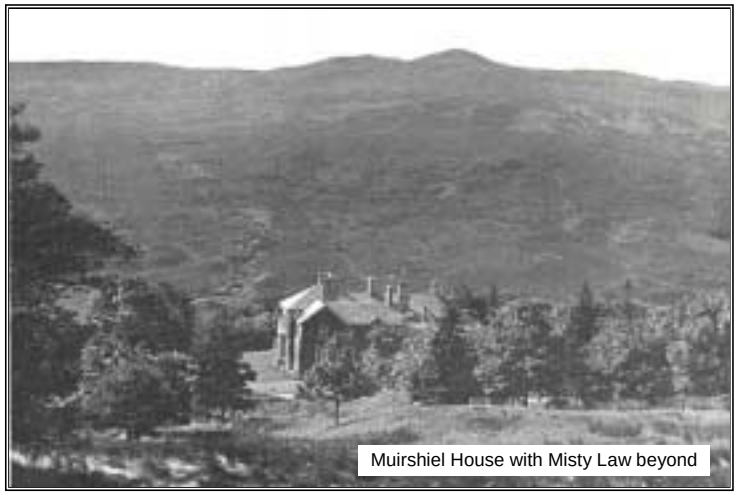
A History of
Muirshiel House and Shooting Estate

Muirshiel Country Park is built on the site of a Victorian shooting lodge and estate. No signs remain of the substantial shooting lodge, which was sited in the car park where the new timber building stands today. But many clues to this former use can still be seen around the Park, such as the ornamental plants e.g. Monkey Puzzle, Rhododendron and Oriental Spruce and the remnants of the walled garden and tennis court.

Muirshiel House

The house was built some time between 1830 and 1875: it is difficult to be more accurate due to the lack of specific historical evidence. An unofficial census in 1821 does not mention the house, nor is it shown on John Thompson's 1826 map, and it is not mentioned in the Fowler's 1831 Directory. The first absolute record of the house is in a cash book of 1875, where there are entries of payments to numerous tradesmen and of 'poor rates', beginning on 1 January 1875 and continuing throughout that year.



Muirshiel House with Misty Law beyond

Another local document 'The Cairn of Lochwinnoch' takes the story a step further when it adds: "*John Millar Esq., a merchant of Glasgow and of Queenside and Muirshiel, is erecting two servants' houses and a cattle shed in October 1831. He intends to take in ground for a garden and has now enclosed it. The ground stands at the foot of Mistylaw Muir and he intends to build a house for his gardener near the said Mistylaw hill this summer. He intends also to grow corn on his improved ground this year. Mr Millar will have nearly 20 acres of crop this summer adjoining Duchal Muir and he has planted nearly six acres of plantation so that in a few years time Muirshiel will be a delightful paradise*". This was perhaps the foundations for what was to become Muirshiel.

Queen Victoria set the fashion for shooting estates when she bought Balmoral in 1852 and started the enduring Royal habit of a country sports holiday in the Highlands. In the past it had only been the aristocrats, born into wealth, who were rich enough to have these expensive holiday retreats but by the mid 19th century the Industrial Revolution had enabled merchants, traders and factory owners to become the wealthy entrepreneurs of their age. These 'nouveau riche' as they became known often used their new found prosperity to buy large houses and country estates close to the mills or factories which they owned.

So it seems likely that Muirshiel house was built following Queen Victoria's example by a wealthy businessman, possibly John Miller or perhaps the Lord Conyngham, in the mid 1800's as a country retreat and somewhere to entertain clients and impress associates.

Muirshiel's Owners

Muirshiel had many owners in its short but lively history. By **1877** the estate had changed ownership to **Lord Francis N. Conyngham** MP, 2nd Marquis of Conyngham, who built a memorial for his parents in the grounds.

Folios for the lands of Muirshiel and Queenside Muir are kept at the Registers for Scotland in Edinburgh. An entry of 24 October **1910**, mentions Muirshiel owned by **Gilbert Thompson Bates** of Liverpool and shows that the estate was still being used by wealthy business people from out with the area who wanted to spend their leisure time in the spectacular setting of the Calder glen. According to Viscount Muirshiel they were involved at a high level with a major British shipping company.

In the **1920**'s one of the daughters of the Bates family, Lady Mary Fletcher, married the next owner, **Sir Edward Lionel Fletcher**, a commander in the Royal Naval Reserve who was also involved in the shipping industry. Sir Lionel was considered one of the finest shots of his day and led the British team in international competition. Shooting was his passion and with dedicated help from gamekeepers and estate-workers such as William Eadie and Peter Clark he made Muirshiel one of the finest sporting estates in Scotland.

Muirshiel House - front

Muirshiel was up for sale again in 1935, by auction with an asking price of £8500 for the mansion house, 1000 brace grouse moor, river and loch fishing, two sheep farms and a number of cottages. The estate extended to 3300 acres, including some 2500 acres of hill grazing and heather, 442 acres of rough pasture and 117 acres of policies around the house.

The mansion house, substantially built of stone and harled with slated roof, is described as having the following accommodation on two main floors; hall, dining room, drawing room, gun room, eight bedrooms, two dressing rooms, two bathrooms, a hall for servants and five rooms for servants. There was also a kitchen, a scullery, a pantry, heating chamber and ample range of cellarage as well as offices, a garage for four cars, the gardener's lodge, an entrance lodge, two cottages and kennels. Attractive grounds surrounded the house and there was a tennis court as well as a walled garden and delightful woodland walks.

On 24 June **1935** the estate was bought by **Baron Howard of Glossop**, Derbyshire for £7250. The Fitzalan Howards were keen sportsmen and continued to improve the woodlands and estate grounds. This photograph, taken at Muirshiel, shows Hon. Miles Fitzalan Howard being presented with a silver salver by Mr Archibald McKellar, on the occasion of his 21st birthday, on 21 July 1936. His father Baron Howard, the Duke of Norfolk and Baroness Beaumont are present along with family

21st July 1936

and invited guests including: the Hon. Mariegold Fitzalan Howard, the Hon. Michael Fitzalan Howard and Violet Lady Beaumont. Other guests were William and James Struthers, Alexander Walker, Mr and Mrs James Speirs and Miss Jessie Thomson.

In **1939** some of the lands were sold to the Local Authority and then in **1944** more was sold to the company of **Keir and Cawdor Ltd** who were interested in developing the barytes mine. Colonel Bill Stirling, a managing director with the firm, stayed at Muirshiel house from about 1945 till 1950: the last occupant of the magnificent shooting lodge. After his departure the estate fell into dereliction and the house was eventually demolished along with all the lodges and cottages except for one remaining gardener's cottage below the main car park. Keir and Cawdor sold the estate to Renfrewshire County Council on 21 June 1952 for £16,000.

The Shooting Estate

The years between the wars were the greatest days of the estate at Muirshiel. Sir Edward Fletcher and the next owner, Lord Howard of Glossop, made it into one of the finest sporting residences in Scotland and one which many of the best shots in the United Kingdom visited. It is said that Sir Winston Churchill, the wartime Prime Minister, was one of the guests at Muirshiel and that he was fitted out with the appropriate sportswear at a draper's shop in Lochwinnoch.

Shooting butt Muirshiel Moor

The John D. Wood brochures announcing the sale of Muirshiel in 1935 contain a lot of information about the shooting there. "*The moor is in splendid order having been well drained and burned and there was a large stock of birds left from last season. It is well butted and is easily walked. It adjoins to the north the famous moor of Duchal and has yielded some exceptional bags for its acreage. In 1932, a good grouse year in this district, 1304 brace were shot. Hares and woodcocks are plentiful and rabbits have been killed in very large numbers. Plantations of spruce suitable for pheasant coverts. Duck have been reared on dam beyond the house*".

The coming of the family to Muirshiel for the grouse shooting season was always regarded by the local people as a major social event. "*Lord Howard usually brought two cooks, six table maids and six cleaners when he came to Renfrewshire*", said Tom Clark, estate worker. "*He had a beautiful Rolls Royce motor car which attracted the attention of everyone in the village. It was kept in the garage where the stables were situated. A lorry was sent down from Muirshiel to Lochwinnoch station to collect the domestic staff when they arrived*".

Picnic lunch for the shoot

Lord Michael Fitzalan Howard himself remembers. "*We got the overnight sleeper train from England up to Glasgow and then travelled out to Lochwinnoch railway station*", he said. "*Peter Clark*, (Tom's Father*) who was an excellent fellow and a very fine worker, came to meet us in a Morris lorry and take us up to Muirshiel. We were out shooting on the moor by 9.30 the very same morning*", he added. Lord Michael has many other happy memories of Muirshiel. "*Peter Clark always took a pony and cart out onto the moors to gather up the game*", he said.

"*We shot the moor on a two-day cycle, the first day taking us up onto Queenside Muir for six drives and the second being confined to rabbit shooting in the morning prior to an afternoon in the Windyhill area where we had two drives for grouse. Sometimes we even went as far as the Kaim where we had access to rented shooting. We usually had a picnic lunch out on the moor*".

He also remembers it was boys from the Kibble School in Paisley, a residential place of correction for young offenders, who did the beating in the Muirshiel area on shooting days. Their duties were to advance towards the "*Guns*", hidden in shooting butts made from earth, wood and heather, shouting and making as much noise as possible and striking the moorland vegetation with sticks to flush up the grouse.

When the season was at its height, the moor was a veritable hive of activity with the shouts of beaters mingling with the constant echo of gunshots as the marksmen fired away at the grouse flying low across the heather, uttering their distinctive alarm calls. Retrievers were used to gather up birds which had been shot. "*The Kibble boys wore red overalls and carried red flags so that they could be easily seen, both by the guns and the grouse* ", said Lord Michael, "*I believe, however, that occasionally one or two of them managed to abscond during the course of a day's shooting*".

Shooting party on the moor

The table below shows the astonishing numbers and range of game being shot:

	1932	1933	1934	1935/36	1936/37	1937/38	1938/39
Grouse	2608	1473	1507	824	1837	548	1020
Pheasants	27	9	2				
Partridges	0	0	7	2	11	9	5
Hares	149	215	145	65	50	63	55
Rabbits	1377	2228	3000	2642	1376	1297	2141
Woodcock	16	47	30	20	5	16	11
Black game	9	7	11	11	5		
Snipe	22	17	15	32	8	27	22
Various	1	4	3		53	33	54
Total	4209	4000	4720	3596	3345	1993	3308

Based on original research by Derek Parker (1988).

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