

PATRICK BYRES OF TONLEY, JACOBITE REBEL & ACCESSORY TO MURDER

'My father what? Had a duel? He's in his seventies! Silly man!' so might antiquarian, James Byres of Tonley have exclaimed when he was brought word about the unseemly quarrel occasioned by Byres Snr. Patrick Byres was an Irish Jacobite, born in Dublin, 1713. In 1741 he married Janet Moir of Stonewood and became a Burgess of Guild in Aberdeen, yet his political leanings and hot Celtic temper seem to have constantly landed Patrick in trouble.

His first problem was his involvement in the Forty-Five Rebellion, fighting on Bonnie Prince Charlie's side as Major Byres in Stonewood's regiment. Escaping Culloden, Patrick's ally, Gordon of Cluny hid him in his castle until he and his family escaped to France. He managed to hang on to Tonley by the clever suggestion that his English name was Peter, thus he was not Patrick Byres the rebel.



Bridge of Alford

While his youngest sons, William and John developed military careers in the Navy and Royal Engineers respectively and second son, Robert took up merchant interests in Prussia, the eldest, James, became something of a tour guide. He embraced antiquarian studies in Rome and became the go-to ex-pat for visiting Scots gentlefolk on their 'grand tours' of Europe. Meanwhile, his father returned to Tonley, Mrs Byres hoping her husband's adventures were over. But, due to Janet's nephew, James Abernethy of Mayen, Patrick was to be the centre of unwanted attention once more in 1763. A traditional ballad is dedicated to the incident in which John Leith of Leith Hall, Rhynie was murdered by Abernethy after an argument in the New Inn, Aberdeen.

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It was the Martinmass or winter term when debts were settled; according to the ballad 'four and twenty gentlemen sat birling at the wine'. As is often the case 'fan drink's in, wit's oot', and the laird of Mayen cast up an old grudge to John Leith. The latter gave him as good as he got, whereupon Abernethy left. Patrick Byres would later reveal that his nephew had gone to fetch pistols in order to settle the matter with a duel to which Leith had agreed. A few of them had talked long into the night without the weapons leaving the table, yet soon after shots shattered the early morning peace of the Castlegate and Leith's servant found him bleeding to death in the street.

James Abernethy had fled on a horse provided by his uncle, never to return. Many believed Patrick had egged James on, providing both weapon and escape route, but he denied it. The Leiths never forgot. The spat at Bridge of Alford decades later was with Alexander Leith of Glenkindie, over the siting of a new road. Patrick's friends calmed the pensioner down and sent him home to Tonley and likely to a reprimand from his son James.



Tonley - House of Patrick Byres, near Tough, Alford