

Grants of Dornoch

A Highland Heritage

Tracing its line directly back to an 18th-Century crofting family, this firm is today a major supplier of prime Aberdeen Angus beef to hotels and homes in Britain and abroad.

QUESTION: What is the connection between the unceasing stream of traffic outside The Dorchester in London's Park Lane and a peaty brown Highland river in the far North of Scotland?

ANSWER: Grants of Dornoch, Ltd.

A straightforward question and a simple answer. Nevertheless, if your eyebrows have risen in doubtful query, the following explanations may prove that the simple answer involves about 150 years of the economic history of a family business.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many Highlanders were encouraged to leave, or were evicted, from their homes and their land. Many went abroad to America, to Nova Scotia and further afield carrying with them the living and undying memory of their hills and straths*. Far from home they often rose to high and important positions as, for example, the first Prime Minister of Canada.

A few of the Highlanders stayed at home, and among them was the family of the first John Grant. They were fortunate because the strath in which they lived was the only strath in the County of Sutherland from which there were no evictions. John Grant and his family stayed on in their Highland croft, 7 miles from the tiny county Town and Royal Burgh of Dornoch – a few acres of arable land lay between the croft-house and the river which swept down in spate from the hills after the winter snows had melted. It was a hard life lived by hard working folk. There were a few crops to be harvested and a few cattle and sheep up on the hill; but it was no easy way to make a living and raise a family.

In the past, drovers had visited each croft and driven the beasts in herds or



droves to the far-off cattle trysts at Muir of Ord, Crieff and Falkirk. John Grant had been one of them. There were no roads and no bridges; at rivers and across estuaries, the cattle swam to the other side. If the crossing were an easy one, the hearts of the drovers were lifted high, for it was a good omen of a good sale to come. Even today are still to be seen the grassy tracks across the hills where the cattle plodded along. Almost every Highland glen and strath knew the drovers, and their drove roads from the North and West can be traced today. A day's march would take the drover and his beasts ten or twelve miles and thousands of cattle moved slowly by these short stages from all parts of North and West Scotland to the trysts further South. With the cattle walked the drovers. Occasionally a man might ride a pony but it was rare for a drover to use more than his own two legs.

Coming changes

His son, also named John, was another of these hardy men, driving his beasts as far south as Falkirk for sale – he would then walk to Glasgow before returning home, where he courted a nurse named Mary who became his wife, making a round journey on foot of nearly 600 miles. However, he had the intelligence to realise clearly that changes were coming, if they had not already come, to the Highlands. With the opening up of the country by road and rail, there was easier access from and to the south. One of the road engineers described a crofter as one who "frequently rode night and day on a wiry pony from Falkirk to Muir of Ord, 120 miles, carrying for himself some bread and cheese in his pocket and giving his pony now and then a bottle of porter". But those days were already coming to a close.



The Grant family began to buy cattle locally and sent them by train to be purchased by dealers from the south. They also wisely took advantage of the change in the eating habits of the Highlands. Formerly, it was rare for meat to be eaten except on very special occasions. The purchase of a pony and trap enabled the Grants to sell some of their meat locally to neighbouring crofters in the parish and beyond. Finally, they opened a small retail shop in Dornoch itself, trading as "John Grant" – the first stage of the development of Grants of Dornoch had begun, with John's records, still to be seen, going back to 1842, which were written for him by his brother William, a school teacher for the district.

John's two sons, Charles and Robert,



Opposite page: Traditional Highland Cattle (top picture) and Aberdeen Angus cattle (lower picture) on the Grants' farm; and (centre) Stuart and Donald Grant Junior selecting Aberdeen Angus beef for The Dorchester.

This page: The John Grant & Sons shop photographed in 1908; Robert and Charles Grant, both now deceased, with their sons Glen and Donald; Donald and Glen Grant looking at a portrait of the firm's founder, John Grant, and his wife.

joined him in partnership before the First World War, so giving the trading name of "John Grant & Sons". After this war the sons looked further afield than Scotland for business, expanding throughout Britain by supplying the finest Aberdeen-Angus beef, building up a reputation for quality and service.

The difficult Second World War years and continued rationing disrupted this trading, until in 1953 when Charles's son Donald, and Robert's son Glen joined the partnership and assisted their fathers rebuild the family traditional trade.

Modern times

In 1970, more than a hundred years after its beginnings, the firm rebuilt, reconstructed and revolutionised the whole business. The drovers (so closely connected with the Grants) were long gone into the mists of history. Walking the long lonely miles over the hills gave way first to a pony and trap, then to the steam train and finally today to a fleet of refrigerated lorries swooping down the motorways.

In 1976 it became necessary to form the business into a Close Company using the present trading title of "Grants of

Dornoch, Ltd.", with Donald's two sons, Stuart and Donald, being made directors together with him and Glen.

The original premises are still in use, though much enlarged among other improvements, to accommodate a supermarket with a retail butchery department, trading as "John Grant & Sons" with Donald and Glen in partnership.

Grants of Dornoch, their modern abattoir and meat preparation factory, built with the most up to date equipment, fully staffed by skilled personnel, are today the largest employers of labour in the town. As meat purveyors, they serve quite remarkably varied clientele, from The Dorchester in London to smaller hotels throughout the length and breadth of Britain; from the local shopper in Dornoch to the oil terminal in the Shetlands, and even as far afield as Malta.

Agreements have been made with many farmers in the Highlands to provide the firm with what is recognised as the finest beef in the world – Aberdeen-Angus. As if this were not enough, the firm farms nearly 1,000 acres of its own to make certain of a constant supply of the finest beef throughout the whole year, despite winter storms and summer droughts and any other supply difficulties which may arise. They also have a herd of traditional Highland Cattle, with sentiments of the past.

The firm today continues to be run by direct descendants of the old eighteenth-century family of crofters, which set its sights on work and opportunities far distant from their own river and hills.

The two most recent directors are Great-Great-Grandsons of the first John Grant. Thus is ensured another generation to continue this old-established family business.

*A strath is a broad mountain valley.