

# The Names Behind The Streets: Abercromby Drive

A new series investigating the origin of our street names

BY ALLAN BROWN

A few years ago it was “Abercrombie” at one end of the drive, and “Abercromby” at the other. And even as this is being typed, my word processor keeps telling me it should be “Abercrombie”. Which is correct? General agreement is for “Abercromby”, but the “ie” is still occasionally used.

Abercromby Drive runs from Kenilworth Road at the top of Coneyhill Road north to the foot of Claremont Drive, before taking a sharp 90 degree turn. It then runs west as far as the junction with Sunnyslaw Road. The road was built on the Airthrey Estate, the owner at the time being Lord Robert Abercromby.

Airthrey Estate had been around for many years, from at least the reign of King David I in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Originally it included “Wester Town of Airthrey”, which we now know as Westerton, with Westerton House and the surrounding modern houses. It was split in 1682 by John Hope (of Hopetoun), the then owner, and Westerton was conveyed to a James Henderson.

The Abercromby family had wealth, power and position. The father, George, was a successful advocate, who made sure his five children had the best education money could buy. Two sons, Ralph and Robert, were to make names for themselves in the army.

The eldest son, Ralph, was as famous in his day as Nelson and Wellington, a national hero revered throughout the length and breadth of Britain. So revered in fact that on his death a memorial to him was raised in St Paul’s London. His military career was extensive and included service in Ireland, Europe and the West Indies.

And another memory of Ralph is here in Bridge of Allan. At the end of Chalton Road at its junction with Well Road you can see a house called Aboukir Villa. The battle at Aboukir (Abu Qir) in Egypt in 1801 is where he triumphed and met his death.

At the mature age of 66 he was given the task of expelling the French from Egypt. After several delays he finally sailed from Malta with a fleet of 175 ships and 15,000 men. Maps were either non-existent or hopelessly inaccurate, with the only documented landing place being the well-defended harbour at Aboukir Bay.

Two officers sent ashore to “recce” the landing were unfortunately caught by the French and the fleet was spotted by the enemy.



Lt General Sir Ralph Abercromby KB

Despite this, the planned attack was scheduled for 2 am on March 8<sup>th</sup> 1801. Each man had 60 rounds, two spare flints, water, a camp-kettle and a blanket. Because of delays it was in 9 am before the troops landed ashore in full daylight, to face brutal fire from Aboukir Castle. By nightfall however the whole force was ashore, with only 700 casualties out of 15,300 men.

The battle raged for the next few days, with charge and counter-charge. Ralph was short-sighted (a family affliction), and during a French attack found himself on horseback amongst the enemy. He was led away by British soldier, but a Frenchman, probably recognising the prize, gave chase.

The French soldier got close enough to thrust his sword at Abercromby. By a miracle it passed harmlessly between his arm and chest, and an obliging soldier of the 42<sup>nd</sup> Regiment (the Black Watch) shot the Frenchman dead.

Ralph was eventually wounded, receiving a musket ball in the thigh, but fought on until the battle was won. He was taken to his ship, where efforts to remove the musket ball were unsuccessful. Battle field injuries in those days as often as not were terminal, antiseptics and anaesthetics being unknown. His age too was against him. He died from blood poisoning on March 28<sup>th</sup> 1801 and was buried with full military honours in Valetta, Malta.

In gratitude Parliament commissioned the monument in St Paul’s Cathedral and granted pensions of £2000 a year (worth approximately £100,000 today) to his widow and two sons. The king created her Baroness Abercromby of Tullibody and Aboukir.

Ralph’s life story, easily worthy of a film script, is described in the book *Four Notable Scots* by T. Crouther Gordon, available from Bridge of Allan Library. The internet also yields much more on his life and times.

Back in Bridge of Allan things were a shade quieter. Robert Abercromby, Ralph’s brother, took ownership of Airthrey in 1798. He too had had a distinguished army career, being Governor of Edinburgh Castle and Commander-in-Chief of the forces in India. Like Ralph he was at one time a Member of Parliament.

Airthrey Mine had closed in 1807, and the supply of water, long believed by the locals to have curative powers, was cut off. Robert was persuaded to have the water tested, and Dr Thomson, Professor of Chemistry at Glasgow University, gave it the green light.

The water was made available to the public, thanks to Robert, and was a huge commercial success. The village became one of the most popular spas in Britain. Pressure to house visitors resulted in land being acquired for housing, and so in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Abercromby Drive was born.

The Abercromby family name died out in 1925 but lives on in this quiet and peaceful street. Spare a thought for Ralph and his men on Abu Qir beach facing more violent times.

TO THE MEMORY  
OF RALPH ABERCROMBIE, A NATIVE OF SCOTLAND,  
KNIGHT OF THE ORDER OF THE BATH;  
A MAN, HIGHLY DISTINGUISHED FOR HIS PROBITY,  
MAGNANIMITY, CONSUMMATE COURAGE  
AND MILITARY TALENTS.  
IN THE SEVERAL WARS OF AMERICA AND HOLLAND:  
WHOM GEORGE THE THIRD, KING OF  
GREAT BRITAIN, WITH THE UNIVERSAL  
APPROBATION OF HIS SUBJECTS,  
APPOINTED COMMANDER IN CHIEF  
OF THE BRITISH ARMY IN THE MEDITERRANEAN SEA  
IN WHICH CAPACITY,  
COMPLETING AN EXPEDITION TO EGYPT, HE,  
ALTHOUGH EVERY WHERE OPPOSED BY THE  
BRAVEST  
OF THE TROOPS OF FRANCE,  
IN ONE FORCIBLE ATTACK GAINED AND KEPT  
POSSESSION OF THE WHOLE EGYPTIAN COAST;  
AND IN HIS PROGRESS DEFEATED AND  
SUPPRESSED  
THEIR ENDEAVOURS TO OPPOSE HIM:  
UNTIL, THE BRITISH AND FRENCH ARMIES  
ENGAGING IN A SANGUINARY CONFLICT NEAR  
ALEXANDRIA,  
ON THE 21ST DAY OF MARCH, IN THE YEAR 1801,  
WHILST FIGHTING IN THE FOREMOST RANKS,  
AND IN THE VERY BOSOM OF VICTORY,  
HE RECEIVED A MORTAL WOUND  
IN HIS THIGH;  
OF WHICH, TO THE KEEN REGRET OF ALL WHO  
KNEW HIM, HE EXPIRED.

Ralph’s epitaph at Valetta, Malta: this time it’s “Abercrombie”