

## Gordons growing potatoes on Easter Ross Peninsula

By Douglas Gordon

My Great grandfather John Gordon took over the lease of Balmuchy Farm on 1st February 1871 and lease of Cullisse in 1881, before that he stayed with his father Samuel Gordon at Braelangwell farm in the Black Isle. They grew potatoes away back then as it was on the rent/ lease agreement that was one of the crops they were allowed to grow.

My Grandfather A P Gordon started farming Bindal in 1921 and grew potatoes in addition to the established crops and cattle. Before that they worked Arabella and Cullisse farm. He bought Bindal and Balmuchy Farm from the Cadboll estate in January 1919, but we did not move to Bindal till 1921, when the Mackenzie's in Bindal bought Cullisse and we swapped farms to get away from heavy land as with horse, light land was easier to work.

My Father started farming Bindal in Easter 1939, and grew potatoes with all the resultant seed shipped out by sea from Portmahomack, however by 1950 it was going by rail for greater reliability. In the late '50s the 2 brothers John and Willie got together with English farmers to treat seed potatoes, thereafter our seed went to Nigg ferry where a group of farmers had a seed dressing plant called Ross-Shire Treated Seed (RTS) which during the 1960s was located at the old mine base (afterwards it was used by Hi Fab as welding school now demolished). Farmers in RTS were my father William O. Gordon; Bindal farm, my uncle John O.Gordon; Balmuchy Farm, in Partnership with Leslie Baker and Frank Arden. John Robertson; Castlecraig owned the old mine base sheds and Nigg Pier and he rented the old mine base to RTS. I was told there was 36 men on Balmuchy payroll in 1960s

RTS was started after the Wedderspoon process of mixing mercury and water to treat the potatoes was taken over by Frank Arden and he needed seed potato grower partners in Scotland to treat potatoes, so this is when he joined up with us where our seed potatoes used his process. Water and mercury were mixed with pumps and the potatoes were then introduced into a bath of this mixture which sealed any wounds before being put into chitting trays to dry. The seed was sold to English potato growers and we used the treated seed ourselves. This process went on for years very successfully. (Mercury is now banned as a seed dressing)

Then it went all wrong as the pumps stopped mixing the water and mercury so potatoes were only going through water. As a result the potatoes were not getting treated and crops sold to England were ending up with Blackleg. To make matters worse, the same issue was affecting our own potato crops planted at Bindal and Balmuchy. It was a disaster and my father was very ill dealing with all the problems coming from England and our own farms; and the resultant complaints as he had been doing all the merchanting as Uncle John had died 1967. I spoke to Ian Michie who was head of Department of Agricultural in Dingwall office and he remembers all the problems with our own seed planted at Bindal & Balmuchy and how they found out it was coming from RTS plant at Nigg. Once they found out the pumps had not been working and the mercury was not getting mixed with water to cure wounds that was the final straw as we could not trust our partners to do the job right.

It was at this time it was decided to split with our partners, so in 1971 I think it was, Gordons Ross-Shire Potatoes was formed and all chitting trays, boxes and plant was moved to Balmuchy Farm where a new double skinned insulated shed was built to store and dress potatoes. So the new partners were my father William O. Gordon; Bindal Farm, John O. Gordon; Balmuchy Farm, Uncle Sandy A.P Gordon; Newmore Farm and George Robertson who did all the contracting work for us on rented land. Growing 250 acres of potatoes mostly on rented land as for seed potatoes you need 7 year crop rotation to stop build-up of eel worm in the soil, which the department of Agriculture tested the land before seed potatoes was planted to check it was eel worm free. There are 7 different types of eelworm and some varieties like Maris Piper was resistant to certain type of eel worm. William O Gordon 2 sons started working on the farm Douglas in 1969 and James in 1970. John O Gordon's son Alex started working at Balmuchy in 1970s.

It was then we started using half ton potato boxes ourselves to store potatoes, no more pits outside and no more potatoes in bulk in sheds so far less damage. So once we had lifted all our potatoes into boxes and stored them, we helped at Balmuchy with their lifting.

Bindal farm grew all the high grade seed VTSC short for virus tested stem cuttings, where they took a shoot and grew in a jelly substance in a laboratory so there was no disease and we got bags of potato tubers to plant and you could have from 1 plot to 8 plots of one variety of potatoes and they had to be kept separate and each year all the produce from that plot was put into chitting trays and they were kept separate for 4 years so you had VTSC1, VTSC2 VTSC3 7 VTSC4 then they could be bulked together and the next year they became SE1 where they were grown on our farm or all the other farms. All these chitting trays were fumigated in a mobile fumigation chamber. Every chitting tray was labelled with the variety, grade and what plot number they belonged to and the department of agricultural would take tubers for testing. It was very labour intensive as they were lifted by hand into chitting trays and stacked on pallets. You had to make sure they were not too full so no tuber could fall out into another tray and mix varieties and planted by hand from chitting trays back into the ground the next year. John Barnettson (Grieve) and I did all the roguing at Bindal for many years until we got potato rogues to do the job for us as they were doing all the rest of Gordons Ross-Shire potatoes.

When we had dressed so much at Balmuchy and had room there, Lorries would cart all our Potatoes to Balmuchy to store for dressing we hired in other hauliers A J Fraser and others except for our high grade seed in chitting trays which were kept at Bindal as they were planted straight back into ground out of the chitting trays.

Then Newmore Farm above Invergordon had all their potatoes transported back to Balmuchy as well and we would go up with our forklifts to help load lorries with half ton potato boxes, it was a shuttle service all day till they were all moved. Mitchells of Alness helped cart boxes from there. All these potatoes were dressed at Balmuchy then seed that was kept would go back to the farm for planting in spring.

The Grieve (farm Foreman) at Balmuchy was Walter Mitchell and he was in charge of everything that happened at Balmuchy farm, storing potatoes and dressing potatoes. The

big double skinned insulated shed held a lot of potatoes in half ton boxes and also the potato grader, conveyors and Walthambury bagging equipment for filling 1 cwt hessian seed and ware paper bags. But we were still hand stitching at the start and Jesse Fraser taught me to hand stitch bags of seed and putting seed labels on before we eventually got stitching machines. All the bags had to be man handled and stacked on pallets. Balmuchy had their own lorry driven by Johnny Walker and he would cart bags of potatoes to Fearn station to load them by hand into wagons there.

All outside fields were organised by George Robertson and with the help of his foreman Robin Cattanach planting them and lifting them, Walter Mitchell organised taking seed out to rented fields for planting. We were involved as well with drilling, planting of outside rented land and the same at lifting with potato harvesters.

George Robertson set up his own chemical business supplying farmers with chemicals and spraying contractor also as a seed merchant at Hill of Fearn in 1961, then it became Robertson Agrochemicals (Highlands) Ltd and was then called Robertson Crops Services Ltd at Fearn then moved to Kildary in 1997 (now owned by Procam), he organised spraying of outside ground with sprayers for weed killers and blight sprays also with Sulphuric acid to burn potato haulm off before lifting potatoes. Sulphuric acid was put on in 2 doses, the first spray stripped all the leaves and 5 days later the second spray killed all the stems off so no green shoots were left so that no stem or tuber blight could get in. Sulphuric acid when it hit the ground it neutralised itself and was a great way to stop potatoes getting any bigger and did a great job, so that skins would set for lifting by machine. Billy Gray did all the sulphuric acid spraying. Before George Robertson went into sprays he had a mobile thrashing machine and went round farms thrashing their grain.

Gordons Ross-shire Potatoes and Caithness Seed Potatoes.

My father William Gordon was at Royal Highland Show in 1976 and met Dr Jack Dunnet who bred potato varieties at Pentland Feld, and the one he had bred was Pentland Javelin, he had got so fed up with Government bureaucracy that he had resigned and was going home to live Canisbay in Caithness with his wife Evelyn. So father suggested that he grow high grade seed potatoes for us in Caithness, so Jack Dunnet set up Caithness seed potatoes and grew high grade VTSC seed for us in Caithness and with his breeding skills started to breed varieties in Caithness. I remember going to Caithness in Gordon's Ross- Shire 10 Ton lorry with Johnny walker the driver with potatoes for planting in Caithness and it had one of these new half splitter gears on the move and that made a huge difference on Berriedale braes or we would have been stuck one gear all the way down and all the way back up. This went on for many years until we found it a very expensive way to grow high grade seed for our own stock as we were also doing it at Bindal. So we decided to stop and wished Jack all best on his own. He has new partners and has done very well for himself as an Independent breeder of potatoes. A.P Gordon had stopped growing potatoes and also George Robertson left our group in late 1970s.

In 1982 we decided we wanted to go on our own so we split from Gordons Ross-shire Potatoes and started again under our own name W O Gordon Bindal Ltd and used the brand

name Gordons Highland Potatoes on our bags. By this time had started to go metric instead of 1cwt (Hundred weight) it was 50kg bags and ware eating potatoes half cwt (hundred weight) were 25 kgs.

Then we were roping 2 tonnes which was 40 bags on to pallets and loading direct by forklift at Fearn station straight into railway wagons what work it saved by hand. Ware potatoes (eating potatoes) were going by road to Covent Garden market in centre of London by road the lorry driver arriving there at 3 am to unload his potatoes and be away before these markets opened for business. Now Covent Garden market is all small shops etc.

With all these markets are now gone, supermarkets were getting ware potatoes delivered to their central stores for delivery to supermarkets. We did supply the CO-OP with ware potatoes direct to a shop up north then a new manager came in and it was all centralised buying, so potatoes had to be sent by road to Bellshill in Glasgow then they would have to be sent to the supermarket adding to road miles. We were not allowed to supply the shops direct.

We were also supplying a lot of chip shops and local shops in Alness and elsewhere with potatoes then, chip shops got these testers for testing potatoes for fry colour so when we went with potatoes, they put this probe into the potato and if the tester said they were not right place would not take them. So now most potatoes for chips come from stores further south or England. As our potatoes were stored at lower temperatures for seed, about 3 C it effects fry colour so the chip shops don't want them. Most our ware potatoes go to Baxter's of Fochabers for getting made into starch for food production and as we separate seed from ware at lifting time so they go into boxes to be delivered in 1 tonne boxes to Baxter's.

The seed goes into boxes and get stored in big sheds, some are refrigerated to keep them from sprouting and at about 3 Centigrade. We had 1 tonne boxes but going into 1.2 tonne boxes. All the potato boxes have GB on them which stands for Gordon Bindal, so when they go off to Baxter's we will get our own boxes back again. The high grade seed used to be fumigated in a mobile fumigation chamber to stop skin spot, which King Edwards were more prone to then and we were doing them in big stacks with tents over them. That is all stopped now as new chemicals or fungicides are put on at planting time to control this. Supermarkets want blemish free skin for selling to customers. So the seed growers want good quality see without skin blemishes to grow potatoes for ware for selling to supermarkets.

Seed now goes in big bags, they are polypropylene bags which are vented to allow potatoes to breathe so they don't sweat, it was 1 tonne potato bags now you also get 1.25 tonne potato loading on to Lorries by forklift, some growers prefer 1 tonne bags for planting direct into potato planter. The 1.25 tonne bag is ideal as you get 22 bags on a curtain sider which is 27.5 tonnes which is ideal weight as some lorries are only allowed to carry 28 tonnes by law, this depends on weight of trailer. It amazes me how a big round pin on lorry tractor unit with cab holds the trailer on and a friction pad covered in grease to allow easy turning.

We use hoppers on weigh platforms which are calibrated to switch off conveyor/ elevator at the right weight then forklift lights hopper and the big bag is hooked on underneath and

trap doors opened to fill bags, then once tied a Science and Advice for Scottish Agriculture (SASA) seal is put round neck of bag with seed label, which has a bar code and also tells you the variety, grade and size and crop number for traceability, so it can be checked back to where it was grown and what seed it came from etc. Some big places use special bag fillers but they cost a lot of money.

Potato machinery is getting more specialised and bigger, there are not many small growers left as big growers are taking over, with the cost of machinery getting dearer and more specialised, small growers can't afford the machinery and used to buy the second hand machines but some of these machines are too big for them, as they need big tractors to pull them.

Seed potatoes are controlled by the Government department which used to be called Department for Agricultural and fisheries was based in Dingwall in Castle street just past the Church of Scotland, and Ian Michie was the head man there he was known as the Tattie King he really knew and breathed potatoes, then Dingwall office was closed down and Ian Michie decided to retire everything was moved to Longman house in Inverness. The department for Agricultural is now called Science and Advice for Scottish Agriculture (SASA).

The Dingwall office was there as it was the main town for Ross and Cromarty or Ross-Shire. But now we are a region called the Highland Region, everything is to do with centralisation in Inverness, which meant Dingwall lost out.

I remember my father telling me that during World War 2, the potato inspectors had been out and a crop of potatoes had been condemned for seed, he was told to dump them as he was not allowed to sell them for ware; there was nothing wrong with them and so much for bureaucracy when the country was starving. My father told the locals to come and help themselves and probably used for stock feed as well, what the locals did not use for themselves.

By Douglas Gordon 15<sup>th</sup> November 2015