

## Potatoes shipped by sea then rail now road

By Douglas Gordon

All produce went out by ship from Portmahomack and coal was brought in by ship, and one photo I have of two ships in Portmahomack harbour 30<sup>th</sup> May- 1<sup>st</sup> June 1934 was the only time these two ships were in the harbour from harbour records. The Argentum 95 Tonner in the inner harbour unloading 178 tons of coal and on the outer harbour the S S Edenside 147 tonner loading with 156 tonnes of potatoes, this scene which was painted by Ken Birks in water colour for my 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday and I said to Ken that is our potatoes in carts, well it could have been our potatoes and lots of other farms potatoes as well. It was a shuttle service coal getting unloaded and returning with potatoes all done by horse and cart.



Painting by Ken Birks of photo above



My father William O. Gordon came home from the Sudan where he had been in charge of a cotton plantation in Easter 1939 to farm at Bindal, before the WW2 started. His brother Sandy Gordon was also in the Sudan on a cotton plantation and he was there when WW2 started.

Father was still sending potatoes by ship from Portmahomack till 1950, they went down to Wisbech and up the River Nene to the same buyers we are dealing with today, the Hartley's. One year a big storm started with our year's supply of seed potatoes on board and the ship could not sail for two weeks my father hardly slept worrying about his potatoes, then he must have decided to send potatoes by rail from Fearn Station after that.

All the farmers and local businesses owned the harbour trust and it was about this time it was wound up as more and more stuff was going by rail not dependant on tides and weather. Also there was more Lorries able to deliver bigger loads to station, but some farms still delivered by tractor and trailer to Fearn Station.

Loading potatoes by hand at Fearn station 1974 with seed in 1cwt (112 lbs) hessian bags



The railway wagons could take 10 tons of seed potatoes in 1cwt (about 50 kgs) hessian bags and it was 20 bags per ton so was 200 bags that had to be manhandled by hand into each wagon to go to England or anywhere in UK.

The railway wagons took 11 tons of ware, that is eating potatoes, usually oversize tubers in half cwt paper bags (about 25 kgs) and it was 40 bags per ton so that was 440 bags and they went to Baragwaneth in Birmingham. They were stacked to the roof.

When it became frosty the wagons were lined with paper stapled on to the wooden sides and floor. The bags were loaded on to a bed of straw with more straw against the paper lining as it was loaded, and once the wagon was full straw was placed over the top of the bags to help keep frost out.

Nearly all the farms were producing potatoes and they all came to Fearn station to get loaded into wagons by hand, it was hard work and nice on calm sunny day not so nice if windy and the wind was blowing against your side of the wagon with dried ground dust of potatoes and hairs of hessian bags.

In frosty weather the station staff would organise papering the wagons with the big rolls of brown paper and when loaded they put labels in a clip below floor level of the wagon to say what was in the wagon and where it was to go, and all recorded by hand, and given to the guard on the goods train.

There was one really nice man at Fearn station called Willie Black, a real character always quick with old stories which I loved to hear, and the different jobs he did on the railways over the years. The one story I always remember him telling me was when the north line was blocked with huge drifts in Caithness and the far north was cut off and could not get supplies or food in by rail or sea. Two big steam engines with big snow plough in front came north from Inverness and Willie got on at Tain and they hit the mile long snow drifts at 50 - 60 miles an hour and sliced through them to open the north line once again. We are very fortunate we do not get these big snow storms now.

Then the train would come to pick up the wagons, if you got a nice train driver he would wait till you finished loading a wagon. Then you had the impatient type of train driver who would not wait till wagon was finished. The guards van at rear of train would have its brake on as it held all the other wagons from moving.

Then train driver would move his steam engine (later on a diesel engine) and empty wagons down the line with points switched over so the train could come back up into the siding to put the empty wagons in one siding then uncouple them, reverse out and come back in to pick up the full wagons. If you got a nice driver he would gently push against the wagons and they would be coupled to the engine with the empty wagons uncoupled at the back if you had not finished filling them all.

But if you got a nasty engine driver he would ram against wagons and if you had not finished loading all your stacked bags would be in a heap and would all have to be pulled out and then rebuilt, but we got wise to this and when you got an impatient driver you would rush and fill the wagons with bales of straw to keep the bags stacked together then shut the doors.

Then once the wagons were back on the main line and coupled to other wagons attached to the brake van, the guard would climb back on board to his nice cosy stove in the brake van and it would head off. I remember we had arrived at the station one morning to discover the wagons had not been pushed into the siding far enough, so we had to cross rails with a forklift then release the brake and push the wagons with the forklift into the siding so we could load the wagons.

We next started putting potato bags on pallets and roping them on, and then we got bigger wagons that could take pallets or boxes of potatoes loaded by forklift for one customer but they still had to be lined with straw and paper in case of frost. Then the railways came out

with a brand new wagon VGA 28 tons with fantastic long metal doors and sealed. We were the first to get them but then other firms found out about them and demanded them so we no longer got them and the following year we had the old wagons again.

Photos below loading VGA 28 ton wagons by Sambron forklift photos by James Gordon



Below the photo showing straw and over potatoes and rolls of brown paper sheet to keep any draughts and frost out not as easy with metal sides as you could not use staples to hold paper up as you could not use staples



Loading seed potatoes 2 tons roped on to a pallet into VGA wagons



My father must have traded 70,000 tons over his lifetime by rail as merchant in potatoes and once his brother John O. Gordon of Balmuchy died he merchanted all his potatoes as well, so it was a huge undertaking and a lot of organising.

The one big problem the railways had, you had to deliver them to the station, and load them into wagons and the farmer at the other end had to collect them and when that contact broke down potatoes could be put into a wrong siding miles from where they should be and in cold frosty weather over a lot of days you got frosted potatoes and a claim against the railways but the big problem was getting them replaced sometimes if seed was in short supply.

Lorries have taken over movement of all potatoes now, much easier and picked up from your farm and delivered direct to the customer's farm so much easier as you do not have to go to the station to load them. The first big artic lorries after they were loaded by hand had to be covered and roped down but now everything is done by forklift and bags stacked on to a pallet and then loaded on to a lorry that would take 1.5 hours to sheet or cover and rope before it was fit to travel on the road. There was one man who was called King of the Flat Deckers, Willie Shields who worked for Bannerman Transport Tain. . He was a perfectionist when it came to covering his lorry with the 2 tarpaulin covers which had ropes to tie them down, then roping over the whole lorry to hold the load on and then the final waterproof sheet covered the whole lorry and it had ropes on it to hold it tight then more ropes to help keep the cover from flapping in the wind. Still a lot of work, but you do not see much done that way now as a curtain sider is so much quicker and can turn a lorry around quickly to be loaded by forklift, strapped on, curtains shut, curtain strapped, paperwork signed and away.

Now big bags or boxes, no more small bags except for ware for selling locally. First big bag was the 1 tonne bag but now we have the 1.25 tonne bags which means you can get a 22 bags which is 27.5 tonnes in an artic curtain sider and their maximum weight they are allowed to carry is 28 tonnes

Cardboard boxes were tried out at one time, they could take 1 tonne, the big problem was filling them gently and they came flat packed then you had to fold them out put them on a small 1000mm by 1200mm pallet, the cardboard base had a lip to hold the sides in, once full you had to be so careful transporting them they would not stand much abuse, then put on to lorry with forklift and the lorry had to bring back empty pallets but when a lorry did not turn up with empty pallets you had to go and buy more .

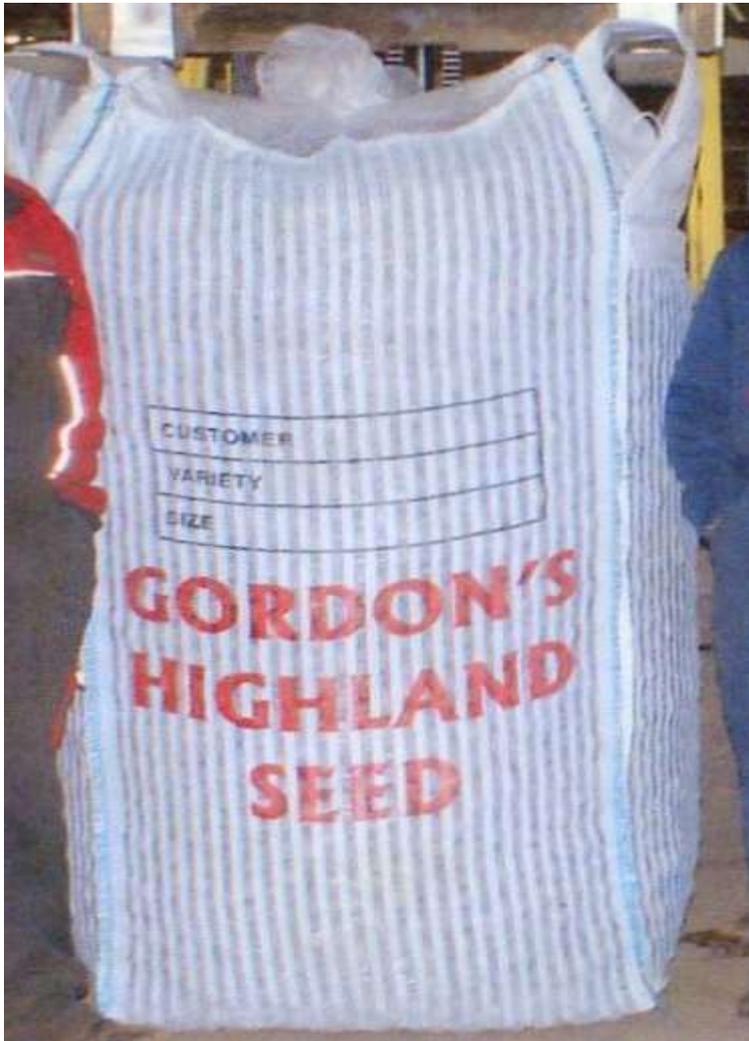
So big bags go to most customers now, some still take seed in boxes as it is cheaper to buy boxes made up here but they have to have their own brand or stamp on the side of boxes so they can use them again for storing their potatoes in them. Also it saves cost of the bag and they have another potato box, as bags when they go to the customers farm, the bags would be emptied into boxes, so it they need more replacement boxes, they are getting new box with new seed in them.

We did try railways again with the railways organising the haulier to pick up potatoes take them to railhead at Elgin then by rail down South then delivered to the farmer. With so many shifts potatoes can get damaged. Then the Black Rail Bridge in Inverness got washed away in a flood so we never went back to the rail again.

Now the lorry driver is your rep and he picks up the potatoes and looks after them and delivers them to the farmer safely, so much better. In frosty weather they have 2 big insulated quilts that cover the whole load right down to floor level. But if frost is forecast during the day as well as night over a few days all transporting of potatoes is stopped in case potatoes get frosted.

Loading 1.25 tonne bag of seed potatoes into curtain sider lorry





Douglas Gordon 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2015

