

Gilalees....the Wilson connection .



Gilalees is the name of a farm high up on the Bewcastle Fells in Cumbria, in the parish of Lanercost.

My first recollection of visiting Gilalees was at the age of about 5. The people who lived there were known to us as Uncle Will, his son Uncle Tom, housekeeper Mary Burn and a young farm worker called John Pearson.

The indelible memory of Uncle Will Wilson was of a very old man with a long white beard sitting huddled over an old fashioned range.

This is a photo of him on his wedding day with his bride Mary Jane Graham, my great-grandmother's niece .



Many people we visited as young children were known as uncle or aunt so it would be many years later that I actually figured out that they really were related!

Only recently through doing some family research have we found the actual link.

Uncle Will died when I was very young so it was his son Tom that really figures in



my memories. I remember his very broad Cumbrian accent. This was Tom as a young man, but below is how I remember him, as a much older man with his house-keeper Mary Burn.

Tom's relationship or lack of relationship to his housekeeper Mary Burn was always the subject of family discussions, with the womenfolk



saying he should marry her and the men folk saying 'Let sleeping dogs lie!'..... What I remember of her would make me side with the men folk!! She was a bit of a battleaxe, but then maybe life had made her that way. There is nothing worse I suppose than living with someone who you love and not having that love reciprocated. But Tom was a typical bachelor and saw no problem!

Although I remember John Pearson I have no clear knowledge of how or why he was

there, I think he was an orphan. He left Gilalees when he married and became an electrician. Again if my memory serves me right it was a case of 'only one woman will be in this kitchen and it won't be Dorothy!!'....such was Mary Burn's determination to remain lady of the house. John later had his own business in Gilsland and Dorothy was the district nurse. My parents did keep in contact with them for quite a while but then, as often happens, lost touch. Both are now deceased.

In the early days we would visit Gilalees about once every two months, travelling from Canonbie via Longtown and Leeshill. Occasionally we would go via Penton, Bewcastle and Askerton Castle .We had an old Morris van.



The Bewcastle road formed one side of the march of the Gilalees land. I also remember my dad once telling me that some of our relations had also lived at Askerton Castle, a connection which also came to light in recent searches.

Getting back to our visits to the farm- Sometimes we would stop on the way for a picnic near one of the many burns that ran through the farm land, then it was on up the fell road to the farm and a wonderful home baked farm tea! [The farm is about 2 miles off the made road which runs from Leeshill to Gilsland.]



It is a typical fell farm. I say is because it still remains a working farm to this day

and is still visible from the main Newcastle road identifiable by it's red barn roof!



The main farm stock were Belted Galloways with a few hens and ducks, which always had to be shut in at night because of the foxes. Most

important to us were the fell ponies- a source of much fun and excitement!

There was no modern farm machinery, the most modern being an old grey Massey Ferguson tractor. Most work was done by hand including the



milking, (for the house use only) and hay making. It was at the Gilalees that I first tasted milk straight from the cow...Yuk! But the home made butter and cheese were to die for!

If my memory serves me right, my eldest brother Keith used to spend some of his summer holidays there working on the farm. Sometimes we were allowed to ride the ponies up the fell.



Part of the farm land had been taken over by the MOD and became the Spadeadam rocket testing site which at that point was all top secret. Strict instructions were given not to go too far up the fell and remain in sight of the farm!

I remember on one occasion, while riding one of the ponies, it suddenly bolted and I dropped the rein in a panic holding on



for dear life! I tried to jump off into a hay stack, missed it and injured my wrist.....I don't think I was very popular because we

*had to leave early for medical treatment!!
On yet another visit there I swallowed a
chicken bone which lodged itself in the
back of my throat....another visit to
A&E!!!!*

*Getting to the farm in the winter was quite
difficult at times. Once we only made it to
Walton because of the snow drifts, those
were the days when we really did have
hard winters.....great for us kids though!
Even rain was a problem. Once you left the
main road, two fords had to be crossed. If
there had been heavy rain high up in the
Bewcastle fells and the burns were in flood,
you could be in trouble! But it was all a
great sense of adventure for us.*

*When Tom became ill and retired, they
went to live in Askerton Keep. Later
when he died, Mary Burn
moved to Brampton to a
Sheltered Housing complex
known as Wilson
Homes.....no relation but
quite ironic in a way.
Tom was buried alongside
his parents at Lanercost Abbey*



It was when he died that I realised they really were family because some of the family heirlooms appeared in our home. This part of the jigsaw was finally put together last year through some information received from my aunt in South Africa and will now be added to the family tree.

My thanks to Marilyn Burns for sending me the photo's of Will Wilson's wedding and the young Tom.

My contact with Marilyn came through her searching for information about her great-great grandmother- my great-grandmother's sister!!.....It's a small world. Her mother also used to visit the Gilalees as a young girl.