

# William Duncan Liness

## Lighthouse Keeper on the Tay



William Duncan Liness was born on 24th September 1849 in Dundee. His father was Edward Lynness (or Liness - spelling of the surname varied, depending on who wrote a particular document. A degree of illiteracy probably contributed to this practice) and his mother Mary Lynness, formerly Duncan. Note here the fairly common practice of perpetuating the female maiden surname as one of the child's Christian names. William was baptised in St. Andrews Cathedral in Nethergate, Dundee on 21st October 1849.

I have reproductions of several old newspaper cuttings and one of them contains his account of an incident he remembered from when he was a young boy. It was the end of the Crimean War and he remembered seeing soldiers of the Black Watch returning home. In his mid-teens, William went to sea, following his fathers' footsteps (Edward was a ship's carpenter). Unfortunately an eye injury prevented him taking his Master's ticket and he returned to a shore-based job. He worked for the Harbour Service for about 50 years and eventually became the Lighthouse Keeper for the East Light on the Tay estuary, living in the cottage beside the lighthouse. The lighthouse still exists today, although not in very good repair when I saw it a few years ago. The cottage looks well maintained and occupied however.

William married Mary Ann Johnstone (or Johnston) on 16th July 1875 at St. Cyrus. From documents still in our family, we knew that William and Mary had four children - Charles Johnstone Liness, Edith Caroline Donaldson Liness, Mary Jane Liness and my Grandmother, Margaret Officer Liness (born 1882). What we did not realise, until we visited the area and found the family headstone in Tayport cemetery, was that William and Mary had actually had three other children - William and Lydia had both died in infancy. The other was Edward Liness, born in 1880 and who drowned in the Tay aged 25 on 15th February 1906. Mary Liness, William's wife, died at Kingsmuir on 12th January 1933, aged 82. The only other details I know at present are that Charles followed in his father's footsteps and became a lighthouse keeper at Tayport and later at the Buddon Ness light in Carnoustie. Edith died in 1977 and Margaret in 1967.

In about 1935 William travelled south to Ilford in Essex to live with his daughter, my grandmother. He lived with her and my grandfather for 14½ years. Although I do not

remember it, William came to my christening on 13th January 1949 at the age of 99. He travelled back to Scotland some months later to live with his nephew, Mr. J. Johnston, at Myrtle Cottage in St. Cyrus, the village where he had married 75 years previously. He celebrated his 100th birthday there on 24th September 1949.

William survived his wife by 17 years, eventually passing at the ripe old age of 101, on Christmas Day 1950, at Montrose.

### **Cutting from People's Journal Newspaper circa September 1949**

"Mr Liness (100) is still fleet on his feet To be 100 years old and as fit as Mr. William Liness is a big achievement. He celebrated his centenary on Saturday at the home of his nephew Mr. J. Johnston, Myrtle Cottage, St. Cyrus. Despite his age, Mr. Liness is fleet on his feet, reads occasionally without spectacles and isn't daunted by a bus or train journey.

He was born at Tayport and went to sea in his youth. Then he had almost 50 years in the Harbour Service. He was on the original Abertay lightship and later at the Tayport lights. In June he travelled alone from London, where he had stayed for about 14 ½ years and spent some time in Forfar before going to St. Cyrus some three weeks ago. His daughter, Mrs. Murray, journeyed from London for the birthday and when she returned this week, Mr. Liness went to Montrose to see her off and returned alone on the bus. There was a family celebration, complete with cake, telegram from the King and greetings from many others.

It was appropriate that he should spend his birthday in the Mearns village, for he was married there on July 16th 1875. Mr. Liness has no special formula for living to an old age, but perhaps part of the secret is that in all of his working life he had only a few months unemployment. "There are lots of things I've made in my time" he told a People's Journal reporter. "I've sewn rugs with old worsted; I've made bedspreads and model ships." He likes the country and probably won't return to city life."

### **Cutting from the Ilford Recorder - 13th January 1949**

"Centenarian at Christening

A centenarian was one of four generations at a christening at St. Andrew's, Ilford, on Sunday. The christening was of eight-week-old Angus John Fraser Murray, son of Mr. and Mrs. Murray, of 16, Preston Gardens, Ilford. He wore a christening robe of Brussels Lace over a hundred years old, the gift of his Great Aunts. Among those present were the child's Great-Grandfather, Mr. William Liness, aged 100, whose only infirmity is a little deafness; Mrs. Margaret Murray, the mother of Mr. Murray and Mr. and Mrs. Murray, the child's parents.

### **Cutting from the Ilford Recorder - 20th January 1949**

"100 this year, he remembers helping troops from Crimea: still does the gardening A hundred years old next September, Mr. William Liness, of 16, Preston gardens,

Iford, still goes for long walks, reads without spectacles, tends the garden and handles all his own business. He remembers soldiers returning from the Crimea War - and his only infirmity is a slight deafness. William, a chubby faced, stocky little man with a full head of grey hair, was reading the paper after a walk when I called to see him (writes a 'Recorder' reporter), but he rose swiftly to greet me with a firm handshake. In a broad Scots accent he told me that he comes of a long-lived Scottish sea-faring family from Tayport. He went to sea with his uncle, when he was 16, but in his twenties retired, because an eye injury prevented him from taking his Master's ticket. He took charge of the Tayport lights and retired when he was 73 and came to live with his daughter, Mrs. M. Murray, 14 years ago. Every day he goes out for a walk. Sometimes to watch the progress of Gants Hill or Redbridge station, sometimes to his bank, sometimes further. "I've been one and a half miles away today," he said, "as far as Dr. Barnado's Homes. It does na' trouble me a bit." "The other day I walked richt doon the road out of the toon to Leytonstone," he chuckled. As for crossing roads, "I dinna trouble ma head about it," he said, "I just stand waiting and tak' ma' turn." William takes three papers a day and the 'Recorder'. "I can sit and read them wi'oot ma specs," he says. He has a pair but only wears them when his daughter makes him. Another startling thing about William is his agility. "Look," he said, bending down as swiftly as a youth to pick up a finely worked rug from in front of the fire, "I sewed a' that wi' old material." Since the war he has been up to Scotland and back twice by himself and during the wartime bombing he used to come up to Preston Gardens once a week to look around the house and do a spot of gardening. Even now he still tends the garden - digging, planting, everything."

#### BACK FROM CRIMEA

One day when he was a boy, he was playing by the seashore when some ill-clad, sorry looking soldiers waiting for the ferry asked him for some water. They were the remains of the Black Watch returning from the Crimea War. "I ran up to the hoose to tell Mother," William told me, "and she put the kettle on to mak' some tea. I was only a wee bairn at the time, but big enough to carry them doon a cup of tea." Another vivid memory is of his uncle's brig docking in Germany and seeing the ill-treated prisoners during the Franco-Prussian War. He remembers his old Granny telling him of seeing the shops on London Bridge when she sailed up the Thames in her husband's ship. William, who has three Great-Grandchildren and does not know what it is to be ill, has never touched liquor nor smoked. His Grandmother died at the age of 103.

**Submitted by Angus Murray**