

3. The Growth of Port Glasgow in the 18th Century

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The importance of Port Glasgow in its role as Glasgow's early sea port is undeniable. However most general histories of Glasgow have concentrated on the port's through trade and paid little attention to the town or its people. Despite being administered from Glasgow, Port Glasgow has a rich history of its own, which has been largely ignored to date (1). Recently a detailed study of the town's feuars has provided an insight into its early development and its people.

The 18th century growth of Port Glasgow is illustrated in Figure 1, summarised in three main phases. From its founding in 1668 right on the shore, houses gradually spread up Custom House Lane. From 1675 breast work was built along the sea to the west and warehouses and cellars established to serve shipping (2). The town's early rate of growth was remarkable. In the period from 1700 to 1780 the population doubled every two decades (3).

The second phase of growth was the general development inland up narrow lanes and closes from the Breast towards King Street. The original expansion around Custom House lane had been haphazard, but from 1718 a planned layout was established, with the building of the first church. Kirk Street leading from the shore to the church, together with King Street at right angles, formed the basis for Glasgow Council's grid plan of the town. Town planning was often enforced in a retrospective manner, such as in 1677 when several unauthorised buildings were taken down 'to allow those who have feued to build' (4). At a later date further houses were cleared to allow expansion of the town and extension of streets (5).

The third phase in the town's early growth occurred in 1765 with the formal establishment of Princes Street and the release of over thirty major building plots flanking the Kirkyard.

One of the most enduring relics of the old town is the Kirkyard Dyke, which has a remarkable history of its own. Conceived in 1721 it was not completed until 1734. Initially the general ground level of the Kirkyard was raised to 'make the burial places dry'. Then the dyke was built '3 ells high, with divisions by pillars at eight foot distance with a bosom stone in the middle betwixt each pillar for distinguishing the burial places which are to consist of eight foot breadth and twelve foot length' (6). The lairs were sold off from the 1730s for £18 Scots. They became a symbol of status in the town and were purchased in advance by the most prominent merchants and shipmasters. Due to their value, the lairs changed hands often, and only those who remained wealthy to the very end of their lives retained the privilege to be buried there. The dyke remains as a memorial to the most prominent eighteenth century citizens of the town. Mingled with the gable ends of buildings erected at all stages in Port Glasgow's growth the Kirkyard Dyke today marks the original heart of the town (7).

A total of over 100 feus have been found, many of which are numbered on the figure(8). Most are dimensioned and can be accurately located, forming a jig-saw map of the town. Generally the tenements and cellars built on the plots were sub-let to at least a dozen tenants. A study of ownership has determined that out of over 70

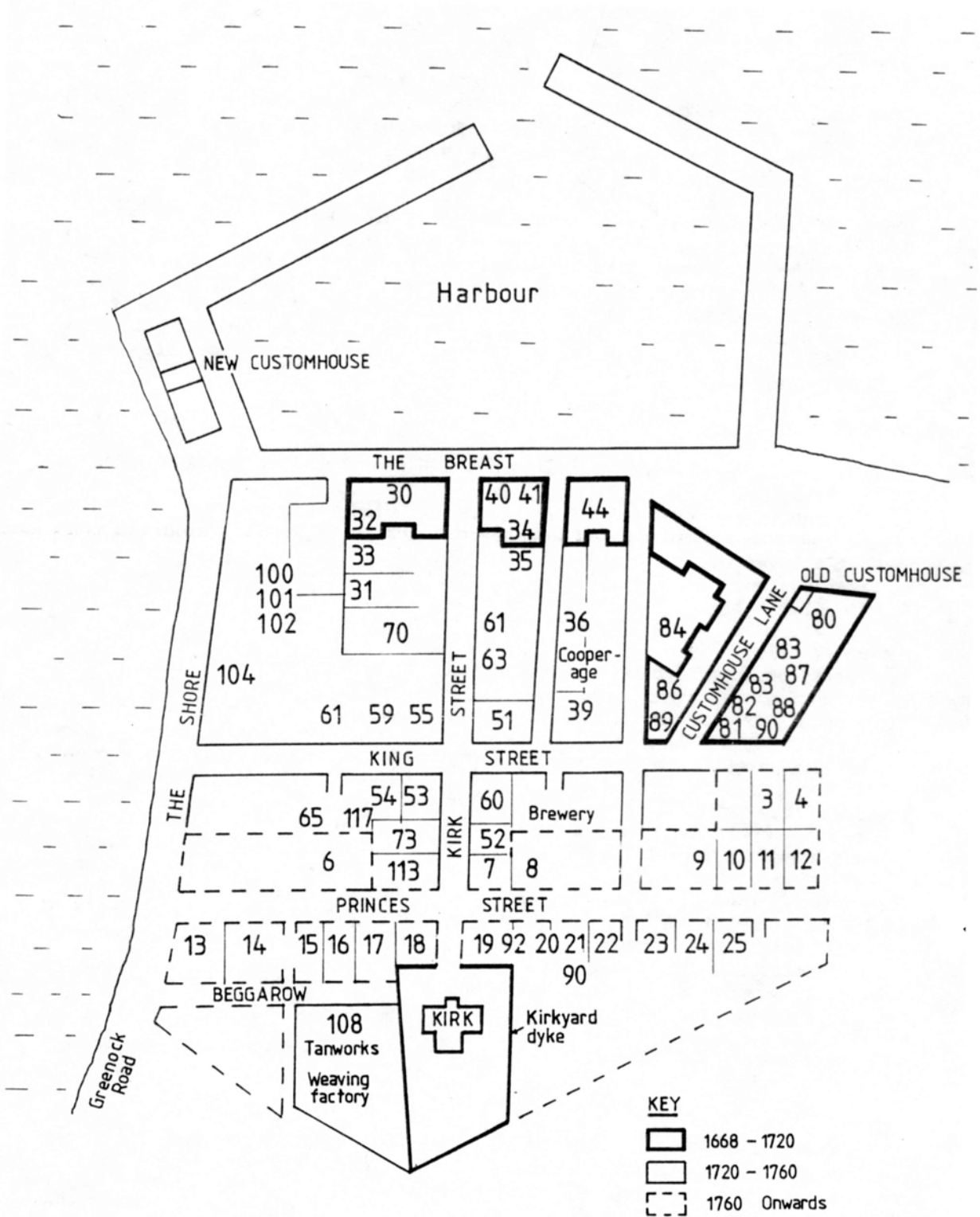
feuars, 40% were tradesmen such as bakers, brewers, carpenters, coopers and wrights serving the port. A further 33% were merchants, mainly local men residing in the town. Out of the remainder, 12% were sailors or ships masters, 10% were professional men such as surgeons or customs officials, and the rest were indwellers and horsehirsers.

In addition to controlling the development of the port, Glasgow Town Council ensured that those operating in the town were Glasgow Burgesses or Freemen. As early as 1697 one William Barclay was admonished for repairing an oven in his dwelling in order to let to a baxter for setting up a baking trade 'to the prejudice of this Burgh and Freemen thereof' (9). Thus the majority of those who rose to success in Port Glasgow were 'settlers' who came down from Glasgow. There was little prospect for local Renfrewshire men to succeed in the port without first completing a Glasgow apprenticeship. In fact many took this roundabout route. Glasgow trade records are full of Renfrewshire farmers' sons who were set up as apprentices in Glasgow trades and subsequently found success in the city or its port. Those who came to Port Glasgow soon settled there, raised families and became adopted citizens. They were quite separate from the major Glasgow merchants who used the town purely as a staging post for their overseas trade.

A typical example of a Port Glasgow success was baker Robert Allason, who came to Port Glasgow from a Renfrewshire background as a humble newly qualified Glasgow apprentice. Twenty years later he left the port as one of its most prominent merchants and industrialists to establish a country estate in his home parish of Mearns (10). Allason's story is typical of the ambitious West of Scotland merchant in the mid 18th century. There were few bounds to their enterprise across all sorts of markets and goods.

Initially Allason established a bakery in the port and through advertising and enterprise the business expanded. He soon joined with two former Customs clerks and began to trade traditional Clyde goods such as salted herring with England and the Continent. In 1750 he purchased a large corner of the town from Glasgow Council where he established the Port Glasgow Tanworks and also a Weaving Factory. Altogether Allason acquired at least 12 plots, where he established tenements and industry. His overseas trade also expanded, and by 1750 he was trading with the West Indies and North America. In 1760 he formed his own company in Virginia and moved up-river to Glasgow. Two years later he established a 220 acre estate in his home parish of Mearns. However like many of his contemporaries, Port Glasgow was where his heart lay, and he was buried in his lair by the Kirkyard Dyke in 1784 (11).

This preliminary study has shown that Port Glasgow has a fascinating history in both its development and its people. The town suffered more than most with the coming of the railway, roads, modern redevelopment and finally industrial decline. However its origins are not hard to find. Anyone wishing to make a starting point in its rich history need only visit the Kirkyard and read of its merchants, shipowners and entrepreneurs.



18 TH. CENTURY PORT GLASGOW

Sources

1. General works on the town include 'History of Port Glasgow', Wm. F. McArthur (1932) & 'Old Port Glasgow', J.C. Osborne (2003).
 2. Various feuars were given permission to 'build wharf or breast work down on the shore within the sea water mark opposite ground which the town has allowed them to build upon' Records of the Burgh of Glasgow (RBG) Vol. IV.
 3. McArthur op. cit.
 4. RBG III, 1677.
 5. RBG VI, 1752.
 6. RBG V 1721, 1729.
 7. The importance of this relic should not be underestimated. Unfortunately part of the Kirkyard is now used as a car park.
 8. General sources for the 18th century feuars are 'Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Glasgow' Vols. 3 to 8 (Mitchell Library): Some of the original deeds survive in Strathclyde Regional Council Archives (SRC) D-TC/1; Many also appear in Renfrew Sasines RS54 Scottish Record Office (SRO). Further details of the feuars themselves come from Port Glasgow Customs Records E504 (SRO), Court of Session records (SRO), Port Glasgow Parish Church Records CH2/303 (SRO), Register of Companies to 1775 (SRC Archives), and Port Glasgow Parish Records (Paisley Museum).
 9. RBG IV, 1697.
 10. Further details of the remarkable rise of this particular merchant can be found in 'Robert Allason & Greenbank', Published by Eastwood District Council, Feb 1992.
 11. Full details of lair purchases and exchanges from 1730 are contained in Port Glasgow Church Session Minutes CH2/303 (SRO).
- Abbreviations:- RBG: Records of the Burgh of Glasgow, SRO: Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh.

NOTES

I am indebted to Isobel Couperwhite, Watt Collection, Greenock, for local assistance. Early eighteenth century plans of the town are recorded but do not appear to have survived. Earliest maps showing streets are the small scale Watt's map of the Clyde (1734) and Roy (1750). Ainslie's plan of the town (1799) is the earliest detailed map that has been located. [Subsequent note: a much larger (c.A3) grid plan by John Watt was later found by the author in Birmingham City Archives].