

II.

ON BEGGARS' BADGES, WITH NOTES ON THE LICENSED MENDICANTS OF SCOTLAND. BY J. BALFOUR PAUL, ADVOCATE, F.S.A. Scot.

The practice of indicating by some distinctive mark those persons who are indebted to the charity of others for the comforts or the necessaries of life is a very ancient one, and continues in many places to our own day. The inhabitants of our almshouses and charity schools are usually either dressed in a particular uniform or wear some distinguishing badge. These badges generally bear the arms or device of the founder of the charity, and are, I presume, survivals of the time when all the noble's dependents wore his cognizance blazoned on their attire. In old days, before any legal system of relief was instituted, the poor were privileged wanderers, and roamed about the kingdom at will, having in their ranks many who preferred to live a life of vagabond idleness to doing any regular work. These "strong and masterful beggars" overran the country so much, that in 1424 an Act was passed, which permitted sick and impotent persons, who were unable to earn a livelihood, to beg, and indeed enacted that they should have a licence for that purpose in the shape of a badge, but denounced the other class as "sorners who, besides other inconveniences which they daily produce in the commonwealth, procure the wrath and displeasure of God for the

wicked and ungodly form of life used amongst them, without marriage or the baptizing of a great number of their bairns." They were apparently composed of gipsies, fortune-tellers, vagabond scholars of the universities, wandering minstrels, and such like. They were ordered to be kept in prison so long as their goods would support them; if they had no goods their ears were cut off, and they were banished from the country, and if they were thereafter found again they were incontinently hanged.

It is, however, with the deserving and not with the undeserving poor that we have to do, for it was the former only that got the privilege of a licence to beg. Why this licence took the form of a badge is not difficult to see: in days when comparatively few people could read it was useless issuing a written licence, which would besides have got easily frayed and torn in the pocket or wallet of its possessor. In other countries, too, long before the time to which we allude, badges were recognised as marking the licensed beggar. Rodrigo Mendez Silva, in his description of Valencia in Spain, says that no poor man was allowed to beg unless he wore attached to his neck a leaden badge stamped with the arms of the town, and he mentions that this regulation dated from 1393.

In England we find a good deal of legislation as to beggars in the reign of Edward VI. By one of his Acts the poor were licensed to beg, and the recipient of the licence was to "weare openly upon him both on the breast and back of his uttermost garment some notable badge or token." In later times (1697) it was enacted that all persons receiving parochial relief had to wear a badge bearing a large Roman P, together with the first letter of the name of the parish or place to which they belonged, cut in red or blue cloth on the shoulder of the right sleeve. The penalties for not carrying out this regulation were very severe, and the churchwardens were fined twenty shillings for relieving any one without this badge. The poor of St James's Parish, Clerkenwell, seem to have worn badges as early as 1695; in this instance also the rule was, nominally at least, rigorously carried out, the parish beadle getting sixpence for the first and a shilling for the second offence he reported, and being fined half a crown for the first failure to report and five shillings for the next. In connection with these badges, a writer in

Notes and Queries, some years ago, suggests that they may have given rise to the phrase "the badge of poverty."

Before proceeding to treat of the history of beggars' badges in detail, perhaps this Society will pardon me alluding to the distressing fact that an antiquary—and one of some note—was once the recipient in his own person, not indeed of a badge, but what was equivalent, viz., a licence to beg, his circumstances being so reduced as to compel him to throw himself on the charity of the public. This was John Stow, the well-known antiquary and author of the *History and Antiquities of London*. In 1604, when a very old man, he found himself obliged to petition King James for a licence to beg, which was granted, and letters patent issued under the Great Seal in the following terms:—

Whereas our loving subject John Stow (a very aged and worthy member of our city of London) this five and forty years hath to his great charge and with neglect of his ordinary means of maintenance (for the general good as well of posterity as of the present age) compiled and published divers necessary books and chronicles, and therefore we in recompense of his painful labours, and for the encouragement of the like, have in our royal inclination been pleased to grant our Letters Patent under our Great Seal of England, thereby authorising him the said John Stow to collect among our loving subjects their voluntary contributions and kind gratuities.

The letters were granted for one year, but the result was so feeble that they were extended for another year, during which the poor old gentleman died.

Turning our attention, however, more particularly to Scotland, we find the Parliament fully alive to the necessity of making some provision for the relief of the poor, and of preventing the evils of indiscriminate begging. The Act of James I., to which I previously alluded, also ordained that the "certain tokens," with which beggars were to be provided, were to be granted them by the Sheriff in the case of a county, and by the Town Council in the case of burghs. A similar enactment was passed in the succeeding reign. In 1583, by an Act of James V., the privileges of beggars were considerably curtailed, none being allowed to solicit alms outside their own parish, the "headsmen" of each parish being required to make tokens and distribute them to beggars. Notwithstanding this provision, it was not able to prevent the poor from

flocking together whenever it was most likely they would get charity. In 1551 Parliament finds that beggars are daily multiplying in all places where my Lord Governor and other nobles convened, and accordingly ratifies the former Acts, another ratification taking place four years after. The attention of the Legislature was once more called to the plague of begging in 1574, and ultimately, in the years 1625 and 1672, there were Acts passed which brought the Church more into connection with the poor than possibly it had been before. The ministers and elders of each parish were ordered to make lists of the poor: the heritors were then to meet with the latter, and appoint them places wherein to abide, that they might be supplied by the contributions of the parish kirk: if these, however, were not sufficient they were to give them a badge or ticket to beg within their own parish.

It would appear then that, at any rate after the Reformation, there were three sources through which the deserving poor might obtain badges conferring on them the privilege of begging. These were—*a*, the magistrates of towns; *b*, the kirk-sessions of parishes; *c*, the Sovereign, who as we shall see could bestow larger privileges in the matter of mendicancy than the others. In some cases town councils and kirk-sessions acted in concert, but of course in country districts the kirk-sessions were supreme.

It may not be uninteresting to point out, as briefly as possible, how widespread throughout Scotland the custom was, for a long period of years, of giving badges to the poor, emanating from the sources above indicated; and I am glad to be able to show to the Society some specimens of the actual badges issued.

The earliest mention I have met with of badges distributed by the authorities of a town occurs in the records of the council of Edinburgh in 1502. The provost, bailies, and council then determine that, owing to the disorders prevalent in consequence of the "pestilence" that had at that time raged for some years (which points to a visitation of the plague previous to the great outbreak after the battle of Flodden), certain "leiden taiknis" shall be given to the "puir failyeit folks to quhat quantity of nummer sall be thoct expedient"; and if any were found begging without a token "be it a man to be strucken throw the hand,

and be it a woman to be brunt on the cheik and banest the toun, but favoures." The cheek of a woman and the hand of a man were naturally enough considered to be the parts which transgressors would least willingly have disfigured or maimed. In 1576 some attempts were made to relieve the necessities of the poor by ordering a general collection to be made for them. It appears, however, to have failed: the inhabitants of Edinburgh would not loose their purse-strings; so the council fell back on the old system, and contented themselves with directing that "nane be sufferit to beg within this toun but sic as sall have the tounis mark upon their hattis, bonettis or schulderris, and their markis to be disponit at the discretioun of the bailies." Three years afterwards we find the council ordering all strange beggars to leave the town, and their own poor to convene themselves in Greyfriars churchyard for examination, and if found worthy, to "resave thair takinis be the quhilk thai sall be sufferit to ask daylie almous throw the toun." The only other glimpse we get of the municipal distribution of badges in Edinburgh is of much later date, and it only consists of an entry in the accounts of the burgh of the Canongate in 1776—"gevin for lattoun to mark the puir ii s. vi d."

It is evident that the practice of the gift of badges by the town authorities to the deserving poor prevailed over the whole of Scotland. All beggars, we are told, were ordered to leave Glasgow during the pestilence in 1574 except those who had leave from the provost, and they were to receive their "markis" at the Tolbooth. What those "markis" were appears from the city accounts for 27th May 1575, when there is an entry of two shillings and threepence for "row lattoun to be markis to the puir folk," row lattoun being circular pieces of brass or pewter: we find also that Robert Wilsoun, hammerman, got the sum of 35 lbs. 2s. for "making of tickets." A hundred years after this badges with the town's arms on them were given to the poor who had been born within the town.

The bailies and council in Aberdeen, we are told, proceeded on the 18th of May 1546 to "vesy" all the beggars, and to give natives of the town the town's token; and in 1574 they were ordered to wear this badge on "their utter garmountht," whereby they might be known. In

1650 William Scott, wright, was ordered by the council to make a number of "ticketis," with the name of the town and the year of God upon them, to be given to the poor folk who had resided for seven years within the burgh. This, however, cannot have been the first time that such badges were adopted in that town, for so early as 1616 the kirk-session of Aberdeen ordered that no beggars should get alms save those having the town's token. It is curious that the badges ordered to be distributed in 1650 were made by a wright. If they were made of wood they would probably be unique examples of the kind.

The good people of Aberdeen seem to have been even more determined than their neighbours that no strangers should get the benefit of their alms; after providing, as we have seen, for the distribution of badges to their own poor, they order that all others shall be imprisoned or scourged; and two scourgers were actually appointed, one of whom was granted an official residence some time afterwards. Their principal duty was probably to expel all vagrants and strange beggars from the precincts of the town. This custom of getting rid of beggars by the simple plan of sending them to beg somewhere else has been apparently kept up in Aberdeenshire till within comparatively recent years, for a correspondent writes me:—"An old man tells me he recollects a man being put on to chivy the beggars out of the parish, a process accompanied by much strong language; and if any one of the beggars were impotent the people in the parish passed him or her on in a barrow from one farm-house to another till the border was crossed." Some, however, were allowed to remain, and these it is supposed got certificates or badges of some sort.

In Dundee the practice of giving badges to the poor seems to have obtained from an early period. In January 1558 the council enact that "no beggars be tholit within this burgh, but quhilk are born within the same; and nane of them be suffered to beg except they (having the town's seal upon their hat or cloak) be auld, cruikit, laim or debilitatit be great seikness."

The last example of the issuing of badges to the poor by a town council to which I shall direct your attention is that of the town of Kirkwall, and in this case we are fortunate enough to possess a specimen of the badge issued. The order of the council relating to it is

dated June 26, 1674, and proceeds upon the narrative that many complaints had been made regarding the number of beggars who infested the town, and that to obviate this it was necessary that a roll of town poor should be made up and a badge granted to them, made of lead, with the town's arms and motto on it. All beggars without the badge were to be expelled by the bellman.

Several other examples might be given of burghs where the poor were distinguished by badges, but enough has, I think, been said to make it more than probable that the practice was prevalent in all the large towns in Scotland from an early period. In country places the Act of James I. provided that beggars should receive their "certain tokens" from the sheriff, but after the Reformation we find the kirk-sessions of the various parishes constantly issuing badges to the deserving poor. The kirk-session of St Cuthbert's, Edinburgh, in 1619 prohibited any one soliciting alms who had not previously received a badge. And so late as 1743 the same body, having unsuccessfully attempted to assess the parish for relief of the poor, had again recourse to badges. They were stamped with the words "West Kirk," the date of issue, and an individual number; and they in all probability continued in use till the erection of the workhouse in the parish in the year 1762. In 1744 fifty-eight badges were given out.

Frequent mention of badges is made in the records of kirk-sessions all throughout Scotland. In 1642, for instance, the Presbytery of Ayr ordained that persons thought worthy to beg by the ministers and kirk-sessions should be marked with "stamps of lead" upon their breasts, for the purpose of discovering them from strangers and idle vagabonds. Again, no less than sixty badges were ordered to be made by the kirk-session of Kilmarnock in 1693; and five years after that we find the kirk-session of Monkton parish providing badges, with the inscription of Monkton on one side and that of Prestwick on the other. This, however, did not prove a popular movement; the independent paupers there refusing at first to wear the badge, though afterwards they consented to swallow their pride and submit to the indignity.

At a later period it would appear that badges or certificates to beg were issued by other bodies than kirk-sessions. In 1725 the heritors

of Aberdour agreed that each poor person in the parish should have some badge or mark, having on the one side "Aberdour" and on the other "Parish"—a mode of authenticating the badges which does not say much for the invention of the worthy heritors.

The latest instance which I have been able to discover of a parochial badge having been worn occurs in the case of the badge (fig. 1) now exhibited to the Society—or one exactly similar. It has been recently presented to the Society by Mr Charles Black, a very intelligent and cultivated old man in the parish of Tullibole (I regret to say that he has since died). He had, curiously enough, several specimens of this badge, which conveys a licence to beg within the united parishes of Fossoway and Tullibole. It is a circular leaden disc, 6 inches in circumference, bearing in the



Fig. 1. Beggar's Badge of Lead (actual size).

centre a double-headed eagle displayed, and on its breast a shield with the Agnus Dei, and around the margin the names of the parishes in Roman letters within a border. There is a projecting eyelet hole at the top of the badge, to enable it to be stitched on to the coat. I have not been able to find out at what date these badges were originally issued, but they continued to be worn down to a comparatively recent period, as the donor, Mr Black, told me that he himself remembered the

last beggar in the parish who wore a badge: his name was Hutcheon, and he died in 1824.¹

The only other kind of mendicant who was privileged to wear a badge for the purpose of soliciting alms was of rather a higher class. The King's bedesmen obtained their authority to beg direct from the Sovereign, and the badge which they wore—one of which is now shown (fig. 2)—bore the Royal Crown and the words "Pass and Repass" for a



Fig. 2. Bedesman's Badge of Pewter (3 inches diameter).

motto, giving them thereby the privilege of wandering throughout broad Scotland, instead of being confined to one particular parish or town, as were the holders of mere local badges. The custom of the King having poor pensioners is of ancient date, and prevailed both in England and Scotland. In this country they were at first merely called "poor men"; but in 1473 we find in the Treasurer's accounts an entry of twelve shillings paid "to Androw blind man, the King's beidman at the King's command to buy him met," and shortly after thirty shillings was granted him for his clothing, &c. "again Yule." Bedesmen proper were usually foundationers residing in an hospital or elsewhere: they were generally thirteen in number, and wore gowns with a badge bearing the cognizance

¹ Since the above was in type a correspondent informs me that one badge at least was worn in the parish of Sanquhar within the last fifty years.

of the founder, for the repose of whose soul they were bound to pray daily at chapel. It is doubtful, however, whether the King's beads-men ever performed such religious functions. They were probably at first selected deserving poor to whom the Sovereign gave a repast on Skire or Maundy Thursday—a custom which was at one time common at most of the European courts. The King served the table himself, and washed the guests' feet; we are told that in 1526 James V. used an apron of Holland cloth on such an occasion. In Queen Mary's time her pensioners were women, not men, but in 1566 the King assisted in washing the feet of thirteen men (the number of the apostles), and the Queen those of twenty-four women, being the number of years of her age. Each pensioner used to receive in Holyrood Chapel a gown and hood of grey cloth—before 1501, of blue cloth after that date,—a pair of shoes and a wooden cup and platter, one containing ale, the other bread and meat, together with a purse of leather in which was a penny for each year of the King's reign.

After the accession of James VI. the ceremony of washing the feet fell—like many other touching and symbolic observances—into disuse; in 1580, however, the giving of alms was resumed, but in order that there might be no lurking suspicion of Popery about the matter, the date was changed from Maundy Thursday to the King's birthday, and the alms were dispensed by His Majesty's almoner, and not by himself.

Besides dispensing the alms, the almoner, who was generally one of the King's chaplains, preached a sermon to the Blue Gowns, but, however thankfully this may have been at one time received, they were latterly, we are told by Sir Walter Scott, the most impatient and inattentive audience in the world. "Something of this," he says, "may arise from a feeling on the part of the bedesmen that they are paid for their own devotions, not for listening to those of others. Or, more probably, it arises from impatience, natural, though indecorous, in men bearing so venerable a character, to arrive at the conclusion of the ceremonial of the royal birthday, which, so far as they are concerned, ends in a hasty breakfast of bread and ale; the whole moral and religious exhibition terminating in the advice of Johnson's 'Hermit hoar' to his proselyte,

'Come, my lad, and drink some beer.'

Scott also says, in his preface to the *Antiquary*, where he has drawn such a vivid and amusing portrait of an old Blue Gown, that few of the King's bedesmen were to be seen at that date (1829) on the streets of Edinburgh; but this must have arisen from the fact that the old men probably preferred to beg in the country, where they got better entertainment, for in 1832 there were sixty-eight bedesmen on the roll. The privilege, however, came to be abused, and it was ultimately determined to suppress the charity. The last survivor of this class of privileged beggars probably died in 1863, for though there is an item of £1, 13s. 4d. in the estimates of 1864-5 for alms and a gown, the charity was not claimed.

I have endeavoured in the above notes to bring together the allusions to the various beggars and their badges, which lie scattered throughout a large number of records, and I trust in so doing I have not been unduly discursive or wearisome. It is singular that so few badges have survived to our day, considering that at one time they must have been extremely common over all the country. They were, however, of little intrinsic value, and probably became children's playthings, or were thrown aside as useless, possibly to turn up again some day and puzzle the antiquaries of a future generation.