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From the Old Histories of Dundee



HISTORY OF DUNDEE COMPARATIVE STATE OF DUNDEE IN THE YEARS 1746 AND 1799

*Contained in Two Letters, signed 'Philetas,' addressed to the
Editor of the 'Dundee Magazine and Journal of the
Times; for 1799*

"Tho' gone the actors, and tho' old the date, What I have seen permit me to relate."

Tempora mutantur, Mr. Editor, since I first studied my hornbook (now full half a century ago) under good Dame Gilchrist: The Town of Dundee, I may say, then lay in the compass of a nut-shell. At the close of a civil war and rebellion, Scotland was sadly torn and divided, and in a state of lamentable distraction and idleness. Manufacturers (in so far as they were advanced) were almost wholly at a stand; men were in a high fever of political delirium; property was nowhere safe (my father's black gelding was taken out of his stable by adventurers); and the credit of the country was naturally suspected and limited. From repeated insurrections, the happy effects of the Union with England had not yet been felt, and its consequent blessings were of course inexperienced and unknown.

Inhabitants.—The inhabitants at that period did not exceed six thousand. The living were warned to bed by the sound of the bagpipe and the toll of the curfew, and the dead were *carried* to their graves by the tinkling of a hand-bell.

Extent.—The extension of the town was not so far westward as present Tay Street, excepting a straggling brewseat and malt-loft in the Nethergate, and a house or two in the Overgate. It was bounded by the *Houff* or burying-ground *northwards*, and the present Sugar-house terminated it to the *east*. Besides this there were no buildings so far as Blackness, *westwards*; Craigie (except Wallace of Craigie), *eastwards*; and Dudhope, *northward*. Black's Garden, Chapelshade, and Black's Croft unenclosed, and in corn cropping. The last was let at an annual rent of fifty shillings sterling only. The *Hill-town* or *Rotten-Raw* always formed an ancient barony of itself. The West Shore buildings were bounded on the south by Mr. Smith's house, the lower part of which is now (1799) possessed by Mr. Thomas Neish. The tide flowed up to it, and frequently up to the present Fish-market. My worthy cousin Grizzel's country-house or villa was then at the *West Port*, on the south side, and not fifty yards from the present Mr. Pyott, the wheelwright's shop. The situation was prescribed to her by her physicians for the salubrity of the air, but above all for the singular advantage of the precious and wholesome flavour arising from a cow-byre below stairs.

Buildings.—The buildings were generally of wood. There were not then above half-a-dozen of stone houses in the High Street or market-place. Large vacant areas were lying in a state of nastiness and puddle in the most central parts of the town, particularly in the Thorter-row and Burial-wynd; and premiums for building had been given by the Magistrates. The town, in police, inhabitants, &c., had been above a hundred years stationary! A couple of dirty houses called inns, or public-houses, were situated in two narrow and dreary lanes, and not so good as a modern alehouse. These were comfortable caravanseras for the repose of the wearied traveller! and, alas! *Bonny Dundee* had none better.



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Shipping.—The shipping (comparatively with the present) were extremely limited; and these were regularly unrigged and laid up for the winter, and there was no voyaging after October. The annual port revenue did not amount to above twelve hundred pounds sterling; and small vessels were then built close to the west gable of the present Sailors' Hall.

Vivres.—Vivres (especially vegetables) were scarce, and could only be procured fresh on a Friday, and that only in summer and autumn, there being then no winter feeding. Onions, leeks, carrots, common kail, and cabbage formed the verdant catalogue. (John, Lord Gray was the first who introduced potatoes for sale from the field in 1753.) They were indeed cheap, and about one-fourth of the present price. Beef one penny halfpenny per pound; a hen fourpence; and eggs three halfpence per dozen. Spirits had not then shed their baneful effects in general, over the constitution and conduct of the lower orders. A draught of malt beverage formed all the debauch of the labourer and mechanic, and this was then so powerful as to send them reeling and happy home. Butchers' carrion (for such things *were*, and perhaps now *are*) was then seized and hung up *in terror-em* at the market-cross, and afterwards thrown into the river. Flour was unmixed, and milk was unadulterated. A choppen of ale was sold for a halfpenny, a goose for one shilling, a decent roasting pig for eightpence, and a Scotch pint of claret for four or five shillings.

Churches.—According to Dr. Small there were then only two established churches; one of them well frequented and a second one but indifferently. There was, however, a third one (the Cross Church) which was appropriated solely as a repository for hay for his Majesty's dragoon horses. So comparatively small was the population of that period.

Shop Rents.—The highest rent in the High Street did not exceed three pounds sterling; and from the shops in general little was to be procured. The shopkeeper locked his door at one o'clock *p.m.*, and retired to feed; his customers (if he was of any note) were forced to wait his bellyfilling, and there was no resource. Some of these shops contained a motley assortment of train oil and salt, candles and molasses, black soap and sugar, all crowded into less than a square of three or four yards.

Lodgings.—In those days our predecessors were easily accommodated. No houses fetched above ten pounds of rent, and few half that sum. A lodging, indeed, of five rooms, low kitchen, garret, shop, a couple of gardens, and pigeon-house and stable, in the High Street, was let, in 1753, at £14 rent only. It was thought very dear, and every wiseacre wondered. The shop alone would now rent at £25 a year. *Withdrawing-rooms* were not known, at least not used. The man and wife lived and soaked lovingly in their bed-chamber, and the dining-room was reserved as a cold bath for the first unfortunate visitor. *The father parent* of the middling and lower classes was then little known to his children: he breakfasted at the alehouse; they went to school and returned before he went to dinner; they were in bed, and fast asleep before he returned in the evening from his club, his twopenny, and his tobacco. Thus, unless on a Sunday, he saw no more of his children than the man in the moon.

Merchants.—The venerable character of merchant was then in the background. The respectable place they now hold in society was not then filled up. *The toe of the peasant lad not then come so near the heel of the courtier as to gall his kibe.* The landed gentry, who (*like the*



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woodcocks) did us the honour to pass the winter amongst us, strutted it about on tiptoe, and in sullen *hauteur*. The feudal manners then scorched us, and reigned uncontrolled.

Floating wealth had not then balanced her current account with *landed insolence*, and the simple cottager, drudging tenant, and useful mechanic were in a total state of poverty, servility, and depression.

Carriages.—One single one-horse chaise supplied the demands and travels of the whole inhabitants. Even *John Darnel*, the *solitary* saddler, who repaired it daily before a journey, grew pert and saucy, from self-consequence and importance. John scrupled not tauntingly to desire his customers who were displeased, to employ his neighbour. John should have had his ears cropt.

Carts and Carters.—Robert Black in the Wellgate was the only carter in town.

Roads.—Turnpike roads were then unknown. The roads were bad, narrow, and unshapely. A journey to Edinburgh was a serious business for a thinking person. It was a route of some days, with the addition of terror from rascally boatmen and lame hack-horses. A man generally made his bequest before he undertook it.

Meadows.—The meadows or greens were then unenclosed, wet and dirty, and the health of the inhabitants was much infected from stagnant pools there.

Post.—The post arrived them in a very irregular and awkward manner. The letters travelled through Fife by Kinghorn and Cupar, by any common carrier.

Milliners and Mantuamakers.—Of these there were two in all, who, with the aid of Mr. Durham, the lank taylor (in the mantua-making line) did all the millinery and mantuamaking business in Dundee.

Dancing.—*Mt. Noseman* was the only dancing-master. I shall ever remember him. He was a tall German; he wore a small silver-laced hat, diminutive round silver buckles, and cane, and walked upright as an oak; drank brandy, and was a thorough pedant in his profession. The present post m r and I figured away in our *first minuet* with him, on the same, day, and paid each a pound of *Bohea* to the servant maid, as the accustomed and stated dues, and as the first fruits of our *labours sa'tant*.

Horse-market and Shambles.—In the centre of the town, and in the narrowest street, was held a horse-market twice a year. There horses neighed, galloped, trotted, and kicked; and the aged, the women, and children were wholly at their mercy. In that same choice spot did our forefathers, in the exertion of their architectivie abilities, erect shambles and slaughtering place. Wounded animals escaping from the hands of the butcher, seldom failed to stick their horns in the first unguarded inhabitant that came in their way. Trembling scenes for parents, guardians, and relatives, and (I was going to add, husbands and wives) and a rich harvest for surgeons, undertakers, and grave-diggers.

Streets.—The streets were in a wretched state. Two narrow lanes (the lanes here mentioned are



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Tindall's Wynd and St. Clement's Lane, which last joins with the Vault, at the point from which the name *Vault* is derived), formed all the communication from the town to the shore and shipping; and they were coarsely paved with round sea stones. The pavements were worse; and stairs jutted out in the common path. Open cellars, stairs adjoining formed men-traps for catching the heedless and unwary.

Lamps.—Not a lamp was to be seen. Not even the shadow of light. All was dark as Erebus, save when the moon lent her friendly aid. There was then no fire-engine in town; and houses burnt at their own leisure.

Raiment.—The raiment of the ladies were costly—Fashions did not change or vary much. High-priced stuffs could not be easily renewed. The grandmother's marriage brocade served the grand-daughter for her wedding garment. A *linsy winsy* clad the middling people. The lower order of the sex were barefooted; except on a Sunday, when in imitation of their betters (for white stockings were rare) they put their limbs into mourning. A full suit of broad cloth was the general wear of gentlemen, and every youngster assumed a round curled wig at his marriage or majority; like barristers, it was thought necessary, to convey the semblance of wisdom to the wearer. Wig and bonnet makers were then tolerable trades. The first is now sickly and the last is lost, and in it is a corporative novelty—there we view *a corporation without one active constituent*.

Bankrupts.—A bankrupt was then hardly known on this side the Tay, if we except a few lairds whose estates were brought to the hammer with less than a reversion. There were in truth no adventurers. There was little money, and less credit, for poor people could not afford to trust. With all our riches and improvements, the Jews have not yet ventured to make a settlement amongst us—whether we are yet too *poor* or too *sharp*, is a problem that my modesty or talents will not at present permit me to solve.

Money Banks.—There were no money banks north of the Forth. Old women and children kept their pozes in the *kist neuks* and *pirly pigs*. Dealers got cash and notes the best way they could from Edinburgh.

Town's Revenue.—The Town's revenue was then in a low state. The present Town-house, or public building, had been lately erected, and had cost a round sum. One of its public rooms (the west one) was not finished till near twenty years after the building. A Provost Fletcher had, before that period, given a severe wound to the funds by vanity and extravagance, and by entertaining the Convention of Burghs in this place. It therefore required wisdom, time, and economy to repair the breach, and to bring the funds again to useful and public purposes.

Sunday.—The Sunday or Sabbath was kept holy and decent; old women went to church with their bibles under one arm and a folding stool under the other. Those persons who did not attend at church gave at least no public offence, and disturbed not those that did. None but a straggling blackguard or two, who were deemed to be past all grace and reformation, were seen idle and parading in the streets during divine service, or in any part of the day, or even in the evening. Field ambulation was not practised on that day. *There were seizers in those days*; and boys were not then publicly permitted to infest the streets and lanes, and to play at *marbles*, *penny-stone*, or *pal-aals*, to the offending of tender and sober consciences, and to the extinction



Friends of Dundee City Archives

From the Old Histories of Dundee



of all decorum in a Christian society.

Passage-Boats and Piers.—The boats of the passage were not then decked, and, it must be confessed, were insufficient; and there was no sloping, shipping and landing pier at all times of the tide. These too deservedly impressed travellers against it, and there was too much reason for their complaint.

Water.—Water-pipes, for the supply of the inhabitants from the Ladywell fountain, had then been introduced, and a few wells were placed in a convenient situation for that purpose. Such was the general state of the town, for I am not writing a minute history. Many other matters stood nearly on the same footing as now. As, for example, swallows' nests, as far as I can learn, were built in the same manner, and were as wantonly destroyed by schoolboys; bees varied not in the texture of their cells; crows and magpies followed their several accustomed styles of architecture, and all instinctly defied improvement.

Mankind came into the world with a bad grace, and often left it with a worse. Incontinency held its wonted place, and knavery lagged not behind. Pedants whipped boys, and apprentices lightened their masters' tills. Virtue- despised vice; and she in her turn laughed at virtue. Cats mewed, dogs barked, mice chirped, geese cackled, frogs croaked, and things went on at the ancient jog trot. Rich men died, and young spendthrifts succeeded. Children looked up for the death of the parent, and the parent looked down for the reformation of the child. Animosities and family feuds prevailed then as much as in the present day; and (like the great potentates), the heaviest purses held out longest.

Parsons preached long sermons by sand glasses, and their wives administered salves and potions by midnight. Little rogues were hanged, great criminals escaped, and captains swore big oaths. Physicians wore large muffs, dangled gold-headed canes, hemm'd loud, and looked wise; and according to the strength or weakness of the natural constitution, the patient recovered or expired. The rich lorded it over their dependents, and they, in their turn, domineered over theirs. Whig and Tory were the pass words for broils and bickerings. Sycophants and parasites scraped and bowed, and even gravest men swallowed the enticing bait. The wealthy feasted, and the poor starved.

A sceptic in religious matters was a character not then known. Such an animal would have been caged in iron, and shown like a wild beast, for sixpence. Topers swilled, guzzled, and besotted in the tavern; and their ladies in revenge took a cup of spirited or wine comfort at home. Lovers ogled, scoundrels broke vows, and dotards coo'd and bill'd. Servants rode before their masters, and running footmen skipped it before their coaches. Farmers toiled hard, and fed on meal, milk, and water. They now live lustily on beef, pudding, and punch. Feasting ruled the roast, gave consequence, led the world, and enlisted table friends and flatterers. Guns and dogs, hawks and hounds, fiddlers and flutes, and billiards and cards, made dreadful havoc amongst youth.

Fornicators received the benefit of ghostly counsel. The case is now commuted; the session funds receive the benefit of their cash. Men smacked each other in the forum on the New Year's day, and danced *chapeau has* in the minuet at Christmas. Ladies tripped it in monstrous hoops, bound themselves up in bone stays and busks, like Egyptian mummies; and footed it to church



Friends of Dundee City Archives

From the Old Histories of Dundee



in gold, silver, lace, scarlet and short mantles. Cowards blustered, and brave men fought. Official men loom'd large, and taylors and shavers looked little. Ingratitude was healthy, and required no nursing; like fern it flourished in the barrenest soil. Cockfighting was publicly taught and encouraged at school, and (would you believe it, Mr. Printer?) the unfortunate combatants were, in imitation of the American savages, slain, boiled, and devoured. To sum up all, the sun rose in the east and set in the west. Lightnings flashed, thunders rolled, and rains poured. Scandal, hypocrisy, and backbiting brought up the rear of this heterogenous mass; and the world continued to roll like clock-work.

I am & etc

Dundee, April 1746 PHILATUS

(Transcribed by Iain D. McIntosh- 2012)