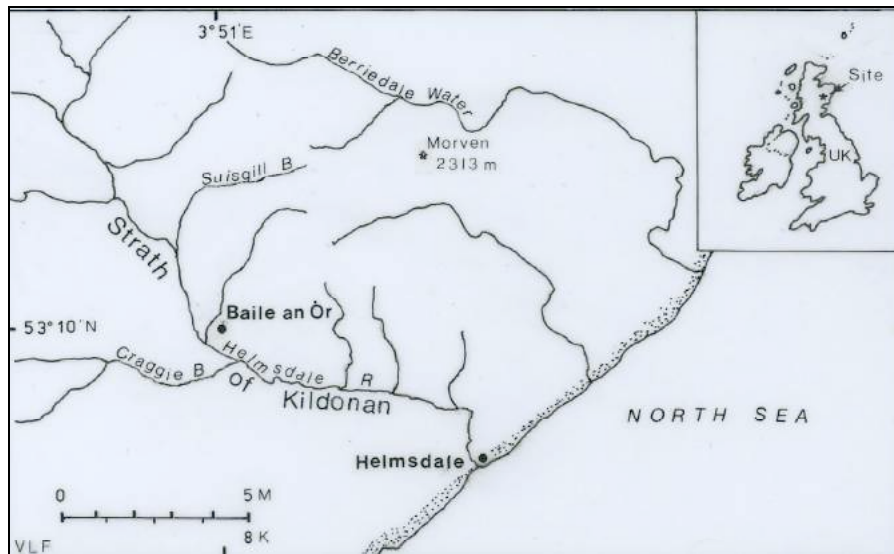


The Baile an Or project: Robert Nelson Gilchrist (1821-1877), A Scottish ‘Hargraves’!

By R.M. CALLENDER

A rare event in Scotland's history was a gold rush to the Strath of Kildonan in Sutherland in 1869. From time to time, occasional finds of gold nuggets had been reported in the local newspapers in the first half of the century, but the news had been treated with casual interest.¹ Most of the land in Sutherland was owned by the Duke of Sutherland, who either purchased the nuggets or accepted the items as gifts, and in view of the economic climate at the time, his tenants probably had little motivation to turn to prospecting.

Figure 1: *Location Bail an Ore, Scotland*



Source: Vivian Forbes, University of Western Australia

In 1868, a prospector with experience gained in Australia, recovered gold in the Helmsdale River and paralleling Robert Hargraves experience in Australia on leaving California,² was eventually acknowledged as the ‘discoverer of the gold’. Robert Nelson Gilchrist was a local man, and until recently, little was known about him, but as interest in recreational gold panning increased in the late-twentieth century, it made sense to compile a biography of Gilchrist, before the information was lost forever. It was not easy. However, a letter appealing to the readers of the Northern newspaper, *The Press &*

Journal, produced a strange response. An anonymous (unsigned) letter pressed me to contact a resident of Fraserburgh, in Banffshire.³ The lady at the address was puzzled by my explanation, but nevertheless allowed me to read a private memoir of the Gilchrist family, never intended for publication. In addition, she kindly augmented the notes with own recollections and, in reading the memoir, I speculated that it had been put together around 1951. Unfortunately, there were no photographs or contemporary documents to accompany it.

The document touched on the hard times experienced in Sutherland at the end of the 18th century. In spite of efforts to improve agricultural methods, by the mid-century most of the population was experiencing desperate problems following failure of the potato crop in 1845/6. In *The Sutherland Book*,⁴ contributor, D. Withrington talks of a population who suffered 'a hard-fought, bare subsistence punctuated by periods of misery, privation and abject poverty that blunted their resilience'. An attractive remedy was to consider emigration to one of the British colonies.

The memoir began with Clunes Gilchrist, a crofter in Gartymore, who married Isobel MacKay in 1812. He had three daughters, before Robert was born on 11th August 1820. Bell (female), John and Rachael followed over the next eleven years, but in 1835, Clunes again married, and Isabella (née McPherson), delivered Hugh (1836) and Jane (1841).

Robert had the distinctive middle-name of Nelson, and grew up on a two-storey croft by the seashore, near Port Gower, which is a few kilometres from Helmsdale. His father assisted Helmsdale Fishery Office with the seasonal trade of curing herrings for export to Europe and this probably explains why Robert learned the trade of cooper. 'Whilst still a young man',⁵ he left Scotland for Australia and the goldfields.

It is possible that he sailed from Birkenhead, a seaport on the river Mersey, some 800 kilometres from his home in Helmsdale, Sutherland. *The Illustrated London News* for 10th July 1852 published a feature on the *SS Bourneuf*, which transported emigrants from England to Australia. The accompanying illustrations showed the depot by the wharf-side, as well as a view of the interior of a 600-seater dining hall, subdivided for English, Irish and Scotch emigrants.

In Australia, Robert W.P. Ashley (RWPA)⁶ was able to contribute some pieces to the jigsaw, by providing a list of passengers travelling to Port Phillip. This confirmed that a 31-year-old Robert Gilchrist [*sic*] had arrived on the *Wanata* in October 1852. At the time, Robert Nelson Gilchrist was 31 years old, but RWPA advised this was a

mature age for a man at the diggings. In the *Victoria Government Gazette* for 17th May 1867, RWPA also traced a Robert Gilchrist who had purchased fifty shares in the Great Victoria Mining Company, operating at Sailor's Gully. On the World Wide Web, when I came on a photograph of the smoke stack at Sailor's Gully, I was again advised to be cautious, but in spite of the judicious warning, it was exciting to make a tenuous connection.

In the early 1850s, *The Illustrated London News* often carried features on the gold fields of Australia. A good article in the issue for 22nd May 1852 explained how society had been disorganised, because of 'the sudden wealth thrown in such profusion into the hands of the working and labouring classes'. Elsewhere in the same issue, an illustrated article introduced the need for escorts, the issue of licences and an artist's impression of the Ballarat diggings. A lengthy contribution, accompanied by five of his sketches, described G.A. Gilfillan's visit to the Victoria gold diggings in March 1852. His sketches emphasised the difficulties of winter travel, but also included a Sunday service at Forest Creek, and a view of the gaol and station of the commissioner. Two months later, a thoughtful piece warned of the dangers of gold fever, and a report on 22nd January 1853, describing the Turon Gold Diggings of New South Wales, included eight attractive engravings showing aspects of life on the goldfields.

Figure 2: *Portrayal of Robert Nelson Gilchrist (1821-1877)*



Source: Reproduced from a woodcut by the project artist, Ron Wilkinson of Buckinghamshire, England. The likeness is based on contemporary source material, as well as a description described in a family memoir of 1951.

From such accounts, it has been possible to envisage the life that Robert Nelson Gilchrist would have experienced in Victoria, before he returned to Scotland in late 1868. Restlessness probably induced him to seek the Duke of Sutherland's permission to prospect for gold in the locality. Gilchrist explained that the hill country and landscapes of the Strath of Kildonan reminded him of the auriferous parts of Australia. With the Duke's approval, Gilchrist toiled for weeks, conscientiously working his way along the Helmsdale River in a methodical manner. As December approached and the first falls of snow appeared, he must have yearned for the warmth of Victoria.

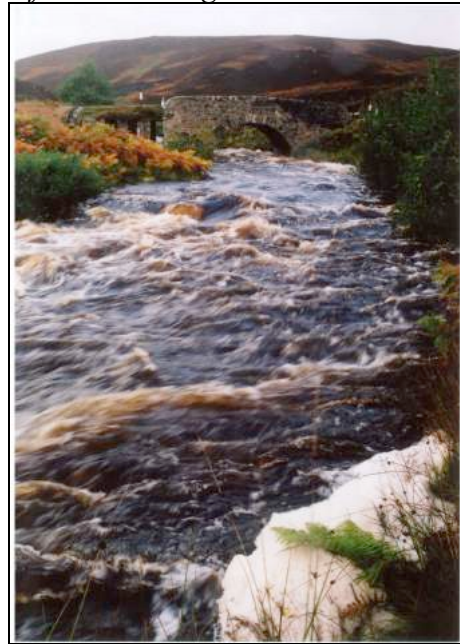
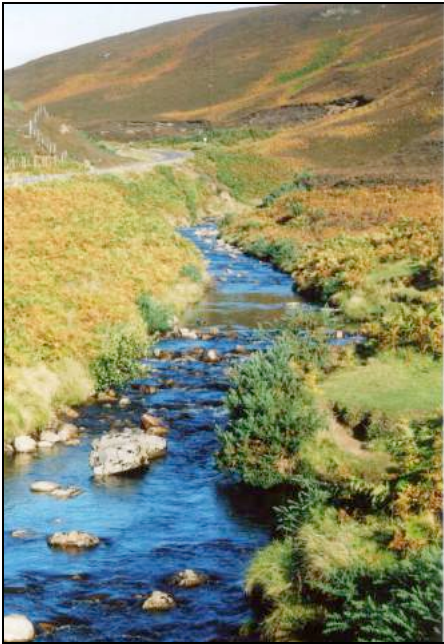
His diligence was rewarded when he reached the Kildonan Burn, some twelve kilometres from Helmsdale. Here Gilchrist struck gold in quantity, and he was now able to report success to the Duke of Sutherland. It did not take long for an announcement to appear in the local (Sutherland) newspaper and a few weeks later, gold was also discovered on the nearby Suisgill Burn. The *Northern Ensign* for 17th December 1868 proclaimed that 'the presence of gold is indisputably proved' and by the end of the year, *The Scotsman* (published in Edinburgh) declared that the *Northern Ensign's* 'somewhat sensational statement has been copied into most of the Scotch newspapers, and has thereby awakened considerable interest'.

Photograph 1: *Phial of gold dust and nuggets contributed by the gold miners, which Gilchrist presented to the Duke of Sutherland on his visit to the Kildonan diggings in April 1869.*



Photograph: courtesy of Lord Strathnaver. The phial of gold is held in the strong room of Dunrobin Castle, Sutherland.

Photos 2 and 3: (left) *The Kildonan Burn looking to the bridge at Baile an Or in May*
(right) *The Kildonan Burn looking north from the bridge in November.*



Source: Photographs by author

Photo 4: *The Helmsdale River in the Strath of Kildonan, Sutherlandshire, Scotland*

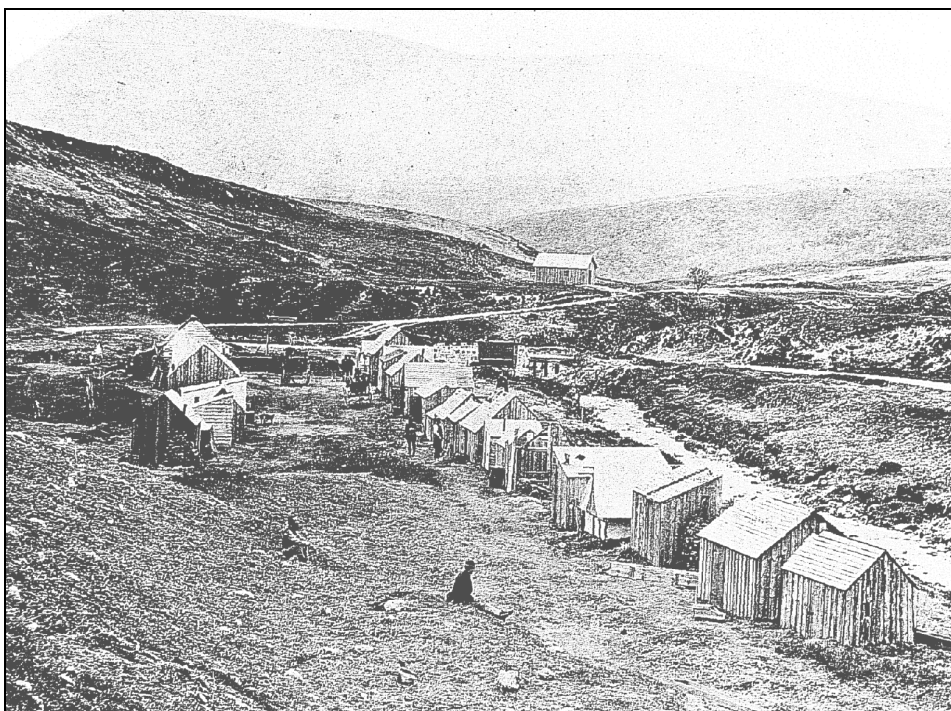


Source: Photograph by the author.

By the 7th January 1869, the Scottish Gold Rush was underway,¹ and for the next twelve months, many papers carried regular reports from the Sutherland Gold Diggings. Gilchrist remained a major influence on the gold fields. He was popular among the men, and visiting journalists emphasised his kindness and patience in providing explanations and demonstrations. The Duke of Sutherland introduced a licence system on 1st April 1869, and in a popular gesture, Gilchrist was always granted his monthly licences free of charge. Knowing the Duke intended to visit the goldfield later in the month, the miners contributed to a phial of gold and elected Gilchrist to present His Grace with the 'mark of their appreciation'.

On his next visit (2nd June 1869), and to recognise Gilchrist's original discovery, the Duke presented him with 'a valuable gold watch' at an open-air ceremony, attended by friends and miners. Many of the experienced men had worked in the colonies and drew up a plan to sink a shaft on a riverbank close to the Helmsdale River. Gilchrist negotiated the necessary permission from the Duke of Sutherland, who attended the trial, accompanied by friends and experts. After much hard work by the miners, there was a consensus that the reasoning was unsound and there were no vast deposits of gold.

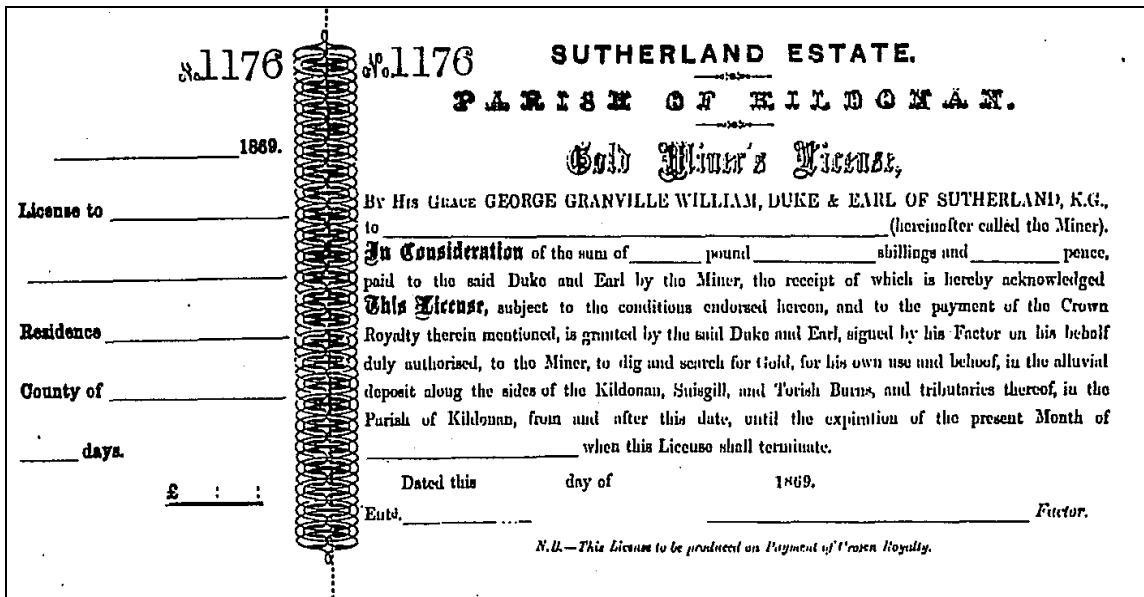
Photograph 5: *The small gold-rush township of Baile an Or (Town of Gold) which evolved during 1869 by the banks of the Kildonan Burn.*



Source: Alexander Johnston of Wick, Caithness, April 1869, with print in possession of author.

Gilchrist renewed his licence for the last time in August (No 866 refers), and as winter approached, many of the men departed, and in early December, the Duke's representative read an ultimatum to the 20 hardy miners who were still working. The gist of the message was that all gold mining had to cease at the end of the year. A brief note in the *Northern Ensign* of 2nd December 1869 intimated that Gilchrist had already left Helmsdale and intended to return to Australia. The family memoir suggests he did return to Victoria in 1870, but recent searches in two continents have failed to provide any substantial information. However, it is worth noting that Eric Burt in Melbourne examined the 'The Pioneer's Index' and came on a marriage in 1872 between Robert Gilchrist [*sic*] and a spouse named Collins. The man gave his place of birth as Glasgow, and under the circumstances, it might be Robert Nelson.

Figure 2: A gold mining licence issued by the Inspector of Licences, appointed by the Duke of Sutherland. Many experienced men on the goldfield referred to the inspector as the Commissioner, thus revealing their previous experience in Victoria.



Source: Reproduction in the collection of the author.

However, there is proof that by 1877, Gilchrist was in London. He was staying at the home of his married sister, Mrs Jane Tasker, who lived at Victoria Terrace on Wingmore Road, Brixton. Robert died on 31st January 1877 and Jane registered the death on 2nd February. The registration also demanded the deceased's occupation and it is a fitting tribute to Robert Nelson Gilchrist that his sister inserted the single word, 'Gentleman'.

Acknowledgement

It is appropriate to acknowledge the enthusiasm of Robert W.P Ashley, who first replied to a routine enquiry in the Australian Mining History Association's, *Newsletter*, no. 3, Issue 42, September 2005. He subsequently provided much information and encouragement, and in particular, he stressed the importance of establishing the date of Gilchrist's death. His commitment to historical research is admirable and, from a long distance, it is much appreciated.

Endnotes

¹ The *John O'Groat Journal*, 24 December 1868, asserted that gold in Sutherland 'is, neither geologically or historically, a new thing. It was claimed three centuries ago'. The claim is substantiated in J. Calvert, *The Gold Rocks of Great Britain and Ireland*, Chapman & Hall, London 1853, which quotes Camden's, *Britannia*: 'It is there stated that gold is found in Durness. In 1840, a nugget was found there [Sutherlandshire] weighing one ounce and a half, in the bed of the Kildonan, a mountain stream'.

² Edward Hammond Hargraves, *The gold discovery of the 12th February, 1851*, F. Cunninghame & Co., Sydney, 1870; Anon., ' "Man who triggered off the gold-rush", [Edward Hammond Hargraves, 1816–1891]', *Australia's Heritage*, vol. 3, part 38, 1971, pp. 889–94; Lynette Ramsay Silver, *A fool's gold?: William Tipple Smith's challenge to the Hargraves myth*, Jacaranda, Milton, 1986.

³ The name and address was provided, but remains confidential.

⁴ D. Omond (ed.), *The Sutherland Book*, Golspie, The Northern Times Ltd, 1982.

⁵ From the manuscript notes compiled by the cousin of the lady in Fraserburgh, around 1951.

⁶ See Robert W.P. Ashley, 'Mining the Victoria Government Gazette', *Journal of Australasian Mining History*, vol. 3, September 2005, pp. 205-11.

¹ For additional information on British goldmining, see, R.M. Callender, *Gold in Britain*, Goldspear (UK) Ltd, Beaconsfield, 1990.