

West Fife: the march of suburbia has made my old constituency feel bigger

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In the third of our pre-election series, Ian Jack returns to his home village, to find a middle-class influx that has transformed the area



*The Forth Road Bridge, which carries commuters between Fife and Edinburgh. Photograph: Fraser Bremner*

The recent history of lowland Scotland is more complicated than the songs of the Proclaimers and the novels of Irvine Welsh would have us believe. By no means everywhere has followed the same pattern of deindustrialisation followed by despair and drugs. Many people have got much richer. And this is especially true in the east.

Guinea fowl boudin with orzo pasta, wild mushrooms and cep powder is an item on the menu of the little restaurant in the main street at North Queensferry, where a three-course dinner costs £36. A newish Land Rover is parked nearby and a cafe-cum-delicatessen stands across the road. All the

retailers I knew as a boy have gone: the newsagent, the butcher, the haberdasher, the two grocers, the confectioner's. The licensed grocer and his wife no longer stand gloomily behind their window display of Keystone Burgundy hoping for trade that rarely comes. The post office next door has become the restaurant. No longer does the postmistress stamp our postal orders and encourage us to join her Christmas club.

Looking at the menu in what was once the post office's window, I remember how she always smelled of Ambrosia creamed rice, milky and sweet. Many smelled worse. Those of us who lived in council houses up the hill could at least have a bath – once a week was considered sufficient – but few of the old houses down by the shore had bathrooms. They look charming now, these houses, with their red pantile roofs and whitewashed walls, but in the early 1950s their inhabitants lived with gaslight, damp plaster and outdoor sanitation. The terrace of quarrymen's cottages that lay in the shadow of the Forth railway bridge was known as Bug Row.

Nobody famous then lived in the village. Today, Gordon Brown has his home there, as did the late Iain Banks. The history of the constituency is a little complicated – which accounts for Brown living in a constituency that isn't his own – but it emerged as Dunfermline and West Fife in 2005 after a series of boundary changes that at last united the town with its hinterland. Until 1974, as West Fife, Labour regularly took more than 60% of the vote. To get elected it helped to be called Willie. An examiner, Willie Adamson, first took the seat for Labour in 1910 and went on to become the party leader towards the end of the first world war; Willie Gallacher, one of the last two Communists to be returned to Westminster, took over in 1935 and lasted till 1950; then came Willie Hamilton, who made his name by criticising the monarchy; more recently, Willie Rennie briefly held the newly amalgamated seat for the Lib Dems.

In the 1959 general election, the first I remember clearly, my mother voted for Lawrence Daly, later to be the NUM's general secretary but then standing for his own little party, the Fife Socialist League. Mining still gave local politics a radical and sometimes pro-Soviet flavour; not simply for the fact of the astronaut's boldly going did the colliery village of Lumphinnans name one of its streets Gagarin Way. But gradually, the pits were closing and the miners finding work elsewhere: Rosyth's naval dockyard, booming in the cold war, was a favourite destination. Men from our village – a few women, too – went off every morning to the dockyard, the paper mill, the shipbreaking yard, the linen factories, the Forth ferries, the quarries and the railways.

Today, the dockyard, now owned by Babcock, still employs a few thousand to fit out and join together the Royal Navy's two big aircraft carriers; most of the other workplaces have vanished. The unemployment rate, however, runs at only 3% as measured by the number of the economically active people on jobseeker's allowance. The explanation is that West Fife has become Edinburgh's dormitory suburb, soon to be served by three Forth crossings when the second road bridge is finished next year. People drive south over the Forth to work. The biggest difference in the place I left more than 50 years ago isn't industrial collapse but a landscape disfigured by housing estates, superstores and parking lots.

"I suppose the place must seem smaller to you now," says the SNP's candidate, Douglas Chapman, when I meet him in Dunfermline. In fact, it seems much bigger: a rambling suburbia that has spread east from the historic old town until it reaches the M90. The name for this development is DEX, Dunfermline Eastern Expansion, and its commuters can reach Edinburgh by car in half an hour. Life has drained from Dunfermline's high street, its cafes and shops. Headline after headline in the local paper features the word "drunk", suggesting either an underclass wrecked by alcohol or a reporting staff confined to the courts.

The political contest here, as almost everywhere else, will be between Labour and the SNP. The speed of the nationalists' rise is astonishing. Five years ago, they came third with 10.6% of the vote, after the Lib Dems (35.1%) and Labour (46.3%). According to Chapman, the yes vote in last year's referendum tended to be strongest in the former pit villages where the electorate is poorer; an echo of the national trend that supports his belief that the SNP has usurped Labour as the party perceived to have "a strong social conscience". By this reckoning, a richer village such as North Queensferry is more a no kind of place.

As I drive around this week, I'm struck by how temporary the most solid of our works can be. Rosyth dockyard, for example, built to keep the German fleet at bay with dreadnoughts: what will it do when the carriers leave? Or Longannet power station: once the largest coal-fired generator in Europe, built by the British state in the early 1970s, now owned ultimately by a Spanish energy company, and so polluting and superfluous to future need that no amount of political protest can extend its life beyond 2020 (the likelihood is that it will close next year). The state shaped my own village, too. I grew up among relics left behind by the war – army barracks, artillery emplacements, a coastguard station – as well as under a Westminster consensus that provided free doctors and orange juice and houses with bathrooms. But what has changed things most since I lived there is the unexpected influx of the middle class.

Against conventional wisdom and the constituency's more general experience, this has given the village a stronger sense of community. Sixty years ago, it had a church, a wolf cub pack and a branch of the Scottish Women's Rural Institute – my mother sometimes won a prize for her fruit slice. Now, there's also a community council a walking club, a rowing club and a heritage trust that has refurbished the old station ticket office as a cafe, and the waiting room as a meeting venue. Come May, will it turn out for the union? When I ask West Fife's MP, Thomas Docherty, if he was worried by his prospects, he replies: "The only Scottish Labour MPs who aren't worried are drunk."

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This article was amended on 23 March 2015 to clarify that Willie Gallacher was one of the last two Communist MPs, rather than the last. He and Phil Piratin both lost their seats in 1950.

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