

Balloch Park Opens to the Public for the First Time Saturday 1st July 1916

By one of these odd coincidences thrown up by history 1st July 2016 is the centenary not only of the first day of the Battle of the Somme but also of the official opening of Balloch Park by Glasgow Corporation. As 20,000 young men were losing their lives in France the official opening ceremony was being held at the south gates and at Balloch Castle of what became known as Balloch Park.



To-day we tend to take the Park for granted, so much so that we're allowing the Castle to fall down before our eyes and there is no party or event to mark the centenary. In the absence of any evidence to the contrary you have to assume that the powers-that-be neither know nor care that today is the Park's centenary That stands in marked contrast to the events of 100 years ago. It was no foregone conclusion that Glasgow Corporation would buy the Park and its purchase was inextricably linked to the Rights of Way protests which kept the Vale of Leven, and particularly Balloch, on the front pages of the newspapers in the 6 years or so leading up to the First World War. The Rights of Way disputes were more about Rights of Access, particularly to Loch Lomond, and a full account of them will appear on the web-site shortly.

Its usually said, even by some locals who should maybe have considered the evidence a little more closely, that these disputes ended in defeat for the protesters who aspired to easy access to Loch Lomond. That's hardly the case. Motivated by the protests, indeed a number had been involved in them, after the end of the court cases in December 1913 a small group of men started to quietly work, out of public view, to acquire land at the southern end of Loch Lomond which they could bring into public ownership. Glasgow Corporation's purchase of the Park was the result of their efforts and was the final, victorious, act of the protests.

The Rights of Way Disputes

We're not going into the events of 1908 – 1913 in detail here other than to say that the large-scale demonstrations at Balloch which drew more than 10,000 protestors, were addressed by, amongst others, Glasgow City Councillors. Two of them in particular deserve mention here – Baillie James Alston and Councillor Edward Rosslyn Mitchell. Baillie Alston was a prominent member of the Labour Party in Glasgow while Rosslyn Mitchell was a prominent Liberal, although in the 1920's he switched to Labour. Both of them addressed the protesting crowds at Balloch, particularly during the John Sweeney Case, and both of them said later that the protests made them more determined than ever to find a way to gain public access to the Loch at the southern end.



Rosslyn Mitchell, who was a lawyer, was close friends with Sir Daniel Macaulay Stevenson who was the Lord Provost of Glasgow when the question of buying land on Loch Lomond was raised within the Corporations in 1913. He too was on record as saying that he became convinced during the Rights of Way protests that public access to Loch Lomond at Balloch was needed. Stevenson was rich and he was a major benefactor to many good causes in Glasgow, including the University: the Stevenson building which houses the University's gyms and swimming pool was largely paid for by money he had left to the University. He gave money for French and Spanish professorships, reflecting his interest in international as well as local affairs

It wasn't just people to the left of centre of politics who supported the purchase of Balloch Park. Arguably the person who kicked the whole process off was Alex Wylie of Cordale who had been the Tory MP for Dumbartonshire until 1906 and who was still a member of Dumbarton County Council.



Wylie's role in the purchase has been forgotten but he has a good claim to be the father of the project and is certainly one of its heroes. During the Rights of Way protests he had been trying to find a practical solution to access to the Loch and had suggested that what is now the road to Drumkinnon Bay be built. This had been viewed with suspicion by the protestors for two reasons. Firstly, it would have to go over railway company land and the railway company was correctly perceived as the evil genius behind the John Sweeney case. The protestors objected to public money being given to the railway company for the building of the road. Secondly, Wylie was still a director of the UTR and the chairman of the UTR John Christie was a leading County Councillor who was totally opposed to the aims of the protestors. As far as the protestors were concerned Alex Wylie was guilty by association but that was wrong because during this whole affair he trod his own carefully chosen path, at some distance from his fellow UTR directors.

Searching for a Solution

As the whole cycle of Rights of Way court cases were reaching their final stages in 1913, Alex Wylie decided to try a different approach and to find some land on the Loch side which could be brought into some form of public ownership. In devising his plan he enlisted the support of fellow former Tory MP Sir John Stirling-Maxwell of Pollock. Sir John came from a rich landowning family, which still lives in Pollock House. He had an education which is still only too familiar at the higher reaches of the British government – Eton and Trinity College Cambridge – and could hardly have been further removed from the background of the protestors. However, he was of a humane strain of Toryism and had an excellent reputation on both sides of the political divide for his charitable work and as an enlightened Glasgow landlord. Wylie and Stirling-Maxwell launched a clandestine private initiative to find a suitable estate on Loch Lomond which could be bought to be made available to the public.

As it happened, Glasgow Corporation had also been conducting an informal unofficial search of its own at the behest of councillors like Alston and the Lord Provost. Members of the Finance Committee of the Corporation had even visited Balloch Castle Estate in 1913, but nothing came of that visit. The Corporation had found that the prices being quoted to them for estates on Loch Lomondside were as the Corporation said itself “prohibitive” and had given up hope of finding anywhere.

Wylie and Stirling-Maxwell had an inside track both in terms of their local knowledge and their social connections. The Dennistoun Brown family had bought Balloch Castle and Estate in 1845. AJ Dennistoun Brown died in 1890, leaving the estate to his daughters. One of the daughters had married some years before and moved to her husband's home in the east of Scotland. The other sisters stayed on at the Castle being best known locally for their good works connected to Jamestown Church. While the estate was not on the public market, Alex Wylie found out that the sisters were open to an offer and he and Sir John Maxwell-Stirling put together a plan to buy it for the public.

The Wylie – Stirling-Maxwell Plan

They each paid £500 of their own money to take out a 6 month option to buy the whole estate from the Dennistoun Browns. This £1,000 option was linked to an agreed purchase price of £30,000. The original idea was that the £30,000 would be raised by public subscription mainly from various public bodies including Dumbarton County Council and donations from wealthy individuals including themselves.

In March 1914 they wrote to Glasgow Corporation detailing their plan and asking for a contribution of £10,000 from the Corporation. Its worth quoting the letter in full.

“My Lord Provost,

With reference to the informal negotiations that have been going on for several years with a view to securing a site to conserve permanently for the public an access to Loch Lomond, we understand that members of the Corporation specially interested in the subject looked upon the prices asked for certain sites as absolutely prohibitive. Fortunately the estate of Balloch, extending to over 800 acres has come onto the market. It has been much admired by yourself and all the members of the Corporation who have visited it. We have acquired an option for six months of purchasing it at the price of £30,000 being about £37 per acre, in consideration of our having paid down £500 each, this £1,000 to form part of the purchase price or be forfeited in the event of the purchase not being completed. We believe that if the Corporation contributed £10,000 towards the purchase we could, with the hearty co-operation of other public bodies of which we are assured, raise the balance by public subscription – in which event the picturesque castle and policies – about 240 acres with a frontage of over a mile on the river Leven and Loch Lomond, and with very interesting historical associations – would form a magnificent national park and the other part of the estate amounting to 572 acres including four fine farms, some good feus, cottages etc, is admirably suited for garden city, sanatorium, and other useful purposes. The estate would be managed by the Parks Department of Glasgow Corporation or a public trust or such other body as may be found legal and practicable. The rents of the farms, feu-duties etc would amply provide for the upkeep.

We shall be glad if you will bring this matter under the notice of the Town Council. We are,
Yours faithfully,

Alexander Wylie
John Stirling-Maxwell”

What is absolutely clear in that letter is that they did not expect Glasgow Corporation to buy the estate on its own. The Corporation was only invited to be part of a consortium acting to buy it on the public’s behalf.

Glasgow Corporation’s Reaction to the Letter

The letter was presented to a full meeting of the Corporation on 19th March 1914 and it was from this date that the consideration of whether or not to purchase the Estate began. The Corporation agreed to refer the matter to the Finance Committee for its consideration, although only after opponents led by Baillie Stewart of Townhead had forced a vote. Lord Provost Stevenson pointed out that the Finance Committee would only be considering the pros and cons of a purchase and not making a decision; he also led a unanimous a “hearty” vote of thanks to Alex Wylie and Sir John Stirling-Maxwell for their public-spirited gesture. So the wheels were now in motion thanks to Alex Wylie and Sir John but the opposition to Glasgow spending any money on Balloch Park had also made itself known and it never diminished in the five months between March and July 1914 when the decision to purchase the Park was finally made by the Corporation.

The decision to consider acquiring the estate was presented as setting up a National Park on Loch Lomondside and appeared as such in the press. During the deliberations about buying the Park, the Glasgow Herald was an enthusiastic supporter of the plan, running various editorials and articles praising the idea.

At the beginning of April 1914 the General Finance Committee reported that the letter from Mr Alexander Wylie and Sir John Stirling-Maxwell had been remitted to a special sub-committee for consideration and report: The Committee included the Lord Provost and Bailie Alston, while the City Treasurer Kilpatrick was the convenor. However, there had opposition

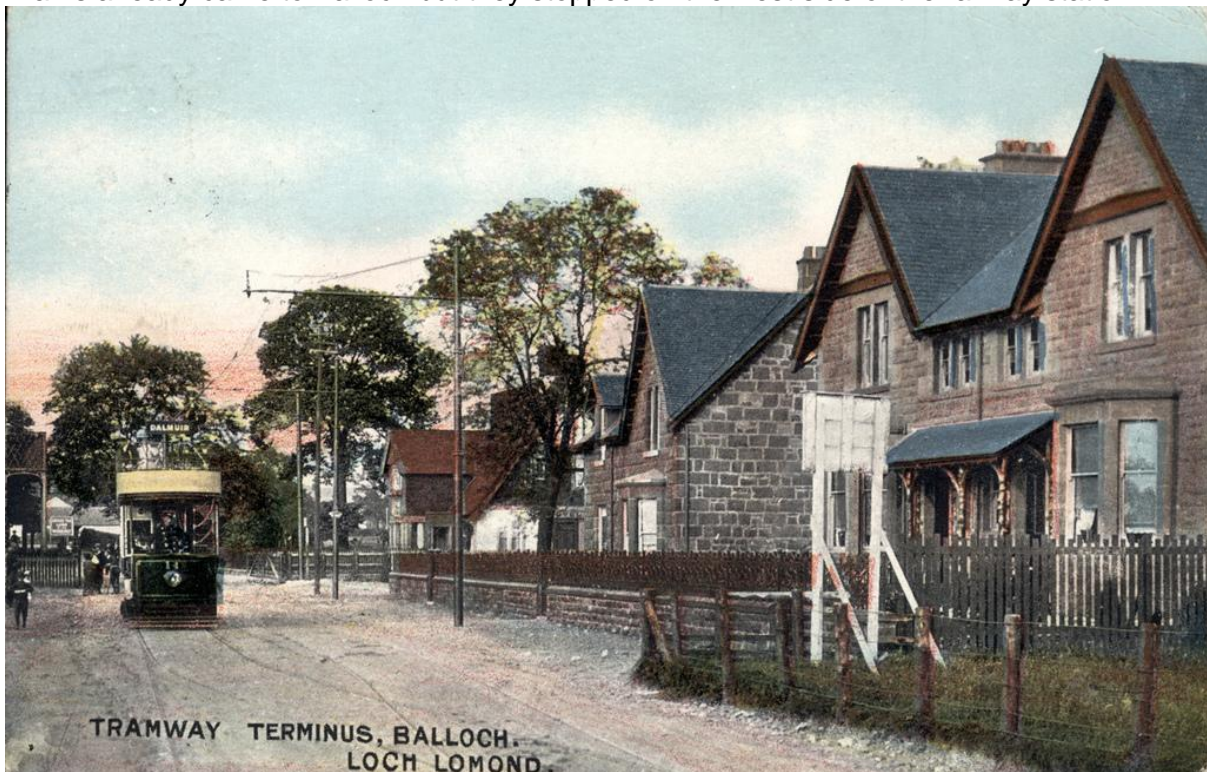
to this move. Councillor Battersby had asked the General Finance Committee why they were seriously considering spending £10,000 or £30,000 when they were struggling to buy open spaces in the congested areas of Glasgow. This park would be 20 miles from Glasgow, it would be a “national” park owned by Glasgow but it would best suit Dumbarton, Alexandria and Renton. He moved, seconded by Bailie Nichol, that the minute be sent back for further consideration. However Bailie David Graham pointed out that the minute committed them to nothing, and it was adopted.

The opposition did not go away and it too crossed party boundaries. Tory councillors objected to spending any money at all while Labour ones such as Patrick Dollan (later knighted as a successful war-time Lord Provost of Glasgow) said that the money would be better spent relieving the dreadful housing conditions. There was a view that the Corporation already had a substantial estate in the countryside – Ardgoil in Argyllshire which had been donated to it – and it provided all the fresh air that Glaswegians needed, including a sail on steamers to Ardgoil.

Opponents of the purchase were helped by the attitude of Dumbarton County Council to the Wylie – Stirling-Maxwell approach. The County Council which had already disgraced itself during the Rights of Way disputes made matters worse by declining to participate in the planned purchase. Needless to say the County Council was dominated by landowners and businessmen, but contrast their meanness with the vision and public-spiritedness of their counterparts in Glasgow.

A Tram to the Front Gate?

Trams already came to Balloch but they stopped on the west side of the railway station.



The supporters of the purchase plan understood the strength of the opposition as well as the validity of some of the arguments against the purchase such as why should Glasgow money be used to help Dumbartonshire. So they looked around for good arguments in favour of buying the Park and one of them was that they could run trams right to the front gate and generate a great deal of money for Glasgow that way. This was a good argument, because it

was forecast that by 1915 the profits from Glasgow's trams would have paid for the cost of building the whole Glasgow system and the trams were now making a substantial contribution to Corporation funds. In addition Baillie Alston became Convener of the Tramway Committee and he was happy to deploy the tram argument in support of buying Balloch Park whenever he felt it necessary, but it certainly wasn't the reason the Corporation decided to buy the Park. Apart from anything else the Corporation didn't own the tramways in Dumbartonshire.

The Decision to Purchase the Park

The first major hurdle for the purchase of the Park was that it should be approved by the Finance Committee and a special meeting of that Committee was held on 19th June 1914 for the sole purpose of considering it. For the first time the terms and conditions of the proposed purchase were made public. The most important part was as follows:

- (1) "That instead of the Corporation making a contribution of £10,000 from the Common Good towards the purchase of the Balloch estate for the purposes indicated in the joint letters from Sir John Stirling-Maxwell and Mr Wylie the Corporation, with the consent of those two gentlemen, should approach the trustees of the estate, with the view of a provisional agreement being entered into between them and the Corporation whereby on the one hand the trustees should agree (a) to cancel the option given by them to Sir John Stirling-Maxwell, Bart and Mr Wylie to acquire the estate at the price of £30,000 and to reimburse each of these two gentlemen in the sum of £500 which had been paid by them in respect of the option; and (b) to sell the estate to the Corporation at the price of £30,000; and on the other hand the Corporation should (subject to them obtaining the powers to do so) agree to acquire the estate out of the funds of the Common Good at the price mentioned. In this agreement there should also be inserted a clause providing (a) that in the event of statutory powers not being obtained by the Corporation for the purchase of the estate both the trustees and the Corporation would be free from the obligations contained therein, except the obligation undertaken by the trustees to repay the said sum of £500 to Sir John Stirling-Maxwell Bart and Mr Wylie respectively; and (b) that in said events the Corporation should pay the whole costs and charges incurred by themselves and the trustees of and incidental to the agreement, and also the Provisional Order."

It was also noted that an application would have to be made to the Secretary of State for Scotland for permission to go ahead with spending the money on the purchase and the maintenance plans for the Park.

Finally in a further attempt to reduce objections to the purchase the City Treasurer reported to the Finance Committee that agreement had been reached with the railway companies for reduced fares in the summer months and holidays for Glaswegians travelling to Balloch to visit the Park. (By the time the Park was opened this was postponed until the end of the War).

As can be seen, the Corporation was now planning to go ahead and buy the Park itself with no partners and that they would repay Alex Wyle and Sir John Stirling-Maxwell the deposit which they had paid the Dennistoun Brown Trustees for the option. The Corporation were going to be the outright owners of the Park.

There was a large attendance at the meeting and the recommendation was approved by 17 votes to 6. The proposal would be submitted in due course to a meeting of the full Corporation.

It still had to go before a full meeting of the Corporation for final approval. This took place on Thursday 9th July 1914. The purchase of the Park was approved on that date by a majority of only 5 – 44 councillors voting for and 39 voting against. As you can see this was a much closer vote than any of the previous meetings suggested would be the case and its obvious that people like Alston, Stevenson and City Treasurer Kilpatrick had had to work hard for their victory.

It was another two years before the Park was open to the public. There were two stages to the delay. The first stage was to get the Secretary of State's approval of the financial arrangements: the deal to purchase the Park could not be completed without that. The second stage was that after it had bought the Estate and taken possession the Parks Department had to lay it out in a way suitable for public use.

The first stage took a lot longer than the second. The purchase was not completed until November 1915. At that time the Parks Department, whose Convener was by then Edward Rosslyn Mitchell, one of the speakers at the Rights of Way protests in 1911, took possession of the policies and began the work of preparing them for public use.

The Official Opening 1st July 1916

The official opening was performed on the afternoon of 1st July 1916. A large party invited by the Lord Provost, who was by this time Sir Thomas Dunlop, and the Parks Committee travelled down from Glasgow by train arriving in Balloch shortly after 2 o'clock. The party included nearly every councillor and head of department with their wives. Rain was threatening as the group made their way from the station to the south gate of the Park where Lady Dunlop, wife of the Lord Provost, officially opened the Park by unlocking the gate and a silver key was then presented to her.

The party then made its way up the main drive-way planting at various points 6 commemorative trees. Among those planting trees were Miss Wylie, niece of Alex Wylie and Mrs Rosslyn Mitchell. A platform had been erected in front of the Castle and speeches were made from there.

Lord Provost Dunlop presided over the platform party which included:

Lord Provost Dunlop and Lady Dunlop

Lord and Lady Inverclyde Lord Lieutenant of Dumbartonshire

Sir DM Stevenson, Bart

Sir Archibald Denny Bart and Lady Denny

Mr Alexander Wylie of Cordale and Miss Wylie

Bailie Rosslyn Mitchell, Convener of Glasgow Parks Committee and Mrs Mitchell

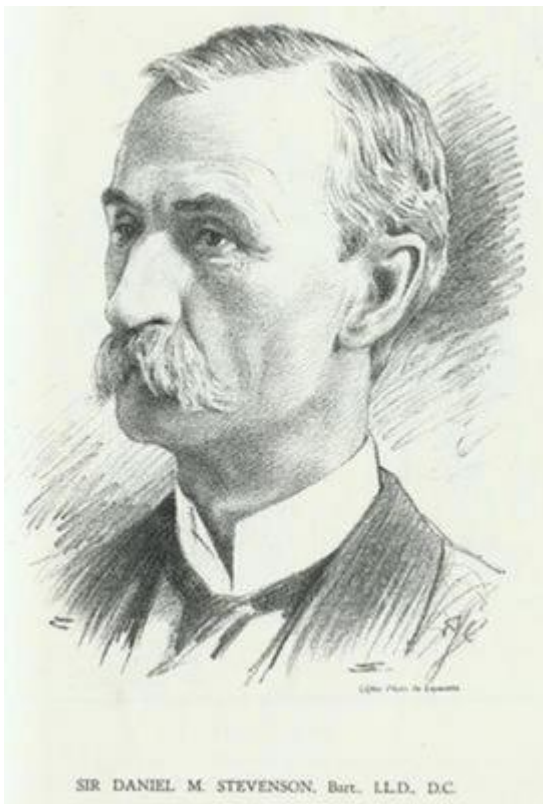
Unlike most speeches on such occasions the main speakers at the opening were both relevant and informative.

Lord Provost Dunlop said in his speech that the estate was one of the most beautiful places in the West of Scotland. For many years the Corporation had been trying to acquire land on the banks of Loch Lomond but the prices asked by the proprietors on the other side were so great that they could not purchase. It was only when Balloch Estate came on the market that the proposal became feasible. For bringing the matter before them at the time they were indebted to Mr Wylie of Cordale (who had been untiring and unceasing in impressing on the Corporation the desirability of acquiring a public park on Loch Lomondside) together with Sir Daniel Stevenson and Sir John Stirling Maxwell. These gentlemen strongly urged the Corporation to buy and their advice was acted upon. Arrangements were made for the railway companies to give reduce fares and although these arrangements could not be

fulfilled at the present time they hoped that when the war was over special travelling facilities would be given that would enable even the poorest citizen to take advantage of the Park

Bailie Rosslyn Mitchell said that he was sure that the Park would be developed to meet the needs of the citizens of the West of Scotland. In acknowledging the services of those who had been associated with the initiation of the scheme **he said that credit was due to those men who had fought the constitutional battles for the rights of way along the river Leven.** He paid tribute to the part taken in the enterprise by the late Bailie Alston (who had died in office November 1915) and by amongst others Sir DM Stevenson when the scheme was promoted and who was so largely instrumental in its initiation; Sir John Stirling Maxwell and Mr Alexander Wylie who had personally undertaken the purchase of the estate so that the city might have it.

Sir Daniel Stevenson proposed votes of thanks to Sir John Stirling Maxwell and Mr Alexander Wylie for their assistance in the negotiations for the purchase of the estate.



He said that the acquisition of the estate was agreed to by a rather small majority of the Corporation. But whatever differences there were at that time he was sure that now there was not a dissenting voice on the Corporation regarding the scheme. It was said that they had done a great kindness to the Vale of Leven but why should they not? If Glasgow did bear the full burden it was after all a very light burden, as the total cost was less than £10,000 for the Park alone. The rest of the estate was good farm lands which would pay their way. Surely if for something like £10,000 or less they had they had acquired for all time the right of access to Loch Lomond not for themselves only but for the whole country and the whole world everyone would say that it was well-spent money and bless the Corporation for having done it.

Mr Wylie replying said that the original scheme for acquisition of the estate was that Glasgow would pay one-third of the cost, Dumbartonshire one third raised by subscription and the remaining one third would be raised under the National Trust. There was not the

slightest doubt that that scheme would have succeeded. The Earl of Plymouth, the President of the National Trust, had come to see the place and like everyone else he was entranced by the beauty of it. The scheme had many advantages but it had one decided disadvantage in that it divided control. As the communities around Glasgow knew the city Corporation was not fond of divided control and they decided to carry through the project themselves. Mr Wylie added that on the portion of the estate outside the park were some of the feuing sites that could be had – ideal for garden cities – and that with proper leasing arrangements and improved agriculture it would prove a very prosperous investment for the city of Glasgow and would far more than pay for the cost of the upkeep of the Park.

Later in the day large crowds were admitted to the Park – a figure of 10,000 is sometimes mentioned - and the rest, as they say, is history. The Park has met all of the aspirations of the protestors, Glasgow Councillors and Alex Wylie and Sir John Stirling Maxwell as well as generations of the general public from all over the world.

The question we have to ponder to-day is whether the current custodians of the Park, particularly the Castle, can match the vision and efforts of those people of 100 years ago.