

FORBES of BRECHIN

Part Two



Image, 1693: This view is from the south, across the South Esk river. The Brechin skyline is dominated by the tall spire of the cathedral church, dating from 1150. Beside it is a great circular tower, which dates from around AD 1000 and is part of an earlier church. In front of them on a crag above the river is Brechin Castle.

It's the mid 1700s; Brechin served as the market town for much of the district, the 30 mile radius in which our ancestors lived. It's an urban center for the region with people living in houses, apartments, rooms, and institutions. Farmers work and cultivate all around the city. There were also a number of "great houses" that required staff. The farms too needed workers if there weren't enough family members to do it all themselves. Issues like coal and peat taxes, roads, relief from natural disasters and

accidents are detailed in [The History of Brechin](#). They give a sense of how the same and how different the challenges we all face as people living in communities making a go of it are - a connection across time. It's a way of getting close to the ancestors and their lives, the talk around the water cooler. The good and the bad.

On Saturday, the 19th March 1785, Andrew Low, a native of Brechin, was hanged on the west end of the hill of Forfar, between the hours of twelve midday and four in the afternoon, having on the 28th January previously been found guilty by the unanimous voice of a jury, of two separate acts of housebreaking and theft. Low is said to have been the last person in Scotland upon whom the sentence of death was passed by a sheriff. The judge presiding was Patrick Chalmers, Esq., of Aldbar, who, it may be interesting to know, acted at the time as sheriff-depute of the whole of Forfarshire for the salary of £150 yearly. The office of sheriff principal was then in Scotland, as now in Eng-* land, an honorary office, and the sheriff-depute was really the highest legal authority in the county, having a substitute or substitutes under him, officiating in the ordinary courts as at present The place where Low was executed is still pointed out upon Balmashanner hill; and at no distant date the name and age of the unfortunate lad were cut out upon the turf, on the old site of the gallows. Fortunately the laws now are not so bloody, and crimes like those of Low would only be visited by transportation for life, or a term of years. Low's fate was long a matter of conversation and regret in Brechin, but it was darkly insinuated that he had been led by cunning men to be participant in a deeper crime than mere housebreaking and theft.



Image Credit: Mike Pennington / Fields west of Stracathro / CC BY-SA 2.0 / Wikimedia Commons

Remains of a former Roman Camp in Brechin and Edzell, Angus, Scotland¹

¹ <https://www.historyhit.com/locations/stracathro-roman-camp/>

Stracathro is a small place in Angus, 10 miles west from the North Sea coast; not so much a village as an **area of hamlets and farmsteads** two and a half miles southeast of Edzell, where Dame Isabella Forbes lived two centuries prior. The parish has an area of 21.3 sq. km (**8.2 sq. miles**).



Forfarshire (Angus since 1928)² is 842 square mi. Stracathro is 8.2 mi.

The value of maps cannot be overstated. [Estate Maps of Scotland, 1730s-1950s](#) is an invaluable resource.

Estate maps illustrate all aspects of estate management, particularly in the countryside: the enclosure of fields and common land, drainage, embankments and the reclamation of moss and

² Sometime in the 1700s Angus was renamed Forfarshire, and then in 1928 Angus was brought back.

muir, new crops and new rotations, the clearance or depopulation of people, especially from upland areas, the creation of planned villages and new housing, and the development of new industries. Estate maps are primarily associated with the major era of agricultural improvement from around 1760 to 1840, and are often the most detailed maps of rural areas before Ordnance Survey mapping.³

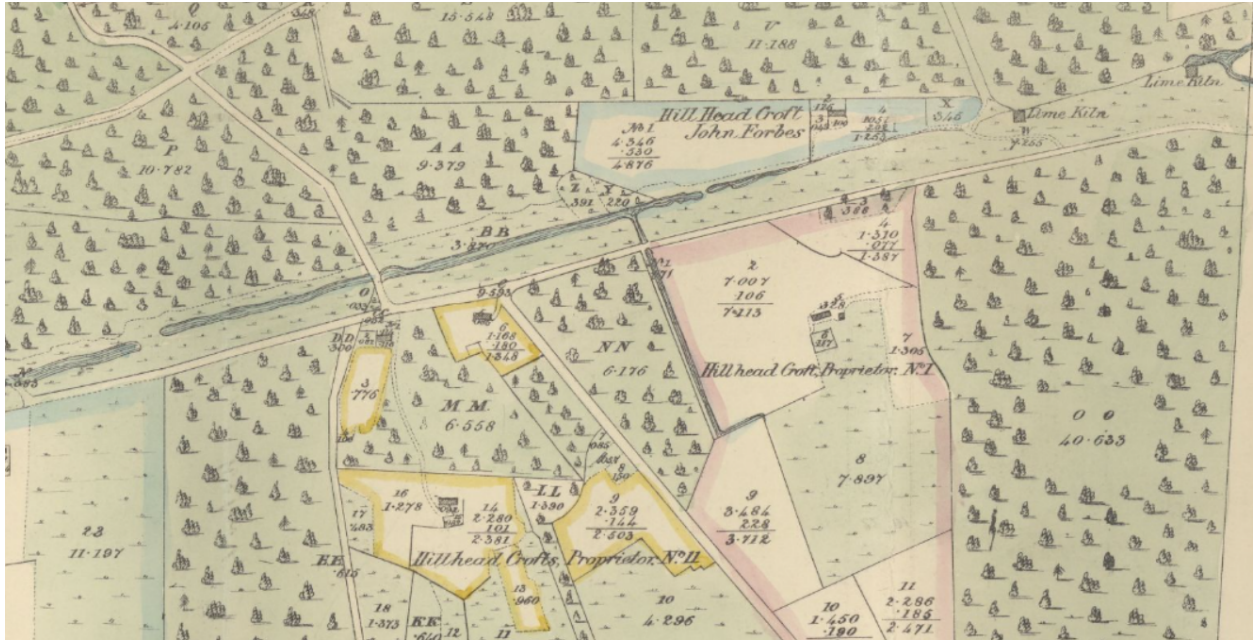
BINGO! A survey map from 1832 ([full map](#)) shows who owns the land along with all the measures of acreage, woodland, pasture, etc. Zooming in we found two surprises. The first is “The Lands of Robert Speid, Esq. of Ardovie” upper left.



The land of Robert Speid, Esq. of Ardovie, 1832

Second, the name John Forbes is shown associated with Hill Head Croft, written Hillhead on properties across the road.

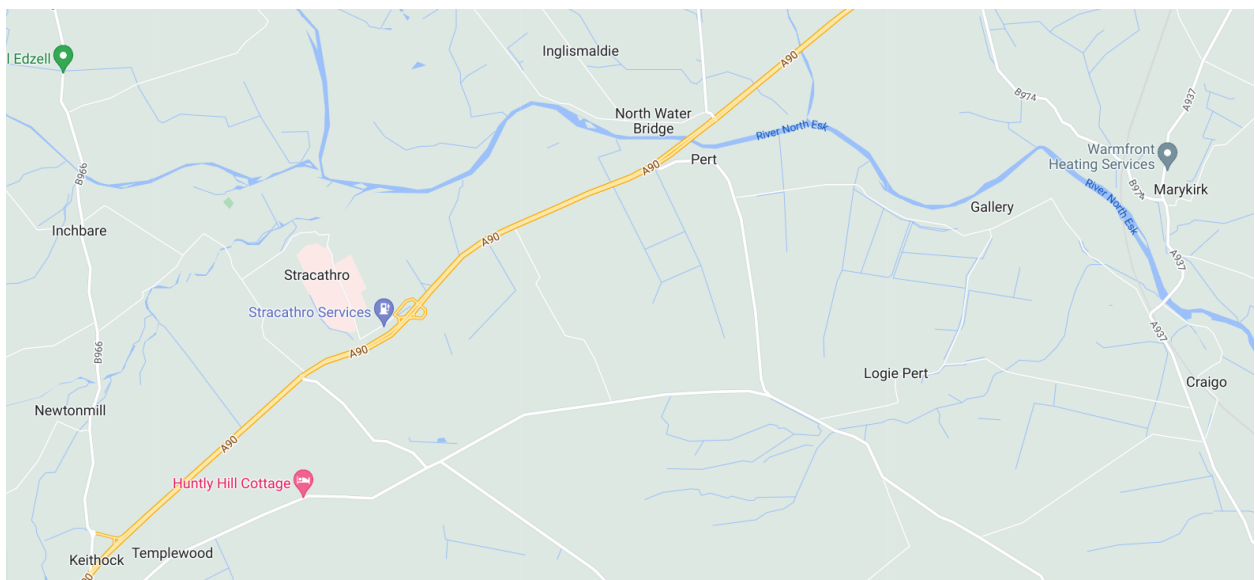
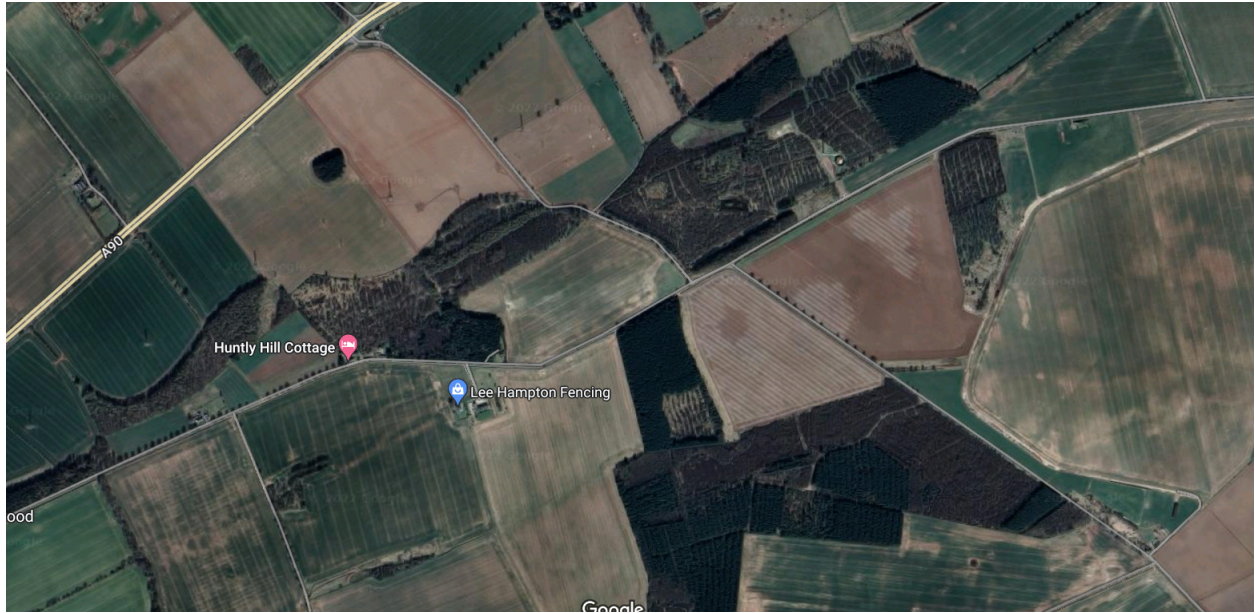
³ <https://maps.nls.uk/estates/>



Trying to match the old map to current google maps, first using the North Esk River as a starting reference point and moving from there south to John Forbes' place. Huntly Cottage seems to line up with the landscape, there still being bits of the once larger forest areas. Also, it appears some of the current roads follow the path of old roads, which is not unusual.



The roads and forest bits roughly line up



Seems about right

This second surprise find, **Hill Head Croft**, is even more exciting than the first in that we can now tie the Forbes family to a place of land in a substantial way. Which John Forbes is this though? Fourth great grandfather, John, Sr. (1733) died before 1832. We'll have to make an educated guess.

John, Sr. had a son **John born in 1766**, and he would have been in his 60s when this map was drawn. There is a possibility it is him. But we don't have a death year for him so it's hard to say for sure. Of note, this John (1766) may have married a Jean Bain, but only very circumstantial evidence exists, and while it is possible, this writer's hunch is this is not correct. There is no record of children (heirs).

The answer to the own or rent question lies in the name of the farm, Hill Head Croft. Whether John Forbes came to own the land over time is unknown.



A croft is a small agricultural unit, and the person who lives on this land is called a crofter. Crofts are usually rented, akin to sharecropping, and are located in one of the crofting areas

designated by the government in Scotland. Crofters live on and work the land. They are tenants of the person who owns the land (the croft), but some of the tenants have now bought their crofts and become owner-occupiers. Traditionally, croft land is used to raise animals and grow vegetables.⁴



CHAMBERS-ARCHITECTS-CROFT-HOUSE-MUSEUM-SCOTLAND

We can see on the map, across the road other entities named Hillhead (proprietors). Also there is a lime kiln across the other way and the plot is surrounded by woods on the remaining sides. It appears by comparison to be in a less than ideal location, and the quality of the land is unclear.

⁴ <https://chambersarchitects.com/blog/the-croft-houses-of-scotland/> photos also sourced from this website

The Forbes and other families seem to have been rural people up to this point. The living conditions in Scotland were abysmal by any standard.

The condition of the Scottish peasantry had undergone only perceptible amelioration from the commencement of the fourteenth to the early part of the eighteenth century. Writing in 1661, Dr John Ray, the naturalist, who then visited Scotland, remarks: "The ordinary country houses are pitiful cots, built of stone, and covered with turves, having in them but one room, many of them no chimneys, the windows very small, broke, and not glazed."

An improved style of farm-dwelling proceeded about the close of the century. Farm-houses were now erected in stone, each containing from three to six apartments. But the door still opened into the farm-yard, as did nearly all the windows.

The farmer, with his wife and children, breakfasted on porridge... Dinner for the entire household was served in the ha' or kitchen. At noon the gudewife, with her maidens, proceeded in the centre of the well-swept earthen floor to erect the timber or iron trestles... In the farmer's kitchen supper was served at seven o'clock. There were ordinarily two courses—first, kale-brose, then oat cakes and milk.⁵

Much of their lives revolved around the land, whether it was owned or rented, and without a trade options were limited for upward mobility.

1788. June 13.	Pair shoes to Robert Burns,	5s. 9d.
„ July 11.	„ Mrs Burns,	4s. 6d.
„ Sept.	Two pair,	. . 12s.

⁵ <https://electricScotland.com/history/sociallife/chapter7.htm>

5.1.3 Land ownership

Scotland in the eighteenth century was, to quote Smout, ‘a landowners’ world’.²¹ Concentrated patterns of land ownership in Scotland compared with the rest of Europe meant that landlords were a powerful force in the country, one that was ultimately responsible for a ‘revolution from above’ in terms of agricultural improvement.²² During this period the relationship of the landed classes to their estates underwent significant change. Beginning in the second half of the seventeenth, feudal power structures steadily diminished in the Lowlands of Scotland: ‘land was increasingly seen by many as an asset to be exploited rather than simply the basis of personal authority and family power’.²³ After 1745, landlords sought to transform their lands into ‘efficient income machines’.²⁴ This process resulted in the introduction of new industries and farming methods, and produced a dramatic reorganisation of the rural economy along commercial lines that, by 1830, had been experienced by all parts of Scotland, including the most remote.²⁵ These changes were readily embraced by a receptive landowning class.²⁶ Feudal relationships, nevertheless, persisted longer in the Highlands. As Tom Devine states, ‘the aristocratic world of the period was one of competitive display where social standing was increasingly defined by material status’.²⁷ Agricultural improvement and the exploitation of mineral resources were ways in which estate owners could finance their aristocratic lifestyles and the upkeep of their physical property.²⁸ Improvement on many estates was also

– Historical geographies of lime burning in Scotland Douglas Mitchell⁶

“A lime kiln is a kiln used for the calcination of limestone (calcium carbonate) to produce the form of lime called quicklime (calcium oxide).” The emissions etc must have been quite unhealthy for those living nearby - like living next to a chemical plant without any safety features used today. How long they were living on this particular farm is unknown. Interesting that it is labeled with his surname which might mean as long time tenants their name was recognizable. It was not unusual for a rental to

⁶ <https://theses.gla.ac.uk/81481/1/2020MitchellDPhD.pdf>

pass from one generation to the next. Did he eventually buy the land after some years? Did John and his family work the ground or the lime? Hard to say at this point. My guess is that this was an “intermittent” kiln used on an as needed basis. Perhaps he did both. As a renter he was on the low end of the system and life was likely rough. Or he could have rented this place after he raised his family and they had all moved on. Hard to say.



Limekiln at Boddin Point II, built 1700s, Angus, Scotland.

While not the same region of Scotland, the following gives a sense of the time period and things happening around the Forbes family, who could have been in a similar position as ‘crofters’.

The Highland Clearances

- One of the main forms of forced emigration was due to the Highland Clearances that took place in the 18th and 19th centuries.
- During this period thousands of crofters were forcibly evicted from their land by the landowners to make way for the more profitable intensive sheep-farming or deer hunting.
- These crofters often had little alternative to move as they were faced with high rents and little legal protection.
- Many of those evicted chose to move to large industrial towns such as Glasgow where they experienced cramped tenement living and poor working conditions in factories. To avoid this, many people chose to emigrate to Canada where they could continue farming.

Scots and Emmigration⁷

A GOOD READ: [The Scottish Clearances: A History of the Dispossessed, 1600-1900](#)

Traditionally, crofts are situated on large estates, and are rented from the landowner. Landlords can have many crofts on their estate, and there are over 17,000 crofts in Scotland. But, the quest for a fair pattern of land ownership has not been easy. 432 private owners control half the land in Scotland, a quarter of the country is still sporting estate. Much of the Highlands remain in the hands of the 50 largest estates.⁸

We can guess that the kiln near John was similar to those included here - one being in very nearby Montrose, the other is two hours south at [Ayr, Scotland](#). Lime had multiple uses including fertilizer and as building material. The whole process is well described [here](#).

⁷ <https://www.nms.ac.uk/media/59284/scots-emigration-handling.pdf>

*Lime burning was an essential resource in the development of Scottish agriculture and industry during the 18th and 19th centuries. Lime was produced by burning limestone at high temperatures using kilns. Lime kilns, which ranged widely in form and scale, became important features of the rural economy, and their remains are a common sight in many parts of Scotland today.*⁹



Kiln at Ayr¹⁰

John, Sr's third child **David Forbes (1770)** had a son **John born in 1802** who would have been 30 years old at the time of the survey map of Stracathro. Interestingly, there is a chance that this 1802-John left Scotland for the Colonies in 1834. Perhaps he was the renter and left two years after the map was drawn. Our

⁹ <https://theses.gla.ac.uk/81481/1/2020MitchellDPhD.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://doriccolumns.wordpress.com/industry/agriculture/lime-kilns/>

guess is that the name on the map refers to John, the 66 year old, by himself or with his perhaps wife Jean Bain. He was likely an old sharecropper at the time of the map. His children grew up and left the farm for what seemed to be better opportunities now available in the cities being industrialized.

Of note, similar to the USA of late, there is a trend toward returning to the land, going back to the farms to live and work. A BBC report highlights a documentary about “farming life on the islands and how age-old methods are being preserved and passed on to inspire and inform young islanders;” [*Capturing the unique rhythm of Scottish crofting life.*](#)

Whether or not John, Sr. died in Stracathro is unknown. By age twenty his oldest child, daughter **Jean (1764)** was married in **Newburgh, Fife**. His son David married a woman from Oathlaw, where John Sr. had been married, and John Sr’s other son William (3ggf), like his sister, married someone from Newburgh.

Regarding John, Sr’s next child, **Alexander**, born in 1772, there is an overabundant number of Alexander Forbes in the marriage records to determine which, if any, of them is “our” Alexander. It’s ditto regarding death records, far too many to determine with any accuracy. The same is true for his youngest child, daughter **Ann** (1777).



Limekiln at Boddin Point I, built 1700s, Angus, Scotland.

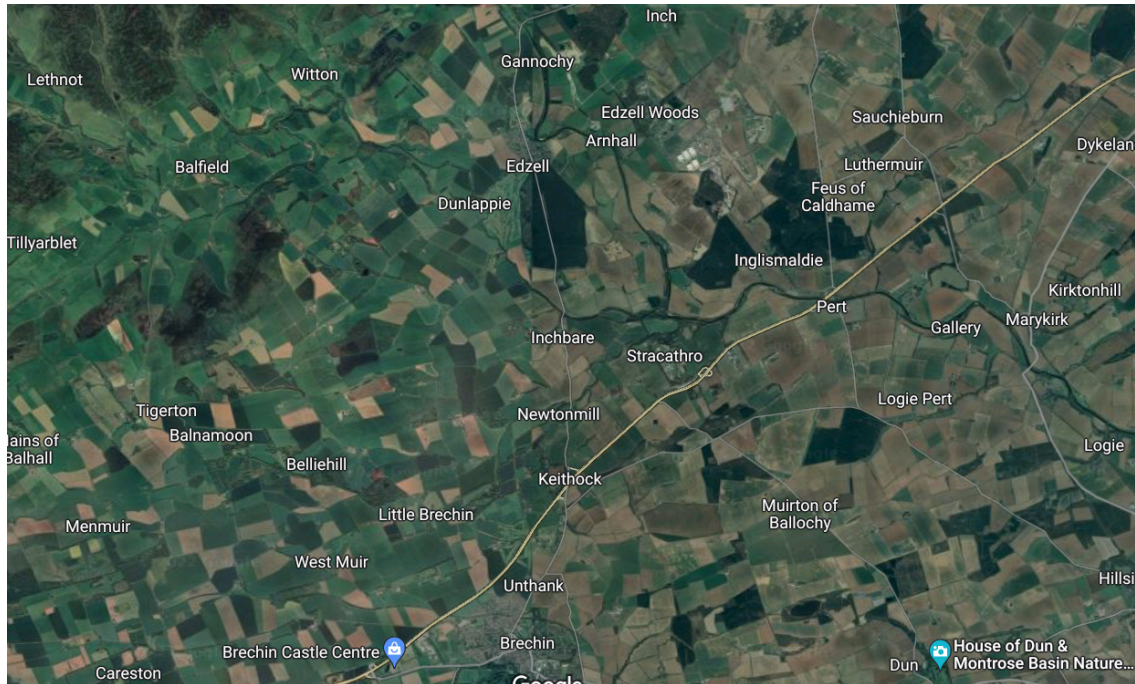
Photos are from an amazingly beautiful collection [Montrose to Ethie – Into the mist](#)

Stracathro is not included in either the 1799 nor 1845 Statistical Accounts compiled by The Church of Scotland, while Oathlaw, Brechin, Edzell, Dundee are included. It may be folded in with Brechin or Edzell. Stracathro did have a parish church as of 1791 so why they were not included is unclear. Details of this tiny speck of Scotland are hard to come by but the hunt continues.

The population of Edzell in 1751 was 862, and it rose to 963 in 1792-3.¹¹ It seems there was a lime kiln in Edzell and it is

¹¹ https://www.electricscotland.com/history/statistical/The_statistical_account_of_Scotland10.pdf

described at length in the Statistical Account. We can assume similar circumstances existed just four miles away in Stracathro.



Stracathro House is an A-listed Palladian-style mansion, overlooking the Cruick Water. In 1775, the Stracathro Estate, which extended to almost 800 hectares (2,000 acres), was bought by Patrick Cruickshank who had made his fortune in Jamaica. His brother, Alexander inherited the property and employed the Aberdeen-based architect Archibald Simpson (1790–1847) to build the house between 1824 and 1827, together with a deer-park and gardens. In 1874, the house and estate was purchased by Sir James Campbell (1790–1876), Lord Provost of Glasgow and father of Prime Minister Sir Henry Campbell-Bannerman (1836–1908).¹²



¹² <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stracathro>

Population Table.

Number of souls in 1755	862	In the village	-	117
----- in 179 $\frac{1}{2}$	963	In the country	-	846
Males	-	Married persons	-	294
Females	-	Children of each mar-		
Under 10	-	riage at an average	4 $\frac{1}{2}$	
Males	-	Widowers	-	14
Females	-	Widows	-	24
Between 10 and 20	-	Bachelors above 50	-	10
Males	-	Unmarried householders		
Females	-	under 50	-	10
Between 20 and 50	-	Unmarried women above		
Males	-	45	-	8
Females	-	Episcopalians	-	40
Between 50 and 70	-	Bereans	-	10
Males	-	Seceders	-	2
Females	-	Roman Catholic	-	1
Between 70 and 100	-	Persons not connected		
Males	-	with any denomina-		
Females	-	tion	-	2
Persons				

Population Table for Edzell 1793

108

Statistical Account

Persons who cannot read,		Alchouse-keepers	-	4
strangers	-	Smiths	-	5
Proprietors (non resi-	3	Tailors	-	9
dent)	-	Waulkmiller	-	1
Clergyman	-	Masons	-	2
Schoolmasters (1 parish,	1	Drystone dykers	-	3
1 Society, 1 private)	3	Wheelwrights and turn-		
Average scholars taught		ers	-	2
English, writing, arith-		Wrights	-	5
metic	-	Shoemakers	-	5
Merchant	-	Flaxdressers	-	4
Shopkeepers	-	Weavers	-	13
Maltman	-	Lint-miller	-	1
Carter	-	Houses inhabited	-	205
Male farm servants	-	----- built within	4	
Female ditto	-	years	-	24
Day labourers	-	----- turned to other		
Cottarmen, servants to	17	purposes, ditto	-	6
their landlords	-			
	16			

The infrequency and non-inclusion of the place name Stracathro in records, books, and the like is a bit frustrating. Moreso when it is mentioned ten times in the "[Angus or Forfarshire, the land and people, descriptive and historical](#)" book but it is only used as a reference point in relation to one of its neighboring parishes of which full paragraphs of description are provided. In a partial listing of monuments in Stracathro churchyard¹³ there is no mention of Forbes or HillHead, nor of a Couper, Bain, or otherwise related person. The earliest persons listed would have been born in the early 1800's.

Recap: The Forbes of **Brechin** arrived on the record in the 1600s, but possibly as early as the 1400s by historical account. **Daniel Forbes**, the first ancestor of record in this line, 7th great grandfather, married into the **Langsandie** family, who were landowners for some time via the **Speids**. He had eight children. His son **Alexander, Sr.** had two wives and four children in Brechin. His first and only son, **Alexander, Jr.** had only one child, a boy named **John**, at **Oathlaw/Tannadice** (8 miles SW of Brechin), probably named after his grandfather. He was the first Forbes to be born away from Brechin proper in three generations. **John Forbes**, 4th great grandfather had six children on a rented farm quite close to their previous in-laws, the Speids. Only two of John Sr's sons married and had children - **William**, 3rd great grandfather, and his brother **David**, 3rd great uncle. All John's children were born in **Stracathro**, four miles north of Brechin. **NEXT:** the Forbes in Dundee.

¹³ <http://dustydocs.com/linkSpecial/163/156614/angus-kincardineshire.html>