

David Gilkison
1747-1810
& Captain William Gilkison

David Gilkison was a partner in Gilkison, Thomson & Co., a small shipbuilding company in Irvine. He was born on 8th October 1747 and died in 1810; in 1775 he married Mary Walker (1757-1822).

Messrs Gilkison, Thomson & Co. launched their biggest ship ever in 1814, the 309-ton 'Montreal'. In 1819, they built a 169-ton brigantine 'Jean' for Alexander Allan (1780-1854), the Saltcoats shipmaster. He was a first cousin of Robert Burns, and of John Galt, and of the John Allan who helped raise Edgar Allan Poe. One of the original associate owners of the 'Jean', named after Allan's wife, was a James Gilkison, shipmaster, possibly a son of David. In May 1819, there appeared in 'The Glasgow Herald' a notice to shippers and passengers for Canada stating that the brig 'Jean' would clear from Greenock for Quebec on June 1 and proceed to sea at the first favourable opportunity thereafter. Allan was an adept trader and soon bought out his associates, so the 'Jean' became the first of the Allan transatlantic shipping line. During the Napoleonic Wars, the "Jean" also held the record for the fastest crossing between the Firth of Clyde and Quebec City. [McJannet records that "after 'Jean' came the 'Favourite', followed by the full-rigged ship 'Canada', and a regular seasonal service was inaugurated", but does not mention that the 'Favourite' was Montreal-built, and the 'Canada' Greenock-built.]

All his sons were ship captains. The youngest was John Gilkison, captain of the 'Fortune', sailing from Port Glasgow to Bombay (now Mumbai) in the late 1820s; there he would have heard of, and probably visited, the Cave Temples of Elora; in 1831 he transferred to a new three-masted barque, naming her the 'Elora', and continued his voyages to Bombay. When William (see next paragraph) needed a name for his new settlement in Canada, he named it after his "brother Johnny's ship".

David's son William was a sailor, adventurer, land speculator, and founder of Elora, on the Grand River in Upper Ontario. As a young man, he was a merchant seaman and was captured by the French during the Napoleonic Wars. After escaping, he emigrated to America, taking with him letters of reference to John Jacob Astor, founder of the Great North West Company. Astor gave him command of a schooner on Lake Erie and he sailed her until 1803, when he married Isabella Grant, the daughter of Alexander Grant, commodore of the Great Lakes in 1777 and Administrator of Upper Canada in 1805. After his marriage, he worked with his father-in-law. Gilkison served in the War of 1812 and was at the Battle of Crysler's Farm (1813). After the war, he returned to Scotland, in 1815, to educate his six children. The air must have suited him because his other five children were born there. His wife died in 1828. In 1832, he decided to join his children, some of whom had returned to Canada, and bought a large lot on the west bank of the Grand River in what is now West Brant in the City of Brantford. There Capt Gilkison established a farm, and called it Oak Bank after his Glasgow home; the farmhouse still stands, as

71 Gilkison St. He then bought about 14,000 acres of land in Nichol Township and commissioned Lewis Burwell to lay out a town, naming it Elora, at the Falls of the Grand. Unfortunately, he never saw the results, because he died suddenly on 23rd April 1833.

William was a cousin of John Galt, who founded Guelph only a few years earlier, in 1827. It is probable that it was Gilkison who told Galt about Upper Canada. Also in the 1820s, Gilkison's brother-in-law's brother William Dickson was founding the town which would later be named Galt. The Irvine Creek joins Grand River at Elora. Another native of Irvine, Adam Ferrie (b. 1777), founded Doon village, now part of Kitchener. Gilkison's eldest son, Jasper T. Gilkison, was the principal promoter of the Great Western Railway of Canada in 1853, running between Toronto and Niagara.

Strawhorn ('History of Irvine' p.120) mis-spells the family name as 'Gilkinson', though the 1819 Wood map of Irvine clearly shows the shipbuilding firm as Gilkison, Thomson & Co., as well as a Mr Gilkison living on High St and a Widow Gilkison on Fullarton St. [Wikipedia, quoting from Appleton's 1974 Allan Line History, has Gilkison, yet clydesite.co.uk, 'quoting from original records', has Gilkinson.] 'Elora' by John Connon (1930) is the source of most of the detail relating to William and family in Ontario. A website, Heather & Roy's driving trips in south-west Ontario, alerted us to the Canadian connections.

To be checked: a building where Shorts is today, on the High St., which had the roof outline of an upturned boat, and had a Gilkison connection, demolished in 1890. (source: SKG)