

AN OLD FIFE BURGH TOWN.

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THE "saut burgh" of Dysart is and was a typical Fife coast town. From its Hie Gait, in the centre of which was the Square with its Cross and tollbooth and the spacious piazzas, where, in olden days, the merchants displayed their wares, many narrow and tortuous streets, well described, in their physical features, by their common name of "wynds," slope down to the quaintest of old-world Fife harbours. Despite its notorious want of safety (which, indeed, did not matter much in days when mariners sailed the seas for half the year only, and lay up, with their boats, for the winter on whatever shore the end of summer found them), this harbour, from an early date, was crowded with craft. These, for the most part, plied a trade with the Low Countries. The principal exports were salt and coals. Dysart supplied the neighbouring towns also with both commodities. In 1659, for example, we find an order to Lord Sinclair's "factor" at Desart to furnish Edinburgh Castle with 1,000 loads of coal, the bailies of Desart to transport them to Leith. In an Act of the Scottish Parliament, nearly a century previously to that, reference is made to Lord Sinclair's "coal-pot" in Dysart. As for salt, "ca'in' saut to Dysart" has long been as contemptuous a proverb as "carrying coals to Newcastle." In return for the exports were imported all the necessaries and luxuries of life which Bruges could supply. Russian furs, fine Flemish cloths, and wines from Spain and Italy came for the courtiers at Dunfermline and at Falkland; wax for the Church, and, as time rolled on, Bibles for the Reformers; pitch, tar, and wood; and even old iron for the Pathhead nailers. So important was the Fife continental trade that when Bruges, after being for three hundred years the market of Northern Europe, declined in favour of Antwerp, the Scots became possessed of privileges very similar to those of the Hanseatics. In the town of Campvere, close to Antwerp, for example, there is said to have been a Scotch Gate, through which Scottish sailors passed "Scot free," while those of other nationalities paid toll. Indeed, so jealous was the Government of these rights that it appointed an official, who was known as the "Conservator of Scots' privileges at Campvere"; and it is of interest to note that such an official existed as late as 1758 in the person of no less illustrious a man than John Home, the author of *Douglas*. So much for the foreign trade. At home the mealmakers, fleshers, shoemakers, tailors, and brewers carried on thriving businesses under the protective privileges of the crafts. Altogether, so industrious and wealthy did Dysart become that it was known as Little Holland, a title which might, with equal fitness, have been applied to the whole seaboard from Inverkeithing to Crail. It would be wrong, however, to think of the Fife towns as quite sordid in their interests: content to grub away at trade and barter and to leave it to others to fight the battles of liberty and of religious freedom. It was not so. Fife led the van of

civilization in Scotland, and was in a condition of comparative peace and plenty when the remainder of the country was in the throes of civil strife. It is a tribute to Fife that when a proof was wanted of the success of the efforts of James V. to restore the Borders to law and order, it was put forward that he received as good an account of his sheep which fed in Etrick Forest *as if they had grazed in the bounds of Fife*. But her merchant sons could fight as valiantly as the Lubeckers. Flodden and Drumclog meant the loss of fathers and sons to her towns. As a matter of fact every foot of Fife is historic ground.



THE OLD TOWER OF S. SERF'S.

Tradition associates this corner of the coast in a marked way with the vagaries of the devil, and legend has it that St. Serf became the patron saint of Dysart by ejecting the devil from a cave in the vicinity of the town. He seems to have done so by means of persuasive argument. In his *Cronykil* old Prior Andrew Wynthoun gives us examples of the patron saint's powers in this direction, and they make it no surprise to us that the devil fled to escape them. This cave is now inclosed within the grounds of the Earl of Rosslyn's Dysart house. Walking on the shore one sunny afternoon, the present writer "got on the crack" with an old native. Pointing towards where the cave was, the native expressed a desire to see it. "It's no' worth your while gaun to 't; some story o' an auld sanct's been the makin' o't," was the contemptuous opinion. But although even the vulgar now affect to speak slightly of the "auld sanct," his name was once powerful in the town. The

parish church was dedicated to him; and at the town council elections "kirk masters" and "compost masters" were chosen to receive "St. Serf's money."

The hold which the Church had upon the town is very evident. Some fifty yards to the eastwards of the harbour there is a cluster of stone and lime which is a record of centuries. The old Norman tower has survived the church to which it was attached, even as the grave-stones have the memories of those whose bones lie beneath them. A blacksmith plies his trade within the walls of what was once the chapel of St. Denis; and all that remains to mark the home of the Black Friars is a gateway upon whose lintel there may yet be distinguished, through many coats of lamp-black, the superscription in relief, "My hope is in the Lord." This gateway leads into an unused courtyard, o'ergrown with grass, in the midst of which is a pit-shaft, kept open to ventilate the present workings on the hill. The quaint building built into the wall of

this gateway is now a tavern whose small rooms could doubtless tell many a tale of smuggling and the sea. To complete the record there are numerous cellars built into the old ruins, which have been salt-gurnels and straw-lofts in their day, although their doors now never open upon their rusty hinges, while, straggling to the water's edge, may yet be seen the foundations of salt-pans—the very ones—who knows?—which the Earl gave in dowery long ago, and were known as “Lady Jane's pincushion.”

The Church and trade, and more interesting still, the municipal polity, and the relationships of man with man, whose character is seen in the very frequent enactments of law-burrows, or bonds not to molest one's neighbour; all these have light thrown upon them in the interesting burgh records. These books, dating from 1533, by which time Dysart had become a royal burgh, are among the most ancient of their kind in Scotland. They are rendered especially interesting by the fact that Dysart, with its rector and vicar and some half-dozen of chaplains, was an ecclesiastical centre, and, therefore, much resorted to in days when commercial transactions



DYSART.

took place in the church. Previously to receiving a Royal charter, it had been a barony burgh holding of the Sinclairs, of whom we shall hear more. The disposition of these burghs may be taken as a sign of the relative power of the Crown and of the nobility. The Crown won an ally in a corporation to which it granted a charter; and it frequently found itself strong enough to step in and raise to the rank of a royal burgh a burgh of barony which had become great and wealthy. This is what seems to have taken place in the case of Dysart. When it was raised to the higher rank it was the seventh or eighth town in Scotland. It possessed so much wealth and influence, as compared with some neighbouring towns, which have far outrun it in the race, that down to a recent date there was a common saying: “The gentlemen of Dysart and the men of Kirkcaldy.”

Let us turn to these records, then, for a knowledge of the old Fife burgh. Its affairs were conducted by two bailies and a varying body of councillors, who, sitting as the head court, made statutes and ordained. There is no means of knowing if the “sett” of the burgh was fixed by charter; it certainly came to vary considerably, for in 1535 there were fifteen councillors, while thirty years later there were no fewer than forty. Nor did they hold office voluntarily. Statutes of the head court decreed that “whilk of the persons (chosen as councillors) bides away from the council being lawfully warnit by ye officer, and they have not received leave, shall be fined ilk time five shillings, except they are reponed.” At the same time we find the tyranny of the

guilds in full force, "nae unfree man nor unfree woman" being allowed "to occupy freeman's freedom in baking or brewing or any other thing of freemen's occupation under pain of eight shillings as oft as they bake. . . ." In the records of the burgh of Kirkcaldy the undemocratic aim of separating the occupants of civic chairs from sordid employments, noticed by Dr. Hill Burton, the historian, finds illustration in the fining of Provost Robert White for brewing ale in his own house.

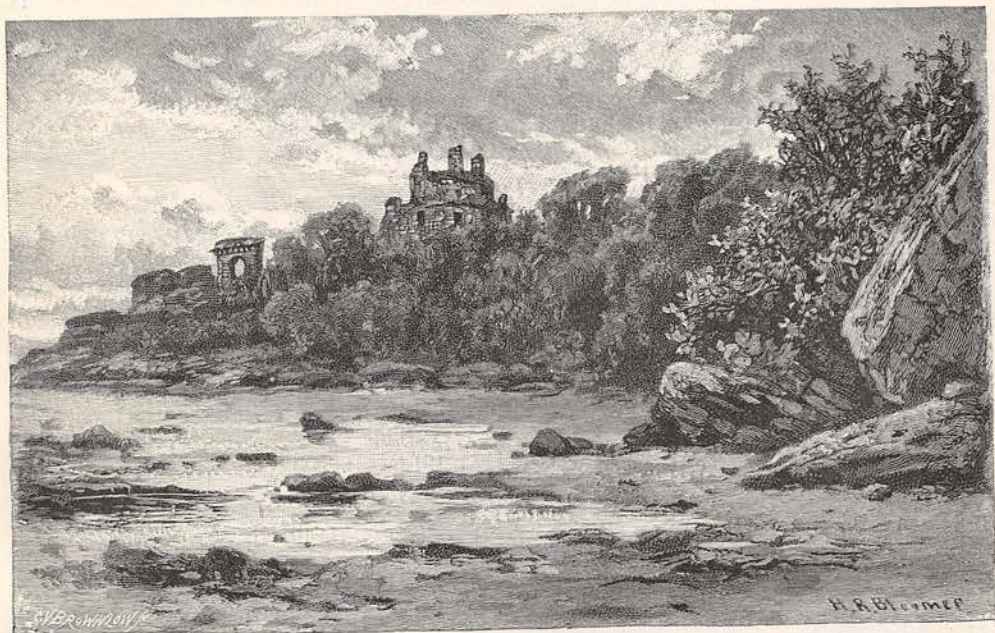
A note in the records fixes for us the summer of 1576 as the date of the building of the present townhouse or tollbooth. Where the old one was situated we do not know; but it seems probable that, for long, it was in bad repair. For forty years, at any rate, before the new one was built, the minutes of council are dated from the steeple; from "under John Kilgor's stair; at ye foreland of Arch. Halkitt; under the stair of umqwhile John Abernethy"; and from "the Market Cross."

The duties of a bailie within his bailerie consisted chiefly in the prevention and punishment of crime. The old powers of "pit and gallows," delegated to feudal lords, were likewise in the hands of the constituted authority of a royal burgh: we find "pain of death" frequently threatened, at least, if not inflicted. Ordinary offences were covered by a system of fines. We may, at least, suppose that there was a system whereby the punishment was made to fit the crime, and that it was a relic of the Anglo-Saxon scale of money value in which each member of the community was assigned a place according to his social position. One unfortunate man, John Kilgor by name, was sentenced to be "wardit and joggit and furyr, for his contention and na comperance, to be dowkit in ye sea." Alexander Stirk, for assaulting the officer and breaking out of prison, was sent to the "joggies," or pillory, and made to stand there "but meit or drink till sax hours at even, and thereafter gif he commits the like fault to be banest the town for ever." Bell Wood for entertaining beggars was sent to the "cuckstule." The minutes of the court are too vague to enable us to exactly understand the constitution of a jury. It is just possible that the bailie, besides being judge, acted as public prosecutor. The chancellor of the assize certainly passed sentence after the verdict was found. We may be allowed to quote from another entry which throws a light upon the desire for fairness in the administration of the law. "The whilk day John Orkney, prolocutor for Margaret Brown his wife, protested that David Blair, bailie, should be nae judge to him nor yet his wife, because that the said bailie and they were not at one." In these minutes and records of head courts and assize we get a glimpse of the practical working of that spirit of humanity which was a distinguishing characteristic of old Scots law.

The actual administration of the law, however, must have been faulty. The modern police is a physical force which the solitary doomster, or officer of court of those days, could not possibly be. The bailies themselves assisted their officers, and passed laws binding "ye haill nybors to be in readiness and defend yaer common weills." Repeated instructions by the magistrates to every booth-holder to have in readiness within the booth "ane jack, ane halbert and steel bonnet for eschewing of sic inconveniences as may happen," may have been made necessary by "inconveniences" from within the burgh as well as by those from without. The town's officer deserves a notice if for no other reason than that he is the precursor of that most original of Scottish worthies, the minister's man or beadle. Although it is not borne out in the Dysart records, there are grounds for the belief that in many cases the office passed from father to son. In a Scottish county-town at the present day there is an old man who is pointed out as the hereditary hangman. We have seen that the doomster, although only a servant, was sworn in along with the bailies; and in several cases of breach of the peace we find the offenders praying for forgiveness on their knees before the magistrates, and on their feet before the officer. As bellman, he warned the councillors to their meetings. As church officer he had to "toyme (empty) the kirk by day ilk Saturday, and to keep the kirk, by prayer and preaching, with a long wand in his hand." It would seem that one of these officials distressed the neighbours (the word appears so kindly) by charging exorbitant prices for burials; whereupon the following scale of charges was fixed: forty shillings Scots for every corpse buried in the kirk; for every corpse buried in the kirkyard, having a coffin, twenty shillings; for young children, thirteen shillings and four pennies; and for a corpse without a coffin, ten shillings. The same statute "appointed the said bellman to bury the puir corps, either strangers or inhabitants and parochoners, gratis." As time wore on, the duties of the Dysart gravedigger became onerous, and he was compelled to furnish, at his own expense, a man to break the

ground. This assistant, however, who was "an able man," undertook other duties whose nature may be inferred from his *sobriquet* of "buff-the-beggars."

The strict measures adopted by the guilds to prevent outsiders encroaching upon their trading rights made the burghess ticket of considerable value; and it is evident that a dividing line was firmly drawn between servants and unfreemen and those who occupied "freeman's freedom within the burgh." Accustomed as we are to free trade, we can have little idea of the tyranny of the guilds. Naturally, as a burgh increased in importance, and the burghers became wealthier, they became also more imbued with the spirit of money-making, and allowed their greed to protect their own industries to an extent that led to the downfall of the whole system. At the same time, while those guild laws limited the production they guarded the quality, and protected the people from extortion. Take, as an illustration of this, the decree: "that no white bread be baked by ony baxter hereof but leaven bread, guid and sufficient stuff, under ye pain of eight shillings; and yat no baxter hereof, nor nane in his name, tak for baking of ane



ON THE DYSART SHORE.

boll of victuall but . . . shillings, all other charges discharged, and ye nybors to be thankfully served." Of a like nature is the order that no flesher should pass to landward to any place where the sickness was among cattle, or to suspected places to buy cattle to slay and sell.

The precautions against the spread of fire, which the old burgh laws reveal, are a proof that most of the houses were constructed of wood. In the middle of the sixteenth century, however, at which time the new tollbooth was erected, a considerable amount of building was being carried on. If we can judge by the inventories and roup lists which have been preserved, the furnishing of the houses at this time was of the meanest description.

In Dysart, previously to the Reformation, there was probably one ecclesiastic for every hundred souls. Shortly after that event a fellow-labourer was brought in to assist the clergyman; and mention is made of a "reader," whose stipend was fixed at twenty pounds. The position of the schoolmaster was more precarious. It was in the year 1600 that the first qualified teacher was provided for the town. Twenty-six years later Mr. John Gow, who then held the office, drew up a petition setting forth that it was the usual custom for the parents by turns to supply the school doctor with meat, and that, as he had been prohibited from enforcing this, he was entitled to extra salary by way of compensation. His representation was favourably entertained and he got four shillings (Scots) quarterly from the parents in addition to his stipend. In order

to further better his position it was decreed: "that na woman, mistress of a school, should receive male children who were able to attend the hie school." Some thirty years afterwards this worthy man's successor was fined and deposed for striking one of the neighbours to the effusion of blood.

These glimpses into this old Fife burgh show us only a busy, shrewd, worldly community. In reality that is the dull ground on which the patterns of romance must be worked. From such a home as this went forth the lads who, with levelled spears, stood shoulder to shoulder round their bonnie Prince at Flodden. Not only the maids in the sheep-folds of the Borders, but those mariners' and craftsmen's daughters also, mourned "with dule and woe the lads who were a' wede awa."

The mention of the men who marched to Flodden with Lord Henry Sinclair is the first authentic one in which Dysart is seen in touch with the history of Scotland. We have earlier traditions of battles with the Danes and of repulses of English marauders from the shore; but from this point the historical associations of the town are numerous, and for the most part are, like this one of Flodden, bound up with "the lordly line of high St. Clair." About a mile westwards from the town stands the old home of this family, the now stately ruin of Ravenscraig; so harmoniously set into its background of trees and rocks that from the seawards it may easily pass unnoticed. Lifted high on its rocky pile it commands the Firth, which now mirrors it in its quiet waters, now beats against its old walls as on that night when the lovely Rosabelle ventured from its shelter for Roslin's halls.

We can best deal with the historical associations of Dysart by observing where its fortunes joined issue with those of the Lords of Ravenscraig. It affected the burgh but little that Oliver Sinclair, the third son of Oliver of Roslin, and an old servant of James V., was raised (much to the chagrin of the nobles) to the command of the Scots army when it crossed the Borders. It was defeated in the rout of Solway Moss, and the unhappy monarch died with the moan upon his lips: "Fy! Is Oliver fled? Oh, fled Oliver." But among those curious inventories of goods and gear to which we have already referred, is one: "Ane Kyst, ane cruik, ane speit, ane tangs, ane spyning wheel quhilk brunt by the Frenchmen." This occurs in 1563, and is a curious confirmation of the presence of the French troops which Mary of Guise brought over to oppose the forces of the Lords of the Congregation. The harrying of the coasts of Fife by those soldiers hastened on events as did also, no doubt, the burning of Walter Mylne by the priests. Lyndsay of Pitscottie says that Mylne was arrested in Dysart by the vicar, Sir George Strachan,¹ "in ane poor wyfe's house, teaching hir the commandments of God, and learning her how she should instruct hir bairns and hir household and bring them up in the fear of God." Taken before the judges, "Thou preachest quietly and privately in houses and openly in fields," the public prosecutor said to him. "Yae, man, and on the sea also, sailing in ships," Mylne answered. There was "grit" in the words. The annals of these religious struggles can furnish a literature which will testify for ever to the greatness of the Scottish language. Walter Mylne was burned; and at the Reformation which soon followed George Strachan ceased to be vicar. He turned his attention to dealings in peat and to the manufacture of salt. History cannot always be written in heroics.

The three meetings of the Synod of Fife, held in Dysart in 1607, illustrate the kind of fight which Presbyterianism had to make against the episcopal designs of James VI. That sovereign desired the appointment of constant moderators, in which the Presbyters saw the rise of Bishops. The first of these meetings was held on the shore between the town and Ravenscraig, the church being shut against it. Two months later the Synod was convened in the church, and again in August. On the last occasion the retiring moderator was Mr. William Cranstoun, whose duty it was, in ordinary course, to preach the sermon. Archbishop Gladstones, of St. Andrews, and the Commissioners, however, interdicted him from doing so. The scene which followed must have been a curious one, although doubtless it was serious enough to all engaged in it. Mr. Cranstoun had mounted the pulpit, when a messenger delivered the interdict to him. To it, and to a similar second message, he paid no heed. Then, even as might have happened at the present day, a little municipal authority was tried, and a bailie of the town went to the moderator and told him that the Commissioners ordered him down. "And I command you," replied Cranstoun, "to sit down in your own seat and hear what God will say to you." The Netherlands Consul next interfered,

¹ The title "Sir" was a mark of courtesy to the vicar.

but he succeeded no better. "The Lord and His Kirk have appointed me ; therefore beware ye trouble that work," was the answer he got. The moderator preached his sermon, in which he did not hesitate to handle the Archbishop severely ; whereupon the prelate is said to have stormed so outrageously that even the Commissioners "were fain to tell him that he was unworthy to be in the number of ministers."

It is startling to be reminded by a visit, paid by the Marquis of Huntly, or one of his train, to old Sinclair of Ravenscraig, one early morning in February, fourteen years before this, that at the time that questions of religion and of Church polity were thus agitating the country a brutal murder, which raised the indignation of all classes, could be condoned by the King. The visitor had come from Inverkeithing that morning, leaving behind him the smouldering ruins of Donnibristle, and the "bonny Earl of Murray," lying dead along with the gallant and faithful Dunbar. Birrel in his *Diary* relates the murder in graphic words : "The 7 of February the Earle of



RAVENS CRAIG.

Huntly came to the hous of Dunnibirsell in Fyffe, quher the Earl of Murray with a few number wes for the tyme, being his awen house. The chieffe man yat wes with him was Dunbar, Shriffe of Murray. The Earll of Huntly sett ye said hous on fyre. The Earll of Murray being within, vist not quhither to come out and be slaine or be burned quicke ; yet after advysment this Dunbar says to my Lord of Murray, 'I vill goe out at ye gaitt before your lordshipe, and I am sure the people will chaarge on me thinking me to be zour lordship, sua, it being mirke under nycht, ze shall come out after me and look if yat ye can fend for zourself.' " Dunbar did as he proposed and was slain, while in the *mêlée* the Earl of Murray fled to the rocks on the shore ; " but, unfortunattly, the said Lord's cnapscurr tippet, quherone ves a silk stringe, had taken fire, vich betrayed him to hes enemies in ye darkness of ye night, himselve not knowing the same ; they came down one him on a suddaine and ther most cruelly, without mercy, murthered him." It is said that it was not the private feud between Murray and Huntly alone that instigated this murder, but that the young Queen Anne had praised the beauty of the Earl too freely ; at any rate the King, in spite of the entreaties of the victim's mother, and the outspoken indignation of the capital, retarded the prosecution of Huntly and finally hushed the matter up. The avowed motive for this murder ; the reason which the popular voice gave for it—that " he was the Queene's luvè ; " the self-sacrifice of Dunbar, who is the only hero of the story ; the picturesque

discovery of Murray among the rocks by the burning fringe of his tippet ; the murderer pursuing his way along the Fife coast, and being received by Sinclair of Ravenscraig with the words : " Since ye have come to my door I cannot shut it upon you, but on such a business you would have been welcome to have gone past it ; " the dying words of the vain if bonny Earl : " Ye have spoiled a better face than your own ; " the grief of his mother and her almost melodramatic way of showing it and of demanding revenge : these all give to the story of this tragedy a wealth of colour which it would be found difficult to match.

The first Protestant minister of Dysart, and in a sense, therefore, George Strachan's successor, was William Murray. He was related to the Tullibardine family, through whose influence his son received a post in the household of Charles I. Gaining the favour of his royal master, his rise was rapid, and in 1651 Charles II. created him Earl of Dysart.

Meanwhile Cromwell had invaded Scotland. Fife suffered greatly. Bad seasons had sent up the price of provisions. The plague was spreading, and we find the magistracy of Dysart giving orders " to close up the town's ports, with sufficient yetts [gates], bands, and locks ; and all the open places of the burgh presently to be biggit up with stane and lime." Four regiments were raised from the county in twelve months, and no fewer than twelve of horse and five of foot quartered on it. The castle of the Sinclairs is said to have been occupied by Cromwell's troops, and afterwards left in ruins by them, and local records afford numerous proofs of oppression. No doubt Fife and the Fifeshire towns would welcome Charles II. in his progress through her in 1651.

Sixty-five years later the Earl of Mar, landing at Elie, negotiated with the Fifeshire lairds in favour of another Stuart, and finally raising the standard of revolt, marched on Perth and captured it. Among those who helped him was the young Master of Sinclair, who brought with him a body of cavalry. To Mar's standard came most of the Highland chiefs. One, the Duke of Sutherland, remained conspicuously loyal. He ordered his ships, with stores, to sail round to Dunrobin ; but the winds being contrary, the captain thought to visit his home before proceeding, and anchored off Burntisland. News of this reached Perth. The Master of Sinclair rode to the shore, boarded the vessel, captured the stores, and carried them off to the rebels. The rising of '15 was a failure, and the Master had to fly ; but he lived to a good old age, and wrote memoirs of the insurrection which were published by his descendant, the late Lord Rosslyn, whose daughter, not many years ago, married an heir of that Duke of Sutherland whose ship the master captured.

The rebellion of '45 marks the close of a great period of Scottish history. From this point men and women take the place of parchments and records as authorities ; and the only qualification that is asked of them is that they shall have talked with men who were out in the '45, and so are able to join hands with the past in the memory of what their fathers have told them.

After the union of the kingdoms, the Fife coast towns lost much of their prestige ; and their history in the past one hundred and fifty years has been one either of decay or of a rise, in new prosperity, from the ashes of the old. But we have failed in our purpose if we have not suggested to the reader a brighter, if still a homely enough, patch than that which must generally be painted in the picture of Scotland.