

## EARLY PUBLIC HEALTH REGULATIONS AND THE PLAGUE

IN the year 1498, the plague, which had appeared in the south of Europe about a century and a half previously, attained alarming dimensions in Edinburgh, and a series of regulations was made by the Town Council with the object of stamping it out in the city. The regulations began on 28th March, 1498, and on 17th November, 1498, the Provost, Baillies and Council, referring to the danger of perilous sickness or pestilence now risen in the east part and largely spread, forbade anyone in the burgh to harbour or receive any traveller on foot or horseback, rich or poor, without first obtaining permission from the Baillies, the penalty for contravention being confiscation of all goods and banishment from the town.

Glasgow seems to have been suspected of harbouring the plague, because anyone passing to Glasgow without permission was subject to quarantine of forty days outside the town. In the following year, further regulations were made against bringing in merchandise, such as wool, skins, hides, or cloth or any kind of food, without permission of the Baillies. Some of the parishes close to Edinburgh, as well as Haddington and Kelso, were in this year afflicted by the plague and it was forbidden to receive any persons coming from these places. Contravention of these regulations was to be punished by branding on the cheek and banishing from the town.

In 1499, the plague appears to have broken out in Edinburgh, and more stringent regulations were adopted. Dogs and "swyne" were to be kept "in hous and band," or, if found in the streets and lanes, were to be slaughtered. Children under fifteen years of age were forbidden to wander in the streets under pain of being put in the stocks and beaten. The schools were to be closed, the booths were not to be opened nor markets to be held, and intercourse with Leith was forbidden. The following is the text of the regulations introduced to deal with these matters<sup>1</sup>:—

6 FEBRUARY, 1499

"It is avysit and statute, in augmentation of the first statute,<sup>2</sup> that na maner of persoun pas furth of this toune to bye or bring in within this towne ony maner of merchandise, sic as woll, skynnis, hyds, or clayth, bot gif thai haif licence of the baillies and counsle, and with that that thai bring sufficient testimonialls that thai ar cum in furth of clene places, vnder the payne of byrning of the stufe and halding furth of the persouns brekares of this statute furth of the town.

"Item, that na maner of stufe nor victuallis be brocht nor resaut into this towne out of na maner of suspect places, vnder payne of byrning and banesing of the bringares.

<sup>1</sup> "Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, 1403-1528," pp. 72, 74-76.

<sup>2</sup> 17th November 1498.

27 APRIL, 1499

"It is statute and forbidden that ony persouns dwelling within this towne howse harbery or resett ony persouns of Hadingtoun (or) Kelso, considering the seikness is largelie spred thair, vnder the payne of deid, and als that nane of thame cum within this towne vnder payne of byrning on thair cheiks with hett yrne and banesing furth of the same.

"Item, that na maner of persoun indwellare of this towne pas till Peblis for ony maner of airands without leif askit and obtenit fra the officeris, provest or baillies, vnder the payne of withholding furth of the town and banesing but favouris."

8 JUNE, 1499

"It is statute and ordanit that all maner of persouns within this burgh, haffand dogs or swyne, sall observe and keip thame in hous and band, swa that quhair thai may be fundin in the contrair within this burgh, in hie streits or venellis, thai to be slayne be the persouns limit thairto.

"Item, that na maner of bairnis within xv yeirs of aige be fundin on the gaitt or in streitts or in the kirk, vagand, vnder the payne to the said bairnis of putting of thame in the stoks and scourgeing of thame with wands.

"Item, it is forbidden that ony scholes be halden be ony maner of persouns, men or women, vnder the payne to the haldare of bannesing this towne.

"Item, it is forbidden that ony maner of buithes be oppin to mak merchandice into, or that ony merkett be maid at the ports of this burgh or thairabout, vnder the payne of escheitt of the guidis quhair it may be fundin, bot favouris.

"Item, that all persouns of this towne haiffand ony vittales of corn, wyne and floure in Leyth, that thai bring up the samyn to this towne in all guidlie and possibill haist, for thai heif declairit to the keperis and rewlars of Leyth that thai latt in na persouns thairin to by ony maner of vittales."

In 1499, the Magistrates became much concerned with regard to the dirty state of the city, and in November of that year they appointed several cleansers to clean houses with a view to disinfection, at a cost of ten shillings to men of substance, five shillings to others, and to the poor according to their faculty of paying. The official cleansers were to have for wages twelve pence daily, a large sum in those days for a day labourer, because the work was arduous and dangerous.

In the beginning of the next year (1500), the Provost and Baillies made further regulations with regard to houses and clothing presumed to be infected. The chief means of disinfection was an order to wash furniture and clothing in the running Water of Leith, washing in the various lochs round the town being forbidden. The official cleansers were now five in number, and they were to carry, as a badge of office, a little wand with a hoop of white iron at the end. They were to hear mass in the Hospital of St. Mary's Wynd, and their wages were now reduced to six pence a day, but they were to have fees for burials and the cleansing of houses.<sup>1</sup>

On 27th September, 1509, a more definite arrangement regarding the town cleansing was reached. Thomas Jhonstoun and Jhone Broun were appointed

<sup>1</sup> pp. 76-78: "Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, 1403-1528."

cleansers, with the duty of keeping the High Street clean from the Castlehill to the head of Leith Wynd, and of setting down yearly forty roods of new causeway wherever it should be most required. For this service each inhabitant of the High Street was assessed four pence in the year, while fleshers and fishmongers, because of "thair inhonestie and filth of the same," were to pay sixteen pence in the year, with additional charges for the cleansing of their stands.<sup>1</sup> Still later, in 1527, a whole-time officer in the person of Alexander Pennecuik was appointed to see that the causeway was "dicht and clengeit sufficiently" every eight days, being provided with twelve servants for this purpose, and receiving the sum of twenty pounds yearly.<sup>2</sup>

Stringent regulations were made in the year 1500 against servants buying clothing without the knowledge of their master or mistress, against the holding of markets until the ensuing St. Giles' Day, and against receiving any goods from the country without leave of the town's officers. Beggars and vagabonds not provided with tokens from the Magistracy were ordered to leave the town on pain of death. The penalty to the citizens for disobeying these regulations was branding on the cheek and banishing from the town, in the case of a woman, while a man was to have his hand struck off and similarly to be banished.<sup>3</sup>

These penalties were no idle threat, for on 31st December, 1502, there is a note that a certain Harvy was convicted of breaking the acts of the town, for which he was adjudged to be taken to the Tron, have his hand struck off and be banished from the town. It does not say what specific act he broke, but it appears from the context that he had broken some of the regulations directed against the plague.<sup>4</sup> Also on 27th May, 1521, a certain Bessye Symourtoun, who was taken by the watch in the act of hiding plague-infected gear under a pile of wood at the end of Fowler's Close, was adjudged to be branded on the cheek and banished from the town.<sup>5</sup>

As time went on and the plague approached nearer to Edinburgh, the regulations of the Town Council became more strict. In 1502, people other than officers were for bidden to hold any intercourse with infected persons in the town, under the usual penalties, and everyone appearing after 9 o'clock at night in the High Street had to carry a light.<sup>6</sup> Any persons or goods which had been taken to the Water of Leith for cleansing had to receive a permit in writing to re-enter the town, and the space of time which had to elapse for cleansing and drying the goods was eight to ten days, after which an isolation period of five or six days had to be passed in the house. Before re-entry to the house, fumigation with heather was ordained.

The persons employed to bury the dead were forbidden to mix with the other citizens.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting that three days after the Seal of Cause had

<sup>1</sup> pp. 124 and 125, <sup>2</sup> p. 232, <sup>3</sup> p. 78, <sup>4</sup> p. 96, <sup>5</sup> p. 204, <sup>6</sup> p. 96. <sup>7</sup> pp. 100 and 101: "Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, 1403-1528."

been granted to the Surgeons and Barbers, viz., on 4th July, 1505, a number of further regulations were made in regard to plague. The first example of notification of an infectious disease occurs in the rules that all cases of plague must be revealed to the officers of the town within twenty-four hours of onset.<sup>1</sup> Three months later the duty of notification was imposed upon the "folkis haiffand the rewle and gouernance of that house," and the time for notification was shortened to twelve hours, under pains of branding and banishing.<sup>2</sup>

An officer was provided with a horse and close cart and two servants to cleanse the High Street daily, and it was forbidden to leave any filth on the street longer than twenty-four hours. The sale of second-hand clothes and the shaking or hanging of skins in front of houses was forbidden.<sup>3</sup>

The plague seems to have died out for some time, but on 14th October, 1512, the Magistrates appear to have thought it necessary to recapitulate all the rules in regard to notification of cases of the plague, exclusion of strangers, shutting up of dogs and swine, cleansing of infected goods, etc., and on the 17th January following, a letter, under the Great Seal, was issued by James IV., containing practically the same provisions. In this letter a quarantine period of forty days is imposed upon infected persons.<sup>4</sup> In 1514, the town was divided into four quarters assigned to four baillies for supervision.<sup>5</sup>

It appears that the practice of using the Burgh Muir for disinfection, and also for burying persons dead of the plague, had gradually grown up. All goods to be disinfected, and corpses to be buried, were to be removed between nine in the evening and five in the morning.<sup>6</sup> Beggars and others who were excluded from the town had apparently taken up their quarters in houses and barns on the Burgh Muir, which, therefore, were ordered by the Town Council to be unroofed on 3rd April, 1520.<sup>7</sup> As time went on, the regulations against possible infection became stronger and on 27th August, 1519, it was ordained by the Town Council that persons coming from suspected places or entering the burgh with pestilence upon them would do so under pain of death.<sup>8</sup>

After this time the plague again seems to have died out for some years, but in 1529 the regulations against infection were renewed. Dundee, Perth, Cupar and other towns beyond the Forth were now suspected, and no one was to come to the Fair of Hallowmass from these places.<sup>9</sup> Alane Blair having, despite these regulations, come from the town of St. Andrews, the Provost and Baillies were graciously pleased to have "dispensit wit his lyf," but they banished him from the town for all the days of his life under pain of death.<sup>10</sup> Daudid Scot, who had entered the town, despite his having been twice banished before for breaking of the plague statutes, was now scourged and banished anew for all the days of his life under

<sup>1</sup> pp. 104 and 105. <sup>2</sup> p. 106. <sup>3</sup> pp. 105-107. <sup>4</sup> pp. 136-141. <sup>5</sup> pp. 149 and 150. <sup>6</sup> pp. 176 and 177. <sup>7</sup> p. 196. <sup>8</sup> p. 190  
 "Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, 1403-1528."

<sup>9</sup>, <sup>10</sup> pp. 10 and 11: "Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, 1528-1557."

pain of death.<sup>1</sup> In this year the plague was apparently severe in St. Andrews, for not only were Edinburgh citizens forbidden to cross the Forth, but they were forbidden to receive anyone from St. Andrews under pain of death.<sup>1</sup>

Margaret Cok, being convicted by an assize of coming from St. Andrews with infected gear, was branded on both cheeks, her clothes burned, and herself banished from the town, under pain of death.<sup>2</sup> A similar regulation was passed with regard to St. Monance on 20th February, 1530, and numerous other banishments are recorded about this time.<sup>3</sup>

Despite all these stringent regulations, the plague appears to have broken out in the city in May, 1530. The regulations were again promulgated, communication with St. Andrews, wandering of swine about the town, and bringing in of clothing forbidden. It was found that great filth had accumulated both on the High Street and in the closes as well as in the gutters of the town, and therefore every man and woman was bidden to "dicht and mak clene befor ther durris and closis," under pain of banishment at the Provost's pleasure.

At the same time, Issobell Forsyth, who had mixed with infected folk and taken the sickness herself, was branded on the cheek, banished for life from the town, and meantime ordained to be taken to the Burgh Muir until she should be recovered. Issobell Cattall also, for keeping secret the sickness of her daughter within her house for three days without revealing it to the officers of the town, was branded, and she with all her children was banished from the town to remain meantime on the Burgh Muir until they were cleansed.<sup>4</sup>

The striking off of the hand of male offenders does not seem, however, to have been so rigorously enforced, for on 25th June, 1530, George M'Turk and Male Mudy, his spouse, Marione Suddirland and Alisone Bird, for having a child sick in their house for three days without revealing it to the officers until the child died, were all branded on the cheek, while Marione Suddirland, who was supposed to have been the source of the infection, was banished for life under pain of death, and the other three banished during the town's pleasure.

Patrik Gowanlok, for harbouring an infected woman for ten days in the lodging of the Abbot of Melrose, was banished for ever, while the servant, Jonet Cowane, who was the cause of the trouble, was sentenced to be branded on both cheeks and banished. A general invitation was issued to those of the townspeople who liked to see justice executed, to come incontinently to the Greyfriars Port where they would see this carried out.<sup>5</sup> After three months' banishment, the Provost and Baillies relented and allowed Patrik Gowanlok to "cum and duell within this toune as he wes wont till do." There appears, however, to have been no relenting towards Jonet Cowane.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> pp. 15 and 16, <sup>2</sup> p. 19, <sup>3</sup> p. 20, <sup>4</sup> pp. 28-30, <sup>5</sup> pp. 35-37, <sup>6</sup> p. 42: "Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, 1528-1557."

An aggravated offence was committed by Daudid Duly, tailor, who had kept his wife, being sick of the plague, for two days in his house until she died, without revealing the same to the officers, and in the meantime had gone to mass at St. Giles' Kirk on Sunday "amangis the cleyne pepill, his wife beand *in extremis* in the said seiknes." As, in the opinion of the Town Council, he had done what was in him to infect all the town, he was adjudged to be hanged on a gibbet before his own door. The Council, however, seems to have been somewhat half-hearted in its wrath, because after the gibbet had been erected, it is related that Daudid "at the will of God eschapit," through the rope having broken. As he was "ane pure man with small bairns," the Provost and Baillies took pity on him and commuted his sentence to banishment for life. Willie Myllar, another tailor, for putting out of his house a woman sick of the plague without revealing this to the officers of the town, on the same day received the lesser punishment of being branded on the cheek and banished from the town.<sup>1</sup>

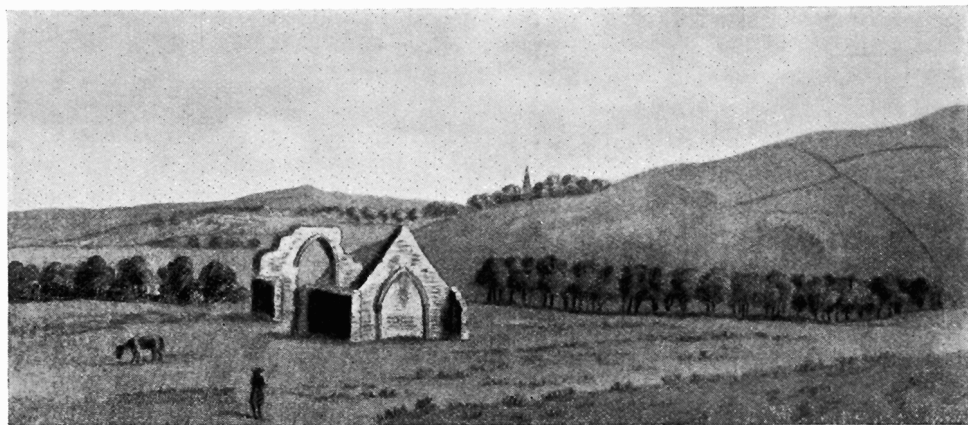
It was evidently regarded as a very serious crime for anyone who was sick or who was in contact with the sick, to appear at Church, and in October of this year Marione Clerk was tried by an assize for appearing at mass in the Chapel of St. Mary's Wynd, and for going to her sister's house and other places while the pestilence was upon her. For this she was adjudged to be taken to "the quarell hollis, and thair to be drounit quhill scho be deid."<sup>2</sup> Issobell Bowy and Kate Boyd, who had been shut up in their houses for suspicion of the plague, were tried for having opened a feather bed and sold half a stone of feathers to Besse Andirsonne, thus running the risk of infecting the whole town, for which the three women were banished.<sup>3</sup>

During this epidemic, many people fled from the town, and were forbidden to return without permission from the Council. At various periods, edicts were issued for cleansing the goods of persons who had remained. There are numerous references to infected persons being transferred to the Burgh Muir south of the town (the district now occupied by Bruntsfield Links, the Grange and North Morningside, southwards to the Jordan or Pow Burn and eastwards to Dalkeith Road).

The favourite place for cleansing goods was in the Water of Leith at Drumsheugh.<sup>4</sup> The goods and clothes of infected people in the Muir were apparently stored in St. Roch's Chapel (which stood near the present Grange Loan) and an intimation was made in December, 1530, that people could now claim these, or if they were unclaimed, they were to be burned.<sup>5</sup> In the severe epidemic which again broke out in 1585, St. Roch's Chapel was used as an isolation place for persons suspected of having the plague.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> pp. 35-37, <sup>2</sup> p. 43, <sup>3</sup> p. 42, <sup>4</sup> pp. 37-39, <sup>5</sup> p. 45: "Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, 1528-1557." <sup>6</sup> p. 416: "Extracts," 1573-1589.

Persons who had been taken to the Burgh Muir for isolation were forbidden to come back to town, and especially to St. Giles's Church, until they had a licence from the Baillies. In September, 1530, the Provost and Baillies intimated that although, through pity, several persons had not been punished for concealing the plague, they would be visited with still severer pains in the future for any failure to comply with the strict regulations.<sup>1</sup> As a result of the strict measures which had been taken, the Town Council was able to announce on 8th October, 1530, that all danger was over and that there had been no appearance of any infection for eight days past. Still they thought it was "verray proffittable" that the rules should be observed for a year to come.<sup>2</sup>



CHAPEL OF ST. ROCH

In the Burgh Muir of Edinburgh early in the 19th Century

In the next few years the regulations are mainly concerned with care to keep out the plague, which was still prevalent in other places. Intercourse with Leith, where the plague was still active at the end of 1530, was forbidden.<sup>3</sup> Various regulations were passed regarding cleansing.<sup>4</sup> Ships coming from Bordeaux, Spain and other places from which wine was imported, from Dantzic especially, and from various other towns where plague was rife, were forbidden to come to land, and watches were set at Newhaven and Leith for the purpose of preventing this. The plan of dealing with these ships appears to have been to allow them to land their goods for a time upon one of the islands in the Forth, and after an interval to allow the goods to be brought into one of the ports.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> p. 41, <sup>2</sup> p. 43, <sup>3</sup> pp. 44 and 45, <sup>4</sup> p. 120, <sup>5</sup> pp. 227 and 228: "Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, 1528-1557."

There seems to have been a small outbreak of plague also about 1568, when the sick were again isolated on the Burgh Muir. Cleansers for clothes and houses were appointed at a salary of eight pounds monthly, and buriers of the dead at five pounds each. These were provided with a gown of grey, bearing a white St. Andrew's Cross on front and back, and with a staff having a white cloth on the end. Two biers were furnished, covered with black and carrying a bell so that people might be given warning of the approach of a plague-stricken corpse. Bodies buried in the Greyfriars Churchyard were to be interred at a depth of seven feet. Persons wishing to visit their friends on the Muir were allowed to do so at eleven in the forenoon in company with the officer appointed for the day, but at no other time.<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that eight days were apparently regarded as the necessary isolation period, for there is a notice that, in 1564, George Younger, furrier, after being cleansed, was ordained to pass to some quiet house outside the town for the space of eight days and thereafter, if in good health, was to be allowed to resort to the town.<sup>2</sup>

In 1568, one of the regulations was that any person falling sick within the burgh, no matter what the sickness was, must, along with all those in the house, remain there until the Baillie of the quarter had been notified and his instructions received. When it was discovered that the house was infected with plague, the whole household with their goods were forthwith dispatched to the Muir, the dead buried, and the houses cleansed.<sup>3</sup> Wooden huts had been built for the reception of the sick on the Muir, to which they, as well as suspects at a later date, were immediately conveyed from the town. Various references are made to a Baillie being in charge of the sick folk on the Muir, and an official cleanser was also established here. In November, 1568, Jhonn Forrest was put in charge of the cleansing on the Muir, and the post was so responsible that his appointment was made on terms of the pain of death for any fault.<sup>4</sup> This outbreak died out in the winter of 1569, when Jhonn Legait, master of the deserted Muir, was cleansed, brought home and paid.<sup>5</sup> On 30th December, 1569, an announcement was made that the pest was over, and that all who had been sick in the hospital of the Senys Convent were to be taken to the Muir and cleansed.<sup>6</sup>

Another outbreak of the plague took place in 1574, beginning in October of that year at Leith, and being present also at Kirkcaldy. The Town Council of Edinburgh ordained anew that any sick should go to the hospital at Senys, and ordered vagabonds to leave the town within forty-eight hours. On 15th November, 1574, Jhonn Forrest, cordinar (shoemaker), was again elected to be master cleanser of the "folkis mendit of the pest, and to haue the charge of thair guddis and of the toвне mure." He was to have a servant, to receive six

<sup>1</sup> pp. 253-255, <sup>2</sup> p. 184, <sup>3</sup> p. 255, <sup>4</sup> p. 256, <sup>5</sup> p. 265, <sup>6</sup> p. 267: "Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, 1552-1571."



pounds monthly, to keep the people under his charge isolated, clean their goods in sufficient manner, and to work under the ominous regulation that if any infection should happen afterwards through insufficient cleansing of the said goods, he was "to suffer the deith thairfor." At the same time, a more efficient method of disinfection was introduced by the Town Council, who authorised their treasurer to buy a cauldron for cleansing of the foul goods. This method of disinfection by boiling was adopted in all subsequent outbreaks of the plague.<sup>1</sup> In the following January, a house called "lytill Loundoun" on the links at Leith was prepared for the cleansed people on the said links, and the house was to be watched night and day that no one should enter except the officers deputed by the town for the purpose.<sup>2</sup> This outbreak was over by 18th February, 1575, when the sick were brought back to town.<sup>3</sup>

Still another outbreak was threatened in the autumn of 1580, by ships coming from Dantzig, and from Bruges and Maine, in the Low Countries. Elaborate rules were made as to the isolation of their crews and disinfection of their goods on the islands in the Firth of Forth.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the year this threatened attack was over, and those who had been isolated on Inchkeith and Inchcolm were allowed to return.<sup>5</sup>

In the middle of 1584, plague again threatened at Wemyss and other places on the north shore of the Forth. Andrew Sclater and James Henrysoun, chirurgiane, on 22nd July, 1584, were sent to see the conditions in Wester Wemyss so that the Council might take the steps necessary to avoid the pest. Regulations were instituted against bringing goods from Flanders, for the examination of persons coming ashore at Leith, and forbidding any intercourse with Dysart, Kirkcaldy or Wemyss.<sup>6</sup>

The people of Edinburgh appear to have been very charitable with regard to the plague-stricken poor in other places, for in August, 1584, a collection was made for the sick at Wemyss; in December, for the sick at Perth; and in May, 1585, the large sum of £201 was collected from the advocates and their servants, and £43 from the writers, on behalf of the sick in the latter place.<sup>7</sup> In October, 1584, two burgesses were sent to inspect the town of Dysart with regard to the occurrence of plague, and, following upon their report that Dysart was in need of help, the Town Council of Edinburgh sent them a present of food and almost one ton of soap.<sup>8</sup> At last, in April, 1585, a woman died at Edinburgh in the Fish Market Close. Despite the fact that all those who had been in contact with her were isolated in their house, and that the usual regulations for cleansing streets, preventing swine from wandering, etc., were enforced, two of the contacts died. The house was cleansed with

<sup>1</sup> pp. 28-30, <sup>2</sup> p. 35, <sup>3</sup> p. 36, <sup>4</sup> pp. 178-181, <sup>5</sup> pp. 189, 556 and 557, <sup>6</sup> pp. 344, 345, 346, 347 and 351, <sup>7</sup> pp. 346, 381, 418 and 419, <sup>8</sup> pp. 358 and 360: "Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh, 1573-1589."

diligence, the contacts were now transferred to a house near St. Roch's Chapel, but, notwithstanding, the plague broke out. A gibbet was set up on the Muir, apparently to form a visible reminder of the public health regulations. A temporary hospital consisting of wooden huts was set up near the Kirk of the Seynis, and five or six other shelters were built on the Muir. The anxiety of the Baillies was now thoroughly roused. Alexander Fraynche, the "clenger," was exhorted to be true and diligent in his office on the Muir, and he was promised, as a reward for diligent execution of his duties, a house, rent-free, and a pension for life. The Council also ordered Dustefute (the hangman) to slay all swine, dogs and cats wherever he might apprehend them. The Council further decided to meet every day for urgent business connected with the plague.

The Muir appears to have been divided into two parts, the clean or west Muir (St. Roch's Hospital), where contacts were isolated, and the foul or east Muir (Sienna or Sciennes Hospital) where the sick were treated.

The Chapel of St. Roque, or Roch (in Gaelic "Maroch"), at the bridge-end of had been founded by James IV. in 1499, and dedicated to the "Patron of Stirling Pestilences." The Chapel of St. Roque on the Burgh Muir at Edinburgh was established by the same monarch some years later, and around it an isolation station, for "contacts" with the plague, was formed at various times during the 16th century.<sup>1</sup>

In 1532, the Hospital of St. Laurence, situated on the west side of the Royal Burgh of Haddington was formally annexed to the Nunnery of the Sciennes. This Hospital had been founded by Richard Guthrie, Abbot of the Monastery of St. Thomas at Arbroath, and out of the revenues a contribution had been made annually to the burgh leper-house at Haddington. The Haddington Hospital was apparently closed shortly afterwards. This must have been a small hospital, as the annual value of its revenues did not exceed £9 sterling.<sup>2</sup> The Hospital of the Sciennes was some years later used for the treatment of cases of plague.

Although it is probable that in previous outbreaks, the town had always consulted some of the surgeons with regard to treatment and isolation regulations for the sick, the Baillies now, on 26th May, 1585, definitely appointed James Henrysoun, chirurgiane, to take care of the sick, to visit all the hospitals of the burgh and the poor who were sick or hurt, whatever their sickness might be. He was to be at the disposal of the Council day and night, and the town was to furnish him with whatever "vngnents, drogs, implasteris and vther mendicaments" he might require. He was to have a yearly stipend of twenty pounds for life. Jhonn Forrest was again appointed cleanser on the clean Muir at ten pounds per month, with various assistants and watchmen. Leave of absence was granted

<sup>1</sup> Moir Bryce: "The Burgh Muir of Edinburgh," Old Edinburgh Club, Edinburgh, 1918, p. 172.

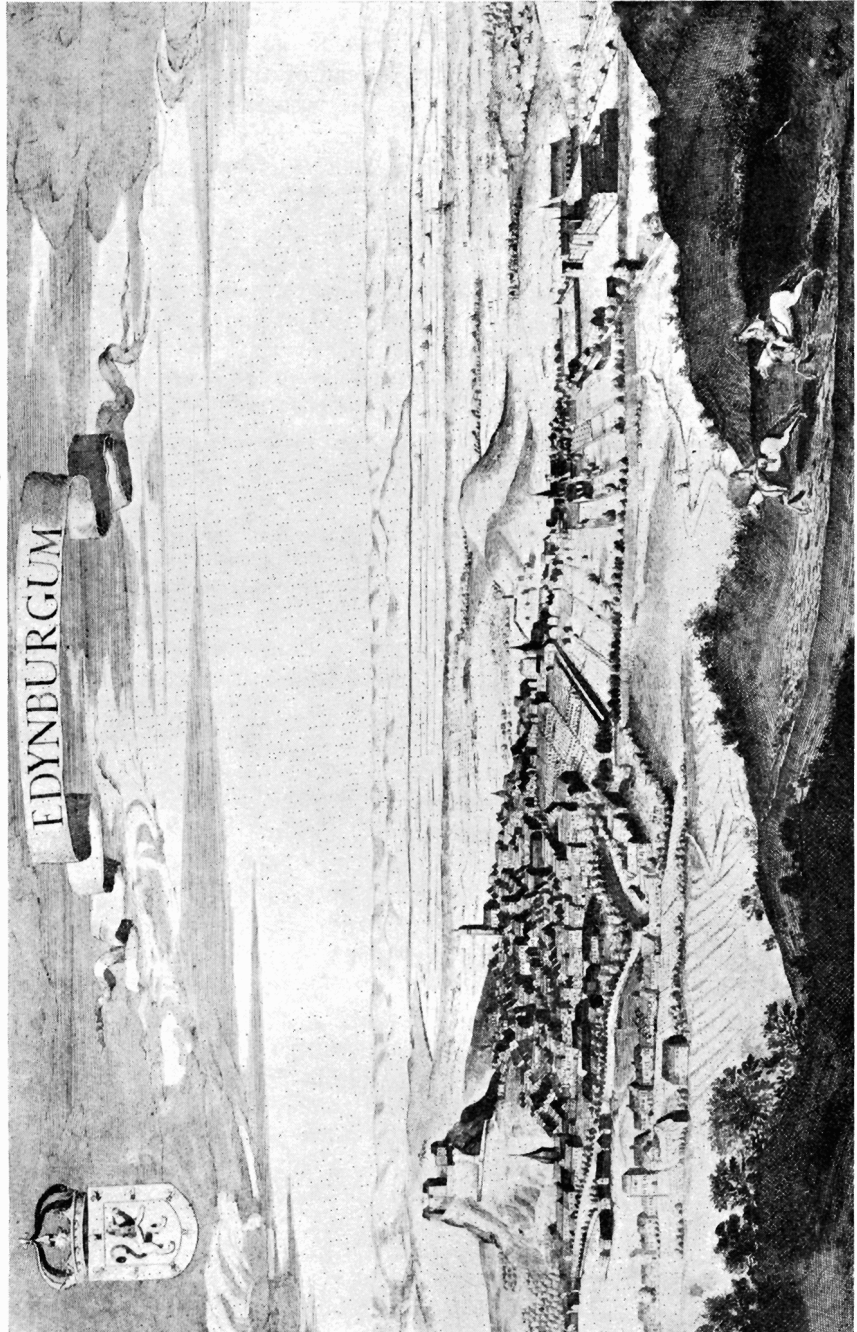
<sup>2</sup> Moir Bryce: "The Burgh Muir of Edinburgh," Old Edinburgh Club, Edinburgh, 1918, p. 122.

to Robert Rollok and Duncane Nairne, the masters of the College, to leave the town, because all the students had fled through fear of the pestilence. Other measures taken were the erection of a gibbet on the western Muir, the purchase of a small kettle for disinfecting the clothes of the poor, the erection of a wooden shed at the Greyfriars port to keep infected goods, the housing of homeless children in the Chapel of St. Mary's Wynd, the raising by tax of one thousand pounds for the support of the sick poor, and distribution of food to the latter. A curious regulation was that the sale of "any sybois, leiks or vngyeouns" (sives, leeks or onions) was prohibited during the plague. There were instances of private charity, as, for example, that the tenants of the Laird of Inverleith in the West Port and Potterrow, who took sick, were placed on a separate part of the Muir at his expense.<sup>1</sup> Robert Fairlie of Braid also offered his house of "Littill Egipt," near the Muir for any suitable use.<sup>2</sup> The Council ordered a heavy bier to be employed for burying the dead on the Muir, and forbade that bodies should be carried upon the backs of men or on sledges through the laziness of the buriers. Apparently some of the officials on the Muir had not behaved themselves, for in July, 1585, Smythtie, "the fowle hangman," was ordained to be laid in irons and bound to the gibbet till further order, while the rest of the servants on the Muir who had not obeyed the orders of the Baillies were to be discharged.

The isolation period was increased in August, 1585, to fifteen days, and anyone returning from the Muir was to remain in his house for this period before he mixed with the townspeople generally. All gatherings at this time, except at Kirk and market, were forbidden, and there appears to have been a great scarcity of town officers and of ministers, even the Provost having absented himself from the town.<sup>3</sup> On 17th December, 1585, the plague had so far abated that the Council was able to place the infected persons in a single house (the White House) which they leased for a certain time. For further purification of suspected goods, it was ordered, in December, 1585, that all such suspected of infection, even if they had been cleansed, should be laid out in yards or other suitable places during the time of the frost.<sup>4</sup> The timber used in the lodges on the Muir was brought in next spring and stored in a vault of the Town's College against the outbreak of some further epidemic.<sup>5</sup> James Henrysoun, chirurgeane, was thanked for his good services, especially as he had contracted the plague himself and had lost his wife from the same cause. He was exempted from all burgh taxes for the rest of his life.<sup>6</sup>

Once again, in November, 1587, the pest appeared at Leith, and the usual regulations were adopted. The gibbets were set up in the town, a watch was kept on the gates to prevent the entrance of undesirable persons, and the sick were taken to the hospital of the Seynis. This outbreak, however, does not appear to have been of any great severity.<sup>7</sup> There were various other smaller outbreaks, as,

<sup>1</sup> pp. 413-426, <sup>2</sup> p. 436, <sup>3</sup> pp. 430-434, <sup>4</sup> pp. 444 and 445, <sup>5</sup> p. 452, <sup>6</sup> pp. 436 and 437, <sup>7</sup> pp. 504-506: "Extracts from the Records of the Burgh of Edinburgh. 1573-1589."



VIEW OF EDINBURGH FROM THE SOUTH-EAST, EARLY IN THE 17TH CENTURY

Showing the beginning of the Burgh Muir in the left foreground

(From an engraving by *Konbout van den Hoyen*)

for example, when in 1593 a ship from an English port, with persons suspected of the plague, was quarantined at Inchcolm. Again in 1597, the pest began in Leith, and many persons fled from Edinburgh, but the epidemic was over by the end of the harvest.<sup>1</sup>

During the latter half of the 16th century, Aberdeen had remained curiously immune from the plague. This may have been in large part due to the severe regulations which had been early introduced. In May, 1585, the Magistrates had erected three gibbets, "ane at the mercat cross, ane other at the brig of Dee, and the third at the haven mouth, that in case ony infectit person arrive or repair by sea or land to this burgh, or in case ony indweller of this burgh receive, house, or harbour, or give meat or drink to the infectit person or persons, the man be hangit and the woman drownit."<sup>2</sup>

From 1603 to 1609, plague was present in one place or another throughout Scotland, but there was no serious epidemic. In 1644, it again appeared in Edinburgh, Kelso, Bo'ness, Perth and other places. At Edinburgh the plague-stricken were housed in huts in the King's Park below Salisbury Crags, and at Perth the epidemic is said to have given rise to the story of Bessie Bell and Mary Gray, who fled from the plague-stricken city and "biggit a bower on yon burn brae, and theekit it ower wi' rashes."<sup>3</sup> At Glasgow, the infection was severe from 1646 to 1648, but this year is the last in which plague is heard of in Scotland.<sup>2</sup>

It is surprising that in their regulations against dogs and swine and dirt in the streets, and the chance of infection by persons coming to the town, the Baillies of Edinburgh did not suspect the rats as a possible cause of plague. The black rat which brought plague into Europe from the East in the 14th century had reached Scotland before the 16th century, and was plentiful in many places throughout the country.

A curious fact which may explain the comparative immunity of the northern city from the plague is that rats were unable to subsist in Aberdeen. Bishop Leslie, in 1578, records in regard to Aberdeenshire: "In this cuntrey na Rattoune is bred, or, brocht in frome ony vthir place, thair may lyue [*live*]." A similar fact is recorded in the 17th century with regard to Sutherlandshire, and in Liddesdale the same tradition was long preserved.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Creighton: "History of Epidemics in Britain," I, p. 369.

<sup>2</sup> Creighton: "History of Epidemics in Britain," I, pp. 371 and 563.

<sup>3</sup> Chambers: "Domestic Annals of Scotland," Vol. II, pp. 166 and 167

<sup>4</sup> Ritchie: "Animal Life in Scotland," p. 426.



HOUSE IN DICKSON'S CLOSE. EDINBURGH

*(From a sketch by James Drummond, R.S.A., in 1850)*

Where in 1647 "three rowmes of ane tenement" were taken as a Convening House for the surgeons and barbers  
The stair and walls are still standing (1927), though the timber front has been removed