

Fields of Disdow Farm

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6. Hillhead Field (3)
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Disdow Farm Field-Names

Disdow

The records of the name of the fine hill that overlooks the High Street in Gatehouse of Fleet from the north-east is a cautionary tale for toponymists: on Blaeu's map of 1654 (based on Pont's lost one of c1590) it is *Dundow*, on Moll's (1732) *Dusdow*, Roy's (1755) *Dundou*, Ainslie (1797) *Dis Dow*, Thomson's (1821) *Disdow*; Valuation Rolls of 1819 show both *Disdow* and *Dendow*, and the (New) Statistical Account of 1845 has *Disdow*. When the Ordnance Surveyors came to collect information, they apparently found it necessary to make two visits, as a result of which a total of four informants, Samuel Sheriff, Samuel McLellan, William Heron and David Sturrock, all confirmed *Disdow*, yet *Dendoo* was inserted as an alternative, and on the 1st edition OS map, the hill is named *Dendoo* or *Disdow Hill*. To cap it all, the farm is *Disdow* in the 1851 Census, but *Dirdow* in 1881, though that was surely a mistake, as was *Disallow* in the online transcription of the Name Book.

An added note in the Name Book gives the etymology, 'From the Gaelic *Dun dubh*, the black hill'; that's confirmed by *Dundow* on Blaeu's map, the earliest and most reliable record. The subsequent variations are more likely to have begun as spelling errors, miscopyings from notes, rather than phonetic developments, though in time the spelling came to shape pronunciation, so the hill is nowadays 'Disdoo', though at least the second syllable preserves the Gaelic *dubh*.

Gaelic *dùn*, primarily 'a fort', can refer to natural hills, not necessarily with forts, and this seems to be the case here. *Dubh* can mean 'dark' in various ways, Disdow Hill is well exposed to sunlight, not overshadowed, so the vegetation (long before the present-day forestry) must have given it a 'dark' appearance. The farm (with traces of a 'moated site' to the north), and several natural features (Burn, Glen, Drum 'ridge' and Wood) are all named from the hill.

1 Galla Hill

Galla Hill is a substantial southern spur of Disdow Hill, cut through by the Military Road, now the B727, which separates this field from Galla Hill Wood in the grounds of Cally. The ancient route from the east across Irelandton Moor, and roads from Twynholm and Kirkcudbright, converged to the east of this ridge and, before The Cut was made, crossed it before dropping down steeply via Robbers' Gate to what became Ann Street, and, until the bridge was built downstream, continued along Old Ford Road to cross the river at the ford.

Gallow (often singular in Scots and northern English) is common in minor place-names throughout Scotland and the north of England, recalling sites where the bodies of malefactors hung as a warning to passers-by. The grim story of Robbers' Gate nearby complements the baleful associations of this place. There is a Gallows Knowe overlooking the old road from Anwoth to Carsluith, between Burnside and High Auchenlarie, and a Gallows Hill south of Twynholm, overlooking the road up from Kirkcudbright Bay near Ingliston; in Wigtownshire there's a Gallow Hill in Sorbie, and Gallows Hills in Penninghame, Mochrum and Whithorn, while a dozen historic examples can be found in the *Dictionary of*

the Older Scottish Tongue; Culcraigrie north of Trostrie Moat and Culcronchie on the road over to Creetown are at similar high points on old roads and may well involve the Gaelic word for 'gallows', *croiche*.

2 The Butcher's Field

The westernmost field, north-west of Galla Hill, overlooking The Cut. It may have had some association with the Co-operative Society's butcher's shop a few hundred yards down the road, opposite the Clock Tower, now The Scone Kitchen.

3, 5, 6, 7 Hillhead, with Hillhead Meeda

A cottage at the top of a steep bank north of the Old Manse was probably named from the point of view of that house. In 1851 it was occupied by a farm worker and his family, in 1881 by a gamekeeper and his. There's still a track leading up from the road to a small building by the transmission mast, but I don't think it's occupied now as a dwelling. Field 3 is to the south of the cottage, on the downhill slope, 5 and 6 two small enclosures on the east side of a small watercourse that runs between them and field 3. #7, Hillhead Meeda is to the north-east of field 3, enclosing a small indentation in the hill-slope. The spelling 'Meeda' is pleasing, it shows a local pronunciation close to Northumbrian Old English *mēdwe*.

4, 8, 9 The Glebe and Wee Glebe

Fields adjacent to the Manse, with straight dykes implying 'improvement-era' enclosures. Both fields were subdivided by east-west dykes at the time of the 1854 map. Field 9 is a small portion enclosing the shrubby cleuch where the Disdow Burn cuts through, by the junction where the road from Drumwall meets the B727; before the Military Road and The Cut, the roads heading for the ford on the Fleet converged and crossed the burn here, then followed it down through Robbers' Gate. 'Glebe' was used in Scots, for land reserved for the parish priest or, once the Presbyterian Church became the established church of the kingdom, the minister. Glebe land was generally fairly close to the parish church or, as here, the manse.

10 The Manse Drum, 13 Double Drum, 15 Front Field/ Disdow Drum

'Drum' originated as Gaelic *druim*, and earlier Brittonic *drum*, the 'back' of an animal, in place-names, 'a ridge', but there are at least 120 'drums' in Kirkcudbrightshire, often, as here, combined with Scots or English words, which indicates that 'drum' had been taken into local Scots place-naming vocabulary. #10 The Manse Drum is to the north of #8 The Wee Glebe, on a ridge formed by the hill-spur to the east of the cleuch in Hillhead Field. #13 Double Drum is immediately to the north, separated from The Manse Drum by a straight dyke; it encloses a pair of spurs separated by a small, deep valley. Disdow Drum is marked on OS maps as the name of the hill to the south of Disdow farmstead, but Bruce Callander says that the field enclosing that hill 'was always known to us as "The Front Field" as it stands out in front of the house.'

11 The Tuit

A field to the north-east of Hillhead, below the boundary of Disdow Wood. *Tuit* would be what John Mactaggart, born at Lennox Plunton, in his *Gallovidian Encyclopaedia* 1824, called

tewhit;¹ in the *Scottish National Dictionary* the headword is *teewheet*, but there are very many variants, and *peewit* is the most common name for the bird in Scotland and northern England. Flocks of peewits/ lapwings probably gathered here, as in many places in Galloway, though sadly not so frequently now.

12 Blanket Slap

Field #12 to the south-west of Disdow Drum is bounded on the south by the road down from Drumwall; on the west it encloses a rather marshy stretch of the Disdow Burn, and is crossed east to west by a nameless tributary stream rising by the road in the neighbouring #17 Cottage Field, where an 'old gravel pit' is marked on the 1854 map. Bruce Callander reports that, 'I've seen maps in and around 1900 with [this field] known as "The Blanket Slack"'. *Slak* is defined in the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* as 'a. A hollow or depression in the ground. b. A valley between hills, lower (freq. boggy) ground between stretches of rising ground; a bog or boggy ground such as is freq. found on the floor of a valley'; that would certainly suit the stretch of the burn in this field; a *slap* or *slop* is 'A gap, breach or hole (in a wall, etc.); hence, an entrance or exit, means of access or egress', and there might well be, or have been, such a feature here. In any case, the words *slack* and *slap* seem to have become interchangeable in later Scots; I suppose *slaps* used by cattle soon become boggy *slacks*.²

A bit more obscure is 'Blanket'. That word, from Old French *blanquette*, referred primarily to a white woollen cloth: it's not apparent today why either the marshy *slack* or the rest of the field might have been noticeably 'white', or blanket-like, but the burn-side is covered by trees and shrubs, and the field is 'improved' grassland, so it's hard to judge how it might have appeared in earlier times. While field-names sometimes indicate bleaching-greens, it seems improbable that a *slack* would have been used for that purpose. In later Scots, *blanket* was used more generally, as it is in English; a particular Scottish use was for a plaid as worn by country folk not only in the Highlands, and again the colouring of this field might at some time have suggested such a 'blanket'. A more distant possibility would be the survival of a Brittonic name **blain ged*, modern Welsh *blaen goed*,³ 'summit of woodland', perhaps a more ancient name for Galla Hill.

14 The Glen

This name ('Disdow Glen' on OS maps) refers to wooded land either side the Disdow Burn where it flows through a *cleuch* from near the farmstead down to the Blanket Slack. Gaelic *gleann* was taken into Scots and Scottish Standard English as 'glen', and is used very frequently in name-formations from those languages, as is certainly the case here.

16, 18 Gib Crag

A large field, formerly (as on the 1854 map) divided into two, to the north of the steading, with the burn on its east side, enclosing the south-east slope of Disdow Hill. The name must

¹ P. 383, under *pirr*, which seems to be a common tern; he says its eggs are 'somewhat like *tewhit* eggs in size and colour'; judging by T. A. Coward's *British Birds and their Eggs*, this is quite true.

² I think Burns in *Tam o' Shanter* may have been playing with this double meaning in 'We think na on the lang Scots miles,/ The mosses, waters, slaps, and stiles,/ That lie between us and our hame ...'

³ There is a place of this name in Grosmont, Mon., and cf. Blenket in Arlecdon Cmb. and Cartmel Lancs., both now in Cumbria.

refer to a 'crag' (note the English spelling) in this locality, though nothing obviously answering that name appears on the maps or satellite views – maybe it's hidden in the forestry to the north-west of the field? *Gib*, short for Gilbert, was a common Scots name for a cat, indeed used as a common noun, mainly for domestic ones, though the eponymous crag might have been frequented in the past by wild cats,⁴ or it might have looked in some way like a cat. On the other hand, this piece of land might at some time have been associated with a man nicknamed or surnamed Gib(b).⁵

17 The Cottage Field

This field, to the east of Blanket Slap and bounded on the south and east by the road continuing as the drive up to the farmhouse, presumably takes its name from the cottage on the east side of the drive, marked on the 1854 map, recorded in the Censuses of 1851 and 1881, and still extant.

19 The Stackyard

Just to the south-east of the steading.

20 Byre-End Meeda, 21 The Bull Field

Two longish rectangular fields lying north of the farmstead up towards Disdow Wood, on the eastern side of Disdow Burn. Obviously the 'Meeda' (see #7 Hillhead Meeda above) extends from the end of the cattle-byre, with the field where the bull is/was kept lying beyond it. The northern end of the latter field is bounded by a straight dyke, the part beyond being apparently included in #25 The Target (see below); on the 1845 map, that portion was included in #21.

25 The Target

An OS map from the 1920s shows a 'R[ifle] Range' in the stretch now occupied by field #20 Byre-End, and #21 Bull Field, immediately to the west of this one and at that time still including the ground later incorporated into #25. However, Bruce Callander says, "The Target" had the rifle range on it for the Home Guard to practice on. There is still evidence of it, and we used to dig up the bullets when wee kids.' It seems, then, that the firing range here probably dates from the First World War, but was apparently extended during Second to allow for practice with longer-range firearms.

23, 22, 26 The Dam, Dam Field, Dam Park

On the 1845 map, the Mill Dam providing power for a thrashing mill is shown in the location corresponding to field #23 The Dam; the small portion bounded by the dam, the lade to the mill, and a channel to the south presumably carrying surplus water through to the farm garden, forms #22 The Dam Field. while #26 The Dam Park is a large enclosure with the dam at its south-west corner.

⁴ One was killed near Balmaghie in 1820; that is the latest record for wild cats in The Stewartry.

⁵ SND records a use of *gib*, probably pronounced 'jib' and maybe short for Gibraltar, as a word for a candy-stick, seaside 'rock'. Unless this field-name was so pronounced, I think that's unlikely here.

26 Dam Park, 24 Horses Park

The Dam Park is a large enclosure with the dam (see above) at its south-west corner; Horses Park lies to the south, so the dam was at its north-west corner. Old English *pearroc* was originally 'an enclosing fence', becoming later 'an enclosure', a piece of ground fenced or walled off, generally a fairly small field to accommodate specific animals. In the south, this word was modified in early modern English to 'paddock' to distinguish it from *park*, from the French word *parc* that ultimately shares the same Germanic origin as *pearroc*, but was used for much larger enclosures, firstly for deer, later for herds of cattle, also horses. Both these were no doubt parks in the English sense, though Scots *parrock* is used for both 'paddock' and 'park'.

27 Charlie's Land, 28 Granny's Field

These two fields, on the eastern edge of the holding, lie on the fairly steep slope of the ridge below Benjarg Wood. They were presumably associated with members of the farming family some time at Disdow. Neither seems especially valuable or easy to work, especially for a senior citizen – maybe Granny, and possibly Charlie too, drew rents from this land. Note the Scottish spelling of Charlie, but English of Granny.

29 Hungry Hill

The third field on the east of the holding, to the north of Granny's Field. This name does not appear on OS maps as the name for the spur of Benjarg on the edge of which the field lies, though the wooded top of the ridge is named Whinny Hill, so no doubt it was shrubby with whins before the forestry plantation. Both 'Whinny and 'Hungry' imply that this was poor land for grazing and useless for cultivation. 'Hunger', 'Hungry' occur very frequently in field-names and other local names throughout England, Hunger Hills certainly run into dozens, and they're likely to be at least as common in Scotland.