

# Kenneth Mackenzie and Coaching Days in Dingwall, 1810-53

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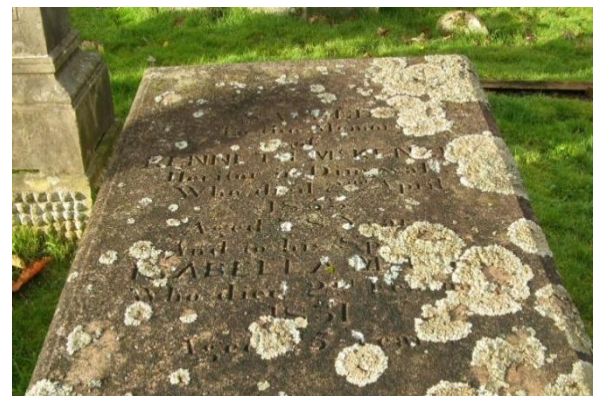


Part of Clark's 1824 Painting of Dingwall © Dingwall Museum

## Kenneth & Isabella (McNeil) McKenzie

St Clements Churchyard in Dingwall contains many gravestones of men and women who are now largely forgotten. One such weathered tombstone carries the text:

Sacred to the memory of KENNETH MCKENZIE heritor in Dingwall, who died 2nd April 1853 aged 78 years, and to his spouse ISABELLA McNEIL who died 2nd February 1831 aged 55 years.



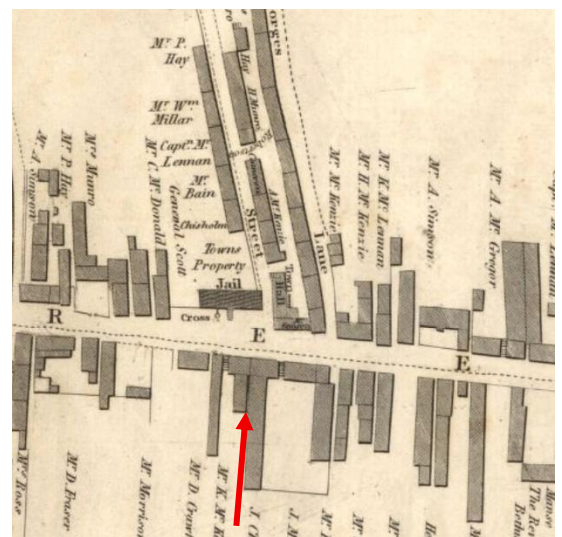
Mackenzie Gravestone – St Clement's Churchyard

Although the engraving gives no clue as to who these people were, their story in fact illuminates important aspects of Dingwall's history in the first half of the nineteenth century.

## From Change House to Coaching-Inn

Kenneth was born into a crofting family at Kinnairdie, Dingwall in 1775. He became a stonemason and married a local girl, Isabel MacNeil, in 1800. When Isabel's father died around 1810, Kenneth and Isabel inherited his small business known as a 'change'. It operated down a lane opposite the town jail and 'mercat cross' – see the red arrow on the map to the right - where coaches set down and picked up mail and passengers. It was essentially a stabling business where horses were changed for the onward journey.

Kenneth was ambitious. He set about enlarging the property, creating a cluster of buildings that served as a coaching inn. It opened as 'Mackenzie's Change House', but by 1820 was known as 'The Head Inn'. It was the town's first such establishment.



Section of Map of Dingwall  
© National Library of Scotland

*The Head Inn (now Inchvannie Court)*

© Forbes Munro



## The Coaching Trade

It was a profitable business. Thanks to Thomas Telford's work on roads and bridges around Dingwall, transport and communications had improved considerably. A coaching trade based in Inverness now included Ross-shire in its operations. By 1820, small mail coaches came through Dingwall every day, on their way to 'post towns' to the north, west and south. These coaches were privately-owned but operated with contracts from the post office to carry the mail on fixed timetables.



In 1826, the principal landowners of Easter Ross invested in a 'Patent Mail Coach' large enough to carry eight passengers. It needed four horses to pull it from Inverness through Dingwall to Invergordon and Tain.

There was also an independent concern called the 'Caberfeidh Coach' which ran a daily service in the summer months between Inverness, Dingwall, and Strathpeffer - where the 'mineral waters' were attracting a small but growing number of tourists.

Kenneth Mackenzie's 'Head Inn' was Dingwall's communications hub - with coaches arriving and departing regularly. The inn provided fresh horses, booked tickets, managed luggage, and forwarded items. It offered passengers meals and refreshments, overnight accommodation, and an opportunity to rent small carriages or horses to complete their journeys. It also served as a convivial business and social centre for the town. Its public room hosted events such as property auctions and bankruptcy proceedings.

Kenneth used his growing profits and wider social recognition to promote the education and careers of his children. William, the oldest son, studied at Aberdeen University and became a military surgeon in India, while Kenneth, his younger brother, became private secretary to James Stewart-Mackenzie of Brahan when the latter was appointed Governor of Ceylon in 1837.

## The Rise of Competition

By 1838 Kenneth was a widower, and had leased a small farm at Inchvannie, between Dingwall and Strathpeffer. He may have planned to develop an inn on the site but, instead, with new opportunities arising in Dingwall, he built a family residence there.

Before moving to Inchvannie, Kenneth leased 'The Head Inn' to a local man, John Mackenzie (no relation), who renamed it 'The Royal Hotel'. In 1840, however, the two Mackenzies became business rivals when Kenneth, who still owned the 'Royal', acquired another building, which he ran as 'Mackenzie's Caledonian Hotel'.



*Inchvannie House © Forbes Munro*



*The Caledonian Hotel © Forbes Munro*

The new premises fronted directly onto the High Street, but it needed extensive renovation and expansion. When this was completed, around 1845, the Caledonian had thirteen bedrooms, a large public room, gas and running water to the kitchen, and a coach-house and stables to the rear.

The coaching trade followed Kenneth to the Caledonian Hotel. In 1842 a 'Duke of Wellington' coach started up in competition with the older 'Caberfeidh'. The 'Duke' offered a larger, and presumably more comfortable, vehicle linking Inverness, Dingwall and Strathpeffer via the Kessock Ferry and the Black Isle.

John Mackenzie responded to these developments by abandoning the 'Royal Hotel' and leasing the former National Bank building at the east end of the High Street. He renamed it 'The National Hotel' in 1841.

The rivalry between the two establishments, and related coach lines, continued despite a worsening economy and rising poverty in the town. A new tenant of 'The Royal' (formerly the 'Head') went bankrupt within a year, and its buildings were sold for other purposes.



**INCREASED ACCOMMODATION.**

**INVERNESS TO STRATHPEFFER.**

**THE PUBLIC** is respectfully informed, that a **NEW COACH, "THE DUKE OF WELLINGTON,"** intended to supersede the 'Old Caberfeigh Coach,' will be started betwixt Inverness and Strathpeffer, viz Kessock Ferry and Dingwall, on Tuesday first, the 21<sup>st</sup> current, leaving

**GRANT'S CALEDONIAN HOTEL, INVERNESS,**  
every afternoon at Three o'clock, for the  
**STRATH; AND MALCOLM'S HOTEL,**  
every lawful morning at Seven o'clock; and  
**MACKENZIE'S CALEDONIAN HOTEL,**  
**DINGWALL,**  
at Nine o'clock, for Inverness.

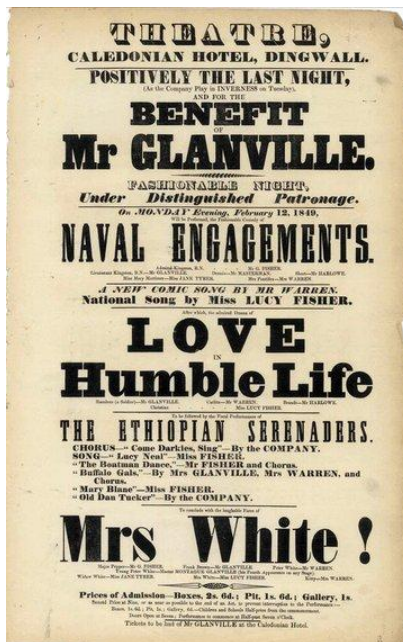
Everything will be done by the Proprietors to insure **COMFORT and SAFETY,** and they look with confidence for the patronage and support of the Public.

Fares from Inverness to Strathpeffer—**OUTSIDE, 4s. 6d.,**  
**INSIDE, 6s. 6d.**

**ONE COACHMAN—NO GUARD.**  
**GRANT, MACKENZIE, MALCOLM, & Co.**  
Royal Mail, and General Coach Office,  
Caledonian Hotel.

© Inverness Courier

## The Successors



Theatre Bill © Am Bailie

By 1845-6 both parties had had enough. Kenneth leased the Caledonian Hotel to an Inverness businessman, Donald MacPherson. He in turn brought new ideas such as using the Caledonian's large public room to host performances by visiting theatre groups.

Meanwhile, John Mackenzie passed the National to an Inverness wine-merchant named James Robertson. He renamed it the 'Robertson's National Hotel' and in 1847 started up 'The Tulloch Castle Omnibus' to Strathpeffer in the summer. The Caledonian responded by introducing the 'Brahan Castle' coach - which could convey 21 passengers to and from the Spa resort. The rivalry between Dingwall's two hotels continued ...



Robertson's National Hotel

© Dingwall Museum

Victory finally went to 'The National'. In 1852, with his lease about to run out and apparently short of money, MacPherson took Kenneth to court in Edinburgh over alleged debts. The jury found in Kenneth's favour, and by the end of the year he was once again advertising the prospective lease of 'The Caledonian'. He died before completing the transaction.

### End Note

Kenneth Mackenzie spent most of his latter years at Inchvannie, cared for by his unmarried daughter, Jessie (who would in turn become a 'well-kent' figure in the Dingwall district). Although not resident in Dingwall, his ownership of the Caledonian Hotel rendered him a heritor of the parish. His pride in this status was in turn reflected on his tombstone. 'Heritor in Dingwall', however, was a more modest honour than the knighthoods that would be awarded later to his oldest son and one of his grandsons.

But the tale of Kenneth and Isabella Mackenzie's descendants is a story for another day.

*Sources: The Inverness Courier and The Inverness Journal and Northern Advertiser, 1820-53; Scotland's People: old parish records and national censuses.*

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