

Broadsheet: EXECUTIONS IN PAISLEY. 1828
(Unknown Author)

With some of its observations on the infrequency of these occurrences here the Glasgow Chronicle took occasion to favour us last week. For the pains it takes in gathering these scraps of local history, we would feel the more graceful, were its information and accuracy in any sort of proportion to its inclination to do us service. On the subject of the eccentricities of our townsmen, and the taste they may evince for these painful sights, the journal in question may speculate at any length it likes, and not be one whit nearer the truth than it often is on subjects of more importance. But even on this point, we scarcely think the inhabitants of Paisley shew a keener relish than their neighbours. Judging from the numbers of draggle tailed sluts and dirty lined fellows who crowded our streets on Thursday, it required no prophet to tell us, that the City of St. Mungo had its thousands tainted with this appetite for ghastly enjoyment, in quite as perfect a degree as any living wight within the balidome of St. Mirren could pretend to. Proud of its inadequate knowledge, the Chronicle of Friday week thus repeats the imperfect information it had communicated in a preceding number:—" It may here be not uninteresting again to recapitulate the executions that have taken place in Paisley since **1697**. On the **15th June**, in that year, 4 men and 3 women were burned on the Gallowgreen, for witchcraft. In 68 years after, viz., on the **7th Nov. 1765**, a Glasgow fast day, a murderer of the name of Provan, was executed on the same spot, and his right hand cut off. On the **17th Aug. 1797**, a period of 32 years after the former, a man of the name of Potts, convicted of robbery at Gryffe Castle, was executed at the market Cross; and from that time to the present date, other 32 years have elapsed."

The very little information the writer had on this subject, will be apparent by and by. A good natured friend, with the view of supplying the deficiencies of this statement in the Chronicle of Monday last, under the designation of "an Inhabitant of Paisley," tells us that " In **1685**, during the tyrannical reign of James, it is well known to all who are versant in the history of that bloody period, that James Edgar and John Park suffered at the Cross of Paisley for their firm adherence to the sacred cause of civil and religious liberty.

"With regard to criminal cases, I have also to mention, that sometime before the middle of the last century, a man of the name of Robert Lyle, was executed at paisley for theft, and being habit and repute; and that a few years afterwards, a

man of the name of Love, who resided and had property in the High Street, was executed for the murder of his son, whom he stabbed with a knife, in a fit of passion, when sitting with his family at dinner."—Even the " inhabitant of Paisley" has fallen into an error, by substituting Edgar for *Algie*, and his notice respecting Lyle and Love is exceedingly vague, inasmuch as it does not give the precise date when these individuals were respectively gibbeted on the gallow green.

For the antiquarian lucubrations of the Chronicle and its correspondents we have as much respect as they deserve, but the value of such pursuits depends so much upon accuracy, that whenever we detect the slightest departure from historical fidelity, or an unbecoming lack of information, we may be excused for treating them with something like contempt, more especially, when by a little research, more facts, and greater accuracy, could easily have been obtained.

Since on this subject our townsmen have evinced some curiosity, we shall put them in possession of a few slight notices, which have occurred to us in the course of our enquiries. We may premise, that deficiencies in our Local Registers, and in the Books of Adjournal, prevent us from carrying these back to any thing approachnig a remote date.

From the declaration of W. Sutherland, contained in the Appendix to Wodrow's History, Vol. I. it appears that that individual was necessitated to officiate at the execution of a witch in this town, in the year **1661**.

In the year following, the parish of Innerkip was overrun with a breed of witches, and their pranks became so notorious, that a commission was issued (**7th May 1622**) to certain noblemen and gentlemen of the county, to try Mary Lamond, Katrine Scot, Janet Hynman, Margret Leitch, Margret Rankine, Jean King, and Margaret Duff, for " the horrid cryme of witchcraft, by committing of malefices, or entering into pactionns with the divell, renouncing their baptisme or otherwayes, &c." Most of these infatuated creatures pled guilty to the crimes of which they were charged, and were convicted on their own confessions, and doomed to death. Where they suffered, does not appear; but as these courts, for the trial of Witchcraft in this county, were usually held in Paisley, it is likely they were, according to the received mode of dispatching condemned witches and sorcerers, "worryit, (that is strangled) at a stake and brint" on the Gallow-Green.

The Jail about that time was seldom without a witch or warlock tenant, and as there was not

then so much Jail philanthropy abroad as in our day, many of these poor and aged wretches died in the loathsome cells where they were confined, some literally devoured by vermin, others the victims of disease or of brutal usage. A witch dying in prison here gives occasion for this curious entry in the Records of the Town Council.

"**1667 Oct. 17.** Whilk day the Baillies and Council having taken to their consideration the incivility and indiscreit carriage of Mr Hugh Montgomerie, Sheriff Depute of Renfrew, in permittiug the corpse of ane Janet Finnie, ane suspect witch imprisoned be him in their Jail and deceased therein, to be unhurried these fyve days bygone or thereby, and refusing absolutely to cause bury her notwithstanding both his duty and their requiring of him, so that they are necessitated to cause bury her, have therefore determined that he shall be deprived of certain favours he has from them, especially that he and his sons shall have no liberty from henceforth to sit in any of the Tounes Seats in the Churches, and for these reasons have ordained their officers to hold them out of both their seats."

Though there is some uncertainty regarding the precise number or the place of execution of the Innerkip witches, none exists regarding those who suffered for bewitching Sir George Maxwell of Pollok, and by devilish sorceries tormenting him until he died.

Accordingly on the **20th Feb. 1677**, we find that four witches and a warlock were burnt at the Gallowgreen of Paisley for this horrid crime. This case has been amply enough detailed in various publications, and we will not dwell longer on it than merely to mention the names of the unfortunate creatures whose lives were sacrificed on the gloomy altar of popular superstition. They were Janet Mathie, Bessie Weir, Margaret Jackson, John Stewart, Marjory Craig, and Annabel Stewart. "Annabel, the maid witch among them, about the age of 14, albeit penitent and confessing yet throw pittie was throw order of the secret council reprieved from burning."

Of this execution, Mr Robert Law, minister of Kilpatrick, in his Memorials, furnishes us with these details:—"The four witches and warlock foresaid, that were burnt at Paisley on the 20th February (for the young one was reprieved for a tyme because of her age) dyed obduredly, except the man, who appeared penitent, whose mother, Jonat Mathie, was first hanged without any confession of her guilt, and the effigies both of wax and clay being put in a napkine and dashed in pieces, were thrown in the fire with her. Her son and daughter confessed that when the Devil

appeared first to them in her house, that she (their mother) called him a gentleman to them, and a good man that would not hear the Lord's name mentioned, for fear it should be taken in vain. There was also one Bessie Weir hanged up, the last of the four (one that had been taken before in Ireland, and was condemned to the fyre for malefice before, and when the hangman there was about to cast her over the gallows, the devil takes her away from them out of their sight; her dittay was sent over here to Scotland) who, at this tyme, when she was cast off the gallows, there appears a raven, and approaches the hangman within an ell of him, and flies away again. All the people observed it and cried out at the sight of it!"

Feb. 3, 1685, James Algie and John Park were executed for refusing to take the oath of abjuration. Betwixt their sentence and its execution, only a few hours intervened, for the inscription on their tombstone tells us, that they were

"At ten condemned, at two to die."

The tombstone lies on the ground, laid off for a churchyard in Broomlands.

In 1687, we had another witch trial here; but whether there were any convictions we have not had the means of discovering.

We now come to the famous Bargarran case in which some four and twenty individuals, male and female, were implicated. One of these, Jean Fulton, an aged woman, appears to have died in jail, and another, John Reid, Smith in Inchinnan, succeeded in strangling himself in the prison of Rentrew, and a third, Alexander Anderson, also died in prison. On the **10th of June, 1697**, three men and four women were burned on the Gallowgreen, for bewitching Christian Shaw, and being habit and repute witches. The Chronicle, with its usual *accuracy* tells us this was on the 15th of the month, and that there were four men and three women. To obviate error, we may mention that the men were John Lindsay in Barloch, *alias* Bishop James Lindsay, *alias* Curate; both these had been delatit witches in **1687**, but got off through their ingenuity; and another man whose name has escaped our memory. The women executed, were Margaret Lning, Katherine Campbell, Agnes Naismith, and Margaret Fulton. It appears that the dress of the Sheriff of Renfrewshire was remarkably gay. On his visit to Christian Shaw, he is described as wearing brown coloured clothes, red plush breeches with black stripes, flowered muslin cravat, and an embroidered sword belt.

In **1694** John, William, and Robert Jamieson, weavers in Broomhead, were tried before the

Sheriff for sheep-stealing, housebreaking, theft, &c., two of them assoilzied and one found guilty, who, in all likelihood suffered a capital punishment, but the record from which this notice is taken is unfortunately defective. On the **28 Nov. 1700** James Laird, turner in Gorbals, was hanged on the Gallowgreen of Paisley, by sentence of Robert Sempill of Fullwood, Bailie-Depute of the Regality. He was tried for stouthrieff, theft, &c.

28th March, 1717, Robert Lang, in Langbank, was executed between the hours of two and four afternoon, on the Gallowgreen of Paisley, for the theft of a gray horse, which he had twice stolen, and was twice taken, as it is technically styled, "with the fang." His Judge was Robert Sempill, Sheriff-Depute.

September 2d, 1743, Robert Love, Messenger, was hanged here for the murder of his own son.

27th December, 1753 Robert Lyle, in Culliochant, parish of Kilbarchan, was hanged at the Gallowgreen between the hours of 10 and 3. He was tried before the Sheriff for housebreaking and theft. He was familiarly styled Rabbie Lyle. His executioner was a fellow prisoner, whose punishment, it is said, was remitted if he would undertake that disagreeable office. To obtain his liberty the fellow agreed, but did the thing so bunglingly, that it provoked the wrath of some native Satyrist, who, in his rhymes, alleged that in turning off Lyle the Hangman broke his head in the first place, and his neck afterwards.

The next who suffered on the Gallowgreen was the detestable ruffian, Alexander Provan, for the murder of his wife. The circumstances attending this murder are shocking, and cannot be related. He was hanged on the **7th Nov, 1765**, his right hand having been previously smitten off. According to tradition, the hangman, through trepidation, severed his hand by the palm instead of at the wrist, and Provan, with a dreadful shriek, cried out " the tow, the tow, the tow." The rope was immediately brought, and a termination put to his sufferings. The axe used to back off his hand was long kept as a relic, and shown as Provan's axe to those curious in these matters.

Thomas Potts, an Irishman, was tried before the High Court of Justiciary for housebreaking and robbery at Gryffecastle, found guilty, and sentenced to be executed at Paisley, on the **17th August 1797**. A crane was erected at the corner of the Tolbooth—the bats which supported it are still to be seen in the walls of the steeple—and on this he was suspended from half past three till a quarter past four. Potts wrote a number of letters,

which were published after his death, and in which he asserted his innocence of the crime for which he was tried, but admitted the commission of others equally bad. The same declaration he made on the scaffold.

These annals of the stake and gibber in Paisley, close with the execution of Brown and Craig, in front of the County Buildings, on Thursday the 29th ult.

Notes:

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www.renfrewshirehistory.info

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