

Walker Dam

Walker Dam is located within the former Royal Forest of Stocket, part of the Freedom Lands gifted by Robert I to the burgh (recorded in a charter of 1319). Now it is in the modern Burnieboozle estate, part of the larger Craigiebuckler estate, which was sparsely populated countryside until the 1950s, when major housing development began in that area. Walker Dam is bounded by Springfield Road (which replaced a roadway called Walker Dam Road) to the east and Woodburn Gardens to the north.

The dam is fed by the Holburn ('Burn of the Howe'), which has two head waters, the northern and greater one coming from Hazlehead and through Walker Dam.¹ The section entering Walker Dam is the West Burn of Rubislaw. The two head streams of the Holburn joined together between Rubislaw Quarry and Springbank Cemetery, and this united stream fed the steam-condensing ponds at Rubislaw Bleachfield before flowing eastward together as far as Hartington Road, where they separate. The south branch, the original burn, crossed Union Grove and passed under the old Holburn Bridge, while the north branch, an artificial mill-lead, went to the Upper and Lower Justice Mills.² As a consequence, Walker Dam was at one time closely associated with the city's milling operations and, especially, with textile manufacturing. In the nineteenth century it was a resource integral to the firm once called Maberly's (established between 1808 and 1811) and later Richards, which had the Broadford Works on Maberly Street and which was the principal user of the bleachfields. An 1866-67 Ordnance Survey description of Walker Dam gives it as 'a very large dam built by the proprietors of the Rubislaw Bleach Field for their own use.'³ Bleachfields were a development of the eighteenth century Scottish textile and thread industries. The first bleachfield in Scotland was established in the late 1720s as an alternative to either small, burnside bleaching operations which were of variable quality, or sending the unbleached cloth to England, Ireland or Holland for treatment.⁴

In March 1801, the lands of Springfield were offered for sale. They were described as comprising about 63 acres, 'inclosed and subdivided', and held feu of 'the Community of Aberdeen' at the annual feu-duty of £2 14s 2d sterling. A large house was included in the sale, and it was noted that 'the dam for the Justice-mills is situated within this property, and the mill-burn passes thro' it, by which considerable benefit may be derived by a purchaser.' Other advantages of the estate were two small plantations of trees, and the fact that the proposed

¹J. Milne, *Aberdeen: Topographical, Antiquarian, and Historical Papers on the City of Aberdeen* (Aberdeen, 1911), 49.

²Milne, *Aberdeen*, p49. (most of para to this point.)

³*Ordnance Survey Name Book, Aberdeenshire* (Vol 69), 1865-1871, 158.

⁴A.J. Durie, *The Scottish Linen Industry in the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1979)

turnpike road to Skene and Alford was to pass through the lands, which would increase their value.

In 1833 Aberdeen Town Council agreed to have Walker Dam cleaned out and deepened, in partnership with Messrs Richards and Company, manufacturers in Aberdeen.⁵ Richards was the instigator of the plan, to which the Council agreed because the work was expected to be 'highly beneficial to the Upper and Nether Justice Mills by affording them an additional supply of water,' and authorised it providing that the Town's share of the costs would not exceed £20; the work would be executed under the sole charge of John Smith, Town Superintendant; and Richards, which must not spend less than the Council on the project, should not use this as a means of claiming any right over Walker Dam in future.⁶

In 1837, Richards proposed to the Council that Walker Dam should be excavated and extended, citing an 1829 agreement to this effect between the Town and Messrs Maberly and Company, the previous owners of the manufacturing works now operated by Richards (Maberley's folded in 1832).⁷ Richards sought a lease of the dam water at a fixed rent once the work had been completed.⁸ The Council remitted consideration of this to a committee previously established to look at a proposal to move Justice Mill Dam westwards to Rubislaw. Early in 1839, the Council approved the recommendation of this committee that Walker Dam should be excavated and enlarged so that it would hold an additional 700,000 cubic feet of water, again on the grounds that it would provide a more reliable source of water for the town's mills, especially in the dry season.⁹ The new capacity of the dam was expected to be more than adequate for the needs of the mills. The estimated cost of the works at this stage was £360: should the eventual cost exceed £400, Richards was to pay the excess. The company was also to pay the Council £75 a year for its lease of the water, and would be responsible for repair and maintenance of the extended dam, to the satisfaction of the Town, during the life of its lease. (Richards continued to own rights over the water for several decades.¹⁰)

After further negotiations, a Council meeting of 15 April 1839 approved implementation of the project and authorised the Town Treasurer to enter into a contract with Richards and Co.¹¹ Work included the construction of a spillwater tunnel and breast mound for the dam extension, along

⁵ Meeting of 2 October 1833, *Council Register* Vol. 72, p.206.

⁶ Meeting of 2 October 1833, *Council Register* Vol. 72, p.206.

⁷ Meeting of 11 April 1837, *Council Register* Vol 74, p131; R. Duncan, *Textiles and Toil: The Factory System and the Industrial Working Classes in early Nineteenth Century Aberdeen* (Aberdeen City Libraries, 1984), p.11.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Meeting of 7 January 1839, *Council Register* Vol. 75, p48.

¹⁰ *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, 6 July 1880, 28 November 1889, 15 March 1894 and 27 November 1895.

¹¹ Meeting of 15 April 1839, *Council Register* Vol. 75, p83.

with additional dykes and the installation of a new cast-iron tunnel pipe and sluice.¹² The plans, drawings and a detailed specification produced by the Council formed the basis of the contract, signed on 17 April 1839.¹³ The revised estimate of costs based on the plans drawn up by the Town considerably exceeded the original £400 anticipated; the Council minutes do not record the new estimate but note that Richards offered to pay the full amount, on the basis that Richards would receive the original £400 from the Town once the work was completed.¹⁴ The Council had earlier noted that implementation of the project would require the purchase of an adjacent piece of land owned by Alexander Bannerman and instructed that he should be approached to sell part of his property near Springfield.¹⁵ The necessary land was obtained from Bannerman at a feu-duty of £20, recorded in a feu charter of 19 April 1839.¹⁶

On 1 August 1860, the lands and estates of Craigiebuckler and Burnieboozle, including Walker Dam, were offered for sale by public roup, as part of the sequestrated estate of John Blaikie, advocate. (John Blaikie went to Spain in 1860, following the collapse of his business and financial ruin. He was a son of James Blaikie of Craigiebuckler, Provost of Aberdeen from 1833 to 1835.) Walker Dam is described in the sale notice as ‘an Ornamental Sheet of Water, from which there is an yearly Revenue of £20 sterling from the Town of Aberdeen’.¹⁷ The estates evidently failed to sell at the advertised ‘upset price’ (the lowest price consistent with the valuation of a property) of at £5,771 2s 6d, since the estate of Burnieboozle, within which Walker Dam is situated, was again offered for sale on 3 September 1860, now at £5,500, with neighbouring lands at Springfield for sale separately.¹⁸ Again it failed to realise this amount and was offered for sale on 5 October 1860 at the further reduced upset price of £5,200.¹⁹ At some point after this date it was purchased by John Stewart, Esq.

The lands of Burnieboozle and Walkerhill were once again offered for sale in August 1865, with Walker Dam included - the sale notice mentions the annual feu-duty of £20 paid by the Town Council on it.²⁰ In early September, the *Aberdeen Journal* reported that ‘The estates of Craigiebuckler, Burnieboozle, Walkerhill, and others, lately belonging to John Stewart, Esq., were on Friday purchased for the sum of £31,500 by Lauchlan McKinnon, junior, advocate, on behalf of John Cardno Couper, Esq., lately of Whampoa, China.’ (Whampoa is now usually known as

¹² Classified advertisement inviting tenders for the work, *The Aberdeen Journal*, 30 Jan 1839.

¹³ Town Clerk’s Plans CA/10/1/72 and CA/10/1/76, *Record of the Royal Burgh and Fonds/Collection 1179-present*, Aberdeen City Archives.

¹⁴ Meeting of 15 April 1839, *Council Register* Vol. 75, p83.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Meeting of 19 April 1839, *Council Register* Vol. 75, p85.

¹⁷ *The Aberdeen Journal*, 18 July 1860.

¹⁸ *The Aberdeen Journal*, 15 and 29 August 1860.

¹⁹ *The Aberdeen Journal*, 12 and 19 September and 3 October 1860.

²⁰ *The Aberdeen Journal*, 9 August 1865.

Huangpu.) Couper, from Fraserburgh, had served as an apprentice in the Aberdeen shipbuilding firm of Alexander Hall and Co. before going to Hong Kong and working with his father in their own highly successful ship-building and repairing company. By the time he returned to Aberdeen in the 1860s, he had amassed a fortune. He was involved in a number of Aberdeen business enterprises and in the Church of Scotland. Couper gave a portion of land close to Walker Dam to be the site of Craigiebuckler Church, built in 1883, of which he was an elder. He died in January 1902 at the age of 82. His son, Lieutenant-Colonel John Cardno Ogston Couper (1st Highland Brigade), succeeded to the property but died at the age of 48 in 1913. His widow and two young children remained at Craigiebuckler; his daughter, Florence, went on to marry the minister of Craigiebuckler Church but she too died young, in 1931.

There was some discussion in 1879 that Walker Dam could provide the water to drive a hydraulic pump at Clarence Street as part of the Council's efforts to improve sewerage in Aberdeen.²¹ In 1880, the Town Council and Richards and Co. gave permission for the dam to be used (along with a local spring and a small artificial pond) to drive a hydraulic ram to raise water for the greenhouses of B. Reid and Co., nurserymen of Granitehill, Rubislaw.²²

Whatever commercial uses it was put to, by the later nineteenth century Walker Dam was evidently well established as general recreation site, and regarded as a public amenity by the people of Aberdeen. Fishing and skating are known to have taken place on the dam, and it was also used for swimming. When the Town Council meeting of 7 July 1862 heard an application from Mr Stewart of Craigiebuckler seeking a lease of Walker Dam so that he had the power to protect his property, adjacent to the dam, from "idlers", the report of his application drew an indignant response from at least one citizen.²³ A letter to the editor of *The Aberdeen Journal* objected to Mr Stewart's proposal to 'monopolise to himself' Walker Dam, and so deprive Aberdeen citizens of their 'undoubted rights' and 'one of the few privileges which the people have'.²⁴

Public enjoyment of the dam was not without its hazards. On one occasion in the late nineteenth century, two boys were rescued from drowning in it.²⁵ Others were not so lucky. In July 1911 Mary Ann McKenzie, aged eight, and her six-year-old sister, Agnes, drowned in Walker Dam. This led immediately to calls for the dam to be better enclosed. A dyke had previously been built around it, but was partly broken down, and this is what had enabled the girls' access to the water.

²¹AWJ 26 Aug 1879 (reporting on a Town Council meeting).

²²AWJ, 6 July 1880.

²³*The Aberdeen Journal*, 9 July and 13 August 1862.

²⁴*The Aberdeen Journal*, 13 August 1862.

²⁵*The Aberdeen Journal*, 29 November 1871.

The Council's Finance Committee visited the dam in the aftermath of the tragic incident and agreed to recommend the repair of the surrounding walls. They also instructed that information boards should be erected at the site warning of the dangers. During this site visit, one of the councillors slipped by the side of the stream entering the dam, and fell into the mud. It is not clear if the children had similarly slipped and landed in the water, or if they had intended to enter it.

The future of Walker Dam was the subject of two proposals of 1933. Council minutes of 4 December that year record that Aberdeen Land Association intended to donate to the Council the wooded den lying between Johnston House on Springfield Road and Viewfield Road, on condition the den should be maintained by the local authority as an open space and that the Council pay half the cost of a proposed road to be built along the west boundary of the property. The Council formally accepted this proposal in January of 1934.²⁶

Also in December 1933, the City Engineer, Thomas F. Henderson, wrote to the Council's Streets and Works Committee, which was then looking at the widening of Springfield Road and the layout and construction of a new road between it and Queen's Road. Henderson asked the committee to consider the future use of the Council-owned Walker Dam at the same time. According to Henderson: 'This dam is formed on a burn which rises in the grounds of Hazlehead and flows through the dam and joins the West Burn of Rubislaw at a point south-east of Kepplestone Nursing Home and later forms what is known as the Ferryhill Burn.' On 12 July that year, very heavy rainfall had flooded the electricity works and caused damage to property in Crown Street and Ferryhill Terrace. To prevent further flooding, the water was run out of the dam on 1 September and although there had been no heavy rain since then, 'we know that, by controlling the flow at the outlet of the dam we can reduce the risk of flooding in the lower parts very considerably.

'In conjunction with the Superintendent of Parks, I have prepared a plan showing how the Walker Dam could be laid out as a pleasure ground where the public could leave Springfield Road and walk through the gardens on to the grounds of Hazlehead. The superintendent of parks is of the opinion that during storm periods the gardens could be flooded without doing much damage to the grass or plants. As the Dam is the property of the Common Good, I would suggest that the sub-committee confer with the Finance Committee and Town Planning Committee and submit a report.'

²⁶ Council Minute, 15 January 1934.

The next meeting of full Council on 3 January 1934 agreed that the committee should investigate further, though it also wanted the remarks of the Superintendent of Parks about flooding not doing damage to the proposed gardens to be deleted. Also presented to the Council at the same meeting was a letter to the Town Clerk from Professor James Ritchie of the University of Aberdeen, suggesting the Council should consider making Walker Dam a bird sanctuary. This was remitted to Streets and Works Committee for consideration. (The two schemes were possibly not wholly compatible - some residents opposed turning the site into a pleasure park on the grounds that it would interfere with the natural beauty and the birdlife of the site.) It seems that these two proposals had been prompted by the threat of the dam being filled in or otherwise scrapped: two days after the Council meeting, a reader's letter to the *Aberdeen Journal* urged that the dam should be improved and made safe for children rather than 'done away with'. The writer suggested that a low wall could be built around it, 'made from the old dykes that have been pulled down in the vicinity'. Whatever enclosure was erected in 1911 after the drowning incident had evidently not endured.

The same edition of the paper published an old photograph of the dam 'before it was drained'. This remark referred to the decision to run off the water in the dam the previous year, to obviate flood damage to the surroundings. However, doing so had created other problems – correspondents to the *Aberdeen Journal* in 1934 complained about the condition of the dam as 'an evil-smelling mudhole' and 'horrible looking and stinking', especially during hot weather, and recommended that the Medical Officer of Health should investigate.

Whatever schemes were mooted for the dam, they took a considerable time to be implemented. The better part of two years later, a short *Bon-Accord* article of October 1935 reports work being undertaken to transform Walker Dam, 'from its present wild state'.²⁷ An accompanying photo depicts workers filling in part of the dam. According to the piece, Walker Dam 'is being used by the Cleansing Department as a tip for hard material, which is being put to a good use in filling up the dam.' At the time this article appeared, the newspaper thought there was no definite scheme approved by the Council for the future of the site, but, 'One proposal is that the site be converted into a recreation ground.' At around the same time, the Council made provision for the installation of a new sewer at Walker Dam, at a cost of £500.²⁸

²⁷ *Bon-Accord* 11 October 1935, p.163.

²⁸ Minute of Finance Committee, 27 August 1935, included in *Minutes and Proceedings of Aberdeen Town Council*, 2 September 1935.

From the mid-1940s and during the 1950s, Stewart Construction (Aberdeen) Ltd., which was by then the heritable proprietor of the Craigiebuckler estate, built several housing developments on the land around Walker Dam.²⁹

The minute of a meeting of the Links and Parks Committee of Aberdeen Town Council, held on 24 August 1964, notes that the committee considered a report by the Director of Parks and agreed the recommendation that the Council lay out an amenity area on ground lying to the south of the woodlands at Walker Dam extending to c. 0.75 of an acre. This was one of three proposed (and agreed) amenity areas to be created in the vicinity and included in the report, the others being a strip of ground on the south side of Hazledene Road (c. 0.4 acre), and two strips of ground adjoining Craigiebuckler Avenue (c. 3,150 square yards). The total estimated cost is given as £1,470.³⁰

By this time Walker Dam had become home to a community of swans. The *Press & Journal* reported that the Links and Parks Committee of 30 September 1964 considered a letter from the Aberdeen Association for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, requesting the committee ban fishing in Walker Dam, so as to protect the swans living on it. The committee recommended no action. This was the second attempt by the association to have fishing banned: it had submitted a similar request at the previous meeting. The renewal of the request was prompted by the discovery of a cygnet badly injured by a fishing hook and line.³¹ Walker Dam is no longer a swan habitat, but they were a popular feature of Walker Dam for many years. When Walker Dam Infant School opened in 1966, it adopted the emblem of swans on water as its school badge. (The swans have also inspired the song, 'Walker Dam', by Aberdeen singer-songwriter Bob Knight.) A Springfield resident, Mrs Nanette Grieve, had left the Council a bequest on her death in 1955 to fund the services of a warden to protect them.³² At times, much effort was put into ensuring this protection: the Evening Express in 1972 reported that the Council had mounted a vigil of 'almost Loch Garten proportions' to see that swan eggs made it to hatching. In previous years eggs had been stolen or lost due to flooding.

As this suggests, the problem of flooding at Walker Dam, highlighted by the City Engineer in 1933, was still an issue over thirty years later. In 1965, the Evening Express published 'before and after' photographs of the flooded area: the latter image shows Council parks and recreation staff laying out grounds and planting shrubs and other flora capable of surviving immersion for a

²⁹ *Craigiebuckler Chartulery* (Charter Register of Craigiebuckler, 1958-1959), CA/4/21 in Records of the Royal Burgh and City of Aberdeen, Aberdeen City Archives.

³⁰ *Minutes and Proceedings of the Town Council 1964-1965* (Aberdeen, 1965), p. 403.

³¹ *Press & Journal*, 1 October 1964.

³² *Aberdeen's Parks* (City of Aberdeen Leisure and Recreation Department publication, undated but believed to be 1980s.)

few days. The newspaper also reported that the works were to include provision for the dam water to be diverted at times into a burn, so relieving the pressure and reducing the silting that had caused flooding problems in the past. A 1969 article in the *Aberdeen Press & Journal* refers to Walker Dam being a body of water ‘shaped and even bottomed by the combined operations of the Aberdeen Corporation Cleansing and Links & Parks Departments,’ and to a plan by Links & Parks to provide an amenity walk or nature trail along the course from Johnston Gardens to Hazlehead, via Walker Dam.

Today (2014) Walker Dam (with Rubislaw Link) is a 3.38 hectare Local Nature Conservation Site, run by Aberdeen City Council’s Countryside Ranger Service.³³ Comprising a mix of open water, landscaped areas and semi-natural habitats, with a footpath running through it, Walker Dam is an important recreational and educational resource, being one of the few larger bodies of water in the city.

³³ *Aberdeen City Local Nature Conservation Sites Booklet* (Aberdeen, 2013), p. 44.