

*THE DRESSMAKER'S SON:
JAMES POLSON, 1848-1901
BY SANDRA CAIRNCROSS*

On the 26th February 1875, Johan Paterson, a dressmaker aged fifty, left her home in the village of Halkirk in Caithness to travel to Thurso, ten miles further north.

She had an appointment with the Justice of the Peace for Caithness, in which she testified that her son, James Polson, had been born on the 16th of December in 1848. She also handed over a stamped notice from the local minister which confirmed that her son had been baptised by him on the 28th September 1852 and that his parents were James Polson, day labourer, and Johan.



Halkirk Old Parish Church¹

Johan had not been married to James's father, and I can imagine that it may have been difficult for her to make that journey, and to ask the minister for his statement.

¹ [File:Halkirk, Caithness, Auld Kirk.jpg - Wikimedia Commons](#) licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 2.0 Generic license. Attribution: Bill Henderson

This was needed, however, to provide proof of James birth so that he could join the Post Office. He was then appointed as a messenger on the Halkirk to Westerdale route. This provided him a regular income and a future pension. Until then, he had been a labourer.

The lives of Johan, James, his wife and children are recounted below providing an insight in family life in Caithness, the most northerly mainland county in Scotland, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Johan was born about 1825 in Reay, just outside Thurso. Very little is known about her early life. It appears that she was working as a house servant prior to having her son. Her mother had also been a domestic servant.

Johan became a dressmaker. In addition to bringing up her son on her own, she also appears to have helped look her niece, Jessie, as the latter was living with Johan and James in 1871.

By 1881 both James and Jessie have left home, and Johan has taken in a thirteen-year-old boarder. He is described as a scholar. In 1891, now aged sixty-five, Johan is living on her own and described as a pauper, either because she was now unable to work or because there was no work available. She dies at home on the 9th of March 1897 at 7.30 in the morning from mitral regurgitation, which she had had for five years. She is described as “a pauper (formerly dressmaker)” and her son registered her death.

The picture, that one builds up in researching the life of Johan, is that of a proud, independent woman who supported her family as best she could and helped her son to a more secure future.

James worked as a labourer before joining the Post Office in 1875 as a rural messenger when he was in his late twenties. This brought with it secure employment with a regular income and a pension.

James married another Johan, Johan Sinclair, in 1881. He was thirty-three and she was twenty-one and engaged in domestic work. They had eight children.

The 1901 census shows James and his wife Johan living in Halkirk with seven of their children, aged between one and sixteen. Their eldest son, William (18), had left home and was working as a draper assistant in Wick, perhaps having been inspired by his dressmaking grandmother. Their second eldest son, John (16), had followed his father into the Post Office and was working as a clerk. This may have been a temporary appointment as boy clerk, which was common practice, as John was subsequently appointed as a rural postman on the Wick to Tannach route in 1903.

James developed a liver complaint and retired from the post office. He died in on the 24th of July, 1901, at 7.50 am, aged only fifty-two. His eldest son, still living in Wick, registered the death. His wife Johan was now a widow with six children under the age of twelve

Very little sense of James as a person emerges for me from the records found – he sought a position to provide security for him and then his family. Having joined the Post Office, he

remained a messenger, but his second son had joined as a boy clerk, perhaps suggesting further aspirations of upward mobility.

In the years following James's death, the family moved to Edinburgh where the family's upwards mobility continues. The 1911 census sees James's widow, Johan, living in Morningside with all her children save John. Her eldest son, William, is now a commercial traveller. Her eldest daughter Annie is a typist. The next two children are a millinery salesman and milliner assistant, and her second youngest son is a law clerk. The youngest two children are still at school.

John is no longer with the family, nor with the postal service. He is now working in Cardiff as a draper's assistant and eventually settles in England as a salesman, having served with the Royal Fusiliers in the First World War.

His elder brother, William, marries after the war and settles in Glasgow, also working as salesman.

Annie travels further than her brothers. In August 1914, just before the outbreak of the war, she travels to America. The passenger list describes her as "5 foot 3 with dark hair, brown eyes and a fresh complexion". She has brought £60 with her. Annie marries the very next day. Her husband, Murdo Graham, was from Edinburgh and had presumably gone out ahead of Annie. The couple move to Detroit, Michigan and then Indiana, quite a distance from Halkirk, Caithness.

Travel records show that Annie travelled back to the UK in the 1920s to visit her mother who had moved to Surrey, possibly staying with another child. Johan Sinclair died in Surrey in 1937. I haven't been able to find out what happened to the rest of James's and Johan's children.

This blog started as an exploration on the life of James Polson, a postal pensioner in Caithness. He remains a cipher to me with his mother emerging as a stronger presence, one carried on through her daughter-in-law and grandchildren.

A mother who was left to bring up a child on her own and so turned to dressmaking, probably as it was an occupation which could be done for home and combined with childcare. A mother who helped her son leave labouring behind and obtain secure employment as a rural messenger by travelling from her home in Halkirk to Thurso on the 26th of February 1875 to confirm his date of birth.

James no doubt played a role in supporting both his mother and wife through actively seeking more secure employment and encouraging his children to widen their horizons, but the influence of his mother appears to continue after her death.

His mother also appears to have influenced the occupations which her grandchildren entered. One son did initially follow in his father's footsteps by becoming a rural postman, but he soon followed his elder brother in becoming a draper's assistant. Two other siblings sold millinery.

I like to think that Johan Paterson would be proud of her son and grandchildren, perhaps with soft spot for Annie who crossed the ocean in search of a better life.

Fact Sheet: James Polson

Pensioner Details
<i>Pensioner name:</i> James Polson
<i>Person ID:</i> SC1030_Polson
<i>Your name:</i> Pauline Gall
<i>USA group:</i> Scotland
Part One: Birth and Family
1: When and where was your pensioner born?
James Polson was born in Halkirk, Caithness on 16 th December 1848 (FindMyPast – Civil Service Declaration, signed by Mother) – 187(3or5) Baptised 28 th September 1852 in Halkirk FindMyPast – baptism certificate – Mothers name Johanna)
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)
Johan Paterson was his mother, a dressmaker born in Reay, Caithness. Born about 1826. She was unmarried in 1881.(1881 census index – Freecen) Johan Paterson signed her name on the civil service declaration of 26 th **** 187(3 or5) 1852 baptism certificate signed by H. or W. Fraser FCM (Free Church Minister??) His father was James Polson, a day labourer from Sutherlandshire. (FindMyPast baptism certificate) No marriage record found for parents.
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)
No record found of siblings
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: <i>You can also use this space to record any details about people your pensioner boarded with.</i>
He married Johan Sinclair in Halkirk, Caithness in 1881 (Scotland’s people) she was born about 1860 in Wick, she was a domestic servant in 1881 before her marriage (FindMyPast)

In 1881 the census index records a general servant Catherine Harper age 14 born Reay, Sutherland.

In 1871 his mother Johan Paterson age 42 was living with him

In 1871 his cousin Jessie Swanson age 13 was living with him

In 1871 his address was Sinclair Street Halkirk

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)

His death certificate records a son, William Sinclair Polson, address in July 1901 – 6, Alexander's Court, Wick. He was born in 1883 in Halkirk. In 1901 he was a Drapers Assistant and was a boarder living with George Doull and Catherine Sutherland.

1901 Census (Ancestry)

John P. Polson age 16 – Post Office Clerk

Anne K. Polson age 11

George J. Polson age 9

Margaret H. Polson age 7

Alexander D. Polson age 5

Hector F. Polson age 3

Elizabeth Polson age 1

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

1861 – Scholar

1871 – Labourer

1881 – Post Messenger

1891 – Rural Postman

1901 – Rural Postman

1901 (Death certificate) – Retired Post Messenger

1881: Listed as Post Messenger

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

1881: his mother Johan Paterson is listed as a dressmaker

1881: Catherine Harper is listed as a servant

1891: Son – William age 8 – Scholar

1891: Son – John P. age 6 – Scholar

1891 – Daughter – Anne K. – age 1

1901: - Son – John P. – post office clerk

1901: Daughter – Anne K. – Scholar

1901: - Son – George J. – Schola

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?

Died 24th July 1901 Halkirk Caithness of liver complaint over 4 months

1901 address Church Street, Halkirk, Caithness

Part Five: Your Sources

Please use this space to record the sources you have used

James Polson birth declaration

<https://search.findmypast.co.uk/record?id=GBOR%2FCSEOA%2F149%2F0169&parentid=GBOR%2FCSEOA%2F00048124>

Baptism certificate

<https://search.findmypast.co.uk/record?id=gbor%2fcseo%2f149%2f0170&parentid=gbor%2fcseo%2f00048124>

Patterson 1881 Census

https://www.freecen.org.uk/search_records/59028a79e9379091b15cc23b/james-polson-1881-caithness-halkirk-1850-?locale=en

Marriage

https://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/record-results?search_type=people&dl_cat=statutory&dl_rec=statutory-marriages&surname=Polson&surname_so=exact&forename=James&forename_so=starts&spsurname=Sinclair&spsurname_so=exact&spforename=Johan&spforename_so=exact&from_year=1881&county=CAITHNESS&rd_real_name%5B0%5D=HALKIRK&rd_display_name%5B0%5D=HALKIRK_HALKIRK&rdno%5B0%5D=HALKIRK&record_type=stat_marriages

1881 census for Johan Sinclair

<https://www.findmypast.co.uk/transcript?id=GBC%2F1881%2F0026134911>

1881 census for James Polson

<https://www.findmypast.co.uk/transcript?id=GBC%2F1881%2F0026133557>

1901 census for James Polson

Parish: *Halkirk*; ED: 1; Page: 20; Line: 19; Roll: *CSSCT1901_9*

1861 census for James Polson

Parish: *Halkirk*; ED: 1; Page: 15; Line: 9; Roll: *CSSCT1861_5*

1871 census for James Polson

Parish: *Halkirk*; ED: 1; Page: 3; Line: 16; Roll: *CSSCT1871_7*

1891 census for James Polson

Parish: *Halkirk*; ED: 1; Page: 3; Line: 21; Roll: *CSSCT1891_8*