

## 11. Findhorn, the Harbour of Forres

**Bruce B Bishop FSA Scot, ASGRA**

During the reign of David I a trading union or 'Hanse' which had been formed some fifty years earlier by the coastal towns of Aberdeen, Banff, Elgin, Forres, Nairn, Inverness and probably also Cromarty and Dornoch, was given the King's full approval and recognition. This allowed free trade and possibly also free movement of tradesmen and craftsmen between the Burghs. This may have been a further formalisation of the trading links that had existed for maybe the past five or six centuries. By the 12th century it was almost certainly becoming associated with the 'Hanseatic League' which was eventually, as vessels grew larger, to see trade links with Bergen in Norway, the Danish and North German ports, the Baltic, and ultimately much of northern Europe. Such trading links would have led to the eventual expansion of Findhorn as the port for Forres and one of the principal ports of the Moray Firth. By 1532 the port of Findhorn was established into a Burgh of Barony by the Abbot of Kinloss, and the following century saw a great expansion of the port.

The salmon fishings and the export of salmon from the port of Findhorn are well documented in the Exchequer records<sup>1</sup> of the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, which give a good indication of how important this trade was following the Reformation, in addition to the merchant trade from the port. In August 1558 William Waught paid taxes on the export of 11 lasts of Salmon, and Alexander Acheson for 14 lasts. On 29<sup>th</sup> January 1587 there is a Sasine of the "*fishings of five stells and yairds*" to Mr Edward Bruce, for a period of seven years. This obviously continued as it was restated in a charter of 1598.<sup>2</sup> A '*Charter of Findhorne*' dated 1611 makes mentions of James Andersone there, and witnesses include Johnne Steill, William Dunbar and George Duff.<sup>3</sup>

In 1661, according to the Burgh Charter, the town had a right to a harbour and a station for ships. This was no doubt an indication that in earlier times either the sea came closer to the town, or the River Findhorn was navigable to a point nearer the town, probably Waterford or Greishop, but this access had now silted up. The attempt in 1661 by Forres to exercise the use of Findhorn as its port was disputed by Robert Innes of Muiretoun, the Laird of the Barony of Findhorn. After a bitter and occasionally violent dispute a tentative agreement was reached between the two parties which resulted in the Burgh of Forres having the use of the port, from which it was to benefit greatly over the following two centuries. The following century saw a great expansion of the port, with vessels trading to an even greater extent with Europe and the Baltic ports.

---

<sup>1</sup> National Archives of Scotland E75/4 etc.

<sup>2</sup> National Archives of Scotland GD247/99/1

<sup>3</sup> National Archives of Scotland GD30/260

James Calder, later Sir James, a merchant in Elgin, was granted a charter under the Great Seal on 6<sup>th</sup> February 1671, of the lands and Barony of Muirtown<sup>4</sup>. Sir James Calder, in company with William King of Newmill, Elgin, carried on a most extensive business as export and import merchants. A series of Exchequer documents<sup>5</sup> from 1673 – 1674 indicate that trade was very extensive with the Baltic and north German ports such as Bremen, Hamburg and Danzig, as well as with the other ports already mentioned. In the later decades of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Findhorn, now designed “the port of Forres”, must have been an amazing sight and a hive of activity in these early times, so much so that it was at this period that the magistrates of Elgin became determined to found their own harbour at Lossiemouth in competition with Findhorn and Garmouth.

By 1690 James Calder and William King exported from Findhorn “*Beaff, tongues, tallow, hydes, bear, malt etc.*” to Bordeaux, Drontone (now Perugia, in Italy), Rotterdam, etc., and from these ports they imported “*wine, brandy, soap, powder, reassins, ffigs, prunes, green ginger, suggar, pepper, indigo, cloves, nutmuggs, rice, needles, muslen, camel’s hair, mourning creapp, hatts of the newest fashion (all black) white Renish wine (Rhine wine or Hock), clear hard seck, tobacco, pypes, french wines etc.*”.

A bundle of shipping ledgers<sup>6</sup> from the period 1686 to 1695 identifies Andrew Russell as one of the merchants whose vessels used the port of Findhorn, but there are also mentions of William Jaffray, James Thomson and Jan & Jacob van Rixel. Andrew Russell is also frequently mentioned<sup>7</sup> as being involved in trade from the ports of Borrowstounness, Leith, London, Stockholm and Rotterdam, and must have been a very influential person in the trade at this time. Amongst the ships leaving Findhorn during this ten-year period were the Lyon of Leith, Anoris, Helen of Borrowstounness, Land of Promise of Borrowstounness, William of Leith, Concord of Borrowstounness, Providence, Maria, The Lyon of Queensferry, Lendrie of Leith, Swan of Borrowstounness, Isobel, Boath, Beattie of Bruntisland, Friendship of Bristol and the ‘Royendermann’ of Stockholm. It is interesting to note the number of vessels from the Firth of Forth, from Burntisland, Borrowstounness (now Bo’ness), Leith and Queensferry. Among the given ports of origin or destinations in this one bundle are Leith, Rotterdam, Dundee, Bo’ness, Queensferry, Briel, Amsterdam, Dublin, Waterford, Greenock, Dysart, Kirkcaldy and Stockholm. The average size of the vessels was about 90 tons, thereby carrying a relatively small cargo.

A typical example of the trade carried on by Findhorn vessels is shown on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1692, when a contract was made between “*George, Viscount of Tarbet, Lord McLeod and Castlehaven on the one part and William Dawsons, skipper in Findhorn and Master under God of the good ship called the Isobell of Findhorn on the other whereby the latter lets his said ship for freight to the said Viscount to take in at Portmaholmack 440 bolls of bear and transport the same to Leith, for which causes*

---

<sup>4</sup> Dunbar Dunbar. E. Documents relating to the Province of Moray. Douglas, Edinburgh, 1895. B Bishop private library

<sup>5</sup> National Archives of Scotland E81/13 et seq

<sup>6</sup> National Archives of Scotland GD1/885/1

<sup>7</sup> National Archives of Scotland RH15/106/155

*the said Viscount obliges himself to pay £163/10/0 Scots for each chalder of bear he shall deliver at Leith with one boll of meal and one barrel of ale within 48 hours after delivering of said freight...<sup>8</sup>*

Andrew Russell was obviously staunchly Protestant, and in a letter which he received in 1687 from James Adie in Danzig, including news of bills paid, there is the comment from the writer; *'Itt is Joyfull Newes to use here when wee hear that poperie meitts opposition in these Nations the Lord give Strenth & abiletie to all the trew lovers of Jesus Christ to resist and oppose the Increase of that Adolletrous & Superstitiouse worship in these lands & God increase the trew Labourers of his vineyard to awaken dead and sleepie conciences in these traying times'*.

In 1694 the estate and lands of Culbin, on the west side of Findhorn Bay, were devastated by the sand blown from the west, which completely covered the lands, buildings, etc., and totally obliterated the estate. The sand also choked the course of the River Findhorn, and was almost certainly a contributory factor to the events of 1701. At this time William Barron held one of the Findhorn Rentals.

The destruction of the old village of Findhorn took place in 1701 (some sources suggest 1702), probably during the autumn, and was caused by a severe storm from the NE associated with very high tides, which breached the sandbar on which the old village was built.

After this destruction the economy of Findhorn fell into rapid decline, almost certainly because of the loss of facilities for vessels to moor or beach at the port. It was not until a second, probably temporary village was established in 1705 that the fortunes of the port began to revive. This second village would have been used to keep the economy of the port viable while the proper, or third village was being built, this not being fully completed, on its present site, until several years later.

The revival of Findhorn, however, is clearly shown on 17th November 1708 when the captain of The Seven Brothers, William Dawson, who was later to become Provost of Forres, was employed by the Lairds of Kilravock, Clava, Thunderton, Kinsterie and Muirtoun to carry a cargo to Lisbon, which comprised *"791½ bolls of bear at £3/6/8d per boll, 3 last of hareings at £96 per last, 6,500 dried codd-fish at £14 per 100, 6 barrels salmond at £38 per barrel and 18 barrels of grilses at 1/5th rebate of salmond price"*, giving a total value of the cargo to Portugal as £4,611/10/8d Scots money.

It was almost certainly due to the destruction of the village in 1701 that James Calder's business began to decline, he fell into financial difficulties and renounced the lands of Muirtown and Findhorn in favour of Rose of Kilravock in about 1710.

In 1713 various letters from Findhorn to Burghead, mainly regarding the price of fish, identify Thomas Findlay, Gilbert Thom and John Marnoch as Skippers in

---

<sup>8</sup> National Archives of Scotland, Cromartie Muniments GD305/1/147/35

Findhorn. In 1717 the Jannet of Belfast sailed from Findhorn with "*121 barrels of 'grilseess' at £2 Stg per barrel, 35 barrel of salmon at £2/10/6d per barrel and 31 barrels of herreings at 10 shillings per barrel*", a total of £345 Sterling of cargo.

In 1727 some of the Findhorn fishermen were moved to Portessie to establish the fishing industry there. The Laird of Rannas provided five houses for them in the village, which was at that time known as Rottenslough.

Eventually the new village was fully established on its present site, straggling along the arc of the northeast shore of Findhorn Bay, and was comprised of rows of fishermen's cottages built in the typical north-east style with their gable-ends to the water. The intervening lanes are known locally as the "stryplies". The centre of the village now is the square around the Crown and Anchor Inn, a white crow-stepped building which dates from 1739.

So at the present time the Bay of Findhorn is no longer "the port of Forres", but a very attractive tourist destination enjoyed by visitors and tourists alike, with the stone-built jetty being the only evidence of its busy historic past.