

In search of our oldest fairs

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

A MAJOR part of the study of the calendar is the study of fairs and markets. People have always come together to trade, or have traded when they have come together. You see it going on in the playground. Historically, it is no less the case in Gaelic Scotland than anywhere else. It tended to go together with worship, with the observance of holy or festive days, with pilgrimages at certain times to wells and shrines.

The most obvious kind of fair or market, then, was the Sunday market. It simply took place amongst the people themselves at the door of the church once the service was over. The story of the Sunday market is a story of tension between religious and civil authorities, relating to matters such as the desecration of churchyards, the intrusion of secular concerns — commercial announcements, for example — into religious observances, and impious behaviour in church, such as drunkenness. It is a good story and I will tell it another time.

Nobody ever got rich out of Sunday markets anyway. What real traders needed was a recognised circuit by which they could travel from place to place, finding large numbers of people congregated in some suitable location, ideally a flat, open space with plentiful grazing, good access, a water supply and an alehouse. This is how fairs grew up. At a given time in its history, a place might have anything from one to a dozen fairs in a year, depending on its commercial importance.

Now obviously there were many factors in this, including the time of year and the type of goods traded. As well as general fairs there came to be craft fairs, seed fairs, hiring fairs, wool fairs, harvest fairs, cattle fairs, horse fairs, and each of these took place at its appropriate time. But the factor that interests me most at the moment is origins. A fair might develop at a particular time and place due to one of two familiar-sounding economic principles — market forces, or interventionism.

What I mean by that is this. There are many fairs which appear to have existed from time immemorial. Indeed, that is a phrase frequently used by the local informants who supplied a great deal of the contemporary information for the standard work on Scottish fairs and markets, Sir James Marwick's "List of Markets and Fairs now and formerly held in Scotland" of 1890. Such fairs were created, or at least sustained and carried forward until we catch sight of them, by market forces. The people wanted them, so they survived, in some cases for over a thousand years.

By 'interventionism' I mean the active establishment of a fair, on the historical record, by commercial interests. In Scotland this goes back to the Normans, and specifically to the reigns of David I (1124-53), Malcolm IV ('the Maiden', 1153-65), and William the Lion (1165-1214). Through their agents in the Church, these kings brought in craftsmen, merchants and traders who were quite unlike our Gaelic ancestors in their attitude to life. What wasn't written down wasn't worth a spit to them. Neither warriors nor farmers, and uninterested in hunting or poetry, they devoted themselves entirely to making things and selling them, amassing wealth, and circulating that wealth within a restricted network of close family and friends rather than within a broader kin group.

To do this they needed to live huddled together in a very un-Celtic, and in many ways unhealthy, manner. The name they gave to these new settlements was 'burgh'. In Latin it was *burgo*, and in Norman French it was *bourg*. Compared to the native *baile*, it was a concept with all the echoes that 'commune' can have for us today. Alien, perhaps immoral, artificial, and lacking in human dignity. But they had the king on their side, for together the Normans and the Kings of Scots were now on a roller-coaster of wealth creation, and wherever the King's writ ran — mainly on the eastern side of the country — it was these people's job to stimulate the economy and keep money flowing into the royal coffers.

That, then, is the first 'interventionist' scenario known to us. Our earliest extant burgh charters are from the reign of William the Lion, but they tend to refer back to that of King David. For example, there is a charter granted by William to the bishop and culdees of the church of Brechin, confirming a grant by David I of a right of market on Sunday.

William's three extant charters to Glasgow are particularly interesting. The first, datable to 1175-8, grants to Bishop Jocelin the right to have a burgh in Glasgow with a market on Thursday, and all the freedoms and customs which any royal burgh in Scotland possessed. The second, datable to 1189-98, grants the right to an annual eight-day fair beginning on the feast of the apostles Peter and Paul, 6 July; this sounds familiar, and the suspicion that there is a remarkable piece of continuity here is confirmed by an Act of the Town Council in 1744 which ordains that the "Glasgow Fair", traditionally held on 7 July, should begin on the first Monday of that month and continue for a week.

Glasgow's third charter from William is datable to some year before 1211. It is interesting for what it tells us about the legal protection of commerce, for it renews the grant of the King's peace to all those travelling to or from the Fair, and also while there, providing that they did what they ought to do justly according to the assize of royal burghs and of the country.

From the twelfth century to the nineteenth, then, we have a continuous stream of speculative sheepskins granting to local magnates, for a fee, the legal right to hold a market, in the hope that it will catch on. The Glasgow Fair was one that caught on and stayed with us, except that it ceased to be a market and turned into a funfair and trades holiday instead. Others caught on for a while but died sooner or later. Many others never caught on at all, as far as one can judge.

An amusing example of this last category is Stornoway. In 1597, says Marwick, an Act of Parliament ordained a burgh to be established in Lewis with all the privileges granted to other burghs in the realm. On 18

October 1607 the King, who had newly become James I of England as well as James VI of Scotland, granted a charter to Lord Balmerino erecting Stornoway into a burgh of barony with a weekly market on Saturday and two yearly fairs — on St Andrew's Day, 30 November, and on St George's Day, 23 April! Clearly the days were chosen for no reason whatever save that they symbolised James's rule over the two kingdoms.

Since the MacLeods lost no time in sending Balmerino's "Fife Adventurers" packing, this was one piece of legislation that remained entirely symbolic, and the next charter on the matter acknowledged political reality in the shape of Kenneth Lord MacKenzie of Kintail, who was in 1610 duly granted the right of "new erecting" Stornoway into a burgh of barony as before, but this time without mention of fairs.

So much for interventionism. It is my job to ask, would the MacLeods of Lewis not have had markets of their own? What of all those fairs held "from time immemorial"?

These are pertinent questions. Historians have a tendency to draw a line under the written record and say, that's it — it wasn't written down, so it didn't happen. Marwick himself, who was Town Clerk of Glasgow, reveals such an attitude when he says: "In Scotland as in other countries markets and fairs have existed from the earliest period in which men have been drawn together in villages and towns, and any record of their mode of life is preserved. Evidences of this are to be found in charters granted by Scottish sovereigns to religious houses and ecclesiastical lords, to royal burghs, and to lords of regality and barony. Undoubtedly, however, the trade and manufacture of Scotland in early times may be said to have been practically confined to royal burghs."

Were they? Only now are we beginning to find ways of doing a little better than this. The first rule is to keep an open mind. There is often no way to be sure, even in such a case as that fair in Glasgow beginning on the feast day of the apostles Peter and Paul, that the first charter was not simply legalising, regularising or renaming a fair that already existed. In other words, the Glasgow Fair in July may be even older than the twelfth century. When you think of it, it makes sense — a fair on the banks of the Clyde at the lowest point where the river might be forded, and at a time of year when there was a chance that the ford would be safe.

The second rule is to formulate your questions. What evidence do we have for fairs and markets before the twelfth century? What evidence do we have for fairs and markets of Gaelic, or other Celtic, origin?

The next rule is to look afresh at all the evidence of placenames and fairs with a checklist in your fist. Placenames to look for will be *aonach*, a fair or market, and *comhdhail*, an assembly. Fairs dedicated to Celtic saints will need to be looked at very carefully, because on the face of it it seems unlikely that such names would have arisen after the twelfth century. Also liable to be ancient, perhaps even more ancient, are fairs associated with the four Celtic quarterdays of St Brigid's (1 February), Beltane (1 May), Lammas (1 August) and Samhain (1 November). Then there are cases where the earliest grants refer to an existing fair, or where a non-commercial element such as races or fires or handfasting looms suspiciously large in the tradition, or where the fair is held at night, or bears a strange name like Aikey Fair, Fyke Fair, Senzie Fair or the Japping Market at Dowally.

Any or all of these items in our checklist might, repeat might, be a sign of great antiquity. I will look at them in more detail next time. With examples, of course.

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