

Cleaning Up Victorian Dunfermline

Reminiscences and histories of nineteenth century Dunfermline present a rosy picture of steadily increasing improvement in all aspects of the town's life and in many respects this was true. However, contemporary records reveals a situation of widespread filth which only gradually improved throughout the century. There can be no doubt that the first thing a time traveller transported back to those days would notice would be the overpowering smell of the place.

Until the 1860s such drainage as existed was by inefficient stone-lined channels covered with flagstones and even the piped system that was built in that decade discharged raw sewage into the Tower and Lyne Burns. (The town's sewage, still untreated, was not piped to the Forth until 1877.) Flushing lavatories had been introduced early in the century but until the advent of drains they emptied into cess pits. The first piped network drained just the main streets of the town and was only gradually introduced into the outlying districts, leaving much of the population still dependent on the age-old privy and dung pit (cesspit). Such public 'necessaries' as there were consisted of privies or of a wooden plank pierced with holes with buckets beneath them.

The other major contributor to the stench was the accumulated dung of the horses, cows and pigs that were kept in the town. Animals were sometimes housed in disgusting conditions and the middens that accompanied their stables, byres and sties were often left to accumulate for weeks. Even if no animals were kept, households disposed of their waste on domestic middens and in ash-pits which were also infrequently cleaned out. Municipal refuse collection was not introduced until near the end of the century.

Who Was Responsible for Cleansing?

The Town Council, of course, bore some responsibility for trying to keep the town clean, but the two major official bodies concerned were the Commissioners of Police and the Parochial Board. The remit of the Commissioners of Police was a wide one; as well as overseeing the tiny 4-man police force they looked after pavements and road-making, street lighting and cleaning and the fire engines. The Commissioners' Cleansing Committee mainly concentrated on overseeing the street cleaning, which was done by a few 'scavengers' armed with birch brooms, rakes and shovels, the scrapings being carted to one of two 'dung depots' and sold to local farmers as manure. The Removal of Nuisances Act of 1849 made the Commissioners also responsible for the cleanliness of private premises but they lacked the funds and the manpower to apply the Act effectively.

The Parochial Board looked after the poor, running the Poors House and distributing outdoor relief to people on the official paupers roll who still lived in their own homes. The Board was also concerned for the health of the poor, who usually lived in the dirtiest parts of the town. It employed a doctor to treat persons on the pauper roll without charge but also did its best to deal with the worst obvious causes of disease, such as open sewers (referred to as ditches) defective drains and domestic filth.

Both the Commissioners and the Board were hampered by lack of funds. They were financed by rates paid by property-owners and tenants and both bodies were very reluctant to increase the rates in order to improve their services. The Commissioners especially were permanently in debt.

Diseases caused by dirt, such as typhus, were endemic for much of the century and, unless there was a major outbreak, they were accepted as a part of normal life, but there was one disease that caused panic among all the official bodies – cholera. There were two outbreaks of cholera in Dunfermline, one in 1832 was followed by a far worse epidemic in 1849, and three years after that it looked as though another one might be on its way. It had not yet been recognised that cholera is a water-borne disease – it was thought to be air-borne in the emanations from sources of filth which, as we have seen, were plentiful in the town.

The story of the sources of dirt in the town and the cleansing precautions taken against cholera in 1852 is best told by the records of the Police Commission and the Parochial

Board. The minutes of their meetings held at the time provide a graphic account of some of the smelliest places in the town and the way they were dealt with (or not).

Meeting of the Parochial Board

7 September 1852

Letters had been received from the Sheriff Substitute and the Medical Officer about the approach of cholera and the necessity of improving the sanitary condition of the town by removing nuisances (a 'nuisance' meant any accumulation or source of filth) and the proper regulation of lodging houses for the poor. The meeting unanimously agreed to co-operate with the Magistrates and the Police Commissioners in all steps considered advisable to improve the sanitary condition of the town. In the meantime the Inspector of the Poor and the Clerk were to take steps to suppress any nuisances brought to their attention, by exercising their powers under the Nuisances Removal Act.

Meeting of the Dunfermline Commissioners of Police

8 September 1852

The Provost submitted to the meeting a letter of 31st August from Sheriff Shirreff in regard to the approach of Cholera again from the East towards Britain, a copy of which follows.

Sheriff's Chambers Dunfermline

August 31/52

Dear Sir

Will you pardon me for bringing under your notice what you may probably have noticed yourself from the public prints, viz^t. the approach of Cholera again from the East towards Britain. Having the prospect of so direful a visitation at no distant period I think the authorities, without exciting panic amongst the inhabitants, should in pursuance of the powers now vested in them by the nuisance removal acts, make a vigorous crusade against filth in all its form; and let nuisance of every kind and description be removed.

In carrying into effect whatever measure may be necessary and competent thoroughly to cleans the Town and suburbs you may rely on my prompt co-operation and assistance.

I remain, My Dear Sir, yours most truly (signed) Chas Shirreff
(address) Wm Kinnis Esq, Provost of Dunfermline.

Also two letters from Dr Kinninburgh one to himself as Provost dated 1 Septr Current and another to the Commissioners dated 7th Septr Current, copies of which follow.

Dunfermline 1 Septr 1852.

Sir

I would most respectfully draw your attention to the fact that Cholera is again approaching this country. I observe from today's *Times* that it has spread from Wasson to Magdeburg on the Elbe. This is within a very short distance of Hamburg. From the great intercourse betwixt this country & Hamburg in all probability it will not be long of reaching some of our seaports. We are as ill prepared to meet the pestilence now as we were when it came last.

There are many accumulations of filth & other nuisances in all parts of the Town which will not fail to add to the inveteracy of the disease when it does com. I believe it to be contagious, but whether it is or not there cannot be a doubt but that residence in a filthy or overcrowded locality adds much to the malignance. My object in Drawing attention to this matter now is not to alarm but that whatever Sanitary measures the magistrates may think of adopting should be set about immediately ere the news reach us.

I would particularly direct attention to the swarms of Low lodging houses in town. These are filled night after night with travellers & other vagrants without the slightest regard to the size of the apartments. In these rooms there is not the slightest attempts made either at cleanliness nor ventilation & in all probability in one or other of these dens of filth will Cholera break out when it does come. I would ask the support of the Magistrates & of the Commissioners of Police in the attempt to regulate these Lodging houses. The Keepers of them should be compelled to keep them clean & should be prevented (from) admitting

more than a certain number of lodgers proportionate to the accommodation, a fine being inflicted for a breach of this regulation.

I also would most respectfully request to be armed with their authority to seek out for & cause to be removed all nuisances which are likely to hurt the public health & generally to have their Countenance in my endeavours to improve the state of our Wynds & closes.

I make no apology for thus introducing the matter on the notice of the Magistrates as I consider I am merely doing my duty. In my opinion the duties of the parochial Surgeon are not confined merely to attending the sick on the poor roll, but also extend to whatever is likely to influence the public health for good or for evil.

I reman, Sir, Your Most Obedient Svt. (signed) Joseph Kinninburgh Parochial Surgeon.
(address) William Kinnis Esq Provost

*To the Commissioners of Police.
Tuesday 7 Sepr 1852*

Gentlemen

Feeling anxious that in so far as we can we should be prepared beforehand in the event of Cholera paying us a visit, I along with Mr John Pearson, Sub-inspector of the Poor & Mr Lambert Superintendent of Police, made a tour on Monday night last through most of the low lodging houses in town. We found them, with the exception of one or two, exceedingly filthy & quite unfit for the abode of human beings. I would more particularly refer to two houses far below ground in Taylor's Close (next to the Old Inn) which ought to be shut up at once. They are not fit for Cows or pigs. In fact I am very certain that no man having a cow worth ten pounds would put her up for a single night in either of the places. There is also another house in the same close inhabited by a John Haggerty in a most horrible state.

We also visited Foley's in Bruce Street, Barney Conally's in Bruce Street, Mulvany's in Bruce Street, Widow Neill's North Chapel Street, John Campbell's North Chapel Street, Brady's North Chapel Street, Biddy Kyle's North Chapel Street, exceedingly damp & unhealthy, Mrs Judge's North Chapel Street, All these houses are in a very bad state & as a rule sadly overcrowded. The proprietors ought to be compelled to put them in repair & to whitewash & clean them thoroughly and the tenants to keep them clean & to ventilate them by opening the windows. No more beds than two should be allowed in each room & the lodging house keeper ought to be prohibited by fine from putting more than two persons in each bed.

I have thought it right to bring the matter under the notice of the Commissioners so that anyone who may wish to satisfy himself individually as to the true state of these lodging houses may know where to find them. With the exception of Mrs Shields in Queen Anne Street and a Mrs Shaw in Bruce St there was not a lodging house that we visited approaching ever to decency and Mrs Shields, although clean, was much overcrowded. I believe that under the nuisance act the Police Commissioners have the power to put down such dens of filth, but even although they had not that (power), even if they should overstep the letter of the law, it would be no great matter.

Pleading the urgency of the necessity as my apology for intruding the matter on the notice of the Commissioners.

I remain Gentlemen Your Mo^t ob^t Ser^t (signed) Joseph Kinninburgh Surgeon to Police.

Which having been read and considered, it was agreed to adjourn the meeting till tomorrow at 12 °C to receive a report from the Clerk as to the powers vested in the Commission by the Nuisance Removal Act 1849.

In the meantime it was agreed to add the following members to the Cleansing Committee viz^t.

Messrs Stenhouse & Smealls, and the meeting trusted this Committee would do all in their power towards the Keeping the town in a clean state.

*Adjourned meeting of the Commissioners of Police
9 September 1852*

The Clerk reported that the Nuisances Removal Act 1849 was still in force and proceedings were to be taken for removal of nuisances, the same as those that had formerly been adopted (during the cholera outbreak of 1849).

The Cleansing Committee was to act for Commissioners in conjunction with any committees that might be appointed by the Parochial Board and Town Council for the removal of nuisances and the proper cleansing of the town. The Clerk was instructed to intimate this to the Inspector of the Poor and the Town Clerk.

The Cleansing Committee was to report to the Commissioners at least once a month and Dr Kinninburgh's letter was remitted to that Committee.

*Special Meeting of the Parochial Board
13 September 1852*

For more efficient working of the Nuisances Removal Act, the meeting unanimously resolved that the Board should constitute itself a Sanitary Committee with the following sub-committee to act in any emergency: William Kinnis (Provost) James Morris (lapper) James Alexander Hunt of Pittencrieff, and Thomas Alexander, James Inglis, Charles Drysdale and James Mathewson (linen manufacturers).

To make the public fully aware that the Committee was determined to rigorously enforce the provisions of the Sanitary Act, notices were to be printed, posted and circulated throughout the town stating the powers of Parochial Boards to remove nuisances, stating what are regarded as offences under the Act and requiring inhabitants to remove nuisances from their premises under pain of prosecution. The Clerk and the Inspector of the Poor (Mr Pearson) were to prepare such a placard for the next meeting.

*Meeting of the Parochial Board
15 September 1852*

The Clerk produced the public notice about the cholera precautions, which was approved and was to be printed and circulated. Thomas Smith, the officer of the Board, was appointed Sanitary Inspector at £1 per week or pro-rata.

*Meeting of the Sanitary Committee of the Parochial Board
22 September 1852*

A letter had been received, signed by Robert Bardner, chairman of a meeting of the inhabitants of James Place, about the condition of a ditch (open sewer) at the west end of the said street. The Inspector was instructed to speak to Mr Tuckett (Turnpike Roads Surveyor for West Fife) about it and report to next meeting.

The Committee members were asked individually to try to persuade the inhabitants of Woodhead Street to lay down water plugs so that the street could be properly cleansed from time to time. (The water supply to the town had recently been much improved by a new Water Company, allowing the installation of fire plugs/hydrants that, as well as being for fire-fighting, were used for flushing and cleaning the streets and drains.)

The Inspector was instructed to procure from Dr Kinninburgh (Medical Officer) a report on the number of inmates that each of the lodging houses in the town should properly contain. He was also instructed to tell Thomas Barron that proceedings would immediately be taken against him unless he removed forthwith a nuisance on property belonging to him in Goldrum Street.

The Sanitary Inspector was instructed to direct the attention of factor for the heirs of the late Miss Robertson to the drain running in front of their property in Bridge St and to insist that the nuisance be immediately abated.

The Clerk was to intimate to Thomas Stevenson (clerk to the Police Commissioners) the wish of the Sanitary Committee to co-operate with the Police Commissioners to improve the sanitary condition of the Burgh. They would be glad of a list of the names of the members of the Committee of the Commissioners who had been appointed to deal with the matter.

While the Parochial Board had been meeting, the Cleansing Committee of the Commissioners of Police had not been idle, as was reported at a meeting of the Commissioners on 24 September.

*Special meeting of the Commissioners of Police
24 September 1852*

The reports of the Cleansing Committee from the 15 Current were read and approved of and the meeting unanimously gave thanks to that Committee for their exertions for the Sanitary State of the Town. The reports by minutes here follow.

*Minute of the meeting of the Cleansing Committee
Held on Monday the 13 September 1852 at 2 °Clock P.M.*

Present

Messrs Henry Crombie (hotelier), John Scotland (grocer), James Smealls (plumber), James Bruce (grocer), John Stenhouse (brewer), John Robertson (brush maker).

The meeting proceeded to make an inspection of the sanitary state of the town. After inspecting the whole of Bruce Street, North and South Chapel Street, Queen Anne Street, James Street, East Port Street and High Street south (north) side. Including Douglas Street, Shadows Wynd (Bonnar Street) Cross Wynd, as far as Bruce Street, they have to report that with few exceptions they found the whole of the places visited in a very bad State, Particularly in Bruce and Chapel Street, where they visited the whole of the lodging Houses and found none of them, with the exception of [] in Cross Wynd and [] in Bruce Street to be fit for human beings living in and even these two exceptions are too much overcrowded but are kept only clean.

We gave orders for the whole of them to be thoroughly cleaned and for to remove some of the beds altogether. There is one in Chapel Street kept by John Campbell only 12 feet by 7 with 3 beds in it. We ordered at once the removal of one and to get the house properly cleaned as it was in a most filthy state.

We found great quantities of Dung Pits (cesspits) and necessaries (lavatories) in most filthy states. We gave orders for the removal of the dung and to be properly cleaned out in 48 hours. We found at the back of that property in Queen Anne Street belonging to James Inglis a Pig sty in a most horrid state of filth, the water coming from it and dung Pit in a most stagnant state owing to there being no drainage for Carrying it away. We ordered the removal of it within 3 days and no more Pig sties or Dung Pits to be erected in their stead.

The dung pit at the end of Mr Inglis property at James Street which was ordered by the Commissioners to be shut up fully 2 months since is still kept open and is daily getting worse through Mr Inglis not getting the place entering to it from James Street not shut up. Your Committee would urge the Commissioners to cause the removal of that necessary and dung Pit in tron close belonging to Wm Drummond as it is kept in very bad state and in a too much confined neighbourhood.

*Minute of the Cleansing Committee
Held the 15 Sepr 1852 at 2. P.M.*

Present

Messrs Henry Crombie, James Bruce, John Scotland, John Robertson, Andrew Boag (linen manufacturer), John Stenhouse.

The Committee then visited Knabbie Street, Reform Street, North and South Inglis Street, Campbell Street, Grants Bank, Pilmuir, Foundry Street and Schoolend Street, in all of which they found great accumulations of filth which they ordered to be removed within 48 hours.

In Reform Street they found a dung Pit belonging to George Anderson very bad and only about 6 feet distant from the Dwelling houses and which we ordered to be removed away altogether directly and on no account to be used again as a dung Pit, it was complained greatly of by the neighbours. A Pig sty in Knabbie Street belonging to Wm Whyte was ordered to be Removed to the foot of the garden as in its present site being too near Dwelling Houses.

Meeting of Cleansing Committee

Held 16 Sept 1852 at 2. P. M.

Present

Messrs Henry Crombie, John Scotland, James Bruce, John Robertson.

The Committee then visited Kirkgate, Maygate, Guildhall Street, Canmore Street, New Row from end of Canmore Street, High Street south side to Kirkgate, Viewfield Place, all in which they found great quantities of filth which they ordered its removal within 48 hours. But the worst place they found in all their visits was at the back of the Poors Rate office in Maygate, the stench of the filth was enough to create disease. Your Committee cannot too thoroughly Condemn the parties who have charge of these premises for allowing it to be in such a state, seeing they ought to set an example of Cleanliness to the whole inhabitants.

Meeting of the Cleansing Committee

Held the 18th Sept 1852 at 10 Past 9 A. M.

Present

Messrs Henry Crombie, John Scotland, James Bruce, John Robertson.

Your Committee then went and visited St Margaret St, Bank St (the short thoroughfare that links Canmore St with the east end of Abbey Park Place), Gibb Square, Moodie Street, west end of Netherton Street, all of which they found in a very bad state of filth with the exception of Bank Street. Moodie Street they found in a very dirty state, great accumulations of Dung at the back of the Dwelling houses, all of which they ordered to be cleansed away by Tuesday morning at latest.

Your Committee would beg to call the attention of the Improvement Committee to the state of the water Trinkets on the west side of Guildhall Street and on the South side of the west end of Netherton, they being very bad and much need to be re-laid.

The (police) officers of the Commissioners were instructed to take the districts formerly appointed to them and report whether the orders of the Cleansing Committee had been implemented and report nightly to Mr Crombie, the Convener of that Committee and take his directions as to what should be done in cases of delay, refusal or otherwise.

(The Minutes now revert to the meeting of the Commission at which the Cleansing Committee report was heard.)

The Clerk submitted a letter he had received from the Clerk of the Poors Board wishing the names of the Cleansing Committee and intimating the Poors Board's wish to Co-operate with the Comm^{rs} Committee in all sanitary measures connected with the Town, a copy of which follows.

(To) Thomas Stevenson Esq W. D,

Dunfermline 22 Sept 1852

My Dear Sir

With reference to you letter to Mr Pearson (without date) and accompanying excerpt from Minute of the Commissioners of Police of date the 9th instant. I am instructed to intimate the desire of the Sanitary Committee to Co-operate with the Commissioners in cleansing measures for the Suppression of nuisances & proper Cleansing of the Town. I am further instructed to request that you will have the goodness to furnish me with the names of the "Cleansing Committee".

I am, My dear Sir yours very truly (signed) John S Soutar.

The meeting agreed that this Committee Co-operate with the Poors Board Committee and attend all meetings in regard to sanitary purposes and recommend that an early meeting of the joint Committees be held for the objects in view.

Meeting of the Sanitary Committee of the Parochial Board

29 September 1852

Also present were seven members of the Cleansing Committee of the Police Commissioners

The Sanitary Inspector reported on the following matters that had been remitted to him.

The ditch at James Place had been cleaned out by orders of Mr Tuckett but it needed to be deepened towards the west end and a trinket (water channel) laid. This item was remitted back to Inspector to try and get the feuars on both sides of the road to join with the Road Trustees in improving the drain.

Many of the inhabitants and feuars were willing to contribute towards putting down fire plugs in Woodhead Street, but many others pleaded inability.

Lodging houses had been visited but there was no report yet on the numbers they could hold without danger to health. The Committee ordered the report to be made.

Mr Barron had promised to have the nuisance removed from his property in Golfdrum today.

Bridge Street drain – It had been found that there was no authorised factor or agent for this property in Dunfermline. The Sanitary Inspector was instructed to correspond with Mr Cuthbertson and find out whether the neighbouring proprietors would join with Miss Robertson in constructing a proper drain. (This overflowing drain at the corner of Bridge Street and Chalmers Street continued to be a problem for some time, as neither the absentee landlord nor some of the neighbouring proprietors could be persuaded to pay towards having it rebuilt.)

The Inspector drew the attention of the meeting to the nuisance on the side of the Stirling and Dunfermline Railway from Inglis Street railway bridge to the viaduct on Town Green and also at another part of the railway near Golfdrum. He was instructed to apply to Mr McFarlane, agent for the Company, to have the nuisances removed.

The meeting recommended the Police Commissioners to have a water plug constructed at the junction of Reform Street and Pilmuir Street, to flush the neighbouring drains and the slaughterhouse. (The installation of fire plugs/hydrants, was a responsibility of the Commissioners, who were currently having a number fitted to the pipes being laid by the new Water Company.)

The Clerk was instructed to write to Mr Herron, pointing out the necessity of covering the ditch (open sewer) on the south boundary of his property at Grants Bank.

*Meeting of the Police Commissioners
30 September 1852*

Henry Crombie, the convener of the Cleansing Committee, stated that the Committee had attended a meeting of the Parochial Board and that these Committees had formed themselves into a Sanitary Board for the town and parish for purposes under the Act 9 & 10 Vict C 96, but until the proceedings under the said Act were understood and agreed on, this meeting delayed taking any action until the following Wednesday, when the convener would present the wishes of the Committee to the Joint Sanitary Board. The Clerk was instructed to communicate this minute to the clerk of the Parochial Board.

*Meeting of the joint Committees of the Parochial Board and Police Commissioners
6 October 1852*

The Sanitary Inspector reported as follows:

The James Place ditch was in the same condition as at the last report.

There was no movement on the supplying of fire plugs in Woodhead St

The Lodging Houses had been inspected again but there was still no report on the allowable numbers of lodgers.

The nuisance on Mr Barron's property in Golfdrum had been abated.

The Bridge Street drain remained in the same state as at the last meeting.

The Inspector has seen Mr McFarlane (agent) who had refused to do anything about the nuisances on the Stirling and Dunfermline Railway. (The problem here was that the nuisances were partly on land belonging to the Edinburgh, Perth and Dundee Railway Company and it took a long time to get them to co-operate in the matter.)

The Clerk stated that Mr Herron has called on him and was willing to do whatever is necessary to improve the open ditch on his property at Grants Bank, short of covering it in.

An excerpt was recorded from meeting of the Police Commissioners of 9 September 1852 authorising its Cleansing Committee to act with any committee appointed by the Parochial Board to deal with nuisances.

Meeting of the Sanitary Committee of the Parochial Board

13 October 1852

The Inspector reported that:

Since the last meeting the Stirling and Dunfermline Railway Company had taken measures to cleanse and keep clean the drain alongside the railway. The ditch along Mr Herron's property had been cleared out. The Edinburgh, Perth and Dundee Railway had done nothing about the nuisance on their ground.

Mr Crombie (convener of the Police Commissioners Cleansing Committee) reported that the Cleansing Committee had ordered the clearing out or removal of 160 nuisances. Only two or three parties had refused to comply and they had been served with statutory notices.

At this point it seems to have become clear that Dunfermline was not about to be devastated by an outbreak of cholera and no further extraordinary measures were taken to keep the town clean. At a meeting of the Parochial Board Sanitary Committee on 21 December it was decided that 'as the sanitary condition of the town had been much improved' the employment of the Sanitary Inspector should cease from that date, except where active measures might be needed.

Of course, if cholera had arrived in the town the measures taken by the authorities would have been of no use at all in preventing the spread of the disease, but their efforts would have at least made the town smell a bit better, if only for a while.

Sources

The Minutes of the Dunfermline Parochial Board

Held at the Fife Archives at Bankhead, Glenrothes

The Minutes of the Dunfermline Commissioners of Police

Held at the Local Studies department of the Dunfermline Carnegie Library