



## **THE BURGH OF BANFF:**

### **AN OVERVIEW OF THE MAIN EVENTS AND DEVELOPMENTS**

#### **DURING THE PERIOD 1795 – 1855**

Arriving by the coach road from Aberdeen in the closing years of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the visitor to Banff would have been impressed by the panorama of the ...‘ noble mansion of the Earl of Fife, ... the smooth flowing Deveron, with its stately bridge, the town and castle of Banff, the bay, harbour and shipping’<sup>1</sup>. This description draws a clear picture of Banff as a flourishing historic trading port, patronised by the Banffshire aristocracy and their illustrious guests.

In fact the characteristic features of modern Banff were recent additions to this scene: Duff House mansion dates from 1740, the Deveron bridge and the newly extended harbour from 1775 – 1779. A less conspicuous landmark would have been the Town House incorporating a court house and prison, on which construction started in 1796. A minute of the Burgh Council Head Court of 19<sup>th</sup> December 1795 records the agreement by the freeholders and proprietors of the county to contribute £700 to the estimated cost of £1,700, with an additional £100 ...‘if the work is well and handsomely finished’. It seems fair to conclude that this proved to be the case, since the building remains a serviceable Town Hall over two centuries later. The final civic improvement project of the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the enlargement of the Grammar School on the petition of the Schoolmaster John Cruickshank, reporting that it had become ...‘too small and confined for the accommodation of the scholars’ whose numbers had increased to 133<sup>2</sup>.

From 1784 until 1831 two names predominate in Burgh Council records, those of George Robinson and his son George Garden Robinson, who alternated as Provost for the majority of this period. The 1798 Statistical Account refers to a linen manufacturing business which had been established by the Robinson family in 1753 using flax imported from Holland and which provided employment for approximately 300 workers in milling, twisting and bleaching operations carried out within Banff itself, as well as 4000 spinners in outlying areas. In addition about 560 people were employed in manufacturing woollen stockings, for which the main market was London. As competition increased and demand fell, these businesses declined in the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and had ceased entirely by 1836<sup>3</sup>.

Census evidence hints at the demise of the textile industry, with 11 weavers recorded in 1841 and only 6 in 1851, during a period which saw a steady increase in the overall population of the Burgh. It seems likely that dressmaking and millinery gradually replaced spinning as home-based employment: between 1841 and 1851 dressmakers increased in number from 23 to 60, and milliners from 2 to 15.

With a population estimated at 2860 in the 1798 Statistical Account, there were, of course, many other commercial activities in the Burgh. Although no detailed information survives from

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1791-99/Banff/Banff/20/321/>.

<sup>2</sup> Banff Burgh Council Minutes, 11<sup>th</sup> June 1796.

<sup>3</sup> <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1834-45/Banff/Banff/13/44/>.



contemporary sources, the Burgh Council minutes of 1795 record elections to the Shoemakers, Wrights, Tailors, Coopers and Weavers Guilds, from which it may be inferred that significant numbers were practising these trades at the time. The Statistical Account also mentions the brewery with 8 employees, a soap & candle works employing 5 and a rope & sail works operating on a small scale. The lease of land at Clayholes for use as a brick works is noted in the Burgh Council minutes of 26<sup>th</sup> August 1796, but as no later references have been identified, it would appear that this enterprise was short-lived.

Given its situation at the mouth of the Deveron, Banff's prosperity was closely linked to its status as a trading port. In 1798 according to the Statistical Account, 137 men were employed on 22 Banff-based vessels, while the largest shipbuilder provided work for 12 men. During the 1790s trading was somewhat hampered by military conflict between Britain and France, but the first 30 years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw imports from Norway, Sweden, Germany, Russia and even from Canada, with cargoes of timber destined for use in barrel-making and ship-building<sup>4</sup>. Exports for a similar period exports consisted of grain, herrings, salmon and livestock, the latter enterprise having proved particularly successful since it was established in 1826<sup>5</sup>.

Until 1809 harbour affairs had been directed by the Burgh Council, but with increasing coastal trade, a separate managing committee was established, consisting of magistrates, merchants and shipowners<sup>6</sup>. Keen to encourage the emerging herring fishing business, the Harbour Committee put forward plans in 1816 for improving harbour facilities by the construction of a new pier to a design by Thomas Telford. Progress was severely disrupted in 1819 by a hurricane and work was not completed until 1828, by which time costs had reached £17,000<sup>7</sup>. Harbour Committee minutes do not survive for the period before 1833, but the revenue surplus of £663 reported in 1835 was declared to be ... 'the best evidence that the trade of the port continues in a prosperous and improving state'<sup>8</sup>.

Despite the protracted harbour improvements, the early 1820s saw significant development at the northern end of the town, in the vicinity of the new pier. A plan of Banff drawn up in 1823 by John Wood of Edinburgh shows a proposed new street leading west from the harbour area and Burgh Sasines for 1821 indicate that this was becoming a desirable residential area, with 8 properties purchased here out of 14 in the Burgh as a whole, the new proprietors including merchants and lawyers<sup>9</sup>.

Fishing appears to have been under-exploited until the early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, according to Head Court Minutes dated 29<sup>th</sup> December 1809, when the magistrates resolved to encourage settlement of white fishers from other ports by providing housing at low rents. With 24 fisherman listed in the census for 1841 and 1851, it would seem that this strategy proved successful in the longer term.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ian Hustwick, *Moray Firth Ships and Trade*, Aberdeen, 1994, p.118.

<sup>5</sup> <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1834-45/Banff/Banff/13/43/>.

<sup>6</sup> Banff Burgh Council Head Court Minutes, 8th April 1809.

<sup>7</sup> William Cramond, *The Annals of Banff*, Aberdeen, 1893, Vol II, p.237.

<sup>8</sup> Banff Harbour Committee Minutes, 7<sup>th</sup> October 1835.

<sup>9</sup> Banff Burgh Sasines record purchases by Lewis Cruickshank, merchant on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1821, George Robinson Forbes, writer, on 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1821 and James Smith, writer, on 20<sup>th</sup> December 1821.



As the population of the Burgh increased, public health became a priority, and although water cisterns had existed prior to this date, it was resolved at a Council meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1810 to establish a supply of piped water. John Blaikie, an Aberdeen plumber was contracted to carry out the work, including construction of reservoirs, at a cost of £654<sup>10</sup>. Similar concerns probably lay behind the appointment in 1822 of the first town scavenger, employed at a rate of three shillings weekly for cleaning the streets of the burgh each day<sup>11</sup>. Further modernisation came when the Banff Gas Light Company was established in 1831. The Council lost no time in introducing gas lighting to the Council Chamber and approved the purchase of a suitably impressive chandelier costing 8 guineas, whereas the Town Clerk and Chamberlain were directed to illuminate their offices ... 'in such a way as they may fix upon, having regard to cheapness and plainness'<sup>12</sup>.

Brief mention has already been made of the Grammar School, where in 1786 the forward-thinking Rector had introduced a revolutionary curriculum, supplementing the usual classical studies with algebra, geometry and navigation<sup>13</sup>. Perhaps as a consequence of this, pupil numbers continued to increase dramatically so that, even after the enlargement carried out in 1796, the Burgh Council found it necessary in 1805 to add another storey to the building in order to provide adequate classroom accommodation. Eventually a generous bequest allowed the magistrates to lay plans for new premises on a different site and on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1838 the Grammar School was rehoused in an imposing Grecian Ionic building, which still serves today as a primary school.

The progressive mood also prevailed at the 1843 Disruption, when the Parish Minister resigned to set up a Free Church congregation. No time was lost in erecting their own church, which was completed in 1844. There was room for every religious persuasion in Banff: the John Wood map of 1823 shows a Methodist Chapel, Congregational Church and Episcopal Church in addition to the Parish Kirk.

By the mid 1840s it must have seemed that every change of wind brought more innovations. While sailing ships still remained in use for some decades, the impact of steamers was to accelerate journeys by sea and in 1846 the inhabitants of Banff were offered a twice-weekly service to London, announced in an Aberdeen Steam Navigation Company advertisement in the Banffshire Journal newspaper which in 1845 had set up premises in the old Grammar School building<sup>14</sup>. The more adventurous might have been tempted by the prospect of a passage direct from Banff to Melbourne, also advertised by the Banffshire Journal<sup>15</sup>. A revolution in land travel was also on the horizon: the Burgh Council had indicated support for the proposed Great Northern Railway as early as 1844, but commercial constraints meant that there was a long wait at the platform of Banff Harbour Station<sup>16</sup>. When the inaugural train carrying railway directors finally arrived there in 1860, welcoming onlookers were witnessing the opening of a new chapter in Banff's history.

---

<sup>10</sup> Banff Burgh Council Minutes, 6<sup>th</sup> November 1810.

<sup>11</sup> Banff Burgh Council Minutes, 4<sup>th</sup> December 1822.

<sup>12</sup> Banff Burgh Council Minutes 25<sup>th</sup> Oct 1831.

<sup>13</sup> <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1791-99/Banff/Banff/20/361/>.

<sup>14</sup> Banffshire Journal, 4<sup>th</sup> January 1846.

<sup>15</sup> Banffshire Journal, 19<sup>th</sup> July 1852.

<sup>16</sup> Banff Burgh Council Minutes, 20<sup>th</sup> May 1844.



## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

### **Publications:**

Banff Preservation & Heritage Society, *The Book of Banff*, Wellington, 2008.  
Cramond, William, *The Annals of Banff*, Aberdeen, 1891 – 93 (2 vols).  
Hustwick, Ian, *Moray Firth Ships & Trade*, Aberdeen, 1994.  
Wood, John, *Plan of the town of Banff*, Edinburgh, 1823.

### **Online resources:**

<http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1791-99/Banff/Banff/>.  
<http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1834-45/Banff/Banff/>.

### **Archive sources:**

GB228/BH/1, Banff Burgh Council Minutes  
GB228/BH1/4/5, Banff Burgh Council Head Court Minutes  
GB228/BH1/5/4, Banff Burgh Register of Sasines  
GB228/DED/BBbH770/2, Banff Burgh Council Harbour Committee Minutes

### **Other sources:**

General Register Office for Scotland, 1841 Census: Registration District 147  
General Register Office for Scotland, 1851 Census: Registration District 147