

Scottish Trade Incorporations and the Church

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The Burghs Trading Act of 1846 brought to an end the special powers and privileges which for centuries had attached to the Trade Incorporations in Scotland. For many years previously these societies had been in a slow decline; and indeed from the last third of the eighteenth century, with the coming of the Industrial Revolution, the writing was on the wall for them. Yet in earlier times they occupied a place of great power and influence in the Scottish economy. Similar guilds existed all over Europe, but aspects of their development in Scotland were without parallel elsewhere; and in particular the relationships between the incorporations and the Church offer several features of interest.

Owing largely to the unsettled state of the country, trade incorporations were first established in Scotland much later than in the rest of Europe. The early history of the European guilds is obscure: but it appears that while they were at least partly religious in their origin, the main reason for their existence became principally self-interest. Normally the merchants in an area were the first to become associated as merchant guilds, and these prospered, gathering much wealth and influence. Craftsmen observed this and learned the lesson that unity is strength. They also began associating together, and found this very much to their advantage. Craftsmen together were able to resist some of the overbearing practices of the merchants, and they could seek a monopoly in their craft, which was considered a necessity for trade prosperity.

Long before reaching this degree of organisation, however, the craftsmen in many countries were associated as religious fraternities, seeking to provide for prayers for the souls of deceased members, and for erecting and maintaining craft altars in a church¹. This early association paved the way for the more developed organisation of later times. The Scottish Parliament met at Perth in 1424 and passed an Act declaring that every craft should have deacon and council to govern and test all work made by the craftsmen so that the lieges should not be defrauded². It has been claimed that this Act was the beginning of craft or trade incorporations in Scotland³, but this is doubtful. It would seem rather that this act is an attempt to reform and tighten the

¹ J. C. Black, *Glasgow's Ancient Craft Gilds*: article in *The Scots Magazine*, 1926, 184.

² *Acts of the Parliament of Scotland*, ii, 8.

³ P. Baxter, *Perth: Its Weavers and Weaving*, 12f.

organisation of existing craft organisations. One of the highly esteemed privileges of a royal burgh in Scotland was the right to establish trade incorporations and at first this right was confined to royal burghs. Later the burghs of regality and burghs of barony were also allowed this privilege, but on a lower level, as it were. Corporations in these lesser burghs were not allowed to engage in foreign trade, but their organisation was similar to that of the corporations in the royal burghs. The earliest extant charters for any trade incorporation in Scotland date from the fifteenth century, but there is no reason to suppose that none ever existed from an earlier date. Documents were always at risk in a country as unsettled as Scotland was.

Corporations were always under strict control. None but burgesses might become freemen members and burgesses must be resident within the burgh. This latter rule was irksome and appears to have been applied with discretion in different parts of the country. Each incorporation enjoyed a monopoly in its own trade, and unfreemen were strictly forbidden to exercise any trade within the burgh. On market days unfreemen were permitted to enter and trade — under stringent rules as to where and when they could set up their booths. They paid a fee for the privilege of being in the burgh at all and were forbidden to undersell the craftsmen of the corporation. The rules governing trading were the main reason for the sparsity of villages in Scotland until the latter part of the eighteenth century. It was next to impossible for a tradesman to make a living outside the burghs and the corporations.

In pre-Reformation society each calling recognised its own patron saint and, a list of these is of some interest, but a little complicated in that while there was mostly a countrywide and even an international, agreement to acknowledge one particular saint as patron of a craft, there were exceptions. A. J. Warden gives the following list as being generally agreed:

<i>Crafts etc.</i>	<i>Patron Saints and Altars</i>
Merchants or Guildry	The Holy Blood.
Barbers and Surgeons	St Mungo.
Baxters	St Cuthbert.
Bonnetmakers	St Mark.
Coopers	St John.
Cordiners	Sts Crispin and Crispinianus.
Fleshers	St Peter.
Fullers or Waulkers	St Mark, St Philip, St James.
Litsters or Dyers	St Mark.
Skinners or Glovers	St Christopher, St Martin.
Tailors	St Ann.
Websters, Brabeners or Weavers . . .	St Severin.
Wrights and Masons	St John and St John Baptist. ⁴

⁴ A. J. Warden, *Burgh Laws of Dundee*, 228f.

He might have added that St Eloi (Eligius) was universally acknowledged as patron of the hammermen. But while the bonnetmakers all over Scotland had St Mark as patron, in Dundee they favoured St Bride. Throughout Europe the cordiners or shoemakers had the twin saints Crispin and Crispinianus, but Perth alone preferred St Duthac. Reasons for such exceptions are quite obscure. Each calling saw some connection between their trade and their patron and erected and maintained an altar to the saint in the burgh church and supported a priest or chaplain to serve that altar, where he said prayers for the repose of the souls of deceased brethren of the craft. And this was expensive. In burghs like Edinburgh and Glasgow, where fourteen separate incorporations were involved in this way, a considerable income was expended in this manner.

Most trades found their resources stretched to meet their obligations to priest and altar. Vestments, decorations and furnishings had to be bought, maintained and renewed from time to time and the high quality white wax for altar candles was not a cheap commodity. A tradesman entering an apprentice paid a fee to the altar, and the apprentice on graduating journeyman paid a fee, as did a craftsman starting business on his own account: fines and assessments were imposed in the course of maintaining discipline within the corporations, and all these fees and fines were commonly computed in terms of so many pounds of wax for the altar. The priest himself was not normally paid a money stipend, but moved in a weekly rota from one member of the craft to another to receive board and lodging. Corporations devised their own methods of raising sufficient funds. The Skinners of Edinburgh had a rule that every master should pay a penny per week—called the Monday Penny, since it was collected on that day—towards the repair of the altar and upkeep of divine service threat “& that each master should sustene the preistis meit thair of as it cumis about⁵”. And special collections were taken at the service on St Christopher’s Day — their patron saint. In the poorer crafts two members might combine to “sustene the preistis meit”. The Bonnetmakers of Dundee ruled that each craftsman should dine the priest once a week, or pay him one penny in lieu: but in Edinburgh the money equivalent of the priest’s meals was calculated at eightpence per day, which presumably represented full board rather than dinner alone⁶.

When the Weavers of Dundee set up their altar “in respect of the growth of grace and for the honour of St Severus the Bishop, the patron saint of the said trade”, the terms of the priest’s employment were set out in a decret arbitral of 21st March 1529:

⁵ Wm. Angus: *The Incorporated Trade of the Skinners of Edinburgh. Book of the Old Edinburgh Club*, vi, 31.

⁶ *Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh*, 22.9.1520; 22.9.1536.

“. . . Alswa we deliuer that the said craft sall giff to Schir William Lwyd, thair Chaplane, fra Sanct Seuerane's day furth, nixt & immediatlye followand the dait of this present Writ, sex pundis vsuale money of Scotland aye and quhill the said Schir William mak ane notable falt to the said craft, and he failt in his Writingis, in onye pairt of thair comptis takking, quhilk may be tinsall to the craft, al that to be allowit in the said Schir William's fee, and the said Schir William to haif the foirsaid sex pundis zeirlye also lang as he makis gwyd seruice quhill he mak ane notable falt, and gif the said craft alleges ane falt on the said Schir William, that to be considerit be us, the saidis Jugis, and failzeing of the said Schir William, Schir David Lwyd his brother, to make seruice to the said craft, as said is, or ellis ane sufficient man in his nayme⁷.”

This is both interesting and informative. The chaplain is to be employed not only for spiritual services, but also as a writer. He will, in fact, be the weavers' man of business — their factor. And it should also be noticed that he may be dismissed, not for conduct unbecoming a priest, but for incompetence as a writer. On the other hand, if Sir William proves unsatisfactory, the weavers are bound to take his brother David in his place, before being free to look elsewhere. Literate men were scarce and six pounds a year — six pounds Scots money, that is, was not an unreasonable fee for such service.

The crafts had their own ideas of their importance to the rest of the community and of the antiquity of their calling; but not all were quite as naive as the Carters of Leith, who built themselves a convening-house in 1726 and over the entrance had these lines inscribed:

“Great God, whose potent Arm drives the sun
 The Carters bless while wheels of time shall run
 of old they Drove thy Sacred Ark O God
 Guide thou their hands and Steps in every road,
 protect this house we Dedicate to thee
 Increase and sanctify our Charity
 Thy blessing Lord be its foundation stone
 And we'll ascribe the praise to thee alone⁸.”

The question of precedence was of great importance to the crafts and a good deal of argument and manoeuvring took place from time to time, when some incorporation thought it could claim a better place in the order. On the great days of procession, at Candlemas and Corpus Christi, when all the crafts paraded, the

⁷ *Inventory of Charters & Other Writings Belonging to the Corporation of Weavers of the Royal Burgh of Dundee*, 1881, 10ff.

⁸ This inscribed stone now stands in South Leith churchyard.

matter of precedence was very public. Edinburgh Burgh Records do not mention any list of precedence among the crafts, but in 1533 Aberdeen decided to settle all arguments between her corporations by adopting the order followed in the "noble burgh of Edinburgh", and made out the list as follows. First came the Fleshers and after them the Barbers, followed by the Skinners and Furriers together: then the Cordiners, next the Tailors and they were followed by the Websters and Waulkers and Litsters together; then the Baxters, followed by the Wrights, Masons, Slaters and Coopers together; and lastly, in the place of honour next to the Sacrament, came the Hammermen⁹. As the Hammermen were neither the largest craft, nor the wealthiest, nor the oldest, the principle on which precedence was decided is hard to discover. And Glasgow had a different order.

Corpus Christi and Candlemas also saw the production of the various craft plays. Over the years words and actions became stereotyped and there was great competition and rivalry to play lead parts. Rivalry between trades also led to these productions becoming increasingly expensive year by year. Craft funds were liable to be dissipated in such ways without bringing any lasting good to the members.

The Reformation evoked an ambivalent attitude among many craftsmen. Without understanding much theology they were happy enough to see the authority of a discredited Church replaced by the authority of a General Assembly which might or might not prove more acceptable than the old hierarchy of bishop, priest and deacon. But they were proud of the workmanship they themselves had put into the churches and were not happy to see it needlessly destroyed. When Andrew Melville, Principal of Glasgow University, in 1579, summoned the people of Glasgow to demolish their cathedral, the city craftsmen at once armed themselves and informed Melville that if the cathedral were pulled down, he who cast the first stone would be buried under it¹⁰. The Reformation brought hard times to many craftsmen, for the Roman Catholic clergy were among their best customers.

Once the Reformation was established, it gradually became plain that there were considerable compensations to the crafts. Whereas hitherto all their income had gone to the church in one form or another, they now found themselves possessed of funds from members' contributions. There was no longer either priest or altar to maintain and the new situation presented a challenge to fresh thinking on the disposal of their money. The leaders of the Reformed Church were casting around for means to pay the ministers and the Town Council of Edinburgh on 24th June 1562 asked certain of the deacons of crafts "quhat euery craft wald gyf in the yeir for sustenyng of the ministeris within this toun". The deacons

⁹ Wm. Angus, *op. cit.*, 35f.

¹⁰ John Spottiswoode, *History of the Church of Scotland II*, 259.

approached said they would be prepared to contribute one-fifth of whatever total the council thought would be necessary. Other deacons said they had had no instructions from their crafts and the matter was apparently taken no further at that time, for it was 1569 before the first contributions to stipends are recorded from the Edinburgh crafts¹¹. On 1st November 1570 the crafts agreed to contribute the following sums to stipends in the city:¹²

Skinners	£20	Wrights and Masons	£10
Tailors	£16	Goldsmiths	£6.13.4
Barbers	£3	John Wilson, Smith	£13.6.8
Baxters	£13.6.8	Cordiners	£8
Fleshers	£10	Websters	£1
Bonnetmakers	£1	Furriers	—

Remembering that these sums are Scots money, the largest contribution of £20 from the Skinners, representing £1.13.4 sterling was not going to buy many comforts for the city ministers when divided between them. But if the town council could not compel better offerings to the Church, it could at least compel the craftsmen to attend church — and another innovation was the closure of all booths on Sundays and Fast Days and during the hours of service on weekdays. Also, to remove any temptation to miss worship, tavern-keepers were forbidden to sell any meat or drink from the last “jow” of the bell to the end of the sermon.

At the same time a great deal was happening within the incorporations. These societies were not equivalent to any modern industrial organisation; they were not employers’ federations, nor were they trade unions. Generally speaking, only employers of labour, or masters of their trade working independently could be full members of their incorporation; but every journeyman employee had to be a member also. The Leith Mariners indeed had three classes of membership — skippers, mates and seamen. Journeymen normally had the right to attend meetings of the corporation, but they were not allowed to speak or to vote; but at least they were aware of what was going on — and most importantly, journeymen, like the masters, received all the available benefits in return for their quarterly payments to the society.

The craftsmen’s contributions to stipend in the city may have been less than adequate, but indirectly the corporations were eventually seen to be of immense financial benefit to the community. When any member of a corporation fell sick, he received a small pension to tide him over; and if old age or injury brought him to poverty he was helped. When he died his funeral expenses were met and his widow and children cared for if in need.

¹¹ Wm. Angus, *op. cit.*, 33f.

¹² *ibid.*

This was all of great importance in the economy of post-Reformation Scotland. In the system of the Reformed Church poor relief and sick benefit were responsibilities of the local kirk session. Relying mainly on churchdoor collections and various small fees and fines, the resources at the disposal of the elders were far too meagre for the needs of the average parish. The system of poor relief was about the worst that could have been devised, for when times were hard and food scarce and dear, the number of poor was greatly increased and; it was at these very times that those normally better off were also feeling the pinch and so contributed less to the poor. It was a considerable relief then, that in most burghs there were incorporations of tradesmen able to provide some kind of support for their own needy members.

These societies varied greatly in size and wealth. Some royal burghs prospered and grew steadily and their incorporations grew with them, increasing their membership and gradually building up funds which with careful husbandry and cautious investment brought a sheen of prosperity to the society — relative, that is, to the standards of old-time Scotland. Other royal burghs never became larger than villages. Anstruther, Lochmaben, Sanquhar, Burntisland were all royal burghs, but even at their best the incorporations in such places, even when they existed, never had more than a few members and acquired nothing like the resources of the trade societies in Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Glasgow. And yet in the burghs of barony, without some of the privileges enjoyed by the trades in royal burghs, it was still possible for some incorporations to become large and influential, as were the Weavers of Galashiels and the Mariners of Leith. (Oddly enough these Mariners had no charter of foundation, so were not strictly speaking a corporation at all until the end of the eighteenth century, when they were provided with a charter when they acquired the right to licence pilots in the Forth¹³.)

A corporation which managed to save money generally sought to invest it, and the most popular forms of investment were money-lending and property. In Scotland's struggling economy the lack of capital was a crippling handicap to small merchants and traders. Incorporations were not averse to lending money to their members, concerning whose affairs the officials of the society were always well informed. If house property were not available for purchase an incorporation would build its own land and let the houses. It was all grist to the mill. Their poor were always with them, even in the wealthy corporations, for the widow and children even of a fairly prosperous tradesman could be brought to poverty after one or two hard winters.

It has also to be borne in mind that in most burghs the same men were elders on the kirk session and masters in the trade

¹³ John Mason, *The History of Trinity House of Leith*, 80ff.

incorporations; and in both capacities they had to concern themselves with the relief of the local poor. Anyone receiving help from an incorporation was not eligible for consideration on the kirk session's poor roll.

The eighteenth century found more corporations with funds in hand, and a more sophisticated approach to the problem of poor relief was gradually evolved. In Dundee the whole of the Nine Incorporated Trades combined to establish a General Fund, to which each trade contributed, and the poor of all the trades were supplied from this central fund.¹⁴ After a bad harvest it was obvious that food would be scarce and dear in the months ahead, and it became increasingly common for corporations to buy whole cargoes of meal, store it, and dole it out to their poor in winter at prices much below the prevailing scarcity prices.¹⁵ In the later eighteenth century coal at Christmas became another way of doing good with money at their disposal. Kirk sessions had no funds for such purchases; the poor of the incorporations were better off than the parish poor.

In Newhaven the Society of Free Fishermen had no seal of cause or charter of any kind, but they were organised like any incorporation and as this was the only such society in the village, its power and influence were considerable. In 1631 Newhaven was detached from the parish of the West Kirk of Edinburgh and added to North Leith. The Free Fishermen then announced they would not consent to becoming North Leithers unless they were allowed to look after their own poor. This was agreed to without any difficulty; the Society represented every family in the village and the demand to be responsible for their own poor must have seemed to the kirk session to resemble manna from heaven. The next move, however, was that the Free Fishermen announced that Newhaveners in future would not contribute to the weekly collections taken at the parish kirk door. Instead, two collecting dishes were set up on either side of the road leading from Newhaven to Leith every Sunday morning. Intending worshippers put their offerings into these plates and, when they had passed on their way, the Boxmaster to the Fishermen emptied the plates into the society's poor box¹⁶.

If there was a hint of sharp practice about this, no comment has been recorded and the arrangement continued for more than a century. Then in 1737 a child was found exposed in Newhaven. Normally the kirk session would take responsibility for such a child, but this case was referred to the Free Fishermen. They

¹⁴ James Chalmers, *Remarks on the Constitution of the Nine Incorporated Trades of Dundee*, 1839, 26.

¹⁵ In 1775 the Weavers of Perth were unable to meet in their own hall because it was full of meal, cf. P. Baxter, *Perth: Its Weavers and Weaving*, 198f.

¹⁶ North Leith Kirk Session Minutes, 26.4.1737.

protested the child was none of theirs and that the founding was an act of God. Reluctantly the elders agreed to clothe the child and pay half its maintenance¹⁷. More trouble erupted in 1760 when the elders, acting on persistent rumour, visited Newhaven and found that the Free Fishermen had collected no contributions from members for over two years, that the poor box was empty, and that the local poor were completely neglected. A committee of the session was appointed to visit Newhaven quarterly in future, see that contributions were duly paid and that pensions to the poor were disbursed. This arrangement was modified in 1768, when it was agreed that the Fishermen's poor box should be opened in presence of representative elders, their accounts audited and the funds distributed by the Fishermen. Even this method had its difficulties, but it worked till 1814. In September of that year a woman was added to the session's poor roll and granted a pension of 4s. a month. One of the elders demurred. He asked why this woman, who belonged to Newhaven, should be on the session poor roll at all? Another visit to Newhaven elicited the information that this woman was not a member of the Free Fishermen's Society and had no relative in the Society. Consequently the Fishermen disclaimed responsibility for her. Further inquiry produced the information that this had always been the view of the Fishermen's Society ever since 1631. No one not in the society was eligible for help in distress. The elders protested but to no avail. The argument dragged on for six years, until the matter was resolved by the first introduction in North Leith of an assessment for poor rates. This removed the responsibility from local hands¹⁸.

This account of Newhaven has been given at length because it is the only record of such a situation. The small fishing village of 1631 had in later times become a diversified community, with glassworks and ropeworks and agricultural development providing a number of indwellers who had no connection with the Free Fishermen's Society. Newhaven was never any kind of burgh and the Free Fishermen were not an incorporation, but the attitude of that society might well have been taken up by incorporations in the burghs. After all, incorporations existed primarily to benefit their members. Since church-door collections were for behoof of the parish poor and, since members of incorporations were parishioners excluded from parish benefit because of their membership in an incorporation, it might well have been argued that the incorporations should look after their own poor exclusively and stop contributing to the church plate, as happened in Newhaven. There is no record of this ever having been done elsewhere; tradesmen contributed to church offerings money that would never come back to them, even in poverty. And in the seventeenth and first

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ North Leith Kirk Session Minutes, 8.1.1760, 30.10.1768, 27.6.1820, 28.1.1823.

half of the eighteenth centuries most people in Scottish burghs had some connection with one or other of the incorporations.

Education was also a prime concern of the incorporations; and here again an important factor in the situation, especially in the small burghs, was that the same local notabilities were elders, masters in the incorporations and also town councillors and magistrates. Where there was a grammar school, the governing body was normally the town council, but the merchants' guild or the associated body of trade incorporations had some say in the governing of the school and the right to nominate some boys to places in the school. This was generally tied up with the amount of the incorporations' contribution towards the expense of running the school. Just as the kirk session paid the fees of deserving and promising lads, so were the incorporations prepared to support their own orphans. Only exceptional pupils ever went to the grammar schools, but the incorporations saw to it that their orphans at least had an elementary education at the Vulgar or English School.

When the urban population escalated with the coming of the Industrial Revolution, the Trades in several towns set about building schools of their own, providing schoolmasters and an education for the sons and daughters of their members. Perth, Glasgow, Elgin and Dundee were all provided for in this way, as was Edinburgh; and these schools survived after the incorporations which brought them to birth had passed away¹⁹.

Wherever they existed in any strength the trade incorporations acted as the partners of the kirk session in their concern for their members and for the common good. They were also closely involved in the maintenance of the parish kirk fabric and even in the provision of ministers. The pre-Reformation church in South Leith was not the parish church, as Leith was then a village of less than 4,000 inhabitants on the northern fringe of the parish of Restalrig; yet in addition to the Preceptory of St Anthony, a very large kirk was erected there around the year 1483. The present-day church represents the nave of that fifteenth century building. There is no record of why this church was built or who built it, but it is not difficult to infer what happened. Leith was a burgh of barony — a possession of the Logans of Restalrig — and a number of corporations had been set up in the burgh. Edinburgh had a grievance in that a burgh of barony should have been permitted only a mile and a half from the royal burgh. This kind of situation

¹⁹ R. Douie, *Chronicles of the Maltmen Craft in Glasgow*, 74.
W. Campbell, *History of the Cordiner Incorporation of Glasgow*, 193ff.
R. D. McEwan, *Old Glasgow Weavers*, 123.
W. E. Watson, *Incorporated Trades of Elgin*, (typescript).
P. Baxter, *The Shoemaker Corporation of Perth*, passim.
P. Baxter, *Perth: Its Weavers and Weaving*, passim.

existed in other parts of Scotland and always produced much rancour and bad feeling. As the very existence of trade incorporations before the Reformation was bound up with priest and altar and, as Edinburgh refused to recognise the Leith incorporations and would by no means consent to their having altars at Restalrig, which was outwith the burgh of Leith, the Leithers, no doubt led by the Mariners, erected their own church. There is evidence of offerings being made to "the new kirk of Leith to Our Ladie" by both James III and James IV and mention is made of altars to St Peter, St John, the Holy Blood, St Crispin, St Bartholomew and St Barbara — corresponding to incorporations which claimed pre-Reformation foundation — the Cordiners, Fleshers, Maltmen, Traffickers, Wrights and Masons. The Mariners had the Blessed Virgin as their patron.²⁰

These corporations, of course, were mostly small in membership apart from the Mariners, Maltmen and Traffickers. The Trades got together in groups, shared priest and altar, and were locally referred to as Fraternities. In 1593 the Presbytery of Edinburgh, not being inhibited like the town council from recognising the Leith incorporations, instituted a second charge at South Leith, the responsibility for the stipend being divided between the incorporations. The Mariners, Maltmen, Traffickers and the Trades each became guarantors for one quarter of the stipend. For this reason they came to be referred to as the Four Incorporations, but in fact they were four fraternities, or groups of incorporations. Indeed the second charge was maintained by the whole population of Leith in this way, for the Traffickers undertook to make a collection among the very few inhabitants who were not connected in any way with one of the incorporations. The patronage of the second charge was vested jointly in the kirk session and incorporations. There is an interesting comparison here with North Leith, which was erected into a parish in 1606, and the patronage vested in the "hail Inhabitants", the church there having been built by the people at their own expense. This situation in Leith, where in the two parishes the patronage was vested in the people, is unique in Scotland. At the same time it was clearly understood that the parish minister of South Leith was the minister of the first charge — a royal presentation.²¹

Corporations elsewhere seized their own opportunities for increasing their influence in the parish church. When pews were first introduced, the heritors were generally the first in the parish to provide their own private accommodation in church, but they were quickly followed in the burghs by the incorporations. The right to be able to occupy a pew was very much a prestige matter in

²⁰ J. Campbell Irons: *Leith and Its Antiquities: I*, 77.
John Russell: *The Story of Leith*, 152f.

²¹ *Acts of the Parliament of Scotland*, VI, 187.

the later seventeenth century, but no incorporation could afford to provide seating for all its members and their families — and in any case the larger corporations would have required too much space. Strict protocol was observed in the occupation of “bottom-rooms” in the lofts of the various trades. The front seats were for the deacon, boxmaster and other officials and the rest of the available space was allotted to members in order of seniority.²² Seat rent was paid to the boxmaster and the funds benefited; but wives and children were perforce excluded.²³

It was many years later before the kirk session in the average parish got around to erecting pews for the rest of the congregation. The elders were well aware of the benefit to be derived from seat rent, but building pews required capital. Pews for everyone did not help the incorporations, who soon found there was a falling-off in the demand for their seats, when their members could rent a whole pew in the body of the kirk for themselves and their families. The time came when the rear seats in the Trades lofts became available for renting to anyone interested,²⁴ and occasionally a small corporation, falling on hard times, would offer their seats for sale to the highest bidder.²⁵

Over the space of several generations members of the incorporations came to regard their loft in the kirk as in a sense their own trade kirk, since these lofts generally occupied the same position in the church as their pre-Reformation altars had occupied. The town council of Perth in 1778 offered the shoemakers an exchange of seats in the East Kirk, but the society refused and indicated that they expected to be left in their accustomed place in the kirk — “the space between the first and second free pillars from the dead wall eastward on the north side of the church, heigh and laigh”. This, comments Baxter, may be taken as an indication where the shoemakers’ altar to St Duthac was situated.²⁶ When it was determined to build a new parish kirk in North Leith to meet the needs of a rising population, the enterprise was held up for some years because the Trades wanted seating reserved for them in the new kirk in the same proportion of the whole area as they had held in the old kirk. The elders pointed out this would defeat the purpose of the new building and offered the same number of seats as the incorporations had had in the old kirk. The new church was several years old before the seating question was resolved.

In Dundee the incorporations took a more drastic step. They considered a fourth church was required for the town and put the

²² P. Baxter: *Shoemaker Incorporation of Perth*, 6.

²³ Hammermen of Elgin, 1698, 1739, 1796, Q. Watson, *op. cit.*

²⁴ Glovers of Elgin, 16.9.1776, *passim*: Q. Watson, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Hammermen of Elgin, 1729: Q. Watson, *op. cit.*

²⁶ P. Baxter, *The Shoemaker Incorporation of Perth*, 108f.

proposal to the town council. After dithering for some time the council came out against the proposal. The Trades then decided to go ahead and build a new church, sharing the expense equally with the kirk session. Ownership of the property was on the basis of 24 shares, 12 of which were held by the kirk session and one each by the 12 trades in the town. The new church was opened in 1774 and, in the words of A. J. Warden, it "supplied the religious destitution of a large and growing district of the town".²⁷

While incorporations in these ways insisted on maintaining their standing and influence within the church, they were at the same time affected, like the Established Kirk, by the growth of dissent. In Perth the question of letting the two seats of the shoemakers in St John's Middle Church caused a sharp disagreement in 1794. A minority of the corporation wished to rent the sittings to any bidder, but the majority were opposed to this and alleged that the innovators were "tinctured with principles which tend to create an innovation in more important matters . . . Besides, most of them do not attend the Established Church — no National Church can sound in their ears, nor is the doctrine preached there, according to their ideas, nearly equal to what is held forth in a dissenting congregation".²⁸ Things reached such a pass that in 1802 the Weavers of Elgin agreed to an "order" in which their seats should be occupied. First came freemen of the corporation; then freemen's wives would be preferred; then their children and servants and; such seats as were still not let should be offered to "strangers", and the rents paid to the boxmaster. In the early nineteenth century many of the smaller corporations sold off their church seats.

If corporations tended to think of their lofts as in a sense their trade kirk, so the minutes of their meetings often read very like the meetings of kirk sessions. Business at meetings of incorporations dealt not only with trade interests in the strict sense, but included what the kirk session would have called discipline and many questions of personal morality were discussed and judged. Meetings generally opened with prayer. The Hammermen of Edinburgh claimed that the prayer they used was specially composed for them by John Knox. It was as follows:

"Most Holy and Blessed Lord, make us Thy servants, met together before Thee at this time, mindful that all things are naked and open before Thy Majesty, with whom we have to do: Give us, we beseech Thee, to perceive Thee in everything we undertake and help; and lead us through every difficulty and strait we meet with! Keep our hearts near Thyself! Remove from us all partiality, corrupt affections and division; and grant us Thy grace to go about everything we, by Thy providence, shall happen to meet with; and that,

²⁷ A. J. Warden, *The Burgh Laws of Dundee*, 287ff.

²⁸ P. Baxter, *The Shoemaker Incorporation of Perth*, 131.

with uprightness of heart, and singleness of eye, as in Thy all-seeing sight and presence, so that the whole fruits of our labours, by Thy special grace and assistance, may tend to Thy praise, and the glory of Thy dreadful and blessed name, the well-being of every one, and the comfort and good of us, who are before Thee, and that for Christ Thy Son's sake, blessed for ever!

AMEN."²⁹

The clerk read this prayer at the beginning of every meeting. The Skinners of Edinburgh used a prayer dating from 1749 — which must have replaced one of more antique phraseology. There is also a curious minute of the Edinburgh Candlemakers on 29th July 1740. Two items present the modern reader with an enigma. First, the boxmaster was enjoined "to put up the Ten Commandments in a board near the chimney piece" — presumably the chimney-piece of the convening hall. Secondly a decision was taken "to lay asyde of the Reading of prayers at publick meetings".³⁰ Quite a range of alternative inferences could be drawn from these two statements.

For 50 years after the Reformation the deacon of the Hammermen of Perth compelled all offenders in moral conduct brought before the meeting to appear in the kirk and there, in an attitude of repentance, to beg forgiveness.³¹ This arrogation to themselves of a kirk session responsibility was not confined to the Perth incorporations. At a much later period the same officiousness was practised in Elgin, where on 19th June 1772 the Squarewrights hustled one of their members to the kirk. Joseph Wilson had been found guilty by the presbytery of uttering blasphemous expressions while "under the influence". His incorporation ordered him to appear before the congregation on three several Lord's days and be publicly rebuked. He was also excluded from every meeting of the craft and none would keep company with him until he made satisfaction to the church.³²

Cursing and swearing at meetings, abuse of the deacon, various malpractices in trade matters — such offences were easily identified and appropriate punishment meted out. Other misdemeanours required witnesses and evidence and incorporations commonly disciplined their members as the kirk sessions disciplined congregations. Thus a freeman of an incorporation would be condemned for beating his wife, for being too often the worse for drink, for failing to feed and maintain his apprentice properly. There was also the recurring matter of Sabbath

²⁹ J. Colston, *The Incorporated Trades of Edinburgh*, 18f.

³⁰ W. Forbes Gray, *The Incorporation of Candlemakers of Edinburgh: Old Edr Club*, XVII, 113.

³¹ Colin A. Hunt, *The Perth Hammermen Book*, lxüif.

³² W. E. Watson, *op. cit.*

observance. This particularly worried the barbers, whose members were prone to this offence, especially in Glasgow and Edinburgh. This riled the officials mightily. Repeatedly they assured the kirk sessions that their policy was to keep the Sabbath holy, but the more faithful the senior men were to this ideal, the more would certain irresponsible young journeymen go the rounds on the Sabbath day, shaving chins, dressing wigs and earning tidy sums of money for so doing. Offenders were interviewed, rebuked and fined by the society, just as they were when brought before the kirk session for the same offence. This made it plain to all that the way of transgressors was hard — when caught.

In Protestant and penurious Scotland there were no prayers for the dead. And since the souls of the righteous were in the hands of God and the damned were past praying for, little regard was paid to obsequies, and the general feeling was that while dignity required plentiful hospitality for mourners, expenditure on the corpse should be kept to a minimum. The mortcloth or funeral pall, in velvet, silk or the cheapest linen was in universal use, lending a cloak of respectability to a very rough coffin. The kirk session hired mortcloths and the poor box benefited. It was only to be expected that the incorporations would not ignore such a sure source of income and they usually had their own mortcloths for hiring to members: indeed if any member buried one of his family and failed to hire the corporation's mortcloth, he was severely interrogated and fined.

By their very nature the trade incorporations were conservative bodies, solidly behind the establishment in kirk and state. Members who joined the Secession Church were not expelled from their corporation, but the trade societies never sought seats in churches other than parish kirks. And the mere suggestion of Roman Catholic emancipation was enough to set all the incorporations in an uproar, and petitions and resolutions against this desperate measure flooded in from incorporations all over the country. Such of these societies as could claim a history from pre-Reformation days were proud of it and presumably of their ancestors' adherence to the Church of their day. But that all belonged to a distant past, when men were ignorant of the truth. In Protestant Scotland Roman Catholics were forbidden to become burgesses and so could not be members of any trade incorporation and so could not engage in any trade. The Burgess Oath of 1745, which every aspirant to the rank of burgher must sign, expressly committed the signatory to upholding the established religion of the realm. And yet in 1793, despite vociferous protests and widespread misgivings, an Act of Parliament was passed, authorising magistrates of royal burghs to admit Roman Catholics as burgesses and guild brothers — but only after signing the following oath:

“I do hereby declare that I do profess the Roman Catholic religion. I do sincerely promise and swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to H.M. King George III and him will defend, to the utmost of my power, against all conspiracies and attempts whatever that shall be made against his person, crown or dignity and I will do my utmost endeavour to disclose and make known to His Majesty, His Heirs and Successors, all treasons and traitrous conspiracies which may be formed against him or them. And I do faithfully promise to maintain, support and defend to the utmost of my power, the succession of the Crown, which succession, by an Act (entituled An Act for the further limitation of the Crown and better securing the rights and Liberties of the Subject), is, and stands limited to, the Princess Sophia, Electress and Duchess Dowager of Hanover, and the Heirs of her body, being Protestants, hereby utterly renouncing and abjuring any obedience or allegiance unto any other person claiming or pretending a right to the Crown of these realms. And I do swear that I do reject and detest, as an Unchristian and impious position, that it is lawful to murder or destroy any person or persons whatsoever for, or under pretence of their being heretics or infidels and also that unchristian and impious principle, that faith is not to be kept with heretics or infidels. And I further declare that it is not an article of my faith, and that I do renounce, reject and abjure the opinion that Princes, excommunicated by the Pope and Council, or any authority whatsoever, may be deposed or murdered by their subjects, or any person whatsoever. And I do promise that I will not hold, maintain or abet any such opinion, or any other opinion contrary to what is expressed in this declaration. And I do declare that I do not believe that the Pope or Rome, or any other foreign Prince, Prelate, State or Potentate hath, or ought to have any temporal or civil jurisdiction, power, superiority or pre-eminence, directly or indirectly, within this realm. And I do solemnly, in the presence of God, profess, testify and declare, that I do make this declaration, and every part thereof, in the plain and ordinary sense of the words of this oath, without any evasion, equivocation, or mental reservation whatever, and without any dispensation already granted by the Pope, or any authority of the See of Rome, or any person whatever and without thinking that I am, or can be acquitted by God or man, or absolved of this declaration or any part thereof, although the Pope, or any other person of authority whatsoever shall dispense with or annul the same, and declare that it was null or void. . . .”

“So help me God.”

This may seem to us not only longwinded, but comic; but once this oath was administered and the applicant's name entered in a book and attested by a magistrate, the usual Protestant Burgess Oath was then taken by the Roman Catholic aspirant — with the difference that in the preamble he declared that he professed the Roman Catholic faith.³³

Despite these formidable barriers Roman Catholics gradually began applying to become burgesses, but none of them seemed desirous of joining any incorporation. They were apparently willing to forgo the inestimable benefits said to attach to such membership. The fact is that the traditional rights and privileges of the corporations were no longer of much account in the early nineteenth century. The rapidly rising urban population made it a practical impossibility to prevent unfreemen setting up in business and prospering without seeking any benefit of membership in the incorporations. The medieval idea of stimulating trade by perpetuating monopolies was an anachronism in an industrial society and the Act of 1846 deprived the corporations of their remaining privileges.

All through their history these societies had shown themselves consistently loyal to the church and powerful allies of kirk sessions in their concern for the well-being of their members and of the whole community. By the 1840s concern for the poor had become a responsibility of local government and the country was on the brink of wide development and rapid advance in the fields of caring for the sick and educating the young. The day of the amateur in social welfare was passing. In their time, however, the corporations not only maintained acceptable standards of workmanship and of personal character among their members, not only provided for their members against poverty, sickness and the sufferings following bereavement, but they were pillars of the kirk and this should not be forgotten now that they have passed from our community life.

³³ W. Campbell, *The History of the Cordiners in Glasgow*, 206ff.

