

## PENTLAND UNITED; THEN AND NOW

It was a beautiful day in 1582, when George, Earl of Caithness set out from his castle in Girnigoe to go riding on the Reiss sands. Approaching the river Wester he came across two of his kinsmen, David and Ingram Sinclair, both of whom had fallen out with their uncle. George Sinclair was not a good person to cross, and on meeting his nephews his revenge was swift and final, running David through with his sword before shooting Ingram with his pistol.

This hideous crime like most others in the 16<sup>th</sup> century went unpunished, as there were no laws as we know them in the country during this period. Therefore most parties resorted to revenge.

At this point you may be wondering what the devil this has to do with football. The simple answer is that these young men were playing "foot ball" when they met their untimely demise. This not surprisingly was the first reference I could find to football being played in Caithness. There is a blank now for over 300 years, when I can verify (from fathers knee) that knotty not football was played at Canisbay school around 1890. Knotty resembles our present day hockey, and has recently been reincarnated in the Lybster area.

It is certain that football was played throughout Caithness on a local basis, and I am told that John O'Groats had a strong team in 1922, complimented with workers from the Duncansby lighthouse project. About this time Thurdistoft Farm also boasted a football team, which would sound quite incredulous today, but remember in that era farming was a very labour intensive business.

By 1930 the town teams had been arranged into leagues, but the rural areas, no doubt due to distance and the lack of transport and communications, had failed to get its act together. This fact had not escaped "Norseman", (William Bremner) the well known Groat columnist, and during his many perambulations around the districts, contacted Abrach Mackay and other notable dignitaries, resulting in a meeting being called in the Carnegie Library, Wick early in 1930.

Present that evening were representatives from Keiss, Mey, Halkirk and Watten the Castletown representative did not attend, but expressed their interest. Donald McAlpine, head teacher at Mey school, was appointed president, ably assisted by Abrach Mackay (Castletown) and Mr Hossack (Watten). George Clyne (Noss) was appointed honorary president. Mr A B Henderson MA (Keiss) was appointed secretary, and it would seem that he was a very capable man and probably the main driving force at the time.

George Clyne presented the Clyne Bowl whilst Abrach Mackay gifted a cup trophy. The Mackay Cup is still doing the rounds, but the Noss Cup disappeared from the scene. As only five areas had promised to raise teams the Wick Scouts were approached to even the number, much to the displeasure of Lybster who with some justification felt they were much more rural than Wick Scouts. The mitigating factor in this decision would probably have been the distance involved, remembering that Lybster was much further away (relatively speaking) than it is today.

In April 1930 the North East Rural Football Association took off, with a league fixture at Keiss on 5<sup>th</sup> of April 1930, when their opponents were Halkirk. The result that evening was a 2-2 draw. Some reports referred to the league as the Caithness Village Football League, but this was probably changed after a protest from Lybster. Mey found the League pretty heavy going and never won a trophy as far as I can ascertain, as the coverage of rural football was very scanty in stark contrast with the town leagues that received massive coverage.

John O'Groats joined the league in 1934 under the name John O'Groats Pentland, and some of their players received training and tactics from Hugh Manson (post office) and Wm. Fulton, minister at Canisbay. Canisbay village itself was a maverick team, sometimes playing for Mey, sometimes for John O'Groats Pentland. The John O'Groats team fared no better than Mey, and in 1937 they both left their intense rivalry behind and amalgamated under the banner of Mey Pentland, later changed to Pentland United. I would have loved to have been a fly on the wall during the meeting when the first 'united' team was picked, but I certainly would not have envied the chairman's job. Mey played in white shorts and maroon jersey with a yellow 'V' at the front and back. Alex Mowat had a cousin who was a senior police officer in Edinburgh, and during his frequent stints at Tynecastle came to be on good terms with some of the Hearts directors. This relationship resulted in a second hand strip being donated to Mr Mowat, hence the maroon and white. To date I have failed to find out if the strip was donated to John O'Groats Pentland or Pentland United.

Flat bottomed lorries were sometimes used for away games and on one occasion a lorry (probably Sandy Sinclair's) came a cropper at the Whitebridge injuring some of the players. I can recall travelling in a stock sided lorry to a Mey V John O'Groats game as late as 1945. The journey inspired great merriment in we younger boys as we peered out between the slats imitating all the popular animal sounds.

Unlike in the dictionary, success did not follow amalgamation, and Pentland United went into 1939 still looking for their first trophy. This situation continued until 1963, when Pentland defeated Keiss at Sir Georges Park to win the Mackay Cup. The team on that historic evening was as follows:

*John Angus, Barrogill Angus, Jimmy Mathieson,  
John Leslie Robertson, Gordon Mackenzie, Ackie Banks,  
Bertie Fraser, John Gill, Tom Anderson, Will McKenzie,  
John Bain. Reserves: Ian Morris and Billy Sutherland.  
See Photo.*

All of these players are indigenous except Tom Anderson, an Orcadian who was working at Philips Mains at the time. The rules the were you either had to be born in the parish or living there for more than two weeks, thus excluding holiday makers. The captain that night was Jimmy Mathieson from Gills and he joins that long and illustrious list that have had the honour. Among these were - starting from 1946 -

*Bill Magee, Davie Geddes, Donnie Manson,  
John Les Robertson, Gordon Mackenzie, John Bain,  
Bertie Fraser, Jimmy Magee, Sandy Swanson,  
Gordon Harris, Ian Morris, Duncan Gray, Jimmy Farquhar,  
Sandy Sinclair (Thurso), Ian McDonald (Thurso),  
Callum Grant, Jocky Begg and the present captain Ross Sutherland.*

I'm sure I missed some out, but they will be included in the next part of this story.

During the first years of the war little football was played in the county. In 1944 and 1945 several games were played between Mey V Groats and Canisbay, resulting in a selection which entered the Rural League after its reincarnation in 1946. The team that took the field on that memorable evening was on the following lines.

*Tommy Geddes, Davie Geddes, Sandy Allan,  
Jim Rosie, Ally Sinclair, Jock Geddes, Willie Jack,  
Ian Allan, Bill Magee, Clare Fraser, Duncan Cameron.*

The result that evening was a 2-2 draw.

Taking 1952 as a criterion, Pentland United's record for that year was as follows:

### **League (1952)**

#### **HOME**

Pentland United	3	Stirkoke	1
Pentland United	3	Watten	1
Pentland United	2	Bower	4
Pentland United	4	Halkirk	0
Pentland United	1	Castletown	0
Pentland United	6	Keiss	0
Pentland United	0	Staxigoe	5

AWAY			
Stirkoke	3	Pentland United	2
Watten	4	Pentland United	2
Bower	0	Pentland United	1
Halkirk	1	Pentland United	4
Castletown	2	Pentland United	0
Keiss	2	Pentland United	2
Staxigoe	3	Pentland United	2

<b>Mackay Cup</b>			
Pentland United	0	Halkirk	2
Keiss	1	Halkirk	3

<b>Patterson Cup</b>			
Pentland United	2	Watten	5

The line up at that time was roughly as follows:

*Tommy Geddes, Davie Geddes, Danny Banks, Donnie Manson, Sandy Allan, George Sinclair, Don Shearer, Bill McIvor, Jocky Shearer, Billy Dunnet, Bill Magee.*

Other players around that time were Andrew Dundas, Patty Manson, Charlie Manson, Donald Cameron and Sandy Manson. Those results would have probably given us a higher position in the league than we would have normally occupied.

The Patterson Cup was gifted by a commercial traveller that regularly frequented the John O'Groats Hotel when the McKenzies were the proprietors.

J. 'Abrach' Mackay, the venerable Castletown County Councillor, presented the Mackay Cup. Later Dr Gill donated the Gill Shield to intensify the great rivalry between Keiss and Pentland. Later on, Walter Long (a Dounreay employee) donated another cup which bears his name.

Though having the largest catchment area - Freswick to the burn of mid sands in Dunnet - parts of that area proved rather infertile in football talent. It is difficult to recall a star that emerged in Freswick and in the early days only a few emerged from the Dunnet, Brough and Scarfskerry area. Stroma, because of its isolation, only provided one player when Bill Robertson came over by boat for a few games in the 50's. About this time Pentland crossed the firth to play a friendly in Stroma. The result escapes me, but to give it a bit of real island authenticity, the goal posts had

been substituted by oars! In the late 40's and 50's Pentland United easily commanded the biggest travelling support with two (Morrison) buses often the order of the day for away games.

Intense rivalry still exists, but seldom matches the hostility shown in pre-war days, especially at Staxigoe when often the Pentland United visitors had to reverse into the haven of Banks and McRae's bus with their 'civvies' over one arm and the free arm shielding them from a hail of clods and divots.

Venues like players changed frequently. The Mey pitch was situated in George Laings park with entry from Cameron back branch road.

This field was also used by the Black Watch and Royal Scots stationed in the Mey plantation and castle during the last war. The goals were constructed of tubular steel poles widely used in the beach defences at Dunnet and Reiss sands. John O'Groats had their pitch on the links along from the hotel. In 1946 the team played in a Tresdale field just behind what was then the doctors house. In the 1950's Pentland moved down the road to a West Canisbay field near the bottom of Canisbay road, where they stayed until the 70's. Since then the venue has gradually 'gone west' via the Mey Hotel to its present site in Dunnet where it enjoys its first dressing rooms.

Some of the venues had their own special peculiarities. Keiss had an enormous cross fall, where players with one long leg and one short leg found it very handy; the play surface however was quite good. Watten at one time had a field criss-crossed with sheep 'roadies' (paths) and the standing joke was, it made life easy for the defenders as all they had to do was stand in the roadies as the forwards were bound to come that way! On reflection, Pentland must have been famous for its cow pats, causing severe staining to shorts, but a great asset to those defenders who favoured the then popular sliding tackle!

Looking back it could be said the teams lack of success was partly due to its wide catchment area. With the lack of communication and transport, organising a practice was almost impossible as telephones and cars were a scarce commodity in those days. Teams such as Castletown and Halkirk etc. had their fields in their respective villages, thus arranging a get-together did not pose such a problem.

Teams, as players come and go - Bower, Killiminster, Wick Scouts, Stirkoke and Staxigoe have departed - hopefully only temporarily. Who would have thought that Staxigoe would ever be defunct, when for decades they were amongst the top teams in the league.

I will not be tempted along the road of Pentland's greatest players, but I could name some very young players, some as young as 15 years, who were thrown in at the deep end of a game much rougher than that of today, when tackling from behind and charging the goalkeeper were the norm.

The oldest player to hold his place consistently was George Sinclair, Gills, who turned out regularly in his 44<sup>th</sup> year. The most prolific goal scorer was probably John Gill, who on more than one occasion score double hat tricks. The name Gill conjures up his even more illustrious father, Dr J P B Gill, who from 1938-1968 was the main driving force behind football in the area.

Comparisons will inevitably be drawn up between the present team and the Pentland of yesteryear and I believe that most over 50's would admit that the Manson and Gray coached teams would have proved to hot to handle for most of the teams of the pre 60's era.

In those days some of the Rural League players could play for town teams which at the time was considered a higher grade of football. I well remember a certain Pentland goalkeeper playing for Pentland United, Thurso Pentland, Thurso Select and Rural League Select all in the space of five nights. Under present rules this can no longer happen, but it certainly cut out the need to train!

There is a distinct gap in Pentland's history and fortunes between 1965-1986 and although minor trophies were won the team yo-yoed between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> divisions from 1975-1981.

The team in 1981 was on the following lines.

*C. Robertson*

*B. Robertson, G. Harris, D. Manson, J. Simpson*

*D. Simpson, J. Steven, S. Campbell*

*S. Buttress, W. Sinclair, J. Begg*

During the 80's Rural League trophies became a common feature on Pentland's sideboard, but they had to wait until 1987 for their first major triumph when after a tense struggle they overcame Groats at the Dammies by a single goal from N. Rollinson. The team that afternoon was as follows:

*A. Budge*

*D. Farquhar, J. Farquhar, W. Sinclair, I. Macdonald*

*C. Grant, J. Bruce, G. Davidson, K. Morris*

*N. Rollinson, J. Begg*

This success was followed by winning the County League by 5 points from Halkirk. These two victories signalled that Pentland had finally come of age, and heralded the start of an unbelievably successful era.

The League title came their way in 1990 and '91 and bettered in '93 by winning the League and the MILK Cup (now the Highland Amateur Cup) also a clean sweep of local trophies.

1999 saw a clean sweep of all the county cups plus winning the County League without dropping a single point. Success followed through to the Millennium with another clean sweep and a record equalling 4<sup>th</sup> Highland Amateur Cup win.

During the past 15 years Pentland United have had, on average, the best defence record in the league. It's unfortunate that you cannot pinpoint a defender for 'saving' goals, whereas strikers always get records of goals scored. Let us now examine some of their most prolific goal scorers.

In the case of Jocky Begg, Kevin Morris and Terry Mackay, Pentland produced marksmen whose records may never be beaten. Here are some of their awesome statistics.

In six seasons Jocky scored 164 goals.

In four seasons Kevin scored 154 goals.

In seven seasons Terry scored 274 goals.

Kevin and Terry share the record for finding the net 54 times in one season, but Kevin claims the record for in one game netting the ball 11 times, 10 times in the first half.

Jocky Begg must be Pentland's longest serving player ever. He started his career at the tender age of 14, and is still going strong in the year 2000. He has recently appeared in the game along side his son Ian Begg.

Biggest winning margin, 19-0.

Worst defeat, 12-0 (1958 approx.)

What has turned Pentland from the Cinderella team of yesteryear to the slick champions of today - in a nutshell fitness and tactics. The late Ian Morris was the first manager to try this out, but had limited success due to the reluctance of the players. Along came Duncan Gray and Dennis Manson, and by this time the players realised that a more professional touch would improve their game - the rest is history.

How long can this success continue? The population of their catchment area is down from 2700 in 1851 to its present level of under 1000. So like other successful teams of the past may have to continue to recruit from outside their boundaries and of course most players like to turn out for a team that wins trophies. This trend of 'poaching' is not a new phenomenon as I recall. From as far back as the 50's the most successful Thurso team of that era fielded its players from Halkirk, Canisbay, Watten and Sutherlandshire.

We wish the *Still The Absolute Best Soccer* team bring more honour to their district and county. Whatever their destiny there is still one honour that cannot be taken away, the honour of playing for the most northerly team on the mainland of Britain.

In compiling this brief history of Pentland United I am indebted to Alistair Ham for his help, and giving me access to his records, especially his recordings of events from 1981 onwards. This was easily the most comprehensive accounts of any footballs records I have witnessed. Alistair served 35 years on committee, 25 of these as president and definitely deserved his 'This is your life' on his retirement!

Some of the earlier parts of this account were written in 1993 and appeared in the Canisbay book (with kind permission from Ann Houston) the later part was penned in 2001



Another Cup triumph!



Jimmy Mathieson lifting the first ever Cup 1963  
On Jimmy's left a youthful Duncan Gray looks on.  
Maybe this whetted his appetite for winning trophies!



Jocky Begg in full flow.



The author (guest speaker) posing with Highland Amateur Cup at his feet.  
*Some consolation as he never won a cup with Pentland United in his playing days!*