

ex-Provost John Paterson writes, c.1880, about Irvine harbour

transcribed from his notes, held by Irvine Burns Club, pages 116-137

*** If using information from this source,
please credit ex-Provost John Paterson & Irvine Burns Club ***

Bold has been added to aid researchers;
Italics indicates where an occasional word is in doubt;
[Square brackets indicate information added for explanation];
Spellings are as in the original.

<p.116-119 consist mainly of notes from burgh documents available in Muniments published elsewhere, so we reprint here only his main points>

The Harbour has always occupied a prominent position in the history of Irvine. As far as appears from any documentary evidence, the burgesses seem to have been satisfied with using the Mouth of the river as a natural basin into which they could run their Barks and Boats, or ... them on the Beach at the Seagate foot. In the 1560s, the Magistrates, being activated by a desire to increase the Trade of the Burgh by endeavouring to induce foreign Merchants to traffic with the Burgesses, set themselves seriously to work to create Quays or Jetties where goods might be landed. Accordingly no doubt after long & due deliberation, they in 1572 acquired ground at Marress "for lousing and landing of their schippis, barkis, & bottis, with their Merchandise".

In 1579 the Magistrates having complained to their friend (J. VI), of the dilapidation of the Port, whether that at the Seagate foot or the new one on Marress, I do not know, but his Majesty with his usual generosity to them, granted the Customs of the Burgh for the Space of five years to the Burgh to assist in repairing the Port, "understanding perfytelie that the heavin and port of oure burgh of Irving being decayit and brokin doun". These of course were the King's Customs and not the Petty Burgh Customs.

Pont writing about 1604, or may[be] a year or two earlier, says that "Irvine is the Chieffe Porte of the country of Cunninghame - The Porte and harbry being now much decayed from quhat it was anciently, being stopt with shelves of sand which hinder the neir approach of shipping." This account would no doubt apply to the Landing place or Harbour at the Seagate foot, as in his time it seems to have been becoming almost unapproachable by vessels of size.

[Following an unproductive commission of three (text Paterson p.115, also in the Muniments) set up in 1587,] the Provost, Bailies & Council in 1596 made still a more desperate effort to improve their shipping by applying to the Lords of the Privy Council & representing that the 1587 Commission had been of no effect, two of the commissioners having died, and the "Wattermouth having become so oureblawne and fillet with sand that is unremediabile . . thair nicchtbouris hes sustenit grite losse and shipwrack, and thair toun brocht to grite miserie and povertie, . . and they having considerit the hail commodious parties next adjacent to their burgh quhair ane harborie maist commodiouslie may be had, they fand na parte sa meit as ane creik in Little Comray [Little Cumbrae] quhilk thay ar unable be thair awne moyne to gett accomodat for that purpois unles the said Act of Parliament tak yit effect."

New commissioners were appointed on 3 June 1596, leading to a report that the cost of establishing a harbour on Cumbrae would be £4,773, consideration of this report by his Majesty & Lords of Secret Council [the Privy Council], and, on 29 July 1596, the Grant by the Privy Council to the Burgh of Irvine for Five years of a right of exacting duties on goods passing up and down the Clyde, the same to go towards the new Harbour for the Burgh, this to be proclaimed "at the market crosses of Irving, Glasgu, Dunbartane, and their parish kirks, and all other places needful, to make payment within ten days of being charged, under pain of rebellion".

[Paterson continues, p.119:] The same volume contains an account of an Action by an English Man against the Provost & Bailies of Irving for seizure of his ship which they sauld and made penny of and imputt the pryce in ane little Kist within Niniane's dwelling house, quhairof he has the key and which the King & Council ordains the said Provost & Bailies to deliver in Glasgu the foresaid little Kist with the money therein within eight days. [Paterson's source: Register of Privy Council of Scotland, ed. David Masson, Edinburgh]

<p.120> No steps were taken for following out this valuable grant [of 1596] I suppose on account of its [Little Cumbrae's] distance from Irvine - fancy what this would amount to nowadays even in five years. Not to be done, however, in 1608 they had turned their attention to The Trun [Troon] for at a Convention of the Royal Burghs held at Selkirk on 7 July that year, supplication was made by the Burgh of Irewin craifing licence to impetrat ane import at thair new erectit herberie callit Trone. Irvine must therefore have been the originators of Troon Harbour.

[An inserted p.125 records:] [Convention of Royal Burghs at] Cowpar [Cupar] 4 July 1609. Hew Scott for Irwin. The sameyn day grantis and givis licence to the burgh of Irwin to impetrat of our Soverane Lord ane gift of the Ankaragis and dock Siller following to be tene of all Schipps, creyaris [= crears, a kind of lighter or barque] and boits ... within thair Herbre at the troune laitlie coft and bigit by them [and a note of dues follows].

[Paterson attaches a note of expenses for someone's trip to Troon in 1611, in which "Ane quart of wyne and ane quheit breid", in the company of James Fullarton, the Laird of Crosbie, costs XIXs.4, ie 19/4 or decimal 96p, the same expense being incurred again when they were joined by the Baillie of Monctoun & his folkis.]

1656: Thos. Tucker, Government Inspector of Customs reported in 1656 that Irwyn, a small Burgh towne lying at the Mouth of a river of the same name which hath at sometime been a pretty small Port, but at present clogged and almost choaked up with Sand, which the Western Sea beats into it, so as it wrestles for life to maintaine a small trade to France, Norway & Ireland, with herring and other Goods brought on Horseback from Glasgow, for purchas Timber, Wine, & other Commodities to supply theyr occasions with - Irwin has three or four vessels the biggest not exceeding sixteen tonnes - Verily indeed the trade of the Country must have been then at a low ebb - Glasgow had 12 vessels, he did not report Air. [Tucker's report repeats the same tonnage as Brereton in 1636, quoted by Strawhorn p.15.]

1665: The Watter Bailieship and teind of the Watter (excepting the Cobbles) were set by Public Roup to Jas Johnstone, Couper Burgess, for one year for the sum of forty pounds Scots, Wm Thompson, Armourer, being James' Cautioner [= surety/ sponsor]. The same

year on 6 May there is an important Minute as to the Harbour. The quhilk day the Magistrates & Council taking into their serious consideration the great prejudice this Burgh <p.121> has formerlie sustenit throw decay of their harberie and the Watter of Irving changing its channell quherby neither schips nor barkis can repaire neir this burgh that there is ane contract maid betwixt the said burgh and the Lairds of Dundonald and Sewalton quferby ther is libertie granted to the said Brugh to cutt throw the lands of Marreis at that place callit the docke for making of ane harberie. [Paterson quotes the rest of the document, by which inhabitants were conscripted to contribute labour; see Strawhorn p.54, who believes the project was not pursued, though Paterson seems below to presume it was, at least partly.] This is a notable example of the great power the Magistrates & Council of a Burgh exercised over its Burgesses and the description is interesting as to the changing of the course of the river. I have often heard it said that at low Water about the time Pont wrote his Account & published his Map that <p.122> the river ran from the Seagate foot in a direct course to the Sea near the present Ship building yard. The Dickies who farmed the Maress about fifty years ago [1830s] said that in Ploughing the field above the shipyard they had come upon old Pauls [mooring-posts] or Jetties and this was corroborated by Robertson the tenant who succeeded them - and this Council Minute bears indisputable evidence of the fact. There was a Dock at the present shipyard and the ancient course of the river can easily be traced from a little above the present foot Bridge & thence thro below the Railway, about 200 Yds to the North of Morras farm & steading, to the present channel again at the shipyard where prior to 1572 it would fall into the Sea at Low Water & at the Seagate at Hightide.

The setting of the Teinds of the Cobles was also an annual affair - they were set for Robert Cunyngham provost this year 1665 for £16 Scot - this must have been the "Salmon" fishing. 1667: The Watter Baillieship with anchorage and teind of Watter (except Cobbells), sett to Robert Cunyngham, Provost, for the soume of fiftie fyve pounds £55. Things seem to have got gradually brisker at what may be called the new Harbour consequent upon the cutting & clearing out of the Watter Mouth by the manual labour of the Burgesses and the Common Coall barell for measuring Coalls was sett by Public Roup to John Brown, Shoemaker Burgess, for Twentie pounds Scot for one year from 1 May 1688, Alexr Davidson, Factor Cautioner. John was bound to keep up the barrels & exact off each Boat four shillings Scot, each Bark or vessel with a Topsail 6/-. [for more on colliers, see Strawhorn p.82] <p.123> Each other Vesel above fourtie tons of burthen 8/-. John was also to confiscat each load of Coalls that is not of the measure of the Barrell with the Coal sack, and to poynd such vessels as refuse to pay him the above dues.

This corroborates Tucker's report of 1656 that the Merchandise was all carried to the ships sides in Bags or Sacks & tradition mentions wicker Creels or Panniers on Horses & Ponies backs. This must have been a very slow and expensive way of loading compared even with the old Coal Cart which was in use fifty years ago and would bear much the same proportion to it as the Cart system would so to that of the present day when 50 or 60 tons of Coal can be put on board in an hour.

1695: Great improvements had by this time been effected on the Harbour and when the Ropeing of the Water bailieship Anchorage & Brig Customs took place after Tuck [= beat] of the Drum and running of the Sand Glass as use is, they were Sett to Wm Smellie, Couper

Burgess of Irving for three years to come counting from 1st March inst. for the somme of Ane hundreth & Six Merks Scots yearly and upholding the Pearches [= parch (variant of Eng. perch), a pole in a seaway to guide navigation, also the heap of stones supporting the pole] and keeping up and placing of the Ballast Pearches [= heaps of stones where vessels were to cast out their ballast] in the manner underwritten as the same were last possessed by John Brown, Cordiner Burgess of Irvine, John Thomson, Merchant Burgess being Cautioner. Wm was bound to keep the Turning Pearch and other Pearches in their proper places as directed, also the places for casting out ballast coming to the Harbour and in case of failure or neglect to be fyneable and liable in all damages and expenses. He was bound not to allow any Coach or Cart to go along the Bridge without libertie from the Magistrates and if any <p.126> person should do the same, he or his cautioner is to bring the person before a Magistrate that Justice may be done upon him. The tacksman was also to be liable for any damage that may happen to any vessel thro his fault or neglect and he was not to have liberty to buy or broker any Herring or other fishes more than for the use of his own family to the prejudice of the inhabitants under such penalties as the Magistrates & Council think fit.

From this description it is clear that a system of Confining the river into one Channel had been commenced at this time, and it is likely that the Wharfage or Quay consisted of the Ballast Dock and about 200 feet of a very old looking Quay at the upper end of the present Wharf on which Samson's Hurry stood & which part of the Quay gave way and was rebuilt about forty years ago [1840s]. The lower part of what was the Old Quay from this down to the Big door & Wall at the end of the present Harbour Office was evidently more Modern and had been added at two or three time, the joinings being visible. It had no sunk foundation but the large Stones of the first course were laid upon long Beech Planks which kept them from sinking much.

In 1752 the Harbour was possessed of a Dredge Boat as a Minute of 29 Janry of that year directs men to be employed to manage it afterwards it came to grief having been arrested for some debt.

Smeaton the celebrated Harbour engineer who did so much to improve the Clyde was directed to inspect the Harbour and report in 1760 - if his report had been extant it would have thrown a good deal of light on the condition and appearance of the Harbour at this time.

The oldest Store House on <p.127> the Quay which I have noticed was Bryces which was opposite the lower part of what I think formed the original Quay of the Harbour formed on Marress but from the date on the oak lintel it was only built in 1767 - in the House to the W. was the Custom House.

On 19 Aug 1779, Provost Hamilton was discharged of his intromissions of £400 rec.d from the Convention by annual payments of £100 for four yeas and this no doubt accounts for the Harbour having been put into better shape. In 1784 the Council ordered the Old Watch House and Coal Ree that stood at the Key to be moved; this no doubt was the time the Quay was extended on the Beech Planks.

From this time downwards there does not appear to have been much change in the works at the Harbour. The export of Coal to Ireland was considerable for the time & facilities and the number of Vessels owned by Burgesses & others had greatly increased. There were also three building yards viz. Gilkison Mair & Co, Munns & Martins; the former popularly known as the Brae is still so occupied, Munns & Martins being on or near the Timber Yard of Messrs John Wright & Son. From the former in March 1814 we learn from the Air [sic] Advertiser that there was launched in presence of a great concourse of Spectators a fine ship of 309 tons burthen free register; this is the largest ever built there; she is called the 'Montreal' and is to be commanded by Capt. Harvey. In connection with the Brae, it may be mentioned, that Eckford [Henry b. in Irvine in 1775, Strawhorn pp.93 & 100], who was the Naval Architect of the United States [with others, eg John Paul Jones], served his time in it, and that it was at one time occupied by the Webbs (Bailie Webb [John Webb, 1759, Strawhorn p76]) who afterwards became eminent Shipbuilders and Merchants in Liverpool. The other two yards also did a respectable business, but after the Clyde Ports, of Greenock and Port Glasgow, began to rise in importance, a number of the Irvine Carpenters left for these Towns, where many of their descendants still reside having risen to opulence and important positions in life. **<p128-131 are inserted pages, with notes still to be transcribed>**

<p.132> 1807: In 1807 the proposal of forming a Harbour at Ardrossan on an extensive Scale and connecting the same with Glasgow by a Canal via Johnston [sic] Paisley & Glasgow which was surveyed by Telford the celebrated engineer. The Magistrates & Council of Irvine with a most unselfish generosity contributed £35 out of the Burgh funds to assist in paying the expense of the survey. From this it will appear that the Irvine Authorities had a hand in promoting both Troon & Ardrossan. In 1824 & 25 they began again to think of doing something from their own Harbour and as the Bridge was narrow and the accesses thereto not wide with no exit from the burgh towards the East or Glasgow direction except by the Smiddebar [Smiddy Bar] now Glasgow Vennel, or the road past the Duntonknoll Quarry. It was resolved to apply to Parliament for an Act for Widening and improving the Bridge and Accesses thereto, for opening up the Street now called Bank Street, and last but not least for effectually deepening and improving the Harbour of Irvine: Capital to be expended £5000.

1826: This Act was passed in 1826, and was certainly an attempt to do great things with little. Previous to this the Harbour which had been purchased as formerly mentioned out of the Common Good had been managed as part of the same, the revenue & expenditure forming part of the Town's incomings and outgoings, but now it was erected into a separate Trust, the Burgh giving up its exclusive right to the dues authorized to be levied, to the new Trustees & seven shipowners. The property in the Fund of course remaining with the Burgh. It is difficult to ascertain what the revenue was at this time perhaps about £300 per annum; the dues it must be remembered were small & only on the vessel, Coals all being shipped **<p.133>** out of Carts wheeled along two planks resting on the Quay, & maybe at the other end on two Whisky Puncheons [casks, usually 500 litre (110 galls)], except at the Upper end, where ... or Samson's Hurry [Samson & Co., Strawhorn p.142] tilted small Waggons containing four loads drawn by Horses from Shewalton Colliery.

The Water on the Bar was only about seven or eight feet at ordinary tides at high Water & 10 feet Spring tides with the chance of a bank with even less on it according to the State of the wind or river. So vessels of more than 100 tons burden had often to take part of their

Cargo on board after they crossed the Bar, in the Bay from Gabbarts. These Gabbarts were flat-bottomed and carried about 20 tons & might be seen at high Water scudding down the Garnock from the Bartonholm or Snodgrass Pits with their large brown lug sails. They up to this time could sail at High Water direct to the Sea from the Garnock through between what was known as the Bar Isle, & the Misk, where the writer has seen the sea flow at High Tide. [After 1778, coal from pits at the Misk, Stevenston, annual output 10,000 tons, was transported by two short canals to the Garnock and floated right down to Irvine harbour (Strawhorn, p.77)] The Gabbart men discharged their Cargo into the Ship by a bucket & Windlass. It was the practice for Wherries & vessels or boats of small burden especially those from Arran and Highlands to endeavour to evade the Harbour dues by railing direct up the Garnock to the Pits where the Gabbarts were loaded and taking in their Cargo without coming to the Quay. This was the cause of many Rows & disputes.

The Harbour at this time furnished employment not only for a large amount of Capital invested in the shipping, which was almost exclusively owned by the Burgesses and their families & dependants, but also to about 500 Marines and the cartage & keep of the Horses circulated much money among the parties concerned therewith. I have heard my father often say, that he has counted one hundred carts loaded with coal standing on the Quay at one time when going to the bathing of a morning with Controller Gray. Coals then as now formed the principal export & the imports were Barks for the Kilmarnock tanners and Grain for the Irvine Merchants & those of the surrounding Country with Limestone from the north of Ireland. The old wooden Vessels of the period seldom shifted without Ballast, so that the Land in the neighbourhood of the **<p.134>** Harbour was greatly raised during the three Centuries it has been there from this cause - as can easily be seen when a Drain or other excavation is made. At the beginning of this Century the Tide flowed across the Street where the present large Drain empties iteself into the the river and there was a Loch of considerable size called the Sluices on the E side of the street where Alexr McKinlay built his House Emerald Bank. Mr McKinlay was long the Harbour Master & gave his House that name knowing that the stuff the Sluices was filled up with was Ballast discharged at the Dock on the other side of the street & brought from Ireland, the Green Isle.

1826: (But to return to the Act of 1826.) The [Harbour] Trustees were in no way inactive; they proceeded to offer a premium to Ship Masters to bring stones in place of earth or Gravel Ballast and as the river below the Quay and its junction with the Garnock was very erratic they commenced and built a Pier about 500 yds in length running nearly in a line from the end of the old Quay in a direct line with the Lady Isle, along which Pier it was supposed the river would run both at low and high Water. At the latter the Sea came up on either side. The old Bar Perch being a little to the South east of the Pier end. This effected a considerable improvement in one way but it effectually did away with the Stray Quay where the deep Water was as it being off the run of the river soon silted up.

1832:

Mr Gibb who had had much experience in improving the Harbour of Aberdeen, which like Irvine had to contend with a shallow river Mouth, recommended that the course of the river should be confined by Jetties so as to increase the Tidal Scoure which at Irvine in consequence of the large amount of land **<p.135>** submerged at high water, should be very considerable and effective in removing the Sand Banks. This, as before mentioned, was a

plan adopted at a very early period, prior to 1665 at Irvine, was again put in force and Jetties were thrown out from the Pier so as to enable the Vessels to sail out with a South or S.E. Wind and also on the North side to a less degree thereby narrowing the course of the river and Navigable Channel to about 300 feet.

Up till the year 1835 before the Jetties had come to take effect, it was quite common in the Months of July and Aug. to see numbers of Men & Women raking sand Eels on the Bar at low Water, there not being much more than a foot of Water on it.

The erection of these Jetties continued on Annually during the summer till about 1845. The Stones for a number of years were carted from the Dunton Knoll Quarry (other than those imported) and shipped on board a Punt or Gabbard at a Quay formed at the Wee Plumb below the Academy & from thence poled or sailed down the river with the receding Tide, during the time the late Robert Wyllie was Harbour Master. Capt Mr Wyllie by the way died very suddenly in Edinburgh in March 1843 after giving evidence in the famous Hot Blast Case Neilson versus the Bairds etc. It was established that Mr Neilson had first applied it to fires or furnaces in Irvine - which Capt Wyllie had seen.

Up till the year 1835 before the Jetties had time to take effect it was quite common in the Months of July and August to see numbers of men and women raking sand Eels on the bar at low Water, there not being much more than a foot of Water on it.

By 1842 a number of new Jetties had been erected, surmounted with wooden stobs, especially near the Bar, which cut the sea in a very surprising manner, & caused the water to be comparatively calm in the river Channel; this with the increased Scour from the Water accumulated on the flats & bed of the river itself, up as far as the tide flowed, caused the sand to be swept out into deeper Water and the Bar was improved up to about 10 feet ordinary Tides and 13 Spring with a S.W. wind - Mr Gibb's recommendation being to follow outwards with the Jetties into deeper Water according as opportunity presented.

<p.136>

1845: In 1845 the Railway (Glasgow & S.W.), which had formerly had no communication direct with the Harbour, made the Harbour Branch, and the Trustees erected a Timber Wharf which was completely detached from the Old Quay, and below the Mouth of the Garnock, to accommodate the Railway Traffic. Ford was contractor for the Wharf. There were two hurries erected in it suitable for shipping four ton Waggons, and the Burgh advanced about £1000 of the cost. In consequence of the Railway connection the shipping increased and the Burgh was benefited so far by the Feu duly paid by the Railway for the Land occupied. The whole debt on the Harbour at this time did not exceed £1800 & the reserve was about £500.

1856: In 1856 it was represented to the Trustees that Irvine laboured under a very considerable disadvantage compared with Troon & Ardrossan in having no Tug Steamer to assist the vessels in entering or sailing from the Harbour & consequently after much deliberation in the Trust and Town Council, it was agreed to purchase a Tug which resolution was carried out by Mr Dick in proceeding to Newcastle and acquiring the Scottish Maid for £1200 - which gave a new impetus to the Harbour. The Burgh had to advance £1100 of the

price and this was dissented from by the then Provost, Senr Bailie & Treasurer. JP who was a Bailie at the time, signed the Bill along with the other Magistrates. Before the Tug was got the vessels entering and sailing had to be warped out by their crews in a small boat in front, when the weather was calm, which was a most laborious business.

Prospects being brighter in 1867 a Provisional order was obtained authorizing the Burgh to advance £10,000 to be expended in improving the Wharfage and in 1869 a Dredger of approved plan was provided which deepened the Bar to about 12 feet of ordinary tides, & the Berths inside to 8 feet low water, so that vessels were always kept afloat. Old stone Quay had consequently to be removed <p137> and a Timber Wharf substituted with deep Piles.

1870: In 1870 Another Provisional Order was got so as to enable the works begun to be completed so far.

1873: And in 1873, JP [the author, John Paterson] being Provost, from the increase of the shipping and the defective powers conferred by the old Act of 1826 in regard to Dues etc it was considered expedient to get a New Act of Parliament more especially as another Railway was being promoted, having proposed connection with the Harbour. The Act was obtained for the Harbour, but the Railway having no Bona Fide promoters, except a young firm of Engineers & a Solicitor, was allowed to drop. This Act conferred extensive powers on a Newly created Body of Trustees, consisting of the Town Council, Ship owners, and Traders, authorizing a new scale of dues etc, & empowering the Trustees to form Docks, and a Breakwater, cut the course of the Irvine, etc, at an expense of £260,000. The debt of the Harbour at the time, principally due to the Royal Burgh being £16,480, which would have made a total of £276,489. Ten years were allowed for making the Docks which has now expired, so that the principal alterations on the Harbour have not been carried out, & never will likely be now, but the Act has been very beneficial, in conferring increased dues, & consolidating the debts, & in every way placing the Trust in a very different position from what it had occupied previously.

1873: The Income arising from 17,982 tons of stuff imported & 103,020 tons exported was in 1873 £2383.6.8 [decimal £2,383.34]. In 1883 it had risen to 28,232 tons & 113,314 tons = £4738.4.3 [decimal £4,738.21] partly on account of the extra dues, etc, authorized by new Act. The ordinary expenditure for '83 being £4400.17/- [decimal £4,400.82]

<end of John Paterson's section on the Harbour>

Transcription by Ian J Dickson, Irvine Burns Club, 2013

see also James Paterson, "History of the Counties of Ayr & Wigton Scotland: Cunninghame, Vol. III, Cunninghame", 612pp, 1866, especially pp.264ff.;
reprinted 2001 by Heritage Books, Inc., Maryland, and partially accessible in Google Books;
also available in full at <http://archive.org/details/historycounties02pategoog>

see also the Muniments of the Royal Burgh of Irvine, digitised by Cornell University Library
(http://www.archive.org/stream/cu31924091787634/cu31924091787634_djvu.txt)