# The Elgin Sword Dancers: who they were and why they did it

Many dancers will have heard about the 'morris dancer's' costume which survives in the Scottish city of Perth, and some will be aware that the Perth dance (in fact a sword dance) was not the only one of its kind. The town of Elgin saw a sword dance performed under very different circumstances.

Elgin is situated about three miles inland on the River Lossie, on Scotland's north-east coast, to the east of Inverness. Despite its location so far north it is culturally a Lowland town and in earlier, unsettled times, the people feared attacks from what they regarded as Highland savages. Between 1130 and 1153 the town achieved the status of Royal Burgh, granting it considerable independence and trading privileges, and by the thirteenth century the burgesses were recognised as a merchant guild and the trades formed themselves into corporations, gaining representation on the town council, which in turn elected the MP. By the standards of the day it was a prosperous and politically advanced burgh.[1]

The facts are these:

> *"7th January, 1623:- James Bonyman, Alex. Petrie, Johne Petrie, Robt. Dunbar, Archibald Law. Theas past in an sword dance in Paul Dunbar his closs and in the kirkyeard with maskis and wissoris on their faces."* Each *gwysser* was fined 40/-.[2]

Much of what is known about the Elgin sword dancers survives because of the religious attitudes of the time. The Calvinist Reformation sought to purge the Church of superstitions, of corruption, and of pagan Romish practices. At the same time the political vacuum caused by Queen Mary's exile and abdication had led to the government of the Church from below, theoretically by the Churchgoers themselves, rather than by royal authority as had happened in the Church of England. Each parish elected a body of 'elders' to undertake its daily business; the congregation as a whole appointed the Minister; and disciplinary matters were dealt with by the elders sitting as a court, the Kirk Session. A group of parishes made a presbytery, and every year delegates from every parish met as the General Assembly, to settle matters concerning the Kirk as a whole.

The local Kirk Sessions quickly became very powerful, and the boundary between civil and ecclesiatical jurisdiction could be rather blurred. The minutes of the Elgin Kirk Session keep returning to the same issues: the enforcement of regular Church attendance, the outlawing of profane pastimes and forbidden rites, and accusations of witchcraft (these were rarely accepted and seem to have had more to do with the settling of scores). The old festivals, even

[1] Mackie, J.D. (reprinted 1984) *A History of Scotland*, chapter 9.
[2] Minutes of the Elgin Kirk Session in Cramond's *The Records of Elgin* (1897: 177).

Christmas, were outlawed because no day was seen to equal, let alone surpass, the Sabbath.[3, 4,5]

Examples Include:

- 1580: order forbidding the lighting of fires on St. John's Eve
- 1581-2: order forbidding the lighting of midsummer (St. John's or St. Peter's) or midwinter (St. Nicholas') fires, or the ringing of bells on Uphellie Eve (Uphellie/Uphalie Day = the first day after the ending of Christmas festivities, hence Uphellie Eve is 12th Night, Uphellie Day is Epiphany).[6]
- 1596, December: Session forbids use of churchyard for any pastime - 40/- fine; also forbids guising or dancing anywhere in town at any time - £5 fine per household where this happens
- 1598, December: several men convicted of offences including dancing, wearing a woman's coat, and having blacked or masked faces
- 1599, December: guising and dancing in churchyard again forbidden
- 1600, January: girl fined for guising in a man's coat; twelve women convicted of singing, dancing, and guising
- 1600, May: Master of the grammar school fined half a year's salary for engaging a piper, buying bells and dancing clothes, and allowing the scholars to perform; (guising and dancing were forbidden, followed by prosecutions, in May, 1603; December, 1603; December, 1604, and so on).[7]

It was not just seasonal festivities that were banned:

- 1601: people cautioned for making an 'idolatrous' visit to a chapel
- 1602 (January): eight people imprisoned and made to repent for making a barefoot pilgrimage to a Speyside chapel, drinking at the (holy) well, and visiting a cave there for its healing powers. The punishment was to continue weekly until August; two of the offenders were described as servants (as we shall see, a different class of person from those undertaking the midwinter festivities), and by February one man was still refusing to swear not to repeat the pilgrimage. Four more admitted to barefoot pilgrimages to the chapel in March, and another four in April.

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[3] Mackie, ibid.
[4] Kirk Session Minutes, various.
[5] Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary.
[6] Jamieson's Dictionary of the Scottish Language.
[7] Kirk session Minutes.

The prohibitions and prosecutions continued into the 1620s, ‘30s, ‘40s, and even ‘50s - the old customs were not easily eradicated, and it is against this background that the sword dance took place.[8]

**Sword Dancing Elsewhere in Scotland**

The Elgin Dance is not an isolated example in this period, and many of the dances enjoyed official patronage, at least for a time.

**Edinburgh:**

- in 1588 the authorities paid for costumes, hats, and bells for six dancers and a fool as part of the celebrations for the marriage of Queen Mary to the Dauphin
- in 1590 they paid for twelve flowered hats, sets of bells, and white shoes for the sword dancers, honouring a visit by Anne of Denmark
- in 1617, in honour of the return of King James, they paid for a hobby-horse, five sets of bells, and a musician[9,10]

**Perth:**

- in 1617 the City Council commanded the Skinners’ Incorporation to provide for a sword dance, at a cost of £40, to celebrate the return of the King
- in 1633 they again ordered a sword dance at a cost of £23 1s, to mark the King’s visit[11]

Sir Walter Scott tells of dances from Papa Stour and Buckhaven, although it is hard to say just how far back in time they can be placed. All the dances listed here took place in East Coast ports, although only the Papa Stour and Buckhaven dances are linked to fishermen. It’s quite possible that the dances spread along the coast (see also Beadnell and Flamborough), although we should not overlook the strong East Coast connections with the Low Countries, where sword dancing was widespread.[12]

There is also a 16th century Scots ballad describing the ritual killing of a bull and likening it to the beheading in a Morris dance (in this period the term ‘Morris’ applied equally to all forms of ‘ritual’ dance).[13]

**Elgin:**

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[8] Kirk Session Minutes
[9] Mill: 15 & 115
[10] Cawte: 61-2
[11] Bennett
[12] Lockhart: 265
[13] Hayward

We come back, then, to James Bonyman, Alexander Petrie, John Petrie, Robert Dunbar, and Archibald Law performing a sword dance outside Paul Dunbar's house and also in the churchyard, wearing masks and visors on their faces, and this at Yuletide.

As we have seen, for decades the Kirk had been attempting to suppress Yuletide celebrations, reminding people every December of the consequences of ignoring the prohibitions. The younger people of the town seem to have regarded this as a challenge.

**The Dancers**

**James Bonyman:** his father was a burgess and pillar of the Kirk; already active in town life by 1596, in 1598 John was described as an elder and 'searcher', with the job of reporting on after-hours drinking and enforcing Church attendance. In 1603, as a bailie (a sort of magistrate), he and James Petrie (Alexander's father) were involved in appointing the new schoolmaster (replacing the one fined in 1600). He was still an elder in 1615, and left 50 marks (£33) to the hospital in 1626.

James' elder brother, another John, was in trouble with the Kirk Session in 1622 for being part of a group of nineteen men and eleven women (including John Petrie's brother, James) who were accused of being together in Spynie Wood (nearby) from 11pm to 4am on a Saturday night despite the Sunday being a fast day.

James himself first comes to light around this time. He appears to have been born around 1600, had three recorded children, and first fallen foul of the Kirk when fined forty shillings for being part of the sword dance. That May he was fined one mark (13s 4d) for running profanely up the High Street plus twenty shillings for missing Church one Sunday, drinking with others, not paying his guising fine, and breaking out of gaol! (And yet all that together amounted to less than the fine for dancing at Yuletide). In July, 1626 he was in trouble for taking part in a blasphemous pledge of friendship at the market cross between 3.00 and 4.00 am. In August, 1629, he and his wife, Janet, were summonsed for failing to keep the Sabbath. After this he appears to have settled down, and by 1650 he had been made an honorary burgess for having served the town as a soldier.

Janet was taken before the Kirk Session in August, 1623, for ripely insulting another woman, and in 1637 she was gaoled for adultery until such time as she might give surety for her good behaviour.[14,15,16,17]

**John and Alexander Petrie:** these were the sons of James Petrie, a merchant burgess of Elgin, who by 1593 was already on record as being a major taxpayer on account of his extensive land holdings. He and his family were no strangers to controversy: in 1593 his wife, Elspeth, was slanderously accused of witchcraft by one Annapill Thomson; in 1609 he and two of his sons, James and John, had to put up 400 marks as surety that they would not harm

[14] Register of Births & Marriages
[15] Kirk Session minutes, Presbytery Records, Town Council Minutes (all in Cramond)
[16] Privy Council Register
[17] Great Seal Register

various people named Cumings, Johnson, and Hay; and in 1613 Elspeth was again accused of witchcraft, this time by Janet Nicoll (on the other hand, in 1622 she and two Bonyman women were before the Session for accusing Grissall Urrall of witchcraft). Nevertheless by 1603 he was a bailie and by 1613 an elder.

**John** was his second son, old enough to have been considered capable of harming his father's enemies by 1609. He was named as one of those who were fined for the incident in the wood in 1622. He seems to have kept out of trouble after the sword dancing, and by 1651 he was a burgess and greeman of the town.

**Alexander** was the fourth son. He was with the others in the wood, he was one of the sword dancers, but unlike his brother he does not seem to have learned from his experiences. In May, 1623, he was fined forty shillings for 'uttering presumptuous speeches'. In May, 1626, he and two others were fined one mark each for 'riding...the grey mare'. Nevertheless, in March, 1631, he became Kirk treasurer, and that October an elder! By 1648 he was described as a vintner and in October, 1657, he became a councillor. However, in 1661 he and his wife were accusing Isobel Cumming of witchcraft but, even so, by 1670 he was a bailie. In 1674, feeling his age, he gave up the Church lands he had been renting, and we hear no more of him.[18,19,20]

**Robert Dunbar:** the son of another Robert, a Kirk elder, the younger Robert's only serious brush with the authorities was the sword dance. After this he crops up as an officer of the burgh (1636), a customs collector (1639), merchant burgess (1643), vintner (1648), and town councillor (1657). He and some of the Bonymans were involved in a slander case in 1631, and in 1646 he and Jean Bonyman were ordered to pay a gardener for his services. (In 1636 his brother, Alexander, was punished for the clinking of basins through the town on Uphaly Eve.[21,22]

**Archibald Law:** of good family Archibald seems to have led a quiet life. His father, James, was a former Snowdon Herald at the Court of the Lord Lyon in Edinburgh, and had been Sheriff Clerk of Elgin and Moray, in which he had assisted James Rutherford, the Provost, in collecting taxes. Rutherford went on to marry James' daughter (Archibald's sister), having represented Elgin at the 1615 Parliament. Rutherford had, in 1605, admitted dancing in the Canonry churchyard at night and marching through the town with a piper - and this on the 26th December.[23,24,25,26,27]

**Paul Dunbar:** no link has been made between Paul, by whose property the men danced, and Robert Dunbar. Paul was a gardener, older than the dancers (in 1597 he had been in trouble with the Session for working on the Sabbath and subsequently trying to avoid going to Church),

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[18] Register of Births & Marriages
[19] Kirk Session minutes
[20] Register of Births & Marriages
[21] Kirk Session Minutes, Burgh Court Book, Town Council Minutes
[22] Privy Council Register
[23] Register of Births & Marriages
[24] Kirk Session Minutes
[25] Great Seal Register
[26] Seton
[27] Robert

and as such out of a different social set. In 1630 he was ordered to present his son to the Session for being cheeky to the beadle. His offence seems to have had more to do with simple disregard for the Kirk than the others' high spirits.[28,29]

**Conclusions**

Knowing all this enables us to put both the dance and the dancers into context. A glance through the relevant dates shows a consistent pattern of December prohibitions followed by January summonses, and a further series of May time incidents. The old seasonal customs clearly had a hold, and yet whatever their origins they do not seem to have contained any religious significance since their adherents tended to settle down as they grew older, to be replaced by a new generation of seasonal revellers. The example of the forbidden pilgrimages is of a different nature since it seems to have attracted a different type of person, and out of a genuine belief in the value of pre-reformation customs.

The dancers themselves were mostly drawn from the educated merchant class. They formed a close business and social circle. Some examples are:

- Bonyman's brother and the Petries were involved in the 1622 woodland incident
- The Petries' mother joined two Bonyman women in an accusation of witchcraft
- Alexander Petrie and Robert Dunbar both became vintners
- Bonyman, John Petrie, and Robert Dunbar became burgesses
- Dunbar and Alexander Petrie became town councillors
- Dunbar and the Bonymans were several times involved together in litigation

Archibald Law was slightly different, belonging more to the administrative than to the merchant class. They all seem to have had their bit of youthful rebellion before settling down to become respectable members of Elgin society, although despite four of them having had fathers who were Kirk elders, only Alexander Petrie became an elder himself.

The Elgin sword dance differed from what is known of the examples from Perth and Edinburgh in that whereas they were officially sponsored as part of civic celebrations, it was a spontaneous expression of seasonal festivities which persisted in the face of civic disapproval. Where the Perth and Edinburgh dances were performances in their own right, in Elgin the emphasis was on the mumming and guising, of which the sword dance was just one expression.

I must have been reading too much, as I came to this area expecting to find a dance performed by fishermen in time of hardship, or or in commemoration of the Old Religion, or maybe just as an expression of community identity and solidarity, yet found a rare example of a folk custom untainted by collectors or folklorists, showing an activity which must have been deeply-rooted and yet was performed, contrary to most theories, by middle-class young men for nothing more than fun. Let's face it, delete the 'young' and that's just what we have today.

[28] Register of Births & Marriages
[29] Kirk Session Minutes