

JAMIE FLEEMAN

THE LAIRD OF UDNYS' FEEL

James Fleming, better known as Jamie Fleeman, the 'Laird o' Udney's Feel', could be described as the last professional court jester in Scotland. Born in 1713 near Longside, he is described thus by local historian, James Pratt, 'His countenance, indescribably or even painfully striking, wore that expression which at once betrays the absence of sound judgement. His head large and round — his hair ... rendered by constant exposure to the weather, a dingy fox-colour, and not sleek, but standing on end, as if poor Jamie had been frightened out of his wits — indicated that his foolishness was not assumed but real.' Yet it was Jamie's razor-sharp wit which endeared him to many, including his first employer, Alexander Guthrie of Ludquharn, who gave him a glowing reference when he moved to John, the Laird of Udney's household.

Jamie had many noble friends, including the Countess of Erroll, an avowed Jacobite, who often employed him to carry messages to fellow supporters of the Stuart cause. Yet it was the Udnys to whom he demonstrated greatest loyalty. The Udnys had been in the area since David II granted a charter confirming their lands to ancestor, Ronald of Uldney in the 14th century. John Udney purchased Knockhall Castle from Lord John Sinclair in 1633. Udney Castle, the family seat, was at this time in the possession of William Seaton who had married Lord Udney's daughter and heiress, Helen.



Jamie Fleeman's Memorial, Longside Kirkyard

In 1734, Jamie Fleeman was in his bedroom at Knockhall, practising his chanter when one of the family dogs came in and pulled at his shirt. Being a great lover of canines, he opened the door, presuming it wanted to go outside, but his keen senses smelt smoke, and Jamie quickly discovered the castle to be on fire. He raised the alarm with the laird's gardener, a good friend of his, then dashed to the charter room where the family's important documents were kept in a huge iron chest. The latter, which normally took three men to lift, was hefted up and out of the window by Jamie, thus saving the contents. The laird's 'Feel' raced outside and skipped about, delighted with his achievement. Yet he was also rejoicing for another reason, his old nemesis,

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the Udnys' housekeeper, was still a-bed and unaware she was in danger of her life. The gardener pleaded with Jamie to rouse her, which he eventually did, declaring to the cantankerous old lady, 'Lucky, lucky, rise or ye'll get het hurdies or lang!' For his pains, Jamie received a life pension of sixpence and a peck of meal per week. The fool was not perhaps as foolish as observers actually believed. Jamie's deathbed plea, 'dinna bury me like a beast' in 1778 was answered by a Christian burial in Longside Kirkyard where his memorial remains today.