

## **GLHS Talk via Zoom: 14th April 2021**

### **'Holidays in the Cheviots: 1910-1915' - the story behind the story**

#### **Speaker: Pam Ratcliffe**

Petersfield, just above Wooler Common car park, is a familiar land mark to most of us today, but at the beginning of the last century, it was the holiday home of a Scottish doctor and his family, who recorded their visits there between 1910 and 1915 in a journal.

Pam gave a tantalising glimpse of the day-to-day events and the people involved in this remarkable snapshot in time, which has now been transcribed and published in a book, a review of which appears below.

Sometime in the early 1900s, the Ford Robertsons from Edinburgh bought a house called Petersfield, up in the hills beyond Wooler. From 1910 to 1915, on regular visits throughout the year, they turned it into multi-faceted holiday home. During the term-time months, they sometimes popped down for the weekend, but over Easter and the summer, the whole household – Dr and Mrs Ford Robertson, their three sons, twins of 11 in 1910 and a younger brother, spent several weeks enjoying Wooler and the Cheviot Hills. For longer holidays, they would arrive by train at Wooler station, to be met initially by the Black Bull's horse-drawn 'wagonette', later replaced by a motor vehicle. With one or two servants, a good deal of baggage, and even a piano, they were already quite a large group. Over the years, they were joined by many other visitors. Relatives and friends came to stay and there was always a flow of day visitors – some of them other families holidaying in the area, and local friends. These included the Archbold sisters, who then lived in a pair of houses, Craiggrossie, in Ryecroft Way in Wooler.

We know all this, and much more, because of the daily log they kept of their activities. Dr Ford Robertson, sometimes referred to as 'the patriarch', must have created this log-keeping practice, meticulously maintained during his absence by one of the boys, an uncle or a visitor. These absences were quite frequent as Dr Ford Robertson was the Pathologist to the Scottish Asylums, and was becoming a distinguished expert in the mental health field. Several of the family's visitors were also fellow medics. He commuted back to Edinburgh weekly in extended holiday periods, catching the 9.33am train from Wooler. Dr Ford Robertson is also known to those interested in the history of walking in the Wooler area as the author of a very detailed book of *Walks from Wooler*, published in 1926. The log book shows just how well he knew the routes described in this book. Hardly a day went by without a long walk over the hills, although the family allowed themselves more rest on a Sunday. They clearly enjoyed ranging over the hills in all weathers, while occasionally organising a more social event, such as a picnic, or going on fishing expeditions to favourite spots. There is a wonderful account in the log book of the experience of using a 'motor vehicle' to reach the Langlee Valley. This early car struggled with steep slopes and eventually drifted into a stream. The family had a few car trips after this, but when ranging further afield they mostly went by train.

They did much more than walking, however. There was a daily schedule of work to be done, fixing the house and creating a garden. The boys mucked in and their contributions were recorded in the daily log (and occasionally expanded on when one of the boys wrote an entry). Each summer the house seems to have got bigger, with more rooms added and facilities improved. The garden was large – sloping down from the house to a marshy area and stream. They created a vegetable garden, planted soft fruit bushes, laid out rockeries and flower gardens, and levelled the ground to make a tennis court. After much effort, the boys managed to dam the stream to create a place where they could swim. In addition to all this, the house party played sports – tennis when the court was finally ready, but also cricket. The boys used bows and arrows and took lessons in the use of rifles. To begin with their biggest success was in shooting rabbits, but by 2014, with the twins coming up to 15 and the First World War breaking out, shooting practice must have felt more serious.

We know about this log book because it was found by chance a few years ago, and has been meticulously transcribed and turned into book form. *Holidays in the Cheviots 1910–15* is the result. Curated by Pam Ratcliffe, who also provides a very informative introduction, and produced by Glendale Local History Society, it is an enjoyable read in itself, as you follow family life on a day-to-day basis. It is also full of other insights into the life and times of a middle-class professional Edwardian family. It provides a window into Wooler life at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and some Wooler families of today may find mention of their ancestors – Shorts, Redpaths, Richardsons and Murrays, for example. The book is also a useful resource for those interested in the transport. Motor vehicles were just beginning to challenge the horse and train. From 2014, WW1 events are recorded from time to time, as the family regularly went into Wooler for a newspaper. And there is a snippet of history of the Scouting movement, as the boys were involved in a scout group in 2010, just two years after the movement was founded. But above all, the log book records the life of a busy and active family, who enjoyed being outdoors and filled their days with energetic activity and projects of many kinds. Perhaps Dr Ford Robertson wanted to show by example the mental health benefits of such a life.

*Holidays in the Cheviots* can be obtained from Glendale Local History Society, c/o Cheviot Centre, Padgepool Place, Wooler, NE71 671 6BL, or via email to: [glhsoc@gmail.com](mailto:glhsoc@gmail.com), or direct from the Cheviot Centre or Brands in Wooler. The book costs £7.50 (£2.50 postage in addition).