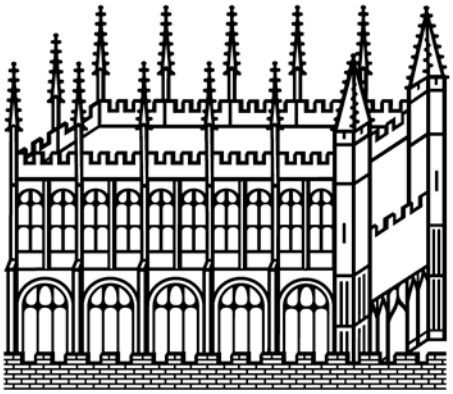

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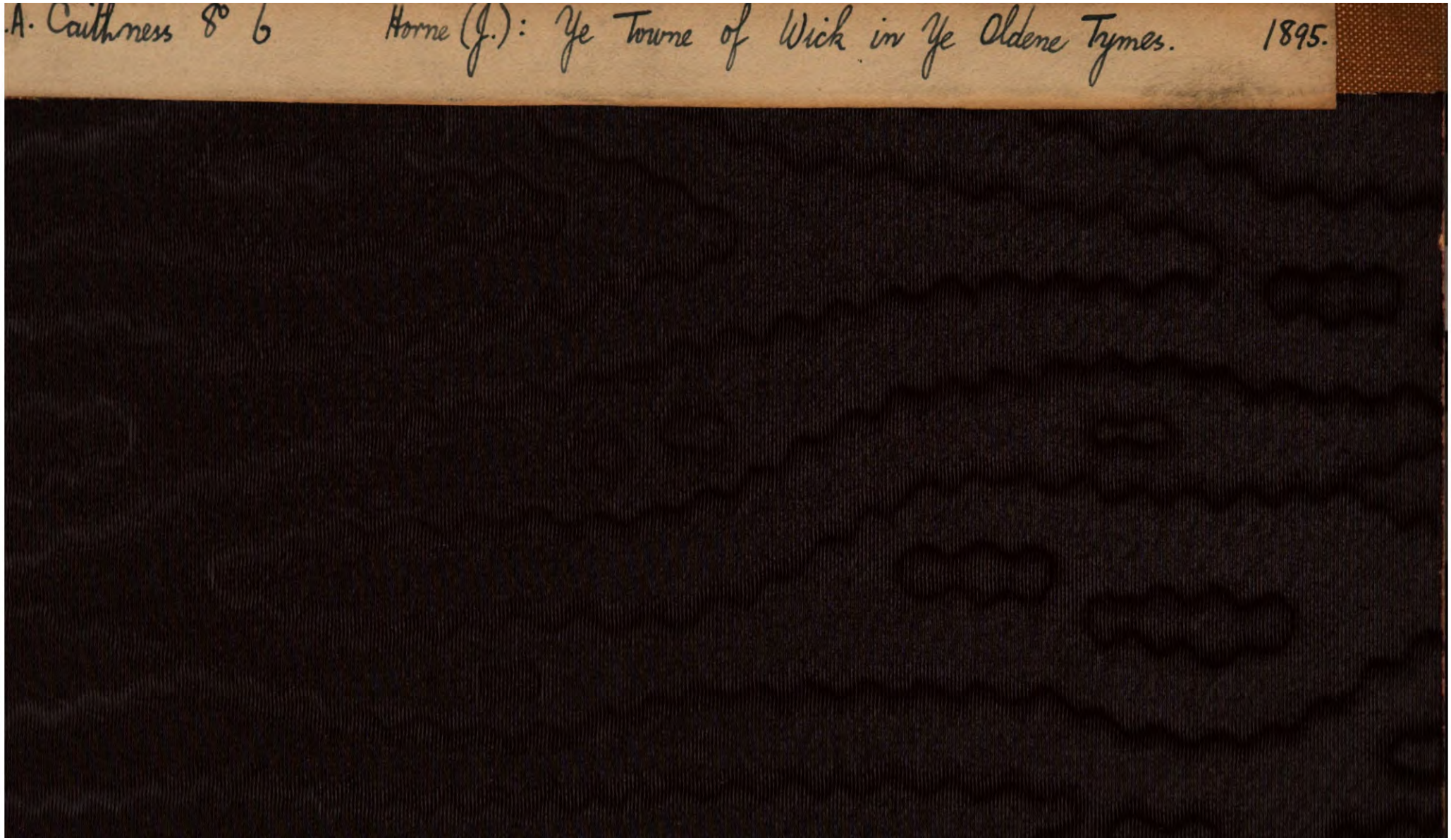

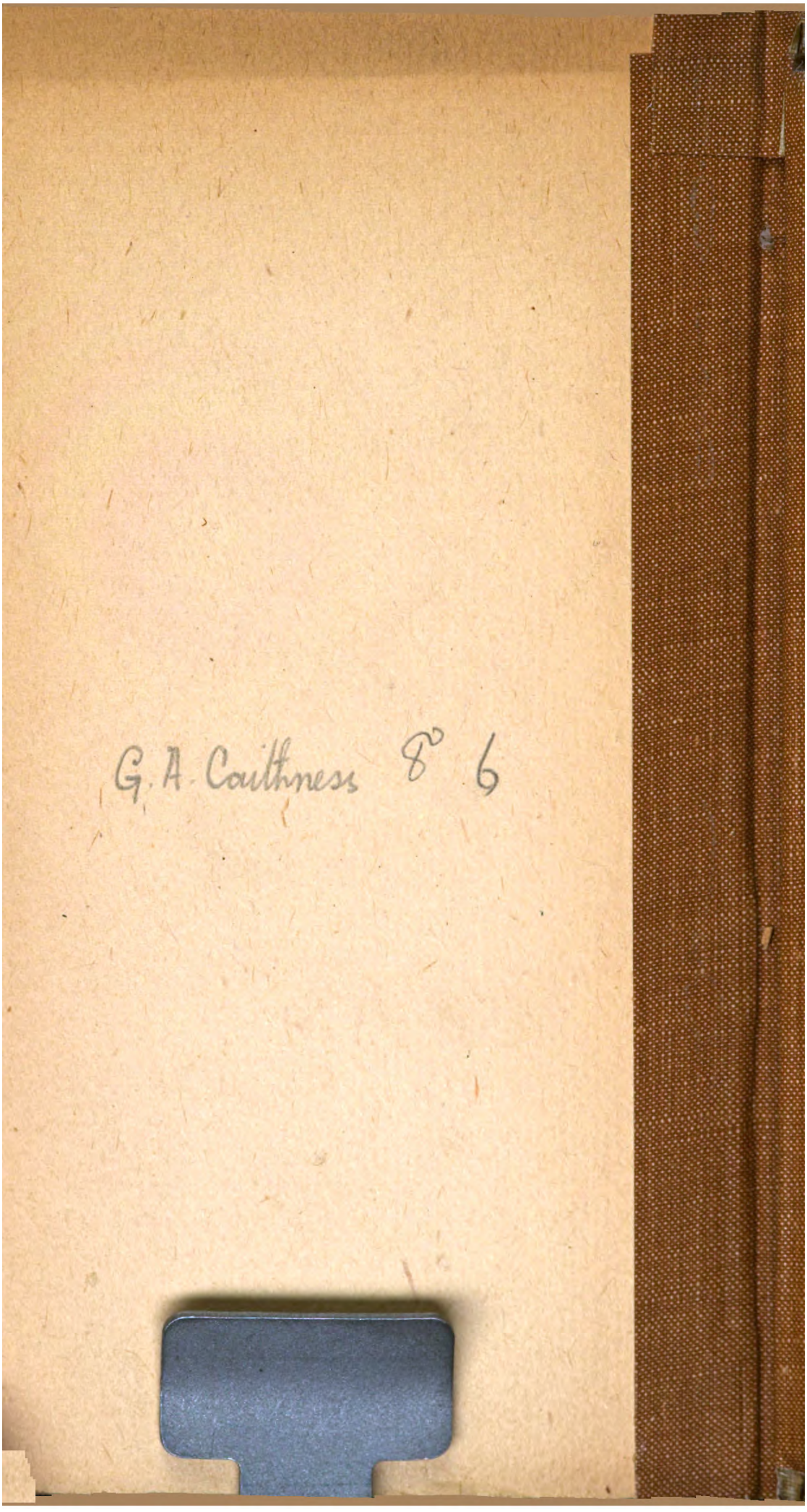
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Ye Towne of Wick inye Oldene Tymes

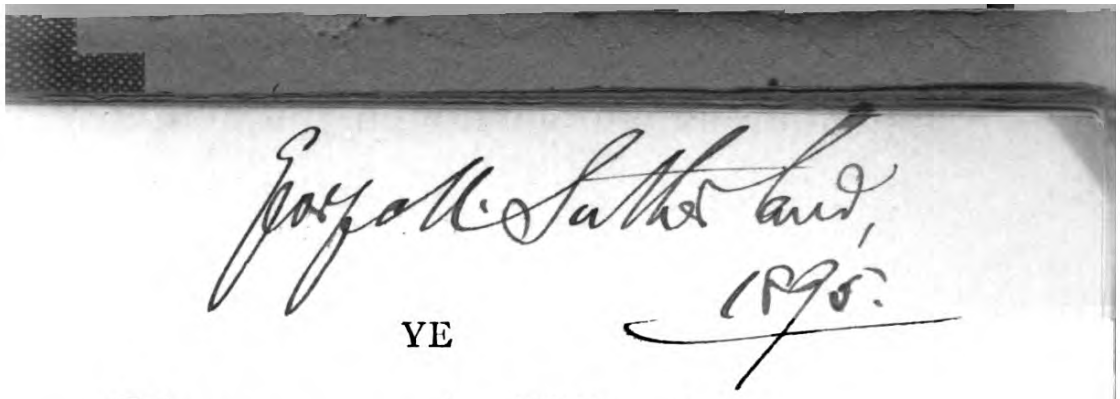
BY

JOHN HORNE

WICK FROM AN OLD SEAL

WICK
W. RAE
1895

Ye Towne of Wick in ye Oldene Tymes



YE

Towne of Wick

IN YE

OLDENE TYMES

BY

JOHN HORNE

WICK
W. RAE
1895

PRINTED AT THE
NORTHERN ENSIGN OFFICE, WICK

THE OPENING

THIS sketchy booklet is written for the entertainment of the ordinary reader. It is not an attempt at a history of Wick, nor does it pretend to humour the specialist by tedious windings.

The author owns his indebtedness to G. M. Sutherland, solicitor, and particularly to Charles Bruce, F.R.A.S., for revising the manuscript and suggesting several important additions.

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Glimpses of Life in the Old Town

GLIMPSES OF LIFE IN THE OLD TOWN

THE early life of Wick*—though quite as good as that of any other place of the period—was nothing to be specially proud of. Making all allowance for the too-particular vigilance of the Kirk Session in bringing trifling cases of Sabbath breaking before them, we do not think that Sabbath observance was the ideal thing that some mourners over modern fashions are apt to suppose. Carrying a tub of water, or gathering pease, were trifles, and need not be mentioned; but the spouse of James Bremner, Barnyards, was convicted for drying and winnowing lint on the Lord's Day, and David Petrie was ordered to stand at the church door in sackcloth, and afterwards to appear

* "Wick" is spelt variously in old documents and maps—Wyke, Weik, etc.

before the congregation for emulating Samson by tying a fire-brand to a cat's tail and setting her loose in a corn-field at Noss. Alex. Croach and William Mowat kicked up such a "rackit" in the church, struggling for a seat, that they were appointed to be publicly rebuked the following Sabbath. Among church neglectors two worthies are mentioned who had not been in the church "this 20 years ago!" They were summoned to appear; and not before time! Monday marriages had to be put a stop to, by public intimation, as "the people who resolve to get married on Monday doe break the Sabbath by qr. (their) preparations qrto. (thereto)." The Session was, no doubt, strict and narrow; but if we believed some present-day wailers, such staid and devout people as are said by them to have been in the world a century or so ago were not the folks likely to break the Sabbath—no, not for a marriage. Even murder has taken place on our streets on Sabbath. On a Sabbath in January 1720, two tinkers were butchered in open day light by three drunken

soldiers. A few years earlier—1709—the Presbytery of Caithness informed Queen Anne that in consequence of the county's distance from the seat of government, it "has for a long time been a stage on which many atrocious villanies have been enacted; particularly many barbarous and inhuman murders and assassinations of persons of innocence and integrity."

By an Act read from the pulpit of the Wick Kirk in 1709, the people were debarred—or, at anyrate, discouraged—from having music and dancing at "contracts," on account of the abuses committed by "the great confluence of people which frequents contracts." The Session went so far as to demand a caution before granting permission for the "contract" to be holden; but if that fact reflects severity from the side of the Session, it also proves—what we already know—that occasions of the kind were formerly sometimes rendered rather rude and boisterous.

We cannot assert that burglary was common in the district, but in the burgh record (1710) a curious case

is mentioned against a woman named Agnes Reilly or Sutherland. This high-handed lady actually entered the manse of Wick* and stole money out of the minister's breeches while his reverence was asleep! She also several times stormed the house of Bailie Doull, in Wick, and carried away with her "ane silver tumbler of twal ounces weight, ane pynt and chopin boule full of rum," as well as napkins, gravats, a quantity of meal, and other things. We may give Agnes the distinction of being a wonderful rarity, even in those bold days!

The lower orders of the inhabitants, it would appear, were not clear of the guilt of fornication—a fault common all over Scotland at the time. Of course, the same names occur with sad frequency; but, this allowed, a serious amount of evidence still remains. One case, at least, of on-goings of this kind in better-class circles has been recorded, and as it affords insight into some doings of

* The Manse at this time was that small tile-roofed house in Tolbooth Lane known as the "Hole in the Wall."

the time, we may be pardoned for referring to it. In 1721, it appears that the sister of the Laird of Stirkoke was pregnant to the Laird of Mey, a married man; and the minister, fearing designs against the child, called a special meeting of the Session in order to take her judicial confession. She admitted having been frequently guilty of intercourse with the laird. In the evidence, it comes out that the laird had provided a nurse to attend her, and also a man-servant to carry off the child as soon as it was born. The nurse was ordered out of the parish, and when search was made for the man it was found that he had taken flight to Orkney. The laird was also discovered to be in another country—in close custody for debt.

A slight trace of superstition lingered in one or two dark minds as far down as 1721. In that year, several persons were rebuked for visiting the ruins of St. Mary's Chapel (below Sibster), on the first Sabbath after the new moon, and "behaving themselves in an idolatrous and superstitious manner."

Public intimation was made that any one found going to the chapel would incur the pain of censure. Long before this—in 1613—Dr. Merchiston of Bower, an zealous reformer, entered Wick to demolish the image of St. Fergus.* The people were enraged at him, so much influence had Popery still over them. They would have done him violence, but the magistrates interfered; they followed him out of the town, however, and, it is reported, drowned him in the river! Calder says, "It was given out that it was the saints who did it, and that St. Fergus, in particular, was seen astride of the parson in the water and holding him down!" A letter from Dr. Merchiston, bearing a later date than that of his reported death, is, we believe, in existence—a fact which either destroys the entire story or discredits the date of his death.

* What is said to be the Saint's effigy, much battered, may still be seen in the jail yard. It was carried thither when the erection of the present church was undertaken.

Early Commerce and Industries

EARLY COMMERCE AND INDUSTRIES

ACCORDING to the minutes of the Caithness Presbytery in 1695, there were no more than 2000 persons in the Parish of Wick at that time. There was not a cart in the entire parish—nor in the county, for that matter. Potatoes and turnips were unknown, and no grass was sown. Oats and bere alone occupied the land.

The houses were nearly all built of turf, with a hole in the roof as a chimney. The ploughs were of the rudest description—they were made entirely of wood, had only one stilt, and required a person to press his weight on them to keep them in the soil. Ploughmen earned less than twelve or sixteen shillings in the half-year. Payment of rent was made in kind. Evidence of the inconvenience of this system may

still be seen in the huge girnals and grain stores erected by the Earl of Caithness at Staxigoe. They contain four girnals, each capable of containing a thousand bolls of meal; and four lofts, each able to hold a thousand bolls of bere. A cow could then be purchased for twelve shillings, a wedder or sow for two-and-sixpence, a lamb for sixpence, a goose for sixpence, a hen for twopence halfpenny, a dozen of eggs for a penny, a cod for a penny, and butter and cheese for three halfpence the pound.

The trade of the town in these early days could not have been of much account; but the list of industries was by no means despisable. Shoemaking, glovemaking, lacemaking, candlemaking, snuffmaking,* lintspinning, and weaving (with, of course, building, joinering,

* By a Town Council Minute passed in 1680, it appears that some persons in town had private snuff mills, and, this being contrary to the law of the burgh, these individuals were ordered to hand over their mills to the "customer" who had purchased from the Council the right to make snuff within the burgh.

etc.), may be mentioned as evidence. Although history narrates the fact that when the Earl of Sutherland burnt the town in 1588, he destroyed the ship of one Andrew Wardlaw, merchant, we need not therefore conclude that much traffic was carried on. That ship may have been the only one belonging to the port; certain it is that, as we observe elsewhere, Wick could not boast of a single vessel a century later. It is also recorded in the Session minutes, as late as 1711, that the minister was instructed to buy in the south some green cloth for the pulpit and black for a mort-cloth—which fact infers that there was no reliable draper in the town to whom the order could be entrusted. The "New Statistical Account" says that the town was supplied with literature by a flying stationer as far down as 1820.

In addition to the industries above-mentioned, it seems pretty clear that beef-curing was practised. Calder mentions in his "History," on the authority of the *Forres Gazette*, that in the year 1694, Sir

James Calder of Muirton, Morayshire, purchased from Baillie Robert Calder and others, in Wick, beef, tallow, tongues, and salt hides to the amount of £8678 19s. 4d. Scots (£723 3s. sterling), the whole of which was to be shipped to Zealand in Holland "by the good ship Ludovick and William of Findhorn." According to the map of Wick issued by the Rev. Timothy Pont about this time, the town was like a broken-up village, divided into four groups of irregularly-built houses which stretched from the North Head to about Craigstown. A large export like the above, from such a humble place, must have been very unusual; and the fact that the ship to convey it was chartered from another port is significant. In 1756, John Sutherland desired to build a storehouse at the Camps, but the Council was careful in defining the site as it was the place "where the beef that is made in this town is usually pickled," etc. It is thus evident that beef-curing was a branch of industry in the old town for over a century. The beef was

mainly cured for the navy victualising contractors at Inverness.

The curing of fish is also referred to—in 1783. Wright—the author of "Husbandry in Scotland"—visited the town in that year, and writes of it as follows:—"In Wick, curing and salting fish is a considerable branch, as also salting and exporting beef. Provisions are cheap and plentiful: beef at salting time, a penny a pound; mutton, three halfpence." He adds that the town sported one inn, where good claret could be had at half-a-crown a bottle. The trade—notwithstanding that the writer says it was considerable—could not have been of great dimensions when a single inn met the needs of the town.

The first reference to tradesmen in the burgh records, we are informed, is in January 1660. These are then stated to be—10 merchants, 6 tailors, 5 shoemakers, 5 weavers, 4 smiths, and 4 coopers. No individual could trade within the burgh unless he was a freeman: that is, a burgess who had paid for his ticket to the town treasurer. The list of the

articles upon which Burgh Custom was charged a century and a half ago is rather curious :—" Bere, Double Trees, Single Trees, Birks, Dealls, Large Couple Legs, Small Couple Legs, Bark, Beef, Mutton, Pork, Butter and Cheese, Oyll, Cloth —Woollen and Linen, Wool, Meal, Hides, Tallow, Ale, Aqua vity, Cart Wheels, Mill Stones, Grave Stones, and Freestone."

Wick, so far as its commerce is concerned, really began with the founding of the Herring Fishing in 1767 by John Sutherland, John Anderson, and Alexander Miller. Staxigoe was the first port, and letters were addressed to "Wick, by Staxigoe." Boats soon began to run up Wick river, however; and when the British Fisheries Society built its first harbour in 1810, Wick became the recognized port.

Ye Olde Tollbooth

YE OLDE TOLLBOOTH

THE building which served as Town Hall and Burgh Jail before the present structure is still standing. It is occupied by Messrs. P. Mackenzie & Co., drapers, and Mr James Sinclair, watchmaker. The erection was put up in the year 1750, at the expense of George Sinclair (father of Sir John).* The burgh had no funds of its own for the purpose. When the new Town Hall and Prison were completed in 1828, this tenement was sold by the magistrates to John Kirk, merchant. The proceeds were applied to the fund for erecting the new buildings. The property was conveyed to Mr. Kirk by the Right Honble. Lord Francis Leveson Gower (who was then Provost of Wick) and the other magistrates of the Burgh, by a feu

* The site occupied by this jail was originally the kail-yard of the minister's manse, temporary. (See note to page 6.)

contract, dated 15th May and 12th June, 1830. In the hall above were held cock-fight balls, dancing schools, and the public functions of the town. Thither the frizzle-haired, blue-bonnetted worthies foregathered, marching in stately form up the stair, and congratulating themselves on their fine Town Hall; while the burgh officer did his best to sustain the high dignity of his calling among the boys who giggled and pushed on the stair-head. The original Toll-booth—not a vestige of which now remains—was prior to this building, on the site now occupied by ex-Provost Reiach's shop and the Bank of Scotland. Near by, in the market-place, were the stocks. Almost in front of it, close to the Cross of Wick, stood the town pump—a square stone erection—the centre of interest on special days, when bonfires were lit. On the weekly market day, mutton was hung around it for sale, and thither buyers and sellers foregathered. The prisoners were said to play pranks on the worthy people assembling round the pump by throwing out, through the

prison window, strings with hooks attached, which said hooks gripped the hats and wigs, and sometimes the mutton, of the douce gentlemen attending the market. Thereupon a hat or other article might be seen bounding towards the jail and disappearing through the window. Tricks of this kind were easily accomplished after flesh-hooks and nails had been fixed in the jail wall on account of the pump becoming overcrowded with the mutton, pork, &c., brought in by the country people.

In 1569, the market-cross was the scene of a pitched battle. Lord Oliphant had been to dinner with a friend in town. Twenty-four men belonging to the Keiths set up a squabble, and his lordship had considerable trouble in getting to his castle at Auldwick. He dispatched some of his retainers to protect his friend, but they were attacked "by seven bowmen standing in arrayed battle at the market-cross of Wick." A fight ensued. One man was killed and not a few wounded. The feud was continued at Auldwick Castle

for fully a week. It may be mentioned, too, that during the rebellion of 1715, the health of the Chevalier was openly drunk at the cross of Wick by Sir Robert Dunbar of Northfield and a number of sympathisers. The Stuarts had many friends in Caithness in 1715, and also in 1745.

Imprisonment in the old days was no more than a name. The prisoners were allowed uncommon liberties. They were sometimes committed during the day and released at night. Their friends, too, could visit them and bring them such comforts as might tend to cheer them—though their need of such brightening was not dire in those glorious days. Occasionally visits of this nature turned out comically, as the following testifieth:—Bell Dow, a female prisoner, had been consigned to the keeping of Willie Coghill, the jailor. It was Sabbath morning, and all was quiet in the old town. Two cousins of the worthy Bell called to see her, and were admitted by Willie. They carried a good supply of spirits with them—being in high spirits them-

selves and bringing another kind of spirits in a bottle. They soon fell to warming up their friend. Willie was not forgotten; and ere long he lay sound asleep on the floor. The prisoner and her friends now secured the keys and treated themselves to a walk in the fresh air. In bidding good-bye to the premises, they locked the door and threw the keys over the stair which led to the hall above. Willie awoke in course of time—to find himself the prisoner! Making for the window with what dispatch he was master of, he bawled out for help. As it happened, the people were returning from church as Willie's head was thrust out of the window. Everybody gazed in astonishment at the jailor jailed. Some thought that he had lost his reason, while others (too correctly) guessed that he had been indulging. Willie bellowed, danced, and swore; and ultimately, losing patience, he roundly abused the crowd. He was at length relieved by order of Provost Macleay. The door was forced open. Willie afterwards found the keys behind the stair. Most likely the

prisoner and her friends were allowed the freedom they had so ingeniously purchased.

Other stories of escape might be narrated, but one more must suffice. The tale is told of four prisoners who requested special attention from the jailor on a certain Sabbath. That dignitary (who, if we mistake not, succeeded Willie Coghill) was a regular church-goer, and, like a good Christian, he said he would see them all at the Devil before he would give up the church services for them. This was precisely what they wanted —to be sure that he was out of the way. When he had left, they struck up the 23rd Psalm (was it to the tune of "*Martyrdom*," we wonder!). While they lustily sang the familiar verses, they worked steadily with an auger, boring holes around the lock of the door. In course of time, the lock fell out, and the four captives were once more free men.

Concerning the old jail, it is recorded in 1807 that "it is not fit to hold in a prisoner who has any intention to get out and ingenuity enough to contrive the means."

Anent the Kirk

ANENT THE KIRK

IN the days of Popery, the Kirk of Wick was dedicated to Saint Fergus. His name is honoured in "Fergusmass Market," "St. Fergus Well," etc. Another Kirk stood at the North Head, consecrated to Saint Ninian. The Chapel of Saint Tears,* inscribed to the Innocents slain by Herod at Bethlehem, was erected near Ackergill. Below Sibster was the Kirk of Saint Mary's. A Kirk at Killmster, called the Kirk of the Moss, was dedicated to Saint Duthoe. There was also a Kirk at Thrumster and another at Ulbster. The latter was consecrated to Saint Martin and is yet practically entire, having for many years been converted into a family tomb. Besides these, there was a Kirk at Haster, dedicated

* Anciently "St Aires," we believe.

to Saint Cuthbert; also the Kirk of Keiss; and the Kirk of Strubster.

It is next to impossible to determine the site of the Kirk of Wick, but opinion is strongly in favour of Mount Hooly, or Hailie, at the head of the Shore Lane. It was followed by the church whose only relics now are the Sinclair and the Dunbar vaults, in the churchyard. That building was erected somewhere about 1570. It was repaired in 1728, and again in 1752. A new church was built shortly after the last renewal; but it was soon discovered to be insecure, and was pulled down.* The present church was then begun, and was finished in 1830.

The Kirk of two centuries ago—that built in 1570 and remaining until 1790 or thereabout—was a

* In Mr. Sage's "Memorabilia Domestica" he has the following reference to this building:— "The services of the Sabbath and week days on that occasion [communion] at Wick were conducted in the open air as the parish church was in a ruinous state, the foundations having some years before given way and rents having appeared in several parts of the back wall."

meagre building, seated with chairs and covered by a thatched roof. On August 5, 1704, the heritors met to view the church and get the opinion of workmen on the state of the roof. After consultation and deliberation, "Donald Sutherland, sclater in Papingoe," undertook to re-thatch it. He received a sum of money for the necessary materials, and the heritors agreed—"condescended" is the word recorded!—to pay him his fee and other expenses when the job would be completed. In the following year, John Harper, wright, was ordered to take down the bell and "set bands about the timber," and see that it was hung more securely. A donation of £1 4s. 0d. is also acknowledged from "John Taylor's relict in Wick for ye great bell."

In September, 1701, "it was put to ye vote whether ye towne of Wick or ye box [collection box] should be at ye charges to put up ane cock-stool [for penitents standing on in the church?]. It was carried by vote that ye towne should doe it," and John Sinclair, "joyner," was ordered to make the stool. A

collection box was ordered in 1707 —the old one having been worn out—and a sum of nineteen shillings Scots was set apart to meet the expense of it.

A few years later—in 1711—the minister received authority to take sufficient money out of the box to buy "green cloathe and fringe" for the pulpit, and also a mort-cloth for the poor of the parish. The minister intended going south—no small expedition in those days when there were no stage-coaches — and the Session considered the opportunity a favourable one for purchasing these articles. It is needless to add that they were duly praised and highly thought of when exhibited by the minister on his return. The mort-cloth was used at funerals and was hired out, the money so obtained going to the poor. The charges were—within the parish, 1s 6d; outside the parish, 2s 6d; and 2s 6d to be given to the officer. No other mort-cloth was allowed into the churchyard.

The church services and ordinances were, at times, somewhat

irregular. From 1650 to 1659—nine years—there was no minister. The Lord's Supper was observed on July 6, 1719; but the minute of Session declaring the appointment of the celebration says it is ordered because "it has not been celebrate for a long time in this parish."* During the minister's absence—attending the General Assembly, &c.—there was only one sermon in two weeks; and when he preached in some other place—as, for instance, at Ulbster, "a quarter in ye parish far distant"—the church was closed.

One of the church-officers—William Abernethie, to wit—appears, in our modern phrase, to have been "a rare youth." In November, 1711, Willie, though occupying the distinguished position of parish beadle, resolved on a "burst." In the full flood of his enjoyment and greatness, he visited on the minister, opening his mind to that favoured individual with overpowering frank-

* After the Reformation the communion was but sparingly observed as the people had not quite thrown off their Romish ideas of it.

ness, and abusing him in choice and select language. Thereafter, he opened the church door without a key (one of his private tricks, and now exhibited as an off-show to his genius) and entered the church. Here he wrathfully seized the chair of Helen Henderson—maybe an old "lass"—and brought it to triumphant desolation. Willie's exploit was not appreciated by an ungrateful public, and "the Session, after mature deliberation, did discharge him his office forever." The appointment was offered to the second officer, who was asked "either to provide one who would assist him in his office for the whole parish, and yrby he should have right to all the emoluments yrfrom belonging to both offices; or to chuse one side of the parish and the emoluments yrfrom according, and the Sess. would dispense of the oyr. side of ye parish and ye emoluments yrof. to anoyr., and he was appointed to give his answer again the next day yr. would be a Sess."—from which it appears that there were two officers for the parish at that time.

It may be interesting to give the names of the Parish Ministers since the Reformation, with the date on which they terminated their ministry. They are as follows :—Andro Philp, before 1567; Thomas Keir, before 1576; Alexander Mearns (reader), Thomas Pruntoch, and John Annand, before 1636; David Allardice, 1638; John Smart (ejected), 1650; William Geddes (ejected), 1675; Patrick Clunis, 1691; William Geddes (restored), 1692; Charles Keith, 1705; James Oliphant, 1726; James Ferme, 1760; James Scobie, 1764; William Sutherland, 1816; Robert Phin, 1840; Charles Thomson, 1871; William Lillie, 1875; Alexander Clark — the present minister.

The Doings of the Kirk Session

THE DOINGS OF THE KIRK SESSION

FROM an early date, the Earls of Caithness exercised hereditary jurisdiction over the counties of Caithness and Sutherland; but Caithness was created a separate sheriffdom by James IV. in 1503, and Wick was appointed the place for holding the courts. Heredital jurisdictions were abolished in 1748.

While affairs were managed by hereditary sheriffs, justice may be said to have been only a name. Minor evils were overlooked altogether, except where they served to further some personal scheme or dislike. The Kirk, however, took up the neglected and misguided work, and, through her Session, attempted to regulate the affairs of the various parishes. We have every reason to believe that the operations of these Sessions were, as a whole, impartial and wholesome, though to

us they seem wooden and amusing.

The Kirk Session of Wick was not behind in administering its affairs with vigilance and despatch. Its jurisdiction was almost unlimited. Cases of unending variety made their bow at its bar. Fornication was very common, and drunkenness was the cause of continual trouble. Fighting, lying, and slander furnished its victims almost every week, while instances of "swearing horriblie" were scarcely less frequent. The feminine disposition being—then as now—of a gentle and submissive make, it comes upon us as no surprise to be told that scolding was a favourite indulgence; but the scold, in those sweet days, was a person of considerable importance and enjoyed the attention of the authorities. "Obstinacie," too, was tabulated among the crimes, as "the man o' independent mind" discovered to his cost. Even instances of alleged "sorcerie" were brought before the awful dignitaries of the Session and considered by them; and the man who was "a fugitive of ordinances" —delightful phrase!—was not over-

looked. Sabbath-breaking was a persistent evil and vexed the Session sorely. In short, a general conglomeration of crimes occupied the thought and talent of that august body, for its rigid vigilance sadly tempted frail human nature to make a dash for liberty. Sometimes, consideration of the poor gave pleasing variety to the proceedings; and occasionally a foster mother had to be found for some "orphant." We find it solemnly recorded on a certain day (surely New-Year's Day!) that "Ye Session appoints saxpence to be given to Robert Robertson, a poor man;" on another occasion, a collection of over "three pounds" is "allowed for ye payment of ye physician qt. cutt a certain poor man, in ye country, for ye gravel."

If the cases brought before the Session were multiform, the punishments inflicted were equally so. Fines were most frequent, some of which—for "adulterie," for instance—were as high as "fortie punds." The "mulct" was also a form of fine; but it was regarded somewhat favourably by the people, who looked

upon it in the light of an equivalent for their wrongdoing. A common decision of the Session was to demand of the culprit that he find a cautioner for his good behaviour—the said cautioner pledging himself to the sum of "8 punds at three terms," or any other sum appointed. The principle of this judgment is still observed in our courts, though the form is modified. Imprisonment was also employed, especially when the Session acted in consort with the civil magistrates, which was sometimes the case. In one or two instances, corporal punishment is threatened if the fines are not paid within a given time; but such a mode of infliction was evidently infrequent. The fines imposed upon the stronger sex for breach of the seventh commandment were regulated by Act of Parliament, according to the social position of the offender.*

* It is recorded of one individual, who had been fined the amount leviable on a "gentleman," that he appealed to the Court of Session against the decision of the Kirk. Their lordships quashed the decision on the ground that the appellant "had not the face or air of a gentleman."

Rebuking before the congregation was, of course, a regular practice—two or more victims occasionally standing at the same service to receive public admonition. Sackcloth was often added, the culprit generally having to stand at the church door with it around him, as the people entered, and then to appear before the congregation for a drubbing from the parson. This process was repeated as often as fourteen times—indeed, until the sinner "doe have some sense of his sin." At times, the Sabbath services were diversified by some one making "public confession of his sin upon his knees before ye congregation," or by the minister reading out the expulsion of some defiant offender from the church and parish. The "greater excommunication," too, was resorted to in dire cases of obstinate fornication or murder, and baneful plagues and troubles were called down—or up!—upon the head of the unfortunate lawbreakers. A neighbouring minister was called in to assist in "ye great solemnity." One special form of chastisement is

chronicled. As we can discover but this instance of its exercise, we may safely infer that it was triumphantly effective. The sinner concerned hap indulged in certain "enormities," which shall be nameless, and had wickedly added to his crime by using what was majestically declared to be "vilipending language" about the minister. For these high-handed affronts, the following sentence was pronounced upon him:—He is to be "carried down from the Kirk of Wick to the Cross, with ane paper hood bearing the inscription of his crime, and to sit there two hours in the stocks wt. the hood on his head." It is also ordered that he must appear before the congregation and "give satisfaction" for his misdeeds. If it fell out that a charge—say of fornication—was made against a man, and he declared himself innocent, he was allowed an opportunity of "purging himself by oath" before the Session and "in ye face of ye congregation." The oath was administered to him on his knees, and (modernised) ran thus:—"I, —— ——, do solemnly declare,

before the Almighty and H
searching God, the righteous J
of all the earth, that I am inn
and altogether free of fornica
and for the more verification of
and satisfaction of all, I impr
upon myself these following pla
if I be guilty: That I may
vagabond like Cain on the e
that some signal judgment from
may be inflicted upon my body,
here on earth: that I may be
prived of the presence of
hereafter for evermore; and tha
the curses that are denounced ag
Sin in the Scriptures may fall
me: And I solemnly declare th
take this oath upon me in the li
meaning of the words, wit
equivocation or mental reservat
Having thus "purged" himsel
was declared innocent before
assembled congregation, and
of the charge laid against him.

By-Past Burgh Officers: Hangman and Whipper

BY-PAST BURGH OFFICERS: HANGMAN AND WHIPPER

IT may come to some of our readers as a surprise to be informed that the town kept a hangman. His duties, it seems, extended over the county; but he was, of course, appointed by the Town Council of Wick and had his residence in the burgh. Mention is more than once made in the burgh records of the appointment of a public executioner. In proof, it may be sufficient to quote the minute bearing the appointment of William Callum to that office—a gentleman who, to save his own neck, agreed to put the rope around those of his fellows—of such, at least, as were unfortunate enough to require his services. The minute runs thus:—"2nd October, 1741—Compeared William Callum, fisher in Wick, who confest that in the night betwixt the fourth and fifth of

September last, byepast, he stole ane sheep out of the cree belonging to Robert Begg at the Head of Wick; that he slaughtered the said sheep at the Mid Dik of the Park of Wick; and that the head, feet, skin, and four legs which were found in his the said William Callum's house by Robert Winchester Bailie, and Donald Lyall, Fiscal of Court, after search made by them on the said 5th day of September, were the head, skin, and feet, and four legs of the said stolen sheep; and in order to be liberated from and dismissed from his confinement and imprisonment in the Prison in the Cross of Wick, and from the hazard and effects of a criminal prosecution against him for the said crime of theft, he, the said William Callum, enacted, and hereby enacts himself, to be ane Hangman and Executioner within the said Burgh and Haill privileges thereof, and within the bounds and limits of the shire of Caithness, and binds and obliges himself to enact and perform everything proper and incumbent upon him in that office as he shall be

ordered and authorized by the magistrates." Whether this man of the rope had any hanging to do or not, there is not evidence to show; but as it is supposed that Gallow-Hill derives its name from the belief that it was the place of execution, we may venture to conclude that his craft was sometimes required. The fact that such an official was appointed also indicates that there was occasional need of him. He had certain perquisites pertaining to his office—such as a fish out of every dozen caught, etc.; and he occupied, free of rent, a plot of ground above the shore of Wick, at the extreme east of the old royal burgh. The plot was long known as The Hangman's Rig.

Tradition has affirmed that when another unfortunate had committed a capital crime, his friends bribed the sureties of the previously-appointed hangman to get him to "bolt," with a consideration to himself for his kindness in doing so. Thus the office became vacant, and the last criminal saved his neck by accepting the appointment.

The Whipper was also a recog-

nized official. His duty was to whip culprits—publicly or privately—with the cat-o'-nine-tails. Here is the agreement of one who accepted the office:—"I, William Bremner in Bankhead, do hereby of my own free will bind and oblige myself to give to William Elder and Alexr. Macdonald, present prisoners in the Tollbooth of Wick, the number of twenty-five lashes to each of them upon their naked backs in the Market Place of Wick, upon Friday, the 6th day of November next, and in case I am employed by the Sheriff-Depute to whip the said Wm. Elder and Alexr. Macdonald in the town of Thurso [also], I oblige myself to do the same, upon their paying me handsomely for my trouble in ready money before performing the same." We fancy that on some quiet night thereafter the culprits "paid him handsomely for his trouble" in a kind of coin not issued by the realm!

Wull Bremner, "whippie," was a tall, half-witted "swack chiel," whose dress in summer was a harn shirt, kilt and pettie, or short jacket.

He resided at the Bankead with his sister, who was imbecile. The boys of the town tormented him much, throwing stones at him. He did not always heed them, but when he made up his mind to punish them his appearance was followed by an instant stampede. In physical strength "Wull" could hold his own with any on whom he inflicted the lash.

The "Auld Brig"

THE "AULD BRIG"

THE erection of the present Wick Bridge is within easy recollection. During its construction it was crossed by the Prince and Princess of Wales and party. The bridge which preceded the present one can also be remembered. It was, like its successor, a structure of three arches; but it sported a huge rise in the centre, after the style of other bridges of the period, and was very narrow. It had no footpaths, and was contracted to the width of the road.

But the "auld brig" goes further back. According to one old writer, it was "a rickety, tottering, structure, which had more the appearance of a mausoleum, raised to the memories of the dead dogs and cats that were deposited underneath, than of being a bridge for Christian men and women." This rather wide and

laboured description would seem to have some justification in fact. Even in its early history, the bridge was by no means a too-staunch erection; and at the period referred to by the writer it was nothing more that eleven dilapitated pillars spanned by planks of wood—planks not too stout, either, if tradition may be trusted. On each side stretched the green banks. The Minute of Council referring to its erection—1776—runs as follows:—After stating that the old bridge is insufficient and dangerous, it says "that such an advantageous opportunity may never occur again, as there is timber lying on the shore from the vessel that was lately wrecked at Sarclet. The Council therefore resolve themselves to accomplish the object—estimate, £80—the bridge to be 8 feet broad, and fitt to carry horses and carriages, it being proposed to support the bridge with new stone pillars and to cover the joists which are to go betwixt these pillars with thick deals and planks." Two years later "the bridge which had been erected at so

much expense" was in danger of being damaged by the horses and cattle passing over it, and these were ordered to be driven over "the ford," unless when the river was in spate, under a penalty of one shilling. It was manifestly not much of a bridge.

The "auld brig" could not have been greatly used. Although Wick had more than a century before this been erected into a Royal Burgh, it was yet hardly more than a village of thatched houses. Perhaps the most regular patrons of it were the servant girls, who, bare-footed, carried over it the daily supply of peats for their respective houses, from the Hill of Newton. Three furrows constituted the day's supply, which was housed every morning before breakfast. As the pillars were in a rickety state, and the planks of the rudest description, it must have been no mean feat to carry a "creel" of peats over the "auld brig."

In 1665 a complaint was lodged against the shoemakers and glovers of the town to the effect that they were breaking down the shank of the bridge —this was the first bridge, previous

to the one built by Harpsdale, the provost, from the cargo of timber—by using it so frequently for dressing and drying skins. The fact of their so occupying it proves that the traffic over it was trifling, while the possibility of their breaking it down by such usage demonstrates its frailty. The cart, as we have before noted, had not yet made its appearance in the county; and the entire population of the parish only amounted to 2000 people. Eleven years before the date of the above complaint, Cromwell's Commissioner of Excise for Scotland says that Wick did not possess a single sailing vessel of any description. It thus seems pretty certain that the grass was allowed to grow almost unmolested between the rotting planks of the first and second bridges. We may, however, quote the opinion of one—Wright, the author of "Husbandry in Scotland"—who visited the town about 1783. He wrote:—"In Wick, curing and salting fish is a considerable branch, as also salting and exporting beef. Provisions are cheap and plentiful: beef at salting time, a penny a pound;

mutton, three halfpence." He adds that the town sported one inn, where good claret could be had at half-a-crown a bottle. The trade—notwithstanding that the writer says that it was considerable—could not have been of great dimensions when a single inn met the needs of the town.

A rather amusing story is told of a certain mid-wife who attempted to cross the "auld brig" under peculiar circumstances. It appears that this important personage, who lived on the north side of the river, was wanted in all haste on the south side. It also happened that the mid-wife's weaver lived on the south side, and, knowing that Saunders would be in want of waft for the web he was weaving for her, she determined to visit him and her distressed patient at the same time. Accordingly, she filled her pockets and apron with the requisite clews, and fastened others around her waist. Burdened thus, and having also a sack of *sidds* for the dressing, our heroine set forth, accompanied by her trusty dog "Help." When about mid-way across the bridge,

she stumbled over the aforesaid "Help." After making sundry frantic efforts to steady herself, she fairly flopped into the river (which was then in spate), clews, sidds, and all. In falling, she grasped despairingly at the tail of her unwitting companion, but to no purpose. Her clews, however, saved her. Acting like buoys, they floated her on the stream until she was dragged ashore. A spectator remarked that "the 'howdie's' appearance, with all her clews about her, closely resembled that of a *yoll* (yawl) setting her nets during a herring fishing night!" The spectator's language is frank, but we forgive it on account of the brilliant metaphor with which he has entertained us!

Schools of Other Days

IN 1687, the Synod of Caithness decreed that parents who kept their children back from school should be rebuked by the Session and compelled to send them at least three days in the week. It was also resolved that none be allowed to marry unless they could repeat the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, and the Ten Commandments.

Notwithstanding the action of the Synod—which may be said to have been compulsory education in the bud!—and the modest demand made upon those who were to set up house, the people remained in a state of regrettable ignorance. In 1701, the call which was presented to Charles Keith to become minister of Wick was subscribed to by the heritors and elders present, and also by a great number who could not

write their names. In the Session records, frequent instances occur where (upon giving evidence) the witness declares that "he cannot write, touches the pen, and allows the clerk to subscribe his name." As late as the beginning of the eighteenth century, only one in every fifty persons within the parish could write.*

Wick (as a parish) was without a statutory school until 1706. Previous to that, education was imparted by any wandering person who could teach writing and spelling after a crude fashion. These teachers, however, flourished long after the introduction of statutory schools, and their successors were plentiful in the town until recent times. Here is a jokey picture of the schools held by these instructors in 1787:—"The two most celebrated seminaries for females that I have any recollection of in Wick during the olden time

* As an evidence of the spread of education, it may be mentioned that when Queen Victoria ascended the throne in 1837, forty-seven per cent. of her subjects could not write; now the percentage is only seven.

were Mrs. Mary Groat's* (a cousin of John's) and Mrs. Madge Macleod's. Desks, seats, and the fine arts were alike unknown in these primitive days, and the favourite position of the interesting creatures, as they pursued their literary studies, was that of squatting, Indian-fashion, on the floor, or, in the phraseology of the time, on their *currie-hunkers.* Scotch was taught in the approved Caithness fashion, but English was totally unknown. Spelling was considered quite superfluous, and, as to grammar, I question whether the word was ever heard pronounced between the Kirk and the Shore. A few sheets of writing-paper were, by some inconceivable process, scrawled over with hieroglyphics, which it required no small talent to

* One of Mrs. Groat's pupils had acquired the then new-fangled habit of saying "Devil," instead of the time-honoured "Deil." The old lady was quite upset at the high-sounding title for the Black Vagabond, and she is reported to have exclaimed, when first she heard it—"'Devil!' 'Devil,' indeed! Ca' him 'Deil,' lassie! 'Deil's' gude enough for him. Set *him* up wi' sich fine names, indeed!"

decipher; but, then, the mammas of the time had the satisfaction of being conscious that their daughters were unable to pen anything in the shape of a *billet doux*. Music, drawing, French, &c., were all totally out of the question. A vagrant dancing-master came occasionally to the town to put life and mettle into their heels, but grace and manner were completely neglected. Such was female education." We suspect that the writer has somewhat indulged his humour in pencilling the above sketch, but we know from independent sources that it carries a considerable amount of truthfulness. There are some aged persons still alive in Wick who conducted schools something after the above fashion—their scholars all squatting on the floor. Indeed, we believe that the practice of making scholars write their "copies" on the ground did not actually cease until the School Boards suppressed most of the private schools in 1875. Widow Laird is also remembered as the mistress of a school at Craigstown—her claim to immortality and distinction lying in

the fact that she always signed herself "Mrs. Lard." Mrs. Laird had followed the Christian precept to pluck out her "i" as it offended her!

It is essential to keep these wandering teachers distinct from those who were examined and authorized by the Presbytery. Almost all the vagrant schoolmasters were incompetent men; but those examined by the Presbytery were men capable of doing the work needed by their times, and what they lacked in technical skill was often made up in enthusiasm. Even then, however, the attainments of the schoolmaster were not immense. Nor were his encouragements tempting. Accommodation was mean and niggardly, and the salary was an insult. The offices of precentor and session-clerk were united with that of schoolmaster, so that, together, their emoluments might enable him to eke out a living. Yet, we doubt not, he was a man of weight, and one to be reckoned with, in his day.

Goldsmith, in his inimitable "Deserted Village," pictures "the village

schoolmaster" as a man of vast learning in the eyes of the rustics; yet his attainments were summed up in writing and arithmetic, with an occasional plunge into other equally marvellous achievements. The quotation is hackneyed, but for that very reason it may be accepted as hitting off the subject with a degree of accuracy, and we cannot resist giving it:—

"The village all declared how much he knew—
'Twas certain he could write, and cipher, too!
Lands he could measure, times and tides presage,
And e'en the story ran—that he could gauge;
While words of learned length and thundering sound
Amazed the gazing rustics ranged around;
And still they gazed, and still the wonder grew,
That one small head should carry all he knew."

There is perhaps a touch of poetic license in Goldsmith's sketch, but the pictures of last century go to credit it. That it is not far from being a faithful description of matters in and around Wick about

1790 is evidenced by the following quotation from Calder's "History of Caithness." Concerning the youth and education of James Bremner, C.E., our county historian writes:— "James, the subject of our notice, was in due time sent to school, but all that he learned there was to read and write, and that very imperfectly. Education in Caithness was then at a low stand. Except in one or two parishes there were no statutory schools; and in the country districts the instruction of the young was chiefly intrusted to females, or to men with the merest smattering of learning, who, being incapacitated by physical infirmity from following any other vocation, set up as teachers. The classics and the higher branches had, of course, no place in the scholastic programme. As the writer of a memoir of Mr Bremner truly observes, grammars and lexicons, globes and maps, were quite unknown, and the pupil who could read through the proverbs of Solomon without stammering, and write pretty quickly, whether he could spell or not, was considered

fit for any situation." This description of teaching was penned by one who was himself a teacher. Notwithstanding, some cases of scholarship have occurred which show that teaching in Caithness was not insignificant. A society schoolmaster in Wick (Hector Maclean) had a nephew, educated by himself, who was about twenty years Greek master of the Edinburgh High School. He was the Benjamin M'Kay mentioned by Calder among the Caithness notables.

The first reference to a school in the Burgh records is made in 1680. It is there stated that "four quartermasters were appointed to build a School House at the Shore of Wick, and that each householder was required to furnish a servant for that work." By 1750 a new schoolhouse was required, as the one erected in 1680 had become ruinous. Here are the specifications of the new school:—"20 feet in length and 16 in breadth, with a fire-room adjoining thereto 14 feet in length, the walls to be 10 feet high—the whole house to be sufficiently lofted with a

chimney in each of the gavels, with a partition in the middle thereof, or wherever it shall be most convenient for the schoolmaster's accommodation." The cost of this building — school and dwelling-house — amounted to the astounding sum of £9 stg. Shortly after its erection, James Sutherland, Tannach, was appointed schoolmaster at a salary of 25s. per annum, with the fees. What the fees were worth, we cannot say; but Mr. Sutherland's successor in office reminded Alexander Dunbar that his were due, whereupon that worthy up with his fist and "took" the schoolmaster across the mouth, "to the lowsen of his teeth" and the covering of his beard with blood. Let us hope that fees were not usually paid in this style!

Fergusmass:
As it Used to be

FERGUSMASS*: AS IT USED TO BE

FERGUSMASS DAY is no longer with us in its glory. We can recall the tail-end of it, but another pen must depict its early greatness. "Stands" with gingerbread, tops, drums and whistles were plentiful, we remember; and shows and play-actors conspired to add adornment to the scene. Druggist George Auld (who died lately) kept open shop—with bulged window in front—opposite the Market Place, and he supplied the youth of the town with tin whistles, penny rungs, locust beans, and an intermin-

* From the frequent occurrence of the termination *mass* in the names of Caithness fairs, we may get an idea of the hold which Popery exercised over the county. Beside Fergusmass, we may mention Margaretmass, Colmsmass, Petermass, Georgemass, Marymass, Lukemass, Magnusmass, Tustimass, Lammass, &c.

able assortment of articles dear to the juvenile heart. The day was a universal holiday, and one of the noisest and busiest of the year. Everybody turned out to see everybody. Now, even the name sounds unfamiliar. No more shall we see many of the staid figures which, in stately stand-up collar and oft-wound black tie, doucely saluted each other on that day—"now green's the sod and cauld's the clay" that wrap them in the grave.

The following description of a Fergusmass Day, which we have been fortunate enough to unearth, goes back beyond the memory of the present generation, on which account it may be all the more welcome. It is vivid and telling :—

"What a conglomeration of abominations was seen! What an amalgamation of sounds was heard! There stood a humble stall devoted to the sale of most villanous gingerbread and sweeties. Here another, on which lay, in admirable confusion, quantities of glass beads, Shorter Catechisms, wicker baskets, horn spoons, the veracious history of

George Buchanan, and melancholy ballads.

"What a mass of gaudily-dressed lasses, with be-mudded cotton stockings; swaggering country blades holding them in soft parlance; obstreperous cows that were not to be controlled; contumacious horses that would not be ruled! This, with the accompanying noise, dirt, confusion and jumble, constituted Fergusmass Market.

"As the day advanced, the mirth and fun grew fast and furious, the noise increased, and the confusion was complete. Night fell apace. The shops emptied and the public-houses filled. There were wives seen thinking of going home, and lasses talking of it, but all determined to 'stay a wee bit langer.' Here was an honest farmer who, in attempting to mount his charger, had fallen three times in the mire. There was another who, with eloquence equalled only by the energy he displayed, was arguing with his better-half as to the propriety of having another half-mutchkin, while she, in a manner

not to be misunderstood, insisted upon his taking the road home. Here was a run—a shriek—a clatter of sticks! There was a broken head —women tugging at men—men, regardless of the women, clearing the causeway! Here were two valiant rustics, stick in hand, ready to decide by their prowess which had the best claim to the red-haired damsel with the tartan shawl and smart dressing-cap—while she, undecided, was loudly calling for assistance, adding, with a mixed air of fear and satisfaction, 'Ochanee, sirs, it's aboot *me;* they'll 'dae themsels ill.' From yonder public-house was to be heard the merry chorus of the rude bacchanalian song, chanted by a parcel of clod-hopping Brahams; from another, the lively tones of the fiddle or the thrilling sounds of the bagpipes, inviting the fair and gallant to dance. All was mirth, friendship, joy, love.

"The market-day from which this sketch was taken would have passed off in the same way in which the market usually did but for the excep-

tions of two or three pot-valiant individuals from the Highland end of the county being clapped in jail for cracking the skull of one of their neighbours; an old woman drowned in the water of Reiss; and an accident which befell a cow of Wildans Keith's."

This is a picture full of life and animation.* Bustle and noise seem universal. The ruder elements have full swing. Yet the total result of the day's crime does not strike us as terrible—owing, no doubt, to the fact that poor Willie Coghill was pithless in such a sweltering crowd. Policemen had not yet been invented. We have no means of knowing who the gentleman was who wore the proud distinction of a cracked skull that day, nor have we any information about the old woman who was drowned on the way home; but, as we know the story of Wildans' cow, we cannot resist telling it, though it is somewhat foreign to our subject. The fact is, that cow of Wildans' got

* At the last Fergusmass market only a calf was offered for sale, and even that failed to find a purchaser!

drunk! She resided—along with the Keith family—in the upper half of a house in Kirkstyle, which was reached by an outside stone stair, unadorned by handrail or bannister of any kind. Among other rarities, the cow was treated to a splendid fill of new *draff* on the night before Fergusmass. It appears that she so enjoyed the draff that she partook of more than a sensible supply for a cow of her age and experience. On the morrow, like other old fools, she deemed it necessary to keep up the reputation of Fergusmass by a show of friskiness, so that, as Wildans was leading her down the aforesaid stair, she thought she would show him a thing or two out of the usual. Whereupon she flung her tail and heels in the air most irreverently, thus defying the laws of all decent society. Finding her first efforts a success, and thirsting after greater conquests, she boldly resolved to dispense with the dull necessity of the steps in the stair. Regarding Wildans calmly for a minute with a benignant smile, so as to throw him off the scent and give him the greater surprise, she

sprang into the air and made for the earth with astounding speed. Such a magnanimous and ingenious undertaking should have been crowned with honour; but, alas! for the best laid schemes of mice, men, and cows, it was the last flourish of that original animal. Willie Able, Jamie Piper, and Sawney Souley, held sundry consultations over her; but she "never smiled again!"

THE END