

Peterkin/Nicol Family: Rope and Sail Makers at Backgreen, Portsoy

My name is Ian Douglas Nicol and I am directly descended from the three generations of rope and sail makers who practised their trade from property, leased from the Seafield Estates at Backgreen, Portsoy from the early/mid-19th century onwards. I understand the Durn Burn was also known locally as “Nicol's Burnie” which gives some idea of their long association with Backgreen.

Photograph 1) shows my older brother Donald, my father and myself at the burn in the mid-1950s



My dad, James Donald Campbell Nicol, served on the RAF air-sea rescue launches based at Torry in Aberdeen later on during WW2 and afterwards joined Aberdeen City Police. However, he was actually born and grew up in Wigtown, county town of Galloway, where his father William Geddes Nicol had settled and was the local chemist and sometime Provost.

Growing up in Aberdeen, our main family connection with the town of Portsoy came through “Auntie” Mary Nicol (widow of George Nicol the baker), their daughter Mary and their son James.

This contact became more so once cars were affordable in the 1950s and 1960s; especially if a visit to Tarlair pool and an ice-cream cone could be worked into the day trips.

Commencing in the late 18th century as a place of threadmaking works and bleachfield, with its ready water supply and suitable land, Backgreen went through a number of business

proprietors and uses before Alexander Peterkin took on part of the premises and grounds as a rope and twine factory, while the importation and dressing of flax was pursued on a very limited scale by a Mr. Cheyne.

Photograph 2) shows the old Nicol house and female figure as it would have looked pre-1900, with the bank of the burn built up against flooding and a picket fence around the garden



The ropery building itself is gone now, taken back by the sea, but the associated houses and stores still stand.

William was actually born youngest of the Nicol children at Backgreen, in 1878, eventually attending Fordyce School before moving away to learn and then practise his chosen profession. William's father was James Nicol, born in Forglen Parish in 1827, brought up in Macduff and was a master rope and sail maker when he moved to Portsoy shortly before 1850 to work for Alexander Peterkin's widow, Janet. James was also related, through marriage, to local businessman, John Allan, originally of Rothiemay. I surmise that (uncle) John Allan had known Alexander Peterkin well and may have been key in bringing James from Macduff to support his widow.

James was one of a new generation of country folk who moved off the land during 19th century farm industrialisation and found employment and improved financial security in the various trades developing along the Moray Firth coastal towns and ports. I have a great wee letter written at Backgreen, from James to "Willie", my grandfather, and dated 1900 basically telling him to "get his finger out" in passing his final exams and get on with earning a living on his own behalf:

"...I will not grumble over the cash provided you make a good use of it and get through seeing it is not only costly and disappointing and wasting precious time..."

A hundred years or more later, I find myself saying the same things to my young Nicols!

Shortly after James moved to Portsoy, it appears that he and eldest Peterkin daughter, Elizabeth, became a couple and decided to marry, living together with her mother and the younger Peterkin children, at Backgreen, and shortly afterwards began raising a family of their own.

According to census, the business there, at the time, employed seven workers and included a smallholding of 8 acres. Oldest Peterkin son, Alexander, became a master ropemaker in Branderburgh, Lossiemouth while brother James Peterkin too became a ropemaker but moved to Burghead to work on his own account by 1871. By the time my grandfather was born, in 1878, a total of ten Nicol children had also been born and he was seventh boy!

Photograph 3) is very formal in style and I believe records the respective families of my grandparents meeting at Backgreen, the Campbells having travelled down from Invergordon. I understand it shows an elderly Elizabeth Peterkin in the front row with son, James Nicol, front right wearing a bowler hat



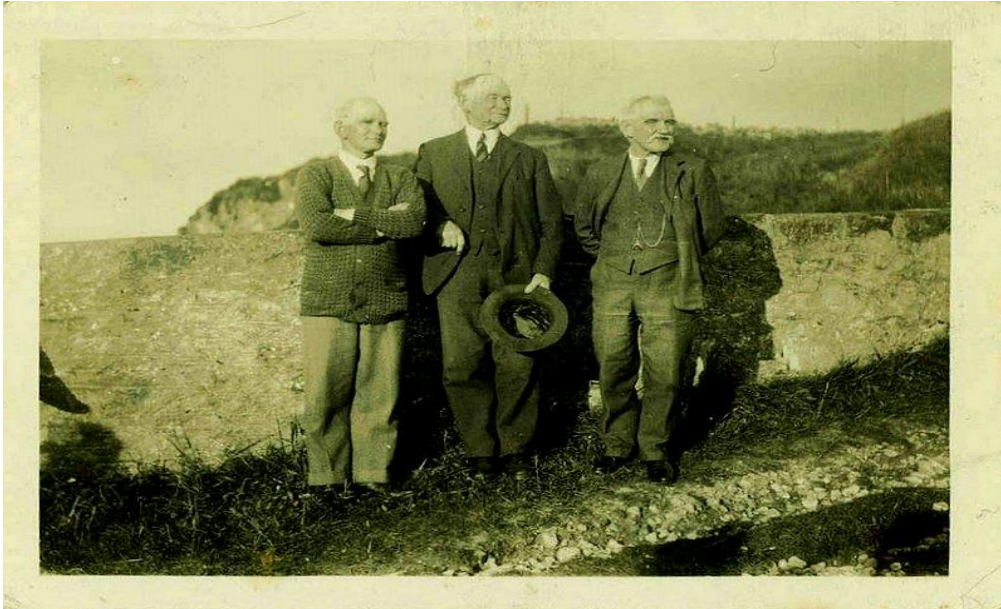
It was not all plain sailing though – increasingly, less folk were employed and The Banffshire Reporter of 1st March 1893 also tells of a great fire destroying the building and valuable contents at the east end of Backgreen - with only the buildings insured, the financial loss must have hit the Nicol family hard.

Society's influence rather than increasing prosperity may have been the reason for very large families in those days, either way, the younger children were looking to education to help guide their way in life. John became a lawyer and William a chemist.

By 1906, James and Elizabeth were gone and eldest son, James Nicol, had taken over the business, continuing to run it throughout WW1 and increasingly tough times until the Depression years and his eventual passing in 1933. James married three times. Others in the family had, by then, made their lives elsewhere or by working locally in other trades such as George Nicol the baker (“Doddie Batcher”) at Aird Street. From that point on, Backgreen itself saw several more occupiers and businesses before it slowly fell into a state of disrepair up to the present time and the current project to renew the derelict buildings into bunkhouse accommodation.

Another George Nicol, the second ropemaker James's son, did try to return to Backgreen and run it as a croft, after many years living and working for Ford in Dagenham, but couldn't get enough land to make it work so, instead, farmed in Galloway before eventually retiring to Portsoy with his wife, Peg, to enjoy his time at the bowling club.

Photograph 4) shows three of the Nicol brothers as old(er) men - (L-R) John, James and George - near the mouth of the Burn of Boyne, 1920-1930



Photograph 5) shows (L-R) Mary Nicol, Ian Nicol, Mary Nicol, Donald Nicol and James Nicol at Aird Street, Portsoy

