

Stirling 900: Reviving Walking the Marches: The Captain's Story

Andrew McEwan: with video introduction and coda by Murray Cook



(to play the video above, download the article PDF and open it with a desktop PDF viewer that supports media playback)

2024 was a very special year for Stirling as celebrations took place to mark 900 years as a Royal Burgh. Central to those celebrations and the principal civic event was the Walking of the Marches. The atmosphere in the city centre on the morning of Saturday 25th of May was electric, estimates put the attendance of participants and spectators at up to 2,000.



Fig 1: Captain Andy McEwan and Councilor Alasdair Tollemache (carrying the Maces) leading the 2024 March

The eight Birlawmen¹ in four groups were piped to the city centre, reports that the Marches² had been checked and were intact were received by the Captain of the Birlawmen who in turn reported this to the now Lord Provost of

1 burgh official who determined disputes in their particular neighbourhood

2 city boundaries

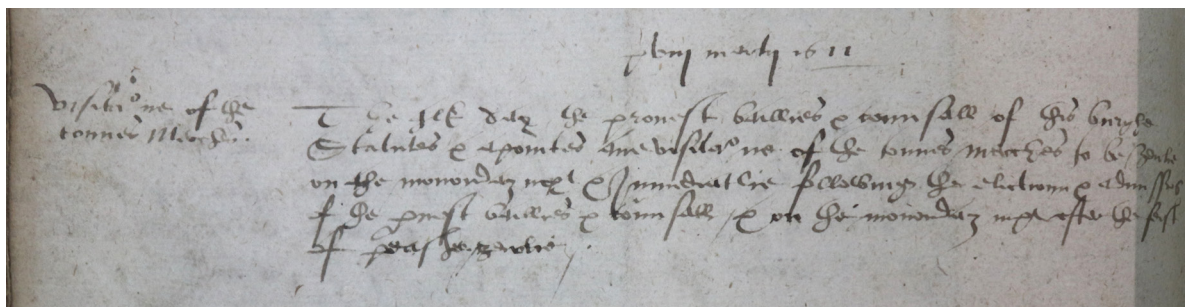


Fig 2: copy of records and transcription.

Stirling³, the Dean of Guild⁴ and the Deacon Convenor of the Seven Incorporated Trades⁵ and an invitation issued for them to join the Birlawmen in a perambulation of some of the most ancient Marches of Stirling in celebration of this. Thereafter, accompanied by three pipe bands, hundreds of participants set off through the city in celebration of part of the history and heritage of Stirling. It's not a long walk but it marked the end of this part of the Walking of the Marches journey:

<https://youtu.be/mq6E9tunOgM>

Stirling 900 Walking of the Marches

It's fair to say that the ancient tradition of the Walking of the Marches in Stirling had pretty well been forgotten about, well not quite. One man started to look into it. With friends, an annual boundary walk started. Nothing official just friends sharing an interest, and the odd beer!

By tradition the Walking of the Marches was organised by the Guildry of Stirling, the Seven Incorporated Trades and the town council. It just

happens that among those participating in the boundary walk were members of the Incorporation of Hammermen⁶, one of the Seven Incorporated Trades. From this the idea of officially restarting the Walking of the Marches emerged.

It certainly is an ancient tradition. Research to date shows that the oldest reference to the Walking of the Marches in a surviving council minute dates back to 1611 (*SCA reference SBC/11/1 Stirling Royal Burgh minutes 1597 – 1619 minute of 23rd March 1611*).

The tradition of The Walking of the Marches, or the inspection of the boundaries, goes back to the days before accurate maps when the boundaries were recorded in writing and the only way to ensure that there was no encroachment was to inspect them to ensure that no one had nicked a bit of the burgh. In Stirling this was carried out by the Birlawmen. At one time the boundaries were marked March stones but these have all disappeared over time, no doubt there will be a sill or lintel somewhere that was once a March stone. The tradition became that the Birlawmen inspected the Marches and marked them by the turning of turfs.

The Scots dialect dictionary shows that the

³ the Lord Provost is a civic official, head and chariman of the burgh council <https://www.stirling.gov.uk/council-and-committees/about-the-council/stirling-council-lord-provost/stirling-council-lord-provost/>

⁴ <https://guildryofstirling.co.uk/>

⁵ <https://stirlingtrades.wordpress.com/>

⁶ <https://stirlingincorporatedtrades.org/incorporation-of-hammermen/>

name birlawman comes from birlie or Birlaw-court, a court of country neighbours to settle local concerns. A birlie (birlaw) man was a member of the Court of Perambulation.

The Birlawmen were officials of the Burgh Court, and the Perambulation Registers, recording the details of the walking of the Marches, were records of the Burgh Court. Those who had encroached upon the Burgh boundaries would be prosecuted by the Burgh Court if they refused to comply with orders or to repair fences, roads, walls etc as ordered to after the Walking had taken place.

By 2014 the idea of properly reviving the Walking of the Marches had firmly taken root and members of the Incorporation of Hammermen approached the then provost of Stirling Mike Robbins. In effect this was the make or break moment and we were delighted by the enthusiastic reception to the idea. The Marches were on! In September of that year, for the first time since 1978, the Walking of the Marches in Stirling would take place.

The support of the provost was critical and we are delighted to say that not only did Mike Robbins support us but we have enjoyed the support of his successors Christine Simpson, Douglas Dodds and the present incumbent Elaine Watterson. Incidentally, Mike Robbins is no longer a councillor but he is a member of the Marches court and is vice-captain of the Birlawmen. The Walking of the Marches can be catching!

So why did it die out? Firstly it is fair to say that it was never a big event in Stirling, we look on with envy at other communities where the

walking or in many cases riding of the Marches is a huge community event and a real highlight of the year. Looking at later references, while the Walking of the Marches in Stirling was still taking place it feels like it was more of a chore than a celebration. What had at one time been an annual event had drifted to being something done every seven years. It is also likely that local government reorganisation in the 1970's had an effect, Stirling no longer had a town council instead there was Stirling District Council covering a larger area and the even larger Central Regional Council. The Walking of the Marches was forgotten about.

The 1970 Walking of the Marches, yes I know it was eight years until the next one but it's a fact, put a new twist on the tradition, the participants went by bus! Well it was raining. Nonetheless the reports of the event show that the traditions (other than walking) were observed, there were Birlawmen carrying picks and shovels, when they got off the bus the procession was led by pipers. The then provost Dr Robert McIntyre was prominent as were the members of the Guildry and the Seven Incorporated Trades. Anyway Stirling is a big place so a bus made it easier to get around. All was followed by a dinner in the evening.

Records of various historic Walking of the Marches are looked after by the Stirling Council archives and they provide a great insight into what our predecessors did. The records stretch back to 1695 (*SBC/27/1 1695 – 1708*). From my point of view the record of the 1820 perambulation is fascinating and also pretty legible (*SBC/27/4 1820 – 1822*)! That was a turbulent year with the

1820 insurrection and the subsequent executions of Baird and Hardie in Stirling. With the Walking of the Marches taking place in July that year it was between the insurrection and the executions. It's all still there, the perambulation, the Birlawmen, but it was a different time and the Walking of the Marches was a serious business. In those days the Birlawmen were paid by the master of Cowane's Hospital.

The payments are given in the Cowane's Hospital Trust account book for 1803–1825 at the Council Archives. The payments for the Walking of the Marches held in the 1690s are given in the Burgh Treasurer's account books, however. We don't know why Cowane's was paying the fees in 1820, but the Cowane's Hospital Trust was very closely linked to the Burgh at this time, with the Provost and Councillors sitting as Trustees.

The perambulants inspected, among other things, mill lades and among other problems identified that mill dam of the burgh mill was in a very insecure state with part of the bank at the sluice having given way. Repair was required.

But that was then and times have changed, we don't even have burgh mill any more. What we had to try and do was to preserve the traditions of the Walking of the Marches while trying to make it relevant to today. As they discovered in 1970 Stirling is a big place and a perambulation of the boundaries is a very long way, we needed to create something new while respecting our past. The first decision was a fairly easy one, the Walking of the Marches would be a celebration of Stirling. After all our history is all around us in Stirling. It would focus on a procession through the city centre.

We decided that the perambulation would be completed the Saturday before the Walking of the Marches. Today we still do this, it allows the Captain of the Birlawmen to report at the start of the ceremonial event that the Marches have been inspected, that they are intact and have been marked by the Birlawmen by the turning of turfs. Of course this report is made to the Provost, Dean of Guild and the Deacon Convenor of the Seven Incorporated Trades as it always has been.

So the traditions are maintained, traditional terms are used. Birlawmen, that is what they were always called so we maintain that term. But there is one important change, the name is no longer gender specific and we now have lady Birlawmen. The Birlawmen with their picks and shovels are almost a symbol of the Stirling Walking of the Marches. We have developed badges and medals for the Walking of the Marches and have adopted the crossed pick and shovel as our emblem. In 2014 the Birlawmen carried real picks and shovels but they complained that they were too heavy – and they couldn't pop them in the back of the bus anymore! Today the Birlawmen carry wooden replicas that are much lighter. The Birlawmen are now also distinguished by the wearing of blue bonnets.

A central character in the Stirling Walking of the Marches is the captain of the Birlawmen. The captain is responsible for swearing in the Birlawmen, for reporting that the Marches have been inspected and are complete. The captain also leads the procession as it wynds through the city centre. Since 2014 this role has been taken by Andy McEwan who did it for the final time in



Fig 3: Valentina Bold and Janie Meikle Bland, the first ever female Birlawmen

2024. Even in the time that has elapsed since 2014 the organisation of the Walking of the Marches has evolved. The committee, the Marches Court, is made up of volunteers but central to that are the Birlawmen. Being a birlawman is now a journey and one that will end with the participant serving for one year as the captain of the Birlawmen, there will be no repeat of one person doing it for years.

In 2014 we were led by a piper, today we have pipe bands. So the revived Walking of the Marches has come a long way, it's been quite a journey but in 2024 year we took another big step. In 2024 Stirling celebrated 900 years as a royal burgh and the Walking of the Marches was a principal part of the celebrations. On Saturday 25th of May starting at 10.45 at the bottom of King Street, in the very heart of the city centre, the Walking of the Marches commenced.

The scene was set by the bellman, the provost welcomed all to the Walking of the Marches.

The captain addressed the Birlawmen asking them to confirm that a perambulation had been completed, that the Marches were intact and they have marked them by the turning of turfs. That being the case the captain reported to the provost, Dean of Guild and the Deacon Convenor of the Seven Incorporated Trades and invited them to join with the Birlawmen and accompany them on a perambulation of some of the most ancient Marches of Stirling.

After all at one time the Marches would have been around the castle rock. With that the procession set off around the city centre before visiting the Smith art gallery and museum where a toast to the Marches takes place. Then it is off up the hill to Scotland's oldest bowling green at Cowane's Hospital, in the shadow of the historic church of the Holy Rude where James VI was crowned. It is a wonderful historic setting and here the procession finished and entertainment was provided. Part of the entertainment is provided by reenactors who bring history to life, they are also part of the procession.

Prominent in the procession is the blue blanket of the seven incorporated trades, the original is in the Stirling Smith Museum, it is now a fragile relic that dates back to the time of Mary Queen of Scots and said to have been sewn by the Queen and her ladies in Stirling Castle. The blue blanket carried today is an exact replica of the original and was produced for the trades by the Stirling embroiderers guild.

To make a report that the Marches are complete the perambulation has to be completed. That was done as always the week before and as



Fig 4: Stuart Campbell, The Deacon Convenor of the 7 Incorporated Trades; Alan Simpson Lord Lieutenant; Elaine Waterston Lord Provost and Elizabeth Road, Lord Dean of the Merchant Guild of Stirling



Fig 5: The Blue Blanket Carried by Stirling's Hammerman

part of the Stirling 900 celebrations it started in the castle. The party was piped into the chapel royal where the captain of the Birlawmen, him again, took charge but only after an introduction from the bellman and a welcome from the provost. A ceremony took place to swear in the Birlawmen, the party were then piped out the castle and set off around the city. All of this was thoroughly enjoyed by hundreds of visitors to the castle on a glorious summers day.

The Walking of the Marches is part of the history of Stirling, thanks to the hard work of the Marches court it is also part of the future. There are ambitious plans to grow the event further in future. We are delighted to partner with others who share our vision, we work with the wonderful Stirling Smith⁷ – home among other things to the world's oldest football, the executioner's axe last used at the 1820 execution of Baird and Hardie⁸ (who were hanged first) plus an array of items related to the Guildry and Seven Incorporated Trades. We have enjoyed the support of Cowane's hospital, no visit to Stirling should be complete without a visit to the beautifully restored seventeenth century building that is the finest surviving example of its type in Scotland and today serves as the Guildhall. John Cowane was Dean of Guild and is Stirling's greatest benefactor, he died in 1633 but his legacy still benefits Stirling today.

Cowane's Hospital⁹ and the Church of the

Holy Rude¹⁰ are at the historic heart of Stirling and sit close to the castle, no article on Stirling is complete without reference to Scotland's finest castle. We worked closely with the castle in planning the 2024 event and are so grateful for their support and also the support from the superb Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders museum that sits at the highest part of the castle rock.

The 2025 Walking of the Marches built on the legacy of the 2024 event with Robin Mair as Captain of the Birlawmen. Planning is now well underway for the 2026 event that takes place on 30th May starting at the foot of King Street at 11am with past provost Mike Robbins as Captian of the Birlawmen. Come and join us if you can, the date will now always be the final Saturday of May.

CODA: THE FINALE...29TH MARCH 2025
DR MURRAY COOK, STIRLING COUNCIL
ARCHAEOLOGIST AND BIRLAWMAN

The final event of Stirling 900 was a march of 17 pipe bands and various local voluntary groups from Stirling Castle Esplanade, through the city, across old Stirling Bridge to Stirling County Rugby Club's ground and the core of the Stirling Bridge Battlefield. The procession featured the great and good of Stirling from the Lord Provost and Lord Lieutenant to Cruachan, a Shetland pony and the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders mascot. The march was launched by the Marches Captain, Andy in his final official act. The Birlawmen and women are back where they belong at the heart of Stirling a fitting tribute to Captain Andy McEwan.

7 <https://www.smithartgalleryandmuseum.co.uk/>

8 <http://www.stirlingarchives.scot/2020/09/08/execution-john-baird-andrew-hardie-8th-september-1820/>

9 <https://cowanes.org.uk/>

10 <https://www.churchoftheholyrude.co.uk/>



Fig 6: aerial shot at rugby

FURTHER READING

Stirling 900-Walking The Marches-The Register
of the Court of Perambulation

[http://www.stirlingarchives.scot/2024/05/01/
stirling-900-walking-the-marches-the-registers-
of-the-perambulation-court/](http://www.stirlingarchives.scot/2024/05/01/stirling-900-walking-the-marches-the-registers-of-the-perambulation-court/)