

Bells, clogs and whistles

The Quern-Dust Calendar — Ragnall MacilleDhuibh

A FEW weeks ago I mentioned the names of some of our strange-sounding old Scottish fairs. After that (but before I got onto the topic of chess) I tried to explain one or two of them. Most of them are still hanging in the air, however, so perhaps it is time for me to pluck a few more off the list and try to provide some answers — or at least draw attention to the questions.

Let me simply start by repeating the list. 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 fairs dedicated to mysterious saints, like St Tarse Fair and St Norman's, St Carden's and St Jonah's, St Tear's and St Trothersmas. And finally there are names that are more obviously Gaelic than most, like *Féill an Bhois* and *Féill Eiteachain*.

Now some are easier than others, for some I am willing to make a guess, and for others I haven't a clue. I'll take some of the easy ones first.

The 'Goose Market' was the name given to the annual fair at Drummond, in the Easter Ross parish of Kiltearn, Ross-shire, in the first week of December. "The proprietor exacted no toll or custom, but maintained a guard while the market lasted to keep order and to prevent riots," says the 'Statistical Account' of the parish, written in 1791. It was obviously a long-established gathering, if we may contrast that description with this one of Drumoak on the Kincardine/Aberdeenshire border in the 'New Statistical Account' of 1845: there were five annual fairs there, we are told, and "being of recent appointment, they are very ill attended".

But why the Goose Market? Well, the bird universally fattened up for the Christmas table was the goose, and it is nice to think that this may have remained true of the North even in the Days of the Fathers. The Rev. Murdoch MacKenzie of Elgin, said to have been so zealous that he swore to the Covenant fourteen times, searched the houses of that town at Christmas 1659 in an effort to root out the cooking of the pernicious bird. "These feathers," he is said to have told the people, "will rise up against you one day."

A minister of the opposite inclination was reputedly censured for eating goose on Christmas Day. Another story tells of an old lady whose Christmas dinner was boiling merrily over a blazing fire when she saw the minister coming to the door. She whipped the pot off the fire, but could not think of any better place to hide it before the minister entered the door than under the bedcover. She was sitting at her spinning-wheel when he came in. He was so delighted to find that she "longed not for the flesh-pots of Egypt", as he put it, that he overstayed his welcome, and suddenly the bedclothes burst into flame.

She had to do penance for both heresy and hypocrisy.

Coming closer to this time of year, the 'Gowk Fair' was recalled about 1890 by an 80-year-old resident in Kippen, Stirlingshire, as being held on the second Wednesday of April, Old Style, for seed, oats and barley sold by sample, and also for a stallion show. By 1890 it had been discontinued for some years. The Old Style dating proves that it was in existence in 1752 when the calendar was changed; the name 'Gowk Fair' is another seasonal one, as a gowk is a cuckoo. What I'm not sure about is whether it refers to 'hunting the gowk' — being sent on a fool's errand — on 1 April, or to the arrival of the real gowk later in the month. It seems a bit too late for one and a bit too early for the other. Perhaps the cuckoo arrived earlier in those days.

There were other seed fairs. According to the 'New Statistical Account' of 1845, Forthingall in Perthshire had a 'Seed Fair' in the end of April, "because the tenants and others resort to it for their lintseed, clover seed, &c". And the 'Gowk Fair' and the 'Seed Fair' help us understand *Féill an Bhois*. This is my spelling of a name given in Marwick's 'List of Markets and Fairs in Scotland' of 1890 as "*Feill 'an vois*, or the seed market". Held at Logierait in Perthshire in April, it was a fair of considerable importance in its day, and drew together large crowds, Logierait occupying a central situation near the confluence of the rivers Tay and Tummel. It was discontinued about 1825. *Féill an Bhois* means 'the Palm (or Fistful) Market', really, and in form it must be a Perthshire corruption of what would have been called elsewhere *Féill na Boise*. The seed would have been sold "by sample", as we are told of the Gowk Fair, and perhaps the *bas* or fistful was some kind of standard measure used by all.

The 'Hogget Fair' was in April too — by 1890, the Hogget Fair and April Show at Lockerbie in Dumfriesshire were on 10 April. This will be hogget in the sense of a hog or yearling sheep.

The 'Groset Fair' is yet another seasonal marker. The fair at Callander on the third Tuesday of July, still surviving in 1890, was generally known by this name. Also called the Groset or Grozete Fair was one at Rutherglen, also still existing in 1890, and held on the Friday after 25 July, for horses and cows. A groset fair is defined by the 'Concise Scots Dictionary' as an agricultural fair, especially the one held in Kilmarnock at the beginning of August. Clearly it was a fair held when the grosets or gooseberries were ripe.

Now I don't know when in the year the 'Japping Market' was held, but I hope it was in high summer too, because the jappers got wet. It was at Dowally, on the Tay between Logierait and Dunkeld. Japping is a Scots word that means splashing. During the course of the day the cowherds ranged themselves on each side of the burn of Dowally. At a given signal they started beating furiously at the water with sticks until one side or the other gave way. The losing team left the market with their tails between their legs, and the winners, we are told, "had the exclusive honour of treating the lasses to fruit, and the enjoyment of their society at the ball".

At this point it begins to get harder. Still in Perthshire, there was a market at Easter Aberlednock called Fordew Fair. It is on record from 1681, and was held on 25 November. The name is a mystery to me, but I am tempted to wonder if it is very old. Easter Aberlednock is at Comrie in the Pictish kingdom of Fortriu. Is it

possible that the name Fordew preserves the name of the ancient kingdom, and that the fair is thus a relic of the chief gathering place of its people?

Now if Fordew Fair is not very, very old, it might in 1681 have been very, very new — that is, it bears some resemblance to Fordyce, and might at a pinch be somebody's surname. As I will demonstrate next time, some landlords in the late seventeenth century developed the habit of coining fair-names anew, and there is at least one good example, I think, of a fair bearing a man's surname — Kilbirnie in Ayrshire used to have a fair called Crawford's Day, and as it was held on the last Tuesday of October, Old Style, it must have originated before 1752.

Bathie Fair, Hagg Fair, Stobbs Fair and Bell's Fair may be cases in point, although I suspect that Bell's Fair, at least, is not. All of these are on record as Scottish surnames. Hagg Fair and Bathie Fair were both held at Greenbarn in Aberdeenshire, having been authorised in 1701 for the second Thursday of June and the last Thursday of July respectively. They seem to have been well attended until the 1860s, but by 1890 the stance on which they were held, says Marwick, "has been enclosed by the Messrs Pirie, of Stoneywood Works, and given over as a people's park for the use of their workpeople". The names may be surnames, local placenames, or something else again.

Stobbs Fair certainly sounds like a surname. It was held at Dundee on the Tuesday after 11 July, and still existed in 1890. The parish of Mains and Strathmartine in Angus also had a 'Stobs' Fair on the same day, for cattle, sheep and horses, and it, too, was still being held in 1890. It sounds as if the two fairs share a common origin. It may be that, as happened elsewhere, the country fair was moved into the town, but that in this case the country version continued to exist all the same.

Stobbs Fair and Bells Fair have a lot in common too. There was a hiring fair called Bell's Fair at Dundee on the first Friday of October, while Mains and Strathmartine also had a Bells Fair on the same day and for the same purpose — the hiring of servants. However, according to the 'New Statistical Account', there was a Ball-day at Kilwinning in Ayrshire on the first Wednesday of November — formerly for cattle, but now for both cattle and horses. By 1890 it was being held on the first Monday of November, and was noted as Bell's Day. This was interpreted by the writer of the 'Account' as Baal's Day, which perhaps reflects his view of the drinking, fighting, gambling and other things that went on.

So far it seems likely enough (despite 'Ball-day') that Bell is the surname, but there is other evidence that makes me feel unsure about that. At Airth in Stirlingshire there was a Whistle Fair, held till about 1890 on the last Tuesday of July. Then there was the Clog Market at Comrie, held till about 1890 on the first Wednesday of December. I could be wrong, but clogmaking strikes me as an unfamiliar and unlikely craft for a Scottish fair. Couldn't it be Gaelic *clog* or *clag* 'a bell'? Isn't it possible that the Clog Fair, the Whistle Fair and Bell's Fair were so called because they started and finished to the sound of these instruments?

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