



Paper  
Treasure

# Who was this man?



*How to use historical sources  
from Aberdeenshire  
to discover local history*

The name “Robert Sellar” was well-known and respected, in Huntly and throughout the world.

In this project, we discover why.

### How can historical sources help us to find out about history?

There are 2 types of sources: **primary sources** and **secondary sources**.

**Primary sources** are original documents. They include old newspapers, letters, diaries, school and church records, birth certificates and so on.

**Secondary sources** are books which contain or refer to primary sources. They sometimes interpret them as well.

Aberdeenshire Council has many historical collections, which are mainly stored at Old Aberdeen House in Aberdeen; at the Libraries’ Headquarters at Oldmeldrum; and in Registrars’ offices throughout the area. These collections have been used throughout this booklet.

### To find out more, contact:

- **Aberdeenshire Registrars** at  
[www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/registrars/offices](http://www.aberdeenshire.gov.uk/registrars/offices)
- **Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Archives** at:  
Old Aberdeen House, Dunbar Street, Aberdeen, AB24 3UJ  
Tel: 01224 481775  
[www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/archives](http://www.aberdeencity.gov.uk/archives)  
[www.facebook.com/aberdeencityandshirearchives](https://www.facebook.com/aberdeencityandshirearchives)
- **Local Studies Department**, Aberdeenshire Libraries,  
Meldrum Meg Way, Oldmeldrum AB51 OGN Tel: 01651 871219

### To get more copies of this resource:

All of the pages in these booklets are printable through the North-east Folklore Archive website under the ‘Paper Treasure’ heading. This can be found at – **[www.nefa.net](http://www.nefa.net)**

### If we want to find out about the past we have to get used to unusual handwriting.

People in the past did not write the way we do now. As you go through this pack, you will notice that the pictures of original handwriting may look a bit strange, and perhaps be difficult to read.

You could try copying the writing, or making up your own document in the style of the old writing. As you read (and write) more, you will find that it becomes a lot easier to understand.



**When someone is tracing their family history, they start at the end (usually with themselves, in the present day) and work backwards.**

This family story is no exception.

We will be working backwards, from 1954, to find out why people in Huntly were so sorry that year, when a certain Mr. R.T. Sellar left the town.

**A local magazine, the "School Road", wrote at the time:**



**... the years as they come and go ring their changes. Some of these are *inevitable* and must be accepted, while others are not so easily understood by the mere outsider.**

**This truth applies to Huntly in many ways, not least in the history of families whose influence for good in past generations was so deep and strong as to be today almost inconceivable.**

**For example, who amongst us ... would ever have dreamed of the Capital of Strathbogie without its resident Robert Sellar?**

This article was not exaggerating, when it tells us that:

- The Sellar family was "an influence for good"
- that they had been in the town for many generations
- that "Robert Sellar" was a well-known name in the town and that people could not have dreamt of Huntly without a Robert Sellar in it

In this topic, using local sources, we will be finding out why the Sellar family was so important to Huntly. We will answer one question in particular:

**Who was this man?**



and we will discover some of Huntly's history along the way.

**Who was this man?**



## Who was the man in the photograph?

Does it give us any clues about

- his age?
- his personality?
- when he lived?

The magazine article we looked at on page 4 went on to say many things about this man:

*With Mr. R.H.N. Sellar, the third of the family to have control of the business, we come to the most outstanding Sellar of them all...*



*The figure of Mr Sellar still presents to those old enough to remember things as they were, say fifty years ago, a personality which constituted the model public servant.*

*While ever faithful to the claims of family and business, he gave liberally of his time and talents to matters of both Church and State, and was indeed a power for good in the community.*



*One of the absorbing interests of his life was education, and in this sphere as it affected the Gordon Schools, his influence was all-powerful.*

- ◆ For how many generations had “the business” been in the family at this point?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ◆ Work out when Mr R. H. N. Sellar was active in Huntly (remember that this article was written in 1954)
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- ◆ What were the four main roles in Mr. R. H. N. Sellar’s life?

## More about R.H.N. Sellar

From 1855 onwards, all births, marriages and deaths in Scotland were kept in public records. (Before this date, such details were usually recorded by the local Kirks; but not everyone was included).

Here is a copy of Sellar's birth certificate, which gives us more information about him and his family:

18 *60* BIRTHS in the *Parish of* *Hainly* in the *County of* *Highland*

No.	Surname, and Name (if given). Name, when given or altered in Baptism, or otherwise, after Registration of Birth.	When and Where Born, with Hour of Birth.	Sex.	Name, Surname, and Rank or Profession of Father.	Name, and Maiden Surname of Mother.	Signature, Qualification, and Residence of Informant, if out of the House in which the Birth occurred.	When and Where Registered, and Signature of Registrar.
43	<i>Cooper</i>	<i>1860</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>James</i>	<i>Cooper</i>	<i>James Cooper</i>	<i>1860</i>
	<i>William</i>	<i>March</i>		<i>Cooper</i>	<i>Cooper</i>	<i>Father</i>	<i>March 20<sup>th</sup></i>
		<i>Thurso</i>		<i>House</i>	<i>maiden</i>	<i>Mr. Pringle</i>	<i>at Thurso</i>
		<i>12.30 P.M.</i>		<i>Carpenter</i>	<i>maiden</i>		<i>John McDonald</i>
	<i>Church</i>		<i>Master</i>	<i>Cooper</i>		<i>Registrar</i>	
	<i>Street</i>						
	<i>Thurso</i>						
44	<i>Sellar</i>	<i>1860</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Robert</i>	<i>Margaret</i>	<i>Robert Sellar</i>	<i>1860</i>
	<i>Robert</i>	<i>March</i>		<i>Sellar</i>	<i>Hunter</i>	<i>Father</i>	<i>March 21<sup>st</sup></i>
	<i>Hunter</i>	<i>Fourth</i>		<i>Agricultural</i>	<i>Sellar</i>	<i>Present</i>	<i>at Thurso</i>
	<i>Nicol</i>	<i>12.30 noon</i>		<i>Blacksmith</i>	<i>maiden</i>		
	<i>Church</i>		<i>Master</i>	<i>maiden</i>		<i>John McDonald</i>	
	<i>Street</i>		<i>Master</i>	<i>Sellar</i>		<i>Registrar</i>	
	<i>Thurso</i>						
	<i>Thurso</i>	<i>1860</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>Robert</i>	<i>Charlotte</i>	<i>Robert Hunter</i>	<i>1860</i>



- ◆ What is Sellar's full name?  
R \_\_\_\_\_ H \_\_\_\_\_ N \_\_\_\_\_ Sellar
- ◆ What date was he born? (day, month and year)
- ◆ Where was he born?
- ◆ Who was his mother?
- ◆ What was his father's name and what was his occupation?

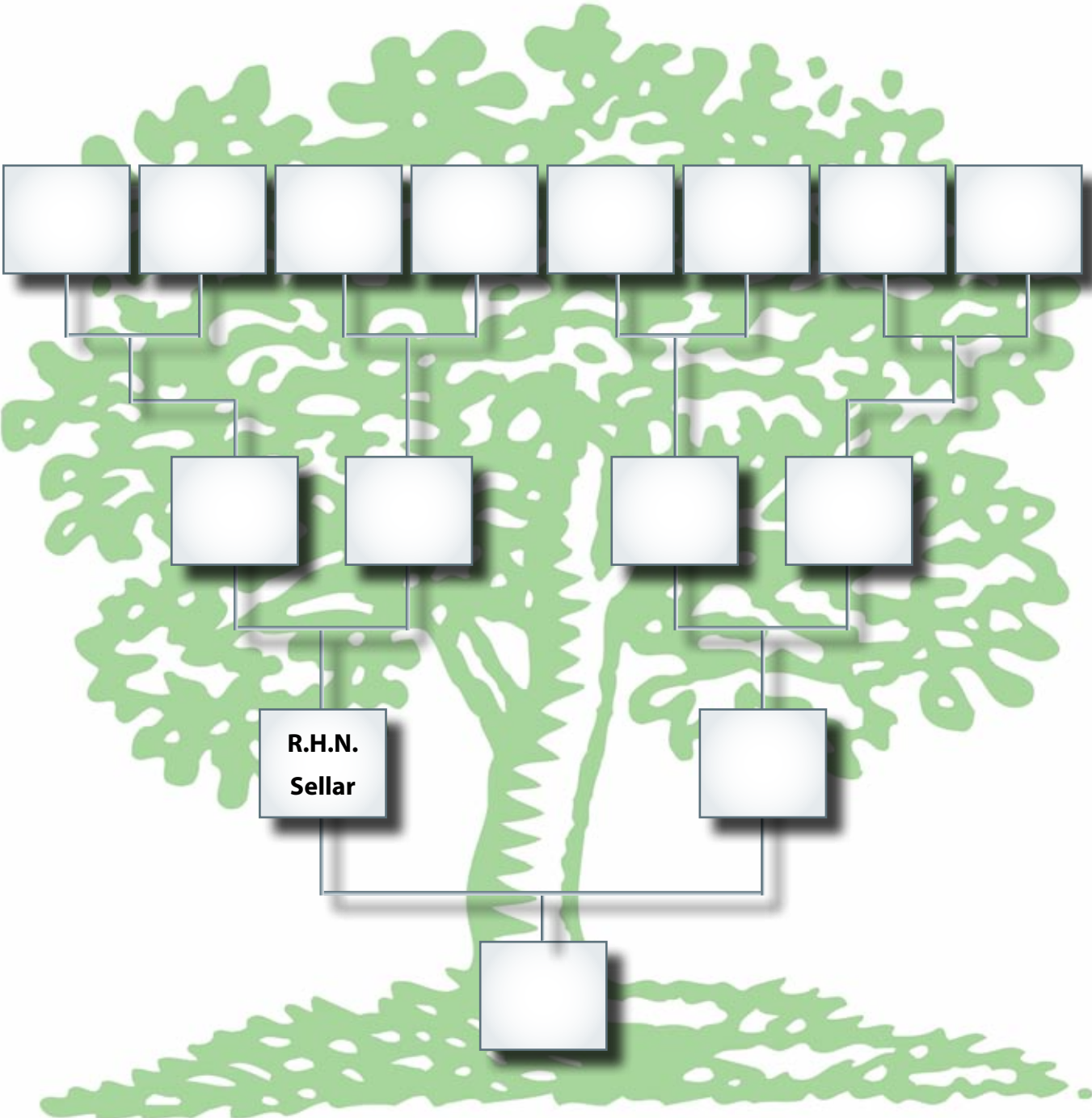
You now have information about 2 generations of the Sellar family.

Add the information to the Family Tree on the following page.

Note: men's names always go on the LEFT in the pairs of boxes

Who was this man?

# Family Tree of R.H.N. Sellar



Who was this man?

## What was Britain like in the year that Robert was born?

- Victoria had been Queen for 23 years
- Britain was at war with China
- Dickens was writing "Great Expectations"
- Tramcars, drawn by horses, started running in London
- Flush toilets were still unusual – the first public flushing toilet had opened in London, just 8 years before Robert was born
- and 4 years later, in 1864 - the first jelly babies were made



- ◆ Find some more facts about Victorian Britain at this time.



### Meanwhile, in Huntly, around the time of Robert's birth ...

- **from 1841:** houses were lit by gaslight, from the Huntly Gaslight Company
- **in 1854:** the railway arrived in Huntly, which improved communications and trade, helping the Sellar company to thrive
- **in 1862:** the Sellar company won a medal at the International Exhibition in London
- **in 1866:** the water works were established, helped by Robert's father. "The Huntly Express", writing about **his father** when he died, said:

*It was in connection with the introduction of water to the town that Mr Sellar scored his best point. To secure this great **boon** he spared neither time nor money, and we know that its ultimate achievement gave him great satisfaction.*



Now that you know the identity of the man in the photograph, he will tell you the rest of his story himself:



*The next time that I appear on public records, is in the Census of 1871.*



### Look at Card 1

The writing can be difficult to read on old documents, but have a good look, then answer these questions:



◆ What was my address in 1871?

◆ What were the names of my 4 brothers?

◆ What were the names of my 2 sisters?

◆ We had 2 people living in our house who were not related to us – what were their jobs?



In 1871, the census recorded that there were 3570 people living in Huntly.

◆ How many live there now?

◆ What is a census for?

◆ How often are they carried out?



*This is probably a good time to tell you about my father and my grandfather.*

In the 1844 census, my father (called Robert Sellar, like me) was living at 144 Church Street, Huntly. He was aged 20, and was a blacksmith.

His father was called George, and he was also a blacksmith, living at the same address. He was 45 years old and married to my grandmother Margaret. It was grandad George who started the Huntly business, when he moved to the town in 1822.

- Use the information above to fill in some more boxes on our family tree.

George Sellar and Son, Huntly, made agricultural implements. They moved from their old premises on the Square, to a much larger forge in Granary Street, in 1835.

My father learnt his trade alongside my grandfather. Then he went south for some time, to work with other firms and to improve his technical knowledge. When he returned to Huntly, he was made a partner in the family business.

The implements which they made included ploughs, harrows and grubbers. They made these from iron (older types had been made from wood). They were very successful, and they often had orders for a thousand ploughs stacking up. Several of these can be seen in the Aberdeenshire Farming Museum in Mintlaw.

They took their implements to shows all round Britain and won medals for them.

For example, "The Aberdeen Journal" in 1855 reported:

*A silver medal to Messrs Sellar & Sons, Huntly, for a double-furrow plough, No. 102, and also for general collection of ploughs combining strength and lightness with general excellence.*



- ◆ What effect did the Sellars' success have on employment in the town, do you think?



*Image of Sellar plough courtesy of Aberdeenshire Council*

**Who was this man?**

## The company of George Sellar and Son was always willing to improve, and to try new ventures.

My grandfather and my father were constantly revising and improving the design of the implements which they made. Read what the "Huntly Express" said about my father on Card 2.



- ◆ How would living in an agricultural district help my father to make good ploughs?

My father had the steel plates needed for his ploughs made in Sheffield, England, which was then known as "the city of steel".

- ◆ How were the steel plates transported to Huntly in Victorian times?

When I was 8 years old, my father had even started making Velocipedes!

These were an early type of bicycle, often called a "boneshaker" – probably because our roads in the 1860s were so bad, that the bicycle shook as it traveled along.



- ◆ Draw me as a boy, trying out a Velocipede made by my father's firm

Who was this man?



*When I was a boy, there were big changes at the family firm. By the time I was 9 years old, my father had installed steam power at the works in Granary Street.*



We know this from looking at old records called Valuation Rolls. Information gathered for the Rolls meant that businesses could be charged suitable rates (a bit like council tax now).

PARISH OF HUNTLY.												
No.	DESCRIPTION OF TENURE.	FURNISHED.	ORIGINAL.	TERRACE.			First payable after 10th June.	Fees duty or ground-rent, &c.	Fines, duties, &c. To whom payable.	YEARLY RATE ON VALUE.		OCCUPATION.
				Not under lease of 21 years, or upwards.	Under lease of 21 years, and not more than 99 years.	Under lease of 21 years, or upwards.				As assessed by the Assessor.	As altered on Appeal, if any.	
	Town of Huntly - Glebe.											
654	Old road, granary	Walter Scott, Glenbromach	Glenbromach Dist.								£7 10 0	
655	Old road, house	Do. Glenbromach	Silvery Do.								4 0 0	
656	Old road, workshop	Do. Do.	Miss McPhee								3 0 0	
657	Old road, two houses	Do. Do.	George James								3 3 0	
658	Hillockfield street, houses	Mrs. Isabella Swends	Proprietrix					£0 13 1	Duke of Richmond		6 9 0	
659	Regie street, houses and garden	Elizabeth Stoval	Proprietrix					0 5 11	Do.		10 0 0	
660	Church street, house, &c.	Robert Sellar, blacksmith	Proprietor					0 15 0	Do.		18 0 0	
661	Church street, office	Do.	Do.								3 10 0	
662	Granary street, house, works, and steam-power	Do. George Sellar & Son	Proprietors								30 0 0	

*Extract from 1869/70 Valuation Roll showing the Sellar firm's use of steam power*



Using steam to power machinery was first investigated by the Scottish engineer and inventor, James Watt. By 1776, steam engines designed by Watt were in commercial use, mainly in pumps. Steam was later used for driving all sorts of machinery and transport. This included the trains which called at Huntly station in Sellar's day, for example, and the machinery in the Granary Street works.

Watt's invention brought about the Industrial Revolution in Scotland and elsewhere. This was a time when work changed dramatically: many people still earned their living farming, but thousands more were now employed in the fast-growing cities, huge factories and heavy industries.



◆ Find out more about James Watt and the Industrial Revolution at [www.ltscotland.org.uk](http://www.ltscotland.org.uk)

◆ Name some of the big industries in Scotland at this time.

◆ What were some of the problems caused by heavy industry?





*In 1877 there was a survey of trades in Huntly, published in a booklet called Worrall's Trade Directory.*

Here are some of the jobs being done in Huntly when I was 17, which featured in the Directory.



**butchers**

**surgeons**

**newspaper publisher**

**drapers**

**solicitors**

**plumber**

**confectioner**

**tailors**

**dressmakers**

**grocers**

**milliners**

**watch and clock makers**

**innkeepers**

**registrar's office**

**photographer**

**spirit dealers**

**post office**

**fishmonger**

**ironmongers**

**blacksmiths (including George Sellar & Son)**

- ◆ Do a survey of trades in Huntly today. Include any of the jobs mentioned above. Are there any trades on your list which Robert Sellar would not have known? Which trades have now disappeared?



- ◆ Look at Card 3 and compare Victorian Huntly with the town today



**Who was this man?**



*My father was sadly missed in Huntly, when he died in 1884.*

He had done much for the town. He provided employment for many men and greatly expanded the company. He helped to bring running water to Huntly, from the nearby hills. He also ran the corps of Volunteer soldiers in the town, was on the School Board of the Gordon schools, and was a trustee of the Brander Institution (now a Cultural Centre). My father had built a large house on the slopes of Battlehill, called Aldie House, where we were living when he died.

An obituary about him said:

*Although many implements were improved and brought out by Mr. Sellar, it will always be in connection with his famous ploughs that his name will be best known.*

In 1881 we had taken a variety of our implements, including our “famous ploughs”, to Melbourne, Australia, where we were proud to receive this gold medal:



**The Huntly Express reported:**

*“We are glad to notice that our townsmen, Messrs. George Sellar & Son, whose ploughs have turned over many thousands of acres of virgin soil in the far-off colonies, have received a first class award for their exhibits at Melbourne...”*

*In breaking up the rough colonial soil a strong plough is essentially necessary, and this fact has not been overlooked by the firm*



- ◆ Why was the Australian earth called “virgin soil” and why was it difficult to plough?



- ◆ What does this article tell us about Sellar & Son's Enterprise Skills?

**Who was this man?**

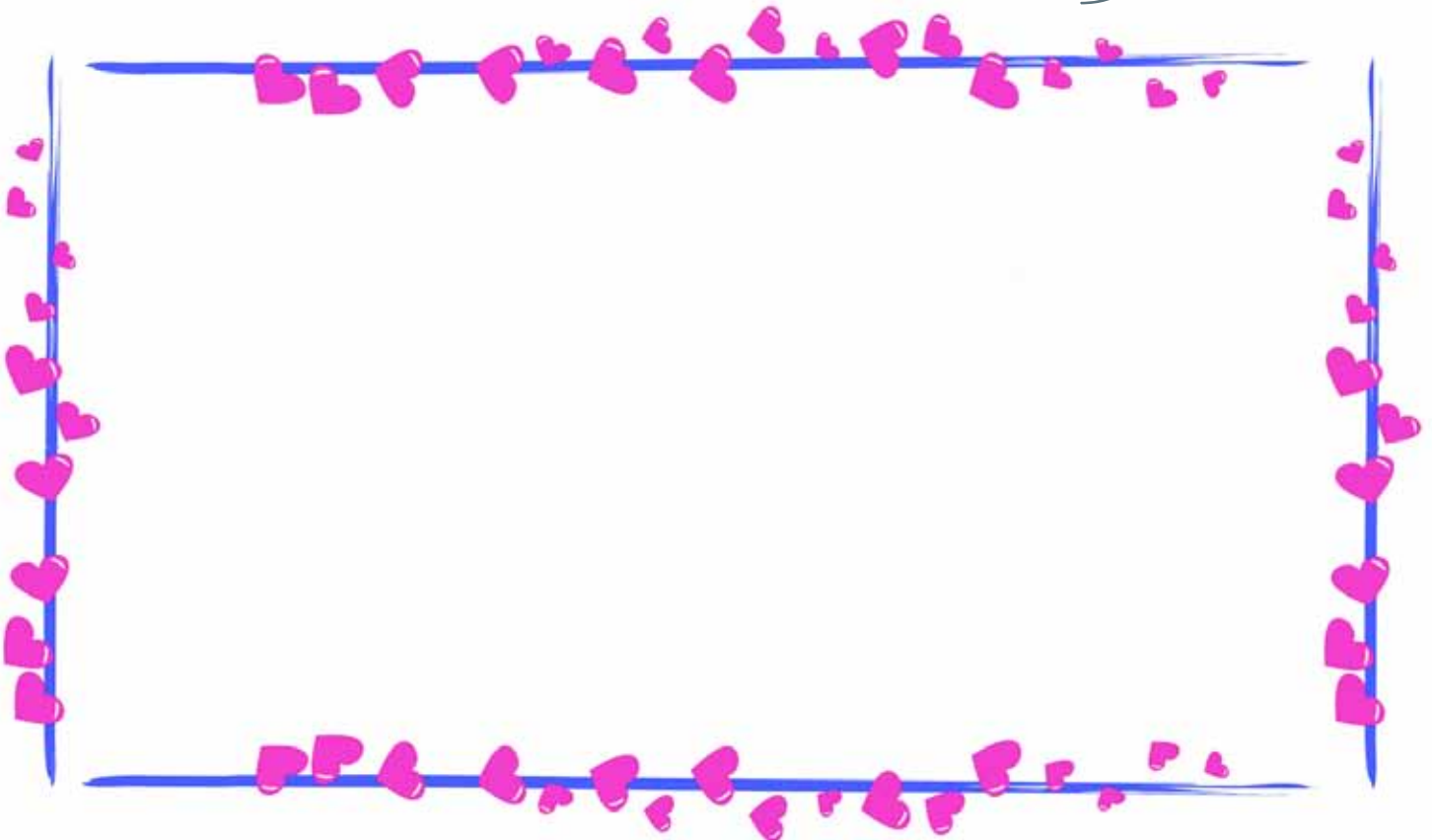


*In 1888, a happy event for me took place.*

**Look at my marriage certificate, on Card 4, and answer these questions:**



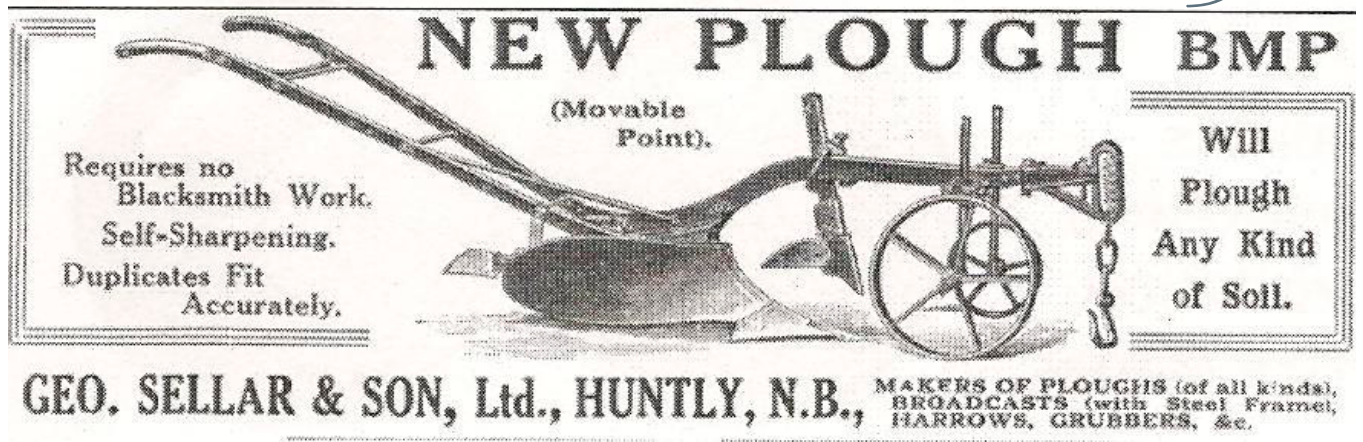
- ◆ What was the name of the woman I married?
- ◆ What date were we married?  
*(add these new facts to my family tree)*
- ◆ How old was she?
- ◆ We were married in her house. What was her address?
- ◆ What was my usual address?
- ◆ As you can see, my profession is listed as “Agricultural Implement Maker”. What was the profession of my bride's father, before he died?
- ◆ How do you imagine my wife and I first met? Make up a scenario here.



**Who was this man?**

*As you have seen, our products were famous at home and abroad.*

My father and my grandfather had made the company successful by constantly improving the implements which they made; and, in 1896, I invented a plough of my own, pictured here:



- ◆ Could you design an improved version of an everyday object? Perhaps you could use recycled materials to make it?

Many items which we take for granted today were invented around this time.

Make notes about:



- ◆ Marconi and the first wireless (radio), launched in 1895
- ◆ X rays, discovered in 1895
- ◆ The electric light bulb, invented in 1879

Who was this man?





## The firm George Sellar & Son \* continued to expand under Robert H. N. Sellar.

(\*what should the company, perhaps, have been called at this time?)

Under his management, part of the business relocated to larger works in Alloa.

- ◆ Find this town on a map of Scotland. Can you suggest why Robert Sellar chose it for the new branch of his company?

Robert H. N. Sellar died in 1918. His life was summed up in the local magazine, *The School Road*, like this:

*“When death overtook Mr. Sellar in 1918, at the early age of 59, many tributes were forthcoming. From press and pulpit, and many public bodies came glowing estimates of his personality, his life and work ...*

*In themselves these tributes tell an eloquent story, covering his work for education (he was Chairman of the Gordon Schools Board); for the Church (he was for some thirty years general treasurer of Strathbogie Church); his work on the County Council (he was vice-convenor of the County of Aberdeen); his culture and personal charm.”*

His son, Robert T. Sellar, now became head of the company. Like his ancestors before him, this Robert Sellar made a positive difference to Huntly. In particular, as Captain of the Huntly Golf Club, he did much to improve the course and to encourage young people to become members.

Robert T. Sellar eventually moved the company to Aberdeen and went to live there himself; which brings us back to the start of this family history, on page 1.

**Robert T. Sellar is the name, then, for the last box of the family tree.** This leaves many gaps, but they have been researched and the information has been provided for you, on **Card 5**.

(Note: The Sellar family tree continued, of course; but for our purposes, the history of the company ends at this point).

- ◆ Fill in the gaps on the Sellar family tree.

**Looking at the main points on this page again, do you now have a clearer understanding that:**

- The Sellar family was “an influence for good”
- they had been in the town for many generations
- “Robert Sellar” was a well-known name in the town and that people could not have dreamt of Huntly without a Robert Sellar in it?

# Paper Treasure and Learning Across the Curriculum

## Literacy Across Learning

- The projects ensure that pupils *encounter a wide range of different types of text in different media*
- the texts frequently contain specialised words which *extend and enrich vocabulary*
- pupils have the opportunity to *make notes rather than take notes*
- the project materials recognise the 3 organisers – *listening/talking, reading, and writing* – and provide a range of activities for each

In particular, the projects promote the following experiences and outcomes:

### Creating texts:

*When listening and talking with others for different purposes, I can:*

- *share information, experiences and opinions*
- *explain processes and ideas*
- *identify issues raised and summarise main points or findings*

**Lit 2-09a**

### Understanding, analysing and evaluating:

- *To show my understanding across different areas of learning, I can identify and consider the purpose and main ideas of a text and use supporting detail*

**Lit 2-16a**

### Tools for writing:

- *throughout the writing process, I can check that my writing makes sense and meets its purpose*

**Lit 2-23a**

## Numeracy Across Learning

The projects recognise that numeracy is a life skill and incorporate tasks which develop and reinforce numeracy skills, and specifically relate to the organiser *number and number processes*.

The materials include practice in reading information from charts.

They contain numeracy concepts and skills applied in a different, relevant context.

The main experiences and outcomes addressed are:

*My learning in numeracy enables me to:*

- *develop essential numeracy skills which will allow me to participate fully in society*
- *apply skills and understanding creatively and logically to solve problems, within a variety of contexts*

## Health and Wellbeing Across Learning

*Paper Treasure* is an example of partnership working: it draws on the expertise of outside agencies and resources, to provide an engaging context for learning.

The projects maximise the contributions of the wider community (Archives, Registrars and Libraries).

They use learning and teaching methodologies which promote effective learning: that is, they encourage self-motivated learning at the pupil's own pace and the materials include activities appropriate to different learning styles.

Pupils are supported and guided in their learning throughout the workbooks and some pupils will be able to work through them independently.

The subjects lend themselves to transition projects which can provide coherence and progression, in that they present complex and multi-faceted subjects, which lend themselves to being "re-visited" at deeper levels as pupils progress.

# Social Studies and Paper Treasure

The projects encourage learning about other people and their values, in different times and circumstances.

They illustrate some of the historical, social and political changes that have shaped Scotland.

Paper Treasure projects help pupils towards specific outcomes and experiences; namely to:

- develop their understanding of the history, heritage and culture of Scotland, and an appreciation of their local and national heritage within the world
- broaden their understanding of the world by learning about human activities and achievements in the past and present
- explore and evaluate different types of sources and evidence
- learn how to locate, explore and link periods, people and events in time and place
- establish firm foundations for lifelong learning and for further specialised study and careers

The projects are cross-curricular, with emphasis on the organiser People, Past events and Societies. They use a mix of approaches, including:

- use of relevant contexts and experiences
- an interdisciplinary learning experience
- opportunities for discussion (listening and talking)

Paper Treasure topics help pupils develop core skills through:

- exploring and evaluating different types of sources and evidence
- developing the capacity for critical thinking through accessing, analysing and using information from a wide variety of sources
- developing reasoned and justified points of view
- using maps in a variety of contexts
- developing an awareness of sequence and chronology

In particular, pupils are supported in achieving the following outcomes:

- I can use primary and secondary sources selectively to research events in the past **SOC 3-01a**
- I can interpret historical evidence from a range of periods to help to build a picture of Scotland's heritage and my sense of chronology **SOC 2-02a**
- I can investigate a Scottish historical theme to discover how past events or the actions of individuals or groups have shaped Scottish society **SOC 2-03a**
- I can discuss why people and events from a particular time in the past were important, placing them within a historical sequence **SOC 2-06a**

*Thanks to:*

- *Mr George Lovie of Huntly for his information on the Sellar Company;*
- *Aberdeenshire Museums for their images of a Sellar plough and the Sellar nameplate;*
- *Trish McLellan's P5/6/7 pupils at Glass School, for piloting this project.*

*This booklet is based on the following sources:*

- *Census Records from Aberdeenshire Council Registrars;*
- *Valuation Rolls from Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire Archives;*
- *old editions of The Aberdeen Journal from Aberdeenshire Libraries (Local Studies Department).*

*To find out more on this topic, contact:*

- *The Aberdeen and North East Scotland Family History Society (tel. 01224 646323)*
- *Aberdeenshire Farming Museum at Aden Country Park (tel. 01771 624590)*

*You can see ploughs made by Sellar & Son at the museums' HQ in Mintlaw and at Aberdeenshire Farming Museum, Aden Country Park.*

*Please phone 01771 622807 for information.*



Aberdeen City & Aberdeenshire  

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A R C H I V E S

**Aberdeenshire**   
COUNCIL

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