

THE ROYAL BURGH OF AYR



Seven Hundred and Fifty Years of History

Edited by

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CHAPTER 15

HOW THE BURGH HELPED THE POOR

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THROUGHOUT its lengthy history the Royal Burgh of Ayr has played a notable part in the alleviation of distress among its less fortunate inhabitants. We shall find, as we pursue our study, that the method of administering assistance to the needy since the foundation of our royal burgh was no rigid one, and that certain definite phases can be discerned, each with its special characteristics. We shall note, for instance, the period from the Reformation to 1845, when the Church played the central role with the Town Council co-operating at various points; from 1845 to 1895, a period with a Parochial Board in charge in each parish; from 1895 to 1930, the period of the Parish Council with the Town Council outwith the picture; and thirdly, from 1930, with the Town Council playing a direct and major part as the administrator of public assistance, until the passing of the National Assistance Act, 1948. Since 1948 outdoor relief has been the responsibility of the newly constituted National Assistance Board, leaving the Town Council as the local authority for the very important sphere of indoor relief and certain other aspects of assistance with, in addition, important responsibilities under the Children Act, 1948.

From early times certain definite duties regarding the relief of the indigent and the treatment of beggars were assigned to burghs by various acts of the Scottish Parliament. Two acts, passed towards the end of the sixteenth century, which transcend in importance earlier legislation, laid down the principles upon which poor relief was administered until 1845, so that we may suitably confine our study of the legal basis of relief to a brief summary of their terms. An act of 1574 directed how magis-

¹ The author desires to record his indebtedness to Messrs. Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh, for granting him authority to make use of his book *Poor Relief in South Ayrshire, 1700-1845*, in the preparation of this article

trates in the burghs could levy a tax out of which the poor would receive assistance, and by an act of 1579 they were required to prepare lists of the poor who had been born within their burgh, or who had resided there for seven years. This act directed that paupers who did not fulfil one or other of these conditions were to be removed within forty days to the parish where these conditions could be fulfilled; and, to simplify the return of paupers to the parish where they had a legal claim to relief, they could be issued with a certificate or pass which authorised them to ask alms on their way home. Finally, the act of 1579 stated, that where funds for relief were insufficient, tokens could be issued which entitled the recipients to beg in their parish of settlement. Thus, before 1600, the Scottish Parliament had delegated to burghs all the main aspects of poor relief administration.

Dr. G. S. Pryde in his *Ayr Burgh Accounts* throws much light on the benevolent work of town councils. 'Both before and after the Reformation', he says, 'the burghs practised all three traditional methods of poor relief—licensed begging, alms giving (our outdoor relief) and hospitals (or poorhouses).' The amount disbursed, however, was never large. 'Though in some years', our authority informs us, 'between £20 and £30 went towards alms, burgh poor relief was too casual to amount, as a rule, to even one per cent of the revenue.'¹ The relief administered was not confined to local residents; assistance was disbursed to strangers from far and near, as the following illustrations clearly indicate.

- 1577-1578. Alms. To ane Troyelus Baskat, Denceman in Norroway, to his support, £2. To ane pure Frenchmane of support, £1.
 1588-1589. Shipwrecked Sailors of the Armada. For meat and drink to the pure Spainyardis, £4. To James Boyd, Cordiner, for four pair of schoone gevin to the saidis Spainyardis, £1. For lodging them, £5.
 1594-1595. Alms. To a pure Englishman, £1. To a pure Dutchman, £1 10s.
 1598-1599. Given to support an Aberdeen man recommended to the town by the Kirk, £20.²

But in the burghs, as in the country parishes, the main agent of poor relief administration was undoubtedly the kirk-session of the church. We have noted, for instance, that the

¹ G. S. Pryde (Editor) *Ayr Burgh Accounts*, 1534/1624, pp. lxxx-lxxxi, lxxxiii

² *ib.*, pp. 143, 161, 185, 197

magistrates were required by an act of 1579 to prepare lists of the needy; but this duty appears to have been discharged by the kirk-session, and we know that as early as 1672 Ayr kirk-session kept a most carefully compiled list of those to whom relief was administered. No similar rolls were prepared by the Town Council; but it would be wrong to suppose that no co-operation existed between these two organisations. And such co-operation was a regular feature of burghal administration in Scotland. In Edinburgh, for instance, from at least 1740, the magistrates and kirk-session of the Royalty agreed to vest the management of the poor in a special committee representative of the Town Council, the fourteen parish churches, the Episcopal Church and other bodies.¹ Similarly, in Aberdeen, in referring to the period 1638/1741, A. A. Cormack writes, 'The Council continued to co-operate with the Session and agreed to an issue of tokens to the Town's poor.'²

In Ayr considerable co-operation existed between Town Council and kirk-session. From the kirk-session records we learn that the magistrates, heritors and session met twice annually, from at least 1730, to consider the state of the poor; and although the minutes of these meetings, unfortunately, cannot be located, it is clear that these bodies worked in close harmony. For example, in July 1730, the session appointed three of their number to join two from the Town Council in order to ascertain the weekly contribution of the inhabitants of Ayr to the poor. Further, the kirk-session in January 1731 appointed two elders to compile a list of all stranger poor, and it is recorded in the minutes that they expected the Town Council to appoint two councillors to collaborate with the session members. Finally, in February, 1731, heritors, kirk-session and Town Council were identified with efforts to suppress begging.³

Just as the kirk-session in country parishes sought the assistance of the justices of the peace in questions relating to settlement or to vagrancy; so, in the burghs, the kirk-session appealed on many occasions to the magistrates for their support. In fact, the earliest reference which the writer has found to

¹ L. J. Sanders, *Scottish Democracy, 1815-1840*, p. 201

² A. A. Cormack, *Poor Relief in Scotland*, p. 80

³ Ayr Kirk-Session Minutes, 8th April 1730; 21st July 1730; 4th January 1731 and 3rd February 1731

the removal of paupers to their parish of chargeability is noted in the session records of Ayr Parish Church where the minute of 7th July 1712, states: 'The magistrates were bespoken to about those who have no testimonial and may be burdensome to this place.' Later a list of those to be removed from the parish was delivered to the magistrates.¹ Similar references are of frequent occurrence in the kirk-session records, and the closeness of the co-operation between session and Council is further illustrated by the fact that in 1729 members of both Council and session were appointed to visit different quarters of the town with the object of compiling a list of all the poor who had not qualified for relief, in order that they might be removed.²

An examination of the Ayr Town Council records for the period 1700/1845 reveals that the Town Council played only a small direct part in the alleviation of distress. It was interesting to learn, however, that the Town Council kept a 'poor box', and that it was opened at irregular intervals when the little money it contained was disbursed by the magistrates, with the advice of the Council, among the indigent persons of the burgh. The Council also continued to raise money, but only on rare occasions, for persons who had been specially unfortunate as, in May 1726, when a collection of £59 Scots was made for persons who had suffered by a fire³; or, as in 1800, when a special collection was organised in order to assist 'the labouring classes of the Community' on account of the high price of grain.⁴

The Town Council of the Royal Burgh of Ayr played an active part along with the kirk-session and other organisations in the establishment of Ayr Poorhouse in 1756. As well, however, as making provision for indoor relief, the Poorhouse directors, working independently of the kirk-session, administered relief to out-pensioners; and so from 1756 until about 1817, there were two funds for the relief of distress in Ayr, the Town Council being actively associated in this work through its representatives on the Poorhouse Board of Directors. A system which involved two separate funds for one and the same

¹ Ayr Kirk-Session Minutes, 7th and 14th July 1712

² *ib.*, 8th December 1729

³ Ayr Town Council Minutes, 3rd May 1726

⁴ *ib.*, 24th December 1800

object possessed obvious defects; so that, when in 1817, it was resolved that payment to out-pensioners should be made by the Poorhouse directors alone, a definite improvement in administration was effected. In order to promote the smooth working of the scheme all members of the kirk-session were added to the board of directors in place of the small representation they had previously been allowed. No alteration was made in this arrangement until 1845.

Until 1845 the Scottish system of relief was essentially one of outdoor assistance, and the provision of indoor assistance was on a small scale. Nevertheless, indoor accommodation must have been advantageous in the case of the aged poor, who might not have friends or relatives to care for them, and this need was long recognised throughout Scotland, although efforts to satisfy it were totally inadequate. Hospitals for the poor had been erected in many of our burghs in the Middle Ages, and, in some instances, the history of these institutions can be traced to our own day. Kirk-sessions in less populous areas sometimes rented or owned houses where refuge could be sought. In Dailly, for instance, there was one such house which, in 1844, provided accommodation for seven persons.¹

A small hospital was constructed in Ayr in 1607, and it was still in use in 1653,² but its subsequent history is obscure. The building known as Ayr Poorhouse was erected, as we have seen, in 1756. Of the arrangements for its erection we know little, but we learn at least from the Ayr kirk-session records that in 1753 a committee of the kirk-session was appointed to confer with the magistrates regarding the provision of indoor accommodation for the poor of Ayr. This committee recommended that the funds for building a poorhouse should be raised by voluntary subscription.³ Little difficulty must have been experienced in securing the required funds, for the Poorhouse was opened in 1756, only two years later, when 24 persons were admitted—9 men and 15 women—of whom eight were aged 80 or over, five were between 70 and 80, and four were between 60 and 70.

Ayr Town Council was actively associated in the administration of the Poorhouse, for, of the board of directors, eight

¹ *Poor Law Report*, 1844, vol. i, pp. ix-x

² Pagan, *Annals of Ayr*, p. 95

³ Ayr Kirk-Session Minutes, 18th March 1754

were appointed by the Town Council; other bodies represented were the kirk-session, the Merchants' Society, the Weavers' Society, and the Incorporated Trades. The day-to-day administration of the affairs of the Poorhouse was the responsibility of the master and mistress. To the former was delegated a variety of duties. He had, for instance, to conduct family worship twice per day and to teach the children reading, writing and arithmetic for two hours each morning and afternoon. He had to walk with the poor to church and to sit with them wherever the magistrates directed. To the master also was assigned the task of ensuring discipline and good conduct within the Poorhouse. It was the duty of the mistress to supervise the cleaning of the house and to keep a correct list of the quantities of food consumed each day.

Information concerning practically every aspect of the lives of the inmates is contained in the minute book of the meetings of the Poorhouse directors, where we have notes on diet, occupations, education and apprenticeship. Regarding diet, three meals were regularly served each day—breakfast, dinner and supper. Oatmeal pottage was served from day to day, but some variety was afforded in the type of food offered for dinner. Below is noted a copy of the menu decided upon at the opening of the Poorhouse:

Day	Breakfast	Dinner	Supper
Sunday	Oatmeal pottage with ale or milk	Bread and ale, or milk	Broth, bread and flesh
Monday	Ditto	Herring and potatoes, or salmon and bread	Oatmeal pot- tage with ale or milk
Tuesday	Ditto	Broth, bread, and cheese or butter	Ditto
Wednesday	Ditto	Broth, bread, and flesh	Ditto
Thursday	Ditto	Herrings, potatoes, or salmon and bread	Ditto
Friday	Ditto	Broth, bread, and flesh	Ditto
Saturday	Ditto	Broth, bread, and cheese or butter	Ditto

According to present day prices the cost of food was incredibly small. For the week ending 15th October 1759, when the number of inmates was 27, £1 6s. 11½d. was expended on food, making a charge per person of approximately 1/-.

This cost was practically identical with that of Glasgow's Town Hospital during its first year (November 1733/4), when the cost of maintenance was 11½d. per person per week.¹ By 1842 the cost per individual per week in Ayr Poorhouse had increased to 2/6.²

Despite the relatively low cost of living, difficulties frequently arose regarding the best method of raising sufficient funds to meet expenses. While the construction of the Poorhouse was financed by voluntary subscriptions, it was found impossible to defray current expenses without the imposition of a compulsory assessment; and, even with the adoption of this method, the directors were often confronted with financial difficulties. The amount of the assessment levied was determined by the magistrates, heritors and kirk-session acting together; but it was the magistrates who appointed the 'Stent Masters' and they in turn fixed the contribution payable by each individual. The sum raised by assessment rapidly increased: in 1784 it amounted to £100, in 1800 to £250, in 1820 to £450, in 1830 to £470 and in 1835 it rose to £806.

From the inception of compulsory assessment much difficulty was experienced in securing payment. In 1777 arrears amounted to £5 18s. 3d., by 1780 they had increased to £17 19s. 2d., and so alarmed were the directors that they threatened to institute legal proceedings against those in arrears. So serious had conditions become that the directors in 1784 appointed a committee to investigate the whole problem. The investigations of this committee emphasised that the mounting expenditure was the result of rising prices and of the rapid increase in the number of inmates, which had almost trebled since the Poorhouse was opened. In due course various recommendations as to retrenchment were made; the diet offered was considerably modified, allowances payable to out-pensioners were reduced and more of the inmates were set to work. In addition to the annual assessment, however, income was derived from various other sources. For instance, at the time of the *New Statistical Account*, several societies or corporations made annual contributions—the Sailors' Society donated £10, the Writers' £5, the

¹ R. Burns, *Historical Dissertation on the Law and Practice of Great Britain particularly relating to Scotland with regard to the Poor*, pp. 326-327

² *New Statistical Account*, vol. v, p. 74

Merchants' £3, and other smaller bodies contributed £14. The Town Council paid £30, while the kirk-session contributed a varying sum from its uncertain income. Despite these sources of revenue it seems unlikely that the financial difficulties of the Poorhouse were satisfactorily solved before the passing of the Poor Law (Amendment) Act, 1845.

We learn from the Poorhouse records that the inmates were employed in a variety of ways, either in the day-to-day work of their establishment or in other occupations, and it was the accepted practice of poor-law authorities to employ the inmates of institutions administered by them. In the Charity Workhouse, Edinburgh, those able to work were employed making clothes and shoes, while in Glasgow's Town Hospital male inmates were employed in shoemaking and in teasing oakum, and the women in washing and working for the establishment.¹ According to a rule of the Ayr Poorhouse, promulgated in 1756, the mistress was instructed not only to employ girls in washing clothes and in doing kitchen work, but to teach them spinning and train them for service. At the end of 1756 the directors recorded in their minute book, 'The people in the House that can work are all employed and are mostly thankful for their situation.' This policy of giving employment is still pursued where, in Ayr Welfare Home and Hospital, the inmates who are fit, perform light tasks under supervision.

Probably on account of the financial difficulties of the Poorhouse directors, it became usual for them to bind boys to apprenticeship in certain trades, and thus they became freed of the responsibility of maintaining them. As early as 1759 two boys were apprenticed, one to a master tailor and the other to a shoemaker. Each master bound himself to educate his apprentice in reading and writing, to supply him with clothing and to give him a grant of 40s. on completion of his apprenticeship. This latter condition was attached to almost all apprenticeship agreements, and it was probably intended to give the apprentice a start in life. The minute books abound with similar references to the apprenticeship of boys and girls.

Difficulties between apprentices and their masters were of common occurrence; sometimes these difficulties were referred to the directors of the Poorhouse for settlement; at other times

¹ *Poor Law Report*, 1844, vol. i, p. ix

they were referred to the burgh court, but, despite these difficulties, the policy of binding out boys when they attained the age of twelve to fourteen years continued. This is not surprising, for with the rise of the cotton industry and the establishment of numerous mills after 1780, the demand for labour was very great indeed. Poorhouses appeared to offer a very valuable source of labour, and there is little doubt but that the poor law authorities were only too anxious to avail themselves of this opportunity. The years 1785 to 1795 were boom years and many important mills were erected, including the New Lanark Mills, which received large numbers of children from Edinburgh Workhouse.¹ It was probably with this demand in view that the Ayr directors advertised in May 1786 that they had several boys in the Poorhouse of an age suitable for apprenticeship, as well as several girls suited for service. No doubt, as a result of this advertisement, the directors made an agreement with Messrs. Brown, Carrick & Co., merchants in Glasgow, concerning boys and girls to be apprenticed in their cotton factory in Rothesay.² On 30th November 1786, the necessary indenture was signed. It stated that the Company would not only 'teach, learn and instruct the said apprentices in their art of cotton spinning', but would also give them instruction in religion and in reading.

The system of binding out apprentices to cotton mills was very general in Scotland, though never so widespread as in England, where the proportion of poorhouses to the population was much greater. The Health and Morals of Apprentices' Act of 1802, which was designed to mitigate some of the evils, had little effect on account of the absence of suitable administrative machinery. A further act, which was passed in 1816, made it illegal to apprentice a pauper more than forty miles distant from his town or village. But by this time the demand was rapidly decreasing for, with the adoption of steam power in factories, mills tended to become concentrated in towns where there was an abundant supply of 'free' children as distinct from 'pauper' children.

The Poor Law (Amendment) Act, 1845, made extensive

¹ They were bound out for four, five, six, or seven years 'according to their age, or generally until they have completed their fifteenth year'. D. F. Macdonald, *Scotland's Shifting Population*, pp. 111-12.

² Poorhouse Minute Book, 30th November 1786

changes in poor relief administration in Scotland; but the need for reform had long been widely recognised, though, on the other hand, the voluntary system, as administered by the Church authorities possessed its staunch supporters. The inadequacy of relief furnished by the Church was strongly emphasised in the Poor Law Report of 1845, where it is recorded, 'There is abundant evidence that the allowance was often inadequate, both in town and country parishes, and that the relief given is frequently altogether insufficient to provide even the commonest necessities of life.'¹ This was due, not to any lack of effort on the part of the kirk-session, but to changing circumstances. While population was relatively small the kirk-session was able to tackle the problem of relief, but some fundamental change in organisation became essential in the nineteenth century when the population increased out of all proportion to the income of the Church, and when the Church itself was beset by its own internal upheaval which culminated in the Disruption of 1843. Already the limitations of the voluntary system were becoming apparent, for more and more parishes were resorting to a legal assessment. In Scotland, up to 1700, only three parishes had employed this means of augmenting its funds, by 1818 the number was 145, and in 1839 236 parishes out of 900 had adopted a compulsory assessment. Thus the voluntary system was being rapidly superseded before 1845.

It was the aim of the Poor Law (Amendment) Act to improve the organisation of relief and to ensure that the new administrators should have adequate funds at their disposal. Perhaps the most striking change effected was the establishment of a central authority of nine members known as the 'Board of Supervision for the Relief of the Poor in Scotland', whose duty it was to supervise the work of the Parochial Boards in whom poor relief administration now became vested. But the establishment of Parochial Boards did not involve any fundamental cleavage with the pre-1845 system, for the Church, the heritors and the Town Council were all represented on the new parish authority; the only innovation being the inclusion in each Parochial Board of a very limited number of members elected by the ratepayers. Nor did the new system involve any change

¹ *Poor Law Report*, Appendix, part ii, p. 442

in the category of persons eligible for relief. Under the Parochial Boards, however, administration became more formal and rigid than it had been under the rather personal touch of the kirk-session. Although no longer the official administrators of relief, the Church did not cease its benevolent activities, and to this day much good work is performed by the Church, particularly at Christmas time, in donating gifts to the sick and to the needy.¹

The first meeting of Ayr Parochial Board was held on 16th September 1845; thereafter two statutory meetings were held annually, at the first of which the roll of paupers was adjusted, while at the second accounts were considered and the report of the committee of management read and usually formally approved. This meeting also elected a chairman and a committee of management, to which it delegated the powers of the Board for the ensuing year.² On various occasions between 1845 and their supersession by Parish Councils in 1895, the provost of the Royal Burgh of Ayr acted as chairman of the Parochial Board.

Parochial Boards organised both indoor and outdoor relief. In Ayr the number of registered poor fluctuated from 241 in 1846 to the peak figure of 563 in 1869 and decreased to 162 in 1894; the cost of the allowances for these years being respectively £863, £2,823 and £1,160. The reduction in the number relieved after 1870, and the corresponding reduction in cost, was the result of the imposition of the 'poorhouse test'.³ In addition to relieving the ordinary registered poor, Parochial Boards were also responsible for assistance to occasional poor, to lunatic poor and for medical relief. Thus the administration of outdoor relief was a very important and difficult aspect of the work of the Parochial Board and, through its representatives on this Board, Ayr Town Council was directly identified with this work.

Following the establishment of Ayr Parochial Board, important changes were effected in the provision made for indoor relief. Prior to the passing of the act of 1845, there were thirteen poorhouses in Scotland; but after 1845 this number rapidly increased: by 1849 the number had risen to 19, and by

¹ Sanders, *Scottish Democracy, 1815-1840*

² David Caldwell, *History of Parish of Ayr*, p. 31

³ *Vide infra*, p. 259

1863 it reached 48.¹ In Ayr, as we have observed, a Poorhouse was erected in 1756; and, by the Poor Law (Amendment) Act, 1845, this building became vested in the Parochial Board. But it soon became evident that more commodious accommodation was necessary, and so consideration was given to the problem of new accommodation. The Ayr Parochial Board decided, however, to ask neighbouring parishes to co-operate with a view to the erection of a poorhouse which would serve them all. Thus a meeting was convened to which were invited representatives from the Parochial Boards of St. Quivox, Auchinleck, Old Cumnock, New Cumnock, Newton, Muirkirk and Symington, the Ayr Board being represented by its chairman Provost Miller and by Mr. James Morton, Mr. Hugh Cowan and Captain McTaggart. It was unanimously agreed that the erection of a poorhouse would be most advantageous and that it should be sited in Holmston Road, Ayr.²

At a later meeting³ a constitution for the administration of the projected poorhouse was prepared and approved. It was originally proposed that accommodation should be provided for 250 inmates and 50 lunatics. Designs for the suggested poorhouse were invited and, finally, the plan submitted by Wm. L. Moffat, Edinburgh, was accepted.⁴ Certain modifications were subsequently made, however, in view of the high cost of the original scheme, and the plan for accommodating lunatics was very rightly abandoned. It was decided also to reduce the number of billets to 150. These alterations were approved by the Board of Supervision on 5th July 1857, and steps were immediately taken to proceed with the erection of a building called the Kyle Combination Poorhouse. A governor and matron were appointed in April 1860 at a salary of £55 and £30 respectively with, in addition, rather liberal subsistence allowances.

Poorhouses during the nineteenth century, and perhaps later, served a dual purpose: they enabled local authorities to satisfy the wants of the old and of the indigent, and they served also as a test of poverty; that is to say, if applicants for relief were offered accommodation in a poorhouse they had either

¹ Thomas Ferguson, *The Dawn of Social Welfare*, p. 212

² Minute of above meeting dated 5th May 1854

³ *ib.*, 1st June 1855

⁴ *ib.*, 31st July 1856

to accept it, or they received no relief. From 1870 we find the Board of Supervision and their energetic officers repeatedly advocating the advantages of the 'poorhouse test' with a view to the reduction of what they termed 'pauperism'. Sometimes the primary object of the poorhouse as a home for the aged and friendless poor and other persons unable to care for themselves was lost sight of altogether.¹ 'In Glasgow,' the report informs us, 'practically every applicant for relief, whether certified able-bodied or not, is offered the poorhouse test.'² By a decision of the Court of Session in 1867 it was ruled that an offer of admission to a poorhouse was an offer of adequate relief.

No doubt, encouraged by this decision, the Ayr Parochial Board became ardent supporters of the poorhouse test, and with quite remarkable results. From 1862 to 1872 the average number of registered poor in the parish of Ayr was 491, and from 1876 to 1886 it fell to 166, a striking reduction, and all the more so if we bear in mind that the population was steadily increasing during this period.³ But, although the imposition of this test brought a reduction in the number of recipients of poor relief and a corresponding reduction in the poor rate, the spirit which actuated it lacked the kindliness of the modern approach of social welfare. One witness before the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress, 1909, states: 'My criticism of the Poor Laws is simply that they are apt to become mechanical and unsympathetic, and even brutal, at times. They lack the human touch and kindly interest which are so helpful to the poor.'⁴

Parochial Boards continued to administer indoor and outdoor relief until the establishment of Parish Councils in 1895. After this date relief was administered in the Royal Burgh of Ayr by the Parish Council and so, until the passing of the Local Government Act, 1929, the Town Council of Ayr had no statutory duties regarding the administration of relief. The Royal Commission of 1909 had recommended that poor relief administration in burghs having a minimum population of 7,000 should be the responsibility of the town council,⁵ but this

¹ Royal Commission on the Poor Laws and Relief of Distress, *Report on Scotland*, part iii, p. 91

² *ib.*, p. 92

³ David Caldwell, *History of Parish of Ayr*, table ii

⁴ Royal Commission on the Poor Laws, etc., *op. cit.*, part iii, p. 109

⁵ *ib.*, p. 67

recommendation did not become effective until 1930. From that date until the passing of the National Assistance Act, 1948, the administration of relief in Ayr, as in other large burghs, rested with the Public Assistance Committee of the Town Council. Unfortunately it happened that this new responsibility was transferred to the Town Council at a period of intense economic difficulty, which became more accentuated after 1929, and which culminated in the economic crisis of 1931. Until the passing of the Unemployment Act, 1934, relief to certain destitute unemployed also came within the province of the Public Assistance Committee, thus giving this committee, during the early years of its existence, a formidable task. During the year ending 15th May 1931, £2,892 4s. 7d. was expended in Ayr in aliment to destitute able-bodied, and applications were received from 1397 vagrants, relief being granted in 1370 cases. The Public Assistance Committee was also concerned with assistance to children, to the aged poor, and to persons in receipt of pensions, but who required further aid. During the year ending 15th May 1931 the total number of children chargeable was 36; of persons over 65 years of age, 147; and of persons in receipt of pensions, 142. The total cost of relief to ordinary outdoor poor for the same period was £9,530 15s. 9d. and for indoor relief £3,753 19s. 2d.

The period, then, between 1930 and 1948, was one during which the Royal Burgh of Ayr had delegated to it very wide responsibilities regarding assistance to persons in distress and, although with the approach of war and the passing of the depression of the early thirties, the incidence of distress lessened, nevertheless the burgh bore a heavy responsibility, until the National Assistance Act, 1948, brought about fundamental alterations not only in the administrative aspect of assistance to the needy, but in the whole approach and attitude to relief. A final and complete departure was made from the harshness of the nineteenth century methods, and we have in Ayr ample evidence of the new kindlier attitude to those in distress, whether adults or children.

By the Unemployment Act, 1934, the responsibility for relief to the able-bodied who had exhausted their right under their unemployment insurance scheme was transferred from the local public assistance authorities to the Unemployment

Assistance Board. The act of 1948 continued this development, and, in creating the National Assistance Board, removed from the sphere of local administration the whole problem of outdoor relief to the needy. In the words of the act, the National Assistance Board grants, 'out of money provided by Parliament, assistance to persons in need'. Thus the provision of outdoor assistance ceased to be the responsibility of the Royal Burgh of Ayr, and of all local authorities in Scotland; but important functions connected with indoor accommodation remained within the province of local authorities. Local authorities were required to provide 'residential accommodation for persons who, by reason of age, infirmity or any other reason, are in need of care and attention which is not otherwise available to them'. The Council, as the local authority, was also required to provide temporary accommodation for persons in urgent need on account of some unforeseen circumstance. Here, therefore, the Council was afforded vast scope for initiative and enterprise.

In a scheme prepared by the provost, magistrates and councillors of the Royal Burgh of Ayr, in terms of the above act, full details are furnished regarding the steps taken or proposed by them as local authority, to implement their duties. 'Under the guidance and instructions of the Welfare Services Committee', we are informed, 'the scheme will be administered by the Director of Welfare Services, assisted by a staff of a Depute Director, two male assistants and one clerkess-typist, with headquarters at 31-33 Kyle Street, Ayr.'

Regarding residential accommodation the Royal Burgh of Ayr is closely associated with Ayr County Council. They are joint owners and managers of the Welfare Home and Hospital situated in Holmston Road, Ayr, where accommodation is provided for aged people and for infirm and handicapped persons. This building, originally called Kyle Combination Poorhouse, was, as we have noted, erected in 1856,¹ the hospital section being added in 1901. In recent years numerous improvements have in many ways transformed the building. The austerity of Parochial Board organisation, and even of more recent days, has disappeared; and, from the administrative point of view the approach is one of sympathy, kindness and understanding. In both Home and Hospital vast improvements

¹ *Supra*, p. 259

have been effected in interior decoration and in amenities. In the Hospital each patient is provided with a bed-light, and in the Home much thought has given added interest and variety to the lives of the inmates, or residents as they are now described. Wireless has been provided and the superintendent is able, from his office, to play gramophone records which are relayed throughout the Home. At least one full day's outing is arranged annually; in 1951, for example, a visit was paid to Loch Lomond. An interesting innovation, which proved eminently successful was tried in 1950, when an 'exchange' holiday for a few residents was arranged with a corresponding home in Musselburgh. Games and tournaments with suitable local organisations provide fresh contacts for the residents as well as adding purposeful enthusiasm for the games played.

Dietary requirements are carefully provided for, as the undernoted specimen menu for one week in April 1951 clearly illustrates:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
BREAKFAST						
Porridge/ Milk	Porridge/ Milk	Porridge/ Milk	Porridge/ Milk	Porridge/ Milk	Porridge/ Milk	Kellog's Flakes Hot Milk
Rolls/Tea	Rolls/Tea	Rolls/Tea	Rolls/Tea	Rolls/Tea	Rolls/Tea	Rolls/Tea
DINNER						
Soup Stewing Steak Turnip Potatoes	Soup Minced Meat Carrot Potatoes	Soup Fish Cabbage Potatoes	Soup Stew Carrots Potatoes	Soup Fish Custard Cabbage Potatoes	Soup Stew Beetroot Potatoes	Soup Mince Turnip Potatoes
Semolina Milk	Bread Pudding Raisins/ Milk	Barley Flakes/ Milk	Sago/ Milk	Semolina Jam/ Milk	Rice/Prunes Milk	Sago/ Milk
HIGH TEA						
Bread/ Butter Scones/ Tea	Macaroni/ Cheese Bread/ Butter Jam/Buns/ Tea	Scrambled Dried Egg Bread/ Butter Scones/Tea	Welsh Rarebit Bread/ Butter Jam/Buns/ Tea	Fried Shell Egg Bread/ Butter Buns/Tea	Hash Stew Bread/ Butter Scones/Tea	Cold Ham Bread/ Butter Jam/Buns Tea
SNACK SUPPER						
Cocoa/Bovril/Tea/Malted Milk/Milk — Buns — Cakes — Bread						

When obtainable, fresh herring are added to the menu.
Liberal supplies of fruit are given apart from generous donations received.

During the year 1949-1950, 29 males and 14 females were admitted to the Welfare Home from the Royal Burgh of Ayr; and to the Hospital 10 males and three females. The number in the Welfare Home at 15th May 1950, chargeable to Ayr, was 10 males and five females. Persons, however, removed to the Welfare Hospital are chargeable to the Regional Hospital Board under the National Health Services Act, 1946, while those living in the Welfare Home make, according to the National Assistance Act, a contribution based upon their means towards their maintenance.

The Home and Hospital are in charge of a superintendent with a staff of 11 nurses, of whom four are employed on a part-time basis. In addition there is a clerkess-typist and a visiting medical officer. Recently the services of a masseur and chiropodist were introduced, a new service which is much appreciated by the old people. Some assistance is also given in the work of the Home by the residents themselves, perhaps as light household duties or as work in the garden.

It is the intention of the Royal Burgh of Ayr to augment the residential accommodation at its disposal 'in general, in the form of homes for not more than 30 persons, of making provision for married couples, and of providing most of the remaining bedrooms in the form of single rooms'. At the time of writing [1951] the burgh had not succeeded in providing any such additional accommodation, so that the Home and Hospital remain its only source of indoor accommodation. Building restrictions and the scarcity of materials make the realisation of the Council's plans a problem which admits of no easy solution. Their fulfilment, however, is a challenge and a task, which, one can confidently surmise, our royal burgh will surmount in course of time.

The benevolent work of the Town Council would be incomplete without some reference to its responsibilities to children. The callousness of the state's attitude in the seventeenth, eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to children finally disappeared with the passing of the Children Act, 1948. Much has already been written regarding the harsh treatment received by children in early times. The poor law acts were very severe towards children. Thus an act of 1617 said that poor and indigent children 'shall be bound to their masters, their

heirs and assignees in all kinds of service which shall be enjoined them, until they are passed the age of thirty; and they shall be under discipline to their said masters, and subject to their corrections and chastisements according to the merits of their offences, in all manner and sort of punishments, life and torture excepted'.¹ Similarly, during the Industrial Revolution, unsuitable work and excessively long hours of labour were the lot of the pauper child. It was only with the agitation of reformers and the passing of factory acts that an amelioration in conditions became apparent; and, with the coming of the twentieth century, increasing sympathy and understanding have been shown to children.

The new act requires the local authority to receive into its care any child who has neither parent nor guardian or who has been abandoned by his parents. In certain circumstances it is the local authority's duty to assume parental rights with respect to the children in their care, and to afford them opportunity for the development of their character and abilities. The act states that children can be boarded out, accommodated in voluntary homes or maintained in suitable accommodation provided under the National Assistance Act. At 15th May 1950 the number of children chargeable to the Royal Burgh of Ayr was 43, of whom 23 were boarded out in private homes, 15 were boarded out in voluntary homes and five were accommodated in the Welfare Home. The gross expenditure for the year ending 15th May 1950 amounted to £3,454 13s. 11d., but of this sum only part was a charge against local rates for a grant from the Home Department lessened the total local cost.

¹ Ferguson, *op. cit.*, p. 287

CHAPTER 16

THE PLAGUE

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THE word plague is applied to a wide variety of conditions varying from minor annoyances such as a plague of flies to major outbreaks of epidemic disease. In a medical sense, however, it refers to a definite group of signs and symptoms which are characteristic of a particular disease. Bubonic plague is the best known example of plague in its scientific sense, and it is an extremely infective and fatal illness which, for many centuries, grossly disrupted the social and economic life of many nations and accounted for victims numbered in millions.

Only in comparatively recent years has the real cause of the spread of plague been discovered. The rat is now known to be the primary offender. This rodent is particularly susceptible to plague; when it dies, the fleas present in its fur during life and nourished by its infected blood, seek a new host. Whenever possible they transfer themselves to man, and in the process of feeding inoculate him with the virulent germs acquired from their late host.

Wherever conditions of life are low, sanitation neglected, and poverty and overcrowding rife, the spread of plague is facilitated by the consequent proximity between man and rat.

The germ theory of disease is a comparatively recent discovery. During the three hundred years when plague was present in Scotland our ancestors had no such satisfying explanation of the spread of an affliction which caused universal dread. The rational fears provoked by the approach of plague were intensified by the belief that these visitations represented the wrath of God. A poisonous condition of the atmosphere germinated by various supernatural agencies, was the popular belief concerning the physical cause of these frequent disasters. The prevalence of this conception acted as a barrier to the

advance of more enlightened views, and thus the affected population were totally unable to appreciate the true cause of their affliction, which lay inherent in their environment. The overcrowded hovels, the streets littered with filth, the verminous and poverty stricken state of the majority of the population were all responsible for precipitating the numerous outbreaks of plague. These recurring attacks were on such a scale and so deadly in nature that the primitive social structure of medieval communities was completely disorganised by the onslaught. It was, however, quickly appreciated by common experience that plague was a highly infectious disease, and, though fettered by ignorance and superstition, various eminently practical measures were applied by the authorities in an effort to check its inroads.

Early descriptions of plague are numerous. The narrative of Homer opens with such an account. The Great Plague of Athens is described in detail by Thucydides. The Plague of Ashdod (1st Samuel, 5 and 6) is clearly bubonic plague; the 'emerods' are undoubtedly the inguinal buboes or gland swellings characteristic of the disease. The first of the great epidemics in Europe of which there is a definite account was that at Constantinople in A.D. 542, when Justinian was emperor. This outbreak began in Egypt and spreading along the trade routes, as is the way of pestilence, it ultimately reached the city and gradually mounted to a climax until the dead are reputed to have numbered ten thousand a day.

England first experienced plague in the course of the spread of the Black Death in 1348. This memorable outbreak originated in South Russia and gradually and remorselessly spread until the whole of Europe was engulfed. The Black Death was undoubtedly bubonic plague in its most virulent and acutely infective form. Introduced at a port in the south of England, it extended rapidly over the entire country. From this time until the Great Fire of London in 1666 the disease remained in Britain. As each epidemic subsided its elements continued to smoulder in various centres until the next upsurge. During the latter half of the fourteenth century it is estimated that 25,000,000 people perished in Europe alone during recurring outbreaks of bubonic plague.

The scourge first appeared in Scotland early in 1350. For a

time it was stayed at the border, but eventually, following a raid into England, it was brought back among the spoils of that ill-fated incursion. Fordoun wrote of it: 'By God's will this evil led to a strange and unwonted kind of death in so much that the flesh of the sick was somehow puffed out and swollen and they dragged out this earthly life for barely two days.' Before it subsided the Black Death is estimated to have destroyed a third of the population of Scotland.

A further outbreak occurred in 1362, the 'pestis secunda', which raged in south Scotland and caused David the Second and his court to flee north for safety. Epidemics in 1380 and 1401 wrought much havoc, that of 1401 being particularly fatal. The next recorded outbreak was in 1430-32 when Edinburgh was the principal sufferer. Plague had raged with great virulence in France and England in 1439 and was introduced to Scotland later that year. The chronicle states: 'and that samen year the pestilence came in Scotland and began at Dumfries and it was callit the Pestilence but [without] Mercy, for there took it none that ever recoverit, but they died within twenty-four hours.' In 1456 the first Scots law relating to the subject—The Rule of the Pestilence—was passed, marking the initial attempt at 'staunching of the Pestilence'. Altogether plague was present in Scotland for almost three centuries, beginning in 1350 with the last case occurring in 1648.

The burgh of Ayr in the sixteenth century was both an important market town and a seaport having a substantial coastal and foreign trade. On both these counts there was a steady coming and going of merchants and traders bringing their goods into the town, and with them, on occasion, pestilence. The early records contain many references to the pest, to the dread of its approach and to the measures adopted to ward it off. As in other towns in Scotland of the period, sanitation was practically ignored in Ayr. Conditions were particularly bad during the intervals between visitations of the plague, but the authorities were stirred to feverish activity by its presence in the neighbourhood or by the arrival in the harbour of a ship from a suspected port. Despite the superstitious fears which prevailed on these occasions, the measures adopted to deal with the menace were essentially sensible and practical so far as they went.

At the first tidings of the approach of the pest the streets were

ordered to be cleared of the litter of 'myddings, intrallis of bestis, and fish guts', which were habitually thrown there. It was ordained that they should be removed to the hills 'for quensing and stanching of the blawing of the sand'. The ports or portals of entry to the town were repaired and provided with 'hingin yettis and leifis'. All the ports in the town were guarded by a special watch. The vennels and back dykes were built up, and none were to enter the town except by the ports. The penalty for breach of these regulations was scourging and branding of the cheek. The inhabitants were forbidden to entertain strangers unless they had previously been examined by the magistrates. A further regulation demanded that before strangers could be admitted to the town they must be in possession of a certificate of health issued by the authorities of their own town. To 'speik, intercommoun or ony wys medell wt ony persoun yt salhappin to be stayit and debarrit at the portis' involved forty days' banishment.

In times of danger messengers were sent to neighbouring towns to get 'tryell anent the infectioun'. Within the burgh in time of plague a strict supervision was maintained over the inhabitants. All cases of sickness had to be brought to the notice of the magistrates since there was a widespread tendency to circumvent the regulations by concealment of cases of sickness by relatives anxious to avoid the inconveniences and hardships which followed discovery. The magistrates had the responsibility of making the diagnosis. If, in their opinion, the sickness was plague, the patient was isolated on the 'foul mure'. This was a stretch of waste ground forming part of the Burrowfield which lay outside the town and was approached from the Kyle Port. This procedure resembled, in a crude way, the modern method of isolation of cases of infectious disease. The 'foul mure' was converted into a lazaretto by the hasty erection of wooden booths or 'ludges' to house the sick and suspected persons. Infected goods and clothing were transported with the patient, and this 'foull geir' was boiled in huge cauldrons set up in the open field. Unless the sick were accompanied by relations or friends able and willing to look after them, they were dependent on the attentions of the 'foull clengers', who were hired by the burgh authorities to supervise the plague camp and its inhabitants, to carry out the work of the camp,

to bury the dead, and to prevent patients from escaping. Any 'infectit and foull persons', who left the moor without permission, were liable to be 'brunt with ane hait irn on the chyk'. There they had to stay until death put an end to their sufferings, or until they recovered and were given leave to return to the town.

These 'foull clengers', male and female, were usually recruited from the lowest classes, and were quite unsuitable as attendants of the sick. The nature of their work being highly dangerous, they were paid high wages and entitled to certain privileges. During the plague in Edinburgh in 1499 they were paid 12d. per day, together with the fees they were allowed to exact from householders whose goods they 'clengit'. In the year 1607/8 *Ayr Burgh Accounts* show in the treasurer's discharge certain items of expenditure for the town's cleaners; William Hunter and John Dowok were paid £20 for their services during Whitsuntide. In addition, £13 6s. 8d. was allotted for clothes, and £4 for expenses. Special cleaners brought down from Glasgow during this emergency were paid at the rate of 8s. for every door disinfected, 14d. for every pound of silver, 6s. 8d. for every cauldronful of clothes treated in the town, and 13s. 4d. for every kettleful on the moor. If any householder refused admission, the cleaners were authorised to force an entry and carry out their duties.

The infected houses, from which plague victims had been removed, were disinfected by the town 'clengers', who were hired for the period of the epidemic. These cleaners wore a distinctive uniform in the shape of 'ane joupe of blak wt a cross of quhyte claith sewit about with the same for desegning and knowing of thame be uthers'. They also carried staffs 'with a hupe of quhyte iron at the end' as marks of authority. In many instances they took undue advantage of their position and by their indiscipline, extortion, and highhanded methods frequently aroused the wrath of the citizens. In this connexion a note in the Privy Council records states that a notary, George Douglas, became embroiled with some cleaners at Ayr, he being armed 'with a sword, gauntlet, and long hagbut'. He was tried before the Privy Council on four charges of assault and the carrying of arms illegally, but was discharged as the evidence was considered insufficient.

Cleansing, which formed an important part of the preventive measures, was effected by means of 'watter and fyre', and from time to time over-zealous or careless application of these means of disinfection caused disaster. The 'clenging' of a house in Kelso in 1645 caused a fire, which spread and destroyed the town. In Ayr the town clerk's house was infected in the outbreak of 1545/6, and in the process of disinfection some of the town records were destroyed.

Airing and ventilation followed these drastic procedures; clothing was boiled in large kettles or cauldrons, and other goods not suited to such treatment were exposed to the air for prolonged periods, frosty air being considered particularly favourable. All these procedures have their counterpart in modern methods of disinfection.

As has been stated, Ayr, during the period under review, was a considerable seaport and consequently it behoved the authorities to keep a watchful eye on the arrival of ships from home and foreign ports when the pest was prevalent. Without constant vigilance it would have been a very likely occurrence for infected goods to have been introduced. In 1602, a ship carrying hides arrived in the anchorage from Ireland, where plague was said 'to be veray vehement'. A request for leave to land was refused and the vessel ordered to remain in quarantine under the sandhills until the moon had changed. All on board were forbidden on pain of death to have any communication with the town or townspeople until the period had expired. Then, having washed the hides, cleansed themselves and changed their clothes, they were allowed to enter the town. Infected or suspect ships coming to Ayr frequently had their cargoes landed and cleansed on the sandhills near the north bastion of the Fort, the ship being quarantined off the shore at that point. There are also records of such ships being secluded on the Newton Green side of the river until the danger period had elapsed.

Very early in the history of epidemiology was the value of quarantine appreciated and put into rigid practice, but since no regular means of imposing equitable restrictions existed, each plague alarm had to be met by hastily improvised measures erring on the side of harshness and lacking in humanitarian principles. Indeed, the enforcement of the quarantine rules

involved the owners of ships in such financial loss that every means was used to evade them. These restrictive measures usually involved suspected ships being anchored off some small island near the harbour or off an isolated part of the shore. There the crews had to cleanse themselves and the cargo, the latter by washing in water or by fire, and thereafter exposing it to the air for a prolonged period. In some instances where this was not practicable the ship was forced to scuttle in tidal water so that the goods could be washed by the cleansing sea. Until the local authorities gave their consent the crews were forbidden to have contact with anyone ashore. These extreme procedures meant severe hardships for those on board, and always heavy financial loss to the owners. Only in the course of centuries were these harsh measures gradually alleviated and effective control maintained with a minimum loss to those concerned.

The records of plague in Scotland before 1500 are very meagre, but it is probable that the burgh of Ayr suffered during the course of the Black Death in 1350, and in the three great epidemics which followed in 1361, 1380 and 1402, though there is no record of this. Plague must have been in the neighbourhood in 1499 as in May of that year the burgh of Prestwick made regulations concerning preventive measures which were to remain in force 'quhill the plaig ces and speciali quhill zule (Yule)', and it was in Irvine during the following summer. The first reference to the pest in Ayr occurs in an item in the *Burgh Accounts* concerning the year 1539 when the Master of Works paid 2s. 2d. for 'closing the town's waste entries'. The town was evidently in a state of vigilance judging by references to the special watch set up at the ports and the repairing of the yetts. These precautions appear to have been successful since there is no further reference to the subject until 1545, when the burgh of Ayr, along with many other towns and localities, was infected and 'the pest wis wonder greit in all the burrowis townis of this realm' (*Diurnal of Occurrents*). This outbreak raged in Ayr from September 1545 until March 1546. Every effort was made by the authorities, within their limited means, to minimise the disaster. The gates were built up and a special watch set to guard the ports night and day. Quartermasters were appointed by the Town Council to supervise and apply

the emergency regulations. The treasurer's discharge for the year 1544/5 shows items of expenditure incurred by these measures such as, 'for keeping the ports til Michaelmas in time of pest, £5 18s. 4d., and keeping the Brig-yett for 17 days after Midsummer, 17s.'. The master of works expended 10s. in erecting 'thornis and stakis to the oppin partis of the toun in the tyme of the pest' to make good deficiencies in the 'toun dykes' which were built of turf and were barely three feet high. They could scarcely be regarded as offering any impediment to entry to the town and therefore necessitated a vigilant watch being maintained. A certain William Neisbit was appointed as 'kepar of the toun and furnissar of the seik folkis upoun the mure in tyme of the pest', various revenues being allocated to him for carrying out his duties. One payment made in this respect amounted to £111 8s. 4d. The money required to meet these extraordinary expenses threw a heavy burden on the burgh finances. In this outbreak half the burgh treasurer's revenues were consumed in plague expenses, and for many years afterwards discharges appear in the *Accounts* against different people for their services during those terrible six months. Further sums were paid to Neisbit the following year; one item mentions 'for John Johnsoun's grassum granted to William Neisbit fur furnissing of the mure in the last pest, £10'. In all Neisbit expended £243 17s. 6d. in providing for the sick on the moor and in the town. These expenses also covered repairs to locks, yetts and ports. He appears to have been appointed chief executive officer during this critical period, responsible for the carrying out of the anti-plague measures, and is styled president and vice-provost. From all accounts he appears to have fulfilled his tasks with great zeal. His 'compt' had not been paid by 1548, by which time he was dead, a probable victim of the pest.

At this time half the dean of guild's rents were in arrears and until 1550 the treasurer was paying off debts incurred during the ravages of the plague. Among the payments thus delayed was one to Mr. Neil Orr as promised for the time 'quhen the schule held not for the pest, £3 6s. 8d.'. Several references to the payment of compensation occur at this time as, for example, 'to Archibald Jelle for the burning of his house and heather stack during the pest, £10', and £2 4s. to 'Andrew

Willok for a bag of blue wool that was burnt', the result of over-enthusiastic application of disinfection.

From then there is a long interval before further references to the pest appear in the town records. Between 1584 and 1588 the plague was raging with great violence in Scotland. It erupted at Johnstone in May 1585, when the magistrates at Ayr were alarmed at the intelligence that some 'infectit and foull personis' had escaped from the moor of that town where they had been detained. All the customary restrictions were imposed on the town of Ayr and an embargo put on trade. No strangers were allowed ingress unless by approval of the authorities, and they had to bear a certificate of health from the town whence they came. No townsmen of Ayr might proceed to Edinburgh, where the plague was rife, without a permit to travel. The inhabitants were advised of these procedures from time to time 'by tuck of drum'.

These efforts to preserve the burgh from infection were intensified when it was learned in the month of June of the increase in virulence of the pest in the 'east country'. Persons entering the town by any but the recognised ports would, if detected, be scourged and branded on the cheek, and to 'speik intercommoun or ony wyis medell wt ony persoun yt salhappin to be stayit and debarrit at the portis' entailed forty days' banishment. There is a reference at the time to the isolation of some 'foull and infectit personis' on the moor, but these appear to have been very few for the pestilence abated in July the same year. In September 1596 it broke out with renewed violence in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and among other precautions the burgh authorities ruled that the grazing of cattle on the Common be prohibited. In order to prevent the surreptitious entry of strangers, innkeepers with premises outwith the town ports were forbidden to brew on pain of banishment and the destruction of the implements of their trade.

Further alarms occurred in 1587 and 1588. Strictures were reimposed against the entry of strangers and vagabonds and 'pure folkis not natif of ye burt'. The ports were watched and the customary penalties applied to 'ye cuming in be bak dykis' because of 'ye vehemence of ye pestilence eistwart'. Two months later it was ordained that the 'portis and vennelis be stekit and closit', and a watch was set night and day in order

that 'be the assistance of ye almyt god the seiknes may be avertit'. These precautions appear to have been successful and the town emerged unscathed. No further alarm occurred until 1597 when the pest had reappeared in Edinburgh. A meeting was held in the Tolbooth at Ayr where news of 'the greit infectioun of the pest to the eist ovir in Leith and vyr eist pairts of this realme qr sindrie of this cuntrie resortis' was reported by the magistrates. The usual measures were adopted and the Michaelmas Fair cancelled lest the town might be infected by visitors from Edinburgh and neighbouring parts. The presence of plague in Dumfries the following year put a veto on visitors arriving from that town unless they were provided with 'sufficient testimoniall'.

No further reference to pest appears in the records until the opening years of the seventeenth century, when the dormant disease again became menacing. It is stated that in the year 1600, when the town was in a state of vigilance, two pedlars arrived at one of the town ports seeking entrance. John Welsh, then minister in Ayr, happened to be present and strongly advised that they should be excluded. 'Bailie,' he said to the quartermaster, 'cause these men to put on their packs again and be gone; for if God be in heaven, the plague is in these packs.' Subsequent events proved him right. The men, repulsed at Ayr, proceeded to Cumnock, where, shortly after their arrival, plague broke out and was so virulent that 'the living could scarcely bury the dead'.

During these anxious years the plague was warded off only by the exercise of constant vigilance until the summer of 1606 when it broke out in Ayr. A public meeting was then held in the Tolbooth to devise ways and means of meeting the situation which had now developed. The meeting was preceded by a prayer of supplication to Almighty God who had 'plesit to veseit this sinfull toun with the seikness of ye pest justlie deservit for ye sinns thereof'. The 'foul mure' was converted into an isolation camp for the reception of the sick and the suspect. 'Ludges' were erected to house them, and huge cauldrons set up for disinfecting the 'foull geir'. Arrangements were made for the supply of food and fuel to the victims and none were to leave the camp without permission. In the town itself the work of disinfection went on relentlessly. Special 'clengers'

were brought from Glasgow, with powers to break into houses if refused admission. The Glasgow burgh records of 21st August 1606, refer to Ayr 'as a suspect place', but it was more than that by that time, because on 22nd August of that year the Convention of Burghs meeting at Burntisland excused the absence of the Ayr delegates 'be ressoun of the pestilence quairwith thay are veseit at this tyme notourle knawin to the haill contry'. On 27th August the Privy Council gave the magistrates of Ayr special powers which were to continue in force as long as infection remained in the burgh. The mortality of this outbreak appears to have been very severe; Lord Dunfermline, writing to Lord Ellesmere on 30th October 1606, says that Ayr and Stirling are 'almost overthrown'.

About this time the records of the burgh of Newton mention that the proximity of the pest was causing the local authorities great anxiety: 'the burrow court of Newtoun sett and haldin in Alexander Wyleis chalmer the 17th day of October the yeir of god Jaj sax hudr and thrie yeirs . . . ordainis yt ye haill tounne dykes be biggit sufficientlie wt all deligence hereto for outhaldin of all strangers suspect of the pest.' A further alarm was occasioned in the summer of 1604 when the usual precautions were put into effect 'becaus of ye greit feir and suspitioun of ye fleand plaig of ye pest yt is in ye land'. Among various references to plague at this period is an account of the procedure much used in other areas concerning 'suspectit geir' known as 'taking the sey', meaning the assay or trial of the gear. It was ordained that if the suspected goods were really dangerous then infection would be manifest primarily among the handlers, and, since the owners and their families usually did the handling themselves, it would be no more than justice if one of them was smitten. It should be mentioned that such goods had to be retained in the custody of the owner until a sufficient period had elapsed for disease to reveal itself.

In 1602 it was decided that funds, which had been bequeathed by certain burgesses of Ayr for the building of 'a hospitall', should be applied forthwith so that it could 'be biggit wt all deligences'. A further advance was made in 1603 when a medical man, one James Harper from Stirling, was given leave to practice in Ayr. He was encouraged to reside permanently by the Town Council agreeing to pay his first year's

house rent. Thus, when the plague appeared in 1606, for the first time a surgeon was in charge of the sick. He was specially engaged 'for ministrating of his cure upoun ye seik personis of yis burt infectit wt ye seiknes of ye pest during ye tyme of ye continuance of ye said seiknes'. The terms of his employment with the Council, though generous, were dependent on his surviving the epidemic, the Council having very judiciously inserted a clause in the agreement exonerating them from claims lodged by his heirs should the doctor succumb before the pest had left the town. He did, however, survive and was duly paid in February 1607, on condition that he should 'attend upoun ye curing of ye seik folkis incais ye seiknes (as god forbid) brek out agane'. Various other outstanding dues were settled at the same time, among these being wages to the 'clengaris and coldron men'; and the school, which had been closed, was ordered to be 'liftit up agane'. This epidemic began on 30th July 1606 and lasted until the end of the year, when the kirk-session, whose meetings had been suspended, resumed their duties. The minute of their first meeting is stated thus: 'At the brut (burgh) of Aire, the 29 of December, 1606, the Session being convenit after the Lord's rod was removit.' In the course of this epidemic two thousand people are reputed to have lost their lives.

A period of almost forty years elapsed before plague was heard of again. In 1644 the Civil War was being contested, and on 9th October of that year Newcastle capitulated to the Scottish army under Leslie. The plague, which had been raging with great violence in that city, infected the victorious troops, who brought it home with them. It rapidly spread over the entire country, producing one of the severest epidemics in the national annals. Ayr was fortunate during this period in that the infection did not get past her defences until September 1647, and did not endure more than three months. In that time only 34 people were claimed as victims. The advent of the pest after such a long period of immunity caused deep dejection among the townspeople, the disaster being regarded as a 'messinger of the Lord's wrath'. This attitude of mind was expressed and intensified in the sermon preached by Mr. Adair, then sole minister in the town, on a certain Sunday early in the course of the epidemic. He took as his text 'the land shall mourn every

family apart', and by the fervour of his address aroused his congregation to a high pitch of repentance, which was followed by a general confession of sins throughout the whole town during the course of the ensuing week. First the kirk-session confessed and thereafter the various trades and crafts. The confessions were read from the pulpit the following Sunday and were subsequently entered in the session book 'for the use of posteritie'.

This proved to be the final appearance of plague in Ayr, although it raged in various places in Scotland until 1648.

The references to plague in Ayr in the old records are sufficiently numerous and informative to provide a picture of the enormous problems with which the community was beset, and of the inadequacy of their resources. To meet such dangers would have taxed the efforts of a modern society equipped with the knowledge, the administrative machinery and the means which have evolved through the centuries. It is obvious that the social evolution of Scotland, among other nations, was constantly affected by the presence of plague either as an actual or a potential danger. The development of the public health service, among other social services, owes its inception to the crude and elementary precautions brought into being by small separate municipalities fighting for their lives in circumstances darkened by ignorance and superstition. One example may be mentioned of the impact of plague on Scotland's political history. It is interesting to speculate on the course of events had Montrose, fresh from his victory at Kilsyth, not been prevented from occupying Edinburgh by the presence of plague in the capital. The most lasting impression of all is the fortitude with which the citizens met these recurring perils, and by standing to their duty, even in the shadow of death, finally vanquished them.

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