

Memoir of the Late Mr. James Bremner, C.E.

The Northern Ensign, Thursday 21st August, 1856

brebner.com

Researching Brebner/Bremner Families Worldwide

We had the melancholy duty, in our last, of recording the sudden death of **James Bremner, Esq., C.E.**, and we now proceed to lay before our readers, in as brief a space as possible, a few of the more prominent points in the somewhat eventful career of this more than an ordinary man. These incidents, were, some time ago, gathered from his own life, and may be relied upon as correct.

James Bremner was born at Keiss, parish of Wick, county of Caithness, on the 25th September, 1784, and was the youngest of a family of nine children, six of whom died in infancy. He was the son of **James** and **Janet Bremner**, who are represented as being as fine specimens of the good old hospitable Caithness cottars as the county could have boasted of.

His father was a man of great muscular strength, uncommon energy of character, and high moral principle, and continued to exert considerable influence in the district till his death, which took place after he had reached an advanced age, and after a prolonged service in defence of his country. Joining the well-known 'Buffs,' he was first sent to the West Indies, along with 850; and, after a ten years' servitude there, during which he was thrice wounded, he returned to his country and home, the number out of the 850 who did not find their graves on a foreign shore being only 27. Soon after his return the Irish rebellion broke out; and though he was well worn out, he did not hesitate to shoulder his musket again; and accordingly, in 1786, we find him at Bantry Bay, where he was recognized by **General Dalrymple**, one of the 27, and through his influence was appointed to take charge of an escort in conveying a number of the leading rebels who had been captured, to Fort George. There he remained for some time.

Young **James** was meanwhile with his mother at Keiss, and enjoyed the benefits of such an education that as was regarded at the time as being of a very superior character. Grammars and lexicons, globes and maps, were then unknown; and the pupil who could read through the Proverbs of Solomon without stammering, and write pretty quickly, whether he could spell or not, was considered fit for any situation of importance, even beyond the limits of Caithness. Accordingly, we find **James** leaving school at about the age of 14, with such an education as we have referred to, with a robust constitution, a good deal of the rover and adventurer about him, and picturing himself a bright and glorious future. Among the crags and rocks of the district none were half so venturesome; fear was not in his vocabulary; and so we find him one morning paddling himself through Sinclair's Bay, sitting in the bottom of a large tub! Fortunately for him, there was not a breath of wind, and his brother **David**, who died here a few years ago, having raised the alarm, he was picked up and safely brought ashore.

The temporary settlement of his father at Fort-George took young **Bremner** there, at the age of 15. Here he became a favourite with **Colonel Macdowal** who being in bad health adopted **Bremner** as his companion, especially in his marine excursions, in which both had many a hairbreadth escape. **Colonel Macdowal**, after a ten months' illness, recovered, and one day asked his protégé whether he would like to join the army or the navy as he intended doing something for him. The reply was, 'None of the two', but **Bremner** added that he would like to learn shipbuilding, and that his father intended sending him to Leith, for the purpose of entering on an apprenticeship in that trade. **Colonel Macdowal** immediately recommended him to go to Greenock, and volunteered his interest in getting him into the building-yard of **Messrs. Steele**. The offer being gladly accepted, we find him, in his 16th year, in that yard, and remaining there for 6 ½ years, at the end of which he made two voyages to America and had all but completed an arrangement for settling at Pictou as a shipbuilder.

Public attention was now being directed very forcibly to the herring fishery. Pulteneytown was in embryo. Tempting promises were made to all who should settle there; and young **Bremner**, in his 25th year, resolved on settling down in his native parish, and prosecuting his vocation at the British Society's settlement. Young, active enterprising, and buoyant, he saw no difficulties before him, and determined to

cut out a career of importance and influence. The shipbuilding yard, occupied by him for nearly half a century, was obtained on a life lease, and he commenced that trade under very promising circumstances.

It is impossible, in such a necessarily brief notice as the present, to give a narrative of **Mr. Bremner's** truly singular and wonderful life, so wonderful, indeed, as to have few parallels. Some facts can alone be indicated. The number of vessels built here was 56 from the '*Glen Huntly*,' of 500 tons, to a small sloop of 45 tons./ The average value of each of these vessels was L.3000, so that his receipts for shipbuilding were nearly L.170,000.

But, as is well known to most of our readers, he did not confine himself to shipbuilding. During his long life he planned and built or improved 19 harbours, of which the following are those on which he was engaged, either in erecting or improving: -

Keiss harbour; cost	£5,000
Castlehill	£1,500
Ham	£1,000
Scullomy	£3,500
Sarclat	£10,000
Pulteneytown	£22,000
Sandhaven	£4,000
Banff	£3,000
Lossiemouth	£20,000
Cairnish	£3,000
Callicott	£3,000

Though not being able to boast of enjoying the benefits of even a superior education, it was truly surprising what skill and engineering talent he brought to bear on the various works at which he was employed, and the narrow escapes from the entire destruction which some of them made. But all his efforts were but the bringing out of natural mechanical power, and his great success seemed to lie in narrowly watching the operations of the sea, and giving it the fullest scope to play. It is questionable if he ever made much money at harbour-building. In one night, at Pulteneytown harbour, during a terrific gale, works which cost him L.5000 were thrown down and rendered useless. Any ordinary man, seeing his whole capital thrown down by the surging tide, would have sunk beneath the disaster. Not so did **James Bremner**. Eight times during that disastrous night was he prevailed on to go home and get his clothes shifted, and as often, in a few minutes, was he seen at the head of his men, cheering them in their efforts to save as much of the property as possible. Sandhaven harbour, near Fraserburgh, was the last of **Mr. Bremner's** contracts, and was finished without the slightest incident.

During the whole of his ship and harbour building career, we find him the same impulsive, impetuous, dashing individual. Nothing daunted him. No physical exertion was too much for his Herculean frame. He had been known to stand, for hours up to the knees in water, without being even hoarse afterwards; and as for frolic and public spirit, his equal was not to be found in broad Scotland. On all days of public rejoicings; on the news of a victory; on the passing of a Reform Bill; at an election, his building yard boomed forth and displayed indications that 'the master' was all alive. This public spirit brought him often into rather awkward collisions with his opponents, particularly in 1826, during the period of a contested election, which some of our readers well remember, and at which riotous proceedings manifested themselves here. **Mr. B.**, being peculiarly obnoxious to the party whom he opposes, was singled out as a fit subject for prosecution, or rather persecution, although it was a matter of public notoriety that **Mr. B.** had sent some score or more of his men to protect from popular indignity the leaders of the opposition party. Much sympathy was felt for him at the time, and was greatly increased when he was indicted to stand trial before the Circuit Court of Justiciary at Inverness, in the following autumn. He was now in the prime of life, of great muscular proportions, and strong energy of purpose; and instead of the summons frightening him, he made it the subject of the greatest bravado, and prepared to meet his enemies and beard them on their own ground. The best counsel was employed; upwards of 30 witnesses summoned, the whole expense exceeding £600, of which about £500 had to be defrayed by **Mr. B.** himself, and when the case was called he appeared, undaunted. The matter created great excitement in the North; letters of sympathy from men of

the highest influence, including the **Earl of Fife**, poured in upon **Mr. Bremner**; a public subscription to meet his expenses was set on foot, and his enemies, to their chagrin, discovered that they had made a gallows on which to hang themselves. The prosecution, after the case had gone a certain stage, was withdrawn, and **Mr. Bremner** came home a conqueror, and was received by the people with every demonstration of triumph.

By this time **Mr. Bremner** had obtained a celebrity as a raiser of sunken and wrecked vessels, in which department he had achieved successes far greater and more numerous than any other man can boast of. The whole number of this description which he has raised in deep water or taken off the strand amounts to 236. Of the former the most remarkable was a large vessel sunken at Broadbay, in the Lews. Her name was the '*Uncertain*' of Sunderland, carrying 700 tons of coals. She went down in 11 fathoms of water, and the aggregate weight of the vessel and cargo was upwards of 1100 tons. After the vessel had lain, imbedded in the sand, for about two years, and after three other individuals had successively undertaken but failed to raise her, **Mr. B.** succeeded, by employing means the same as those for which he obtained a patent for Harbour building. Not less triumphant, and far more heroic, was his effort in raising the '*Orion*' of Pillau, wrecked at Watersound, in Orkney, in 1825. This vessel's cargo consisted of 40,000 feet of timber, which, with the wreck of the ship, he constructed into a huge raft, 450 feet long, 22 feet broad, and 16 feet deep, on which he constructed paddles, wrought by manual labour; erected poles, with sails; and after being twice driven through the Pentland Firth, he succeeded in bringing the whole to Pulteneytown Harbour! Having previously bought the cargo, undertaking all the risks, he crossed over from Scrabster in a lobster boat, with £1500 in his pocket, and commenced operations. On the same principle he constructed and navigated seven large rafts, some of them from the distance of 100 miles, and in all cases encountered and mastered the strong tides of the Pentland Firth.

But in the matter of ship-raising the crowning triumph of **Mr. Bremner** was the taking the '*Great Britain*' of the strand, at Dundrum Bay, in August 1847. After men of science and engineering skill had exhausted their energies in endeavouring to remove this leviathan vessel, **Mr. B.** was applied to, and proceeded, along with one of his sons. Many a hearty laugh have **Mr. B.'s** friends enjoyed, as he recounted the proceedings on that occasion, the ill-concealed jealousy of certain great men in the scientific world, to whom the rude and unlikely machinery of a humble Scotch shipbuilder, not very remarkable for the education he could boast of, was a great eye-sore, and the mortification which they showed, when, one fine August morning, the '*Great Britain*' once more floated on the waters, like a thing of life. To **Mr. B.'s** plans and exertions was this happy result attributable, although one or two individuals have subsequently unjustly endeavoured to claim the merit to themselves.

After being examined before a Committee of the House of Lords on the subject of Harbours of Refuge, **Mr. B.** obtained a patent for Harbour Building, and exhibited his plans and models for building harbours, raising vessels, &c., and of a life-boat, at the Great Exhibition in 1851. In 1845 he published an interesting Treatise of about 60 pages, with maps, dedicated to the Lords of the Admiralty, and containing a detailed account of the various harbours, &c. on which he had been engaged. The appendix contains a great variety of letters and testimonials from various of the Proprietors, Town Councils, Harbour Trustees, Shipowners, and Insurance Brokers, by whom he had been employed, all certifying to his talents and success. Few men had such a wide range for his operations, or have been more extensively applied to for advice and assistance. In the erection of the Thames Tunnel, Dover Harbour, and other great undertakings, he was frequently consulted; and he had the honour of numbering among his correspondents his late **Majesty King William the Fourth**; the late **Duke of Wellington**; the **Earl of Fife**; **Sir Byam Martin**; **Sir Charles Napier** (from whom he received a massive gold finger ring;) the late **Sir John Sinclair**, and many other distinguished individuals.

Mr. Bremner married early, and his marriage was a happy one in every respect. The object of his choice was a woman whose Christian character shed a lustre and spread happiness around the domestic hearth, and who devoted herself with assiduous, and untiring, and anxious effort to bring up her numerous family in the way they should go. She died on 14th May last. Three of the family are now dead; among them, **David**, Engineer for the Clyde Trustees, a young man of great promise and attainments, and of high moral principle. Of the five who survive, the two men are of considerable note in the engineering world – **Alexander** and **James**.

For some time back it has been obvious to all who had occasion to come into contact with **Mr. Bremner**, that his physical strength was giving way, and that the constitution which had so long stood against exertions before thousands would have fallen, would not hold out much longer. This has been particularly noticed since the lamented death of a daughter sometime ago, and more especially so since the demise of his wife; and although he was, up to within a few hours of his death, actively engaged in business, which he transacted in Wick on the day of his death, few who saw him doubted that his constitution was fast giving way. Accordingly, while his death, as might be looked for, has awakened feelings of regret over an extensive district, to a certain extent it has been anticipated by many, though its suddenness has taken the district by surprise.

Writing of **Mr. James Bremner** as a public man, we can truly characterise him as an individual of great public spirit, who has in multitudes of instances been instrumental in saving shipwrecked mariners, often at the risk of his own, and who, with all the failings natural to fallen nature, was, by his extraordinary natural genius, and his great energy and perseverance, a man whose name has been mentioned by Caithnessmen over the world with feelings of patriotic pride and gratification.

THE FUNERAL

Yesterday **Mr. Bremner's** remains were interred in the Churchyard of Wick. The body was accompanied to its resting place by a very large concourse of people, some of them from the most distant parts of the county. In the procession were several of the landed proprietors, including the **Hon. Captain Dunbar** of Latheronwheel, **Mr. Wemyss** of South Dunn, **Mr. Henderson** of Bilbster, and **Mr. Adam** of Lynegar; the **Rev. Messrs. Mackay** of Inverness, **Mackenzie** of Olig, **Gunn** of Watten, **Mackay** of Bruan; **Lillie, Gemmel**, and other ministers of Wick, belonging to various denominations. There were also present: - Sheriff Russell, the Provost, Magistrates and Town Council of Wick, the Pulteneytown Improvement Commissioners, of which body **Mr. Bremner** was a member; most of the merchants, fishcurers, and tradesmen of both towns, many of the farmer of the district, and a large number of the general inhabitants. During the day all the vessels in the harbour had their flags displayed half-mast high, and other flags were similarly displayed at the South Head and Pilots' Lookout. All the shops in the line of the procession, and several in other parts of both towns were shut.