

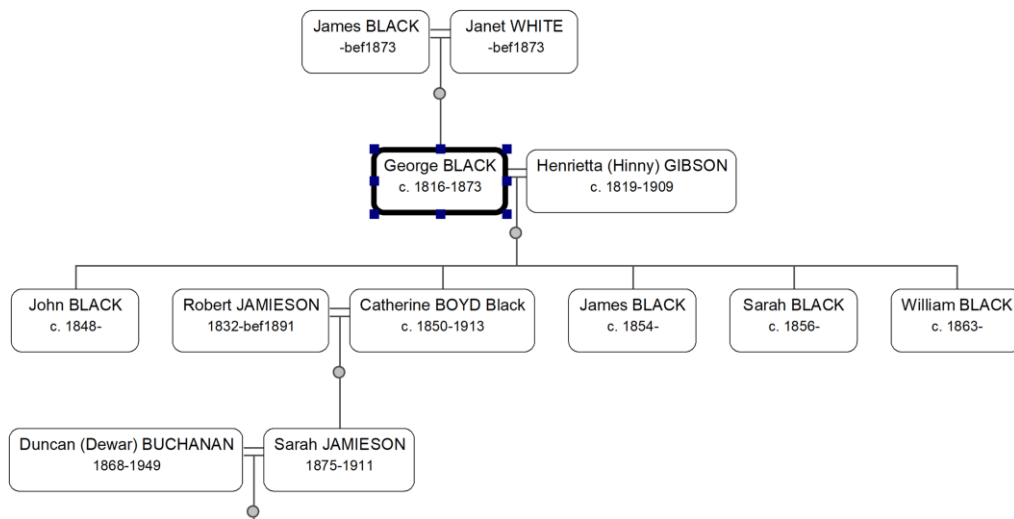
George Black

c.1816 – 1873

### A reported tragedy

When George Black was born to his parents, James Black and Janet White, they, the extended family, friends and neighbours were faced with epidemic, war, starvation and death.

The end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 had led to economic instability across Europe, and



*Family Tree of George Black – See enlarged version at Appendix*

many communities faced a dreary poverty due to the downturn in trade and agriculture. People, especially those in urban areas, lived in overcrowded, filthy and unsanitary conditions. This made children susceptible to diseases such as cholera, typhus, and smallpox. High infant mortality rates were also common because of a lack of medical knowledge and inadequate healthcare.

The year 1816 is infamously known as the ‘Year Without a Summer’ due to the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia in 1815, when the explosion spewed millions of tons of dust, ash and sulphur dioxide into the atmosphere, temporarily changing the world's climate and dropping global temperatures by as much as 3 degrees. This in turn caused global climate anomalies; ‘Snow in June, freezing temperatures in July,



*The effect on climate caused by the eruption of Mount Tambora meant long periods of temperature extremes throughout the world*

[and] a killer frost in August', and rain, rain and more rain in Scotland. As a result, there were poor harvests, food shortages, and high prices; all contributing further to widespread and grim hunger and malnutrition.

When George was born in the Parish of St Ninian's, Stirling, life was almost bound to be demanding and oppressive. It was never going to be easy.

St Ninians Parish lies south and south-west of the city of Stirling. Stirlingshire, in general was a fertile agricultural region of the central belt with key crops of; barley, potatoes, wheat, turnips and oats, one of the most important staples during the period. But in 1816 an excess of rain caused flooding, rotting harvests and famine.

In the first few years of George's life, things didn't get much better. Between 1816 and 1819, major typhus epidemics occurred in parts of Europe, including Ireland and Scotland. Tens of thousands died throughout the Continent.

The typhus germ is transmitted by the bite of the body louse; so the disease was directly connected with filth and overcrowded unwashed clothes and shared beds. In various circumstances it was called 'putrid fever', 'ship fever', 'jail fever' and 'camp fever' and was particularly virulent in cold weather, when poorer people would tend to wear every ragged stitch they possessed

The typhoid germ enters the body through the mouth, usually in contaminated food and water. Drinking water taken from contaminated wells was a common source of infection. The patient suffered headache and nose-bleeding, general body aches, a feeling of tiredness and persistent fever which may have lasted up to three weeks.

University of Nottingham

In Ireland, the disease was also at epidemic proportions and the advice given to people was that in all probability, the disease remained; '*in your rooms, and about your clothes*', and to remove it they were advised to;

*Let all your doors and windows be immediately thrown open, and let them remain so throughout the day.*

*Let the clothes you wear be steeped in cold water, and afterwards washed: and let any chest, box, drawer, &c in the infectious house be emptied and cleansed.*

*Let the house, room, or cabin from whence the patient is removed be immediately cleansed; all dirty clothes, utensils, &c immersed in cold water; the bed clothes, first steeped in cold water, then wrung out, and washed in warm water and soap.*

*If you lie on straw beds, let the straw be immediately burned, and fresh straw provided, and let the ticken be steeped in cold water.*

A disappointing grain yield and predominantly wet weather in the period before the onset of the epidemic created the perfect conditions whereby the disease could ravage an already-vulnerable population. It spread quickly, chiefly among the poor.

Typhus symptoms vary and may include abdominal pain, backache, dull red rash that begins on the middle of the body and spreads, fever, can be extremely high, 105°F to 106°F and can last up to two weeks, hacking, dry cough, headache, joint and muscle pain, nausea and vomiting.

*Whitewash all your rooms, and the entrance to them, with lime slaked in the place where you intend to use it, and while it continues bubbling and hot.*

*Scrape your floor with a shovel, and wash it clean; also, your furniture.*

*Keep in the open air for the space of a week as much as you can.*

*And lastly, wash your face, hands, and feet, and comb your hair well every morning at least.*

Given the prevalence of typhus in the area George almost certainly knew people who were impacted or died from the disease.

Further research may locate siblings after 1814 when George and Janet married but George seems to have grown up as an only child.

His father James was a handloom weaver but in the early nineteenth century a significant decline in wages for these tradesmen came about when the market was flooded with cheaper, machine-produced textiles from the burgeoning industrial mills, an output that drastically reduced the demand for handwoven cloth and consequently lowered the prices and earnings. Weaving was frequently a family enterprise, with all members contributing to the production process. However, as pay fell, it became increasingly difficult for families to support themselves, leading to poverty and hardship. Frequently living in poor conditions, predominantly as circumstances worsened, they typically worked long hours in their own homes under trying surroundings, with little light and ventilation, which affected the health and well-being of all present.



*Scottish  
handloom  
weaver*

The early nineteenth century, in the land of the Scots, also saw political unrest and agitation for reform. Events such as the Radical War of 1820 reflected widespread discontent among the working classes, affecting the stability of communities.

In the first week of April 1820, across central Scotland, some works stopped, particularly in weaving communities, and radicals attempted to fulfil a call to rise and strike. Several disturbances happened across the country. The worst was a skirmish at Bonnymuir, just ten miles south of Cambusbarron, near the Black family home, where a group of about 50 radicals clashed with a patrol of around 30 soldiers. Did James's father take part?

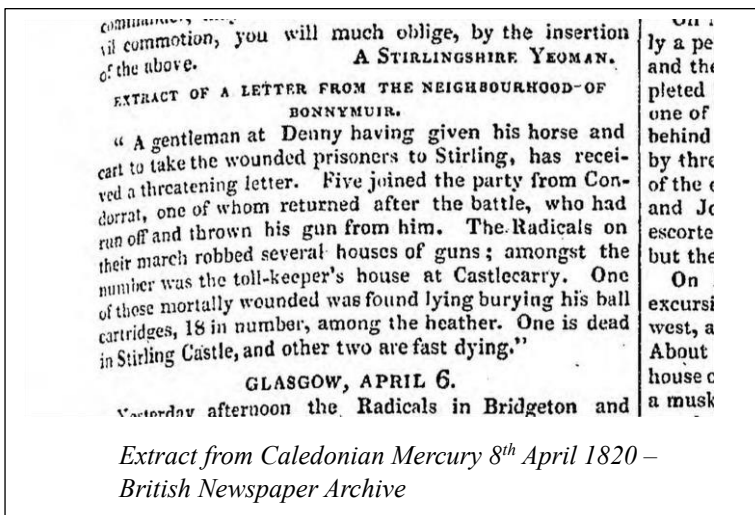
The 'Radical Rising' or 'Radical War' of 1820, also known as the Scottish Insurrection of 1820, was a week of strikes and unrest in Scotland that culminated in the trial of a number of 'radicals' for the crime of treason. It was the last armed uprising on Scottish soil, with the intent of establishing a radical republic.

Based in Central Scotland, artisan workers (such as weavers, shoemakers, blacksmiths), initiated a series of strikes and social unrest during the first week of April 1820. This pushed for government reform, in response to the economic depression. The Rising was quickly, and violently, quashed, and subsequently trials took place in Scotland from July to August 1820. Two ringleaders were hung and beheaded at the Stirling Tollbooth in September the same year.

Scotlands People.gov.uk

On 29<sup>th</sup> May 1820, a ‘special commission of ‘oyer and terminer’ [translated as ‘to hear and determine’] was granted under the Great Seal of Great Britain. This commission conferred royal authority to hold treason trials in several counties for those individuals charged with involvement and resulted in hangings and beheadings.

George is unlikely to have attended school because admission to education was limited, particularly for offspring from poorer families. Many of the brood had to work anyway from a young age to support parents and siblings, which also restricted educational prospects. In this



third decade of the century, infants began grim working lives as young as five or six years old. This was especially true for the underprivileged folk who needed every family member to contribute to the household income. Industrialisation meant that many youngsters were employed in factories, mines, and other hazardous environments, and it was not unusual to toil for up to 16 hours a day, leading to serious wellbeing issues. They worked for minimal wages but

it is more likely, though fortunate, that George worked with his parents all through his early years, carrying out simple tasks as he began to learn the trade.

His day typically looked something like this;

Wake up early, usually at dawn; 5 or 6am. Complete household chores; fetch water, feed animals, gather firewood.

Breakfast – make and eat brose, a Scottish form of porridge.

Assist father in the weaving shed by preparing the loom and organising yarns. Watch and learn some of the basic techniques.

Card wool or spin yarn for mother.

Noon - eat bread and cheese or leftovers.

Afternoon - run errands in the village then continue normal tasks including a practice on the loom just before the end of the day.

Evening – eat supper then help father repair tools and mother with spinning.

Bedtime - go to bed when total darkness falls, to save burning lamps or candles.

And so on...



Hand carders - undated

As the 1820's advanced into the 1830's, two key events arose; King George IV died and was succeeded by King William IV, and the Factories Act regulated the hours of young workers and barred work by children under the age of nine. George was seven when it was introduced so was of an age to benefit, unless of course he was working for his father for whom the Factories Act remained an unknown.

The small hamlet of Cambusbarron in the St Ninian Parish, began to grow as more and more people were driven off the land and into urban areas as the enclosure movement, that began earlier, powered into the 1830s. Enclosing common lands allowed for more efficient farming but also displaced many small farmers who subsequently needed to find homes and jobs. Efforts were made to improve education around that time, with the establishment of more schools. However, access to education was limited for many offspring although surprisingly there was a gradual increase in literacy rates, possibly supported by the spread of primary education and the influence of religious organisations.

By 1841, George, aged 25, was employed as an agricultural labourer and living in the Cambusbarron area. Starting work at dawn and finishing at dusk, his workdays were long and hard. Ploughing, sowing, weeding, harvesting, and threshing crops as well as caring for livestock, repairing fences, and maintaining the farms equipment, were among his many tasks. During peak times like planting and harvest, the labourers found work easily, but in the off-season, many faced unemployment and poverty. Pay was generally low, and payments often made in kind rather than cash so he could have received housing, firewood or portions of crops as part of his payment.

It's not clear whether George lived with his parents in the 1840's as labourers typically lived in small, rudimentary cottages provided by the landowner. These cottages were commonly poorly insulated and had limited ventilation, as well as inadequate sanitation. Coupled with hard labour and inadequate nutrition, a range of health problems befell many with diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera, and typhoid becoming common. There was always something to worry about and, on top of these hardships, the agricultural revolution, including the introduction of new machinery, was well underway, further threatening his and other agricultural labourers' livelihoods.

Some good came out of the decade however, when he met and married Henrietta Gibson on the 20<sup>th</sup> May 1842 in Stirling. On the marriage certificate George is described as a 'carter'.

Life as a carter consisted of transporting goods using a horse-drawn cart to move a range of materials and products, both within towns and between rural and urban areas. This did not necessarily mean he had an easier life; indeed, walking alongside his own or a rented cart to maximise its load was an option. As is customarily the case, women assisted with lighter tasks so Henrietta may have accompanied him on these arduous journeys.

No children were born in these initial years of marriage, maybe inevitably because of poor physical condition or perchance they were just too busy earning a living. In 1842, contraception was a topic shrouded in secrecy and controversy and the methods available rudimentary. The social and legal environment sometimes stigmatised their use.

The most common method of contraception involved male withdrawal but condoms made from animal intestines or bladder were also utilised and often reused...

Various herbal concoctions, passed down through the generations, and pessaries – a device inserted into the vagina to block sperm from entering the cervix – made from beeswax or metal, were also common. Unfortunately, infections and complications from improper use of contraceptive devices or dangerous herbal concoctions were regular occurrences.

Churchgoers heard directly from ministers about the split in the Church of Scotland in 1843 when a spectacular mass walk out from the Kirk's General Assembly occurred at Tanfield in Edinburgh. The 'Great Disruption' in the Kirk caused bitter divisions, left ministers without homes and salaries, and meant that whole congregations found themselves without churches to worship in. It also left the country with two national churches - the Church of Scotland and the Free Church of Scotland - instead of one.

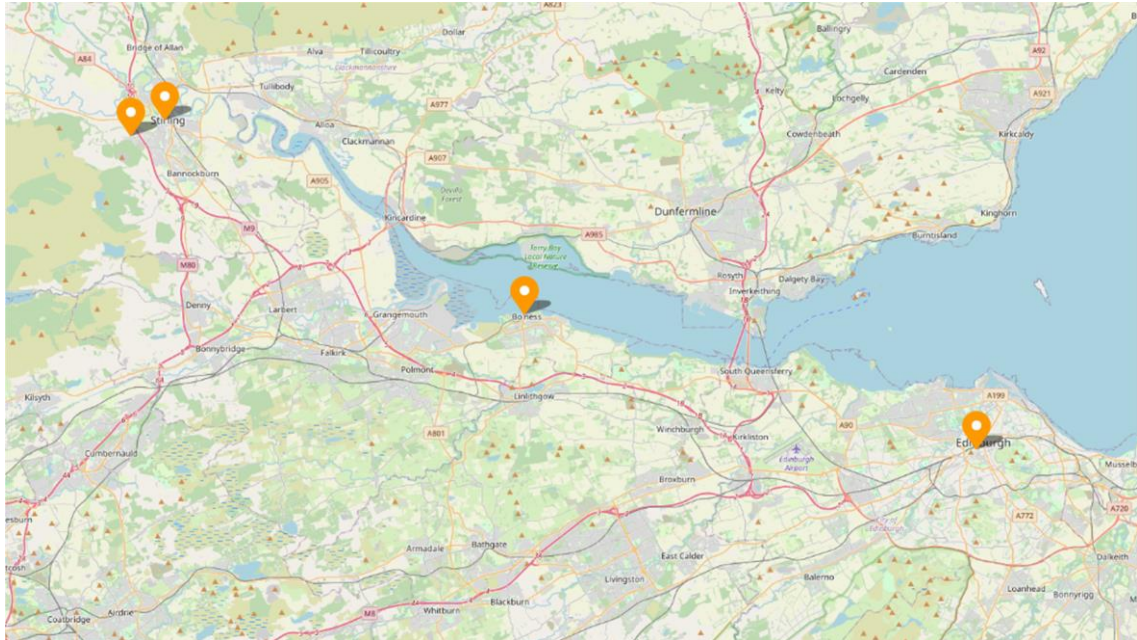
This state of affairs and the resultant administrative issues could be another reason why no offspring were registered in those early years of marriage because the first recorded child for the couple, John, was not born until five years later in 1848 and was then followed two years later by a baby girl, Catherine. Over the following decade three more arrived with James in 1854, Sarah in 1856 and finally William in 1863. Long gaps appear between some of the children resulting in ages ranging in 1863 between fifteen and one. Some may not have survived, were miscarried, or the division of the church caused blips in the recording of details. Research continues.

Through some of these births, Henrietta had stayed with her sister Isabella, who lived 20 miles south east of Cambusbarron, at Bo'ness in West Lothian. After Henrietta returned home, the couple decided work prospects might be better in West Lothian. Henrietta had seen how the area was booming. The development of the shale oil industry by James 'Paraffin' Young was a significant attraction for work hungry men. So much so, that the shale bings – piles of red rock - still exist at the time of writing. Young's innovations in extracting oil from shale rock led to the establishment of the world's first commercial oil works in Bathgate in 1851 but by 1860, the industry had significantly expanded, providing numerous local job opportunities throughout West Lothian. There were also rich black coal deposits, that were extensively mined. The availability of coal was crucial for industrial activities and home heating, making the county an attractive location for engagement. The coal industry supported other local industries, such as ironworks and brickworks, enhancing opportunities and economic development. George and Henrietta packed what few belongings they had and moved to Bo'ness.

George found work as a labourer as did his eldest son John whilst Catherine and her brother James attended school. Things were looking up. It was also a busy time for Henrietta or 'Henny' as she was sometimes referred to. With Sarah and William still at home it may not have been possible or practicable for her to work but at least jobs were available. Spinning, weaving or dyeing in a local mill, processing or packaging shale oil products - although this came with its

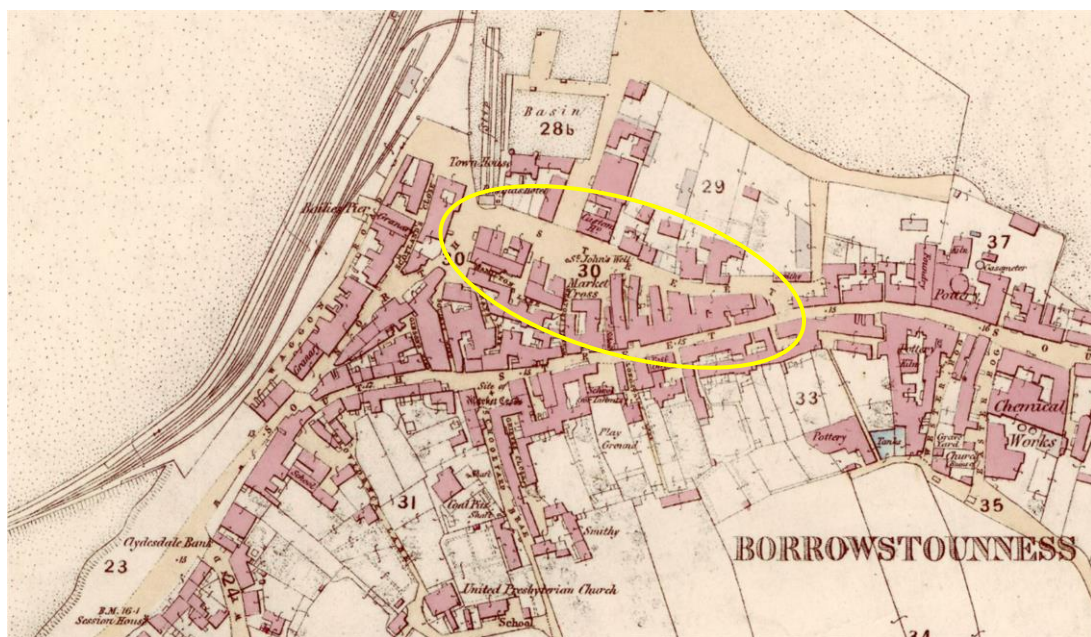
own risks -, or undertaking similar tasks at home. Sewing, mending or laundering garments for others was also possible.

The house at North Street in Bo'ness was different than the last one. It was located, not on the



2024 Street map showing, from left to right; Cambusbarron, Stirling, Bo'ness and Edinburgh -  
Courtesy OpenStreetMap

main road nor a leafy suburb, but in the working area sandwiched betwixt the main town thoroughfare, South Street, the harbour, basins and slipways and the grimy and raucous railway marshalling yards. It was a noisy and malodorous area throughout. The stink from the nearby



Bo'ness, West Lothian. North Street is highlighted – Ordnance Survey Borrowstounness (Bo'ness)  
25 inches to 1 mile - published 1856 – National Library of Scotland

chemical and gas works, and decomposing seaweed from the shore caused many visitors to baulk at the thought of walking down the main street.

Henrietta carried out daily shopping chores in the small town, a blend of routine and necessity, often centred around essential household supplies and food.



Milk was delivered fresh each day and bread was purchased from a bakery just off the main street. A butcher with an enticing front window or a fishmonger who sold freshly caught produce were only some shops that were on offer. Occasionally a market opened up near the harbour and vegetables and fruit were sold but dry goods, such as flour, sugar, salt, tea, and spices, came from a general store at the end of South Street. Candles that flickered in an evening's darkness and oil for lighting, which produced a smell that stuck to your outfits, came from a small shop that may have been in the same family for years and where the shopkeeper plausibly enjoyed passing the time of day with Henrietta and his other clients. She always tried to pay cash but some shops allowed weekly and monthly credit so perchance she took advantage of this.

Although this was seen as a chore by many, Henrietta likely enjoyed the interactions with neighbours and friends as she placed her purchases in her shopping basket.

With at least seven in the house, personal hygiene was challenging to maintain due to the lack of proper washing facilities. Bathing was infrequent, contributing to the spread of illnesses. Access to clean water was also limited with many households relying on communal wells or pumps, which were sources of contamination. It's likely that cholera, typhoid fever, dysentery, hepatitis A, and various diarrheal diseases were prevalent. Driven by poor sanitation and contaminated water supplies, significant public health reforms and infrastructural improvements were desperately needed but they would not arrive for a number of years.

Although at 45 George was no longer in the flush of youth, he had a good family around him and a plentiful supply of work. But was it possible he aspired to a role greater than simply labouring and what did he do with any leisure time he had or indeed, was there any?

Churches, schools and community organisations played a vital role in the social life of local residents. They provided support and a sense of belonging in a rapidly changing environment but then so too did the local pub...

On 13<sup>th</sup> August 1869, daughter Catherine was the first to marry. Robert Jamieson was a farm servant from the hamlet of Abercorn two miles east along the coast from Bo'ness and the couple chose that location to marry. Within three years son John, who was now a sailor, married too. His wife Maria McAllister was a local lass who lived with her widowed mother. Her father, a joiner, had died some time previously. The service took place at The United Presbyterian (Church of Scotland) manse in Bo'ness on 13<sup>th</sup> December 1872.



The 1871 Census recorded George's age as 59, but he was more likely 55 or 56. His vigour had deteriorated over the years, making it difficult to handle the daily labouring tasks more suitable for a younger man. Seeking new employment, he was fortunate. Jobs were relatively plentiful, and he quickly found work at a local pit as a night watchman. This role was much less physically demanding and better suited to his capabilities. Despite some of the teenagers leaving home, mouths needed to be fed. The family income was supplemented by son James, who worked at a local ironworks, while Sarah and the youngest, William, were still in school. Wife Hinny, was 55, but in this current situation neither of them enjoyed the best of health, occasionally going without proper food so their children could eat. October was a



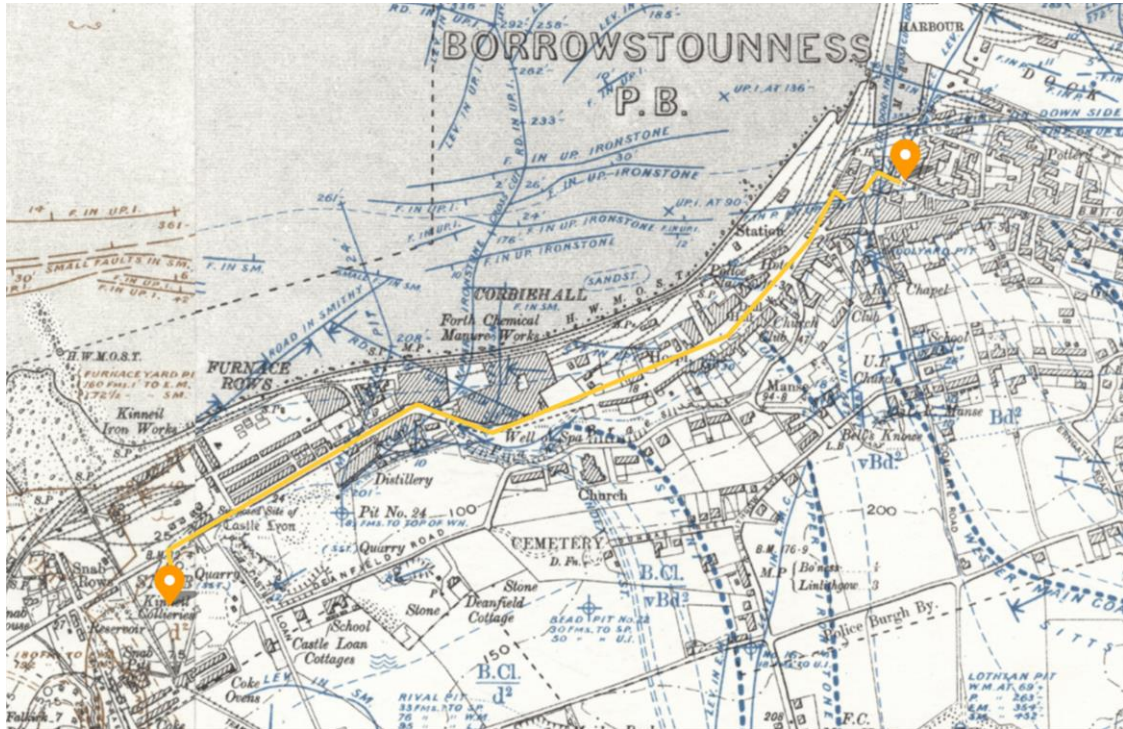
*Kinneil Colliery, undated – Courtesy Falkirk Local History Club*

transitional month for weather in the country between the cool summer and wet winter. You could expect rain and wind, as well as possible frost. On average, the temperatures ranged from highs of 12°Centigrade and lows of 5°Centigrade.

When George set off for work on the evening of Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> October 1873 it was cold and wet. A normal working day for many of his mining colleagues at the pit who operated a shift system, seven days a week. Not for George though were the risks they were exposed to from black lung, fibrotic lung disease, chronic coughs or shortness of breath. Neither was he at risk from the methane gas, or the resulting explosion, cave ins, floods, blackdamp or white damp. As the nightwatchman he was surface based and generally not exposed to those levels of hazard.

George was a deterrent against thieves and vandals, and worked alone for most of his shift, operating from the watchman's hut. Conducting patrols around the mine shafts, checking buildings, equipment, and entrance points to underground shafts were essential to ensure that no unauthorised persons entered the mine and that the equipment was secure. Given the risk of fire in mining areas, he had to be extra vigilant for smoke and flame.

Leaving the house, carrying a piece to enjoy on his break, he continued to digest the light supper he had eaten. The dismal evening air was cool and damp and the clouds low as he walked the ill lit roads towards Lothian Pit number 18 at Kinneil or ‘the Snab’ as the miners had named it. The distance of one and a half miles took him from his home at North Street, west along the road leading out of Bo’ness, passed the police station and was within sight of the railway lines serving the pit heads. The smell of the shoreline mixed with that of the Forth



*Geological Survey Linlithgowshire I.S.E. Published 1909 showing The Snab (left) and North Street, Bo’ness (right) and the likely route George took to work— National Library of Scotland*

Chemical Manure Works as he continued the desolate walk, stopping infrequently to chat with neighbours and friends. The foreboding blackness of the silent distillery and the subdued huffing and puffing of the Kinneil Ironworks where hellish flames were just visible through occasional windows or gaps in the structure caused the eerie darkness to close around him as he trudged the final few hundred yards to Snab and the solitary access to the pit site.

Covering the route in under 45 minutes he arrived at the hut and was likely updated by his day shift colleague as to anything that had arisen or areas that needed a particular eye kept on. The underground miners’ shift was already underway but of course there were pithead staff and surface workers barely visible across the inky, colourless outlook of the poorly lit site. George might have enjoyed some company as he sporadically bumped into and spoke with work colleagues throughout the evening, but we just don’t know.

George’s body was found in the watchman’s hut about 7am on Sunday morning.

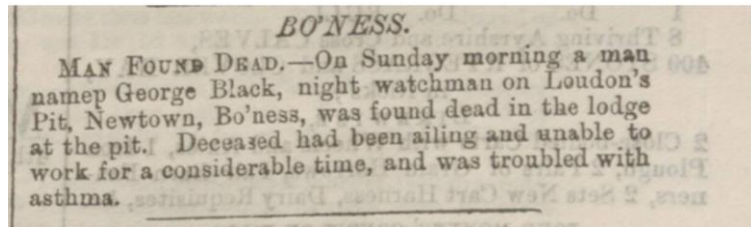
The incomprehensible circumstances of his death were such, that an investigation was conducted, interviews recorded and eventually an inquest held. The verdict, recorded on an addition to his death certificate states that he died of ‘exposure to cold [whilst his] constitution was debilitated and his body improperly nourished’. He had been alone and unmissed for almost seven hours and many questions remain unanswered including why no fire was lit in the hut. A shortage of coal was never in dispute.

The news was devastating for Henrietta and the family. A tragic end to a hard life, as it was for many from this era. Hinny signed her husband of thirty years death certificate with an 'X'.

George Black's name is not registered as a 'mining' death so it remains unclear whether any pension was granted or compensation paid. The fact that his constitution and health were poor and he was generally malnourished would not be seen as his employer's fault.

Age & Sex	When and Where Died.	Cause of Death.
George Black 37 years Male	Between 12. & 7 A.M. on 26 <sup>th</sup> Oct. 1873. In the watermans Pit at Rothmans pit No. 18 near Kinnel, Parish of Bonnowtown, County of Leith.	Exposure to cold, deceased's Constitution being debilitated and his body improperly nourished; — Dr. Benjamin Graham Corrie made a post mortem examination of body. — Death supposed to have been instantaneous.

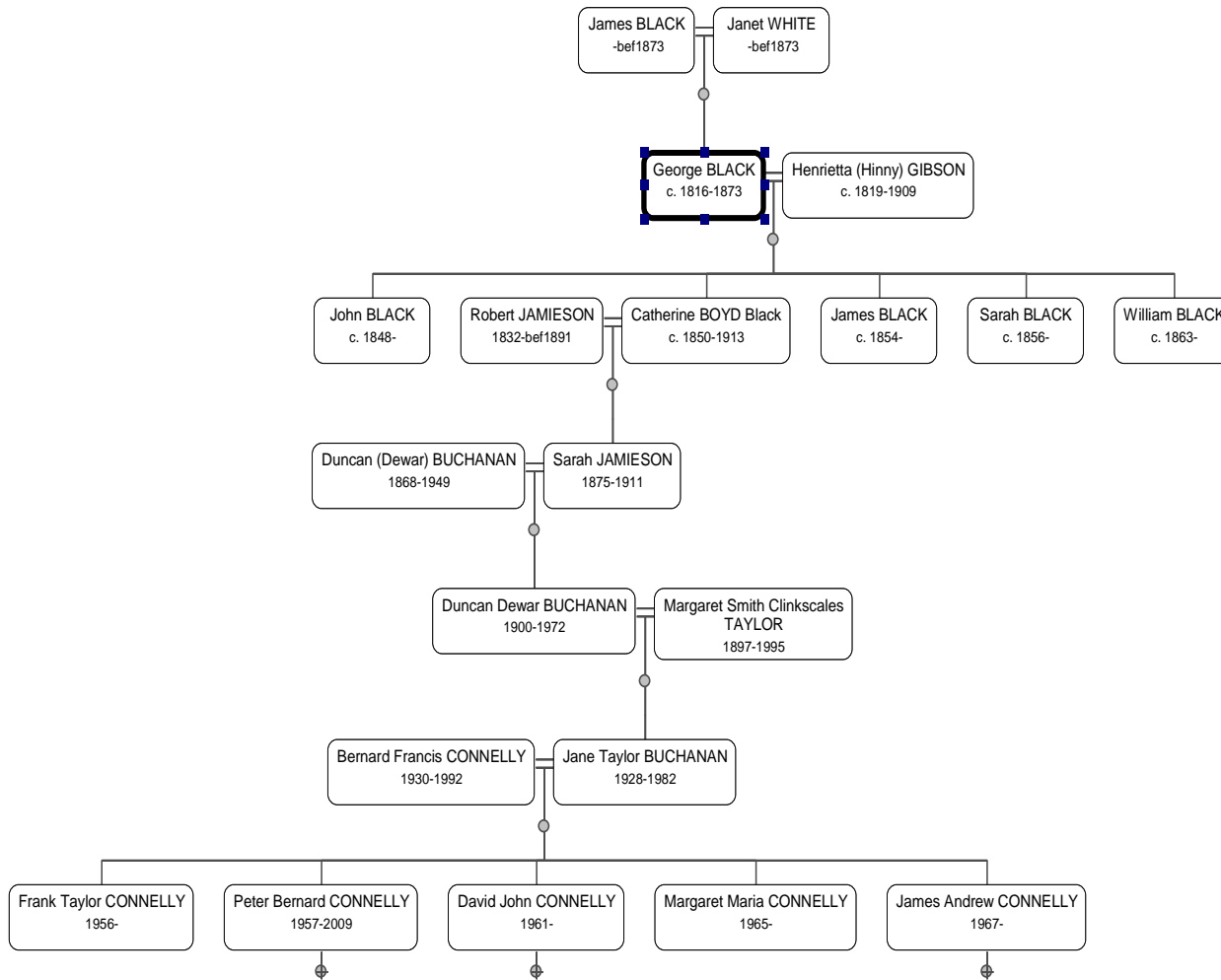
Extract from Register of Corrected Entries for George Black – Scotland's People



Falkirk Herald 30 October 1873

Henrietta continued to live in Bo'ness, watching as her boys and girls married and produced grandchildren. Eventually, with an undoubted sense of melancholy, she moved a hundred yards or so to a more suitable house where she saw out her days, dying in January 1909 at the ripe old age of 96.

## Appendix - Family Tree of George Black



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