

# SCOTT SKINNER & THE REAL LIFE LASS O'BON ACCORD

The gravestone of James Scott Skinner, the 'Strathspey King', is an impressive sight in pale silver granite, standing near the Great Southern Road gate of Allanvale Cemetery, Ferryhill. As well as a bronze bust of the fiddler and dance teacher, engraved on the stone are the first few bars of Skinner's tune 'The Bonnie Lass o' Bon Accord'. The lass herself was a real person whom Skinner met at a party.

James Scott Skinner was born near Banchory in 1843; his father William had been a fiddler for country dances. By age 8, James became accompanist to local fiddler, Peter Milne. One night the dance went on so long that James fell asleep on his cello, but somehow continued playing.



Fetteresso Cemetery, Wilhelmina Bell's final resting place

After one of his regular country dance classes in the North Silver Street hall (now Milne's Auctioneers) Skinner was invited to a friend's house on Union Terrace. There he noticed a very pretty serving maid who looked as if she had been destined for better things. Everyone, including the servants, joined in dancing to Skinner's fiddle music, and he declared the maid 'a splendid tripper of the light-fantastic toe'. She introduced herself as Wilhelmina Bell, explaining that her father, the farmer of Cockley, Maryculter, had once played bass for Skinner's late father. Stunned, he asked her why she was working as a maid. 'Mina' tearfully replied that her father had been bankrupted after standing guarantor for a friend's debts and lost the farm. 'Never ye mind, lassie,' Skinner said, 'I'll mak a tune that'll keep ye in mind when we're baith deid!'

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Skinner duly wrote the tune and showed to his friend, photographer, Alexander Dinnie, who remarked there was “something great” in the tune. By an incredible coincidence, Mina just happened to cross the road nearby and Skinner pointed her out as the ‘bonnie lass that the tune’s about’. Dinnie exclaimed, ‘I’ve got it, ca it The Bonnie Lass o Bon Accord!’ and thus began the song’s fame.

Skinner’s lovely tribute to the poverty-stricken Mina was never forgotten. In 1927, she was an honoured guest at Skinner’s funeral when his headstone was unveiled by Sir Harry Lauder. Eleven years later, the ‘Bonnie Lass’ herself passed away aged 72 and was buried in Fetteresso kirkyard. Her headstone facing Clayfolds Farm, Newtonhill, where she was born in 1866.

The inscription records Mina’s connection with the Strathspey King and his famous tune. The stone was erected by her nephew, Doug Bell, son of her brother David. Doug had found the story in some correspondence of Dinnie’s and was delighted to discover the connection between the famous tune and his aunt. Journalist James Lees would later share the story in the Leopard magazine, formerly Aberdeenshire’s best source of local tales and legends. Now Skinner, Mina, her brother and nephew Doug lie under the sod, but just as the Strathspey King predicted, the tune still lives on to this day and often makes a popular addition to many a local ceilidh band’s repertoire.



Mina Bell's Gravestone, Fetteresso Kirkyard