

GREENOCK AND PORT GLASGOW: TWO PORTS IN SELF CREATED STORMS

By

John Smith

This is a survey of the early development of the Parish of Port Glasgow and the Parish of Greenock and how they interacted for two hundred years, in an antagonistic way at first, eventually ending in some harmony at the end of second decade of the eighteenth century.

Early History: the Barony of Finlaystone and the Barony of Newark

This history starts before there was a Port Glasgow. About 1405 the lands of the Barony of Newark by the Clyde River were owned by the Maxwells of Calderwood, having been created out of the Barony of Finlaystone, owned by the Dennistouns. Sir Robert Maxwell, a younger son of the family of Nether Pollock, started to think of developing the future Newark castle lands which stretched from Glenclune Brae to at least the Devol Burn on the south side of the river. He built his dwelling place in a square tower beside the fishing village which was originally set up to administer the mansion house estate but developed to also fish the herrings from the river.

The village prospered as a herring fishing village over the next four hundred years till the end of the seventeenth century..

Glasgow merchants in 1597 possessed six small ships that used various ports and harbours including Newark Bay. They traveled to Europe. Records of the import duties show that they were employed in the importation of French wines. On one voyage five of them had a cargo of "Howtopas" (Haultpoyis) wine, and the other carried "Byone" wine.

The first description of Newark and its shipping by a government official is to be found in a report by a Mr. Thomas Tucker, Registrar to the Commissioners for Excise in England in 1655 during Cromwell's administration...

Of Newark he said, "A small place where there are (besides the laird's house of the place) some four or five houses, but before them a pretty good roade."

Dumbarton he describes as "a small and very poore burgh at the head of the firth

which gave shelter sometime to a vessel of 16 tons or thereabouts, coming from England or Ireland". The harbours of Dumbarton were beginning to silt up at this period.

He does mention some merchants adventuring further afield than Europe: "Here hath likewise beene some who have adventured as farre as the Barbadoes ; but the losse they have sustayned by reason of theyr going out and coming home late every yeare have made them discontinue going thither any more."

Finding a port for Glasgow; turned down by Dumbarton

The time was ripe, according to the thinking of an ambitious Glasgow, for Glasgow merchants to acquire proper harbours for their growing shipping.

They approached the Dumbarton Magistrates to base themselves there. They were refused on the grounds that "the great influx of mariners and others would raise the price of provisions to its inhabitants."

Glasgow looked elsewhere. The foreshore on the south side of the river from Newark to Greenock was much better than Dumbarton and the deep channel running close inshore made navigation easy, so a suitable site was looked for there. Irvine was also being considered but rejected as too far.

The Navigation Act of 1660

In 1660 the Restoration of the Crown took place and the Navigation Bill was passed which had been intended to check the competition of Dutch shipping. It had the effect of putting Scotland in the same position as if it were a foreign power the effect of this on Scotland was that England had a monopoly of the growing trade with America and the West Indies. This did not seem to interfere with Glasgow's scrutiny of favorable sites and their desire to clinch a deal.

Greenock wanted to monopolize the herring industry

It was known that Glasgow planned to cure herring and this was a mainstay of Greenock's livelihood. Greenock in the person of the Laird, Sir John Shaw, saw the interest of Glasgow in processing herring as a threat to Greenock's future plans.

The Shaw family took action. The family, who had the major land holdings in Greenock seemed to have had much influence with the new King, King Charles I. Sir John Shaw had supported the Royalist cause and fought at the battle of Worcester in 1651 as lieutenant colonel of a regiment of Scottish Horse. A principal street in Greenock was named after King Charles, Charles Street.

Using this influence and the King's tendency to give monopolies to his friends, on 12th June, 1661, Sir John Shaw received from the king a charter giving the Royal Fishery Company, which was formed in Greenock, and of which King Charles was one of the shareholders, an exclusive right to cure herring up to the end of September yearly. This being the biggest part of the principal herring fishing season, the remaining fishermen including those of Glasgow and Newark could only pack and salt herring during the rest of the year. This cut directly into Glasgow's interests.

At this time in the seventeenth century herring fishing in the Clyde was very big business.

The runs of herring were mainly three times per year and these times were called the 'Drave'. Boats came from Greenock, Crawfordsdike, Gourock, Newark and Inverkip. Typical shipments from the Clyde were of a large scale, 20,000 barrels of herring to La Rochelle, in France, and Sweden for instance. All of these were cured herrings in salt and all the small towns had curing areas and coopers for making barrels.



Herring Barrel

At the busiest time of a great drave, 900 boats were employed, with each boat having four men and 24 nets. The Fishing season was from 25th July to 25th December with the Greenock Company having the best time for harvesting the catch from July to the end of September and Glasgow and others left struggling with the rest.

A second bid thwarted for a Glasgow port

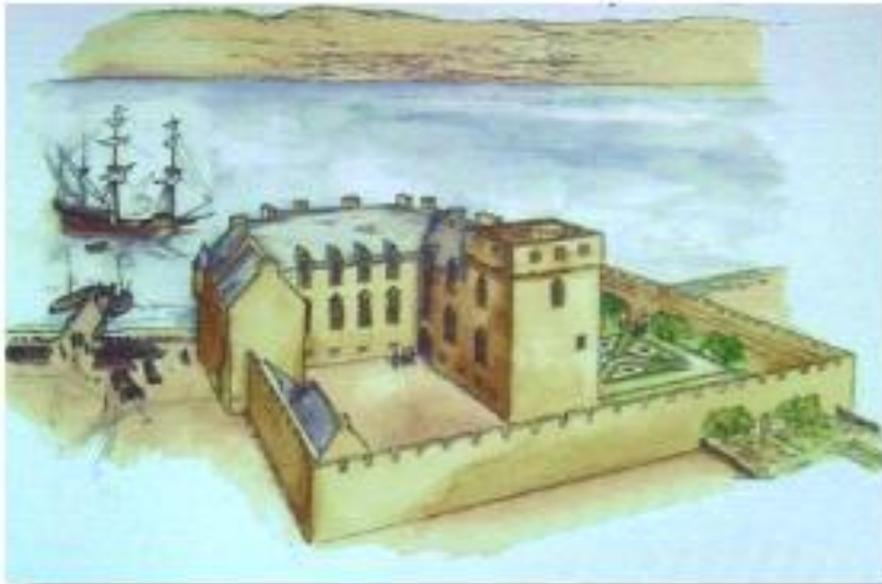
The Glasgow merchants, who, having in 1664 fallen out with Greenock on the questions of harbour dues and warehouse accommodation as well as the herring

monopoly, and then made a strong bid for the lands of Easter Greenock for siting their port. In July and October a bargain was nearly completed with Lord Cochrane, the owner, for ground at Cartburn between the present Port Glasgow and Greenock.

Sir John Shaw stepped in and bought the land from under them. He had the double motive of wanting to use the land for forming a harbour for Greenock and of further shutting out Glasgow's influence and control.

Glasgow continued to search.

Other enterprises were being put forward at this time. In 1667 a soap work was established in Glasgow, and it was with the idea of procuring fats for the manufacture of this product that whale fishing commenced using Newark Bay as a base. For this purpose there was a fleet of five ships put into service, mostly sailing to Greenland. This kept up Glasgow's interest in a port near here.



Newark Castle in 1496

A third successful bid for a Glasgow port

Fortunately, Glasgow's quest for a port seemed to be coming to an end. Sir Patrick Maxwell at this time was the Laird of Newark and he was interested in developing his lands. Glasgow was happy with that since the Newark Bay had long been one of the anchorages for vessels unloading into small boats to Glasgow

An arrangement was agreed with Glasgow, and Sir Patrick Maxwell and his family feued thirteen acres of Newark lands to Glasgow, on the 28th of February 1668...
“Said Lords of Newark, elder and yor, had set aside the land for payment of 4 merks/

year and relieving them of the Kings Taxation.”

The charter stated that this Newport was erected as a free port, with power granted to the magistrates to build a harbour, a tolbooth, or a prison. To appoint Baillies, clerks and officers for the administration of justice and exercise jurisdiction, civil and criminal, competent to a "Baron" and also be able to levy customs, tolls and anchorages. This was ratified by Parliament and the King.

Glasgow was not long in developing their new property. Attention was first directed to the construction of a harbour. The adjoining town of Newark had grown in size due to the herring fishing, and housed the larger portion of the inhabitants till well in the next century.

On 27th December, 1668, it was decided to build "a new pier" or harbour "with some houses and dykis" on the ground which had been bought from the Laird of Newark.

Thus a new settlement, Newport (later Port Glasgow), began.

To pay back the expense it was decided that in future, all Glasgow merchants were to use Glasgow or Newport and no other "port, harbour or creek".

The town was beginning to grow. Streets were appearing, laid out at right angles to each other according to a set plan, and lined by houses which were also built to plan.

By the end of the year 1669 some cellars [stores] were completed.

To emphasize the new facility the Glasgow Council sent notices through the streets of Glasgow "with touk of drum" to warn all manner of persons who desire to take the said cellars that they come to the Tolbooth the morrow and that they who bid most would get them.

Sir John Shaw and his illegal Charles II Charter

Not to be upstaged Sir John Shaw struck again but his tactic backfired...

On 11th January 1670, with Sir John's influence, Greenock received another charter from King Charles II. It converted the town and barony of Greenock into what was called a free Burgh of Barony, with power to buy and sell wine and all other kinds of merchandise and staple goods, to pack and peel herring, and repair and build a free port and harbour. The effect, if it could have been carried out, was that Greenock would have been placed in the favoured position of the Royal Burghs.

The attempt by Sir John Shaw to put this charter in force resulted in much litigation and violence.

The charter Sir John had got from the king was not recognized as it was not ratified by Parliament, and as Greenock was not a Royal Burgh so its traders (“Free Traders”) were in effect smugglers who paid no duties and customs

Smuggled goods were sold at the Clachan of Kilmacolm and New Kirk, Greenock and so by 1675 there were complaints from Glasgow that Greenock merchants were infringing the staple of the royal burghs by handling salt, brandy, tanned leather and wine.

In 1675 The Provost of Port Glasgow went after Greenock for importing wine, brandy and salt. On the 6th of June a Greenock ship with wine, brandy and salt was moored at the road stead opposite the Hill of Ardmore. A gang of sailors sent from Newark captured it and brought it to Newark Harbour. A customs officer was called and he sealed the hatches.

The Laird of Greenock, Sir John himself, turned out that night with 150 men in six boats and called for deliverance of the ship

The Port people on board said “No”. So under cover of fire the Greenock men boarded.

However the Laird and his men were thrown overboard. The vessel was then placed under the guns of Dumbarton Castle till it was resolved by the courts in favour of Port Glasgow.

To further strengthen Glasgow's hand, in 1677 Port Glasgow was declared to be the only port on the River Clyde in which goods and merchandise, which Royal Burghs were privileged to export and import, could be loaded or unloaded.

Voyages from Glasgow to the New World

It is right to mention that there were journeys to the colonies despite the Navigation Act. Walter Gibson, the son of a Glasgow provost, and who himself occupied that position in 1687, is credited with being the first to trade to Virginia.

There was then a build up of contacts with the colonies and Greenock and Port Glasgow. It got so serious, from the English point of view, that in the year 1690, the English Government began to patrol the Channel between Northern Ireland and Scotland to intercept ships coming into Port Glasgow with tobacco from Virginia. and a few were caught.

Greenock loses its herring monopoly

1690 perhaps was a body blow to Sir John in Greenock, for his friends the Stuarts were defeated in the Glorious Revolution and also with this change his herring monopoly was withdrawn.

By 1695 the customs agent in Scotland reported that there were twenty four Scottish ships trading with the American colonies, and an English official in Philadelphia complained that all the tobacco in Philadelphia was assigned to Scottish merchants.

As a benchmark in 1700 the Port Glasgow and Newark population was 400 (300 were in Newark) and Greenock several times larger mainly made up of herring fishermen.

Glasgow was the size of a large village with 12,000 people

The Union of the Parliaments

A major change in 1707 was at Government level between England and Scotland with the Act of Union, and the repeal of the Navigation Acts. This allowed both Greenock and Port Glasgow to rapidly prosper, with the tobacco trade. now being carried on legally.

North American and West Indian trade was now open to Scottish merchants on equal terms with those of Whitehaven, Liverpool and Bristol.

Sir John's Harbour in 1711

In Greenock in 1707 Sir John Shaw saw the success of Port Glasgow and the opening up of trade. He wanted to build a harbour at Greenock but was unsuccessful at raising money from the Government presumably now that his friends, the Stuarts, had gone. He, however, was a determined man . He financed the construction of the harbour himself.

It was based on the design of the Port Glasgow ones, only larger, and was completed in 1711 at a cost of £5,555 sterling.

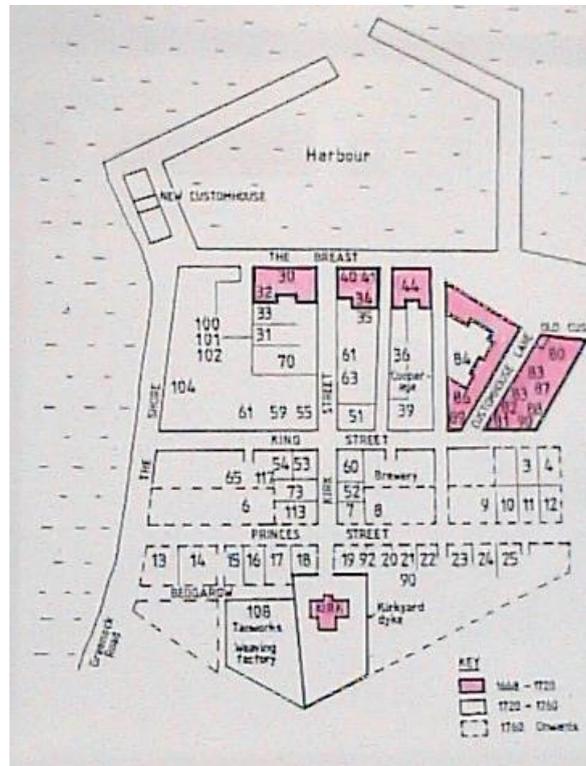
Sir John tries to get the Customs business

Again his conflict with Glasgow was sparked into the open in the same year (1707) as he made an attempt to get the Custom House removed to Greenock.

The Lords of Treasury, after hearing Glasgow's case, refused to permit the change. On 16th September, by an exchequer commission, Port Glasgow was established as

the principal Custom House port of the Clyde, and continued to be till 5th July 1812, when Greenock and Glasgow were declared to be independent ports.

In Port Glasgow a Custom House was set up at the foot of Custom House Lane (or Collector's Court) above a shop and was established as the Principal Custom House on the Clyde. Dutiable items were stored in buildings bounded by Scarlow St, Water St, Queen Street and Anderson Street.



The Herring Industry and Slavery

The fishing industry was still going strong. The herring caught in the Clyde were larger, firmer, and of a better taste, and cured better than others with salt. All salmon or herring had been salted with the best salt, either French or Spanish. If not well cured they were confiscated. They tasted better than any other in Scotland. And they were consequently, both in their fresh form and salted, more valued at home and abroad. Glasgow Magistrates often sent presents of barrels of herring to persons in London and Edinburgh whom they wished to influence (law makers presumably) to continue the open fishing without ever imposing another monopoly. A major use of the herring was in the Slave colonies in the New World.

The boats engaged in the fishing were called herring Busses and of a very similar style to the Dutch versions. They and other smaller craft engaged in the fishing trade were mostly built in the early part of the eighteenth century by Scott & Company in Greenock, who commenced business in 1711.



Herring Busses

Tobacco plantations and the tobacco trade

In the Colonies the trading openings for Glasgow were being exploited. Tobacco plantations flourished after 1713 and tobacco trade expanded.

The tobacco had to be got to the ships for transportation. Putting the tobacco on a barge on the Potomac in Virginia and sending it down a navigable creek or river was the most efficient method of getting the harvested crop to the port from which it would be shipped.

If you were inland the tobacco was rolled along a “rolling road” to the port. The barrel of preference was called a hogshead and probably measured about four feet in length and two and a half feet in diameter. Fully packed it weighted almost half a ton. The ships of the time held up to three hundred of them.

Greenock wins Customs approval

Greenock's harbours were a great success and the port, even with the restrictions of the non Royal charter status, flourished. At last this was recognized by the authorities.

Port Glasgow during its early years was the chief Government port on the lower reaches of the Clyde, but in the year 1714, owing to the amount of foreign goods imported, the Lords Commissioners of Queen Anne's Treasury constituted Greenock a Public Port, and officers of the Customs from Port Glasgow were ordered to reside in Greenock for the ease of trade and the collection of the revenue.

Glasgow still was very interested in Port Glasgow and poured money into the town to keep it as up to date as Greenock. In 1718 Port Glasgow had a population of 800 people and Port Glasgow and Newark had become a single Barony under Glasgow.

Public works were undertaken such as improving the harbour, and the original Parish Church was built. Half the cost was paid by Glasgow Council.

Both towns, Greenock and Port Glasgow, now on an equal footing and being determined to set aside their differences, set out to take the maximum advantage of the Atlantic trade.

A common attack on both towns

The two towns did not have to wait long, however, before they had to unite under a common attack on them.

The opposition to Scots tobacco trade grew in England and in 1720 the tobacco merchants at Liverpool, London and Whitehaven combined and presented a petition to the Lords of the Treasury accusing the Glasgow merchants of fraud: that they, with the connivance of the custom house officers at Port Glasgow and Greenock, evaded payment of full duty.

The commissioner, after a hearing, dismissed the petition on the grounds “that the complaints of the merchants of London, Liverpool and Whitehaven were groundless, and that they proceeded from a spirit of envy and not from a regard to the interests of trade or of the King's Revenue.”

This was not fully taken on board and the Glasgow herring presents, if they were sent, did not seem to work as in 1721 new English officers for Customs were appointed to Port Glasgow and Greenock, whose private instructions were to ruin the trade by creating hardships and delays using lawsuits. On several occasions up to 33 ships were held and delayed, for example.

Prosperity in Both Towns

Trade in the towns went on despite this and by 1723 there were twenty or thirty ships engaged in the tobacco trade from the Clyde. Greenock and Port Glasgow had sorted out their differences and were united in facing a common foe. They eventually overcame this hindrance allowing them to prosper many-fold in the next fifty years of the booming Atlantic tobacco trading.

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