

*THE LIFE OF JAMES
PEEBLES,
CLERK/TELEGRAPHIST IN
THE TOWN OF ANSTRUTHER
BY ANONYMOUS*

Clerk and telegraphist with the Post Office James Bell Peebles was born on 21st September 1860 in Anstruther Wester, part of the thriving fishing community of Anstruther in the County of Fife.

The Fife coastal town of Anstruther (known as Anster to locals) lies on the north shore of the Firth of Forth some fifty miles north east from Edinburgh by road and nine miles south of St Andrews. It is the largest of several fishing villages that were described by King James II of Scotland as the “fringe of gold on the beggars mantle”.

The town is formed from three adjacent communities: Anstruther Easter, Anstruther Wester and Cellardyke. Before the development of the railways, Anstruther’s relatively isolated position meant it greatly relied on the sea for communications and transport.

During the lifetime of James Peebles, the town saw great changes with the rapid development of the fishing industry and its supporting occupations. The majority of people in the town were employed in these in the second half of the nineteenth-century.

Originally Anstruther Easter was the largest community with a population of 1169 in 1871 while Anstruther Wester, where James lived, had only 484. With the construction of the new harbour at Anstruther Easter, completed in 1877 at a cost of £80,000, the exploitation of the herring in the North Sea increased with larger steam trawlers taking over from sail with larger steam-powered line fishing boats taking over from sail. A large migrant population followed the fishing fleet each year as it in turn followed the shoals of herring from the far north of Scotland, down as far as Great Yarmouth.¹

¹ “Anstruther”, *Wikipedia*. [Link](#).



Figure 1: Cellardyke boats in Anstruther Harbour. Source: The Cellardyke Trust.

As the size of fishing boats increased, the use of the harbour decreased, and over fishing of the herring shoals resulted in the town declining such that it is now almost totally reliant on the tourist and leisure industry. James Peebles would recognise the harbour and many of the buildings, but not the decline in the number of boats or the traditional industries associated with fishing.

Having said this, only one member of James's family was employed directly in the fishing industry. Before we go there let me tell you a little about his family. James was the son of Robert Peebles a stone mason born around 1815 and Janet Bell born around 1826 who were married in Anstruther Wester on 25th May 1847. The families of both his parents were from the local area. As was normal in these days after marriage came children.

James was the fifth of eight children and lived his entire life in High Street, Anstruther Wester.

His siblings were: Robert Peebles baptised 2nd April 1848 who was twelve years and five months older than James; Mary Peebles baptised 3rd February 1850 who was ten years and seven months older; George Peebles baptised 6th June 1852 who was eight years and two months older and who died in 1902 aged fifty; Helen Peebles born 1858 who was approximately three years older and who died in 1906 aged forty-eight; John Peebles born 1863 who was approximately three years younger and who died in 1936 aged seventy-three; David Peebles born 1866 who was approximately six years younger and who died in 1944 aged seventy-eight; and Janet Peebles born 20th March 1869 who was approximately eight years younger and who died in 1943 aged seventy-three.

James never married and had no children. His father died in 1878 aged sixty-two, leaving his mother to head the family. It is of interest to note that most of his siblings didn't marry and, four of them (including James), lived with their mother in the same house.

His eldest brother, Robert, worked as a cooper, likely making barrels for the storage of the salted herring. None of his other siblings appeared to be directly involved with the fishing industry, doing jobs including: dressmaker, blacksmith, farm servant, shoe maker and draper's assistant.

The railway reached Anstruther in 1863 bringing the electric telegraph to Anstruther. It appears James started work with the Post Office young as he was a clerk/telegraphist in 1881 when aged twenty-one. He is described as a telegraphist to the Post Office in the 1891 census, and sorting clerk and telegraphist in the 1901 census.

James retired from the Post Office on ill health grounds in 1901 but tragically did not live for very long after doing so. He died aged forty-one of pulmonary phthisis (or pulmonary tuberculosis) on 10th February 1902. What is even more tragic is that his mother Janet, with whom he lived his entire life, had died only five days previously. His brother Robert is noted as being the informant of his mother's death at which time he was living in Yarmouth, no doubt following the fishing fleet in the quest for herring.

Today one of the main tourist attractions in Anstruther is the Scottish Fisheries Museum which reflects the life of the town in James's time.



Figure 2: A c.1885 photograph of Anstruther by Erskine Beveridge. Source: Canmore.

Fact Sheet: James Bell Peebles

| Pensioner Details |
|--|
| <i>Pensioner name:</i> James Bell Peebles |
| <i>Person ID:</i> SC_1029 |
| <i>Your name:</i> Anonymous |
| <i>U3A group:</i> Scotland |
| Part One: Birth and Family |
| 1: When and where was your pensioner born? |
| James Bell Peebles was born on the 21 September 1860 at 7.00 am in Anstruther Wester, Fife. At that time his father was a mason. |
| 2: Who were your pensioner's parents? Record any details you can find out about them here (e.g. occupation, religious affiliation, whether they could read or write) |
| <p>James Bell Peebles father was Robert Peebles (possibly born 12 February 1815) and baptised on 25 February 1815 in Anstruther Wester. Robert Peebles was a stone mason. James Bell Peebles parents were married in Anstruther Wester on 25 May 1847. His father died in 1878 aged 62 in Anstruther Wester. Robert Peebles parents were another Robert Peebles born about 1778 and Helen Wallace who married on 27 December 1806 in Anstruther Wester, Fife.</p> <p>In 1841 James Bell Peebles father was a Mason aged 25 living at Main Street, Anstruther Wester with his father Robert Peebles a Mason aged 63 and siblings George Peebles a Drapers Shopman aged 23, Margaret Peebles aged 17 and Helen Peebles aged 15 and a Helen Robertson aged 10.</p> <p>James Bell Peebles mother was Janet Peebles whose maiden surname was Bell. She was born in approximately 1826. The census for the years 1861, 1871, 1881 and 1891 say she was born in St Andrews, Fife but the census for 1851 says she was born in Anstruther Wester, Fife and the census for 1901 says she was born at Reekie Mill, Fife. Her parents were George Bell a Miller and Mary Bell whose maiden name was Kirk. His mother died on 5 February 1902 aged 76 in High Street, Anstruther Wester of cardiac syncope. The death was registered by her son Robert Peebles who was then residing at 45 Admiralty Road, Yarmouth.</p> |
| 3: Did your pensioner have any siblings? What were their names, and how old were they in relation to your pensioner? Use this space to record anything else you have found out about them (e.g. occupation, later life) |

James Bell Peebles had the following siblings:

Robert Peebles baptised 2 April 1848 in the Registration District of Anstruther Wester in the County of Fife who was 12 years 5 months older than James Bell Peebles;

Mary Peebles baptised 3 February 1850 in the Registration District of Anstruther Wester in the County of Fife who was 10 years 7 months older than James Bell Peebles;

George Peebles baptised 6 June 1852 in the Registration District of Anstruther Wester in the County of Fife who was 8 years 2 months older than James Bell Peebles. He died in 1902 aged 50 in the Registration District of Anstruther Easter in the County of Fife;

Helen Peebles born 1858 in the Registration District of Anstruther Wester in the County of Fife who was approximately 3 years older than James Bell Peebles. She died in 1906 aged 48 in Anstruther Wester;

John Peebles born 1863 in the Registration District of Anstruther Wester in the County of Fife who was approximately 3 years younger than James Bell Peebles. He died in 1936 aged 73 in the Registration District of Anstruther and Kilrenny in the County of Fife;

David Peebles born 1866 in the Registration District of Anstruther Wester in the County of Fife who was approximately 6 years younger than James Bell Peebles; He died in 1944 aged 78 in the Registration District of Anstruther and Kilrenny in the County of Fife;

Janet Peebles born 20 March 1869 in the Registration District of Anstruther Wester in the County of Fife who was approximately 8 years younger than James Bell Peebles. She died in 1943 aged 73 in the Registration District of Anstruther and Kilrenny in the County of Fife;

Part Two: Marriage and children/ boarders

1: Did your pensioner marry? What was their spouse's name, and when and where did they marry them? Use this space to record any extra details you can find out about their spouse (e.g. when/where they were born, their occupation). **Note:** *You can also use this space to record any details about people your pensioner boarded with.*

James Bell Peebles did not marry.

2: Did your pensioner have any children? What were their names, and when they were born? Use this space to record any extra details you can find out about them (e.g. occupation, where they lived later in life)

James Bell Peebles did not have any children.

Part Three: Work

1: What occupation was your pensioner recorded as doing in census years? Please make sure to state clearly which year you are referring to

1871: Listed as a "Scholar"
1881: Listed as a "Clerk (Telegraph)"
1891: Listed as a "Telegraphist P O"
1901: Listed as a "Sorting Clerk and Telegrah Hist

2: What occupations were people living with your pensioner (e.g. spouse, children, boarders) doing in the census years? Please make sure to state clearly which year you are referring to

1861: James Bell Peebles aged 6 months was living with his father Robert Peebles aged 45 a Mason and Head of House and his mother Janet Peebles aged 35 in the Parish of Anstruther Wester, Fife. Also resident in the house were his brother Robert Peebles a Scholar aged 13, his sister Mary a Scholar aged 11, his brother George Peebles a Scholar aged 8, his brother John Peebles a Scholar aged 7 and his sister Helen Peebles aged 3.

1871: James Bell Peebles aged 10 was living with his father Robert Peebles aged 55 a Mason and Head of House and his mother Janet Peebles aged 45 at Chesterhill, in the Parish of Anstruther Wester, Fife. Also resident in the house were his brother Robert Peebles a Cooper aged 23, his sister Mary Peebles a Farm Servant aged 21, his brother George Peebles a Blacksmith Apprentice aged 18, his brother John Peebles a Scholar aged 7, his sister Helen Peebles a Scholar aged 13, his brother David Peebles aged 4 and his sister Janet Peebles a Scholar aged 2.

1881: James Bell Peebles aged 20 was living with his mother Janet Peebles Head of House aged 55 at High Street in the Parish of Anstruther Wester, Fife. Also resident in the house were his brother Robert Peebles a Cooper aged 33, his brother George Peebles a Blacksmith aged 28, his brother John Peebles a Shoemaker aged 17, his sister Helen Peebles aged 23, his brother David Peebles a Drapers Apprentice aged 14 and his sister Janet Peebles a Scholar aged 12.

1891: James Bell Peebles aged 30 was living with his mother Janet Peebles House Keeper to the Family aged 65 at High Street in the Parish of Anstruther Wester, Fife. Also resident in the house were his brother George Peebles a Blacksmith aged 36, his brother John Peebles a Boot Maker aged 27, his sister Helen Peebles aged 33, his brother David Peebles a Drapers Assistant aged 24 and his sister Janet Peebles a Dress Maker aged 22.

1901: James Bell Peebles aged 40 was living with his mother Janet Peebles Head of House aged 75 at High Street in the Parish of Anstruther Wester, Fife. Also resident in the house were his brother George Peebles a Blacksmith aged 48, his brother John Peebles a

Shoemaker aged 57 (this is what the census says but his true age should have been 37), his sister Helen Peebles aged 43 and his sister Janet Peebles a Dress Maker aged 32.

Part Four: Anything Else/Later Life

Please use this space to record anything else you have found out about your pensioner. For example: what do we know about their life after retirement?

Part Five: Your Sources

Please use this space to record the sources you have used

Ancestry Source Citations:

- 1901 census for James Bell Peebles - Parish: *Anstruther Wester*; ED: 1; Page: 5; Line: 20; Roll: *CSSCT1901_129*
- 1891 census for James Bell Peebles - Parish: *Anstruther Wester*; ED: 1; Page: 6; Line: 11; Roll: *CSSCT1891_122*
- 1881 census for James Bell Peebles - Parish: *Anstruther Wester*; ED: 1; Page: 5; Line: 8; Roll: *cssct1881_113*
- 1871 census for James Bell Peebles - Parish: *Anstruther Wester*; ED: 1A; Page: 5; Line: 14; Roll: *CSSCT1871_69*
- 1861 census for James Bell Peebles - Parish: *Anstruther Wester*; ED: 3; Page: 11; Line: 18; Roll: *CSSCT1861_53*
- 1851 census for Janet Bell - Parish: *Anstruther Wester*; ED: 1; Page: 2; Line: 1; Roll: *CSSCT1851_84*; Year: 1851
- 1841 census for Robert Peebles - Parish: *Anstruther-Wester*; ED: 1; Page: 12; Line: 1430; Year: 1841