

Aberdeen Combworks: Stewart Family History

The company which eventually became the Aberdeen Combworks (ACW) was established and developed for the best part of 100 years by the Stewart family. John Stewart, a native of Perth, arrived in Aberdeen around 1830 to set up a comb manufacturing business in partnership with Joseph Rowell. Despite competition from existing comb manufacturers in Aberdeen, Stewart, Rowell & Co thrived and became the leading comb manufacturer in the world.

The following account charts the history of the remarkable Stewart family, drawing extensively on the National Records of Scotland.

John Stewart (1810 – 1887)

John Stewart, founder of the company that eventually became Aberdeen Combworks (ACW), was born in Perth in October 1810. Records suggest that his father, also John Stewart, was a blacksmith in Perth and his mother, Mary Martin, was the daughter of a farmer in Forgandenny, outside Perth. This conflicts slightly with details in the death certificate for John Stewart jnr in 1887, which gives his mother's maiden name as McPherson. The certificate also gives the occupation of John's father as a 'Gentleman', suggesting he had become a man of means.

At the tender age of 18, John Stewart first applied his entrepreneurial spirit in setting up a business in Edinburgh making combs from horn but the business failed and he moved to Aberdeen two years later to set up a similar business in partnership with Joseph Rowell. This time the company was successful, thanks partly to being the first comb maker to introduce steam driven machinery, which reduced process costs by 80 %, and partly by introducing a novel technique for producing two combs from one sheet of horn. Consequently the fortunes of Stewart, Rowell & Co went from strength to strength and they amassed a substantial fortune.

The connection between John Stewart and Joseph Rowell was that, in 1832, John married Mary Irvine, who was the sister of Joseph's wife, Isabella Irvine, whom he had married in 1829.

In the 1851 census, John Stewart, aged 40, is described as 'master comb maker', employing 626. He was living at Cotton Lodge, Aberdeen with his wife, Mary (39), and their children, Julia (17), David (15), John (13), Mary (12), George Irvine (10) Joseph Rowell (6) Jeny Souter (5) Patrick Irvine (3) and Sarah (1). Also in the household were 3 domestic servants and a farm servant. John and Mary completed their family around 1854, with the birth of Hannah.

In 1853 John's partnership with Joseph Rowell was dissolved and the company was renamed Stewart, Rowell Stewart & Co with the new partners being John Stewart and three of his sons, John Stewart, George Irvine Stewart and Joseph Rowell Stewart. John's eldest son, David, was not named as a partner, perhaps because he was a student at Aberdeen University at the time, although he started working for the company in 1855 and played a big part in its development.

In the 1861 census, John (50) is described as a cotton manufacturer, shipowner, railway director and landed proprietor. It appears that 'cotton manufacturer' was a mistake and should read 'comb manufacturer' because he was still active in Stewart, Rowell & Co. He

had set up a steam shipping line and was a director of the newly formed Highland Railway. The 'landed proprietor' description also applied because he had purchased the estate of Craigiebuckler, to the west of Aberdeen on the north bank of the River Dee.

The lands of Craigiebuckler were granted to the City of Aberdeen by Robert the Bruce as 'freedom lands' in 1319. The lands were sold off at the beginning of the 19th century to pay for the construction of Union Street. In 1826, James Blaikie, who became the first Lord Provost of Aberdeen in 1833, built a Mansion House on the grounds of Craigiebuckler. John Stewart, a relative of James Blaikie, purchased the Mansion House in the 1850s but had to sell it in the late 1860s when his shares in the Highland Railway depreciated. John Couper, an engineer working in China purchased the estate and laid out the grounds as they are today. In the 1930s the estate was purchased on behalf of the newly founded Macaulay Institute of Soil Research. The Mansion House and grounds are now the home of the James Hutton Institute, which is an amalgamation of the Macaulay Land Use Research Institute in Aberdeen and SCRI (Scottish Crop Research Institute) in Dundee..

In 1865 John Stewart owned, Craigiebuckler House, the Overseers House, the Home Farm, Braeside farm and houses at Slopefield.

As a result of the cost (£46,000) of setting up the North Steam Company with a fleet of steam ships and because of the depreciation in the stock of the Great North Railway, triggered by the contract for mail being awarded to the Highland Railway, John Stewart was forced to sell the Craigiebuckler Estate in the late 1860s.

In December 1870 John Stewart jnr ceased to be a partner in Stewart, Rowell Stewart & Co.

In the 1871 census, John Stewart, aged 60 and described as a comb manufacturer, employing 600 – 700 men, was residing at 32 Bon Accord Square, Aberdeen, with his children: Joseph (28), Jessie? (25), Patrick (23) and Sarah (21). Also in the household were their grandchildren, Arthur Oncke (4), born in Germany, and Gertrude Oncke (0) born in Leith, and 5 servants. His wife Mary had died at Craigiebuckler in 1863, aged 52.

With the continuing success of Stewart, Rowell & Company, John Stewart's financial fortunes were revived and he was able, in 1872, to purchase Banchory House and estates, in the parish of Banchory-Devenick, Kincardineshire, just across the River Dee from Craigiebuckler. The Banchory Estate dates back to the 14th century. In 1843, the previous owner, Alexander Thomson, started to build a new mansion house on the site of the one built in the 17th century, which had fallen into disrepair. One notable event at the new house was a visit from Prince Albert in 1859, in connection with a meeting of the British Association in Aberdeen.

In the 1881 census John Stewart (aged 70), widower, comb manufacturer and JP, was residing at Banchory House, Banchory-Devenick, Kincardineshire, with three of his children, Joseph (38) (occupation: comb manufacturer), Jessie (35) and Hannah (27) (all unmarried). Also listed in the household were 6 servants.

John Stewart died on 25 January 1887, aged 76, at Banchory House, Banchory-Devenick, Kincardineshire. In his death certificate he was described as 'Comb Manufacturer and Proprietor of Lands', widower of Mary Irvine.

Of his two sons, listed as partners in Stewart, Rowell Stewart & Co, George Irvine Stewart had died in 1870 and Joseph Rowell Stewart died in 1888, after which the company was managed by John Stewart's eldest son, David.

Sir David Stewart (1835 – 1919)

David Stewart was born in Aberdeen in July 1835, the eldest son of John Stewart and Mary Irvine, and he was baptised in St Nicolas Church on 29 July 1835.

In the 1851 census David (aged 15), was living at Cotton Lodge, Old Machar, Aberdeenshire with his father (40), comb manufacturer, and mother (39) and siblings Julia (17), John (13), Mary (12), George Irvine (10), Joseph Rowell (6), Jenny Souter (5), Patrick Irvine (3) and Sarah (1).

David was educated at Dr Tulloch's Academy, graduated from King's College, Aberdeen in 1855 and joined his father's comb making business.

At North Lodge, King St, Aberdeen on 19 July 1860, David Stuart (24), comb manufacturer, residing at Cotton Lodge, Aberdeen, son of John Stewart, comb manufacturer, and Mary Stewart (ms Irvine), married Margaret D Brown (23), North Lodge, King St Aberdeen, daughter of David Brown DD, professor of theology, and Catherine Brown (ms Dyce). Witnesses were George Carr and David D Brown.

David and Margaret Stewart went on to have 11 children, with 8 still surviving in 1911. These include David Brown Douglas Stewart (born 1862), Alexandra Catherine Dyce Stewart (1863), William Dyce Stewart (1864), Mary Stewart (1865), Julia Charlotte Stewart (1868), Margaret Isobel Stewart (~1872), George Irvine T Stewart (1872), Jessie (or Jenny) Stewart (1873) and Charles Stewart (1876).

In the 1861 census David Stewart (25), comb manufacturer, was residing at Carden Place, Aberdeen with his wife Margaret (24) and 2 domestic servants.

By 1871 David Stewart (35) master comb maker, had moved to 259 Union St, Aberdeen, with his wife Margaret (34) and children: David B D Stewart (8), Alexandra C D Stewart (7), William D Stewart (6), Mary Stewart (5), Julia C Stewart (3). They had 3 domestic servants.

In 1881 David (45) comb manufacturer employing 700, was still at 259 Union Street, with his wife and 8 of their children: David B D Stewart (18), student of arts, University of Aberdeen, William D Stewart (16), Mary Stewart (15), Julia C Stewart (13), Margaret J (9), George J T (8), Jessie (7), Charles (4). They still had 3 servants.

For the next 20 years David, in addition to running the comb manufacturing business, played a full public role. His list of achievements include:

1883-84	President of Aberdeen Chamber of Commerce
1885-88	Member of the School Board
1885-89	Dean of Guild
1889	Elected to Aberdeen Council as Councillor for Ferry Hill ward
1889-1900	Member of University Court
1889-1895	Lord Provost
1896	Knighted
1891 -1919	Director of Great North of Scotland Railway
1904-1919	Chairman of Great North of Scotland Railway

He also served as a Rector's Assessor at the University of Aberdeen and Deputy Lieutenant of Aberdeenshire and Kincardine. In the 1895 General Election he stood (unsuccessfully) as a Unionist candidate in Aberdeen South.

David and Margaret have not been identified in the 1891 census, probably because they were not in the UK, but some of the family were residing at Banchory Lodge, Banchory-Devenick, Kincardineshire, former residence of David's father John Stewart who had died in 1887.

In 1899 Stewart, Rowell Stewart & Co bought up some smaller comb making companies in Aberdeen to form Aberdeen Combworks (later known as ACW), with Sir David as Chairman and his two sons, David B Douglas Stewart and William Dyce Stewart as Managing Directors.

In the 1901 census: Sir David Stewart (65), landed proprietor, retired from managing Aberdeen combworks, was residing at Banchory Lodge, Banchory-Devenick, Kincardineshire, with his children, Alexandra Catherine Dyce Stewart (37), Julia Charlotte Stewart (32), William Dyce Stewart (36), single, manager of Aberdeen Combworks. The returns for the household also included 7 domestic servants, a groom, a retired farmer and his wife. Sir David's wife, Margaret does not appear in the census.

In 1903 the Scottish Comb Company, a business set up in Aberdeen by Birmingham businessmen, was taken over by Aberdeen Combworks. In 1840 Stewart, Rowell & Co had 40 employees. By 1850 this had increased to 245 and by 1906 it was over 1000. In 1850 the company was producing 9 million combs per year and this grew to 25 million per year by 1906.

The valuation roll for 1905 shows that Sir David Stewart owned 32 estates in the parish of Banchory-Devenick, 50 % of which were farms. He was referred to as the 'Laird of Banchory'. It is also believed that he owned several properties in Aberdeen.

In the 1911 census, Sir David Stewart was visiting London (Berners Street, Oxford Street, probably a hotel; now the site of The London Edition Hotel, 5-star). Residents at Banchory Lodge were his wife Margaret (74), their son, William Dyce Stewart, and 4 domestic servants. William is recorded as single and Managing Director of Aberdeen Comb Works. The census return also records that David and Margaret had been married 50 years and had 11 children, 8 of whom were still alive in 1911.

Sir David Stewart LLD, landed proprietor, married to Margaret Dyce Brown, died at Banchory House, Banchory-Devenick, Kincardineshire, on 11 October 1919, aged 84. His wife, Margaret, died in 1920, aged 83.

Sir David's son, William Dyce Stewart, died in 1920, a few months after his father, while Colonel David B Douglas Stewart died in 1935. In the latter's death certificate he was described as a 'landed proprietor' and there was no mention of being a comb manufacturer. Thus, after 100 years, the link between the Stewart family and the comb making business was severed.