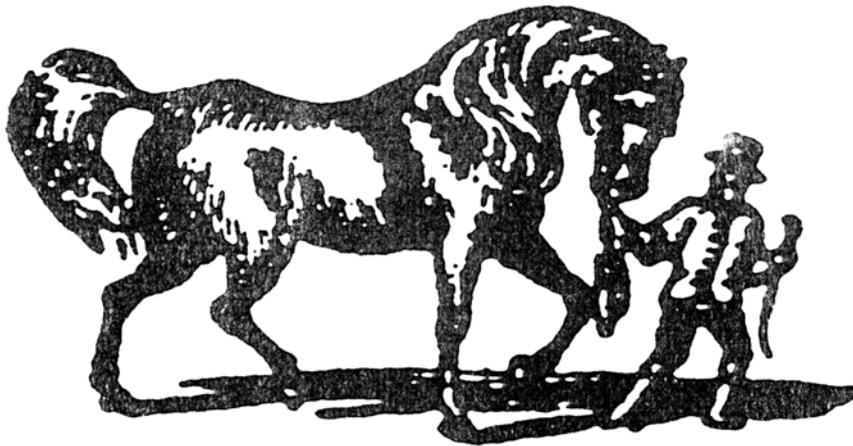


1. Paisley Horse Races and the Silver Bells

John Burnett

Up to about 1850 Paisley Fair was one of the main fairs in the west of Scotland, important particularly for the sale of livestock. This essay, however, is concerned with the horse race which was held in Paisley from 1620 onwards. From 1665 the races were at St James's fair. Gradually they became more important than the commercial side of the fair, and by 1860 they had almost completely taken over. At the same time, fair slowly took on the meaning we associate with Glasgow Fair - a local holiday when many people went away from the burgh. Paisley races thus became races which were held in the burgh but not for the people of the burgh. They were last held in 1907 and 1908, as will be explained.



History of Racing

First, some background on the history of horse racing. In ancient times it had been an occasional amusement, and in the form of chariot-racing it was highly popular in ancient Rome. ⁽¹⁾ Through the Dark and Middle Ages it continued, but not in the form of the annual races which developed later: contests or challenges were arranged on the spot, or at short notice - thus the various races in the great ninth century Irish epic, the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. This kind of race vanished only with the end of horse power in agriculture. Usually, informal races left no traces, but there are exceptions as when in 1838 the carters who had brought curling stones to the newly-constructed Stanely Reservoir raced their horses across the ice. ⁽²⁾

In the Middle Ages all forms of sport were reshaped into military training, and it is only in the sixteenth century that horse racing reappears as a source of entertainment in itself. Thus at Dumfries in 1575:

My Lord Hamilton had a horse so well bridled, and so speedy, that although he was of a meaner stature from other horses that essayed their speed he overcame them all upon Solway sands, whereby he obtained great praise both of England and Scotland.

The oldest surviving horse racing prizes for which the Scots competed - I am choosing my words carefully - are the Carlisle Bells of 1590, now in the Guildhall Museum, Carlisle. The oldest Scots horse racing prize is the Lanark Bell, which dates from 1608-10. The race for the Bell was last run in 1977, but it may be revived. Paisley could have been in contention for the honour of having the oldest racing prize in Scotland, for the Town Council agreed in 1608 to institute a race with the prize of a silver bell. The plan was not carried into action: there was no race that year although it is probable that the bell was made.

There are two Paisley Bells. The larger is about 4 inches high and the smaller about 1.5 inches high. They are both the same shape: like the Lanark Bell their tops are conical and the undersides hemispherical.

The Paisley Bells are made of silver but do not appear to be hallmarked, though there may be marks inside them which cannot be seen. The Carlisle bells are a different shape: they are round.

The absence of hall marks on the Paisley Bells does not mean that they cannot be dated, though I have not been able to do so. Two shooting trophies of the same period, the silver guns of Dumfries and Kirkcudbright (1587) can be dated because they are engraved with the arms of the provosts of the time. So far as I know the arms on the Paisley Bells have not been identified: perhaps they point to an individual and so to a term of office. If the date of the larger bell is 1608, the second may have been added by the Council in 1620 or later, but the absence of references to a second bell in the council minutes suggests that the second one may have been added by a winner, perhaps even by Crawford of Cloberhill. The practice of adding medals or other tokens to a trophy, to commemorate one's own victory, had been established on the continent in the late Middle Ages and the appendages to the Musselburgh arrow (1603) show that the tradition had reached Scotland.

In 1620, the Council Minutes recorded:

that yeirlie in tyme cuming thair bell raice salbe rwne on the saxt day of Maij in manner following, viz.... that the horse and maister yairof that first comes over the scoir at the said walnuik of Paisslay, sall have the said bell with the said burghe's airmes yairvpoun for yat yeir ... and sall have the said silver bell hung at his horse heid ⁽³⁾

The race was to be held from St Connailie's or St Conval's stone (known now as the Argyle stone) ⁽⁴⁾, finally east to the house at the Causeyend of Renfrew, to the Wallneuk of Paisley. The bell was won on 1 June 1620 by Hew Crawford of Cloberhill. Cloberhill was north of the Clyde - Knightswood housing estate now occupies the site. Typical of the winners in the first two centuries of the Paisley Bells, Crawford was a local laird.

Paisley and other races were begun in the reign of James VI and are linked to his personal interest in horse racing and hunting. James set up the course at Newmarket and imported Arab horses, improving the breeding stock. The whole of Britain benefited, and more Scots burghs set up annual races. We know of other races which began at the same time as the Paisley ones: Dunfermline (by 1610), Perth (1613), Cupar (1621), and Jedburgh (1625). There must have been more.

In the eighteenth century, three Scottish race meetings were of wide interest - at Leith, Perth and Kelso. Others were local affairs and some lapsed from time to time. Those at which high quality horses ran were at Dumfries, Dunfermline, Stirling, Montrose, Aberdeen, Paisley and Inverness. Though local, they were valued: James Houston of Kilbarchan, born in 1754, attended Paisley every year from 1763 to 1839. ⁽⁵⁾ There was an increasing quantity of racing as the century progressed. One of the interesting factors in Paisley races in the nineteenth century is that they belonged both to this tradition of organised racing, and to what one might call folk horse racing.

Folk horse racing was less formal, though it contained certain elements of organisation.

It was held on the same day every year - in Gaeldom, at Michaelmas, and elsewhere on Saints' feast days. Near Paisley, one can point to races at St Inan's fair at Beith, at Johnstone Fair, and at the various races where Habbie Simpson, piper of Kilbarchan, played.

And at Horse Races many a day,
 Before the Black, the Brown, the Grey,
 He gart his pipe when he did play,
 Baith Skirl and Skreed,
 Now all such Pastimes quite away,
 sen Habbie's deid.

Folk horse racing was accompanied by social rituals such as other sports and processions. One such event which has been recently described in detail is the Kipper Fair at Newton-on-Ayr. ⁽⁶⁾ The best summary of it was written by the Ayr-born journalist William Robertson (1848-1924).

It consisted of the Cadgers' Procession, the Cadgers' races and sports, and the eating of kippered salmon in the various inns and public - houses of the New Town. The cadgers ... wore enormous Kilmarnock bonnets and they had their horses gaily decorated; preceded by a band consisting of a flautist and a drummer, they paraded the streets, drank whiskey at the doors of various public-houses, and then adjourned to the north shore, where they indulged in horse-racing ... the heavy-legged Clydesdales ... made a dreadful noise, especially when they dashed through the pools of water on the beach ... There was a lame horse race - these days being prior to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals - and afterwards attention was centred on the efforts of men and boys to climb a greasy pole for a leg of mutton. To climb the pole was almost an impossibility, and the mutton was generally won by a blind man called Blood, who was pushed up from behind with a long stick, and whose blasphemies in his unsuccessful attempts were quite a feature of the day's proceedings. ⁽⁷⁾

Another author gives more detail on the role of the Captain. He was elected two weeks before the holiday, and carried shoulder high through the Burgh, being 'jagged wi' peens [pins]' by the other cadgers. The day before the races was his treat, when the carters formed a long row in front of the Captain's house and were served with whisky, bread and cheese by his wife. These social rituals were conducted year after year, and some of them survive at Irvine in the fair at Marymass, held in August.

Traditional racing was associated with rowdy crowd behaviour. Though the middle classes might disapprove of it, it was relished by the people - as can be seen from Robert Fergusson's 'Leith Races'. Rather than quote that familiar poem, here are the words of a Leith baker, Alexander Campbell. He praised the races then turned to the more organised running which had replaced them in 1816:

the Musselburgh races are utterly and wholly destitute of any portion of that reckless and thorough-going spirit of hilarity, which never failed to attend those of Leith. The former ... are the coldest and most heartless things imaginable; and what they have gained in elegance and refinement, but indifferently supplies the place of the obstreperous interest, which the rough and round skelping on the plashy sands of Leith were wont to excite. ⁽⁸⁾

An important point here is that Leith races were on the sands immediately beside the

burgh and only two miles from Edinburgh, but Musselburgh was much further away.

In other places such as Johnstone the race was held on the high road through the town. By 1820 this was also true in Paisley, where the racing was on the Greenock road.

Before we leave traditional racing, here is a charming description of the effects of the evening's drinking and dancing which followed the carters' races at Lasswade in Midlothian.

But night is bye, and mornin's in;
There's mony a weary frame,
Ere these queer bodies do begin
To tak' the road they came.
When they get hame, they then, nae doubt,
Among the blankets creep,
And there at last they ha'd it out
Beside auld daddy Sleep
Their friend that morn.⁽⁹⁾

Paisley Races in the Nineteenth Century

With the beginning of the Paisley Advertiser in 1825 the information we have about St James's Fair increases to the point where it is possible to write a coherent history. Tantalisingly, it is only in the first account the Advertiser published that the paper records tandles, tannels or tawnles: bonfires which were lit on the night before great Celtic Fairs.

We do not recollect of having ever witnessed more splendid Tandles than what gleamed on the Cart on Wednesday night. To children it had formed the occupation of many weeks, to construct the circular mounds or little islets in the middle of the river where the Tandles are lighted ... these immense fires with myriads of children dancing round them had altogether a very grand and imposing effect ...⁽¹⁰⁾

Tandles, which are pagan in origin, are known to have continued into the nineteenth century in other places in south-west Scotland. They were also lit in Ireland, and the word tannel comes from the middle Irish teannáil, a bonfire. Presumably the Paisley ones were stopped almost as soon as the Advertiser had recorded them, swept away by the increasingly swift flow of the River Cart as the demand for water power expanded.

Paisley Fair was changing in other ways. 'This year ... begins a new era in Paisley racing' said the Paisley Advertiser in 1836. 'Ascot and Doncaster must take care, otherwise Ayr and Paisley will throw them under an eclipse.'⁽¹¹⁾ Instead of the being run on the Greenock Road, there was to be a specially laid-out course on Paisley Moss. The land was levelled and ashes laid, and the stumps and roots of many oak trees were dug up. The presence of horses from England had been noted for the first time in 1834, and more were expected in following years, as was Wombwell's great menagerie.⁽¹²⁾

The races held at Johnstone Fair were banned by the Sheriff of Renfrewshire in 1840, agreeing that because they were on the turnpike road, they were dangerous. Without an alternative venue, they were finished.⁽¹³⁾

On the two race days at Paisley in 1836 the crowd was said to be 50,000 on each day. There were about 50 refreshment tents, of which 'Two erected on the non-inebriating principle, had ample employment.' One imagines that those on the inebriating principle also had full employment. A wide selection of local landowners was present including the Earl of Eglinton, Lord Keiburne, Sir James Boswell of Auchinleck, Alexander of Southbar, Fleming of Barrochan, Sir William Napier of Milliken, Cunningham of Craigends, M'Dowall of Garthland, Houston of Johnstone Castle, Col. Harvey of Castlesemple, Alexander Oswald, younger, of Shieldhall.⁽¹⁴⁾ A notable visitor from the east was Ramsay of Barnton, then the leading figure in Scottish racing and the sustainer of Stirling races. As well as property, literature was represented: Professor John Wilson - 'Christopher North' - and family, and Thomas Campbell were present. The burgh gave Wilson a dinner on the basis that he was the most famous living native. There was also an unprecedented attendance of pickpockets.

Another index of the rising status of Paisley Races was an increase in prize money. In the early 1830s the prize money at Paisley Races was typically £35 for the whole meeting. In 1836 it was £80, and a week after the races £320 had been subscribed for the following year. In the early 1830s the crowd had reached 40,000, but in 1837 the figure of 110,000 to 115,000 is given on the authority of John Orton of York, a professional race judge who had been employed for the first time that year. This is a staggeringly large figure before the railway age.

Symbolic of the new status of the races was the new box which was made for the Bells in 1836. It recognised the importance of preserving them, and the importance of the history of the race. There has always been an aristocratic element in horse racing, and to it the royal connection was important. This after all is the decade of the great Reform Bill, which made Tory landowners feel threatened: the opportunity to confirm a sporting tradition associated with James VI was welcome. The box is preserved along with the Bells in Paisley Museum. It is of oak, 10 by 6 by 4 inches deep, and has silver mountings some of which are purely decorative - thistles and the arms of the burgh - but most of which bear the names of the winners from 1836 to 1907, and their owners. A plaque in the centre of the lid is engraved 'Paisley Bells/ 1836.'

For a few years Paisley races remained an important fixture which attracted the aristocracy and gentry. In 1838 'St James's Club House', was erected, a gambling tent where Rouge et Noir and Roulette were played.⁽¹⁵⁾

By 1839 the crowd had fallen, but was still at the comparatively high level of 25,000 to 30,000. In 1840 it increased to about 40,000, chiefly by the agency of the railway. 'Hundreds who had never risked themselves behind a locomotive delayed their trial trip till the Paisley meeting.' 'The scene at the station-house at Tradeston [Glasgow] baffled all description.' Others came by canal, river, and horseback - and of course thousands must have walked.

By 1840 Paisley races seemed to have established their status: 'That which Musselburgh races are to Edinburgh, those of Paisley are to Glasgow.'⁽¹⁶⁾ In other words, Paisley was one of the two premier race meetings in Scotland. This halcyon period did not last. The decline was almost as sudden as the meeting's rise from obscurity - but it was in a different direction. The reasons are not clear, though the Earl of Eglinton's temporary withdrawal from racing was one of them. By the 1850s Paisley Races had a bad name: 'There was as usual a good amount of drinking, thieving and fighting, especially in the after part of the day.'⁽¹⁷⁾ The trains which brought Glasgow people to Paisley took Paisley buddies to Greenock and other places on the Clyde Coast. The Glasgow, Paisley & Greenock Railway opened in 1840 and on one day of

Paisley Fair in 1841 it ran twenty-five trains to Greenock: in the crowd at Gilmour Street there was a tremendous crush in which a woman had her leg broken.⁽¹⁸⁾ Much of the rowdyism at Paisley which was criticised in the press was probably due to visitors from Glasgow.

The Riot at Paisley Races In 1857

The atmosphere at Paisley Races degenerated to the point where there was a riot. The event was very lightly policed: there may have been only one policeman on duty at the racecourse, though there would have been more in the middle of town. When a fight broke out involving dozens of men, it could not be stopped.⁽¹⁹⁾ The consequence was that there were calls for the races to be suppressed. One newspaper bellowed:

the Paisley Races must cease. Kilwinning may shoot at the Papingo, and Linlithgow 'redd the marches,' as of yore, but there can be no such sport - or indeed, open air sport of any kind - with attraction for the lowest, within walking reach of Glasgow. The place is too large, the population too dense, the dregs too manifold, not to be alarming when stirred. Against the paint and spangles of Glasgow Fair our civic authorities have begun to wage war. Paisley Races must likewise retreat before the necessities of our new civilization.⁽²⁰⁾

The Minister of the Free St George's church added:

It is sad to think that such a prolific source of corruption and misery should have been for so long tolerated and encouraged ... It is needless to refer to the gambling and violence, to the drunkenness and debauchery, which are invariable accompaniments of the race-course ... few will stand up in defence of such unblushing wickedness, or hesitate to ascribe to it that systematic and monster iniquity, which annually attracts to our town so large a proportion of the blackguardism of the country, and which casts a withering blight, as well as a foul reproach, on the whole community that tolerates it.⁽²¹⁾

This was typical of the Free Church's view of society, which emphasised control and public discipline.

The radical Renfrewshire Independent, part of whose independence was a freedom from theological influence, more humanely suggested that holidays were good for working people, and that for them horse racing was a harmless entertainment. The Independent did not tackle the question of gambling, which must have lain underneath the Free Church's hostility to the races. Through newspapers and public meetings a public debate was conducted, but the future of the races was not resolved when Alexander Hastie, for many years Paisley's M.P., died. Paisley's considerable political energies were thrown into an election.

The politicians had forgotten Paisley Races, but the people did not. In 1858 the race was organised at the last moment and held in the traditional manner - on the road. The crowd was estimated at 6000 to 8000. The following year the racecourse was in use again, and there were 20,000 spectators.⁽²²⁾ Both county and burgh police were present, hunting 'cardsharps, thimble riggers and other professors of legerdemain'. On the Thursday before the races in 1860 the thefts were 'few and trifling', though a man was mauled by a lion in the menagerie. 'The people behaved well', said another account, and the arrangements for the crowd at the re-laid course were praised. For the horses, the Glasgow Herald reported a growing belief that the racecourse was

unsuitable: in particular, sharp turns made it difficult for the horses to keep their feet.⁽²³⁾

The Later Years

Paisley Races' great days of the late 1830s were long past by the 1860s. The crowds were still large, typically 30,000 on the Thursday and 40,000 on the Friday when the Bells were run. The course was on public land: it was damp and other facilities such as stands were poor. A report in 1870 said that the course had improved a little because the paddock was now on the same side as the stand - so that the areas for those who had paid for admission were together. The stand still had a single stair case, however.⁽²⁴⁾ There was little resemblance to racing at Ascot and Doncaster.

The races were, unusually, a family affair.

There is one feature of the Paisley Racecourse which we have not observed to the same extent elsewhere. Within the extensive circle, which is quite free to the public, hundreds of small family groups may be seen seated on the grass enjoying their humble picnics, the children, when not eating, frolicking about in the most gladsome manner, and the others contenting themselves with a distant view of the flying horses with their gaily dressed riders, without apparently taking further interest in the business than being pleased to hear and repeat that 'Mr Cowan has won the "Bells" again', or 'Yon braw tartan jacket, with the yellow sleeves, are Lord Eglinton's colours', which some recollect being popular at Paisley meetings more than twenty years since, and other matters of a similar kind.

There was a great variety of amusements on the ground, the post popular and absurd of which was a velocipede railway, on which great numbers of youths and even men paid a penny each for the privilege of driving themselves, and an equal number of females, for about three minutes.⁽²⁵⁾

Admission to the races was free until the mid 1870s. The size and nature of the crowd changed when commercial interests took over: the crowd was reduced to about a quarter of its former size. Nevertheless there were still more women present than at most race meetings:

The pleasure they experienced must have been of a peculiar sort - it could not have been of a very elevating character, and judging by the expression on their countenances it could not have been very entertaining; but with a quiet resignation that would have become a better cause they lingered it out so long as it suited the fancy of their husband and father.⁽²⁶⁾

Around 1880 there were still large crowds at Paisley Races, perhaps as large as 70,000, but after admission was charged to everyone who went on the course - hitherto payment had only been required from carriages and people on horseback - the figure fell sharply. There were only 15,000 present on Race Friday in 1890.⁽²⁷⁾ By comparison, the largest football crowd which St Mirren have attracted to Love Street is 47,000.

In 1905 the Daily Record reported

There may not be much of the aristocratic element about the Paisley meeting, but you may travel far before finding a more

enthusiastic gathering of local people who patronise the sport
... Everybody knows that Paisley's racecourse is not exactly an
ideal one, and that the quality of the racing is generally mediocre,
to use no harsher expression, but there was only one 'spill'...⁽²⁸⁾

Standards had risen elsewhere: the facilities at Paisley had probably not improved significantly for seventy years.

By 1907 the Jockey Club's control of racing was well established. It was an absolute control. The Club licensed courses and jockeys, and if a man rode a horse on an unlicensed course, his licence was withdrawn - and thus his source of livelihood. So when in 1907 it became known that the Club had refused to recognise racing at Paisley after that year, it was understood to be a death sentence. The Bells were won and the last race, the St James's Park Plate, named after the course, was run at 4.30 on Friday 9th August.⁽²⁹⁾

Afterword

The longest history of horse racing in Scotland was published by a great racing character, Major Jack Fairfax-Blakeborough, in 1972.⁽³⁰⁾ It is not, perhaps, a book of general interest because his real enthusiasm was for the horses and their 'form'. He spent his whole life as a racing journalist, and was 91 when the book appeared: he had been present at the last Paisley Races, sixty-five years before.

It was never a good course but it was always popular with Glasgow folk and the belts gave it unique interest. I was at the swan-song meeting. There is always a certain sadness in the knowledge that an old fixture which is steeped in tradition is to drop out of the list and I know many of us felt that we were parting with an old friend.⁽³¹⁾

So there was another reason for the survival of Paisley Races - the racing community wanted them to. But tradition was not enough to satisfy the Jockey Club. The underlying problem, which was insoluble, was the draining of the course. The standard of drainage which had been adequate in 1836, when work was done 'with a view to secure a continuance of the celebrity which has dawned on Paisley races,' would not do in their Edwardian twilight. The 1907 races were not quite the end, since an unlicensed race was held the following year. It did not have the support of the Jockey Club, but it shows the strength of tradition. Other local race meetings continued, such as the Marymass races at Irvine, which are still held every August.

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