

## Bellmen and Beadles

Beadles have been employed by the Church of Scotland since its inception, but their duties in those early days were somewhat different from the ones they carry out today. In Dunfermline until the middle of the seventeenth century the beadle was also the bellman, who announced deaths through the town. The first one whose name we know was Alexander Culross, whose son James was baptised in May 1600 but since the position was usually held for life, Alexander had presumably died by 1606 when James Thomson had become the bellman, to be succeeded on his death in 1625 by his son Andrew.

Two English travellers have left us descriptions of Scottish burials and the role of the bellman in the seventeenth century. One is quoted in a 19<sup>th</sup> century pamphlet:

When anyone dies, the sexton or bell-man goeth about the streets, with a small bell in his hand, which he tinkleth all along as he goeth, and now and then he makes a stand and proclaims who is dead, and invites the people to come to the funeral at such an hour. The people and minister many times accompany the corpse to the grave at the time appointed, with the bell before them, where there is nothing said, but only the corpse laid in."

In 1679 Thomas Kirke wrote a book called, "A Modern Account of Scotland by an English Gentleman." This is his description of a Scottish bellman and funeral, in which he also attempts to mimic a broad Scots accent :

When anyone dies, the bellman goes about ringing their passing-bell, and acquaints the people therewith, in form following: 'Beloved brouthrin and susters, I let you to wot that there is an fautful broothir lawtli departed awt of this prisant varld, aut thi plesuir of Aulmoughti Good (and then he vails his bonnet) his name is Volli Voodcok, third son to Jimmy Voodcock, a cordinger; he ligs aut thi sext door vethin thi Nord Gawt, close in thi Nawthwr Rawnd, and I wod yaw gang to hus burying on Thrusdau before twa aclock,'.

The time appointed for his burying being come, the bell-man calls the company together, and he is carried to the burying-place and thrown into the grave, and there's the end of Volli

The lack of a religious rite at funerals was particularly offensive to Englishmen, whose burials were always accompanied by the service set down in the Book of Common Prayer. In 1617 an Englishman who accompanied James VI/I to Scotland had noted tersely that the Scots 'bury without divine service' and this practice continued until comparatively recently.

As the bellman was also the beadle he was responsible for overseeing the graveyard and had many other duties in the kirk. During the Sabbath 'preachings' he patrolled the church to wake up sleepers, stop people taking snuff and control unruly children. He held a set of kirk keys and acted as the kirk officer, summoning miscreants to be disciplined by the Kirk Session, and some of the Dunfermline bellmen were also officers for the Presbytery.

### *Andrew Thomson*

Most of our early evidence for the duties of a beadle/bellman concerns Andrew Thomson, son of James, who held office from the time of his father's death in 1625, when he was nineteen years of age, until his own death in 1653. After his father's death Andrew lived with his mother in his late father's house at the west end of the Maygate, part of which extended over a pend that gave access to the northern gate of the churchyard. In 1628 he married Janet Flockhart who carried on her mother-in-law's business of selling ale, the couple being frequently fined for providing too much drink to 'bridals'. Their alehouse was probably popular with wedding parties because it was situated so conveniently close to the church.

Once the earliest Kirk Session minutes become available in 1641 we learn more about Andrew's duties as beadle. We find him being paid for washing the communion cloths and

being reimbursed for buying lead for the tokens issued to people who were to participate in the half-yearly celebrations of Communion. He also bought candles to light the church and carried out the kind of repairs that were too minor to warrant employing a tradesman. He was included with the town's officers in yearly payments from the Town Council for a pair of shoes, because he also acted as the church officer, summoning the Session to meetings and sinners to their admonishments. As officer to the Presbytery he would have had to travel some distance on errands to the ministers of the surrounding parishes, for which the Presbytery paid him an annual fee and in 1649 adding an extra 10 merks (£3 13/4d) 'for his extraordinary service this winter'.

Andrew also provided hospitality to various visitors, such as Mr James Mirk, one of the many Scots ministers who were expelled from Ireland, who stayed in his house for four or five days in 1643. Six years later, at the height of a local witchcraft scare, he accommodated 'the tryers of the mark on the witches'; the 'prickers' who stuck long pins into suspected witches to find the supposed numb part of the body that was said to be the 'devil's mark'. At the same time, however, he provided food for a poor stranger and for the suspected witches themselves.

In the churchyard Andrew was responsible for overseeing the digging of graves, for which he was entitled to a part of the fee of £1 for a small grave and 2 merks (£1 6/8d) for a large one. In 1641 he was instructed by the Kirk Session to get something done about the chronic waterlogging of the graveyard for which a drain was planned, although it does not seem to have been constructed.

Andrew died in March 1653 and by the May John Thomson, a tailor, had been appointed in his place. John was probably a relative – he lived in Andrew's house – but he was not one of Andrew's two sons, James and Harry, who may have died in childhood. They were certainly dead by the time their mother died in 1664 because her house by the churchyard gate was then inherited by her late husband's cousins Bessie and Christian Strang. The sisters also laid claim to a considerable quantity of household furniture, furnishings, linen and utensils which testify to Andrew Thomson's comfortable lifestyle. His own testament shows that he was worth nearly £850 when he died, money accrued from the proceeds of his alehouse as well as his charge for ringing the funeral bell, his share of the gravedigging fees and his payments as church and Presbytery officer.

#### *Division of Duties*

The Town Council may have felt that in view of Andrew Thomson's prosperity someone else should have a share in the remuneration and John Thomson was appointed as beadle only. The Council leased the handbell to John Dalgleish, who was the bellman until his death in 1677; thereafter the bellman was always a lessee of the town although, confusingly, the lease was sometimes granted to one of the beadles. Initially after this separation of functions there was a dispute about the apportionment of the gravedigging fees, part of which had always been a perquisite of the bellman. The Council decided that in future the bellman would have half of these fees and the other half was to go to the beadle who would pay the gravedigger (currently Henry Malcolm) his share. The Kirk Session ratified the Council's decision with the proviso that the bellman might charge the poor a reduced fee for his services and that the wealthy should pay more than the official gravedigging fee.

It was at this time that a pattern was established that would continue for the next fifty years. The beadle (John Thomson) had overall responsibility for the graveyard and the church building and also acted as officer to the Kirk Session. He was assisted by the gravedigger (Henry Malcolm) who was sometimes referred to as the sub-beadle.

John Thomson is last mentioned by name in the Kirk Session records in 1680 and nothing more is heard of any beadles until August 1711, when the widow of the recently deceased James Pringle initially refused to hand over some of the church keys. Her reason is not stated but it was possibly because the kirk still owed some money to Pringle. If that was the case the Session seems to have agreed to pay, because within a week she had agreed to

give up the keys along with the other church property that her husband had held – four silver cups, a communion tablecloth, six towels and three basins, two large and one small.

#### *Eighteenth Century Beadles and Gravediggers*

The Kirk Session seems to have continued its practice of replacing deceased beadles with their relatives because the next to hold the post was Charles Pringle, with Robert Strachan as his sub-beadle/grave-digger. In 1716 Strachan died and his place was taken by Peter Shorthouse. Five years later Charles Pringle also ceased to be beadle, but not through death. In October 1721 he was dismissed for committing adultery with Jean Hutton. James Hutton, a weaver who had lost a hand and thus his means of livelihood, was appointed in his place. By this time Peter Shorthouse was acting solely as grave-digger and John Anderson was the sub-beadle – from this time forward there were usually two beadles and a gravedigger. Anderson was instructed by the Session to get from Charles Pringle the baptism and communion cloths, kirk key and all the other items in his custody that belonged to the Kirk. Pringle, however, refused to relinquish them and, what is more, continued to collect the beadle's share of the grave-digging fees, which he did until he was forbidden by the Presbytery in January 1722, by which time he had also returned the Session's property. As an adulterer he had to sit for several Sabbaths on the black stool of repentance and he asked the Session to 'haste his discipline' as he needed to leave the town with his family to look for work. He made his final appearance on the stool on the fourth of March.

In 1724 the beadle John Anderson died and Andrew Mitchell was appointed in his place but because Anderson's widow, Margaret Elder, had been left extremely poor Mitchell had to give her half of his share of the fees for weddings and baptisms. Within four years, however, Andrew Mitchell himself was dead and Charles Pringle once more appeared on the scene. It seems that even if he had left the town to look for work as he had claimed he was still in the neighbourhood, because on 28 January 1728 a deputation of the Bailies and several members of the Town Council attended the Session's meeting and recommended Pringle as the successor to Mitchell. There was an alternative candidate, Robert Gallagher, a poverty-stricken weaver whose application was backed by the Deacon of his craft, but the majority of the Session voted for Pringle, who was so poor that he was unable to provide for his five small children. The Elders also took into account the fact that his behaviour since his fall 'hath been sober and inoffensive so far as they knew' and that as well as the recommendation of the Town Council 'some of the most considerable Gentlemen in the parish' wanted him to be reinstated. Like Andrew Mitchell, however, he had to give up part of his fees to Margaret Elder.

For the next ten years James Hutton and Charles Pringle were the beadles but early in 1734 Pringle died and there was once again a poverty-stricken widow to be helped by the Session. Once again the Town Council and the Heritors intervened and Pringle's replacement, Samuel Alexander, was ordered to share his fees with her until she could fill the next vacancy to occur among the eight widows who were supported by the almonry of the nearby St Leonard's Hospital.

In December 1742 it was noted by the Session that James Hutton had not carried out his duties as beadle for some time and he was called to a meeting at which he was asked whether he would obey the Session's orders and specifically whether he would attend any minister to the pulpit who was appointed by the Presbytery to preach during the current vacancy. Hutton refused and was dismissed. The reason for his neglect of duty and his refusal to act is not given, but it is most likely that he was a follower of Ralph Erskine who had given up his post as first minister of the Abbey church in the previous May and now led an alternative congregation elsewhere in the town. The assistant minister had died in the same month, hence the vacancy that was being filled by visiting preachers. William Findlay was appointed in Hutton's place but only served for a few years. By the beginning of 1748 William Westwood had joined Samuel Alexander as second beadle and the Session had appointed Peter Shorthouse as grave-digger.

Shorthouse seems to have been in poor health by 1748 because in March he was instructed by the Session to teach his son Charles the positions and bounds of all the burial places in the graveyard and by December 1749 he was dead and Charles had taken over his post. By this time the Session minutes were regularly noting that before any application for the purchase of a burial plot was granted the grave-digger was consulted by the Session as to whether the plot was vacant. (This did not mean that there were no burials at the spot but that it was not currently known to belong to any particular person.) Charles Shorthouse became a witness in an adultery case in 1752, when he caught his widowed stepmother in flagrante delicto with George Wilson, farmer of Knockhouse.

Three years later William Wellwood died and Charles was appointed beadle in his place:

entitling him to the equal half of all the dues and perquisites at present belonging or which in former times did belong to any in that post. With what is usually given for declaring the boundings of burial grounds, but taking from him the gratuitous drink money that used to be given for making graves and at setting up of head-stones, and the one half of what the grave digger used to receive for the graves of still-born children, reserving the half of this last-mentioned article to him till a new grave digger has learned to do the whole work.

The new grave-digger was another William Wellwood, a shoemaker who was to have all the drink money got for making graves, half of what was charged for making the graves of still-born children, all that was charged for setting up a headstone. His fee for digging graves was to be the same as the beadle Samuel Alexander used to give Charles Shorthouse. He and the two beadles were each to get a third of the fee charged 'at the breaking of the ground'. It would appear from all this that paying to have a grave dug involved several different handouts from the bereaved, but in spite of all these inducements it seems that grave-digging did not after all suit William Wellwood, who resigned after a year in the post. There is no record of a successor to Wellwood and Charles Shorthouse continued to inform the Session of the positions of grave plots, so it would appear that he continued to dig the graves in addition to his duties as beadle.

For the next few years Samuel Alexander and Charles Shorthouse worked together but in 1761 a major scandal erupted when Alexander was caught stealing money from the collection plate. Every Sabbath each of the two beadles took charge of a plate in which members of the congregation put money for the poor as they entered the churchyard, one plate being at the north entrance and one at the west. Alexander admitted that for the past five or six years he had occasionally taken a shilling from his plate, which he had partially replaced the next day. Charles Shorthouse had twice caught him at it and told him to replace the money but he had not done so. Shorthouse corroborated this story and added that several parishioners had told him they had seen Alexander take money out of the plate. An elder testified that one Sunday he had seen a gentleman put money in Alexander's plate which Alexander had immediately removed but had not handed over to any of the elders after the service.

Alexander's excuse for taking the money was that the beadles' dues on communion Sundays were now less than they had been when Ralph Erskine and James Wardlaw were ministers at the Abbey, in other words there were fewer communicants because so many people had followed Ralph Erskine to his new church. However, no excuse was going to make any difference. He was deposed and ordered to give up all the Session property in his custody and appear before the congregation in three weeks time to be rebuked. John Roxburgh, a tobacconist, was appointed in his place and was still a beadle along with Charles Shorthouse thirteen years later.

Information about beadles now becomes somewhat sparse but it is known that when Robert Burns visited Dunfermline in October 1787 it was 'Charlie Shorthouse' who unlocked the Black Yett and ushered Burns into the Satur Churchyard to show him what was then supposed to be the tomb of Robert the Bruce and which Burns duly kissed. Unfortunately this homage cannot have been paid to the correct piece of stone because

Bruce's tomb was not discovered until the new Abbey church was being built in 1821, so the poet's lips were probably placed on one of the six slabs in the Satur Churchyard that were thought to denote a group of royal burials.

### *Willie McNicol*

The last beadle to have charge of the churchyard was William McNicol who was known, for some as yet unknown reason, as the Blue Beadle. He was a 'character' who was well-remembered by Dunfermline people. Alexander Stewart in his *Reminiscences of Dunfermline* wrote of Willie

When his ghastly trade was dull he used to complain that he had not "*buried a livin' flesh for a week*". His dismal occupation did not in the least affect his genial flow of spirits; he was fond of a dram and many a funny story he could tell when his boon companions were assembled around him. With a pawky smile he used to say, " 'Deed man, I'm feared to speer at ony body hoo they are, in case they micht think that I was wearyin' on them, or even over a dram to say to them, 'my services to ye!'"

It was Willie's fondness for a dram that led to the story told by Alexander Thomson in his *Anent Dunfermline* collection.

One day in 1820, Dr Baines seeing Willie the gravedigger a little tipsy in the north burying grounds said he was sorry and amazed to see him in that condition. "Man" replied Willie, "can ye no look o'er this ae little faut o' mine. I'm sure I've covered up mony a sair witness o' your failings an never said a word about it". Exit doctor.

Willie was in charge of the graveyard at the height of the body-snatcher scare of the 1820s, when the stories about him become rather less amusing – *Anent Dunfermline* again:

In about 1828 Willie McNicol was known as the Blue Beadle and was a very respectable man. In about 1830, as a joke some 'local wags', being in Edinburgh, sent him a letter as if from some dissecting doctor there. The purposely misdirected it so that it was opened by the foreman in Mr Hunt's warehouse in the High St. The letter included the lines 'The last one you sent was to old for agreeable use. Send a fresher one next time'. The rumour spread fast 'and poor Willie was in imminent danger for a time'. He offered to prove his innocence by opening any grave fixed on but his loom shop in St Catherine's Wynd was closely watched, his door tied and his candle blown out.

Alexander Stewart reminisced that:

Our own Dunfermline *Blue Beddel* was sometimes blamed for doing a little in aiding and abetting the "resurrection" business, but he always said he would "far rather bury ten persons than rob the grave of one!" Be this as it may, it is a fact nevertheless that his house was attacked and wrecked by a mob one Handsel Monday morning, as there was a suspicion that he had dealings with those interested in the grave-snatching trade.

The passing of the Anatomy Act in 1832 authorised the use of any unclaimed bodies, especially from poorhouses or prisons, for dissection by licensed practitioners and put an end to the body-snatchers' trade, but it came too late to put to rest any fears about Willie McNicol. He died in the cholera outbreak of that year and was buried in one of the trenches he had helped to dig for the other victims. Thereafter the graveyard was in the charge of a succession of Superintendants, whose era is the subject of a separate article.