

The strange story of Sunday markets

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

IN MY last article I mentioned a couple of traditional Scottish fairs which were noted for being held at night, and pointed out that this may be a sign of antiquity. You don't meet in the dark for purposes of trade, after all, but if the aim is to hold a fire festival, to carry out a rite of sacrifice, to mark a boundary of time, or to greet the arrival of some particular dawn, then the hours of darkness are entirely appropriate.

One such gathering was held at night, however, for a very different reason. The 'Statistical Account' of 1796 tells us that the weekly market on Saturdays at Kirkcaldy in Fife began between 3 and 4 a.m. and was generally over by 6 a.m. The custom was probably introduced, the writer points out, to evade the law which prohibited Saturday and Monday markets. And the convenience of attending the market in the morning and returning home in time for the ordinary labour of the day had induced the country people to continue the custom, despite the frequent attempts that had been made to alter it.

Now that is just one of the strange twists in the story. Markets have always arisen where people have congregated on a regular basis, and in historic terms the most basic market of all was the one that took place as people left the Sunday service. But there were bound to be conflicts of interests. For parishioners from remote districts it was the only chance of the week to buy essential supplies. For traders it was therefore an opportunity too good to miss. But for the church it might mean sacrilege and desecration.

A tradition of *Féilltean Domhnaich*, Sunday Markets, was remembered in Lewis until recently. It is not so many generations ago that tobacco was sold in Uig after the sermon. Before the eras of travelling vans and of shops, the *ceannaichean siubhail* or pedlars clustered round the church door on Sundays like bees to a honey pot.

Back a little further, in the seventeenth century, Baron Court records such as those of Breadalbane tell us how Sunday markets were regulated. Every Sabbath the tenants of Campbell of Glenorchy in Kenmore parish had to come to church with their 'bowis and baggis, or ellis with swordis and targis under paine of XX. lbs. for disobedience'. It may be assumed that the 'baggis' should contain a good clutch of arrows to practise with. The quality of ale was controlled by 'cunstaris' (*cunnstairean?*) or inspectors who visited the ale-houses every Sunday. To ensure that the ale was fit for use on Sunday it must be brewed on Thursday. No ale could be sold before preaching on Sundays. And whisky was completely banned.

So governments swayed this way and that. In the Middle Ages we find Sunday markets being encouraged (or at least legislated for) by Acts of Parliament. For example, when King Robert the Bruce erected Seton in East Lothian into a free burgh he gave it liberty to have a market on the Sabbath Day. And in 1542 Crawford in Lanarkshire was made a free burgh of barony with a right to a weekly market on Sunday. One of the latest grants of a Sunday market was to Prestonpans in 1552, when Queen Mary granted the town as a burgh of barony to the abbot and convent of Holyrood; in 1617 a charter of her son, James VI, confirmed the town's status but changed its market day to Saturday.

When things got out of hand, however, or when spiritual interests predominated over commercial ones, governments went the other way. So in 1397 Robert III directed his chancellor to issue a charter empowering the burgesses and community of Glasgow to keep their market day on Monday instead of Sunday. It was perhaps the earliest of a number of statutes in which pre-Reformation governments can be found trying to prohibit the holding of markets or fairs on Holy Days because of the ungodliness they created. They tried and tried, but with only partial success, for what people do on Sunday cannot ultimately be controlled by legislation.

*Moch 's mi 'g éirigh air bheag éislein
Madainn Chéitein Dhomhnaich,
Bha eòin an t-sléibhe gairm gu h-eutrom
'S grian nan speur cur ròs dheth;
'N tìs moch mhadainn 's mi m'èideadh
Ghabh mi sìos gu sràid na féille —
Choinnich na cairdean r'a chéile
'S dh'fhalbh mi fhéin 'nan comhdhail.*

"As I rose early despite some weariness / On a Sunday morning in May, / The birds of the hill were calling cheerily / And the sun of the skies glowed red; / In dawn's first light once I was dressed / I walked down to the market stance — / Friends and kinsfolk met each other / And I went along to join them."

*Dh'fhalbh mi fhéin agus fear no dhà dhiubh
Ghabhail sràide comhla:
Smaointich sinn, 's an latha fuar,*

*Ruaig thoirt don taigh òsta;
Chunnaig mi fear gàireach ruadh
A'tighinn a-nall le làn na cuaich —
Bha glacadh làmh againn mun cuairt
Le gloine chruaidh ga pògadh . . .*

“I went off with one or two of them / To take a walk together: / We decided, the day being cold, / To drop in at the tavern; / I saw a laughing red-haired man / Come over with brimming cupful — / Joining hands around the circle / We kissed the sturdy glass . . .”

The balance was tilted against commercial interests by the Reformation of 1560. The General Assembly of the earliest Reformed church, about 1560-75, began by expressing disapproval of the holding of markets on the Sabbath. This, as session records show, was merely part of a wider campaign to avoid distractions in time of preaching. So, for example, an Act of the Privy Council of 1574 enjoined the magistrates of Aberdeen to prohibit the keeping of Sabbath markets, and from this point on, successive burgh charters of Aberdeen specified the power of holding a weekly market on Saturdays.

However, sabbatarianism of a more Mosaic kind gained ground in the time of Andrew Melville. In 1579 the Scots parliament forbade all forms of working by hand, bodily recreation and drinking on Sundays, and the General Assembly added condemnation of Sunday dancing and travel. There commences a spate of legislation in which Parliament struggles to enforce its hardline views on the merchant burgesses who control the country's markets. So a charter of James VI, 1587-8, changes the weekly market at Tain from Sunday to Saturday.

Reading between the lines of such legislation, one can detect a long-standing tendency for markets to be held on Sundays in defiance of the law. For example, a charter of 1540 had granted Dalkeith a weekly market on Thursday, yet in 1581 it somehow required an Act of Parliament to change its weekly market from Sunday to Thursday. Again, Parliament changed Crail's weekly market in 1587 from Sunday to Saturday, yet this seems to have had no effect, and another Act of Parliament was required in 1607 to change it from Sunday to Friday. In 1589 Nairn was given a weekly market on Saturday, yet in 1661 another Act of Parliament was required to change it from Sunday to Friday.

In the case of Pittenweem no legislation appeared to be necessary, given that pre-Reformation statutes of 1526 and 1540-1 had provided for markets on Saturday and Monday. Yet an Act of 1663 changed the markets hitherto held on Sunday and Monday to Tuesday. Combined with the decay of such little Fife towns, the result was perhaps inevitable — by 1692 there was no weekly market there at all.

In other cases one senses that a process of weaning was deemed necessary. So, for example, Culross in Fife had a Sunday market, with a charter of James IV from 1490 to justify it. The charter of James VI which erects Culross into a Royal Burgh in 1588 grants the town a weekly market on Tuesday, but a further charter of 1592 authorises it to be held on a Saturday.

Rural districts appear to have got less subtle treatment. In August 1590 Lord Somerville was cited before the General Assembly for holding a market on the Sabbath in his burgh of Carnwath in upper Lanarkshire. He appeared, brandishing the charter of 1491 that authorised a new market to be held there on Sundays, and pleading “an ancient custom and privilege granted to him and his predecessors by the kings of Scotland and confirmed by James IV and V”. But on being threatened with the censure of the Church, he agreed that no market should be held there any more on that day.

Legislation is a tricky business, and sometimes the Reformers took two bites at the cherry before they got it right. In a charter of 1594 to the then-powerful burgh of Elie in Fife they confirmed all previous charters and granted the power to hold free markets and fairs “as often and on such days as they had been in use to be kept”. Discovering their error, in a renewed charter of 1598-9 they specified that the Elie market should be on Saturdays. It seems to have done little good, for in 1672 an Act of Parliament changed the town's market from Sundays to Tuesdays.

If even Elie could be overlooked, far-off Fortrose could be forgotten. A charter was issued to Fortrose on 6 August 1590 confirming its burgh charter of 1455. Unfortunately for the Reformers' point of view, this had given its burgesses and inhabitants the right (among other things) to two weekly markets, one on Monday, the other on the Sabbath. Not until 1661 was the mistake rectified, and the Fortrose markets changed by Parliament from Sunday and Monday to Tuesday and Friday.

Meddling on this scale must have caused great local strife. We have already noticed the fate of Pittenweem. Traditional market days were strung along the circuits of merchants and pedlars like beads on a necklace. Sunday markets were among the biggest and most lucrative of all, and the communities losing them faced an uncertain economic future. The point is well illustrated by the plight of Forfar. In 1593 Parliament changed its weekly market from Sunday to Friday, but by 1793 it was being held on Saturdays, and in that year the writer of the ‘Statistical Account’ of the parish stated: “At what time the change was made from Friday to Saturday was not known, but the reason of the change appears to have been that Friday interfered with the great weekly market in Dundee, and that the other days in the week were kept as fair days by the other towns in the shire.”

During the seventeenth century the cattle trade increased steadily in importance just as sabbatarianism was gaining a firm grip on the minds of the Scottish people. Drovers were rough folk who reckoned that the Sabbath was made for man, and all through the century the records of the Privy Council and of the Church contain constant complaints of Sunday droving and describe efforts to prevent it. For that and other reasons, markets which fell on a Saturday or Monday were gradually switched to another day of the week.

The Fife town of Largo had a Saturday market, granted by charter in 1513 and confirmed in 1542 and 1594, but in 1596-7 it was changed to Friday. An Act of Parliament of 1603 granted weekly markets to Edinburgh on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, but successive Acts to prevent the profanation of Sunday in 1639, 1640 and 1644 transferred all Monday markets in Edinburgh and Glasgow to Wednesdays. According to the 1640 Act, wool, butter, cheese, skins, hides, shoes and 'unfreeman's work' were traded on Mondays in Edinburgh, while horses, live cattle, meal, bear (barley), craftsmen's work, salt, salt butter, cheese and timber were traded on Mondays in Glasgow.

Later accounts spell out graphic reasons for such changes. In 1645, we are told, the town council of Linlithgow "appointed Tuesday and Saturday to be market days for the sale of leather, but afterwards substituted Friday for Saturday on account of the drinking which took place on the latter day, with the consequent effect that many could not attend church on the Lord's Day with becoming preparation".

Two hundred years later, the author of the 'New Statistical Account' of Turriff in Aberdeenshire tells us that "feeing markets had been established at Whitsunday and Martinmas, and if these had been found an accommodation in some respects, it had been dearly purchased by their corrupting influence on the morals of a large class of society. At all events, if these markets were to be kept up, it would be well if the Scots Statute of 1605 were acted on, and any other day than Saturday chosen for holding them."

Feeing markets were for the hire of agricultural labour, and it is worth noting that the Turriff hiring fairs remained on Saturdays for as long as they lasted — into the present century. The Reformers' legislative tide had long since ebbed. It had reached its high-water mark in an Act of 1656 which forbade anyone to bake bread, 'profanely walk', travel, or do any other worldly business on Sundays, and even then, at least two Lowland markets were still being held on Sundays as they had been from time immemorial; its last little splash, perhaps, had been in 1799 when Arbroath changed its Saturday market to a Thursday.

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