



# **‘Knowing Your Place’ A Place-Name Walk in Markinch**

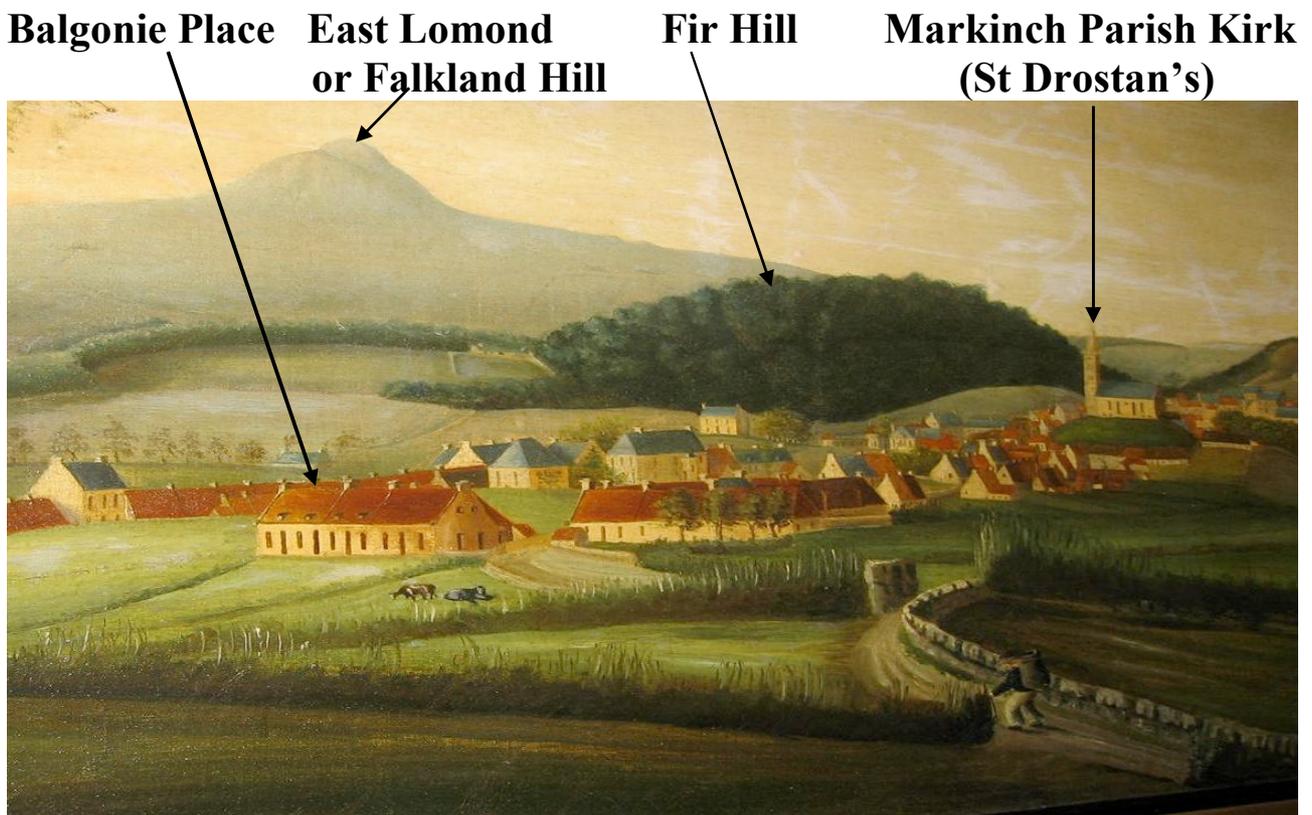


Fig. 1. Painting of Markinch c.1820, reproduced by permission of Markinch Parish Church.

**Constructed in conjunction with the MARKINCH HERITAGE GROUP and  
introduced, with place-name commentary,  
by Dr Simon Taylor.**

**An exploration on foot of some places and their names  
in and around Markinch.**

**Duration: about 3 hours. Stout footwear required.**

## A Place-Name Walk in Markinch

### *Introduction*

What is a place-name walk? It is a walk through past and present, through landscape and language. It is an attempt to see the modern environment through the eyes of the people who gave it the names which we still use today, taking the names themselves as our guides.

These names are guides also to the languages of the past: for Fife these are chiefly **Pictish**, **Gaelic** and **Scots**, together spanning around 1,500 years, with some names going back even further, perhaps into the first millennium BC, names such as **Fife** itself, or the river-names **Leven** and **Ore**. However, earlier than that we cannot go: we have no idea, for example, what language or languages were spoken by the people who built the henge at Balfarg, the stone circle at Balbirnie or the burial cairn at Law Head, all of which were constructed between about 4,000 and 5,000 years ago. There may be echoes of their languages still in some of our place-names, but if so, they are too faint and distorted for us to hear. This rich linguistic past brings with it so-called dating horizons: this means that a name coined in Scots, such as **Brunton**, can scarcely be older than the thirteenth century; one coined in Gaelic, such as **Auchmuty**, cannot have been coined much before c.1000 AD, nor much after the 1190s, although it is first recorded in 1240; while names like **Markinch**, which could be either Pictish or Gaelic, may go back to the eighth century or even earlier.

On this walk we will encounter everything from the recent appropriation of earlier farms and estates to the needs of the new town of **Glenrothes**, a name created in the late 1940s, through the estate planning and naming of the early modern period, right back to the medieval church and settlement of **Markinch** and the ancient legal assembly place of **Dalginch**.

**A word about the lay-out:** main names are given in **bold** followed by one or two early forms of that name in *italics*, along with the date when the form was recorded. The meaning of a word or place-name is given in single inverted commas.

### ***The Route***

Starts at Markinch Station [new ticket office, 2009, beside the old one, 1847], built on a piece of land formerly called **Pennys** [1766]; running west from here is Landel Street named from the holder of a rig here as shown on the plan of 1766.

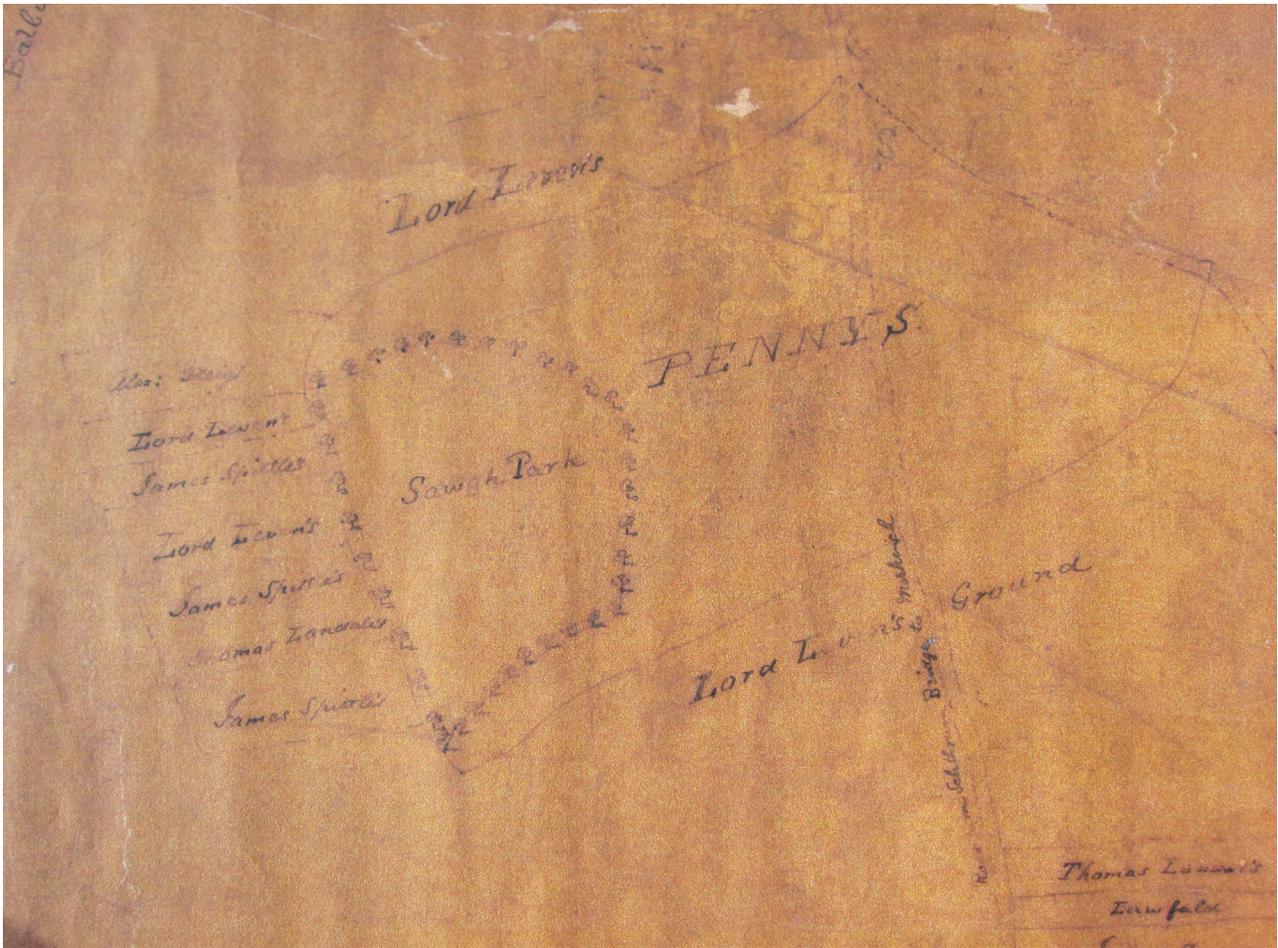


Fig. 2. RHP22135 (1766), detail. Markinch railway station probably stands on the piece of land called *Pennys*; beside (or within) this land is *Sawgh Park* ‘willow park/field’: presumably the trees marked around its perimeter are willows. The names attached to the row of rigs from north to south are: Thomas Greig’s, Lord Leven’s, James Spittle’s, Lord Leven’s, James Spittle’s, Thomas Landale’s (whence **Landel Street**), James Spittle’s. In lower right corner: Thomas Landal’s and *Lawfald* [i.e. Scots *fauld* ‘fold, pen; enclosed piece of ground used for cultivation, small field’ on the law, applied to the hill also referred to in the name **Law Head**]. Reproduced by permission of the National Archives of Scotland.

Turn left out of the station and head south past the business park, formerly Haig’s Whisky bottling plant, to the edge of the car park. Looking to the north-east, a good view of **Law Head** [1856, ‘head or top of the hill (Scots *law*)’], with the new cemetery and a prehistoric cairn on the summit.

Looking to the south, to the 63 steps going down to **Parley Brae** [1856] below the main-line railway viaduct, over the valley of the **Leven** [*Leuine* c.1050: early Celtic, probably ‘smooth-flowing river’] i.e. **Strathleven**, a name no longer used, but once referring to the whole territory of Markinch parish [*Stradleuene* c.1165: Pictish or Gaelic ‘valley of the Leven’], with **Sythrum**<sup>1</sup> [*Scheithum* 1471: perhaps a Gaelic name containing *sìth*, ‘fairy hill or mound’; more generally ‘the Other World’, referring to a mound or small hill] on the hill opposite, and the site of **Sythrum Mill** [1511] below (originally grain, later flax). Upstream is **Middle Mill**, [1799] with old mill-cottages and (gutted) mill-building dating from c.1800; and a short distance further west, **West Mill**. On the other side of the Leven is **Bighty** [*Bychty* 1511: perhaps from Scots *bicht* ‘bend, loop’, referring primarily to the Bighty Burn], formerly a farm, now a suburb of **Glenrothes** [a new name coined for a new town in the late 1940s, using the title of the main land-holder in the area, the earl of Rothes], the Bighty Burn flowing into the Leven near Sythrum.

Head along the footpath which follows the disused railway line to Leslie. To the right are the lands of **Sweet Bank** [1828: Scottish English ‘a bank or slope of good land’?], originally part of the lands of **Balbirnie** [*Balebrenin* c.1168: Gaelic ‘wet or well-watered farm’].

Go past **Balbirnie Mills** [*Babirnie wake mill* 1662<sup>2</sup> i.e. a waulkmill, for waulking or fulling cloth] onto the old main road from Kirkcaldy to the north (via the New Inn).

Turn left onto the old main road, over the mill-lade to **Balbirnie Brig** [*Balbirnie Bridg* 1684] over the Leven, to the lands of **Auchmuty** [*Admulty* c.1290: Gaelic ‘(place at the) ford (*àth*) of the wedders (G *mult* ‘wedder, castrated ram’, the ford probably crossing the Leven where the Balbirnie Brig now stands], making a short detour up the hill to the south, along the old main road, to **The Plaisterers** [*Plasterers* 1775], an inn built by Thomas Alburn, an Englishman, ‘the best plaisterer that ever was yet in Scotland’, c.1725, after whom this suburb of Glenrothes is named, **Alburne Park**. The inn stood on or beside a small hill (Scots *knowe*)

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<sup>1</sup> Pronounced *sithrum*, with stress on *thrum*.

<sup>2</sup> During a great storm of rain and wind in November 1662 ‘att Babirnie wake mill ther was a yowng woman ther lost, when the mill was goeing’ (*Lamont’s Diary* 157).

formerly called *Wanders Know* or *Wandersknows* (1781),<sup>3</sup> later known as *Alburn Knowe*. When you come to Markinch kirkyard look out for Thomas Alburn's grave (see below).

Retrace steps northwards over Balbirnie Brig and up the old main road (now pedestrianised) to the modern road, with **Prestonhall** [*Priesty Hall* 1775: Scots 'hall or big hoose (sometimes used ironically) associated with a priest?'] on left, Sweet Bank on right. Cross with care this busy modern road from Markinch to Leslie (via **Cadham** [*Caldhame* 1487; Scots *cauld hame*]), which c.1750 replaced an earlier road cutting through the Balbirnie Estate. In this way both the north-south and the east-west road network was displaced in order to create a more private space around Balbirnie House.

Go a short distance into Balbirnie Estate, the policies around Balbirnie House, along Mount Frost Drive, with **Mount Frost** on the left [*Minfrost* 1821; *Mount Frost* 1914: Scottish English, an exposed hill, contrasting with the positively named Sweet Bank immediately to the east? Or inspired by Cadham (*Caldhame* 1487, Scots *cauld hame* 'cold home or settlement') immediately to the west?].

Turn right towards the east, along bridleway past **Wester Markinch** [*Wester Merkinch* 1492] and **Inchinnie** [*Inchawne* 1491; *Inchehony* 1512: Gaelic *innis* 'island; piece of raised ground surrounded by bog', the second element is difficult, but it may be Gaelic *aonach* 'assembly-place'], today where caravans assemble, being the Balbirnie Park Caravan Site, past the old estate office of Balbirnie Estate, now called KROWDRAH [try reading it from right to left!], at the corner of **Croft** Road [*Croft* 1766, Scots *croft* 'an enclosed piece of ground', in this case formerly of about 6 acres].

Up Croft Road and along Wellpark Terrace to Commercial Street (formerly the High Road to Balgonie). Up to the parish kirk of **Markinch** [Pictish or Gaelic 'horse- or steed-island', the island (Gaelic *innis* or its Pictish equivalent) probably being the raised ground on which the kirk and old village stand], past the site of the narrow close or wynd called **The Throatie**.<sup>4</sup> The kirk is dedicated to St Drostan, a Pictish saint whose cult is centred on Old Deer, Buchan, Aberdeenshire, and to John the Baptist ['the

<sup>3</sup> This may derive from a shortened form of Scots *wanderer* 'wanderer, traveller', with reference to those travelling up and down the main road between Kirkcaldy and the north which ran past it. Or, more ominously, it may be the Older Scots word *wandreth* or *wander* meaning 'sorrow, distress, misfortune'.

<sup>4</sup> Information from Colin Thomson, MHG, who located it as running across the small memorial garden from Galloway's towards Selkirk Place.

church of St John the Baptist and of St Mo-Drust the confessor, of Markinch' (ecclesia sancti Johannis Baptiste et sancti Modrusti confessoris de *Marchynche* (*St A. Lib.*)), was dedicated on 19 July 1243 by David de Bernham bishop of St Andrews].<sup>5</sup> The kirk, with its fine tower dating from around 1100, with early links to St Serf's monastery, Loch Leven, sits on a raised piece of ground with a good view to the south over the 'new town' of Markinch, begun to be built in 1796: Glass Street (formerly *The Causey* 1765, a causeway built up over boggy ground immediately south of the kirkyard), and beyond it High Street, formerly *Howie Gate* 1765, 'hollow road', i.e. a road with steep sides. In the kirkyard, near the base of the tower, you'll see the grave-slab of Thomas Alburn the Plaisterer of *Wanders Know* 'who died about the year 1713 aged 55 years', and his descendants.

Then up Kirk Street past the end of **Manse Road**, in which is Mansefield, built as the parish manse in 1655 and reconstructed by Thomas Barclay, 1785-6.<sup>6</sup> This is probably the site of the house and grounds of the vicar of Markinch (curtilagium vicarii), mentioned in the 1284-charter (*St A. Lib.* 420-1, for details of which, see below). The next street on the right is **School Street**, named after the old parish school, the buildings of which still stand as Nos. 11-11A (by architect Neil Ballingall 1800-01, and extended in 1825 and 1835 by Robert Hutchison).<sup>7</sup> Continue up Stob Cross Road, turning right into the park, past a fallen march stone marking the boundary between the lands of Balfour of Balbirnie (the side with B carved on it) and the earl of Leven (the side, now face down, with L) to a spot with a view over to the **Stob Cross** [probably marking a girth or sanctuary around the church, containing *Sc stob* 'stump' 'apparently denoting originally the stump of a tree, or of a standing-stone or stone cross' (*DOST*)], then walk around **Markinch Hill**, along one of the **Terraces** past the **Playfield** [the *Play-fields* 1790s, Scots 'an open space for public festivities, performances etc'; both the Terraces and the Playfield were perhaps associated with the assemblies at Dalginch]; down **The Hill Rigg** to Northall Rd., then turn left following Northall Rd. under the railway line to Northall Cemetery, opened in 1853, and probably the original site of **Dalginch** [*Dalginge* c.1165; *Dalgynche* c.1200: Gaelic

<sup>5</sup> There is an image of St Drostan on the war memorial, which now stands on the green beside the Laurel Bank Hotel.

<sup>6</sup> The present manse is in Kirk Wynd, by James Gillespie & Scott, 1901-02 (architectural information from Gifford 1988, 320).

<sup>7</sup> Architectural information from Gifford 1988, 320.

‘thorn island’ (*Dealg-Innis*); described in the 12th century as the chief place of justice in Fife]. Beside the cemetery, on the other side of the Markinch Burn, is **Northall**, formerly called **Prickhilly**.

Retrace your steps under the railway line, turning first left, still following Northall Rd., then right along Brunton Drive and the edge of **Brunton** estate [the *Burntoun* 1435, Scots ‘farm on a burn’, the burn being the Back Burn, also known as the Markinch Burn],<sup>8</sup> looking over to **Backside (of Balgonie)**, changed to **Barnslee** c.1800; now demolished. The road back into town skirts a large open piece of ground on the right, the ‘meadow’ given by William de Valence to St Andrews Priory in 1284 (see *Glimpses of Markinch in the Thirteenth Century*, below). Then up Brunton Road: going down Brunton Road to the ‘meadow’ is still known locally as ‘gaun doun the Stank’, *stank* being a Scots word for a pool or ditch. Then to Glass Street, turning left along the High Street and so to the station.

### *Glimpses of Markinch in the Thirteenth Century*

Edward I of England was in Markinch on Sunday 12th August 1296, when the place was described as: ‘*Merkynche*, ou il na que le mouster et iii mesons’ (‘where there is only the minster and three houses’) (Stevenson, *Documents* ii, 30). There will of course have been cottages, where the bulk of the population lived, but they were too lowly to count. Two of these three (more substantial) houses belonged to the prior of St Andrews and the vicar respectively, as is clear from *St A. Lib.* 420–1, which is dated 1284, twelve years before Edward I’s visit. This charter describes land gifted to St Andrews Priory by William de Valence thus:

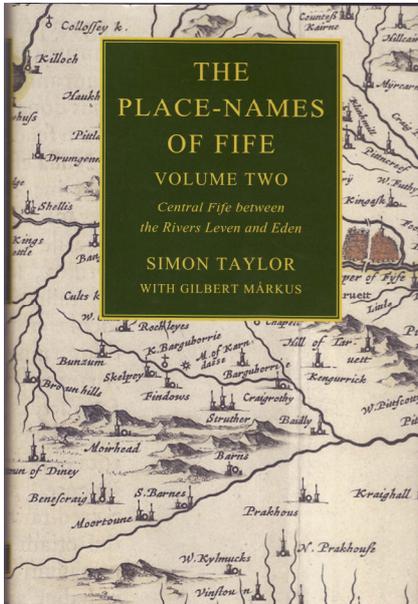
all that meadow (*pratun*) which lies to the south of the grounds of the house (*curtilagii*) of the prior and convent of St Andrews at Markinch along with that plot or piece (*placia*) of land lying between the said meadow and the cemetery of the church of Markinch by the following marches: beginning at the south side of the cemetery and descending towards the south by a ditch (*fossura*) beside the causey (*calcetum*) ‘as far as another ditch between the said meadow and the arable land of Markinch, and so towards the east by the ditch stretching towards the north as far as the ditch between the grounds of the house of the prior and those of the vicar.’ (usque in aliam fossuram inter dictum pratun et terram arabilem de *Markynch*’ et ita uersus orientem per illam fossuram extendentem se

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<sup>8</sup> In 1556 we are told that ‘solemn business’ was conducted ‘at the thorn-tree of Brunton’ (apud spinam de *Brontoun*).

uersus aquilonem usque illam fossuram inter curtilagium prioris et curtilagium vicarii). He also grants them the right to graze two cows with their calves [literally ‘followers’] of one year on his common pasture ‘for the support of the gardener who lives in the grounds of the house of the canons at Markinch’ (ad opus ortolani residentis in curtilagio eorundem apud *Markyng*’).

Adapted from *PNF 2*, 398-9.



Full details of all these names, and many more in and around Markinch, can be found in:

*The Place-Names of Fife, vol. 2: Central Fife between the Rivers Leven and Eden* by Simon Taylor with Gilbert Márkus (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2008) 550 pp.

Price £24

Available from the publisher or the author

Full details of most of the place-names encountered in the walk can be found in *PNF 2* (see inset). For each name these details include: early forms, with their date and source, and the context in which they are recorded; a full discussion of its language and meaning, and how it relates to the landscape; and (for most names) the local pronunciation. This information will not be repeated here, but I will take the opportunity to add names and details omitted from *PNF 2*. All the names in this section are listed in alphabetical order.

# after a name means that it is obsolete.

## CROFT

*Croft* 1766 RHP22135 [a ‘good piece of ground’ of about 4 <Scots> acres; 1 Scotch acre = 1.26 Imperial]

Sc *croft* ‘a piece of enclosed land, or small field, used for tillage or pasture; a small holding.’ (*DOST*). An early instance quoted by *DOST* is in the plural: ‘in cultura que vocatur *Alriches croftys*; c.1250 *Dryburgh Liber 122*’, where the Latin equivalent is *cultura* ‘piece of plough-land’ (‘in the piece of plough-land which is called Alric’s crofts’).

The Markinch name has given rise to the street-names Croft Road and Croft Crescent.

**MIDDLE MILL**

*Middle Mill* 1799 Sasines no. 5328 [‘Mill called *Markinch Mill* or *Middle Mill*’]

*Middle Mill* 1856 OS 6 inch [shown at NO293010, between *West Mill* and *Sythrum Mill*]

Sc *middle* + Sc *miln*

One of three mills near each other on the River Leven, in the middle between Sythrum Mill to the east and West Mill to the west.

**NORTHALL**

lands called *Prickhilly* 1714 NAS GD26 sec. 5 (Leven and Melville Muniments) [(re the installation of a water wheel to drain proposed coal-workings) ‘belonging to the said Mr John Dewar upon these his lands called *Prickhilly* in the parishon of *Markinsh*’]

*North Hall* 1765 Markinch Plan/1765

*Northhall* 1822 Balfour Inventory no. 46 [‘Four acres of Land in *Prickhilly* parish of *Markinch*, commonly called *Northhall*’]

*Northhall* 1856 OS 6 inch 1st edn [*sic*]

SSE *north* + SSE *hall*

It is presumably called ‘north hall’ in relation to the centre of Markinch, which lies to the south-west. The primary meaning of Scots and SSE *hall* in place-names is ‘high-status dwelling, big hoose’, but it is often used ironically to refer to a very humble abode, especially when combined with vegetable- and bird-names e.g. Sybahall, Clochred Hall [check forms]etc. It is not clear which of these senses the original name-coiners had in mind.

From evidence recently discovered by Bruce Manson, it appears that Northhall was a name coined in the eighteenth century for lands which had previously been called Prickhilly.

**PARLEY BRAE**

*Parley Brae* 1856 OS 6 inch 1st edn

‘An elevation in the public road from Lady’s Square<sup>9</sup> to Markinch near Sythrum and immediately north of a wooden bridge over the River Leven’ (OS Name Book 92, 33).

I do not know what the derivation of this name might be, but there is no doubt that it shares it with the much better documented Parley Hill, a street-name in Culross FIF just south of Culross Abbey (NS988863), early forms of which are: *montis campum*

<sup>9</sup> Now called Lady Nina Square. The OS Name Book (early 1850s) describes *Lady’s Square* as follows: ‘A few rows of cottage houses forming a four sided figure. Chiefly occupied by Colliers – it contains a boys school’ (94, 5). Lady Nina married Charles B. Balfour, owner of Balgonie Colliery, in 1888 (see *The Scotsman*, 12 May 1913). The eponymous Lady of Lady Square was presumably an earlier Lady Balfour.

vulgo *Parlahill* vel *Uter-clois* 1560 x 1565 *RMS* iv no. 1632 [‘the field of the hill commonly (called) Parley Hill or \*Outer Close’]; et communem locum lie *Parlahill* 1581 *RMS* v no. 170 [‘and the common/communal place the Parley Hill’]; et locum communem lie *Parlawhill* 1642 *RMS* ix no. 1092 [‘and the common/communal place the Parley Hill’]; *Parlaw Hill* 1664 *RMS* xi no. 599.

### **PENNYS #**

*Pennys* 1766 RHP22135

lands called the *Pennies* 1798 Sasines no. 5063

the lot called *Pennys* 1804 Sasines no. 6695 [‘lying on the south side of Markinch’]

This is perhaps a reduced form of the Fife surname Monypenny, itself probably of Norman origin (see Black 1946 s.n.), so ‘land belonging to someone called Monypenny’.<sup>10</sup>

Markinch station was built on this land. A good impression of its situation before there was any building in this part of Markinch can be gained from RHP22135 (1766), for which see Fig. 2, above.

### **PRICKHILLY # see NORTHALL**

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Sc: Scots (language).

SSE: Scottish Standard English (language).

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<sup>10</sup> I owe this suggestion to Bruce Manson.



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Fig. 3. Markinch and environs in 1775: detail of Ainslie's Map of Fife. From a digital image kindly supplied by National Library of Scotland, and published with their permission.



**MH = Markinch Hill; P = The Plaisterers; S = Markinch Station; T = The Terraces**

Fig. 9: Sketch map of Markinch, the red arrows showing the course and direction of the walk as described in this booklet. *Drawn by L. A. Reid.*

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