

## **12. FIRE!**

**Bruce B Bishop FSA Scot, ASGRA**

**In the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the threat of fire was ever-present.**

With such a large amount of wood being used in the buildings, with most of the less affluent members of society still having houses with thatched roofs, and the people storing their fuel in the house to keep it dry and secure, every town and burgh was very aware of the risks and issued Acts and Edicts to the townspeople. For example, on 11<sup>th</sup> September 1671 the Town Council of Elgin, in Moray, issued an "Act against lint, peattes, heather or firr above the fyre – It is enacted by the Counsell that no inhabitant within the said burgh shall keip aither lints, peattes, heather or firrs above ther fyres or within ther duelling hous in tyme cuming and that under the payne of banischment of ther persoues and confiscatioune of the lint and uthers abov prohibited"

*Source Elgin Kirk Session Minutes NRS CH2/145. 1671*

This, however, could not cover the actions of a wealthy lunatic prisoner in the Elgin Tolbooth just 30 years later:

### **Elgin Tolbooth Destroyed in 1700**

The Magistrates of Elgin, on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1701, applied to, and got authority from, the Privy Council, to remove in shakles Robert Gibson, proprietor of Linkwood, a lunatic, to another place of confinement, "he having, in the preceding October, set their Tolbooth on fire, when it was burnt to the ground".

*Source. Documents relating to The Province of Moray, Edited by E Dunbar Dunbar of Glen of Rothes. Edinburgh 1895. B Bishop own library*

In the densely packed capital. However, the consequences could be much worse:

### **Giving an Account of a Great Fire in Edinburgh in 1700**

A letter from Mr Duncan Forbes in Edinburgh to his brother Col Forbes at Culloden dated Edinburgh 6<sup>th</sup> Febr'y 1700

Dr Brother

Upon Saturday night, by ten a'clock, a fyre burst out in Mr John Buchan's closet window, towards the Meall Mercate. It continued whill eleven a'clock of the day with the greatest frayor & vehemency that ever I saw fyre do, notwithstanding that I saw London burne.

Ther are burnt, by the easiest computation, betwixt 3 & 400 familys; all the pryde of Eden<sup>r</sup> is sunk; from the Cowgate to the High Street all is burnt, & hardly one stone set upon another. The Commissioner, President of the Parl<sup>t</sup>, Pres<sup>t</sup> of the Session, the Bank, most of the Lords, Lawyers & Clerks, were also burnt & many good & great familys. It is said just now by Sr John Cochran & Jordan-hill, that ther is more rent burnt in this fyre than the whole City of Glasgow will amount to. The Parliament

House very hardly escapt; all Registers confounded, Clerks Chambers & processes in such confusion, that the Lords & Officers of State are just now mett at Rosse's Tavern, in order to adjourneing of the Session by reason of the disorder. Few people are lost, if any att all; but ther was neither heart nor hand left amongst them for saveing from the fyre, nor a drop of water in the Cisternes; twenty thousand hand flitting ther trash they know not wher, & hardly 20 at work. These babbels, of ten & fifteen story high, are down to the Ground & and ther fall's very terrible. Many rueful spectacles, such as Corserig naked, with a child under his Oxter, happing for his lyffe; the Fish Mercate, & all from the Cow Gate to Pett Street's Close, burnt; The Exchange, waults, & Coall Cellars under the Parliament Close are still burning. This epitome of dissolution I send you, without saying any more but that the Lord is angry with us & I see no intercessor

Y<sup>r</sup> Lo<sup>t</sup> bro<sup>vr</sup> to serve you

D Forbes

*Source. Culloden Papers, An Extensive and Interesting Correspondence from the year 1625 to 1748. London 1815. B Bishop own library.*