

IV.

SOME NOTES ON ROAD BILLS, WITH REFERENCE TO A COLLECTION OF THEM, IN THREE VOLUMES, NOW EXHIBITED;—AND NOTES ON THE CASTING FROM ABERNETHY IRON WORKS, NOW PRESENTED TO THE MUSEUM. BY WM. CRAMOND, A.M., LL.D., F.S.A. SCOT., CULLEN.

A perusal of the Road Bills of last century recalls some interesting features in the social life of our fathers. The collection that illustrates these notes is probably the largest that has been made, containing, as it does, in two bound volumes, about seventy different varieties of Scottish bills, and nearly an equal number of English. A third volume consists almost entirely of MS. bills from 1733 to the present day, a few modern continental varieties being included for comparison.

Before the middle of the eighteenth century, road bills were wholly in MS. Printed forms then came into general use. The name and address of the hotel-keeper appear at the top, with occasionally an appropriate pictorial design in a style of art not much removed from that of the old chap-books. The body of the bill is occupied by a list of eatables and drinkables and other requirements on a journey, as copious and varied as the most exacting traveller could be expected to demand. The Scottish varieties are, as a rule, ruder in design and execution than the English bills. Exceptions, however, occur. The bill of the George Inn, Stonehaven, shows a spirited engraving of St George and the Dragon, while the Swan Inn, Brechin, in 1768, has an elaborate steel engraving, representing a swan as the central figure. The latter was executed in Birmingham, and excels even most of the English road bills. The French traveller Saint Fond remarks in 1780 that his Ediuburgh hotel was magnificent and adorned with columns, as his bill was with flourishes and vignettes. Many of the northern bills were printed by Chalmers of Aberdeen and Davidson of Banff.

In the collection are represented most of the hotels the traveller would have passed about a century ago in going by the usual road from Inverness to London. As we look at the names of some of the hotels

we are reminded that there Burns, Johnson, and other famous tourists rested for the night.

One may judge from these bills what were the favourite drinks of our fathers. It was not whisky, for till the present century the entry seldom occurs. Claret, port, and sherry were more suited to the taste of those times, and these and several other varieties of wine, as Champagne, Burgundy, and Madeira, could be had even at most of the out-of-the-way inns. Wine was the drink of those who could afford it. The humbler classes drank ale or beer.

'A tappit hen' heads many of the bills, but few had the courage to call for one. Many a company, however, felt itself equal to a 'magnum bonum,' and at a club dinner sixteen magnums was not thought an immoderate order, for it had to be supplemented by a dozen or two bottles of port or sherry. Some of the drinks, although they attained popularity in their day, have scarcely survived to our time. Such were 'Old men's milk,' 'Scrape,' 'Shrub,' and 'Athol brose.'

In looking over these bills, one is struck with the extreme disproportion of the charge for eatables compared with that for drinkables. The dinner proper, for example, may have cost 2s., but to this was sometimes added 3s. for claret, 2s. 3d. for port, and perhaps a small supplementary charge for porter or ale. Claret could generally be had in Scotland at a moderate rate, especially at the seaport towns which traded direct with France, a bottle sometimes costing only 10d. In the early part of the eighteenth century all charges were moderate: for example, at Banff, in 1737, the laird of Lesmurdie's horse cost him 1s. 2d. for corn and straw for two nights, his two servants' diet for three days, at a penny per diet, came to 1s. 6d., and eighteen pints of ale to them 3s.

Other entries one cannot fail to note in these old bills are 'To grease,' which was required sometimes for the horses' feet and sometimes for the chaise, appearing in the latter case as 'cheese greese'; 'To watching the coach, 1s.'—a regular nightly charge when valuables were carried on a journey; and 'To broken' or 'To brokage'—a fair item for the landlord to indemnify himself for, seeing the customs of last century were such that the utmost stretch of charity could not be expected to characterise such occurrences as accidental.

On crossing the Border, the bills, like the customs, change. 'Eating' now becomes the first entry in the bill in place of 'tappit hens.' 'Servants' eating and ale' takes the place of 'Drink to servants,' and so on.

The facilities for travelling at the present day as compared with former times mark one of the greatest triumphs of modern civilisation. Two centuries ago it was the custom in Scotland to travel on a hired horse, a footman running alongside to bring the horse back, the charge being 2d. per mile for horse and guide. About 1770, as these bills show, the charge for a chaise was 9d. per mile, which charge afterwards increased to about 1s., including government duty. It cost a gentleman at that time about £90 to make a journey from the North of Scotland to London; and in 1782 the travelling expenses of the Countess of Sutherland from London to Sutherland and back amounted to the sum of £192.

The Iron Foundry at Abernethy, Inverness-shire.—The great forest of Abernethy, in Inverness-shire, attracted the attention of the York Buildings Company of London, who in 1728 purchased a portion of the forest for £7000, and worked it for some nine years. This company, with all their shortcomings, was notable at least for enterprise. They made roads and saw-mills, and transported wood, as had never been done before. One of the most energetic of the officials was Aaron Hill the poet, who devised a form of raft, which proved a great success. A man guided it with an oar at each end. Another industry they introduced was iron-smelting. The iron ore was carried on the backs of ponies from the Lecht, near Tomintoul, and smelted with wood, of which there was an inexhaustible supply, at the Iron Mill Croft. The Company ceased working and left the district in 1737, the floods of the Nethy covered and concealed almost all trace of their operations, and not till the memorable flood of 1829 laid bare the foundations of the iron mill did the inhabitants realise that a great industry had once existed in their midst.

Two iron castings of great size are still to be seen at the rear of the

hotel buildings. They are eighteen feet in length and seven inches square, and weigh perhaps three tons each. The pig-iron has usually the date cast upon it, the most common date being 1731 or thereby. The specimen now exhibited when entire bore the following—'I. 1731.' It weighs fully thirty pounds. Near View Cottage smithy are the remains of the kiln, and quantities of ore, slag, and charcoal. Specimens of these are also exhibited. Part of the dam dyke still exists close by, and another dam may be traced near the Iron Mill Croft. 'Crawley's Well,' a substantially built well of excellent water, perpetuates the name of one of the Company's workmen, James Crawley. The large hammer of the foundry lay, not many years ago, at the boat on the Spey, near where Broomhill Bridge has been erected. A rope through the hole in the head of the hammer kept the boat fast. Farm-servants considered it a fair test of strength to lift the hammer-head; but unfortunately it one day slipped into the river, where it no doubt still lies.

The employees of the York Buildings Company had a bad reputation. A Gaelic rhyme still lingers in the district, which may thus be translated: "A hundred times wishing you good health, the forester that frightened the Englishman from Coulnakyle."

The specimen of iron here exhibited, and now presented to the Museum, was submitted to practical men, who pronounced it to be hematite iron in the first state after coming from the furnace, and before being submitted to the process of moulding.