

Sources for the Social History of Haddington up to the end of the Eighteenth Century

By David Moodie

There must have been a settlement of sorts at Haddington from around 660AD at least, as the Anglian *-ington* names date from this time; but where exactly this settlement was, or how large, we cannot say, as there are no written records and there have been no archaeological excavations in the town. We know, of course, none of the inhabitants' names, a state of affairs which persists through half the subsequent history of the town.

The only pointers to what the town was like through these hundreds of years are drawn from analogies. At nearby Dunbar, for example, an Anglian *grubenhau*s or weaving house, 7 metres by 4.5 metres, has recently been unearthed, with 40 loom weights on site.

For the period from around 1300 one can also make use of evidence of structures still showing in today's townscape, although there are probably no domestic buildings in Haddington older than the seventeenth century and very few of those. The shape of the town centre preserves a much older layout, as is often the case, because redevelopment tends to be piecemeal. Thus the wedge comprising Market Street and High Street has the familiar hallmark of towns planted in the Middle Ages – the East Kilbrides of their day – to encourage trade and market activity by means of an international system imported from the continent. It is suggested, of course with no documentary evidence, that Market Street and High Street were originally one, i.e. the north side of High Street and the south side of Market Street did not exist. The medieval foundation may have been accompanied by an influx of foreigners, Flemish or English perhaps, bringing new skills, just as Japanese capital and technology play an important part in the town's modern economy ⁽¹⁾. And just as today's corporations have their logos, so did the institutions of the middle ages; hence the town's coat of arms with its mysterious goat and grape vine, which may refer to nothing more than wishful optimism that the good life of the Mediterranean could be translated to the barren cold of Scotland by means of economics.

The first surviving record generated from within Haddington itself is a fifteenth century court book followed, from the sixteenth century, by a more or less complete run of council minutes (some, including those from the time when the town council colluded with the occupying English army, 1548-9, have mysteriously disappeared). Very few Scottish towns have anything very much older than Haddington, but the experience of Aberdeen, which does, suggests that town life remained remarkably constant over 300 to 400 years, for the same preoccupations recur. These are well to the fore in the Haddington record. There is the burghesses' jealous protection of their monopoly of trade (they were a minority of the actual inhabitants) and persecution of those who infringed those rights. There is the anxious fear of plague and the 'watching and warding' at the town gates to repel any strangers arriving from infected areas. There are complaints about beggars, especially those from outside, and hostile reaction to the approach of gypsies or 'Egyptians' (still unchanged today – see the *Courier* for 14th July 1995). There were complaints too about street fights and 'young and insolent persons being drunk, swearing, playing at cards and dice and being

rowdy in taverns' – another ancient Haddington tradition of passage into manhood which is still going strong.

Animals were everywhere; inevitably, for they dominated the local economy. As one historian has written, one craftsman's waste products were more often than not another's raw materials. Hence cattle slaughtered in the town became the raw material not only for fleshers, but tanners, cordwainers, cobblers, bone workers – who made pins, needles, dice, knife handles, bobbins and toggles – rope makers, horners, gutters, candlemakers. The cattle, under some sort of control, were taken out to pasture daily by the back lane (still called the Cowgate in many towns). But dogs, and especially pigs, were an endless nuisance. The town bellman in 1532 was charged to keep dogs and the poor folk out of St Mary's Church. As for pigs, everybody had, just as they have cars today, roaming the streets causing havoc. Middens (including all excrement) were piled before the houses and in the closes. Here hens, chickens, cats, dogs and rats roamed.

We can learn something about the houses in the town from a variety of sources: the court books, council minutes, dean of guild records and the burgh register of sasines (the town's record of property transactions). Most roofs would have been of turf (not the much-discussed pantiles). How else on 5th December 1611 could George Dick set fire to his bedding whilst imprisoned in the Tolbooth and then, when released, set fire to the turf of Alex Speir's house? There are frequent references to 'outsetting stairs' (the outside stairs which were a feature of so many old Scots towns until recently) and to 'pillars' which could suggest that there were many examples of covered arcades such as those which survive at Elgin and Gladstone's Land in Edinburgh. Many houses were gable-end to the street (today's Mercat Hotel conceals its orientation by means of a false screen frontage). Window glass was rare and we know from seventeenth century travellers that many houses had wooden shutters instead, covering just half the aperture. The extant 17th-century houses, such as the old Lodge⁽²⁾ in Lodge Street and Craig's in High Street are recognisable by the small size of their windows. It is uncertain how many of the pre-18th-century buildings were of stone.

What were kept in these houses? Not a lot if we are to believe the inventories of gear made when their owners died, just as they are today as part of the executors' duties. These are found in the court books. An example from 1532 includes some clothes (one gown, doublet, hose, cloak and belt), a sword and buckler, bed, chest, press, trestle, stool, a couple of pots and dishes, two panes (of glass?), a larder, saddle, candlestick and spinning wheel. Most of these items were in the 'hall', like the hall of a castle where master and servant lived and worked together. Since that time, halls have progressively shrunk to the entrance lobbies they have become today.

From the 17th century, records become more extensive. We have the luxury of putting names to all the ordinary folk; not just those who gain notoriety by misbehaving. This is due to the keeping of parish records of births, deaths and marriages. Kirk session records start to nose their way into people's business. There are minute books of the trade incorporations and 'one-offs' such as the hearth tax returns of the 1690s.

More records, more prosperity. The inventory of goods of the great Duke of Lauderdale (1616-82) would have looked very different from that given above. His family having determined he would be laid to rest by his ancestors in Haddington, the funeral party processed from Inveresk with 2000 horses and 25 coaches 'insomuch that they filled the

highway for full four meils in length'. Even allowing for exaggeration, this was a new kind of grandeur. So grand, in fact, that the undertaker was reputedly paid only a small part of his £2800 bill.

Buildings too had become more grand. The Tolbooth, which stood in Market Street roughly where the Pheasant Hotel is now, was being slated in 1531, possibly for the first time. In 1612 a Dunfermline plumber was being paid 'to theik with lead the rounds and tourements, and the knockhouse (clock tower) was being raised and the great bell hung in it, the whole topped with a brass cock' possibly like the one still to be seen on North Berwick Council Chambers. The town council obviously had more cash than before. For the first anniversary of the Restoration in 1661 they ordered 12 collars of white and blue taffetas, with the town's arms and the word 'Haddington' on them. They sat with these on a stage at the market cross, with a whole puncheon of wine, and 20 lbs weight of sweetmeats, with a competence of figs and raisins. They were also sponsors of a silver cup made annually as first prize for the Haddington horse race.

Clocks, silver ware, embroidery, exotic fruits – these were all alien to the old market system of Haddington; only trading in cereals, meat, fish, and dairy products was allowed. That system was breaking down and soon one of the great vices of the medieval economy – hoarding goods to force up prices, or regrating – was to become a standard fixture in the town in the form of shops.

We get to know something of these new shops because a shop tax was introduced to Scotland in 1785 and the returns have been preserved. By that time there were 24 shops in Haddington, of which 17 are described as merchants' premises. These were likely to have been the sort of warehouse which Edward Burt ⁽³⁾ had visited in Inverness much earlier in the century: 'There is ...a shop up a Pair of Stairs, which is kept by three or four Merchants in Partnership, and that is pretty well stored with various Sorts of small Goods and wares, mostly from London'. Of the seven Haddington shops with a specified stock, three are chandlers, one a seedsman (Roughead's), one a tobacconist and two surgeons.

If by a marvel of time we could be deposited down in Haddington High Street in 1785, we might still find it difficult to realise where we were. Most of the facades we now see are the work of James Burn at the very end of the 18th century, followed by later Victorian work. It was probably only with Burn that the shop window became prevalent, and some of the small squarish windows from that time survive in the High Street. Displays was then a novelty – a rather vulgar novelty in many people's eyes. So the time traveller of 1785 would probably find a lot of warehouse-style buildings, with outside stairs, the ubiquitous pigs being often housed in the 'crauchie' underneath them. There would be few familiar landmarks: the Town House in part (without the Assembly Rooms, without the spire) – this was a 1748 building to replace the old Tolbooth further down the street); Carlyle House, Craig's (in the guise of the premier coaching inn of the town) ⁽⁴⁾, and a few of the houses and vennels on the south side at the eastern end. The George would have been there but minus the distinctive round tower facing down the street.

The people would have been the same and yet different, as they would have throughout Haddington's history. Squabbles seem always the same, but we would not elect annually an 'abbot of unreason' to indulge in a day's blasphemy nor leave money for masses to be sung in perpetuity for the salvation of our souls. Four hundred years ago the inhabitants

apparently got up at four in the morning, washing and eating habits were quite different. On one level social behaviour seems determined by the culture around us; on another by universal characteristics such as fear, anger, envy and jealousy.

Notes:

- (1) At the time of writing Mitsubishi colour tv factory was in operation at Gateside.
- (2) During recent renovation evidence was uncovered showing this property was once arcaded – the ‘pillars’ the author mentions. It has been dated to the first half of the 16th century making it the oldest domestic property known in Haddington.
- (3) Burt, E. ca 1727/28, *Letters from a Gentleman in the North of Scotland to his friend in London* Letter IV.
- (4) Once known as the White Hart. From 1764 to 1855 known as the Blue Bell.