



GUILD HALL, OR COWANE'S HOSPITAL.

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BY WILLIAM L. SHIRRA.

JOHAN COWANE, the founder of the Hospital which bears his name, was a prosperous merchant who, in the early part of the seventeenth century, was for more than twenty years one of the most prominent figures in the public life of Stirling. He was a member of the Merchant Guild, the oldest and the most influential of the ancient Incorporations of the burgh, and he took an active share in the business of that body. He was nine times chosen Dean of Guild, and held that office at his death in the end of 1633. On his deathbed he directed his brother Alexander, his heir and executor, to bestow out of his estate the sum of "fortie thousand merks for building and erecting of ane Hospitall or Almous-hous, to be callit in all tyme cumyng Cowane's Hospitall, and for enterentyng and sustenyng thereintill of the number of twelf decayed Gild breither."

In 1637, Alexander Cowane entered into a contract with the Magistrates and Council, transferring to them lands, bonds, and money to the amount specified, to be held by them in trust for the execution of his brother's bequest.

The Council at once proceeded to erect the Hospital, which was finished in 1643; but, so far as can be ascertained, no appointments to the benefit of residence in the house were made until more than twenty years after. This state of things appears to have been due to the independent spirit of the "decayed Gild breither," who, even in poverty, preferred a life of liberty and association with their families and friends, to the rigid discipline and semi-monastic rules of the Almous-hous. For a period of about thirty years, appointments to the Hospital were made from time to time, but before the year 1700, residence in the house was discontinued, and a system of out-door pensions was established, which has continued to the present day.

What is now the large hall of the Hospital was originally in two flats, the upper one having been intended as the dormitory of the inmates. After the almsmen had ceased to reside in the house, these large rooms were used as schools, and for various public purposes. In 1852, the two were thrown into one by the removal of the dividing floor, and the hall then assumed its present appearance.

Cowane's Hospital has acquired the name of the Guild Hall from its being the official meeting-place of the Merchant Guild. The Guild Supper, held here yearly at the Feast of St. Michael, is an institution whose age is to be reckoned by centuries, and it

forms a link between the present generation of Guild Brethren and their predecessors in times long prior to the Reformation.

The Guild Hall is open to visitors, and contains a number of relics of Old Stirling, which are well worthy of inspection. On the walls are portraits of a number of gentlemen who in past years held the office of Dean of Guild of Stirling.

The exterior of the Hospital has undergone little change since its first erection, and with its low doorways, its small windows, its crow-stepped gables, its walls embellished with inscriptions and appropriate scriptural quotations, and its general quaint old-world air, it is an interesting example of the public buildings of a bygone age.

In a niche in the belfry tower, above the central door, is a statue of the founder in the costume of a well-to-do burgher of the time of Charles the First. The statue is not without merit as a work of art; but its main value, to a Stirling man at least, is that it represents the worthy benefactor of his native town, in his habit as he lived.

On the east side of the Hospital is a spacious paved terrace, with a massive stone balustrade, which forms a striking feature in the general view of the building. From this terrace a time-worn moss-grown stair descends to the bowling green, formed in 1661, and believed to be among the oldest public greens in Scotland. Beyond the bowling green is a little old-fashioned Dutch garden; the severely formal arrangement of the paths and flower plots, and the closely-clipped bushes, trimmed into stiff conventional shapes, are reproductions of a style which must have been familiar to Cowane and his contemporaries in their frequent visits to Campvere, and the Scottish staple ports in the Low Countries; so that this little garden may be regarded as a pleasant memorial of the intercourse between Stirling and Holland, which existed at the time the Hospital was built.

The money left by Cowane was invested in lands in the neighbourhood of the town. These have much increased in value, and now produce an annual revenue of upwards of £4000—nearly twice as much as the whole original capital. A large part of this income has, by recent legislation, been diverted to schemes of secondary and technical education, and the amount available for the purposes of the original trust has been correspondingly reduced. Last year (1896) the Patrons of the Hospital distributed a sum of £855 among 79 pensioners—necessitous and deserving Guild Brethren and their dependant female relatives. These are all elderly persons who have seen better days, and now in their declining years they have the burdens of life made easier for them, and the eventime of their days made brighter, by the munificent charity of that large-hearted and generous Son of the Rock, John Cowane.