

On This Day – 21st April 1740

Sir Robert Preston of Valleyfield born

The Preston family had owned the Valleyfield estate since the first half of the 16th century, and the Baronetcy was passed to Robert after the death of an older brother, who was childless. Preston spent time in both the East India Trading Company (where he increased his riches and earned the nickname 'Floating Bob'), and as a Tory MP for two English constituencies, as well as over-seeing business interests in London. During this time he became friends with William Pitt the Younger (the youngest PM in British history, at the age of 24), traveller and writer James Boswell, and Sir Walter Scott, who said of Preston: "[he was] as big as two men, and eats like three". He was also friends with famous painters like JMW Turner and Alexander Nasmyth, with latter painting several landscapes of Preston's estate at Valleyfield.

Under Preston's watch the area which is now Valleyfield Woods was developed into a designed parkland landscape, and also saw the construction of Preston Island, an artificial piece of land just south of the village itself, and which looks fairly incongruous on the shoreline given its neat rounded shape.



Nasmyth's painting of Valleyfield Estate

Valleyfield Estate was the only Scottish example of the work of famed landscape architect Humphry Repton, and was suitably extravagant for someone with the riches of Preston. It held a 100-room mansion, stable block, artificial island on the Bluther Burn, a canal for pleasure boating, and a walled garden. The signs of these are still present, and can be found by exploring the woodland. David Douglas, the botanist who introduced over 200 species of plants to Britain and who would give his name

to the Douglas Fir, was an apprentice gardener here, and studied Sir Robert's collection of botanical books.

Although fully connected to the shore now, a small channel of water separated the island from the mainland. Upon construction Preston saw this not only as an opportunity to further increase his fortune, but also to build a lasting monument to his work by literally re-shaping the landscape.

Coal mining began on the site in the early 1800s, as did salt production: the latter ended up being much more profitable, to the extent that it supported the heavy financial losses of the coal mines. An explosion in one of the mineshafts ended the project, with Sir Robert having lost £30,000 constructing www.innerforthlandscape.co.uk

and running Preston Island. The Island was last used industrially by illicit distillers in the 1850s, and the channel between the island the shore was filled with ash slurry from Longannet in 1970. During World War Two it was home to a 'starfish decoy', a system of lights set up to appear – to enemy bombers at least – to be a city or factory, so that they would bomb only empty patches of land, and is currently a local nature reserve.

More information:

[Floating Bob and the Forgotten Mansion](#)

[Valleyfield Heritage Project](#)

[The History of Parliament's entry on Preston](#)

Nearby IFLI projects:

[Researching Our Local Heritage](#)

[Valleyfield Estate Community Woodland](#)