

Écu, almighty father of great markets

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

THERE'S nothing quite so weird and wonderful as the names of some of the old Scottish fairs. There's Whistle Fair and Troit Fair, Stobbs Fair and Bells Fair, Aikey Fair and Pepper's Fair, Gowk Fair and Trewel Fair, the Clog Market and the Goose Market. Then there's Paldy Fair and Groset Fair, Hagg Fair and Bathie Fair, Hogget Fair and Seingie Fair, Breag Fair and Lung Fair, the Japping Market and the Sleepy Market, not to mention strange-sounding fair-days like Tennant's Day and Play Feersday and Scarce Thursday. There are plenty of fairs dedicated to saints, but what about saints no-one has ever heard of? Like St Tarse Fair and St Norman's, St Carden's and St Jonah's, St Tear's and St Trothersmas. Who on earth are they?

Once investigated, some of these names will turn out to be very old, some not so old at all. It's quite possible that the name of a fair in the heart of the Lowlands may turn out to have Gaelic origins, such is the antiquity of some of these gatherings. And of course in the Highlands there are some Gaelic names that are hard to explain, like *Féill an Bhois* and *Féill Eiteachain*.

It's difficult to get information on names such as these, because nobody has ever brought the whole subject together. All I can do is say what little I know at the moment. In some cases that just means mentioning where and when the fair took place, and speculating as to what the name might mean. For example, the Whistle Fair was held till about 1890 at Airth in Stirlingshire on the last Tuesday of July. There had been a July fair in Airth since at least 1597, held at first on the 24th and later on the 14th. Was it started by the blowing of a whistle?

The Troit Fair was held at Alyth in Perthshire down to 1845 or so, at what time of year I have no idea. What I do know however is that Troit Monday was an alternative name for Handsel Monday, the first Monday after New Year's Day. Troit means 'treat'; Handsel Monday was the one legally-sanctioned holiday in the year for farm servants, and was associated above all with presents and treats.

The younger and poorer members of the community went from door to door in quest of bannocks and other gifts; in school, favours (small presents) were exchanged between teacher and pupils and then the class was dismissed for the day. In Gaelic the name of the day was *Di-Luain Sainnseil* (from 'Handsel') or *Di-Luain Traoight* (or *Troight*, or *Trait*, or *Traoit*, or in Skye *Traosta*). Whatever the spelling, 'troit' is what lies behind it.

I can't find the slightest trace of a fair in Alyth on the first Monday of the year, but an almanack for 1814 lists one there on Fasten's Even — that is, Shrove Tuesday. Was the term 'Troit' applied to Shrove Tuesday, I wonder?

One name that is not hard to explain is the Sleepy Market. This was held in May on the green beside Christ's Kirk of Udny at Kennethmont in Aberdeenshire. It began about sunset and ended an hour after sunrise. Around 1758 the proprietor changed it from night to day, but so devoted were the people to the old custom that they abandoned the fair completely rather than comply with the alteration.

A number of our strange names are those of saints, and these will be among the oldest of our fairs. Trewel Fair (also at Kennethmont) is the Fair of St Rule (or Regulus), just as Trinnian's is St Ninian's, and Tennant's Day at Beith in Ayrshire is the Day of St Finan — in Gaelic *Latha Fhéill Fhionain*, with silent *Fh*. Mrs Mary MacLeod Banks pointed out in her valuable account of fairs in 'British Calendar Customs: Scotland' that "the names of Scottish saints underwent strange disguises on the lips of pedlars and hucksters, who could use greater freedom with these on merry fair days than with those of wider fame".

So Paldy Fair in Kincardineshire is the Fair of St Palladius. The Lung Fair at Tarland in Aberdeenshire bears the name, not of an internal organ, but of a good Gaelic saint — Mo-Luag of Lismore. Similarly, Sumereve's Fair at Elgin, despite being held on 5 September, had nothing to do with summer evenings — it was the Fair of St Ma-Ruibhe of Applecross. Then there is the market of St Trothermas at Olig in Caithness, which appears on maps as Trothanmas and is remembered in oral tradition as Tustimas; as a recent edition of the magazine 'Tocher' pointed out, the saint here is neither Norseman nor Gael but a Pict, St Drostan of Deer in Buchan.

Which brings me to Aikey Fair. By 1800 or so, thanks to the cattle trade, the market held in the first week of July on Aikey Brae near Old Deer in Buchan had become the biggest in the north of Scotland. Alexander's 'Northern Rural Life in the Eighteenth Century' (1877) offers for it the kind of description which (like Mrs Banks) I cannot resist quoting *in extenso*, because it pulsates with the lives of ordinary people. "On the day preceding the great annual fair, cattle were to be seen converging from all sides to fields within easy reach of the stance. Dealers and others from a distance came, all on horseback. Thus at the ford of the Ebrie, some eight miles off, as many as a hundred horsemen would pass on the evening before the fair. They rode not infrequently at full gallop. Bets on the comparative merits of their horses gave rise to racing, but there was, in addition, the notion that it involved a slur to allow your neighbour to pass you on your road to the fair."

Alexander goes on: "On the day of the fair fifty or sixty acres of Aikey Brae were covered with human beings, cattle, horses, and various kinds of merchandise. Aikey Fair day was regarded as the great summer holiday, and both old and young flocked to it. It was the boast to have seen so many fairs. As many as 10,000 persons are said to have been sometimes present, all attired in their Sunday best. The men appeared in the old-fashioned home-spun, woven, and tailored coat and vest, with big pockets and big buttons, knee breeches and hose, all made of the wool of the sheep reared at home. They wore shoes with long buckles, and some of the rustic dandies came dressed in white trousers and vest.

"The women were also in their 'braws', those who could afford it dressed in white. They generally wore high-crowned gipsy mitches. The gentry made a point of attending the fair, and several carriages might always be seen at it. The traffic included cattle, horses, sheep, merchandise, and chap-book literature. Pipers came from the country around and a dance would be improvised on the green-sward. As time wore on came the 'slicht o' han' men'. Cattle and horses were the animals chiefly exposed for sale. Most of the cattle sold were driven south to be fattened on the rich pastures of England. Seventy years ago as many as 6,000 beasts are said to have passed through Tarves in a continuous drove, a mile long, on their way south the day after the fair."

Everyone seems to agree that Aikey Fair is ancient. It makes a pair in Old Deer with St Drostan's in December. It is mentioned in 1661 as beginning on the first Tuesday of July, and continuing for the rest of the week. Alexander describes how Aikey Brae slopes downward to the north, affording an extensive view, with the ruins of the Abbey of Deer nestling among the orchard gardens of Pitfour. Six miles to the north, he adds, is Mormond Hill, the highest in Buchan, where the figure of a white horse occupies an acre of ground on the south slope, the space within the outline of the animal being covered with white quartzose stones.

Mrs Banks was equally captivated by the antique atmosphere of the place. "The district was recorded by the Romans as a seat of Pictish authority," she says, "and the remains found in peat-bogs near, those of red deer and wild bulls of enormous size, with battle axes and flint arrow-heads, coffins with clay urns, as well as sculptured stones, carry us back to times long before its fame as a centre of Christian teaching. Legends tell of its first stone church, of St Drostan, commemorated by Dunstan Fair in December, and of the abbey, keeper for many years of the Book of Deer, with marginalia and decoration of early Celtic character. This treasure of historical and pre-historical remains points to early settlement where gatherings for trade and entertainment must have been widely known long before an Act of Parliament gave them licence in 1661."

The marginalia in the Book of Deer (now in Cambridge) date from the twelfth century and are the oldest surviving texts in Scottish Gaelic. They mention Pitfour, and I will be come back to them in a minute. But what I want to ask now is, who or what is Aikey?

Well, local tradition has it that Aikey Brae and Aikey Fair are named for a pedlar known as Auld Aikey. At some very early date he had the misfortune to drop his pack into the water while crossing the River Ugie on some stepping-stones, a mile west of the Abbey of Deer. Fishing it out, he laid the contents to dry on the slope above the river, 300 yards downstream. He had prints and woollens, some in gaudy colours, and passers-by were so taken by them that he was soon sold out. He promised to show them something better still if they would meet him next year at the same time and place, and so a popular annual market became established.

Is there any way of identifying Auld Aikey? I think there is. I believe he is none other than St Féchín of Fore in Westmeath, who died in 665 or 668 and who also appears to have given his name to St Vigeans near Arbroath. In his 'Celtic Place-Names of Scotland', Professor Watson points out that the affectionate form of his name was *Mo Fhécu* (or, when *Fh* became silent, *Mo Écu*). This occurs in the placename Lesmahagow in Lanarkshire, *Lios Mo Fhécu*, which may thus be translated 'My Aikey's Enclosure'. While Gaelic was still spoken in Buchan, Aikey Fair would have been *Féill Écu*. I have come across no record of what the eighteenth-century Highland drovers called it, but I would expect it to have been *Féill Euga*. Aikey Brae is pure Gaelic and would have been *Bràigh Euga*.

If proof be required, it is found in the Book of Deer, where two separate legal documents are recorded as witnessed by a person or persons, *Mael Fhéchín*, whose name ('the Servant of St Féchín') arises from the cult of St Féchín. In one case it is spelt *Malaechín* and in the other *Malechí*, which may reflect the affectionate name Aikey itself.

The date of the fair offers another check, and here we run into problems. Aikey Fair is in July; St Féchín's Day is 20 January. The best proof of all that St Vigeans near Arbroath is named for St Féchín is that St Vigeans Fair was held there on 20 January. It is a real difficulty, but it may be that Féchín was commemorated in July as well as in January.

Some evidence for this is forthcoming from Galloway, where the village of Auchencairn boasted a 'Fyke's Fair'. Fyke may have been our saint, and the fair was another sleepy market — a sign of antiquity, I dare say. "It began at 10 o'clock at night," says Mrs Banks, "and continued through the night and part of the next day. It was held in the latter part of July, distinguished by its pony, cuddy and foot races. The most popular race was a foot race between a party of old dames for a packet of tea."

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