



St Mary's Church ... location for Kirrie Kist's Play "Soldiering On" in June 2015



Magdalene Gillies,  
Pitmiddle, Carse of Gowrie

## 'Soldiering On' ..... and Magdalene

An impressive and inspiring Play was performed last week in Kirriemuir. It was a **Promenade Play** with the audience following the Actors around various outdoor and indoor scenes. Presented by '**KIRRIE KIST**' the **WW1 story 'Soldiering On'** was written by Jan Natanson, Mary McIntosh and Sandra Affleck and contained all the essential ingredients to reveal how it was for the folk 'back home' when the men went off to War. **Set in 1915** the story dramatically conveyed the conflicting emotions of that time, sadness, anxiety, fear, determination, and not forgetting romance and humour. This was achieved through the imaginative **dialogue, readings, music, singing and dance**.

**The Dancing!** Now that's where **Magdalene's story** comes in to play. One of the writers, **Jan Natanson** is also a keen Scottish Country Dancer and she gathered together a few volunteers to perform two short dances to begin to tell the story of 'Soldiering on' in the opening scenes of each of the **five performances** (9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> June 2015). **Mairi's Reel** came first to suggest happier times for Mairi, one of the leading characters in the Play. The second dance was a slow, sad **Strathspey** which showed the male dancers disappearing one by one to enlist in the War, their place in the dance being taken by women folk. The dancers **had to find suitable costumes** for the dances. **Long skirts, shawls, and pinny's** for the ladies, (**trousers, nicky-tams, flat caps, auld shirts and braces** for the men) and boots or heavy shoes as the dancing was to be done **on a gravel path**. **So – the hunt was on for costumes**.

I was one of Jan's happy troupe of dance volunteers and had already settled on wearing a plain long skirt and big scarf. **Not really very 1915 (ish) in style but they would do!** However I didn't have a long 'pinny'. A couple of nights before the first Performance I asked my neighbour if she had such a thing as a long pinny. Well, she did and the rest of the story is now hers. My neighbour is Eila (nee Robertson) Webster. There's lots to learn about Eila in our village website [www.westmuir.org.uk](http://www.westmuir.org.uk) and now with thanks to Eila we can offer more of the background of Magdalene (pronounced Magdalena).

Eila offered her **Grandmother Magdalene's dress** for the 'Soldiering on' dances. By coincidence **Magdalene died in 1914**, just over 100 years before the date chosen for the Kirrie Play. The outfit was beautifully made and still in almost perfect condition. The **flowing, fawn coloured skirt** had a heavy hem (ideal for dancing): the floral cotton **blouse had a lace trimmed cape style collar** which draped across the shoulders; **the black shawl** was very light and delicate...must have been a Sunday best shawl; there was a **small white crocheted cap**; and **four beautiful aprons (pinny's) to choose from**. What an absolute **privilege** it was going to be to wear Magdalene's outfit.



Eila (Robertson) Webster outside her cottage chatting to Helen Humphreys, wearing Magdalene's dress.

Eila then produced some fascinating **family photos and records** about her Carse of Gowrie ancestors. Whilst sadly there was no photograph of Magdalene wearing the dress which was 'borrowed' for 'Soldiering On' there was in fact a photo of Magdalene with her husband and family. Magdalene died when she was only 55 years of age from a medical condition which would have been quickly and safely resolved nowadays.

The **family photograph** is shown below.



**Mr and Mrs John Robertson with their seven surviving children**

**Father:** John Robertson 1841 – 1921; **Mother:** Magdalene (nee Gillies) 1859 – 1914

**Back Row:** (1) James. (2) Margaret. (3) William.

**Middle Row:** (1) Magdalene (Mother). (2) John. (3) Susan. (4) John (father).

**Front:** (1) Alexander (2) Christine (twins)

**Sons:** James....1889 – 1976; William ....1893-1978; John (Eila's father)....1887-1979; Alexander....1896-1940.

**Daughters:** Margaret....1886-1935; Susan....1884-1975; Christine....1896-1974.

One son died in infancy: George .... 1890-1891

## Magdalene's Parents: James and Margaret Gillies , Pitmiddle, near Abernyte



Magdalene's parents were James Gillies (1832 – 1920) son of James and Elizabeth Gillies of Abernyte. In January 1853 he married Margaret Gray (1833-1908) of PITMIDDLE, near Kinnaird. They had 10 children Magdalene being their 6<sup>th</sup> child.

### GOLDEN WEDDING IN THE CARSE IN THE YEAR 1903

#### MR and MRS JAMES GILLIES, PITMIDDLE, KINNAIRD

*Since the time when Pitmiddle in the Parish of Kinnaird was a hamlet of greater importance than it is in these days of de-population, there has not been a larger or happier gathering in the 'Sleepy Hollow' than that which assembled last week to pay honour to Mr and Mrs James Gillies at the celebration of their Golden Wedding.*

*A gathering of 50 persons, young and old, had somehow or other found their way to the ancient out-of-the-way place and a jolly night and morning were spent in congratulating the old couple.*

*It would be a matter-of-fact unromantic statement to say that Mr and Mrs Gillies are both natives of Pitmiddle. It would be only slightly more interesting to add they were married in the house where the Golden Wedding was celebrated but when we also have to record that the 50 years bride, Margaret Gray, was also born in the house – ay, and that her mother was born and married in it before her, we find ourselves in the midst of as enthralling a love story as any sentimental or practical person could desire.*

*The officiating clergyman 50 years ago was the Rev. Joseph Wilson of the U.F. Church, Abernyte, and within the half-century there have sprung into the records of the Gillies family ten children and 31 grand-children. Eight of Mr and Mrs Gillies' family still survive and, of these, one son and four daughters were present, also twenty of the grand-children attended. Mr John Reid Gillies, the son in the name of the family, presented each of the old couple with a purse of sovereigns and many other valuable presentations were also made.*

*Mr Gillies is now 71 years of age and his wife is only one year younger. He was a mason to trade but now is a well-known figure in Dundee Berry market. He is a man of high esteem and as 'good a hand' at the gun at the present day as any sportsman ever wished to be. To get him in the best of humour, provide him with a good sheet of ice, a broom, and a 'curling stane or twa' along with a few old cronies and, well !!! other necessities. There you'll have him in all his glory, 'Gillies o' Pitmiddle'. The old couple are still hale and hearty and as evidence of the 'spunk' still left, they joined in a foursome at their Golden Wedding.*

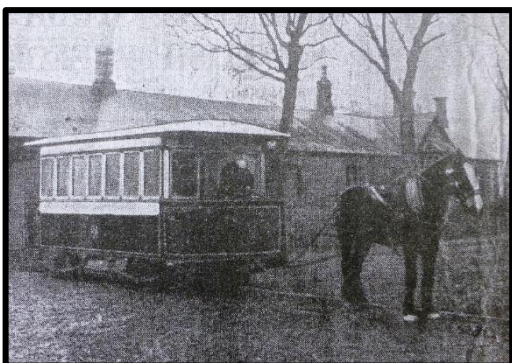
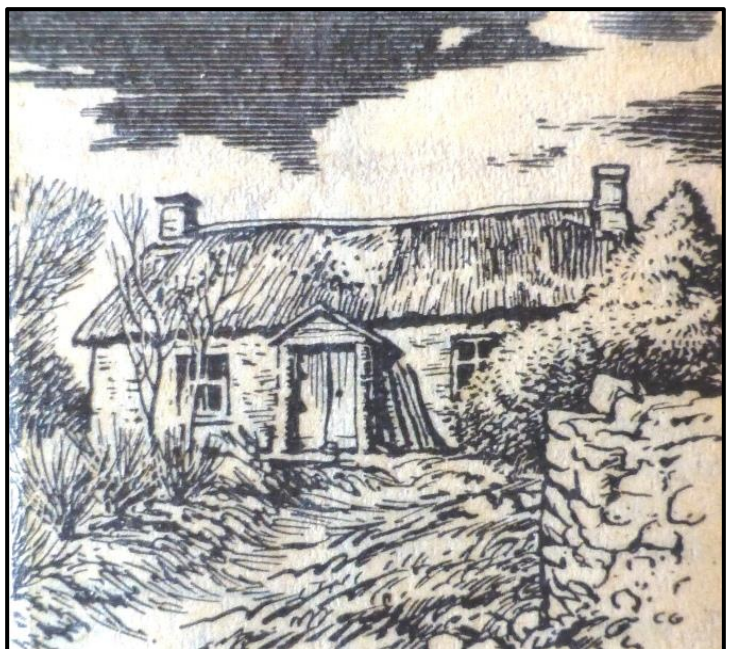
(Copied from the Dundee Journal in 1916 by grand-daughter Isabella Gillies, daughter of the son, John Reid Gillies.)



The Golden Wedding article on the previous page suggests an appropriate and rather quaint journalistic style perhaps typical of 1903. It states that **one son, four daughters and twenty grandchildren** were present at the **Golden Wedding party in Pitmiddle**. The records of the Gillies family confirm that four sons had emigrated to Canada and one daughter died in infancy. One daughter had no children and another had one son, James. From the information provided it is clear that Magdalene and her family attended the Golden Wedding along with her brother John Gillies (Gamekeeper, Forfar) and sisters Elizabeth, Christina, and Margaret. The party numbers above just wouldn't add up without Magdalene, and family. Eila said that her father often spoke of visiting the family in Pitmiddle and she recalled him talking about attending the 50th Celebrations with his father. She also recalls that there was a photograph of Grandmother Magdalene wearing the 'Soldiering on' dress. Perhaps one day a photograph will be found which confirms that the dress worn at the "Soldiering On" production was the very dress worn by Magdalene for her parents special Wedding Celebrations. That truly would be the icing on the Golden Wedding cake.

Magdalene's father was a Master Mason - but perhaps he was also quite a Master of many Trades as Eila recalls from family conversations that **he was the person who thatched many of the roofs** of the 55 cottages at Pitmiddle. The village has gone now but **James** (son of Margaret) was the last **person to live there**. Around 1950 he moved to Bridge of Weir to live with his mother.

Eila remembers that **her father** (who would have been 16 years of age in 1903) travelled on the **Inchtire Express** with his father to make his way to Kinnaird, then walked on to Pitmiddle. Eila's father, Parents and six siblings lived in Carnoustie at that time – so quite a journey.



“ The **Inchtire Express** was a horse-drawn carriage driven by **Bob Speed**. It was operated by the **Caledonian Railway Company**, and the rails ran along a hedge lined route to **Inchtire railway station**. Bob Speed (see photograph) drove a **white chestnut** and the only 'driving' equipment he needed was a **whip** and a **brake**. An article in the **People's Journal** in **1955** stated that *“People used to say that there were two speeds dead slow and stop. It closed down and the rails were lifted in 1916.*