

Harley-Davidson

... the Scottish connection

By Al Paul

The history of the Harley-Davidson Motor Company is well documented, having been covered by literally millions of articles and books, helping to make the company and brand a 20th century icon, well known all over the globe. But scant information is available covering the history of the Davidson family before the company was established in 1903.

Their story is probably typical of many thousands of hard-working Scottish families who decided to emigrate to the USA, from the early 1600s to the present day. Emigration took place for a variety of reasons, including colonisation, transportation as rebels of the Cromwellian Civil War and the aftermath of the Battle of Culloden, and the subsequent infamous Highland Clearances. The dream was usually to rid themselves of the old class system which still operates in Britain, and perhaps make something of themselves through sheer hard work in the land of opportunity, the New World.

A combination of opportunity and Scottish natural inventiveness has led to benefits to mankind in a wide variety of ways - imagine a world without telephones, radios, televisions, radar, penicillin, steam engines, threshing machines, logarithms, and, more importantly for motorcycles, pneumatic tyres and overhead valves. It's little wonder Scots do so well abroad - they have the ideas and enthusiasm, usually rich in everything... *except hard cash*.
Map of Scotland

Local records for the parish of Angus, in Scotland, show that Alexander Davidson, the founder Davidson's grandfather, was born in Brechin in 1807, to James and Ann Davidson. In 1832 Sandy (a Scottish shortened version of Alexander) married Margaret Scott from nearby Forfar. In the 10-yearly government census (a population headcount survey) of 1841, Sandy was described as a wright, an occupation covering many industrial fabrication professions, but in Scotland in those days it usually meant a carpenter, or sometimes a wheel-wright. For instance, my own ancestors for the same period were described in parish records as 'paling wrights' - they made wooden stake fences (called palings in Scotland), probably for local estates.

The 1841 census also shows that, at 35 years old, Sandy was already industrious enough to run the 'smiddy' (blacksmith's workshop) at Netherton, Aberlemno, Angus, and indeed employed another wright and his apprentice. The Davidson family and the two employees actually lived next door, in the smithy (blacksmith) cottage adjacent to the workshop, up a slight embankment from the working area. At the time of the census (really a snapshot of who was living in particular buildings on a particular day, and their relationship to each other) they had four children - Ann (8), Margaret (6), Marjory (2), and Alexander Jr (6 days).

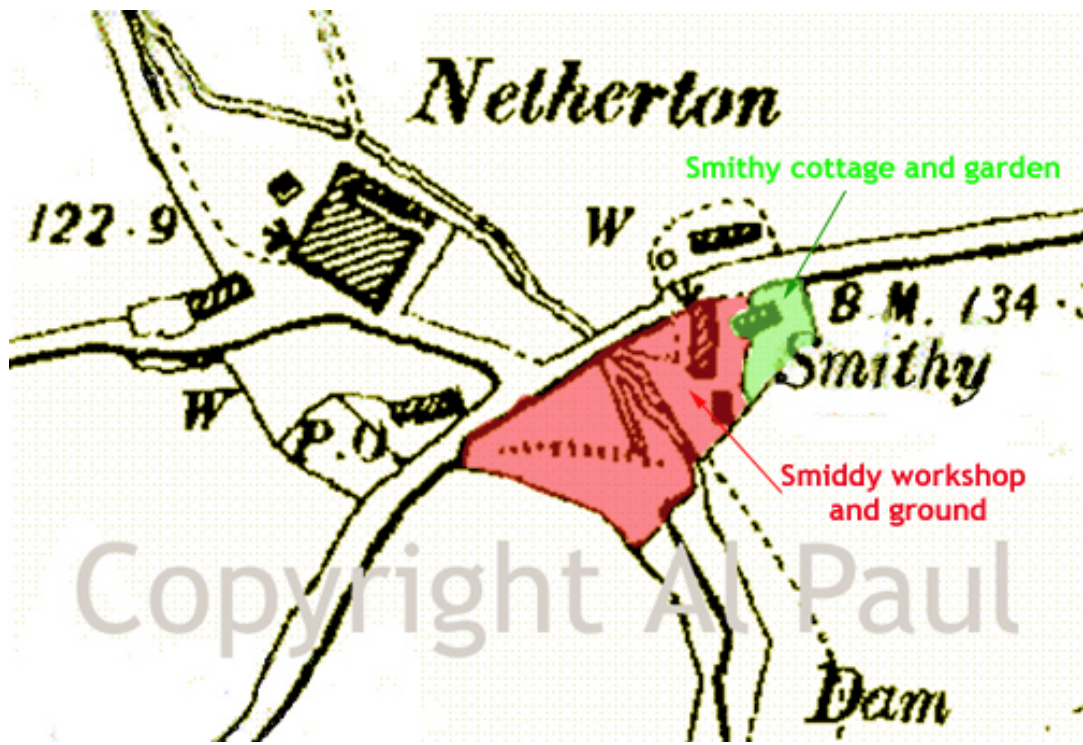
A typical Scottish smiddy scene from the late 1800s



Marjory died very young, some time before the 1851 census. Life expectancy was very short in 1800s Scotland, and infant mortality high. Even as late as the 1880s, for example, over half of all deaths in Glasgow were children under ten years of age. Some of the parish records indicate the Davidsons may also have had another child who died young.

The Davidson's smiddy at Netherton was situated on the Brechin-Aberlemno road, where it is crossed by the Melgund burn (a small Scottish stream), providing water for the workshop and cottage.

Old Netherton map 1850



Post 2000 satellite image of same area



It may be worth noting here that the government maps of the 1800s, such as the one shown for 1850, can be totally relied on as being very accurate representations of the ground truth, and incorporate much more correct detail than modern Ordinance Survey maps for the same area. For instance, an 1873 map of my own property shows the exact 'L' shape of my home, whereas the modern map-makers have represented it completely incorrectly, and my old map also shows a line of several ancient oak trees in my garden, still surviving, in exactly their right locations - they obviously knew their stuff in those days!

By the 1851 census records, the Davidsons had five children - Ann, now 18, Margaret (16), Alexander (9), William C (5), and John (1), and Sandy employed two labourers. Their son, William C Davidson, born January 4th 1846, is the main link between Scotland and the Motor Company - he was the father of the three Davidson brothers who co-founded the Harley-Davidson Motor Company, together with William S. Harley.

The local 'smithy' (blacksmith) would have been an integral and vital part of Scottish village life in the 1800s, since any vehicles for transport, agriculture or recreational purposes would have been horse-powered, and the smithy would have been required, amongst many other tasks, to make and fit horseshoes, and repair or fabricate iron parts for carriages and farm vehicles, such as chains, wheels and other farm implements.

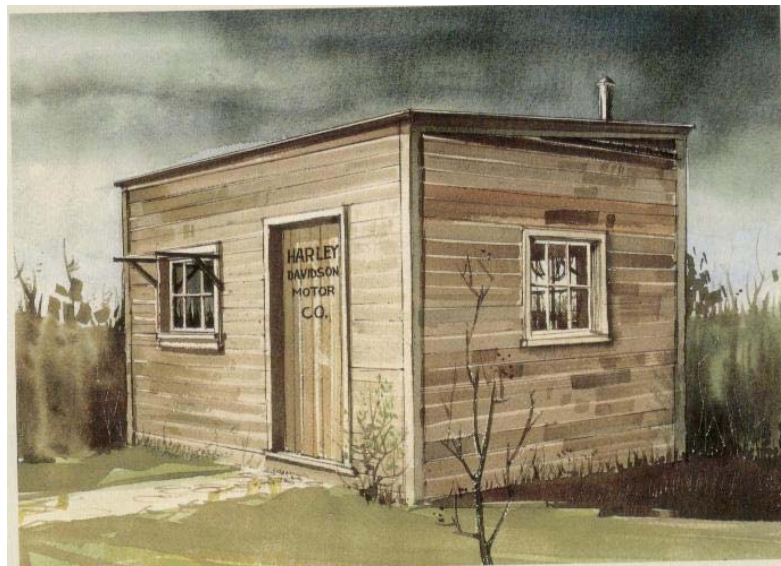
This quiet area of eastern Scotland has not actually changed much in 150 years - undoubtedly it would still be instantly recognised by the Davidson family. It is hard to imagine now, but a local blacksmith in those days would have worked at the very cutting edge of technology, a spearhead of the industrial revolution. No doubt by simply living around this exciting environment the Davidson boys would have acquired a very firm foundation in engineering practices, fabricating objects from raw materials, using furnaces, iron, and sheer human physical effort. It has often been said that Harley-Davidson motorcycles have gained their reputation for toughness because the engineering involved relied more on blacksmithery than anything else!

Records are scant, but the Davidson family seem to have left the area for America around 1857, and are indeed missing from the 1861 Aberlemno census.

After leaving school William C Davidson, worked for the Chicago, Milwaukee & St Paul railroad, where he later worked with his son. He married a girl named Margaret McFarlane in 1867, and had six children - Janet, William A, George, Walter, and Elizabeth. William C Davidson died on May 20th 1923, and is buried in Forest Home Cemetary, Milwaukee.



William C Davidson's youngest son, Arthur (1881-1950), joined up with William S Harley (1880-1943) to form the Harley-Davidson Motor Company, later joined by Arthur's brothers Walter (1876-1942) and William A Davidson (1870-1937). Here is a photo taken of them in the 1930s - from left William S Harley (Engineering), William A Davidson, Walter Davidson (President), Arthur Davidson (Sales).



When entrepreneurs Arthur Davidson and William S Harley needed a 'factory', their father William C, an accomplished cabinetmaker, built them the (now famous) ten-by-fifteen foot shed in the backyard of their Milwaukee family home in 1903, with their aunt Marjory painting the iconic 'Harley Davidson Motor Co.' on the shed door. A testament to William C's woodworking skills, the shed still stood well into the 1970s, transported from the family home to the factory at Juneau Avenue, where it was later bulldozed, mistaken for scrap wood!

The smiddy workshop at Aberlemno continued on another hundred years after the Davidsons left, but was finally closed when the last smithy, Ivory Edwards, retired in 1955. It will delight owners of Japanese motorcycles to learn that in 1963 the workshop was again utilised by a newly-established company called Netherton Tractors. The company acquired a John Deere franchise in 1967, and is now one of their biggest agents in the UK. By 1995 the company had outgrown the site, and moved to another area nearby. This was the beginning of the end for the smiddy workshop area - and sadly the site was recently bulldozed and developed for new buildings.



But it was heartening to discover that the Davidson's cottage next door is still in existence, albeit in a fairly poor state of preservation. The last occupant, Bella Edward, Ivory's daughter, passed away in 2006 - her bicycle is still inside the cottage. The garden, where William C. Davidson and his brothers and sisters once played, is now overgrown and neglected - shaded by trees and surrounded by cereal fields.

I was relieved and delighted, however, to find the cottage has been saved from unsympathetic development. The Senior Cultural Services manager of Angus Council, Norman Atkinson, was kind enough to inform me that he was able to furnish an enquiring Harley-Davidson enthusiast with historical evidence of the property's providence, and it has since been purchased, with a dedicated vision of returning the cottage to how it would have looked during the Davidson's occupation, perhaps with an accompanying Harley-Davidson motorcycle museum.

Great news indeed - perhaps we may still find, some time in the future, that the cottage becomes a 'must see' for enthusiasts all over the world, and become one of Scotland's national treasures, as it very much deserves to be.

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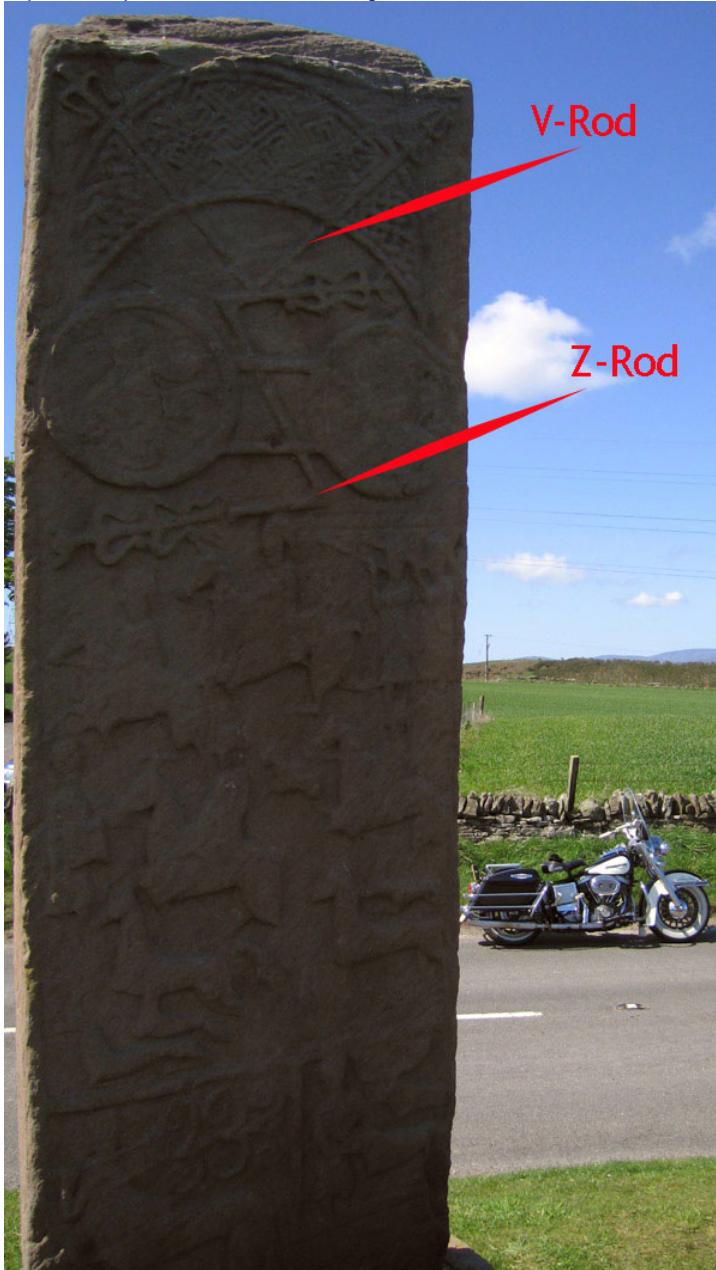
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Left is the cottages 'Range', a cast-iron fireplace which would have provided heat and cooking facilities for the home, and is indeed contemporary with the period when the Davidsons would have been in residence.

Other artefacts uncovered dating from the 1800s include a small 'cuff iron', for ironing starched shirt cuffs! No doubt many other interesting finds will emerge once the rebuild starts...

I'm sure I speak for many Harley-Davidson enthusiasts when I wish the new owners every success for the future.

A post-script on other interesting local facts:



The area around Netherton and Aberlemno is rich in Pictish history. The people who settled in Scotland immediately after the last Ice-age (around 10,000 years ago) were hunter-gatherers, and mainly migrated across land (now the North Sea!) from Scandinavia and Germany. By the time the Romans arrived in Scotland, around 2000 years ago, the indigenous people had organised themselves into loose tribal groups, which the Romans called the 'Picti' - the painted ones. Scotland was in fact the only part of the known world the Romans were not able to conquer, and instead built huge stone walls and fortresses, more or less where the modern Scottish/English border is now, to keep the marauding Picti out. Millennia would pass before the Pictish tribes developed into the better-known Highland Clans.

But little is known about the Picts, since they left no known written history of their own. What they have left is mainly in the form of intricate rock carvings, covered in mystical symbols and representations which still baffle archaeologists and scientists to this day. Some symbols appear very frequently, and obviously meant something of the utmost importance to the Picts. Arrows, either broken in two places (known Scientifically as 'Z-Rods'), or broken in half (known as 'V-Rods'), adorn the majority of carved stone slabs. Here is one with the scientific identification 'Aberlemno III' from the road-side at Aberlemno, dating from around 600 AD, when the Picts were in the process of being converted from Paganism to Christianity. The bottom half of the stone shows a Pictish hunting scene, and two Centaurs.

Sandy Davidson and his family must have very familiar with this stone, a few hundred yards from their cottage, probably passing it on most days. I'm sure Willie G Davidson, Sandy's great-great-grandson, must have known about the significance of these symbols from his past when he named a Harley-Davidson model the 'V-Rod' in 2003 - it's too much of a coincidence otherwise!

Curiously, another famous Scot from the same area left with his family for America around the same time as the Davidsons. David Dunbar Buick went on to found the Buick Motor Company, invented the revolutionary overhead valve engine, and also developed a method of coating cast-iron baths with vitreous enamel still used today. Sadly, the father of all modern car engines died impoverished and forgotten in Detroit in 1929.

The house in Arbroath where David Buick was born was demolished many years ago, replaced by new council houses, so it is very gratifying that the Davidson cottage will not follow the same fate.

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