

OLDMELDRUM SAILOR STATUE



In June 1938 the following letter was published in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal*:

“Statue of a Sailor

Sir, - I have recently purchased a statue of a sailor from the estate of the late Mr Lawson of Craigievar, near Alford, and I am desirous of tracing its history if possible.

I feel confident that some of your many readers would have reliable information on the subject, and I would be very grateful if you would kindly help me to approach them through the agency of your journal.

The statue is of a sailor dressed in the uniform of, I should think, many years prior to the advent of steam. It is of freestone and stands on a plinth and pedestal of grey granite (probably Rubislaw). The figure is about life size.

So far as I can gather the statue has stood in Mr Lawson’s garden for some thirty-two years, and prior to that was in the grounds of Kingsford House, near Alford. I am told that prior to being erected at Kingsford House, the statue occupied a site either in Old Aberdeen or in the Union Terrace Gardens, Aberdeen.

I realise that the desired information may be difficult to obtain. I believe, however, that if the history of the sailor is to (be) found, it can only be traced through the medium of your widely read columns.

I should be glad if any information obtained is forwarded to me at the undernoted address – J. A. Kelly, Meldrum Arms Hotel, Oldmeldrum.”¹

Given the statue was purchased c. 1938, had been in Mr Lawson’s garden for c. 32 years, or approximately 1906, at this time Kingsford House was owned by second-generation of Lyall Grant family.

Originally David Rait Lyall Grant purchased Kingsford House in Spring 1858 from estate of Mr Benjamin Lumsden (c.1772-1856), at reduced price of £8,000. David R. L. Grant died in December 1884, and thereafter the property was in name of his second son, Charles Lyall Grant (1835-1908).

Another newspaper article in February 1978, on Oldmeldrum’s general historic past provides:

“The famed statue of a sailor at Oldmeldrum. Life-size and of uncertain origin, it is believed to have been sculpted in free-stone for a sailor’s widow. Its present stance outside the Meldrum Arms is the last in a long line, states the report – it stood at Kingsford, Alford, until 1906, and was then moved to the Old Schoolhouse, Craigievar, until 1938. It is also said to have come from Aberdeen’s Castlegate; Nigg, near Aberdeen, and the South of England.”²

Ian Shepherd in *Aberdeenshire: Donside and Strathbogie*, describes statue “Sailor statue in freestone, early/mid-19th century, outside hotel: engaging, near life-size with large head, said to

¹ Letters to the Editor, *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, Thursday, June 16, 1938, p. 3.

² Burgh will keep its historic character, *The Press and Journal*, Monday, February 6, 1978, p. 7.

have been carved for a sailor's widow who came from Kingsford, near Alford. It was rescued from a rubbish dump near Craigievar by the collector Postie Lawson and moved with him to Oldmeldrum in 1938.”³

The above article is slightly erroneous as Postie Lawson died at his home at Craigievar in February 1938 and, as can be seen in June 1938 article, Mr Kelly, Meldrum Arms Hotel, purchased the statue from his estate.

A third mention in a newspaper in July 1938, possibly in answer to appeal month earlier, has a photograph of the statue, with caption “This statue of a French sailor used to stand in Union Terrace Gardens – now it ornaments a hotel in Oldmeldrum.”⁴

No definite information could be found on the Sailor statue’s origins. David Rait Lyall Grant (c.1806-1884) was, according to census returns, born in Old Machar, Aberdeen. No birth or baptism record could be located. Interestingly his birth name was David Rait Ragg, son of John Ragg, Farmer at Pitfishie on estate of Monymusk, and Isabella Ragg, ms Grant. Again, no marriage was located for John and Isabella. John Ragg died Aberdeen in 1864, and David was the informant of his death.

[A girl, Isobel Ragg, age 2, is listed on 1841 census, living with Arthur & Gilchrist Gardiner, and their two daughters, Margaret & Jean on Benochie Commonly. No relationships are given on the census so who Isobel was is, as yet, unknown.]

David R. Ragg began working with William Brebner, leather and provision (tea) merchants, St Nicholas Street, Aberdeen in 1830s. In October 1830 he married Jessy Lyall, of Fordoun. Three of their children were baptised with the name Ragg up to 1840. In March 1841 William Brebner died and left bulk of his property to Mr Ragg who then took entire charge of the business, which also encompassed the tea trade, which he ran successfully for many years. It would appear, shortly after William Brebner died, David changed his name, adopting his wife’s surname, Lyall, and his mother’s maiden name, Grant. There does not appear to be any explanation for the name change – or maybe the surname “Ragg” was seen as detrimental to running the business?

An obituary for David R. L. Grant, in 1884, states “Mr Grant was described as being curiously interested in what, considering his constant attention to, and engrossment in, business, might have seemed out of the way subjects. In 1846, he purchased the whole of Natural History collection belonging to Thomas Edward of Banff, which he wished for his son who had a taste in Natural History. And this same hobby of making himself owner of what, in the strictly business view, must have seemed very incongruous odds and ends, continued with him to the last, we believe, with the result of his having amassed a large and amusingly miscellaneous collection of a general sort at Kingsford.”⁵

The articles provide conflicting information on the Statue’s origins. Could the statue have already been in situ at Kingsford House when David R. L. Grant purchased the property; or perhaps he inherited it along with the business from William Brebner? More likely it would seem the statue was one of the “incongruous odds and ends” amassed from miscellaneous sources at Kingsford.

Alison Kennedy
4 April 2019

³ I. Shepherd, *Aberdeenshire: Donside and Strathbogie* (Edinburgh, 2006), p. 172.

⁴ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, Friday, July 8, 1938, p. 1.

⁵ Death of Mr Lyall Grant of Kingsford, *The Daily Free Press*, (Aberdeen), Saturday, December 20, 1884, p. 4.