

5. Time was not always of the Essence

Bruce B Bishop

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the ownership of a clock or a watch was the prerogative of the better-off members of society, and if the weather was favourable the poorer people had to rely on the town sundial, the rising and setting of the sun, and probably also the rumbling of their stomachs to keep track of time. It was not until the coming of the railways that a national time standard was established, and prior to this each town or district throughout the country had its own time; for example due to its longitude Elgin was some 12 – 15 minutes behind London Time and the further west one went the greater the time difference. In common with many other towns in Scotland at this time, Elgin made use of the services of two or three men whose primary duty was to keep some sort of schedule for the inhabitants, and also to keep the people, many of whom would have been illiterate, informed of the latest news, parish meetings, and other events of interest to the population in general. The Town Drummer was an officer of the Town Council, and it was his duty to walk around the town beating his drum as a morning alarm call, as an evening curfew, and also to give notice of forthcoming secular events. The Bellman was an officer of the Kirk Session who walked the town with his bell giving notice of funerals and other items of importance to the religious life of the town. The Town Clock-Keeper was a duty, in Elgin at least, which was originally carried out by the Bellman, but in later years was the job of one of the Clock or Watchmakers in the town, as authorised by the Town Council. All of these gentlemen of course, undertook these duties in addition to their normal occupations. There are several mentions of these men in the Minutes of both the Town Councils and of the Kirk Sessions, but in general the precise passage of time seems to have been of little importance in these pre-railway times. One of the oft-used excuses for Breach of Sabbath was that the accused did not even know what day of the week it was! The Town Drummer The drummer was an invaluable, but probably not always very popular member of the community, especially on the cold, dark winter mornings. Every day at 4 a.m. he would make his rounds of the town, and this was usually followed by a second round at 5 a.m., with the Kirk Bell being a final reminder rung at 6 a.m. The evening, or curfew bell, was rung at 8 p.m., and then the drummer made his final bedtime rounds of the town at 9 p.m. This 'curfew' was not an instruction to the inhabitants that they should be off the streets, but deriving from the Old French *covrefeu* (to cover the fire), an essential precaution in those early times when so many of the buildings were made of wood, and thatched with heather or straw. The threat of fire amongst the houses of any burgh, especially in its densely populated closes, was one which the Town Council took very seriously. The Town Drummers seem to have been a particularly hardy breed, the records showing that they rarely, if ever, missed a day's

work, but may sometimes have taken a few short-cuts on their route. In 1709 the drummer in Elgin seems to have been neglecting his duties, and there were complaints from some parts of the town that he "was not beating the tap-tow and reveiller through the whole town", a complaint which the Council took seriously enough to threaten him with a fine for each time that he did not walk the whole route. Walking the streets of any town or burgh in the dark mornings and evenings may not have been the most pleasant experience for any of the drummers, the streets being used generally as a rubbish dump and a common sewer, with dung-heaps from the burgess lands and the closes lining the edges of the streets. It is noted, for example, that in 1770 the dung of the streets of Elgin was roused for sixteen shillings Sterling for the year, the tacksman having the right to all of the dung on the High Street and School Wynd, and being obliged to remove it only twice each week. Despite the introduction of 22 oil-burning street lights in 1772 (a short-lived benefit due to the operating costs), it must have definitely been a case of "watch your step". In 1779 the early morning call by the drummer was set at 5 a.m., this "being more convenient to the inhabitants", with the church bell continuing to be rung at 6 a.m. Some forty years later the Poet Laureate, Robert Southey, who was visiting Elgin, does not seem to have approved of the town drummer's daily activities, being disconcerted by the "appearance of decay... and an abominable drum... beaten at nine".

The Bellman The earliest mention of a bellman in Elgin was 1583, at the time of his marriage, and there are mentions throughout the later Kirk Session minutes of the bellman being required to publish various notices throughout the town, a duty which sometimes brought him into conflict with the town drummer, who often considered the broadcasting of information to be one of his other sources of income. It would have been thought that with all the progress made during the Victorian era the idea of having a man with a bell walking the town proclaiming notices and such like would have soon died out, but it seems that there was still a requirement for the services of a bellman into the early 20th century. The Northern Scot of Saturday February 15th 1902 comments that "Yesterday the bellman of Elgin patrolled the streets with the welcome intelligence that a free distribution of meal would take place at night. The protracted storm has thrown many labourers out of employment, and it is not surprising that among their dependents there are some necessitous cases. About seven o'clock quite a small crowd presented themselves at the Old Court House, and the Provost, Town Clerk, Councillors Sellar, Gordon and Lipp had a busy time in judging the applicant's claims for consideration. But they were sympathetic and tactful, and no deserving party was turned away".

The Keeper of the Town's Clock It is known from various sources that there was a town clock in Elgin in the late 17th century, almost certainly on the tower of the tollbooth, but there is no record of anyone having specific responsibility for it. In 1703, for example, James Russell was appointed Bellman, but sometimes the duties overlapped and his main responsibility was stressed as being "to keep the town's clock so right in her going as that she shall not go half an hour wrong backwards nor forwards in twenty four hours

tyme, and also obliges himself to ring the eight hours bell at night and the four hours bell in the morning punctually". In 1706 the working day was extended when the Council decided that the evening bell should not be rung until ten o'clock, this being "a fitter hour for tradesmen to leave off their work". The coming of the railways in the 1850's and the subsequent introduction of a national system of timekeeping, brought to an end the ways of local timekeeping which had survived for the past two centuries, and probably longer. Now we all tune in to the BBC to check our clocks and watches, something which would have been unimaginable to our more distant ancestors.

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