

The Wreck of a Limekilns Ship

In 1903 William Gifford, former Limekilns shipmaster and Leith shipping agent, published a book of reminiscences of life in Limekilns called *An Ancient Seaport on the Shores of the Forth*.¹ It includes this harrowing account of the wreck of the brig *John Monro* in 1840.

It was a bleak March morning that news reached Limekilns of the loss of the brig *John Monro*, then commanded by Robert Monro, father of the late Captain. The ship had not left home many days, bound for London, when she was overtaken by a heavy easterly gale, and when endeavouring to reach anchorage had to run between two dangerous sand banks that line the Norfolk coast. She struck, and all but the Captain perished.

The ship crew were all Limekilns and Charlestown sailors. We have heard the late Dr Johnston² say that nothing caused him so much pain as “breaking the sad news” to a bereaved family when a ship came to grief. The scene and the disaster itself in all its heartrending awfulness and the noble daring of that soon to be engulfed family of sailor heroes was described to us many years after by the survivor and as nearly as possible we produce it here in his own words.

“The gale” said the aged Captain, with a gulp in his throat, “blew heavily from the E.S.E. The morning was dark and could we have helped ourselves we would never, especially with the flood, attempted the Gatt – the Pakefield Gattway leading to anchorage off Corton, but it was either go ashore on the outer side of the Scroby or Barber Sands or run the gauntlet of a racing flood tide through the Gatt. After consulting with the mate, Robert Wood, one of the bravest of the crew, we resolved to run the latter course. Under reefed topsails and fore course, with Jamie Ronald, one of the seamen at the helm, and all hands less the laddie keeping a lookout for the Pakefield lights, we entered between the sands, the flood tide racing in a foam across the fairway and the easterly gale driving us before it in terrible force.

We had all but got through when the force of the flood drove us towards the tail of the sand and then she struck.” The warm-hearted sailor captain here stopped for a minute ere continuing the awful tale. “And then she struck”. No-one but a sailor can really understand what these words convey. What they mean in the circumstances above narrated, no words can adequately portray or define. It must be felt, and cannot be spoken or written.

“It was morning, but dark,” the captain continued, “every wave rolling over her bore her up further on the deadly sand. Consternation but not despair, overshadowed every face on board; ah! brave hearts had every one of the crew of that Limekilns brig. The decks were being swept by the seething, rolling wave. Every crash on that fatal sand shook the quivering hull, every thud caused masts and yards to quiver.” Rather than be swept from off the deck each one, following the example of the brave-hearted Captain, stripped to the drawers and shirt. “Everyone for himself, perhaps they will see us from shore ere she breaks up” was the last consoling remark of that dauntless heart.

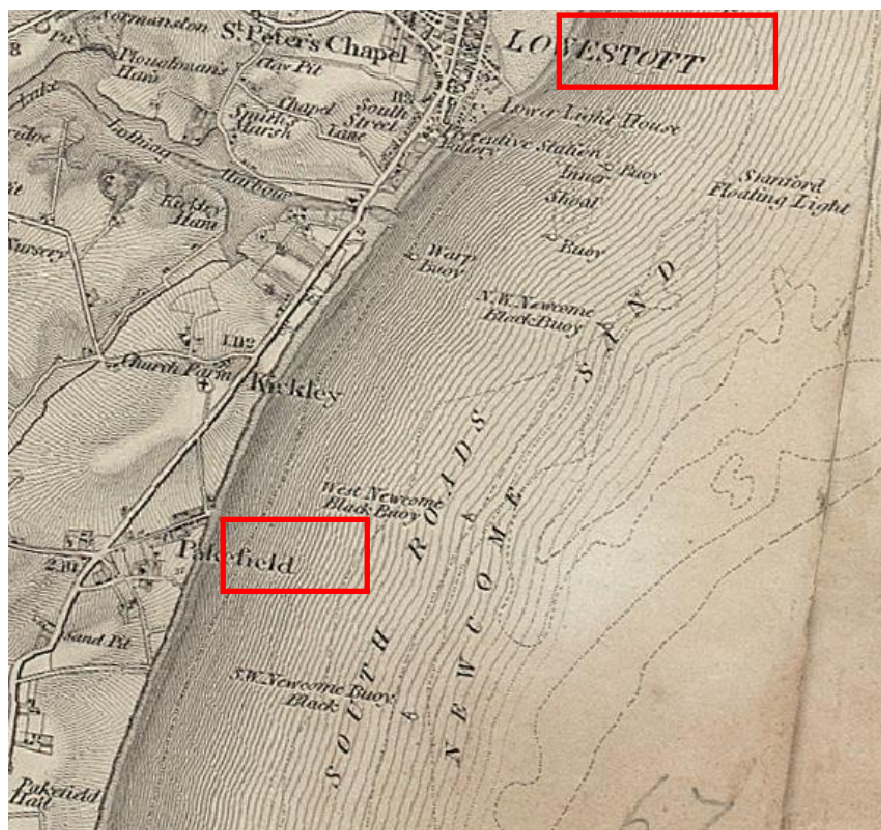
“We then,” continued the Captain, “took to the rigging, so many on each mast. I took with me the little cabin boy and lashed him to the shrouds beside myself. We were not long in that position when another crash on the sand knocked the masts out of her and she broke up. Daringly did the crew cling to portions of the wreck, swimming and changing from one piece to another to escape being carried by the storm-maddened flood tide over the tail of the sand bank. One piece only,” said the captain, “a portion of the stern frame of the ship, remained partly embedded in the sand and to this I clung.” From this perilous position he witnessed one after another of his crew carried away by the roaring flood. As if to mock him in his woe, his unopened sea-chest, which loving

¹ The book is available second hand online at prices ranging from £85 to over £200. It is also available free on the open shelves of Dunfermline Local History Library.

² The Rev Dr William Johnston was the Minister of Limekilns church 1823 – 1874.

fingers at home had packed, floated past, “at which” he said” I cast a last, lingering look.”

Alone he held on to the piece of wreck. Hours were to elapse ere he was to be taken off. Daylight at last dawned and from the watchful shore the lifeboat put off to the rescue. All but dead he was got on board, the sole survivor of the ill-fated ship. Mothers, wives and maidens heard the sad tale. They spoke not, but stood wringing their hands. Tears would not flow. The grief was too deep and keen and the sluices of the forlorn hearts for the moment were shut. For years this shipwreck tale dimmed many an eye, welled high in many a breast and blasted joys on several homes of the often bereaved sailor families belonging to the ancient seaport by the shores of the Forth.



19th Century Map of Lowestoft and Pakefield
Showing the complex of offshore shoals, sandbanks and other hazards

William Gifford’s recollection of Robert Monro’s horrific story was no doubt accurate, but the ‘bleak morning’ he refers to dawned not in March but in November 1840, as reported in the *Fife Herald* of 10 December 1840.

LIMEKILNS

Wreck of the John Monro – The brig John Monro of this port was lost off Lowestoft in the dreadful gales of Friday the 20th ult. The following are a few particulars, which may be interesting to our readers, as the vessel was well known at most of the Scottish ports.

The letter, after stating that all hands, with the exception of the captain Mr Monro, were drowned, adds – “Amidst such appalling loss of life, his preservation has been almost miraculous. Almost immediately after the ship struck, the boats were both washed away and the sea making a complete breach over the deck. The crew clung to the masts but had not remained long there when a tremendous wave laid the vessel on her beam ends and swept the whole lot of them into the sea. The mate and captain, after a desperate struggle, got hold of the maintop and, while speaking together about the possibility of escape, another sea washed them both off and the mate was never seen again.

The captain had stripped himself to swim and he succeeded in getting hold of a piece of the wreck, which proved to be the stern-frame. He secured himself to it the best way he could. The rest of the crew had all disappeared, with the exception of John Edwards, who was struggling to get hold of something, but did not succeed as he soon

disappeared amid the roar of waves. Mr Monro was now left alone, his strength quite exhausted, when he saw a boat approaching him from the shore. A rope was thrown to him which he eagerly caught and fixed round his body, but a great deal of the wreck lay between him and the boat, when the rope had to be let go by the boat's crew lest he should be crushed to death; eventually he was got on board, but quite exhausted, and could only articulate the name of his ship. He is still under medical attendance, and slowly recovering from his sufferings, which so nearly proved fatal.

An article which appeared in both the *Suffolk Chronicle* and the *Norfolk Chronicle* of 28 November 1840, adds some further details.

LOWESTOFT Nov. 27

AWFUL SHIPWRECK AND LOSS OF LIFE – About half past ten P.M. on the 21st instant, a strong gale blowing from the South-west accompanied with a drifting rain, the John Monro of Limekilns, on her passage to London, struck on the tail of the Ridge and in less than 30 minutes was a complete wreck and scarce any part of her to be seen. The master was fortunately saved by lashing himself to a spar and was picked up some distance from the wreck almost gone; but the rest of the crew, seven in number, were drowned....A new Life-boat is to be stationed at Pakefield³ and every person knowing the situation of Pakefield will rejoice when she is complete for sea; had she been so on the above day we do not hesitate to say all would have been saved from the John Monro and also the crew of another unfortunate vessel at Kessingland.

The *John Monro*, 159 tons, had been launched at Bo'ness in 1826 and named after her owner, Robert's father John Monro. She was built as a schooner, with two masts bearing fore and aft sails, but in 1833 she was re-rigged as a brig, with square sails on both masts and a fore and aft sail on the hinder side of the after mast. According to her entries in Lloyd's Register of Shipping she had a single deck with beams and her draught when loaded was 13 feet. Robert Monro was her captain from the beginning, sailing her down to London in the early spring of 1826. She cleared out from London on her maiden voyage to Leghorn in late April.

All her subsequent voyages were either to Mediterranean and West Coast European ports (Gibraltar, Malaga, Almeria, Cadiz, Tenerife, Grand Canaria, Lanzarote) or the Baltic (Rostock, Wismar, Pilau, Riga, St Petersburg, Cronstadt, Lubeck, Travemunde, Memel). In 1831 she made the long voyage round the north of Finland to the Russian port of Archangel, arriving there from Leith on 29 August and returning to Kirkcaldy with a cargo of flax on 17 November, having 'performed quarantine' at St Margaret's Hope, presumably because of the current prevalence of some infectious disease at Archangel. Her other known cargoes were all utilitarian items – flax, wheat, tallow, hemp and coal. Early in 1840 she sailed to Malmo, arriving back at the King's Stairs in London on 29 May. A week later she cleared out in ballast for Danzig, also visiting St Petersburg, from where she arrived at Leith on 16 September. A few days before 20 November she left Leith for London, on her final voyage.

John Monro did not live to see the fate of his ship. He had died on 9 March 1840 and attending his father's funeral may have been one of Robert Monro's last actions before sailing for Malmo. John Monro and Elizabeth Muir or Moir had been married at Torryburn on 19 February 1791. They settled at Crombie Point, where their six children were born, Robert being their third son, born in 1797. From the start of his marriage John Monro was master of a 54 ton sloop⁴, the *Happy Return* owned by the Limekilns firm of Reddie and Co, but by 1802 he had prospered enough to have his own 107-ton schooner built at Leith, also named the *Happy Return*.

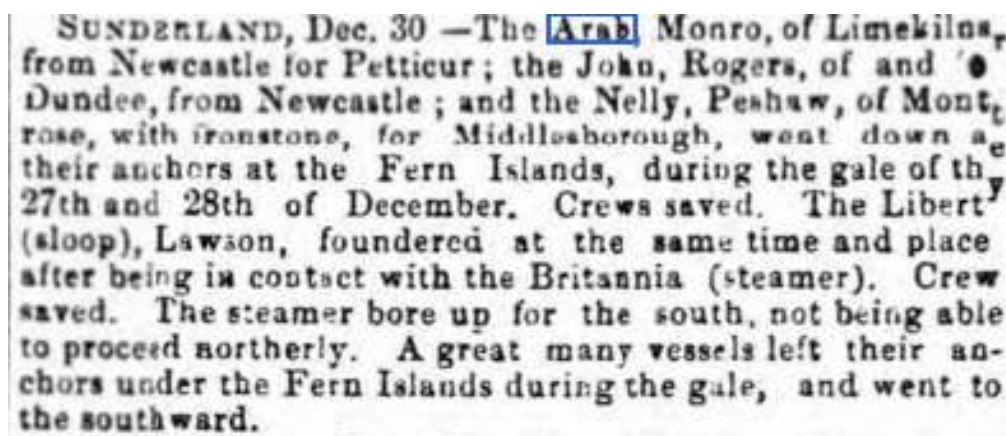
³ Pakefield is now a suburb of Lowestoft but at the time of the wreck was a village situated about two miles south of the town. A lifeboat was stationed there by January 1842, when she saved a man from the wreck of the *Thomas Holloway* of Blyth.

⁴ Sloops were small vessels of about 40 – 90 tons, with a single mast, a mainsail and up to 3 foresails. They were the workhorses of the Forth, carrying coal, salt, lime and other bulky cargoes up and down the river and to the east coast of Scotland.

In 1812 John Monro bought a plot of land in Limekilns and built a house on it, containing a dining room with a small bed closet off it, a parlour, two bedrooms, a kitchen and a lobby. The family presumably moved to the village once the house was completed. In his will, made in 1830, John gave directions for the division of the ground into three parts, legacies to his three surviving sons Robert, David and Andrew. His executors were Helen Moir his wife, William Johnston, the minister at Limekilns and his brother in law, the shipmaster John Reid who was married to John Monro's daughter Eliza and whose own daughter Helen had married Andrew Monro in 1828..

The *Happy Return* was the forerunner of a small fleet owned by John Monro. In 1814 he had another vessel, the 98 ton sloop *Fame* built at Bo'ness. The building of the *John Monro* in 1826 was followed the next year by a 131 ton brig built at Leith and named *Eliza Moor*, after John's wife. In 1828 another schooner was built at Leith, the 101 ton *Arab*. Her fate was recorded by George Blyth, the teacher at Charlestown School, in his diary entry for 29 December 1849, 'The crew of the *Arab*, Mr Andrew Monro, came home today, they were wrecked near the Fern Isles by being run down by a steamer. They lost everything but the clothes they had on. She was insured £400.'

Some details of the wreck of the *Arab* were also mentioned in an item in the *Morning Post* of 2 January 1850:



SUNDERLAND, Dec. 30 —The *Arab* Monro, of Limekilns, from Newcastle for Petticur; the *John, Rogers*, of and 'o Dundee, from Newcastle; and the *Nelly, Peshaw*, of Montrose, with ironstone, for Middlesborough, went down at their anchors at the Fern Islands, during the gale of the 27th and 28th of December. Crews saved. The *Liberty* (sloop), Lawson, foundered at the same time and place after being in contact with the *Britannia* (steamer). Crew saved. The steamer bore up for the south, not being able to proceed northerly. A great many vessels left their anchors under the Fern Islands during the gale, and went to the southward.

Life At Sea

Robert Monro's career at sea had begun in February 1810 at the age of 13, when he was apprenticed to his father in the *Happy Return*. He served in her as boy, seaman and mate until November 1818, voyaging up and down the British coasts and to the Baltic. In February 1819 he took over command of his father's ship the *Fame* from her previous master, Graham. He sailed her in the Baltic trade with his brother Andrew as mate until September 1825, when Andrew took over as master of *Fame*, Robert transferring to the newly-built *John Monro* in the following January. (According to William Gifford *Fame*, like *Arab*, was lost off the coast of Northumberland. He does not give a date but the ship's final entry in Lloyd's Register was made in 1832.)

In April 1841, by which time Robert had recovered from the wreck of the *John Monro*, he bought his own ship, the *Middlesbro* of Bo'ness,⁵ a 247 ton snow⁶ that had been built at Sunderland in 1838 for the firm of Taylor and Co of Stockton. The *Middlesbro* was quite a family affair – Robert took on his own son, Robert as a 15-year-old apprentice on the *Middlesbro* in 1845. When Robert jnr finished his apprenticeship in 1849 he stayed on with his father as seaman for a year and was then promoted to mate in 1849, serving until 1852 when he was taken on as second mate of the *Coromandel* of London. Robert's other son John served as an ordinary seaman in 1843/44 and as mate from 1846 to 1849. Robert was still sailing the *Middlesbro* as far afield as America when the Mercantile Marine Act was passed in 1850, requiring all ship masters and mates to hold a certificate of competence. Robert Monro was one of the first Limekilns skippers to apply for a certificate, on 13

⁵ Limekilns vessels were officially registered at Bo'ness because it was the chief customs port for the area, so the same ship often appears in the records as either 'of Limekilns' or 'of Bo'ness'.

⁶ A snow was a brig whose fore and aft sail was mounted on a supplementary mast attached to the after mast.

October 1850, his application listing the details of his experience to date. His Certificate of Service was issued to him at Limekilns in the following January.

The *Middlesbro'* was last mentioned in Lloyd's Register in 1855 and after this there is a two-year hiatus in information about Robert Monro's career until 1858, when he bought another Sunderland ship, the four-year-old 181-ton snow *Cicerone* from her owner Mr Lumsden. Two years later Robert was again in the news, when the *Cicerone* came to the aid of Captain Francis Leopold McLintock, who was in the Arctic in command of HMS *Bulldog*⁷ looking for a route for a transatlantic telegraph cable. The incident was reported in the *Dunfermline Saturday Press* of 15 September 1860.

We have received from a correspondant in Limekilns the following interesting particulars about Captain McLintock's present voyage to the Arctic regions, where he is now taking soundings to test the practicality of laying a telegraphic cable between this and America, via Iceland and Greenland.

"The *Cicerone*, Monro, arrived at Limekilns on Saturday last, direct from Goodhaal in Greenland, which she left on the 18th of August, and brought dispatches for the Admiralty from Captain McLintock and a packet of about 170 letters from the officers and crew of the *Bulldog* and the Danish inhabitants of Kerenhutte.

The *Cicerone* was chartered to proceed to Frederickshaal with a cargo of coals and there to wait the arrival of her Majesty's ship *Bulldog*. On reaching that neighbourhood a continuous barrier of ice was found, blocking up all access to the harbour, hence Captain Monro could only cruise about in the parallel of 62.N. Lat. as previously arranged. He continued to do so for twenty-four days, till on the 3rd August he fell in with the *Bulldog* sixty miles from land.

Captain McLintock, after waiting four days at Iceland, had failed in getting the required supply of fuel by the non-arrival of the expected vessel; hence he was very glad to meet the *Cicerone* which he took in tow the following morning and proceeded in for land. Failing still to find an entrance they proceeded northwards through fields of ice in search of another. A gale parted the tow-rope and consequently the ships parted for a day, during which time they drifted northward farther than was desired. On the 7th they entered Goodhaal, at the mouth of the Baal river and there the brig's cargo (263 tons) was taken on board the *Bulldog* which quite filled her spare room.

Captain McLintock again left on the 14th August for Frederickshaal, where it appears he was desirous of commencing the soundings across to the Labrador coast."



Captain Francis Leopold McLintock

⁷ HMS *Bulldog* was a 1124 ton wooden paddle sloop, built at Chatham Dockyard in 1844/45. Captain McLintock had previous experience in the Arctic and in 1859 he had become famous when he recovered the remains of the ill-fated Arctic expedition of 1846-8 led by Sir John Franklin to discover the North West Passage. His voyage in the *Bulldog* was his last visit to the region.

At the end of the 1865 sailing season Robert, now aged 68, retired and handed over command of *Cicerone* to 'Steel'. (The only known local skipper of that name of the right age and experience was Andrew Steel, former master of the *Giffords* of Limekilns.) Whoever 'Steel' was his command did not last long. In November 1868 news came from Wyborg that on a voyage from Cronstadt to London *Cicerone* had been stranded on the shore near Narunskar and was now waterlogged but that her crew were safe at Frederikshamn. The steamer *Neptune* was sent from Helsingfors to tow her off but when she reached the place *Cicerone* had floated off and broken up. No trace of the ship was found although some of her cargo of tallow was later salvaged.

Home Life

As well as pursuing his seafaring career, Robert Monro, of course, had a life on land. On 19 January 1828 he had married Jean Wilson, daughter of another Limekilns shipmaster, John Wilson. The family first appears in the 1841 Census. It was taken while Robert was at sea, but Jean (or Jane) was recorded as living in Limekilns with their six children – John 12, Robert 10, Adam 8, Jane 5, James 3 and David 1. John and Robert grew up to be shipmasters like their father but the other four children died young – David in 1848 (possibly in the scarlet fever epidemic of that year), James in 1849 of heart disease, Adam in 1850 of TB and Jane in 1851 of the same disease.⁸

In 1859 Robert was the instigator of a committee that organised the first Regatta in Limekilns and he acted as Commodore on the day. (The Limekilns and Charlestown Regatta became an annual fixture.)

LIMEKILNS AND CHARLESTOWN REGATTA

Fife Herald 18 August 1859

Saturday last was a complete gala day here. Through the active exertions of Captain Robert Monro a number of our respectable villagers and several gentlemen from Dunfermline who, with their families, are spending the summer here, arrangements had been made for a Regatta. Early in the day the village assumed an unusually gay appearance, crowds of visitors from Dunfermline, Inverkeithing and the neighbouring district kept pouring in and the Elgin Colliery Band, who have of late improved vastly in their execution, enlivened the whole proceedings with choice music, finely rendered. In the forenoon Captain R Monro, commodore, Mr Adamson sailing master, Mr James Young treasurer and A Beveridge Esq, writer Dunfermline secretary; along with a numerous company of ladies and gentlemen, assembled on board Mr Adamson's sloop, which was used as Commodore's ship for the occasion and at twelve o'clock noon the races began.

The day's amusement was so great and the success of our Regatta so decided, that we hope next year to see the sport renewed. It was very gratifying to observe, notwithstanding the immense concourse of people, that the utmost order, sobriety and decorum prevailed.

The first race was for sailing boats of 10-foot keel or less and the entrants were:

White Star, Mr Whitehead (shipbuilder) Limekilns

Seagull, Mr Meldrum, Limekilns

Brucehaven Brewery, (BHB) Mr Adamson, Limekilns

Nonsuch, Thomas Young, Limekilns

Jessie, Henry Angus, Rosyth

Margaret, Mr Wilson, Charlestown

Blue Jacket, Mr Izett, Charlestown

⁸ All these deaths were recorded in his diary by George Blyth, teacher at Charlestown.

ing to Mr Izett, Charlestown. As the boats left the starting-point off the Capernaum pier, the scene was animating. They had to proceed round a boat lying off betwixt Blackness and Hopetoun, and from thence round a buoy above Charlestown; but from the state of the wind they had to tack up to near the Charlestown buoy, from whence they fell down to the boat off Blackness, and returned again to Charlestown and Capernaum. During the contest the boats frequently changed positions. For a considerable time the Sea Gull took the lead, but, as the wind abated, it fell behind in returning from Charlestown, and the B. H. B. came in first, followed in six minutes eight seconds by the Margaret, and in another minute and forty-eight seconds by the Sea Gull. These three boats accordingly gained the prizes, and the other boats arrived at Capernaum in rapid succession after them.

The second match was with gigs, not exceeding 21-feet keel. Three gigs were entered for this match, viz.,—the Ariel, booked by Mr Drake, Queensferry; the Jessie Miller, belonging to Mr Thomas Young, Limekilns; and the Sarah and Betsy, belonging to Mr Adamson, Limekilns. The distance was from off Capernaum pier to the buoy above Charlestown and back. The Ariel, soon after starting, got and kept the lead, coming in forty-two seconds before the Jessie Miller, and three minutes before the Sarah and Betsy.

The third match was with jolly boats not exceeding 16 feet over all, with four oars and coxswain. For this match three boats were entered by Mr Angus, Mr Adamson, and Mr Drake. Mr Angus's boat came in 17 seconds before Mr Drake's, and one minute and a-half before Mr Adamson.

For the fourth match—for two-oared boats, not exceeding 14 feet over all, without a coxswain—only two boats were booked, viz.,—the Banshee, belonging to Miss Elizabeth Miller, Dunfermline, and the Sarah and Betsy, belonging to Mr Adamson. The Banshee took the lead, and maintained it for the greater portion of the distance; but the rowers having lost their thowl pins, the Sarah and Betsy came in a little before it.

The last match was for sculling. Three competitors started for it in the Banshee, the Jessie, and the Margaret. The Jessie came in first, followed closely by the Banshee and Margaret.

The *Press* added the detail that it had been intended to give a prize for ‘catching the duck’, a sport in which one boat was given a start and a second boat had to catch it up, but it was thought that the strong breeze made this too dangerous.

Robert Monro was one of the Limekilns school managers, many of them shipmasters, who formed a Building Committee in 1862 to replace the village schoolroom. There had been a school in Limekilns since the eighteenth century, but in spite of splitting the pupils between the schoolhouse and the King’s Cellar the accommodation became totally inadequate and a new building was needed. The committee was so successful in raising money that the new schoolhouse was opened in 1864. Robert’s brother Andrew, having by this time retired, was convener of the committee, but Robert also played his part when he was at home.

In contrast to Andrew Monro, who was very active in the life of Limekilns village, Robert seems to have lived quietly after his retirement in 1865. He died on 15 March 1878 aged 80 of a strangulated hernia. His wife Jean died four months later aged 79 of ‘general debility’. Their son John seems to have moved to England in pursuance of his seagoing career, but Robert jnr remained in Limekilns. In 1876 at the age of 44 he had married Margaret Henderson Anderson aged 27 at her home in Logie, Perthshire. Their first child, Jane Remington, was born at sea in the South Pacific in 1877 but their second, Helen, was born at Limekilns in 1879. By 1891 the family were living in The Knowe, Limekilns and this was still Margaret Monro’s home when she died of flu in Edinburgh in July 1900. In the 1901 Census Robert’s address is given as Red Row, Limekilns. Living with him were his daughter Helen, now an art student, and his mother-in-law Helen Anderson. By the time of his death in 1909 the daughter at home was Jane Remington, to whom he left his house and all his other possessions in his will. She married James Alison, an Edinburgh bank manager in 1915 and died at Kirkcaldy in 1950, the last representative of this branch of the Monro family.