Local Government in Elie and Earlsferry

The history of local government in Elie and Earlsferry is somewhat complicated.



It is, of course, well known that Earlsferry is a Royal Burgh and because of that its history is much older than that of Elie and the other villages that comprise this community.

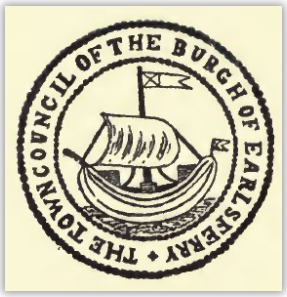
Royal Burghs were established essentially by the King and he would grant to a number of local people the right to administer a specified portion of land. The important part of this was that the area of land was clearly defined and what happened within these boundaries was entirely the responsibility of the councillors who were elected to control the area.

Part of the duties of a Royal Burgh was also to provide early warning to the monarch of any attempted incursion into his Kingdom. This meant that most of the Royal Burghs especially in Fife were coastal establishments and their duty was to warn the king if enemy fleets appeared off their shores. In return for this obligation the king allowed the administrators of the Royal Burghs virtual carte blanche to deal with all aspects of their community affairs. They could feu off land to those who wish to build properties on it, they would ascertain days upon which there would be local markets held and for which people would pay for the privilege of holding them, and especially in coastal Royal Burghs the crown granted them the right to the profits from any seaware and to levy import and export duties on produce imported or exported from their area. Seaware was anything that the sea produced and especially sand and seaweed that was used extensively as a form of fertiliser. The Royal Burghs derived their own independent income from these sources and in most cases Royal Burghs became financially very successful. Also latterly they levied rates on the local houses to pay for the services provided by the council.

The powers and obligations of Royal Burghs were set out in charters granted by the king and handed to the administrators of the Burghs. It was within the boundaries of the charters that the magistrates or organisers of the Royal Burghs had to confine themselves. Earlsferry was in a slightly difficult position

because it claimed to be a Royal Burgh but its Royal charter granting that status had apparently been lost in a fire in Edinburgh in the 15th century.

Earlsferry petitioned the king, at that time James VI, for a new charter of confirmation of the charter that they claimed had been granted in the 13th or 14th centuries. There did not appear to be any opposition to this and so accordingly Earlsferry was granted a new charter. Of course, it begs the question as to whether it was a Royal Burgh in the first place because it was an extremely small community (at best some 160 souls) and had little significance in the coast of Fife. Its apparent history in rescuing Macduff from the clutches of Macbeth was then and still is of doubtful provenance.



However, there was between the 10th century and the Reformation a flourishing ferry across the Forth from the North Coast of East Lothian. That ferry had originally been established by land owners in Fife who also had extensive holdings in East Lothian. It was much more practical to administer these two sets of holdings by crossing these 7 miles of sea between East Lothian and the South Coast of Fife.

It now seems to have been accepted that Earlsferry was indeed a Royal Burgh and it exercised all the powers that a Royal Burgh had. First and foremost it had an elected council, a provost and elected Ballies and magistrates. It had authority from the king to police the Burgh and to hold courts where necessary to punish offenders.

Elsewhere, where there were no Royal Burghs the areas were usually administered by a local landowner or a church or a Bishop. In these circumstances the local authority was the landowner and his or her say was what mattered. They had little powers to raise revenue but as owning the land that related to that settlement they did not necessarily need to raise revenue and could impose local taxes on their subjects.

Thus we have Earlsferry, the Royal Burgh, and adjacent to it were two small hamlets of Williamsburgh and Liberty, and then the slightly larger establishment of Elie itself. The two small hamlets were of little consequence consisting ,as they did, of merely a handful of houses and people. Elie was in a different position being obviously larger.

As the population of villages grew so there was pressure to create administrative systems away from the hands of the local landowners who had in

many cases just allowed the area to deteriorate. From the mid 1830s onwards there were a number of acts of parliament under the title Burgh Police (Scotland) Acts. “Police” in this context was not exclusive to law enforcement but had many other commitments, sanitation, water supply, public health, lighting and looking out for the community and of course the power to levy rates/taxes on their inhabitants.

There was at the same time a move to increase suffrage. Prior to this so far as Scotland was concerned the Royal Burghs were the ones who elected members of parliament. In addition to the extra duties that it was expected local government to perform there was concern that there was much corruption and bad administration especially by some of the local land owners.

At that time, mid 1830s, there was developed a better system whereby a council could be elected to manage a particular area.

Accordingly in 1864 the residents of Williamsburgh, Liberty and Elie joined together and petitioned the Sheriff Court in Cupar in terms of the 1863 act to form their own administrative district. William R. Ketchen a local bank manager and generally a “fixer” spearheaded the application. The petition was granted and thus in 1864 the administrative unit of Elie, Williamsburgh and Liberty was established. Initially this Burgh and others created in the same way were known as “police burghs” as in the context of police as above. The administration consisted of a number of commissioners who were elected by the inhabitants of the enfranchised area and whose powers were clearly set out in the statute.

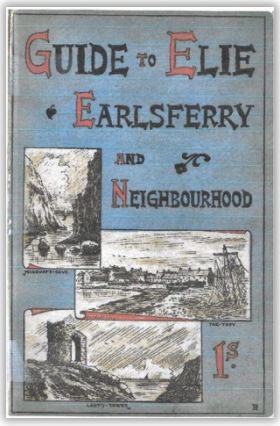


So on the one hand the Royal Burgh of Earlsferry handled all the affairs lying to the West of the boundary of Ferry Road and Elie handled all the affairs of the rest of the village.

One of the problems that Earlsferry had was that its economic situation was insufficient to provide enough people who were qualified to vote - the so called “£10 voters”. So Earlsferry, along with one or two other Royal Burghs, became moribund (“rotten”) in respect of electing any local councillors. They struggled on for a few years, but eventually with deaths there were too few living councillors to fulfil their functions. An opinion was obtained from counsel, who advised that they could not carry on and a petition was presented to the court to appoint managers of the council.

In 1851 the Royal Burgh of Earlsferry went into administration. This meant that Parliament appointed Commissioners to run the affairs of the Royal Burgh on the basis that it could not run its own. By 1871 there were moves afoot to revert to the previous administration of a Royal Burgh. By that time – 1868 Municipal Elections Act - more people became eligible to vote and so the council was re-constituted. At the time it was felt that the managers (all local people) had actually done a better job than their elected predecessors.

Understandably, Earlsferry felt somewhat intimidated by the larger neighbour of Elie and whilst there was no outbreak of warfare there was a certain degree of jostling for power. This was particularly important towards the end of the 19th century with the arrival of the railway which had opened up both Elie and Earlsferry to a lucrative burst of tourists. Various communities especially along the East coast of Fife were vying with each other to provide their own special facilities for these visitors thereby making a financial contribution to the economic welfare of the village. So for example in 1889 when Elie established the Recreation Park, which included the golf course and putting green and tennis courts Earlsferry had no equivalent. There was, however, a plan for Earlsferry to provide a putting green for visitors at Chapel Green and later for there was to be a swimming pool of some sort there as well. Neither of these schemes came to fruition.



By the mid 1920s it was clear that a number of the police Burghs, which had now been converted simply into Burghs with their own town council and elected officials was such that much of the administration of local areas were impractical. There were a large number of smaller councils operating in a restricted area with seemingly overlapping interests. Accordingly it was decided that some should be amalgamated. The Act of Parliament - Local Government Scotland Act 1929 -specifically stated that the Royal Burgh of Earlsferry and the Burgh of Elie should be amalgamated into one administrative region.

This of course was anathema to the Earlsferry people who considered being the Royal Burgh gave them precedence over their larger but less regal neighbour. It came about therefore in the mid 1920s, in anticipation of that act of parliament, overtures had to be made between the two town councils towards amalgamation. The first approach was in 1923 but got nowhere. This was known colloquially as the “fusion project”.

In February 1927 there was a meeting of the joint councils to discuss the necessary amalgamation. One of the councillors said “….but as matters stand

at present if an improvement was carried out in Elie, Earlsferry would resent paying [a contribution to it] and vice versa." The interests of the two Burghs, he said, were identical. Provost Milligan said that the sub-committee had been asked to report on facilities for amusement not on amalgamation.

Was Earlsferry to swallow up Elie? It was a big affair to tackle and in any case Earlsferry would never agree to it. The clerk suggested that Elie town council should meet Earlsferry town council at an early date to discuss amalgamation.

Various meetings were held up to May 1929, the amalgamation date. Any hostility between the burghs was resolved and much discussion took place about whether the combined burghs should be called Royal Burgh of Earlsferry and Elie and various other permutations but eventually it was decided by one vote that officially the name would be the Royal Burgh of Elie and Earlsferry, thereby Elie annexing the Royal Burgh soubriquet over the heads of the Ferrymen. So it has remained.

The Lord Lyon King of Arms had also granted warrant for matriculation in the public register in the name of Royal Burgh of Elie and Earlsferry. A coat of arms was approved - the first and fourth quarters representing the ancient arms of the Royal Burgh of Earlsferry namely a ship with the arms of the old Earls of Fife upon the sail. The second and third quarters refer to the burgh of barony of Elie erected in favour of William Scott of Grangemuir and the burgh seal in terms of his charter in 1598.



At a meeting of Earlsferry and Elie town council 7th September 1929 in order that a suitable name for the united burghs might be officially adopted and included in the next statutory order a special meeting of the town councils of Elie and Earlsferry was held in Earlsferry town hall. The name used by the secretary for Scotland "the United burgh of Liberty Williamsburgh, Elie and Earlsferry" was considered cumbersome. The provost of Earlsferry recommended that united burgh should be called the Royal Burgh of Elie and Earlsferry. As an amendment councillor Webster move the united Burgh should be called the Royal Burgh of Earlsferry and Elie. On the vote, 4 voted for the amendment and 5 for the motion and accordingly it was to be called the Royal Burgh of Elie and Earlsferry and that was the correct name henceforth.

The choice of motto was not so easy. Various suggestions were put forward and it came down to either "The welfare of the People in the first place" or "Union nourishes courtesy". The latter marginally found favour and on

translation into Latin became "*Unitas Alit Comitatem*" – hardly one thinks aspirational or inspirational.

So the combined Elie and Earlsferry Town Council ruled administrative affairs until local government reorganisation in 1974 where these local councils were abolished and regional authorities established. Elie and Earlsferry came within the sphere of North East Fife Regional Council and then in 1994 reorganisation again abolished the regional councils and it all come under the aegis of Fife Council.

Whilst it is easy to criticise these variations, there is no doubt that so far as Fife is concerned as a county there is a considerable difference between the demographics of north fife and south Fife. The latter have many deprived areas as opposed to the former where there is a perception that the better off district needs no assistance. This has resulted in a concentration of resources in the southern region and a degree of neglect of the north east region. Perhaps it is time to have another look at the situation.

Ironically in the reorganisation of 1974 there was an initial proposal, fiercely resisted by the Fifers, to divide Fife into two units with a line drawn west to east through the centre. The northern part would have joined Tayside and the southern the Lothians. The demographic of these areas is very much more aligned than the disparity between the north and south of Fife.

AGJ March 2026 (rev Oct 2027)

.

