

Maritime Dundee

As Dundee grew up on the shores of the Tay, so did its maritime tradition. Dundee's importance as a whaling port in the 19th century can trace a lineage back to 1227 when King Alexander II decreed that half of the fat of all whales caught between the Tay and the Forth was to be given to Dunfermline Abbey to make candles.

It was an important centre of trade with Europe, with iron coming from Sweden, and wood from Norway. It was also a major distribution centre in Scotland for imported Spanish and French wines. Four entries from Dundee's shipping lists of the period reveal the nature of the trade:

- 11th January, 1614 - "Ye schip called "The Gift of God" comes to Dundie (Dundee) from Cadise in Spayne (Cadiz in Spain) with spanische Wyne."
- 21st March 1612 - "Ye schip called, "The Pelican" of Dundie comes from Burdeaux (Bordeaux in France) with nyne twns half wyne (nine and a half tons of wine).
- 31st August 1618 - "Ane ship of Dundee called "The Fox" comes from Stokhollme (Stockholm) with Irone." V
- 30th July 1618 - "The ship called "The Thomas" canes ~~from~~ Norroway loadit with tymmer (timber)."

The Dundee merchant David Wedderburn travelled overseas exporting wheat, herring, salmon, sheepskins, and gunpowder from the town.

He imported into Dundee from Europe vinegar, copper, velvet, "oly-duly" (olive oil), "ungeonis" (onions), "toffie" (toffee) from Flanders, and "tubacoo" (tobacco) from the West Indies via France, amongst other things.

The development of trade brought with it a quayside culture of tales such as the following which would reverberate with exaggeration in the inns and taverns around Dundee's harbour as they were told and re-told.

Ships from the Scottish navy and the English navy were locked in combat off the Tay in 1490. The Scottish admiral, Sir Andrew Wood, with his ships, "The Flower" and the "Yellow Caravel", had engaged English raiders in a two day-long battle which saw ships that had ranned into each other drifting into the firth of Tay with their crews fighting. The Scots emerged victorious and brought the English ships into Dundee as prizes.

In 1567, the Earl of Bothwell, husband of Mary Queen of Scots, was declared to be a pirate when she was forced to resign the throne. Dundee seamen "Thomas Cristell, maister of the "James", Thamas Davidson, also Aister of the same ship, Thomas Kinloch, maister of the "Prymrosse", Alexander Strauchachin (Strachan), and George Lochmatory" were ordered by the Privy Council to pursue at sea Bothwell and his supporters "with fyre, sword and all uther kynds of hostilitie."

It was no small occurence for a ship once having left the firth of Tay to be picked off by pirates. The Dundee ship, the "Peter" laden with wine was one such victim in the late 16th century. This incident and others like it roused King James VI and the Privy Council to thunder at the "oppin robbaries ccemittit by pyrattis (pirates) and uther evil-disposed personis", and in 1587 they

instructed Dundonians to hold themselves ready and to be armed with "artillierrie", and engage then in combat whenever possible.

Jams Nichol was the captain of the Dundee ship "The Red Lion." In 1588 along with three other Scottish ships he was captured by the English when the ships ran aground off the English Downs. Nichol managed to escape by bribing his guards, and made his way to Spain. There he gave the Spanish government details of England's plans to defend itself against the might of the forthcoming Spanish Armada. In a letter, . Nichol outlined how Sir Francis Drake was to lead 100 ships against the Spaniards and described the defensive preparations at the English ports and inland.

In 1636, a ship from Dundee was shipwrecked near the mouth of the Forth at Dunbar. It was carrying the trappings of the luxury of the day - soap, sugar, raisins, figs, tobacco, pepper, cinnamon, saffron, nutmegs, starch, brimstone, silk and Holland cloth. The townspeople of Dunbar immediately looted the shipwreck, stealing away into the night with its cargo. They were later pursued by the Privy Council offering rewards from "5 marks to fifty pounds" for the capture of the looters.

In 1689 the luckless Dundee skipper, James Brioch, who had been shipwrecked and captured 4 times previously, fell in with a French privateer who seized his cargo and £1,000: The French took Brioch's son prisoner, releasing Brioch to find a ransom of 600 guilders to be paid at Dunkirk. The penniless Dundee seaman appealed for help from the Privy Council who set up a voluntary fund to help raise the necessary ransom money. As a maritime town Dundee was a convenient centre for naval recruitment through the notorious "press gangs" which clubbed unsuspecting men over the head and carried them off to ships to serve as their crew. Such brutal methods were officially approved by the Navy. In February 1755, the Lords of the Admiralty sent a secret letter to Dundee Town Council asking them to co-operate with a press-gang recruitment campaign that they were about to begin in the town. As an encouragement, a price of £1 was offered for each Dundonian clubbed and judged "fit for His Majesty's service."

In 1803 smugglers and customs and excise men were engaged in a struggle over casks of whisky in the Hilitown. The smugglers made off with three of the casks.

The Elements

In November 1608 tremors from an "earthquake" in western Scotland were felt in Dundee. In February 1633, "a great storm of snow and wynde, the likes had never been seen before" hit Dundee. "Countrymen's houses" were overturned, and "the outrageous storm stopped the natural ebb and flow of the Tay." In 1634-35, there was a severe winter, "the most tempestuous seen these past 60 years." In October 1668 a violent storm caused great damage to Dundee's harbour, resulting in a loss of ships. In November 1683, there was a severe frost which lasted for 4 months. "The Tay is frozen over which hath not been observed in the memory of many before. Cattle and sheep are reduced to great want, the like of which has not been seen since the winter of 1674."

In February 1597 there was an eclipse of the sun. "The Compt Buik of David Wedderburne" describes how the people of Dundee reacted. "On the twenty fifth day of February, it being Settirday, there was the ecllips of the cone and the chaynge of the moon between ten and eleven hours before noon that day. Darkness overshaddowit the face of the haill earth that nae person within their houssis had any licht except a candill. The people with great fear fled aff the streets

to their houssis mourning and lamenting. This sicht was maist terrible and fearful to all people young and auld, and nae person living could declair they ever heard or saw the like in ony time before."