

3. The Burgh of Paisley 1795 - 1855 60 Years of Change, Improvement & Calamities

Andrew Eadie

Introduction

Andrew Eadie explores the nineteenth century development of Paisley through the wealth of burgh minutes and other records.

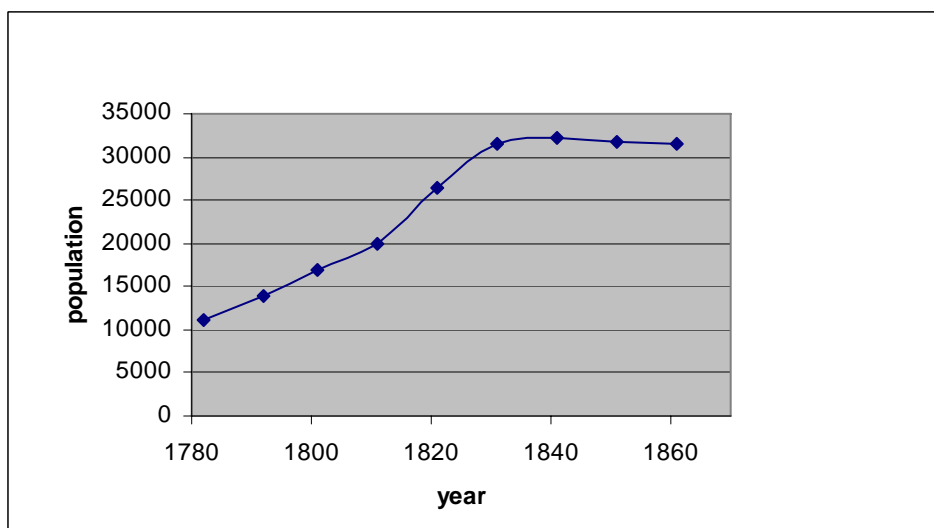
Origins

Paisley was created a Burgh of Barony in 1488, which gave the inhabitants similar rights to those of a Royal Burgh, but no Member of Parliament until the Reform Act of 1832 when Sir John Maxwell became the first MP. In 1665 Charles II granted a charter of confirmation in favour of the bailies, treasurer, councillors and community of the burgh and town of Paisley ¹.

The eighteenth century had seen a period of gradual growth for the town and the council purchased adjoining areas of land in Abbey parish. In 1805 the Council sold the lands of Ferguslie to Mr Thomas Bissland for £12,000 ² that had been purchased in 1748 for £2,750. Unlike other burghs Paisley had a peculiar mode of landholding whereby persons held land by 'booking' and details were recorded in a Register of Bookings ³. In 1814, the Provost was so concerned about poor quality of the register of marriages that the Magistrates agreed to assemble the parish clerks in the town to devise improved registers, to ensure patrimonial succession ⁴.

The inhabitants of the town, along with the surrounding area, worshipped initially in the Abbey church. With the growing population the Town Council obtained the right to build new churches and by 1795 the town comprised of three parishes Low, High and Middle. The Council was responsible for the upkeep of the church in each parish. The three parishes operated under one 'General' Session and poor assessments were combined for both outdoor relief and running of the Town's Hospital. The Council consulted with the community in the appointment of new ministers, for example the High Church in 1832 ⁵.

The period 1792 to 1831 saw rapid population growth in the town from 13,800 to 31,460 persons but after this the population remained static first due to the Cholera epidemic in the 1830s and then severe depression in the 1840s illustrated in the graph below for the census years ⁶.



There were bad harvests in 1799 and 1800 leading to a shortage of grain that then became expensive. On 3rd February 1800 the Council agreed to subscribe to the cost of providing public kitchens for the relief of the poor. Then in August the Council offered a premium of £3.3s to the person who brought in the greatest quantity of potatoes into the burgh each day ⁷. In 1817 the Council was concerned about the effect 'the Cottage Tax is having on the industrious and labouring classes' and sent a memorial to HM Treasury petitioning their Lordships to repeal this 'unprofitable and inconvenient assessment' ⁸.

From the end of the eighteenth century there were disturbances and riots in the town and at a Council meeting on 30th October 1800 the councillors decided to elect a number of constables, with the Clerk being instructed to write to Glasgow to know what their powers were and the mode of their election ⁹. After discussions amongst the magistrates, council and the community, a bill for a police establishment was drawn up and received the Royal assent in 1806. This act was for paving, lighting, cleansing and 'watching' the Burgh of Paisley and suburbs ¹⁰. The first meeting was held on 8th August 1806 in the council chamber to appoint two commissioners for each of the nine wards. Frequent meetings were held to arrange the installation of 320 street lamps and to appoint a Superintendent of police, two sergeants, four officers and 12 watchmen. Byelaws were quickly agreed and rates were levied on all houses and property valued at more than £2 ¹¹. An Act for lighting the Town of Paisley, and adjoining areas with gas was granted in 1823 ¹² and the Paisley Gas Company was producing gas by 1826 ¹³.

Discussions started in 1812 about erecting a Bridewell in the County ¹⁴ and the Town Council agreed to contribute towards the cost of the proposed building that included accommodation for the Town Council ¹⁵. An Act to erect and maintain a Bridewell, Gaol, Court House and Public offices for the Burgh of Paisley and the County of Renfrew was passed on 7th June 1815 ¹⁶. Building commenced in 1818 and was ready for use in 1821 ¹⁷.

Depression set in again after the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and the 'Radicals' were coming to the fore ending up with riots in Paisley in 1819 & 1820. Instructions for Special Constables were posted in the town in September 1819 ¹⁸. The final culmination of these events led to the trial in Paisley of two weavers for high treason, James Speirs and John Lang ¹⁹. The trial took place in the new George Street Church ²⁰ on 2nd August 1820. The jury, largely composed of merchants, found both men not guilty ²¹. One of the jury members was James Coats and whose firm became J & P Coats in 1830 ²².

The next major event in the town was the arrival of Cholera on 13th February 1832 ²³; the town was prepared for its arrival as a broadsheet had been printed in January 1832 regarding cleanliness, in particular preventing stagnant pools in middens ²⁴. By November the town was free of Cholera but 444 persons had died of the disease out of 764 cases ²⁵. Cholera returned to Paisley again in September 1834 but not as severely as in 1832. Perhaps if the town had been successful in implementing the Act that was granted in 1825 for a better supply of water to the Town of Paisley the ravages of the cholera might not have been as severe ²⁶. An improved water supply for the town was finally achieved in 1838 following a further Act in 1835 ²⁷. However Cholera did return again in 1848, but with fewer deaths than in 1832.

The final calamity that befell Paisley was the depression of the 1840s that hit Paisley so hard that many merchants and manufacturers and even the town went bankrupt. The trade in Paisley being mainly textile based, with large numbers employed in the

cotton, silk and weaving industry, was very dependent on any changes in fashion. The 1841 Census showed that of the 42% of the population in employment, about 45% were in those industries²⁸. In a list of failures in Paisley in 1841-3, the total debt is given as over £0.75M with the Community of Paisley owing £43,000 and the Poor Trust £22,000²⁹. The Glasgow Constitutional reported in December 1841 that the 'management of the Radical town-council of Paisley' had applied to the Court of Session for a sequestration³⁰. The River Cart Improvement Trust also went bankrupt. By February 1843 only four friendly societies in the town survived out of 36 originally and over £45,000 had been paid over to the Relief Committee³¹. Trustees were appointed for the creditors acting under the Act for Regulating the Financial Affairs of the Burgh³² and trade started to improve again in 1843. It is important to remember that the Town Council had become an elected council following the Scottish Burghs Reform Act of 1833 but with less than 1,000 voters³³.

This period saw a rapid growth in different forms of transport with the canal from Glasgow to Johnstone starting to operate in 1810; this project had the support of the Town Council who had purchased shares in the company³⁴. Steam carriages started to operate between Glasgow and Paisley on 3rd July 1834 but this venture came to an abrupt halt when one was involved in an accident four weeks later resulting in three deaths³⁵. Then on 11th October 1834 a prospectus was issued for the Paisley and Renfrew Railway Company and an Act for this railway was passed in 1835³⁶; after opening in 1836 it was not a successful venture. The Glasgow, Paisley and Ayr Railway was open for business in the summer 1840³⁷ and used the same line between Glasgow and Paisley as the Glasgow, Paisley and Greenock Railway whose prospectus had come out on 16th January 1836³⁸.

Finally the most important event at the end of this period was the opening of the John Neilston Educational Institution with its magnificent cupola on 5th April 1852 to both poor and fee-paying pupils³⁹. This school was funded by John Neilson who had left an endowment called 'the John Neilson Endowment for educating, clothing and outfitting of young persons'⁴⁰.

Abbreviations:

BM	Burgh Minutes
GUA	Glasgow University Archives
HCPP	House of Commons Parliamentary Papers
HL	House of Lords
NAS	National Archives of Scotland
OSA	Old Statistical Account
PCM	Police Commissioners Minutes
PP	Paisley Pamphlets
SDA	The Scotsman Digital Archive
TTDA	The Times Digital Archive

References:

- ¹ *Royal Commission to inquire into State of Municipal Corporations in Scotland*, report on the Burgh of Paisley, HCPP 1836 [32] [33] [34], p.283
- ² BM Vol. 20, p.137, 13.07.1805
- ³ *Styles of Deeds & Instruments*, J. Henry, Edinburgh 1862, p.259
- ⁴ BM Vol. 21, p.52, 08.10.1814
- ⁵ BM Vol. 22, p.552, 27.03.1832
- ⁶ Population for 1782 and 1792 from OSA, Vol.7, p.66 and for 1801 to 1861 from *Return of Population of Scotland at each Decennial Period 1801-81*, HCPP 1883(161), p.33
- ⁷ BM Vol. 19, pp.500-510
- ⁸ BM Vol.21, pp.165/6. This was the Small House Duty levied on houses that paid no other duty NAS E327/126
- ⁹ BM Vol. 19, p.519. Glasgow had obtained a Police Act in 1800
- ¹⁰ HCPP, Private and Local Bills and Acts, George III year 46 c.116
- ¹¹ PCM, P1/11/1 pp.1 - 27
- ¹² HCCP, Private and Local Bills and Acts, William IV year 4
- ¹³ SDA 05.07.1826, p.5
- ¹⁴ BM Vol.20, p.522
- ¹⁵ BM Vol. 20, pp.546-551
- ¹⁶ HCCP, Private and Local Bills and Acts, George III year 55 c.73
- ¹⁷ BM Vol. 20, p.427
- ¹⁸ SCRAN, ID000-000-497-450C
- ¹⁹ NAS, JC21/5
- ²⁰ The burgh had paid for this to replace the original Low Parish Church that was too small, BM Vol. 21, pp.173-196
- ²¹ Glasgow Herald 04.08.1820
- ²² GUA, UGD 199/1, 28, 32
- ²³ SDA 18.02.1832, p.3
- ²⁴ PP Vol.16 p.61
- ²⁵ SDA 14.11.1832, p.3
- ²⁶ HCCP, Private and Local Bills and Acts, George IV year 6
- ²⁷ HL/PO/PB/1/1835/5 & 6 W4 n121
- ²⁸ HCPP, Abstract Return for taking account of poulation of Great Britain, 1844 (588) pp.68-72
- ²⁹ PP Vol. 28, p.256
- ³⁰ TTDA, 29.12.1841, p.3
- ³¹ SDA, 08.04.1843, p.2
- ³² *Commercial Directory for 1844-45* (Paisley), p.83 and HL/PO/PB/1/1843/6&7V1n141
- ³³ BM Vol.22, p.675-6, 07.11.1833
- ³⁴ BM Vol.20, p.311, 05.09.1809
- ³⁵ SDA, 05.07.1834, p.3 & 02.08.1834, p.3
- ³⁶ SDA, 22.10.1834, p.1 and NAS, BR/PRR
- ³⁷ SDA, 15.08.1840, p.2
- ³⁸ TNA, RAIL 1075/393
- ³⁹ PP Vol. 34, p.54
- ⁴⁰ NAS, SC58/42/12 Paisley Sheriff Court

Bibliography:

Primary Sources

Records of the Burgh of Paisley held at Central Library, Paisley
Minutes of the Town Council of the Burgh of Paisley,
Vol.19, 1781 – 1801
Vol.20, 1801 – 1813
Vol.21, 1813 – 1823
Vol.22, 1823 – 1834
Police Commissioners Minutes, P1/11/1, 1806 – 1817

Printed Papers and Records

General View of the agriculture of Renfrewshire by John Wilson and printed in 1812
Old Statistical Account 1791 – 99, Vol. 7, pg. 62
<http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1791-99/Renfrew/Paisley/7/62/>
New Statistical Account 1834 – 45, Vol. 7, pg. 135
<http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1834-45/Renfrew/Paisley/7/135/>
Paisley Pamphlets, Vol.16 yr.1832, Vol.18 yr.1834, Vol.34 yr.1843, Vol.34 yr. 1852, Vol.35 yr.1853, ephemeral material from 1738 – 1893 compiled by Robert Brown (PP)

Archive Websites

<http://www.nls.uk/broadsides> National Library of Scotland
<http://edu.archive.scotsman.com/> The Scotsman Digital Archive 1817 – 1950
<http://find.galegroup.com/menu/> The Times Digital Archive 1785 – 1985
<http://athens.scran.ac.uk/> The Scottish Cultural Resources Access Network, SCRAN
<http://www.oxforddnb.com/> The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography
<http://parlipapers.chadwyck.co.uk/home.do> The House of Commons Parliamentary Papers
<http://www.nas.gov.uk/> The National Archives of Scotland
<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/> The National Archives

Secondary Sources

S Clark, *Paisley, A History* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1988)
H Hamilton, *The Industrial Revolution in Scotland* (London: Frank Cass & Co. Ltd, 1966)
W W Kelso, *Sanitation in Paisley 1488 – 1920* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1922)
M Lynch, *Oxford Companion to Scottish History* (Oxford University Press, 2001)
W M Metcalfe, *A History of Paisley 600 – 1908* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, 1909)
A E Whetstone, *Scottish County Government in the 18th and 19th Centuries* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers, 1981)