



'I was always intrigued by the local rumour that the Davidsons of Harley Davidson lived near Brechin before emigrating to America'

Top left: Walter Davidson pictured in 1908 with an early Harley Davidson motorcycle. **Left:** William Davidson. **Below (l-r):** Arthur Davidson, Walter Davidson, William S Harley, William Davidson.

The easy riders frae Angus

Harley Davidson motorbikes may be quintessential Americana, but the family which started the company hailed from Angus

WORDS WENDY GLASS

Harley Davidson is an American icon, one of the world's most famous motorcycle manufacturers, a name that encapsulates a lifestyle dreamed of by motorcyclists across the globe. Yet, only a few generations ago, one of the company's two founding families was living in a humble, two-room cottage in the heart of the Angus countryside.

'My father was a keen motorcyclist and I was always intrigued by the local rumour that the Davidsons of Harley Davidson lived near Brechin before they emigrated to America,' says Norman Atkinson, Cultural Services Manager of Angus Council, who is an expert in the history of



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HARLEY-DAVIDSON



‘They weren’t the poorest of the poor, but America must have offered a very tempting chance of a new life’

Clockwise from top left: A 1913 Harley-Davidson advertisement; the shed where the original Harley Davidson was built; the three members of the Davidson Legacy just before renovations began on Netherthon Cottage; the Davidsons’ wheelwright grandfather at work in his smiddy in Aberlemno.

the county of Angus. ‘So, six years ago, I used my genealogical expertise to work back from Arthur Davidson, one of the founders of Harley Davidson, to his grandfather, Alexander Davidson. Thanks to the 1851 Census, I discovered that Alexander Davidson was a wright employing two men who had lived at Netherthon of Melgund, a hamlet somewhere in the Brechin area, with his wife Margaret and their six children.’

By studying the 1868 Ordnance Survey Map, Atkinson found Netherthon Smiddy and two nearby cottages in the hamlet of Aberlemno. ‘The smiddy and the cottages were part of Melgund Estate, so, as Sandy Davidson was the wright on the Melgund Estate, he would have lived in one of these cottages,’ he says. ‘To pin down exactly which cottage was owned by the Davidsons, I looked through the valuation rolls held by the Angus Archives, which revealed that the cottage on the same side of the road as Netherthon Smiddy was where the local blacksmith or wright lived. I’d found the Davidson family’s ancestral home.’

Saving the Davidsons’ Angus home

A visit to the area revealed that the remains of Netherthon Smiddy had been demolished and that the same fate was about to befall the now-derelict Netherthon Cottage. That was when Mike Sinclair, a self-confessed Harley Davidson fanatic, stepped in. ‘When I heard that Netherthon Cottage was up for sale, I suggested to a fellow Harley Davidson enthusiast, Maggie Sherrit, that we buy it, only to find an offer had already been submitted by a developer,’ said Mike.

‘We had to save this cottage,’ said Maggie. ‘If it was flattened, the only tangible link between Angus and Harley Davidson would be gone forever. However, we didn’t have enough money until a friend, Keith Mackintosh, was infected by our enthusiasm and offered to chip in.’

Mike, Maggie and Keith set up The Davidson Legacy with the sole aim of saving Netherthon Cottage, pooled their savings and made an offer. ‘In May 2008 we became the proud, if slightly bemused and much impoverished, owners of a derelict but ‘n’ ben, with no water supply, electricity or bathroom,’ said Mike. At that point, they didn’t have a clue what to do next, or where to find the money for the repairs the cottage required.

‘That’s when we hit upon the idea of restoring the cottage and letting it out as holiday accommodation,’ added Maggie, ‘enabling Harley Davidson fans to experience what life was like for the Scottish forebears of one half of the Harley Davidson dynasty.’

After almost three years of funding applications, organising planning permission and coping with ‘challenges’ such as the roof falling in, bouts of vandalism and one gable end of the cottage developing a serious crack, repairs and restoration started at the end of 2010. ‘Netherthon Cottage is now almost ready for its first visitors,’ said Maggie. ‘The cottage is almost exactly as it was when the Davidsons lived there, with the “Good Room”, the kitchen – complete with box beds and a 19th century range identical to the original, irreparable one that was in the cottage – a pantry and a sleeping area in the loft space. In keeping with the 1850s restoration, there’s no running water or electricity but the amenities block in the garden has showers, toilets and all other mod cons.’

Rural life in 1850 was tough, says Atkinson. ‘The Davidsons weren’t the poorest of the poor but Alexander, or Sandy Davidson would have had to work extremely hard all the hours of the day to feed his family. As a wright, as well as making wheels, he’d have turned his hand to anything metal or mechanical: shoeing horses, mending gates, repairing ploughs. Sandy’s wife Margaret wouldn’t have fared much better. As well as looking after their six surviving children, Margaret would have been kept very busy washing clothes, keeping the house clean, cooking, tending the vegetable plot and the many other tasks that were the responsibility of the woman of the house. America must have offered Sandy and Margaret a very tempting chance of a new life.’



ANGUS COUNCIL CULTURAL SERVICES

The Davidsons left Scotland in the mid-1850s, probably to join Margaret's mother, a Forfar widow who had emigrated to America several years earlier. 'Margaret's mother must have been quite a woman,' said Maggie. 'During the Davidson Legacy's trip to Milwaukee in 2012 to talk to the Harley Davidson Motor Company and the Harley Davidson Museum about our plans for Netherton Cottage, we met Jean Davidson, granddaughter of one of the Harley Davidson founders and the Davidson family historian. She told us that, having gone to America alone with her three youngest children, Margaret's mother was one of the first pioneers to head west to Milwaukee, where she opened a store.'

Having crossed the Atlantic, the Davidsons also settled in Milwaukee and, if not for the mechanical prowess and enterprise of one of Sandy and Margaret's grandsons, their story might have been no different from that of the many other anonymous Scots who left their homeland in search of a better life in the 19th century.

Arthur Davidson was the youngest son of William C Davidson, one of the six Davidson children who lived at Netherton cottage in 1851. In 1903, aged 21, Arthur and his childhood friend William S Harley started making motorcycles in his shed. The bikes were fast, powerful, beautiful and popular. As the company grew, two of Arthur's brothers, Walter and William, joined Harley Davidson, and the Davidson family has remained entwined with the marque ever since. 'It's a dream of ours that one of the Davidsons will stay at Netherton Cottage one day,' said Maggie.

Netherton Cottage officially opens on July 14, 2012. 'It's been incredibly hard work but we've had so much help and support from the biking community, especially Harley Davidson owners,' said Maggie. 'Over and over again, we've heard the unmistakable noise of six or seven Harleys heading our way and then stopping at the cottage so they could stand where the Davidsons stood almost two centuries ago. Everyone who visits is astounded by what we've achieved at Netherton Cottage. You don't get many opportunities in a lifetime to save history – this was ours.' 🍷



'In 1903, 21-year-old Arthur Davidson and childhood friend William S Harley started making motorbikes in his shed'

Top: Netherton Cottage in 2008. **Above:** The 1960s classic film Easy Rider, starring Dennis Hopper, Peter Fonda and Jack Nicholson, cemented Harley Davidson's place as an American icon.

FIELD FACTS

For information about Netherton Cottage, visit www.davidsonlegacy.com. For information about ancestral and local history resources in Angus, visit www.tayroots.com. Tayroots is a publicly funded initiative supported by the European Regional Development Fund.

