

## The Auld Christmas Pie

It was in the late 1700s that an Aberdonian, Peter Sievwright, established Lerwick's first bakeshop in a house, (now demolished), at the foot of Navy Lane on the south side of its junction with Baker's Closs. Peter died in 1830, and his business was carried on by John Bannatyne who arrived in Lerwick from Rothesay in 1831.

Eight years later he moved down the Closs then built a new house and bakeshop at the foot of the adjacent garden - 10 Mounthooly Street – the building we see today. By 1851 Bannatyne had four men employed and he and Sinclair Pottinger, at Mariner's Court, were the only bakers in town. (Mariner's Court was situated in Reform Lane but disappeared in 1888 when the old Roost houses were demolished).

After Mr Bannatyne retired George Irvine, who had been one of his apprentices, took over the business. James Sinclair later joined him and they were trading as Sinclair & Irvine when an incident took place on the morning of Old Christmas, 5<sup>th</sup> January 1861.

James Hunter the Parochial School Master had invited four of his pupils and two young pupil teachers to breakfast at his schoolhouse near the top of Mounthooly Street, (now a private residence, previously the Baptist Church Manse). They were Daniel McKinven, son of John McKinven, Minister of Lerwick Congregational Chapel; Isaac Cowie, son of John Cowie, Surgeon and Medical Practitioner; Andrew MacFarlane son of Andrew MacFarlane, Minister of Lerwick United Presbyterian Church; William Christie, son of George Christie, Superintendent of Police; William Strong, pupil teacher and son of Thomas Strong, Master Shoemaker; and Robert Stout, pupil teacher and later Chief Magistrate and Prime Minister of New Zealand, son of Thomas Stout, Merchant.

All except Isaac Cowie accepted the invitation.

Mr & Mrs Hunter and their guests sat down at about 9.00am for breakfast, which included a warm beefsteak pie. Mrs Hunter had prepared it earlier and a servant had taken it to Sinclair & Irvine where the pastry had been added before firing. When the pie was delivered Mrs Hunter had remarked that the crust was scorched but Daniel McKinven enlightened her that the oven was too hot when it was put in and, when questioned, admitted that he was in the bakeshop when the servant had brought in the pie. All the boys were served a piece of pie but apart from Andrew MacFarlane the others ate very little. The Hunters remarked that the boys had surely already had breakfast before they arrived but as they were hungry they ate their slices.

Soon after the boys departed Mr Hunter began to feel nauseous. He ate next to nothing at lunchtime but Mrs Hunter enjoyed some of the cold pie.

They had been invited to spend the evening with Mr & Mrs Muir about a quarter of a mile away, (at Roadside Cottage, South Road, opposite the Cairnfield Road junction). Mr Hunter was still feeling unwell when they set out at 6.00pm, and wished he did not have to go. Their pleasant evening was suddenly interrupted when Mr Hunter was overcome by a severe attack of diarrhoea and he had to "bolt outside to the garden".

On his return his host attempted to revive him with a little whisky and cayenne pepper.

Shortly after 11.00pm, on the Hunters way home, disaster struck them both. Mrs Hunter suffered the indignity of having to “kilt her cotts” and squat at the side of the road alongside her husband. They were forced to relieve themselves at least three times before reaching home and the short walk that should have taken less than ten minutes actually took almost an hour.

Nausea and diarrhoea plagued them throughout the night and next day. Mr Hunter came to the conclusion that they had been poisoned and if they did not get speedy treatment they would surely die. Dr Cowie, (Isaac’s father), was sent for and he prescribed drops of laudanum, which they took at regular intervals over the following days.

Mr Hunter was unwell for four days while his wife was seriously ill for about a week during which she had collapsed unconscious at one point.

It then came to light that Andrew MacFarlane had also been afflicted as well as the sister of the servant who too had eaten a piece of the pie. This confirmed Mr Hunter’s suspicion.

The matter was reported and the Procurator Fiscal duly questioned the boys. Andrew MacFarlane said he had learned later that John Cowie had gone into his father’s surgery in Law Lane and taken some Jalap, a purgative, which he had given to his brother, Isaac, to put into the pie.

Mr Hunter had been told that John Cowie had given his brother Isaac something which Daniel McKinven had put into the pie. Apparently a year earlier John had been a pupil but due to misconduct he left the school bearing a grudge.

Isaac Cowie denied any involvement and stated that the first he had been aware of anything amiss was when his father was called to see the Hunters.

Daniel McKinven and John Cowie denied all knowledge of any tampering with the pie and Daniel announced that in fact he had never seen it until it was produced on Mr Hunter’s table!

Despite continued investigation by the Procurator Fiscal neither the bakers, the boy who had delivered the pie to the house, the servant nor the other three boys at the breakfast could throw any additional light on the subject. The cause or culprit was never established

Mr & Mrs Hunter survived their ordeal, but it is highly unlikely that they ever again risked eating a beefsteak pie or extended an invitation to pupils to join them for a meal.