

## PETER MACFARLANE – CHEMIST, FORT WILLIAM

As you walk through the High Street of Fort William, one of the longstanding businesses is MacFarlane the Chemist. Round the corner from the Chemists is to be found the well known and respected West Highland Museum, which was founded by eight men and one woman who met in the Palace hotel on 23 May 1922. Among those involved was “Peter MacFarlane the Chemist” and it struck me what a remarkable life he led, let me share some of his highlights.

Peter was born in Spean Bridge on the 20<sup>th</sup> June 1849 to Peter MacFarlane and Mary MacDonald (Drochaid). Peter (Snr.) had been born near Kingussie, his father John MacFarlane reputedly in his 80's and his mother Grace a granddaughter of Alexander MacDonell, the chief of Keppoch who died leading his Clan at the battle of Culloden in 1746. Peter (Snr.) was brought up at Killichonate with his uncle (Capt John MacDonell) and eventually was a Carpenter and Contractor. It would appear that he took over the Shop at Spean Bridge in the 1840's; by the time of the 1851 census he was described as joiner, postmaster and merchant. Peter (Snr.) had five sons and one daughter, the eldest son John became a successful businessman in London, Archie ran the shop in Spean Bridge, Angus became the RC Bishop of Dunkeld and George went to the USA. Our subject Peter was the youngest son who was born in what is now the sitting room of Ian and Fiona's house next to the present shop in Spean Bridge.

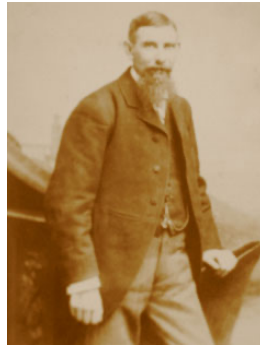


**The old Shop in Spean Bridge where Peter (jnr) was born and raised.**

Peter received his education under the very able tutorage of James Munro, Schoolmaster, known as the Blarour Dominie. His apprenticeship was registered in June 1864 ***“It is Contracted, Agreed, and ended between Allan Ritchie Affleck Chemist and Druggist Fort William of the first part and Peter MacFarlane junior residing in Fort William with the advice and consent of his father Peter MacFarlane senior carpenter Unachan”*** This apprenticeship was for four years commencing November 1865. ***“Allan Ritchie Affleck binds and obliges himself to furnish the said Peter MacFarlane junior with sufficient bedding, food and washing during the whole space of his apprenticeship and to pay him the sum of ten pounds sterling annually in name of salary for the last two years of his apprenticeship over and above his lodging, bedding food and washing as aforesaid”***. Peter was on his own on the 1<sup>st</sup> November 1869 as per the following reference of the same date: - ***“I can confidently recommend him to fill a situation as assistant to anyone requiring his services (signed) A R Affleck Apoth Hall Fort Wm.”*** It is reputed that when it was time to leave Fort William, Peter left £10 in the till in case he might be responsible for any bad debts.

He went off to London, when there he had to go to “Holburn” and asked for “Holburrin”. “Oh” replied a Londoner, “you must mean “Owbun”! “No, I don't mean Oban, I mean Holburrin!” Peter met Louisa Priest; they were married in Brompton Oratory in April 1877, on a Sunday. He opened a business close to Brompton Oratory and was in despair as he had so few customers to start with. A great friend while there was one Dr Abernethy, a fellow Scot. Dr Abernethy asked Peter to fashion a portable medicine case with small quantities of necessary portions, this was done and thus was born the first “Black Bag”! Dr Abernethy is commemorated to this day in the Abernethian Hall at Barts, London.

Eventually Peter and Louisa went to Fort William and bought out Affleck. That business was on the Loch Side of the High Street and more towards the Esplanade direction. Peter sent his family to Arisaig for a year when what became the well-known “MacFarlane’s Chemist” and the house above was built. He was elected to a seat in the Council Board in 1880, ultimately succeeding to a Bailieship and finally attained to the office of Provost, the first Catholic elected to this position in Scotland since the Reformation. During his term as Chief Magistrate he had the satisfaction of seeing the Burgh illuminated by electricity, the erection of a slaughterhouse, the acquisition of an ambulance and fire engine, but the crowning glory of his provost ship being the supply of an inexhaustible supply of pure water.



**Peter about 1893**

Along with his Druggist business, Peter manufactured aerated water and also had a photographic business. On the back of his photographic prints he had

P MACFARLANE  
Photographer to the Queen  
FORT WILLIAM  
N.B.

This was due to the following letter: -

Osborne  
January 23 1882

Sir

I am commanded by the Queen to thank you  
For the interesting Photographs of the Summit of  
Ben Nevis which you have had the kindness to  
Present to her Majesty

I am Sir

Your obedient Servant

Henry Ponsonby

P MacFarlane Esq.

And so commenced a connection with Ben Nevis, which was carried on by Peter’s son and grandchildren due to their lifelong involvement with the Ben Race. The current success of the “Lochaber Games” also owes a debt of gratitude to Peter MacFarlane, going back to the early 1880’s! Extracts from a newspaper article in 1923 on “THE LOCHABER GATHERING” illustrates this ably.

*“Enjoying as it now does repute outwith Lochaber this popular Highland fixture came into being quite modestly. In the early eighties Mr William T. Brown along with Mr Peter MacFarlane conceived the idea. The original arena had its location on ground upon which is now occupied by part of the public school building. This was roped off and a good number of spectators put in an appearance. When the sports were ready to commence, but none would pay the sixpence asked for admission. Mr MacFarlane, after himself giving an exhibition throw with the hammer, commanded that the ropes be cut. The order was promptly carried out, whereupon sightseers and competitors flocked into the enclosure free. ....”*

*Following the inauguration of the sports, an influential committee was nominated, and the Lochaber Gathering, as such, has never looked back'*

Peter was a Justice of the Peace for the County of Inverness, sat as one of the Licensing Justices for the Lochaber District, appointed a parents representative on the local School Management Committee and president of the Merchants Association. He worked to promote the interests of An Comunn Abrach and for leisure he enjoyed bowling and curling.

They say if you want something done well, give it to a busy person. Well that would appear to be the case with Peter MacFarlane, he became one of the first Scout Masters of Fort William in 1911 at the age of 62.



**Peter at a Scout Camp in 1912**

Peter died on the 7<sup>th</sup> of June 1925 and is buried in the old graveyard of Cille Choirill next to his parents, brother Archie and Aberarder ancestors. He leaves a legacy of not only the West Highland Museum, but also many other Lochaber institutions that he either started or was intimately involved with.

Apart from newspaper articles and obituaries, much of the above information and pictures were courtesy of the late Mrs Winnie Chisholm, one of Peter's daughters who died in 1976, and her daughter Theresa Otto who died in South Africa in 1996. The late George MacFarlane, Peter's grandson also supplied documents relative to Peter's apprenticeship and correspondence with the Queen.

Robert MacFarlane  
South Africa - March 2008.