

James Bremner

(1784 – 1856)

John O'Groats Journal
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brebner.com

Researching Brebner / Bremner Families Worldwide

(by "Howburn")

Monday this week marked the centenary of the death of **James Bremner** who died suddenly at his home at Harbour-place, Pulteneytown.

James Bremner, engineer and ship-raiser, was born at Keiss on September 25, 1784. His father was a serving soldier. He received such education at Keiss as his mother's means allowed up until 1798, when he was apprenticed to the firm of **Robert Steele and Sons**, shipbuilders at Greenock. He was employed there for over six years. At the age of twenty-five he returned to Wick where he eventually occupied a ship-building yard, where he built – over the years – fifty-six vessels, ranging in size from 510 tons to 450 tons.

He was also engaged in designing and constructing piers and harbours on the north coast of Scotland, including those at Keiss, Sarclet, Lossiemouth and Pitullie, near Fraserburgh; he also carried out reconstruction work at the of harbour of Pulteneytown.

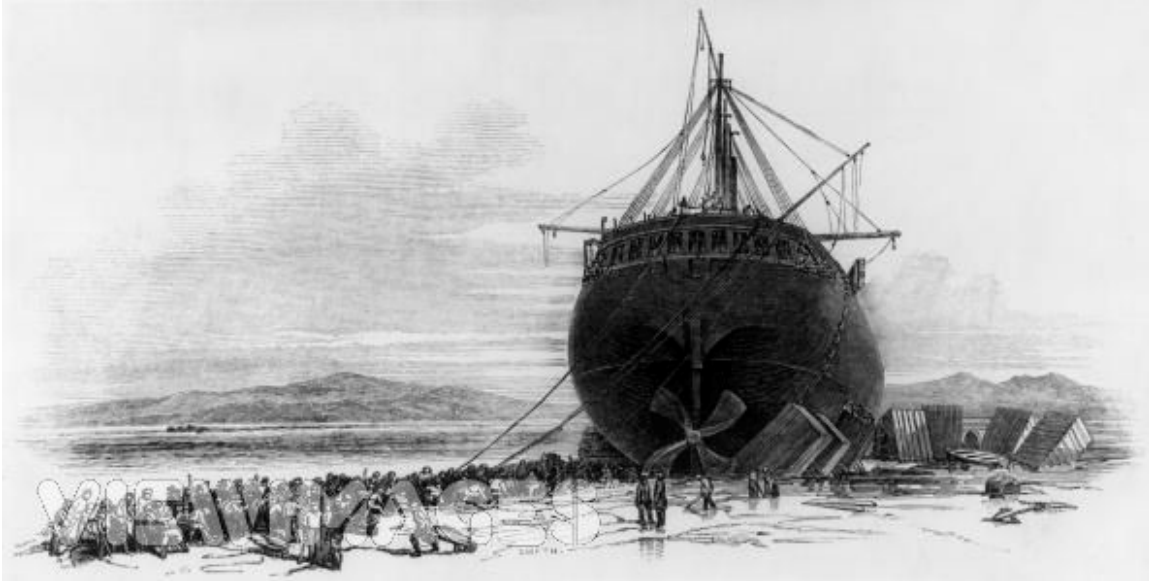


Castlehill Harbour, built by James Bremner in 1825 for the shipping of flagstones.

John Brebner, May 2007

Salvage Feats

James Bremner was particularly successful in raising and recovering wrecked vessels; his work in this field ranged from the Aberdeenshire coasts up and around the Pentland Firth (including Orkney and Shetland) as far west as Lewis and Isle of Skye. He raised no less than 236 vessels. Perhaps his greatest feat was the salvage of the ship “*Great Britain*” ashore at Dundrum Bay, in Ireland. She was then the largest ship in the world, having a registered tonnage of 3500, and built of iron. In that venture he had the assistance of his eldest son, Alexander, and succeeded where some of the most eminent engineers of his day had failed.



Great Britain aground at Dundrum Bay, January 1st, 1847

Another notable feat was his raising of the “*Unicorn*” of Sunderland, which had lain sunk in eleven fathoms of water and embedded in sand for over two years. She was laden with 700 tons of coal and the gross weight of ship and cargo reached nearly 1100 tons.

Another major salvage feat was that of the “*Orion*” of Pillau, at Watersound, Orkney, in 1825. The “*Orion*’s” cargo consisted of 40,000 feet of timber which, with the wreck of the ship, he constructed into a raft 450 feet long, 22 broad and 16 deep. With the aid of manually worked paddlers and sails erected on poles, he safely brought the raft to Pulteneytown Harbour, after twice being driven through the Pentland Firth.

Literary Works

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Gifts Wasted

When **Hugh Miller** visited Wick he was introduced to **Bremner**, and later wrote that he was shocked that a man of **Bremner**’s gifts should have been wasted as a mere agent of a steamer company in a third-rate seaport town. **Napoleon**, he added could have estimated more adequately than our British rulers the value of such a man, and had he been born in France his entrancing talents would have been put to better use in the evening of his days.

According to the minutes of the Institute of Civil Engineers (1857), all **Bremner's** sons were brought up as engineers; one of them – **David Bremner**, who died in 1852 – was engineer for the Clyde Trustees.

Calder, our Caithness historian paid him this tribute” “Viewed in the professional character,” he wrote, “he was a remarkable instance of the force of material talent, unaided by education, overcoming all obstacles and pushing its possession forward to high distinction. He was a man of whom Caithness may well be proud, and his name will live in the annals of Engineering Science.”

James Bremner was one of seven children to **James Bremner** and **Janet Bremner**. He married **Christian Sinclair** in 1811, and had eleven children.

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