

BEGGARS' BADGES

Except for a few isolated examples still in private hands, the beggars' badges of Scotland have become the preserve of museums - and as such are rarely displayed. Little has been written about them, except by L. Ingleby Wood in his "Scottish Pewter and Pewterers." They are, however, a key to close on four centuries of social history. Despite being made in base metals like lead, pewter or brass, they conferred valuable rights. When an act of 1574 ordered all legitimate and authorised beggars to wear them, this was designed to differentiate between these and "the armies of "scroungers and vagabonds" that flowed endlessly from one Scottish town to another. Immediately the gypsies - who were another plague- began to falsify them, both for their own use and for sale.

It was an Act of 1424 that authorised sick persons, or those incapable of work, to support themselves by begging. They had to identify themselves with a badge to show that they were licensed by the authorities. Similar licences were granted in England while Spain had adopted a similar scheme as early as 1493. Not until 1502, however, was Edinburgh's first distribution of beggars' badges recorded. Due to the "pestilence" that had devastated the town for several years, the Town Council decreed that "leiden taiknis" should be given to the "puir failyeit folks to quat quantity of nummer sall be thocht expedient". Any found begging without the token "be it a man to be strucken throw the land, and be it a woman to be brunt on the cheik and banest the toun."

Aberdeen appears as officialising the custom in 1546, while Dundee in 1558 decreed that only those born in the town and granted its badge could stay on. " Aliens" were to be branded and expelled. "Nane of them be suffered to beg except they (having the town's seal upon their hat or cloak) be auld, cruikit, laim or debitatit be great seikness". In some cases the licence was granted by kirk-sessions for specific parishes only. In 1674 Kirkwall decreed that badge-less beggars were to be expelled by the bellman. In others the license was given directly to "the King's bedesmen." Their badge carried the Royal Crown and the motto "Pass and Repass." This conferred the right to beg across the whole of Scotland rather than just in one town or parish.

What has not been appreciated is the variety of designs to be found in the badges. Some like Dysart are simple, cut-edged rectangles. Others like Alloa are circular with the name of the Parish and the beggar's number. The 1775 Parish of Comrie again is circular and shows a doubled-headed eagle bearing on its breast the shield and Agnus Dei that form the arms of the

County of Perth. The same basic design is to be found on the 1773 Parish of Little Dunkeld. Another circular one from Aberdeen shows a castle with battlements. The Parish of Cavers in 1729 is a heart-shaped badge while an unidentified circular one with four pierced holes shows a church with a spire with a stag's head above. This is thought to be from a parish in Shetland.

The Parish of Dunnottar has two badges, one oval in copper, the other a convex circular badge of brass. A circular brass badge of Fettercairn is dated 1817, while another oval copper badge belongs to Fetteresso.

The beggar's badge of Edinburgh is circular with four holes. In the centre below a crown appears "Edin." . A surviving example with the number 331 shows the magnitude of the social problem is what was then a very small town. It lacks, however, the artistic merits of other examples. Kirkcaldy across the Forth offers a badge with the three spired building that is the town's arms. Much further north, Kirkwall contributed perhaps the most attractive badge of all - a circular one inside a moulded border with four equi-distant loops around the circumference. In the centre a sailing ship appears.

Much simpler, but of significant social interest, is an old circular badge from the Parish of Newtyle. Its inverted 'S' and 'B' marks it out, most unusually, as a badge issued to a "Stranger Beggar," something that broke with the whole philosophy of the Scottish beggars' badges. Also of considerable social interest is a Royal Bedesman's badge in the Edinburgh Museum of Antiquities collection. With its crowned thistle and the number 28, it is dated as late as 1847, showing that even at that time the historic poverty of the nation was far from overcome.

Around ten examples exist of parishes which, to save money, pierced their communion tokens so that these might be used as beggars' badges. These are often mis-identified - as is the badge showing the arms of the Edinburgh Incorporation of Hammermen. As Ingleby Wood points out, this was not a begging badge for the bedesmen of the Magdalen Chapel. It was in fact a badge for the Incorporation itself. Examples in silver and brass exist. They were used by the office bearers. The lowly pewter ones presumably belonged to the ordinary members of the Incorporation.

This article was written by Alex Neish

Here follows illustrations taken from Scottish Pewter-Ware and Pewterers
by L Ingleby Wood Published in the early 1900s.
photos are likely larger than the original sizes to try to show more detail



NC 18.
 Beggar's Badge issued
 in 1847 and inscribed
 PASS AND REPASS.



NC 68.
 Badge in lead issued by
 the Town-Council of Kirkwall,
 in 1674. Presented by
 Mr. Williamson.



*The public of Kirkwall as it is
 complained upon and reported by divers
 not sundry inhabitants within this in-
 corporation, that there are many vagrants
 bound and beggars increasing in great
 place, both from the landward parishes
 and Isles, as also from over country through
 the place, to the oppression. There-
 fore, and in some of view, the said Magis-
 trates and Councilors put, both ordained
 and roll of the towns poore to be taken up
 and one badge made of thame of lead,
 stamped with the towns arms, qch is to
 shipp with the towns motto, and none to
 be allowed or tolerated to remain or
 reside within the said town except these
 qch shall have the said badge, and for
 the better obtempore hereof, it is
 appointed that James Laughton, bellman,
 use through the town and putt out all
 those qch not have the said badge.*



NC 83. Beggar's Badge
 of rolled lead with incised
 cross and the initials BB.
 Purchased 1897.

NC 69.
 Badge of Fossway Parish.
 Presented by Charles Black;
 1887.



NC 70.
 Badge of Tullibole Parish.
 Presented by Charles Black;
 1887.



NC 88.
 Badge of lead
 of Kirkcaldy:
 Purchased 1899.