled on 15th April 2004.