

IV.

THE STORY OF A "BARBER'S BLEEDING-DISH." By GEORGE A. FOTHERGILL, M.B., C.M.

As the records of the Surgeon-Barbers' Guild of England carry us farther back than those of the same Guild do in Scotland, I have gathered a few particulars about this London Guild from its early history (written some years ago by Mr Sydney Young) with which to preface my remarks concerning the Edinburgh Guild.

London still possesses headquarters for its "barbers." The old Hall is in Monkwell Street, E.C. By the records preserved there we know the Barbers' Company, as it is now called, dates back to the middle of the thirteenth century. Richard Lebarber was the first master of the Guild, in 1308.

Edward IV. granted its first charter in 1462.¹ The charter is still preserved at the Hall. Barbers were surgeons, and surgeons barbers in those days. It appears that later on the actual surgeon-barbers were a stronger body than the surgeons, which proves there must have been some little distinction between the surgeon and the barber, and that there was considerably more haircutting and shaving, and possibly blood-letting, too, than surgery, hence the assertion of power of the surgeon-barber over the surgeon pure and simple. In 1540 Henry VIII. granted

¹ Dr J. Smith, LL.D., F.R.C.S. Ed., is therefore in error when he says, in his *Origin, Progress and Present Position of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh* (published for the surgeons privately 1st July 1905), that the earliest surgical corporation chartered in the United Kingdom was the Edinburgh Guild.

the Company another charter. By this charter barbers were forbidden to practise surgery, and surgeons barbery. The exceedingly valuable painting by Holbein, still to be seen at the Hall, commemorates this event. By the year 1745 the surgeons had gained pre-eminence over the barbers, and they sought for a dissolution. They were re-incorporated, and the Company of Surgeons and the Company of Barbers were henceforth distinct bodies.

In the *History of Edinburgh* by William Maitland, F.R.S. (published in 1732), I have found this reference to the Scottish surgeon-barbers:—
“The Barbers of Edinburgh, on the first day of July, in the year 1505, were by a Charter from the Town Council, incorporated with the Surgeons; but imagining themselves injured in their Rights and Privileges by their new Brethren, frequent Disputes arose; which continued till the 23rd Feb., anno 1722, when in a Process before the Court of Session, the Barbers were, by a Decree of said Court, separated from the Surgeons in all respects other than registering their apprentices with the said Surgeons, to be admitted both by them and the Barbers. The Barbers by the aforesaid decree, being a society empowered to govern themselves, formed certain Constitutions and Rules for their better government, and applied to the common Council of Edinburgh to ratify the same.”

From Councillor James Colston's *The Incorporated Trades of Edinburgh* (published in 1891) I have culled the following notes. The art of hairdressing, shaving, blood-letting, etc., was formerly termed “Barbourie craft,” and those who followed it as a trade were called “Barbouris.” When anyone had been attended to in this respect, he was said to have been “barbourised.”

To be a barber in Edinburgh in early times it was necessary to become first of all a freeman and burgess of the town. The would-be barber was also examined carefully by the “Maisters” in his craft before being admitted as a member of the Guild. Upon being admitted he was at once known as a “Maister Barbour,” and could “practise” as such. He was obliged, too, to pass an examination on “the anatomy of the human

frame, and the nature and complexion of every member of the human body; he must also know the veins of the same that he may mak Flewbothamea (blood-letting) in dew tyme."

As the surgeons and physicians advanced in the respect and esteem of the community, the barbers were left behind to continue a necessary but much lower grade of craft.

In 1818 there was privately printed by J. Hay & Co. for the surgeons of Edinburgh "A collection of Royal Grants, etc., relative to the Constitution and Privileges of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh." Therein is to be found a copy of the first charter, dated 1st July 1505.

It is evident, therefore, that at the beginning of last century this charter was in the possession of the surgeons; but the present secretary, Mr Robertson, informs me that he has never come across the ancient vellum, and yet he has had the care of the Surgeons' documents for over forty years.

Mr Robert Scott-Moncrieff, W.S., has furnished me with some interesting particulars. He writes:—"The surgeons further re-incorporated themselves in what the barbers termed a 'mongrel' society, known as the Surgeon-Apothecaries, about the year 1657. The *Town Act of Counsell* in favour of these two bodies was ratified in Parliament with a Patent granted by King William and Queen Mary on 17th July 1695.

"The result of these proceedings was that barbers became scarce in Edinburgh, and complaints were made to the Town Council by the landed gentry that in coming in to Edinburgh they could never get shaved, nor their hair and beard trimmed. The Town Council thereupon ordered the Incorporation of Surgeon-Apothecaries to license barbers in the town."

It appears these licensed barbers demanded a say in the administration of the Corporation, as they had to pay admission fees to the funds of the Corporation and fees for their apprentices. The quarrel dragged on for some time, and was finally brought to a head by some of the

barbers in 1718 raising an action against the surgeons. "This action," Mr Scott-Moncrieff goes on to say, "was keenly contested, the surgeons holding that under the original seal of cause barbers were bound to pass in anatomy and reading and writing, and that the Corporation would thus consist of surgeons who practised as surgeons, and surgeons who practised as barbers. The barbers contended that the Corporation consisted of two crafts, namely, surgeons who were to pass in surgery and reading and writing, and barbers who were to pass their own tests. From examination of the copies of documents I am inclined to agree with the view put forward by the barbers as being most reasonable. The Court at the time, however, decided contrarily, but admitting the hardship under which the barbers suffered, practically disjoined the two bodies. Henceforth the barbers were allowed to appoint their own præses and 'box master' (treasurer), and to administer their own affairs; the only link remaining between the two being that (1) all barbers' apprentices had also to be registered in the books of the surgeons, on payment of five shillings sterling for each; (2) that the clerk of the surgeons was also to be clerk of the barbers; and (3) that the rights of presentation enjoyed by the old Corporation of sending four children to the Trades' Maiden Hospital was to be enjoyed equally between the two bodies, the surgeons having a right to present two children, and the barbers having also a right to present two children.

"In 1845 the surgeons approached Parliament for a new Incorporation, and in order to simplify matters they agreed to pay £10 annually to the barbers, if the barbers would resign or discharge their right to the reversion of the rights of presentation belonging to the surgeons. The latter also agreed to allow the barbers to appoint their own clerk. In 1847 restricted trading was done away with by Act of Parliament, and this spelt death to the Corporation of Barbers.

"The body lingered on until 1893, when the last meeting was held, there being only one member in existence. Since then he has disappeared, and so have the funds."

I have sketched purposely for this account the small oak box (fig. 1),

dated 1724, which is now in the possession of Messrs Scott-Moncrieff & Trail, W.S. This, with its contents—a good many papers and documents—and a few old ledgers, etc., the earliest dated 1722, are all that remain to us relating to the barbers since they branched off from the surgeons.

The symbol of the barber of yore, viz., the pole, adorned with white,

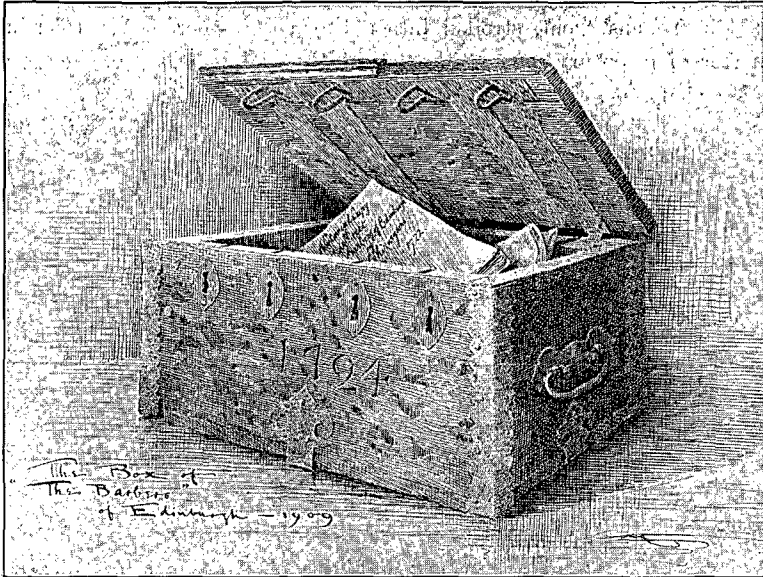


Fig. 1. The Box of the Barbers of Edinburgh.

blue and red paint,¹ is still in use with many who cut hair, shave, and sell scent, but it is not so common as it used to be to find the brass bleeding-dish hanging near the end of the pole. The *ancient* dishes are well-nigh lost sight of, and the modern ones, still made, are not so readily sought after. The pole alone is the usual symbol by which a barber of to-day advertises his trade.

¹ The white ribbon indicates the bandage, the blue the venous blood, and the red the arterial blood. Both veins and arteries had to be considered in blood-letting, whether from the arm or nape of the neck.

That these bleeding-dishes have come under the notice of the antiquary and collector of curios is shown by the following tale, which may also be taken as a warning to the collector to keep his eyes open.

In the year 1882 I visited Edinburgh, with my father, for the first time. My father, having also a love for what is quaint, and liking to see things and hear what is to be heard in some of the lowest quarters, as was Dickens' wont, strolled into a tiny shop—kept fairly clean a quarter of a century ago—at the top of C— Road, to have a shave and a chat with the barber, and he took me with him. I was only fourteen at the time, but I remembered the queer little shop with its red, blue and white pole and the brass dish hanging from it under a large gold knob.

Out of sheer curiosity, then, upon coming up to these parts again twenty-six years afterwards, which was last September, I paid a visit to the shop; but the brass bleeding-dish was gone, I noticed, and a new barber presided at the sign of the same pole, since painted red and white only. I had a few words with the anything but busy barber, and told him I was interested in old signs and signboards, and asked him to direct me to a shop where I would find a bleeding-dish still hanging. "Yes, in the High Street you'll find one," he promptly said, giving me the address at the same time of another shop at the foot of Blair Street. I left him, and started off for the High Street, but hadn't gone twenty paces when he came running and shouting after me with a wish that I should return and see something he had wrapped up in a very dirty paper.

He brought out what I, at first sight, thought was a beautiful antique brass bleeding-dish. I knew such a thing would be looked upon as a great curiosity by the antiquary, and even valued more by the surgeon, whose profession in 1506 was incorporated by Royal Charter with the barbers' craft. I also noted that it was handsomely chased and had some letters on it. "Would you part with it?" I said. "No," says the barber; "it's very valuable indeed." "Well, what *would* you take for it?" I remarked eagerly. "It's worth three 'alfcroons—not a

farthin' less," he replied. I ended by leaving him all I had in my pocket, two half-crowns and a florin, and went off chuckling at my bargain, for I knew very well that if I wanted to part with it, after sketching it, I could easily get three times that sum for it. But before leaving him, I told him to write me down its history on paper. The following is what he wrote in a somewhat ready fashion, and in a much better handwriting than I expected to see :—

"My grandfather Had this Plate on his Pole in the Lawn-market in 1796 in Paterson's Close I have had it on My Pole in C—— Road Below L—— Street. F. D—— Oct. 8, 1908."

I next went to the High Street, and found out the barber's shop there to which he had directed me, but found no brass dish on the pole. Upon making inquiries I found that it had been stolen off the pole a day or two ago!—not an uncommon thing, I have since heard; and the barber in Blair Street couldn't lay his hands upon his dish at the time I called—this, too, was mislaid!

The next day I took my link with the old barber-surgeons to the Library of the Society of Antiquaries in Queen Street, and showed it to Dr Anderson, who said that he didn't quite understand it, as he'd never seen its like before. He pored over it, turning it first this way and then that, but could make no more out on its highly polished surface than I could at that time—indeed he did not think I was right in assuming the middle letter of the three which puzzled us, "Bre," was "R," but he saw with me the "J. & J. MORISON, EDINBURGH," and the chased thistle in the centre, and thought that this was surrounded by thistle buds. Dr Anderson invited me to sketch it for the Society so that an illustration could be made from the drawing; he also asked me to hunt up all the notes I could lay hold of concerning "Barbouriecraft," and put me in the way of getting books relating to it. He also suggested my looking into the old Town Directories for the name of Morison among the hairdressers, but no firm of that name *after* 1828 (the date of the earliest Directory in the Library) was to be found, so we presumed that "J. & J. Morison" must have been earlier than

1828. Some weeks afterwards I called at the house of my friend Mr Harold J. Stiles, F.R.C.S. Ed., who now possessed the dish, with a view of borrowing it. He had written me previously: "Many thanks for letting me see the old bleeding-dish. I am only too delighted to possess it." A first-class antique-dealer had also seen it, and advised me to take it to Dr Anderson for inspection. That dealer, too, would have liked to buy it from me, and another dealer expected a Georgian bleeding-dish would be worth a couple of sovereigns.

Mr Stiles had given the dish a place of honour on the mantelpiece of his consulting-room. Had I known at the time I saw it there what I knew twenty-four hours afterwards, I might have thought it was doing something else there besides recalling barbourie-craft—which will be explained when I come to the end of my story.

Next day I sat down to one of the hardest tasks I have yet set myself—drawing from the microscope was nothing to it.¹ I spent nearly four hours with the naked eye sketching what will seem to you to be but a simple "tricking" of a very simple subject (fig. 2). But I can assure you that two hours and more elapsed before I was able to decipher the eight most important letters, those that gave me the clue to the history. I went from one part of the dish to the other, filling in gaps indiscriminately wherever a dot or a line showed itself. I had eventually sketched in eight letters, but I stuck at the ninth, the *central* letter. It never occurred to me, oddly enough, to read what I had deciphered; in other words, to put four and four together, I was so completely off the "scent." But I hunted up indexes of various Edinburgh books on my shelf to see if I could find some street beginning with "PALE" that would fit in with the rest of the letters I had tricked out. Tired of the job, I left it for lunch, and when I returned to the task my eye read at once on the paper before me, not the name of an Edinburgh street, but—"PALE ALES!" And so there was no ninth or central figure to be deciphered—the task had already been completed.

¹ Its brilliantly polished surface made the faint outlines of the letters invisible, unless by constantly shifting its position, so as to alter the incidence of the reflection.

Instead of immediately collapsing and considering myself thoroughly taken in, I was the more delighted still, for here, thought I, was an "ancient" mode of advertising, the making use of a barber's bleeding-dish for the purpose of heralding some particular beer—and I knew



Fig. 2. The Barber's "Bleeding-dish."

Edinburgh was noted for its Cowgate breweries over two hundred years ago. I thought, in fact, I had made a double find.

My next move was to go and consult the old Directories; but before I got to the Antiquaries Library I was attracted by the three golden woollen bales of Mr Harrison in St Andrew Square, and went into the shop to inquire about their history. In course of conversation with him I showed him the bleeding-dish, which I had with me. He told me

J. & J. Morison were not an "ancient" firm, and gave me their address.

I walked straight down to them to see what they had to say about their name appearing on a barber's pole! In a few moments, almost directly Mr Morison had seen the thistle, the name, and "PALE ALES," he told a clerk to bring forth one of their public-house trays, as supplied to tenants of their houses.

I need go no further, for it was at once evident, on comparing the bleeding-dish with the tray, that one of these brass things, made only about twenty years ago, had found its way out of a public-house; its rim had been cut off, and the plate stamped with enormous pressure, thus completely altering the appearance of the original common-place design, rendering it superior in style, and, in short, giving it the look of an old Georgian brass, which we all—those of us who had seen it—verily imagined it to be!

That is the story. Need I point the moral?

