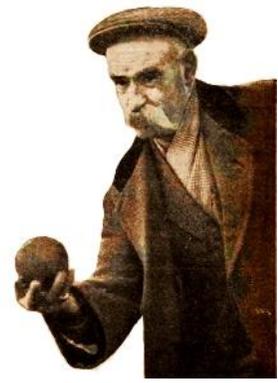


## Bawbee She Kyles



A game which many have heard of but few know about. Its origins are lost in the mists of time and that seems to have always been the case, no matter the starting year. The name lives on in the housing complex at the bottom of St.Clair Street, where the cottage hospital once stood. The game was played on one day each year. Initially it took place on Handsel Monday but in time moved to New Year's Day. If New Year fell on a Sunday, then Monday became the match day. Handsel Monday was the first Monday of the New Year. In some parts of rural Scotland it was celebrated on the Monday following the 12<sup>th</sup>, in remembrance of the old "Julian" Calendar, as opposed to its "Gregorian" replacement. There have been two venues. Originally played on the sward inside Ravenscraig Castle and then, on Dominic's Green or St. Dominic's Green in Ravenscraig Park. It seems that it was originally played by Pathhead men, although in time, players even came from outside Kirkcaldy. The Fife Free Press offers a theory, suggesting "the origin is lost in antiquity but is supposed than in days when the Castle was occupied as a garrison, the retainers were allowed on New Year's Day to invite their friends to sports on the Castle Green, and of all the games, this is the only one now played". This certainly is a theory to explain the use of a cannonball.

## The Bawbee



A bawbee was a Scottish halfpenny, valued at 6 pence Scots and was the equivalent of an English halfpenny. It was a silver coin and was first minted in 1538 at the command of James V. It was last minted in the reign of William of

Orange, who died in 1702. When England and Scotland created a common currency after 1707, it continued to mean a halfpenny. Interestingly, there is a Fife connection with the introduction of the bawbee. The Master of the Mint for James V was one Laird of Silliebawby and his Estate was in the parish of Burntisland. The name bawbee seems derived from a portion of the estate name.

Although long gone – the bawbee as a word lives on. It appears that in Aberdeenshire a “bawbee bap or cake” is a cheap bap or cake. The song “The Crookit Bawbee” has been recorded by both the Alexander Brothers and Kenneth McKellar. The tune is a staple in Scottish Country Dancing. It is however best known from the song “Coulter’s Candy”. The coins minted in the reign of Charles 11 have a connection with modern coinage. The motto on the bawbee of “nemo me impune lacessit” (no one provokes me with impunity) is still on the border of Scottish one pound coins.



## The Kyle

We require consultation with two dictionaries to discover the definition of “kyle” in this context. They are the “Dictionary of the Scot’s Language” and the “Scottish National Dictionary”. Here we learn, that a “kyle” is rather like a bobbin and were used in the game of ninepins, which was greatly enjoyed in Ayr. The front pin of the nine was known as the “king kyle”. We also learn of another variant from Ayr called “lucky Kyle” where only one pin is used. Here attempts to hit the” kyle” from a distance were accompanied by the cry, “wha’ll try the lucky kyle? A preen

(pin) or a boot or a button a chance". (this variation was given by a man in 1880 remembering his childhood). It would seem that the Kirkcaldy game was a derivation of this. Instead of pins, the idea was to land the ball in a hole, which if successful, was a "kyle". Variations played in other areas involved trying to roll a ball through a hoop or at East Wemyss, the game of "yetlins" was played. This involved launching the ball from a thong and the object was to cover a measured distance in the fewest number of shots.

We learn that these games tended to attract betting and the dictionary tells us as early as 1702 – "censors were sent to "bowling greens", "kyle alleys" and places of public gaming to discover abuses and to report on them".

The good Dr Johnston, in his esteemed dictionary of 1755, tells us that kyles is "a kind of play still retained in Scotland, in which 9 holes ranged in 3s are made in the ground and an iron bullet rolled among them".

The St.Andrew's Gazette of the 12<sup>th</sup> January 1867, tells us that "its ruins (Ravenscraig Castle) were thronged from morning till night by a motley crew, many of whom visited the "bluidy well" or indulged in the exciting game of "ye kyles" which is carried on there with great enthusiasm all for the exchange of a few coppers".

## The Field of Play



The traditional home was the ruins of Ravenscraig Castle. The game took place on the castle sward, which was relatively flat but the grass was far from smooth.



The castle had been commissioned by James II who reigned from 1437 until 1460. It was intended as a home for his wife, Mary of Guelders. It was amongst the first, if not the first to be built in Scotland, to withstand cannon fire. Many of the walls were 14 feet thick. Although James was involved in the planning, he never saw a stone laid. In 1460 during the siege of Roxburgh Castle he was killed when a cannon exploded.

Mary of Guelders had work started, as both a memorial to her husband and a dower house for herself. The Castle was nowhere near completion when she died in 1463. The Castle passed to her son James III who reigned from 1460 – 1488. However in 1471, James gave the Castle to William Sinclair, Earl of Orkney and Caithness. In exchange, James secured the Earldom of Orkney and its attached lands. James then annexed Orkney from Norway. The Castle was completed by the Sinclairs.



However in 1650/51 the Castle was invaded, captured and damaged by English forces under Cromwell. The Castle stayed in the family but no attempts were made to repair it. The Sinclairs built Dysart House around 1755 and passed the Castle and its policies to the St. Clair Erskines, Earls of Rosslyn. The Castle and Estates remained in that family until 1896, when the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl sold them to the linoleum tycoon – Sir Michael Nairn. Nairn by this time was also the owner of

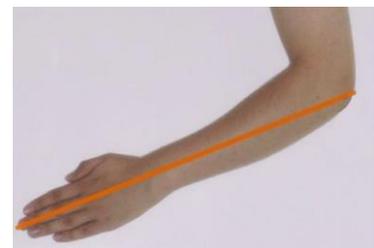
Dysart House.

During World War One, the Castle served as an ammunition dump. In 1929, in yet another magnificent gesture, the Castle and 85 acres of land were gifted to the town as a park by the Nairn Family. The Castle and park are close to the site of the former Cottage Hospital, another gift from the family. (Are you watching Barry, Ostler and Shepherd?). In 1955 the castle went into the care of the State and is

now managed by Historic Scotland. It is open to visitors but sadly has neither custodian nor guide.

## The Game Itself

For details of how the game was played, credit must be given to two sources, the staff at Kirkcaldy Galleries and a Mr.J Barrie. On the 11<sup>th</sup> November 1965, Mr. Barrie had typed a letter containing details of the game and forwarded it to Miss Luke, who was the Librarian at the time. Mr. Barrie was a Kirkcaldy resident and tells us that his Grandfather, Father and Uncles were all keen on the game. He relates that he was absent from Kirkcaldy as a teenager between 1907 and 1923. His memory of the game stretches back to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He writes that he knew all about the game before he ever saw it. The game consisted of three lanes with three holes per lane. The holes were 6" in diameter and each hole was a yard or an ell apart. An ell was a Scottish measurement which was standardised at approximately 37 inches in 1681. It was abolished in 1824. As the ell was the term for measurement in the game, it is not unreasonable to suggest the game came into being after 1681. It must also be remembered that the Castle was damaged in 1651, which would leave the sward open to hold the game. A line or mark was made, 10 yards from the target holes. The players threw a Bawbee down on the mark, prior to the commencement of the game. Each player took turns to roll the ball, in an attempt to locate one of the nine holes. If a ball landed in the hole it was "kyled" and the winner took the "kitty". If in the first 6 attempts no "kyle" was achieved – then the players flung down another bawbee each, and started again until a kyle was secured. That ended the game and a player/s could retire and be replaced by the next person in the queue. There could be no more than six players in each game. Starting time was around 10.00am and continued as long as there was interest. Mr. Barrie recollected large excited crowds inside the Castle.





1910 Edward VII Halfpenny

Independently there was betting amongst the spectators, as opposed to the competitors. However these wagers were based on each shot – not each game. The call “a bawbee she kyles” went up from an individual, who then dropped a bawbee on the grass. Another spectator would retort, “a bawbee she disnae” and their bawbee was placed alongside the original. The winner collected the two coins. In these wagers the most that could be won was a bawbee, while when it took a number of “ends” to get a “kyle” – there could be a reasonable sum to win.

The “golden age” of the game ended in 1910, when the last game was played within the Castle confines. The Castle was not open to the public, other than specifically for the game to be played. The Earls of Rosslyn and Sir Michael Nairn had always allowed the game to be played on its traditional site but in 1911 – a notice had been placed on the gates – that parts of the walls were in a perilous condition and sadly the doors could not be opened. Although the game did move to Ravenscraig Park – it was not immediate and nearly 20 years were to pass before the game was revived.



We are told that the “pie men” did a roaring trade with the traditional shout “mutton pies – reekin hot – one a penny – five for a groat!” A groat was a Scottish

coin worth 4 pennies. So even then, bulk buying paid dividends, as you secured an extra pie with your groat! At one time before the fruit was more widely available – Seville oranges were also sold.

Mr. Barrie concludes with last game, which was played in 1951 being filmed for posterity. Its whereabouts are unknown or even if it is still in existence.

## Miscellaneous

### Snippets from the Press.

[From an article in the Fife Free Press and Kirkcaldy Guardian of 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1909.](#)

“For over four hundred years the old castle on Pathhead rocks, has withstood the buffetings of war and storm and still remains wonderfully intact”.

“Throughout the year the castle stands gloomy and sad, tenanted only by the birds who still find it a fitting stronghold during the winter gales, but on New Year’s Day, the old halls again resound to the cheery ring of human voices”.

“On opening the Castle this day, Sir Michael B Nairn follows the time honoured custom and during the day crowds of people, including an unusually large percentage of old folks, made their way across the old moat and through the postern gate between the keeps and onto the Castle Green”.

“Times change, old friends who had been met in past years had now passed away but nothing seemed to have changed in the ancient pile”.

“The grass on the Green was as rank as in years gone by”.



“The old stairway, which fifty years ago seemed only fit to hang together a few years longer, presents the same indications of decay but apparently no new symptoms”.

“It is a peculiar fact that although the game has been played throughout all these generations, no one has thought it relevant to adopt modern ideas in the way of leveling the playing pitch or shearing the greens and so the game continues stereotyped by the conditions of the ground, as a sport largely dependent on luck”.

“Each year, the crowds on the Green changes and it is a big leap from the representatives of the old Pathhead weavers and nailers in their moleskins, with wives in mutchies and Paisley shawls, to the company which yesterday enjoyed the sport”.

[From an article in the Fife Free Press and Kirkcaldy Guardian of 7<sup>th</sup> January 1911](#)

“This year a notice was issued by the proprietor that the building would not be opened as a consequence of danger from falling masonry”.

“Those from a distance, who happened to return to the town at the holiday season, were always certain to meet old cronies and under the shadow of the ancient pile, there seemed to hover a spirit of the past which directed conversation to bye gone days”.

“There were many who missed the privilege of this gathering”

However on the same page (5 of 8) we find a small note under Pathhead. It seems all was not lost, at least for 1911.

“The ancient game of “She Kyles” was played in Millie’s Park on Monday”.

(Note – Millie’s Park was at the rear of John Millie’s house in Back Road (Commercial Street) and Millie Street is named after him.)



[From an article in the Fife Free Press and Kirkcaldy Guardian of 4<sup>th</sup> January 1913.](#)

“In consequence of the unsafe condition of the building, the public were again denied the privilege of visiting the Castle on New Year’s Day”.

“The closing of this ancient gathering ground is a great disappointment to many, especially of the older generation, who on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the year had an opportunity of meeting old friends”.

“The closing of the grounds has also terminated the playing of “bawbee she Kyles” which had been played on the Castle Green from time immemorial “.

“Among many, there is a strong feeling that before another year, Mr. Michael Nairn should be approached on this matter, when the part of the old “Keep” considered unsafe might be fenced off, or some other piece of ground in the immediate vicinity of the ruin set aside for the playing of the quaint old game, in which generation after generation of “Pathhead Laddies” from time immemorial have indulged”.

“In the circumstances Mr. Nairn would no doubt interest himself in suiting the desires of the community in such a matter”.

[From an article in the Dundee Courier on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1930.](#)

“After a lapse of nearly 19 years an old New Year’s Day custom was revived at St Dominic’s Green in Kirkcaldy yesterday”.



“The weather was very much against the success of the event, but a few fore joined and made a formal start”.

“An interesting feature was that the original cannonball was used. The ball for some time had been exhibited at Kirkcaldy Museum”.

[From an article in the Fife Free Press and Kirkcaldy Guardian 30<sup>th</sup> December 1933](#)

“And in view of the great interest taken since it was resuscitated some years ago, a large attendance may be expected, provided the climatic conditions are favourable”.

“Even those who are not fit enough to roll the ball will find the efforts of the various participants full of interest and amusement”.

“With so many bowlers of note in our town, both of the indoor and outdoor variety, there are surely many local men who would like to try their skill”.

“At any rate if they do so, they will find a great difference in the weight of the “bool” and an even bigger difference in the “draw” of the green, which definitely has not been flattened out or rolled over for the event”.

[From an article in the Dundee Courier on 1st January 1934](#)

“The pitch which is now and as far as is known always was, a rather bumpy, unkempt and undulating grassy plot”.

“This being a reckless age – it is now “a penny she kyles”.



[From an article in the Dundee Courier on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1934.](#)

“A fairly large crowd gathered to watch members of Ravenscraig Park Old Men’s Club take part in the games”.

“Game not played on its original spot this year, Dominic’s Green – but a short distance away, where conditions were more suitable”.

[From an article in the Fife Free Press on 28<sup>th</sup> December 1940](#)

“Resuscitated some years ago after a lapse, the ancient Kirkcaldy game of

“Bawbee she Kyles” is now an established New Year’s Day attraction and in spite of war worries is due to take place as usual on Wednesday of next week”.

“Mr. D Goodsir along with other enthusiasts were responsible for the revival of this time honoured game and hope that quite a number will come forward to display their skill”.

[From an article in the Fife Free Press and Kirkcaldy Guardian on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1948](#)

“On New Year’s Day each year some of the old Pathhead worthies indulge in a



game of “Bawbee she Kyles” but on Thursday, Mr. John Chalmers, Harriet Street, Kirkcaldy, carried down to Dominic’s Green, Ravenscraig Park the iron cannonball used for the game, there were

no takers, for the heavy rain kept most of the contestants indoors, so the few who turned out were disappointed. This game which has been played for 100s of years continued throughout the war”.

[From an article in the Dundee Courier on 30<sup>th</sup> December 1949](#)

“The particular cannonball used for centuries is now in Kirkcaldy Museum. It once fed the guns manning the Castle and was last turned out for the hardly annual on New Year’s Day 1948. A replica is now used”.

“One of the keenest “Kylers” is 79 year old Henry Robertson of 193 Mid Street Dysart. He commented – “When I was a lad we used to get hot pies from the baker at 9d for a dozen. We went down to the Castle and sold them at a penny each – that was a 3d profit on the dozen”. (Looks as if no baker’s dozen there). Mr. Robertson kyled for over 30 years. He was a hand printer with Messrs Michael Nairn & Co. for 32 years until he retired at age 65”.

“Another veteran reflected how hundreds had thronged the grounds in years gone by. Now there is only a handful who turn up for the occasion. The younger folk don’t take to it .It’s too slow for them”.

“Although he agrees that interest in Bawbee she Kyles” is ebbing fast, Mr. John Chalmers confirms that I’ll be there at 10.00 o’clock on Monday morning. If we get decent weather, I expect there will be a couple of dozen down at the park. Mr. Chalmers was employed by John Y Thomson, Monumental Sculptor, Bridge Street, Leven and is “Keeper of the Ball”. This is the one made to replace the ancient cannon ball presented to the Museum by Alexander Forsyth, Dysart Road”.

“An additional attraction when the game was held in the castle grounds was a visit to the Castle’s “bloody well”. This is where the soldiers were reputed to throw their dead after battles centuries ago. The sightseers were escorted by boys holding flickering candles”.



[From an article in the Fife Free Press and Kirkcaldy Guardian of 7<sup>th</sup> January 1950.](#)

The hopes of Mr. Chalmers that a couple of dozen might appear proved unfounded as the following week’s paper proved.

“Very few spectators turned up to witness the game”.

“Mr. John Chalmers, who is the recognised “keeper of the ball”, managed to “kyle” on four separate occasions – quite a feat if you haven’t tried it”.

“Play started about 10.15am and finished about noon. The attraction of East Fife v Raith Rovers game apparently proving too much. Unfortunately, Raith Rovers failed to “kyle” and might have fared better if they had been at Dominic’s Green”.



“A young lad from Cowdenbeath, Harold Scott, who lives at 2 Keir Street, made a special journey to have his first essay at the game and did quite well”.

[From an article in the Fife Advertiser on 5<sup>th</sup> January](#)

1952

A headline told us the sad news. “Nobody Turned up for the Ancient Game”

The story mentioned that once again there had been no game held but produced a photograph taken many years ago, showing throngs inside the Castle watching proceedings.

[From an article in the Fife Free Press and Kirkcaldy Guardian on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1953.](#)

“One traditional sport which did not take place was “Bawbee she Kyles”, a game which has been played in Ravenscraig Park on New Year’s morning for many years. On Thursday, only three people turned up at the Green and this unique sport had to be cancelled”.

[From an article in the Fife Free Press and Kirkcaldy Guardian on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 1954.](#)

“John Chalmers waited over an hour at Dominic’s Green “just in case someone turned up” Mr. Chalmers pointed out, most of the men who regularly took part in the past are no longer living or have reached an advanced age and the modern young men are simply not interested”.



## Conclusion

There is no doubt that the opening of the Castle on New Year’s Day made the day and the game something of a gala. It was largely Pathhead oriented and was most certainly a meeting place for the inhabitants and those returning to their home town for the holidays. Kirkcaldy United FC. who played at Scott’s Park – at the corner of Factory Road and Kidd Street – had their New Year’s Day attendances boosted by those who had been at the Castle earlier but now wanted other entertainment. Is it a coincidence that the game was in abeyance between 1912 and 1929, when the park and castle were gifted to the town? It certainly seems

that if approached to fence off the dangerous areas or provide an alternative site, Sir Michael may have refused. There is no way of telling but certainly leaving the Castle was the first nail in the coffin. The year 1911 is certainly the only occasion the game was played at Millie's Park.

History simply faded away after hundreds of years. Of course times change, as do interests but it is hard to believe that given the number of bowling greens and bowlers in Kirkcaldy, the game could not have survived if the appetite was there. Perhaps in time the game could be restarted with a representative of each bowling club taking part – not for gambling but perhaps a trophy. It would not have to be on New Year's Day (perhaps midsummer day) and perhaps Historic Scotland would allow play in its original home.

