

Stockbriggs Curling Pond ca 1817

Challenging a Curling History Myth

D. Bruce McCowan: Draft 8 – Sept 26 2025

(V7 - New Section: Did the Estate Owners...); (New Appendix One)

(V8 - New Section: Clay Layer at Stockbriggs Curling Pond)

The Myth

Histories of curling will have you believe that the first “artificial” curling pond or rink was created / invented by the famous curler, Dr. John Cairnie, Esq., Largs, in about 1827 (or a year or two later).

A huge disagreement soon arose as to the “real” inventor of the new curling ground preparation process. The surgeon, Dr. Cairnie, used almost twenty pages in his 1833 *Essay on Curling and Artificial Pond Making* to defend his claim against the claim of “Mr. S.” (Mr. J. Somerville). Dr. John Cairnie was a son of Neil Cairnie (or Carnie) who was the managing partner of the very profitable Herbertshire Print Works in Denny, Stirlingshire, and who was owner of the substantial walled estate and mansion of Carronvale.¹ The well-connected Dr. John Cairnie clearly wanted to secure his place in history as the creator of the first artificial curling pond -- and he had the resources to publish his story in a book. Over the past two centuries many dozens of writers and historians have accepted his “...*Artificial Pond Making*” story as fact.

New Information

We can now argue that neither of these fellows – John Cairnie nor J. Somerville -- were the real inventor of the artificial curling pond – a shallow pond that had nothing to do with a mill of any kind. It is very probable that Ayrshire-born embankment contractor James McCowan was the first to level the ground (and possibly bring in dense clay to seal in water) to make a curling rink -- as early as 1817. James McCowan (1773-1834) was a busy but ordinary guy – coalmaster of the Stockbriggs / Auchanbeg Coalworks in Lesmahagow Parish, lime merchant, grocer, part-time **tenant** farmer, buried in litigation over the estate rents and five children under the age of ten. He didn’t have time to write a book about his work embanking the Nethan Water after a damaging flood in about 1817. So his story of the first “artificial” curling rink remained untold for over two centuries.

Stockbriggs Curling Pond – Manmade/Artificial – Likely by a Cumnock-Born Contractor

About a mile north of James McCowan’s rented home at East Auchanbeg, Lesmahagow, was a curling pond known locally as Yondertown Pond (being on the farm of Yondertown or Yonderton) and, also, as Stockbriggs Pond (being on the estate of Stockbriggs). On Feb. 11 1865 the Hamilton Advertiser reported on a friendly curling match here between Lesmahagow Parish shoemakers and a group of other local tradesmen. Little doubt the early nineteenth century tenants of Stockbriggs estate, including coalmaster James McCowan and some of his Auchanbeg coal workers, gathered here for the occasional friendly curling game. The search continues for clear evidence of curling matches held here between 1817 and 1833.

Surely a convenient place for local folk to curl in the mid-19th century – was it always so? Was Stockbriggs curling pond a natural feature? Or was it man-made?

¹ <https://falkirklocalhistory.club/around-the-area/houses-and-estates/carronvale-denny/>, accessed 2024/4/22.

In his detailed table, “*Contents...*”, James Whiteford’s 1802 survey (Fig. 1) lists the 6-acre parcels of land labelled “K” as “Yondertown Meadow”. A “Meadow” was grassland, but often marshy and near a river. Whiteford shows this 6 acre strip in a tinted blue colour, suggesting wet ground. But Whiteford’s map does not show a distinct pond anywhere in this area.



Fig. 1: [A Portion of]
A Plan of Stockbriggs in the Parish of Lesmahagoe
The Property of James Corbett Esqr
Surveyed by James Whiteford AD 1802²
 (The cart-track between Yondertown and the bridge over the Nethan skirts along the south west edge of the wet “meadow” ground labelled “K”)

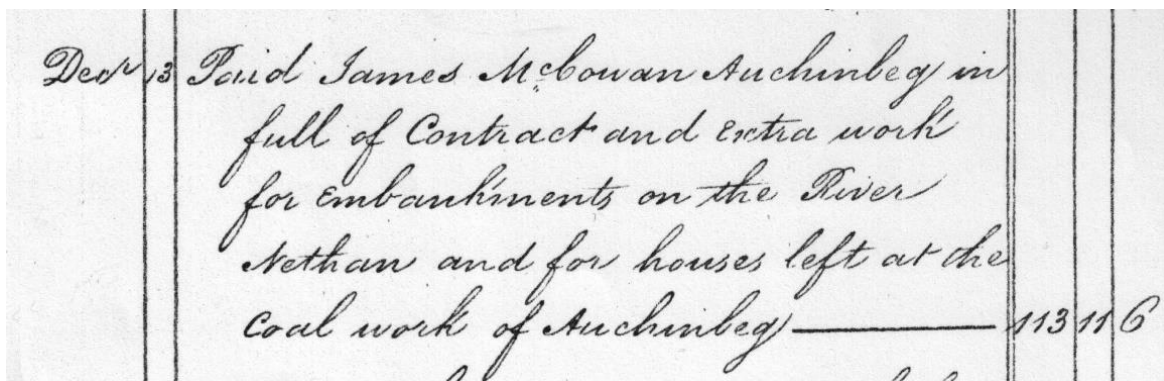


So Stockbriggs pond must have been “created” after 1802. Levelling the ground here into a 150 foot long flat strip half a dozen paces wide would yield a nice water-filled spot for a game of curling. This could have been done almost anywhere in the “Yondertown Meadow”, labelled K by James Whiteford.

² This 1802 estate survey was shown to the author by Ian Buchanan, the owner of Stockbriggs estate in the 1970s. For a time after his passing the survey was held by Mr. Buchanan’s lawyer. However its current location is unknown. The original survey plan was huge -- 49 inches by 64 inches in size.

Referring to the photograph below (Fig. 3), now, just who did the work to make this Stockbriggs pond large enough for a curling bonspiel – moving rocks and dirt off to the edges to build up the banks that you can see in the photo below? The Stockbriggs Pond area ultimately drained into the Nethan Water, a hundred or so paces away. In about 1817 Auchinbeg coalmaster James McCowan got the contract from the Stockbriggs Estate Judicial Factor (John Lawson) for “seacaring” the banks of the Nethan Water after a severe and damaging flood. To get this seacaring / embankment contract, James must have had the equipment, horses, crew and know-how to efficiently move lots of rocks and soil.

During his labouring days in Old Cumnock, Ayrshire, in and around the coal pits of Lord Dumfries, on Jan'y 20th 1798 James McCowan signed a receipt: *To 6 days repairing the road and banking Mofsback burn @ 20d. £---10---*.³ His river embanking experience went back a long time. By 1817 certainly a seasoned very hands-on coalmaster in Lanarkshire, it is no surprise that James McCowan would get the Nethan Water embanking contract.



**Fig. 2: Estate of Stockbriggs Report on Judicial Factor's Accounts, Page 72
1819 “Repairs and Allowances to Tenants”**

The Report is an incredible record of how landed estate litigation affected tenants.
Crown copyright, National Records of Scotland, CS96/1224

James and his crew (probably his coal-workers) would have done a certain amount of earth and stone scraping, digging and moving for that Nethan Water embanking job -- “gee, why not make a good flat and level curling pond while I’m at it”. And so, the “artificial” Stockbriggs Curling Pond – unrelated to a mill -- preceded John Cairnie’s much-hyped-and-argued-about 1827 Artificial Pond by about a full decade.

“Extra Work” – A Benefit to Offset Tenants’ Rent Increases

Note the Judicial Factor’s wording in his account above (Fig. 2) -- “extra work”. His wording is very interesting. Was the judicial factor, John Lawson, sympathetic to the local folk amid the upheaval of the Stockbriggs estate litigation? Was he trying to hide the expense of the curling pond embankments within the River Nethan embankment contract? Stockbriggs mansion was in the flood plain of the Nethan and had been damaged during the flood (page 31 of the Estate of Stockbriggs Report at the Scottish Record Office⁴). The estate owner’s mansion was repaired out of increases in the tenants’ rent. Shouldn’t the tenants get some modest benefit out of that damaging flood – a handy curling pond?

The embanking of the River Nethan in about 1817 was a great opportunity to create a man-made curling pond practically in the centre of the Estate of Stockbriggs. Something else to research – was a Stockbriggs Rink put together within the Lesmahagow Curling Club membership?

³ Dumfries House Papers, Box 19: Kindly sent by Lord Bute’s archivist, Alexander Hunter, in July 1984.

⁴ National Records of Scotland, CS96/1224



Fig. 3: Yonderton / Stockbriggs Pond, Jan. 2022

The man-made raised embankment is still visible at the east end of the pond.
With thanks to Dave Browning.



Fig. 4: Yonderton / Stockbriggs Curling Pond looking west, October 2023

With many thanks to 10-Year Old Caleb Browning

If no evidence can be found of an official Stockbriggs Rink in the 1820s – it comes as no surprise. The period 1817 to 1833 was a time of intense uncertainty for the tenants of Stockbriggs Estate.⁵ They were very pre-occupied...

Stockbriggs Estate Litigation, ca 1817

The heirs of Stockbriggs Estate in Lesmahagow Parish were absentee landlords – squabbling over their respective rights to the farm and coal rents. On several occasions, the Judicial Factor, John Lawson, had to actually pay the heirs to show up at the estate to discuss important issues. Through no fault of their own, the tenants of Stockbriggs Estate, including coalmaster James McCowan, got dragged into

⁵ At least 3 of the farm tenants left Stockbriggs Estate between 1827 and 1833. <http://mccowan.org/newmode.htm>

the long-drawn-out litigation. Although very unpleasant for the tenants at the time, one nice outcome (for us that is) of the litigation and the goal to sell the estate was a survey and plan drawn up and produced in 1825. Because agricultural improvement – building stone dykes, planting hedges and digging ditches -- was a major real estate marketing issue, the surveyor took the time to show those man-made “enclosure” features on his plan. And so, shown below (Fig. 5), we can see the location of the man-made Stockbriggs or Yonderton Pond, as of 1825. The 1825 map-maker shows the north, south, and east embankments around the pond as dashed lines (as opposed to solid lines), probably because these three embankments did not look like proper dry-stone agricultural dykes. Judging by the shape of the ca 1825 east embankment, there looks to also be a shorter sheet of ice, perhaps for the junior curlers.

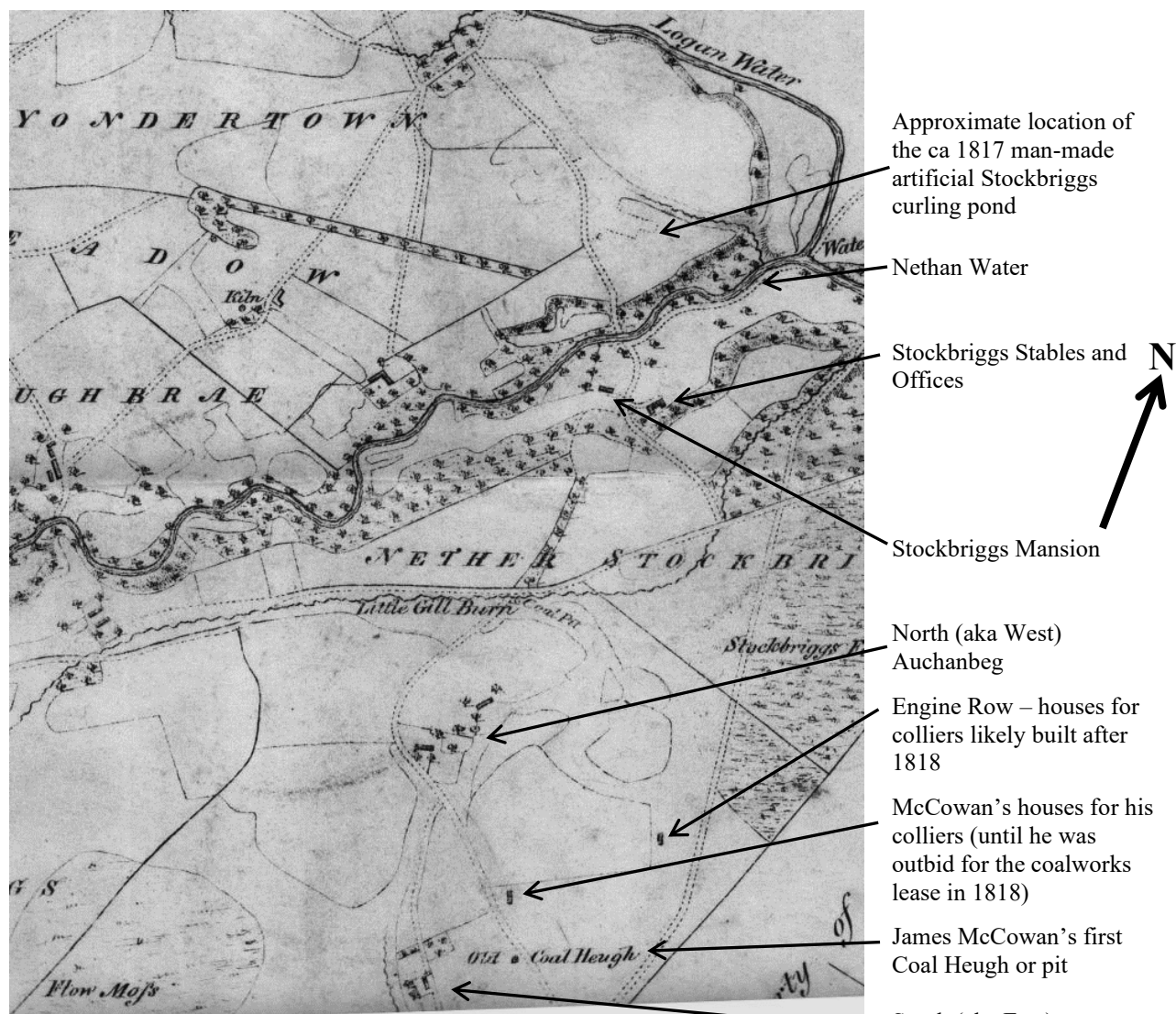


Fig. 5: Part of the Plan of Stockbriggs Estate, Lesmahagow, 1825

Drawn and printed soon after the Judicial Factor dealt with estate litigation and re-organized the farm leases.

Image © National Museums Scotland (W.MS.1986.51)

Did the Estate Owners Have a Role in Creating Stockbriggs Curling Pond?

As to the landlords of Stockbriggs Estate possibly taking an interest in making and maintaining a curling pond, it seems very unlikely.

The heirs of James Corbet (who died in 1806) were absentee and only seemed interested in getting their share of the rents while the estate was under judicial management (for two decades). The judicial factor, John Lawson, seemed to do a good job of keeping the estate going and spent some of the estate's income repairing the mansion house and building the new offices / stables in about 1820.

The UK was still creeping out of the post-Napoleonic depression in the early-mid 1820s. There were at least two solid attempts to sell Stockbriggs estate, 1818 and 1825, which failed to materialize. Finally, John Gibson, Procurator Fiscal in Lanark, bought Stockbriggs in 1828. We have 3 old letters, 1834-1837, which point out that John Gibson of Stockbriggs had serious financial troubles. "*I believe he [Stockbriggs] is altogether dependant on what his wife can squeeze out of her father for his maintenance.*"⁶ Gibson had pushed a four-fold rent increase onto his tenants.⁷ Clearly, paying for his tenants to have their own curling pond would not have been of any interest to John Gibson.

In about 1836 James W. Alston (1796-1866), a Glasgow merchant, bought Stockbriggs Estate. James McCowan's brother, William, refers to Alston as "*a large profiter in Lesmahagow*"⁸. Would a "*large profiter*" concern himself with winter pastimes for his tenants? Alston had his priorities -- he enlarged the mansion-house at some point. Was he the type to sponsor curling, even as a figure-head in the re-vamped Lesmahagow Curling Club? In his "*Annals of Lesmahagow*" J.B. Greenshields does not list Alston in connection with the re-organization of the Lesmahagow curling club when they joined the Royal Caledonian Curling Club in 1848. Nor does Alston appear in the *Annals of the RCCC*. So, Alston is unlikely to have paid for excavation of a curling pond.

It seems clear that excavation of Stockbriggs curling pond was a grass-roots effort...

A Grass-Roots Effort For Sure

It is argued in *The Hog-Score in the Great Rink of Time: Book 1 – The Outdoor Natural Ice Era in Scotland, 1500-1900* that James McCowan was a curler. While no absolute proof has yet been found, James could have been the one to negotiate the deal to build the Stockbriggs / Yonderton curling pond. He certainly had many discussions with the Judicial Factor regarding his coalworks and farm rents and the Nethan embanking contract. Furthermore, land surveyor James Whiteford, was a good friend of James McCowan, having been, more-or-less, a mentor to the young coalmaster. A locally influential fellow as Factor or Manager of Blackwood Estate, James Whiteford could have also pressed for creation of the curling pond. (In 1793, a James Whiteford, Schoolmaster, was a member of the Douglas Curling Club just a couple of miles south of McCowan's home.)

Perhaps just as likely, the curling pond deal could have been brokered by the tenant of Yonderton farm, William Pate, who also acted as the country griever to coordinate estate matters decided upon by the Judicial Factor. Out of the estate income, the Judicial Factor paid William Pate for damage done to his

⁶ Letter, J. Gibson, Lanark, to James Gibson, Scarborough, Upper Canada, 16 July 1834.

⁷ "*Articles of Lease...*", 1829, James McCowan papers.

⁸ Letter, William McCowan, Colburn, to his nephew, Robert McCowan in Scarborough, Upper Canada, 27 Nov. 1837.

farm by the Nethan embankment workmen.⁹ This payment (in disguise) could actually have been compensation for the loss of a bit of Yonderton meadow pasture – being replaced by the new curling pond.

Regardless of who brokered the deal to build this curling pond, it was very probably James McCowan who levelled and embanked it, being the contractor who was hired to embank the Nethan Water in about 1817.

Physical Description

Many thanks to Dave Browning and Lindsay Scotland, a Trustee of the Scottish Curling Trust, who spent time at Stockbriggs curling pond in March 2024. Lindsay kindly prepared a report: “*Stockbriggs Curling Pond Site Visit 9/3/24*”. Some highlights are provided here:

*There is a still-obvious embankment that had been constructed on the ‘eastern’ side of the pond in order to constrain the water flow down the valley and thus create the pond. The length of the embankment is approximately 45 metres, making the width of the pond an ideal size for a sheet of curling ice... The northern and southern sides of the pond are constrained by low mounds now covered by trees. It would be interesting to find out to what extent these mounds are natural or whether they were created or enhanced by spoil from the pond... Walking around the area, the extent of the pond to the west is unclear as there is no obvious embankment on that side.*¹⁰

Wait! What About the 1858 Ordnance Survey?



**Fig. 6: Ordnance Survey
Lanarkshire Sheet XXXI,
Surveyed 1858
National Library of Scotland
<https://maps.nls.uk/view/74427719>**

This 1858 Ordnance Survey shows a square-ish pond which appears to be several dozen paces northwest of the presumed pond shown by the dashed line dykes on the 1825 plan (Fig. 5) above.

This discrepancy of a few dozen paces can very probably be put down to inaccuracy of the earlier survey. The 1825 plan of Stockbriggs relied partly on the Whiteford survey of 1802. The 1825 plan does not even show the coalworks / steam engine set up by James McCowan sometime around 1810 a few hundred paces north of the East Auchanbeg buildings. Put a straight-edge-ruler along the straight leg of the cart-track close to the Nethan Water. In Fig. 6 (1858) your straight line extends to a point

⁹ National Records of Scotland, CS96/1224, *Estate of Stockbriggs Report on Judicial Factor's Accounts*, Pg 73.

¹⁰ Lindsay Scotland, “*Stockbriggs Curling Pond Site Visit 9/3/24*”

significantly south of the Yondertown buildings. In Fig. 5 (1825) your straight line extends to a point slightly north of the Yondertown buildings. **The 1825 plan is probably incorrect.**

Great Theory – What Else Needs to be Done?

It is my understanding that a local group is interested in coordinating an archaeological field survey of the Stockbriggs / Yonderton pond. Some bits to look for:

- What are the length and width dimensions of the pond bed?
- Is the pond bed reasonably flat and level?
- How deep was the water? Were the north and south banks simply the result of scooping out enough dirt to give a depth of six or so inches of water?
- How much soil / dirt has washed down from the embankments over the past 200 years?
- Have animals been at work changing the flat-ness and level-ness of the pond bed?
- Does it appear that a special layer of clay was brought in to seal in the water?
- Are there any parallel lines scratched across the pond bed two to three feet apart? (Made by a horse-drawn levelling scoop, Fig. 9.) (Very much a long-shot as these marks in the clay would likely be worn away within a couple of years.)
- Where is the source of the water – is there any evidence of a lade from the nearest stream? Or was the pond spring-fed? **(Or is the pond within a naturally marshy area?)**
- Is a primitive asymmetrical curling stone buried in the pond bed?
- Is there evidence of a curling stone storage shed beside the pond – perhaps even a few stones with or without handles settling into or under the soil?

And further archival research:

- Is there a record of curling matches on Stockbriggs pond between 1817 and, say, 1833?
- Was a Stockbriggs Rink put together (say, between 1817 and 1833) within – or even outside -- the Lesmahagow Curling Club membership?

Finally, one valuable outcome would be the installation of a historic plaque on the nearest roadside and a maintained footpath by which visitors can see this *curling-history-myth-busting* “**artificial curling pond**” made about 1817.

Clay Layer at Stockbriggs Curling Pond

On June 8 2025 members of ACFA – the Association of Certificated Field Archaeologists – took a preliminary look at the site of Stockbriggs Curling Pond. The vegetation was too tall and thick for a detailed survey of the site – ACFA will come back!

BUT: A definite layer of clay was discovered within the pond perimeter. It was also noted that there is a distinct roadway leading to the pond from the bridge-to-Yondertown cart-track.



**Fig 7: Stockbriggs Pond looking east toward the embankment and the ACFA volunteers
Note the distinctly different vegetation growing in the clay on the pond vs
the more natural native vegetation in the foreground
D.B. McCowan Photo**

In The Annals of Lesmahagow, J.B. Greenshields reported (page 241) in 1864:

There is likewise a rich blackband ironstone, from eight to twelve inches thick, and a number of clay-bands, with fire clay in great abundance. These are all overlaid by another bed of lime-stone, seven feet thick, which is extensively wrought at Auchinbeg, Bellfield, and Brockley.

James McCowan is also recorded as a Lime Merchant at Auchinbeg, doubtless working his seven foot bed of lime-stone and, little doubt, the abundant fire clay too

At his Auchanbeg Coalworks, coalmaster James McCowan had a “Ninefoot” seam of coal – a pair of coal seams sandwiching a layer of clay. Although no proof has yet been found that McCowan made clay bricks using this band of clay during his time as coalmaster, 1799-1818, he would have surely noticed how well that band of clay stopped the flow of water in his nine-foot coal seam. He continued farming and cattle-breeding at Auchanbeg until early 1833.

In the early 20th century, a brickworks was set up a few hundred paces east of Auchanbeg at Auchlochan pit number six.

I checked some early 1900s Coal Board plans that I received 40 or so years ago regarding coal mining at Auchinbeg. These workings plans talk about the "upper 9 foot" and the "lower 9 foot" seams at Auchinbeg. Presumably these are references to the 3 or so feet of coal above the band of clay and the 3 or so feet of coal below the band of clay. The early 1900s workings encountered waste "in stoops" in these seams. So someone had been working very close to the clay band in the 19th century – quite likely James McCowan.

Also, there was a "mine to 9 foot coal" (meaning driven into the 9 foot seam's outcrop) only a hundred or so paces north of James McCowan's house at East Auchinbeg. So the clay was close at hand and easy for McCowan to get at.

The owner of Stockbriggs Estate as of 1979, Ian Buchanan, had a large old plan "*Sketch of the Lower Part of the Mineral Field of Bankend June 1839*". Bankend was immediately south of and adjacent to Auchinbeg. This 1839 plan shows "Clay Ironstone Bands" near Brockley Houses. So the band of clay was known to be of some value as early as 1839. No doubt James McCowan (who had the lease on the Auchinbeg coalworks, 1799-1818) also knew of the value of the clay band and probably extracted it -- for brick-making and for curling pond water-sealing!

In the spring of 1833, James and Margaret McCowan took their family of eight to the edge of the clay Scarborough Bluffs in Upper Canada. Their oldest son, Robert (1813-1886), farmed lot 18 concession C, 1839-1855, also right at the edge of the clay cliffs. According to David Boyle, author of the 1896 History of Scarboro:

- the first brick house in Scarborough was built in 1831
- “*early in the century bricks were made on lot 18 concession C*”

Is it possible that Robert McCowan (1813-1886) was employed at making bricks during his teen years at Auchanbeg and carried his brick-making skills and knowledge to Scarborough, Canada? It would indeed seem likely!

Walking Tours – Scotland’s First Artificial Curling Pond; Early Deep Mining; Covenanters

Within a one mile radius surrounding Stockbriggs curling pond there are several historically significant sites:

- An old stone bridge across the Nethan Water (possibly two centuries old) (Fig. 7)
- One of the four (or so) earliest steam engine installations for deep coal mining in South Lanarkshire, ca 1813 (East Auchanbeg)
- An early underground rail system, likely pony-drawn, ca 1817 (East Auchanbeg)
- Birthplace of Alexander Muir, author of Canada’s “*Maple Leaf Forever*”, 1830
- Death-place of Covenanter David Steel, 1686
- A “monk’s cell”
- And of course, Scotland’s first artificial curling pond, ca 1817 (Yonderton)

In particular, the 1817 artificial curling pond, scenic beech-hedge-lined old roadway (Fig. 8), stone bridge over the Nethan, and proposed historic plaque make for a very nice two hour tourist stop for curling history enthusiasts.



Fig. 8: Old Stone Arch Bridge Across the Nethan Water (2013, D.B. McCowan)

Possibly repaired at the time of the 1817 embankment work.

Vertical distance from the water to underside of the arch – about 12 feet.

Stockbriggs mansion was on the south side of the Nethan.

Roughly half of Stockbriggs estate was on the north side of the Nethan.



Fig. 9: Beech-Hedge-Lined Roadway on the Way from the Bridge Toward the Curling Pond

Rather out-of-control now, these beech hedges would have been well-manicured in their early decades.
(2013, D.B. McCowan)



Fig. 10: The Horse-Drawn Levelling Scoop Used on the McCowan Farm in Scarborough, Ontario
(2023, D. B. McCowan)

The two wooden handles and the U-shaped frame for pulling by the horse were removed by Bill McCowan in the early 1960s. Bill added the parts near the middle for attachment to the three-point hitch of the 1939 Ford 9N tractor.

This scoop (with tractor and chain) was used by Bill (on tractor) and the author (at the scoop handles) in the mid-70s to dredge a channel to dry up the swamp at the McCowan Pickering property.

A horse-drawn scoop such as this – about two and a half feet wide – would have been used to level the Stockbriggs curling pond bed.

Appendix One -- Families on Stockbriggs Estate

We are hoping to find some hidden archival treasures -- a letter or a diary entry that mentions curling at Stockbriggs Pond (also known as Yonderton Pond). It is believed that this shallow pond was excavated in about 1817 so that the tenants and farm workers on Stockbriggs Estate and the coalminers at the Auchanbeg Coalworks could enjoy Scotland's favourite sport. So, if your folks lived on Stockbriggs estate or at Auchanbeg, please have a look in your attic for some evidence of curling at Stockbriggs in the nineteenth century.

Tenants of Stockbriggs Estate

This list is not complete. In the first four decades of the nineteenth century, tenant families of Stockbriggs (for at least some of that time period) include the following:

Brown, Cruden, Fleming, Gilchrist / Gilkerson, Gowans, Greenshields, Haddow, Harrison, Hodge, Johnston, Kirkwood, McCowan, Pate / Peat, Peacock, Saddler, Wharrie / McWharrie, Wilson

Colliers at the Auchanbeg / Stockbriggs Coalworks

This list is not complete. Coalmining families that lived at Auchanbeg (for at least a short time) include the following:

1800-1820: Porteous, Rae, Johnston, Vass, Hamilton, McCowan, McKinnon, Hislop, McLean, Gooldie, Jamieson, Brown, Purdie, Lindsay, Proudfoot

1821-1840: Hall, Muir, Carruthers, Coupland, Barr, Boyd, Wharrie, Jack, Shearer, Sloan, McGachie, Gray, Carmichael, Menzies, Gemmel, Dickson, Redi, Scott, Tennant

1841-1861: Morton, Robertson, Denholm, Cameron, Ferguson, Grierson, Howie, Adams, Cooper, Inch, Clark, Daryman