

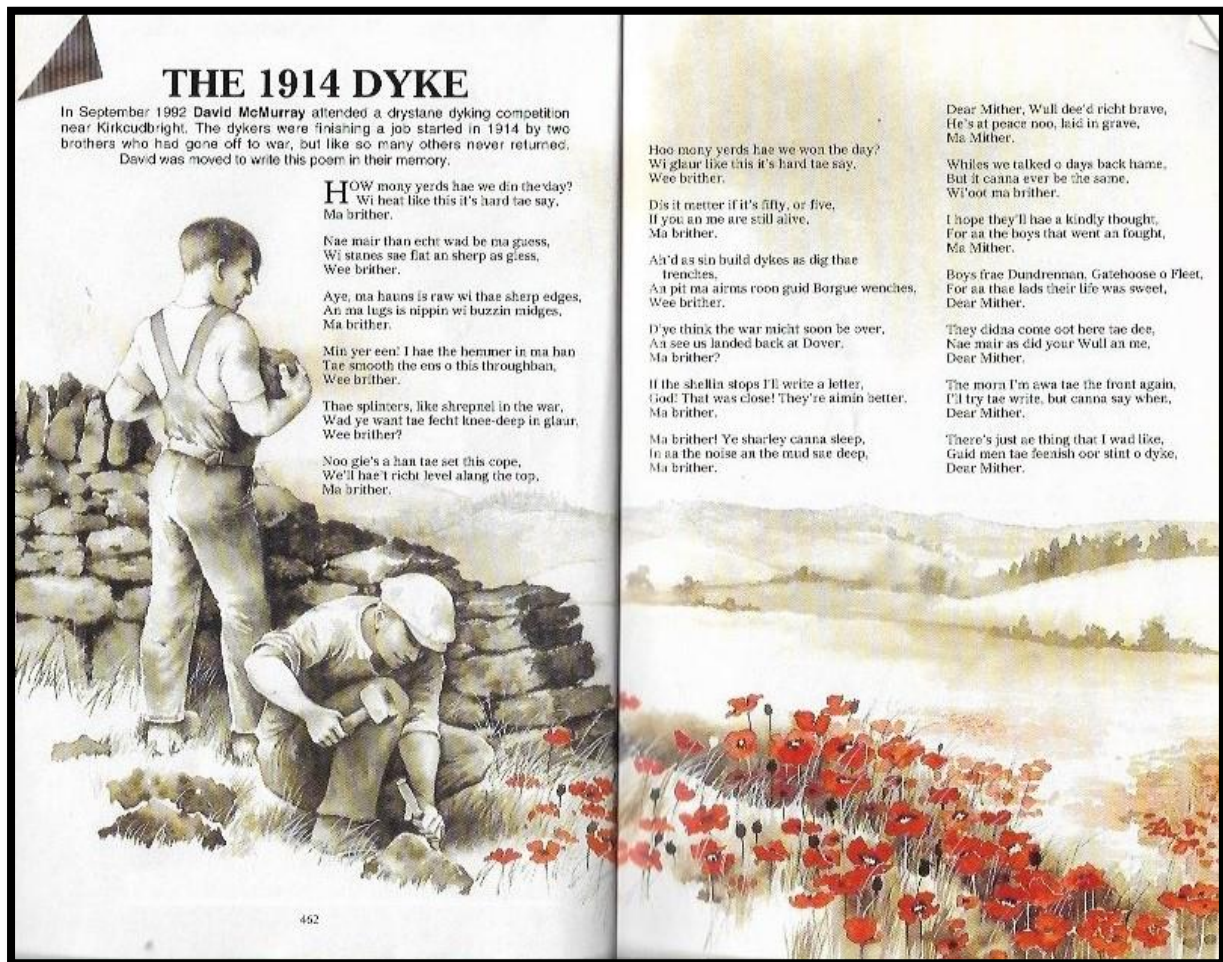
The 1914 Dyke

In 1914 two brothers started the construction of a drystone dyke somewhere in Galloway. The names of the brothers and the location of the dyke seem to be unrecorded. The brothers became soldiers before they completed the dyke and both were killed in action.

The dyke remained incomplete until September 1992 when a dyking competition was held somewhere near Kirkcudbright at which the completion of the dyke was undertaken.

David McMurray attended the competition, was touched by the story of the brothers, and was moved to write a poem which has been recorded as “The 1914 Dyke”.

The poem was printed in the November 1995 edition of “The Scots Magazine”, and this is copied below.



In June 2024, David Hume, a historian from Northern Ireland, came across the above article and wanted to complete the story.

He wanted to know : Who were the brothers that started the dyke ?

Where was the dyke ?

Who was David McMurray ?

Was the “Wull” in the poem the name of the 1st brother to be killed ?

Borgue, Dundrennan & Gatehouse are mentioned in the poem – were these places where comrade soldiers came from or where fellow dykers lived ?

Personal Recollection

Stuart Nichol is a Gatehouse builder and a well-known dyker. He had previously heard the story of the dyking brothers and thought that the dyke was on Lennox Plunton Farm (between Gatehouse and Borgue), but he thought that the dyke was never completed. He said the Farmers were well-known dykers with a distinctive style having built many fine dykes in the Lennox Plunton area.

Lennox Plunton Farm has been owned by the Sproat family for many years, **Benji Sproat** being the current farmer. Benji's older brother John is very interested in local history, but he knew nothing of the dyke or the brothers' story and he doesn't remember his father mentioning them.

The poem suggests that the first of the brothers to be killed might have been named "**Wull**", presumably short for William. A brief check of soldier brothers who lived in Girthon or Anwoth did not include a William who was killed first. Brothers, one of whom was a William, who lived in other nearby parishes didn't meet the criteria, either because only 1 brother was killed or the William didn't die first.

Local Brothers who were soldiers killed in WW1

Surname	1 st names	Info about the brothers
Farmer	Eugene & Cecil <i>Anwoth & Girthon War Memorial</i>	Parents James & Elizabeth had 9 children. Lived at Woodfoot. In 1911 census Eugene was 26, when John was 22 and Cecil 14. James, Eugene & John were listed as drystone masons. Cecil enlisted in 1915 and died in 1916 aged 19. Eugene enlisted in 1914 and died in 1918 aged 34. John enlisted in 1916 and he survived.
McQuarry	Lauchlan & William <i>Anwoth & Girthon War Memorial</i>	Both McQuarries were farm labourers. Lauchlan died in 1915 at Loos, France, age 39. William died in 1917 (age 29) in Belgium.
Shaw	Thomas & William <i>Anwoth & Girthon War Memorial</i>	Tom Shaw enlisted in 1915 and died in France in 1917, age 20. We have no details of William Shaw but his family believe he was killed aged 17, yet his name is not on the War Memorial.
Nelson	Thomas & William <i>Anwoth & Girthon War Memorial</i>	Thomas & William Nelson both enlisted in 1915. Both brothers emigrated to Canada prior to the start of the war. They were both killed by the same blast in 1915.
Hogg	Andrew and Henry <i>Borgue War Memorial</i>	Family were from Dromore Farm, Kirkcudbright. Both killed in 1917 but Andrew died in East Africa and Henry in France.
McKie	Robert & William <i>Twynholm War Memorial</i>	Robert enlisted in 1914 and was killed in Palestine in 1917. William also enlisted in 1914 and died in 1918 in France. Family were from Ingleston & Campbeltown.
McQueen	Frank & William <i>Kirkcudbright War Memorial</i>	Frank McQueen died in 1916. William's death is unknown.
Paterson	William & John	William was killed in Turkey in 1915, age 29. John died in France in 1918, age 37.

	<i>Kirkcudbright War Memorial</i>	
McMillan	Charles & William	details unknown.
Graham	Alexander & William	Alexander died in France in 1918, age 19. A William is listed but there are no details. They could have been brothers.

Conclusion

- There is no clear evidence that the first of a pair of brothers to be killed in WW1 was named William.
- Stuart Nichol was adamant that he knew the story of the Farmer brothers and its association with Lennox Plunton. He clearly remembered talking about the brothers and their dyke to his father Nigel and grandfather Jock, both being accomplished dykers themselves.
- The dyke was started in 1914 and the poem was written 78 years later in 1992.
- The identity of the poet, David McMurray, is unknown.
- It is possible that the people who related the story to David McMurray in 1992 either didn't know the names of the brothers or didn't pass on their details to McMurray.
- ***It is most likely that it was the Farmer brothers who started the dyke and that David McMurray, author of the poem, used "poetic license" in naming the first of the brothers to be killed as "Wull".***

Below is a transcript of the Scots Magazine article.

The 1914 Dyke

In September 1992 David McMurray attended a drystane dyking competition near Kirkcudbright. The dykers were finishing a job started in 1914 by two brothers who had gone off to war, but like so many others, never returned. David was moved to write this poem in their memory.

<p>How many yerds hae we din the'day ? Wi' heat like this its hard tae say. Ma brither.</p> <p>Nae mair than echt wad be ma guess, Wi stanes sae flat an' sherp as gless Wee brither.</p> <p>Aye, ma hauns is raw , wi they sherp edges, An ma legs is nippin wi buzzin midges. Ma brither.</p> <p>Min yer een'. I hae the hammer in ma han Tae smooth the ens o this throughban Wee brither</p> <p>They splinters, like shrapnel in the war, Wad ye want tae fecht knee-deep in glaur Wee brither ?</p> <p>Noo gie's a han tae set this cope. We'll hae't richt level along the top, Ma brither.</p> <p>Hoo many yerds hae we won the day ? Wi glaur like this its hard tae say. Wee brither.</p> <p>Dis it matter if it's fifty, or five ? If you and me are still alive. Ma brither.</p> <p>Ah'd as sin build dykes as dig thae trenches An pit ma airms roon guid Borgue wenches. Wee brither.</p> <p>D'ye think the war micht soon be over An see us landed back at Dover. Ma brither ?</p>	<p>If the shellin stops I'll write a letter. God! that was close! They're aimin better. Ma brither.</p> <p>Ma brither! Ye sharley canna sleep In aa the noise and mud sae deep. Ma brither.</p> <p>Dear Mither, Wull dee'd real brave, He's at peace noo, laid in grave, Ma Mither.</p> <p>Whiles we talked o days back hame, But it canna ever be the same. Wi'oot ma brither.</p> <p>I hope they'll hae a kindly thought, For aa the boys that went an fought. Ma Mither.</p> <p>Boys frae Dundrennan, Gatehoose o Fleet, For aa thae lads their life was sweet, Dear Mither.</p> <p>They didna come oot here tae dee, Nae mair as did your Wull an me. Dear Mither.</p> <p>The mora I'm awa tae the front again, I'll try tae write, but canna say when, Dear Mither.</p> <p>There's just ae thing that I wad like, Guid men tae feenish oor stint o dyke. Dear Mither</p>
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The Farmer Family, Drystane Dykers

James Farmer and **Elizabeth Allen** were married at Penninghame, Wigtownshire in 1883. James was born in Glasserton, Wigtownshire about 1850 and Elizabeth in Penninghame about 1863.

In the **1891 census**, the first after their marriage, the couple were living at Ornockenoch Cottage, Anwoth.

40-year-old James was a builder mason, wife Elizabeth 28.

They had 4 children:

- Eugene Allen, 6, born Anwoth,
- Rowena C., 4, born Penninghame
- John McClelland, 3, born Anwoth
- Jane, 3 months, born Anwoth

In **1894** James and Elizabeth had a daughter Hilda Clement Farmer born at Anwoth. Sadly she died from influenza in 1900 at Woodfoot Cottage, Anwoth, age 6,.

In the **1901 Girthon census** the family were living at Woodfoot, beside Castramont Wood in the Fleet valley.

James, mason, was now 50 and Elizabeth was 40.

Eugene Allan, 16 was a mason's apprentice.

Rowena Campbell, was 14.

John McLelland, 12 was a scholar

Jeannie, 10 was a scholar.

Cecil, age 4 was born in Girthon.

Alfred George, age 2 was born in Girthon.



Woodfoot c. 1900

In the **1911 census** the family were still at Woodfoot.

James, 60, was a drystone mason and his wife Elizabeth was 48.

Eugene A., 26, was a drystone mason.

John, 22, was a drystone mason.

Jeanie, 19 had no occupation.

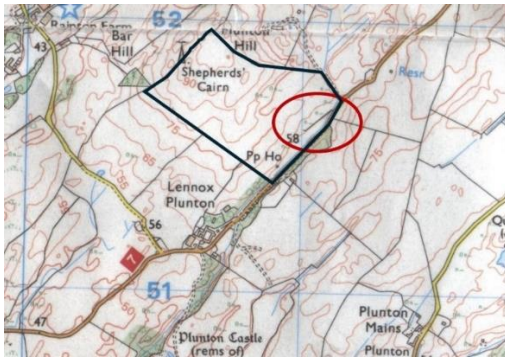
Cecil, 14 had no occupation

Alfred G., 12, Angus, 9, and Edwin G., 6 were all scholars

Nellie M, 4, and Lewis H. were at home.

James Farmer and his sons had a reputation in the Gatehouse area for building good strong drystone dykes. They are known to have built many dykes in the Sandgreen and Lennox Plunton area, many of which are still standing today.

Stuart Nichol who is from a well-known Galloway dyking family, remembers being told by older dykers, including his **father Nigel** and **grandfather Jock**, that there was an unfinished dyke at Lennox Plunton Farm. Stuart was always told that it had been started by two of the Farmer brothers before they left to fight in World War I. The brothers were both killed and the dyke remained unfinished.



The highlighted field is "The Cairn".
The "1914 Dyke" is within the red oval.



This is the end of the 1914 dyke furthest from
Lennox Plunton farmhouse.

The First World war started on 28th July 1914 and ended on 11th November 1918.

Eugene Farmer enlisted with the K.O.S.B. in October 1914, soon after the war started, He was reported missing, presumed dead, on 17th September 1918 and is named on the Loos War Memorial, France.

Farmer, Private Eugene Alan, Woodfoot, Gatehouse. Enlisted October, 1914, 2/5 King's Own Scottish Borderers. Transferred to 7/8 K.O.S.B. Wounded once at Hulluch. Reported missing 17th September, 1918. Prior to war was seven years in the Galloway Rifles.

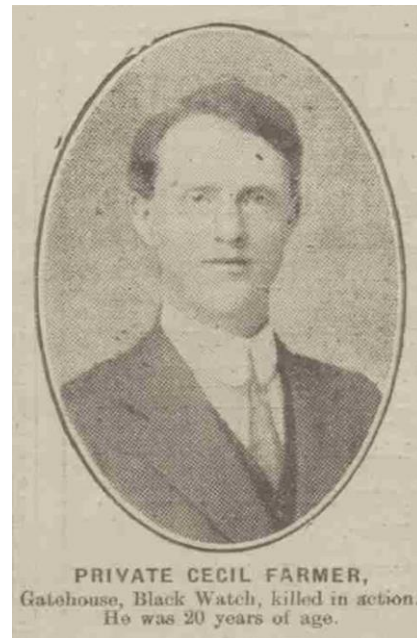
Entry from Stewartry Roll of Honour

He died aged 34 and left a widow Margaret née McNaught, who lived at Carsluith.

Cecil Farmer enlisted in September 1915 with the 3rd Royal Highlanders and served on the Western Front. He was killed at Ploegsteert on 19th March 1916, aged 19. He is buried in Rifle House Cemetery, Hainault, Belgium.

ON THE ROLL OF HONOUR.
Farmer.—Killed in action on Sunday, 19th March, 1916, Cecil Farmer, private, Black Watch, aged 19 years, son of James Farmer, Woodfoot, Gatehouse-of-Fleet.

Entry from Stewartry Roll of Honour



Younger brother **Alfred George Farmer** died from influenza in 1915 at Woodfoot. He was an apprentice gardener, age 16.

John Farmer enlisted in May 1916 with the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders. He was later transferred to Home Service with the Agricultural Company -

Farmer, Private John M'Lellan, Woodfoot, Gatehouse. Enlisted May, 1916, 2/4 Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders. Transferred to Agricultural Company. Home Service. Prior to war was fully two years in the Galloway Rifles.

perhaps because his 2 brothers
had been killed.

Entry from Stewartry Roll of Honour

In **1921 census** the family were still living at Woodfoot.

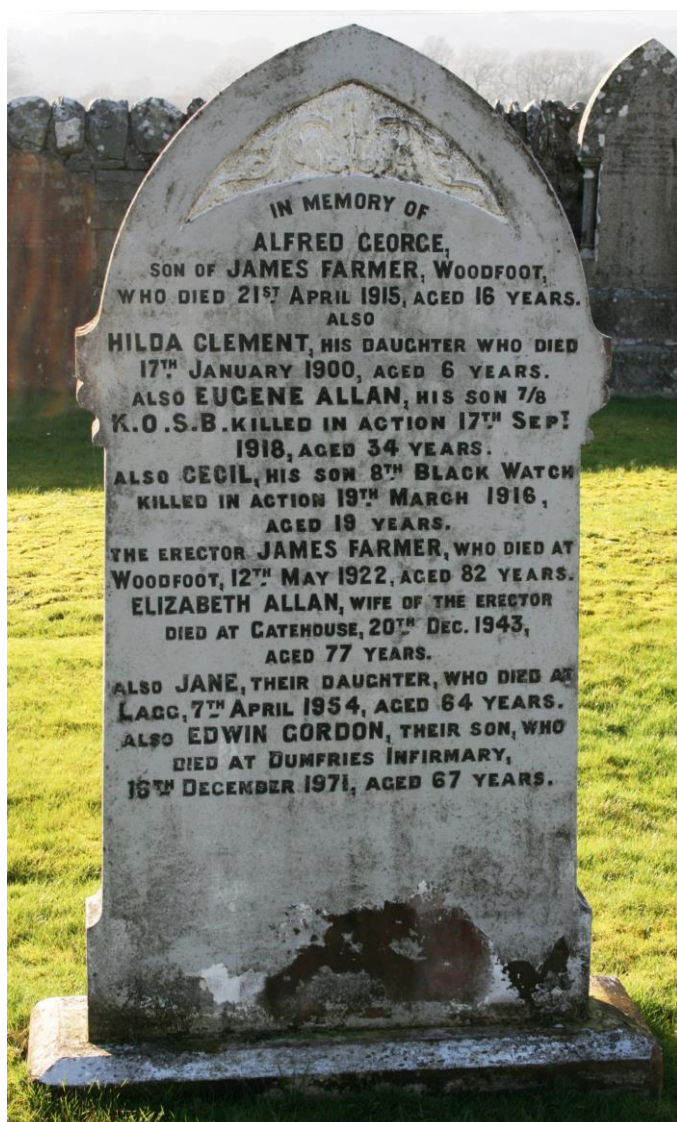
James farmer, 72 was a mason, retired. His wife Elizabeth was not at home on census night.

Son Angus, 19 was a stone dyker.

Daughter Nellie, 15, a chemist's assistant

Rowena, 34 had household duties

Lewis, 12 and Wilfred, 10, both born at Girthon, were scholars.



The Farmer grave in Girthon Cemetery lists many of the family.

Girthon Cemetery

(Grave 22.03)

Headstone Inscription :

In memory of
Alfred George,
son of James Farmer, Woodfoot,
who died 21st April 1915, aged 16 years.
Also
Hilda Clement, his daughter who died
17th January 1900, aged 6 years.
Also Eugene Allan, his son 7/8
K.O.S.B. killed in action 17th Sept.
1918 aged 34 years.
Also Cecil his son, 8th Black Watch,
killed in action 19th March 1916,
aged 19 years.
The erector, James Farmer, who died at
Woodfoot, 12th May 1922, aged 82 years.
Elizabeth Allan, wife of the erector,
died at Gatehouse 20th Dec. 1943,
aged 77 years.
Also Jane, their daughter who died at
Lagg, 7th April 1954, aged 64 years.
Also Edwin Gordon, their son, who
died at Dumfries Infirmary,
16th December 1971, aged 67 years.