

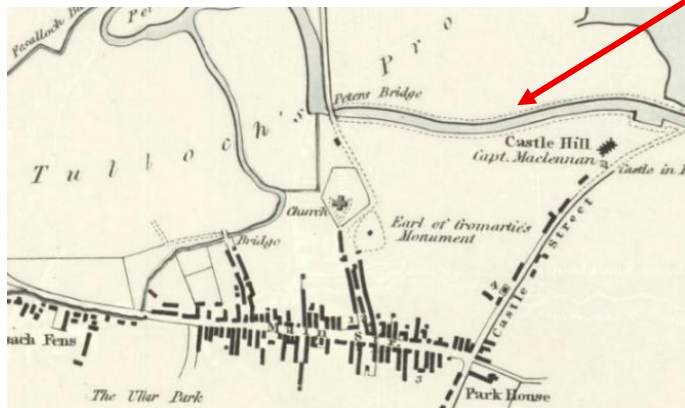
# Dingwall's 'Meal Mob' of 1847

*by Forbes Munro of Dingwall Museum*

By the 1840s the short canal at the lower end of the River Peffery provided sea transport for Dingwall via the Cromarty Firth. Small vessels made their way to a landing site or harbour at Peter's Bridge to unload building materials and coal, and load timber and grain for outward shipment.



In the late winter of 1847 such activities sparked angry riots about food supplies and prices.



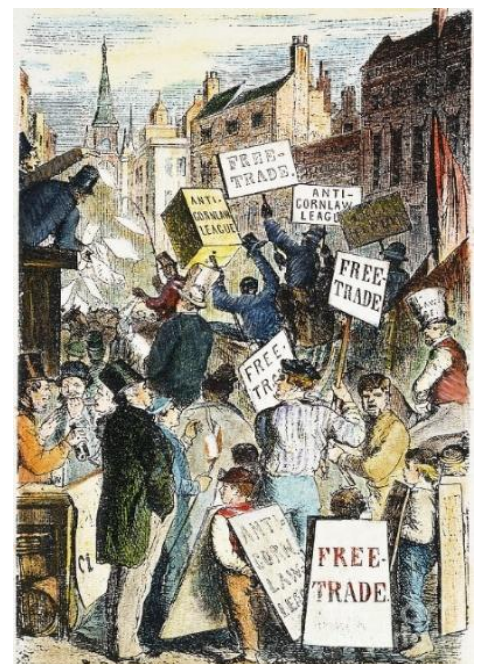
The disorder started over the weekend of 27<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup> February, when men prevented the loading of grain onto a ship and threatened the captain with violence should he attempt to sail. These events alarmed the town council, which held a special meeting 'to maintain peace, secure food supplies, and appoint special constables'. The meeting took place amidst noisy protests from a large crowd

outside the townhouse – which dissuaded some of the intended special constables from taking up the role.

The following night a mob broke into a corn merchant's granary at Greenhill and mixed the different grains together in such a way as to prevent their resale. It then went to the harbour, to commandeer a vessel and run it aground on the mud flats of the firth.

The council tried to appease the protestors by selling small quantities of oats and barley at a reasonable price. Tempers however remained high. A few women who had been arrested and found guilty of disorderly conduct were physically released on their way to the jail. It took the arrival of 100 men of the Inniskillings to restore order. The soldiers arrived from Invergordon with 15 prisoners and news that there had been similar riots further north along the firth – at Foulis Point, Alness and Balconie.

There seems little that was unique about the Dingwall disturbances. Similar events happened all around the Moray Firth – from Wick to Burghead – as people tried to prevent grain from being shipped to markets in the south. The causes of the problems are well-known. A series of poor grain



harvests created 'The Hungry Forties' across Northern Europe. In Ireland and Northern Scotland, more especially the Highlands, the difficulties were compounded by a potato blight which drastically reduced the availability of the foodstuff on which most people relied. Hunger, poverty and rent arrears followed.

For many people, especially in the industrial cities, hopes of reducing food costs and restoring real incomes centred on repealing the Corn Laws, and opening markets to international supplies. A failure of repeal in 1846 to bring immediate relief may help explain the timing of the riots of 1847.

Even so, stray comments in the press suggest that observers considered social distress in Dingwall to have been particularly acute. If true, this may be explained by events to the west – along the Conon River basin, and over the watershed into Wester Ross. There, between the late 1830s and early 1850s, growing rent arrears at a time of rising wool prices encouraged landowners and their factors to turn land over to sheep farming. People squeezed out by the process drifted eastwards towards Dingwall. A few moved on to emigrant ships at Inverness. Some sought small-holdings on marginal land around Dingwall and the Black Isle. Others came into the town to find jobs or accommodation with relatives, putting a strain on housing, sanitation and wages.

The fact that in 1851 Dingwall experienced a serious outbreak of cholera indicates that the crisis of the later 1840s was not just about food supplies. The Burgh's 'Age of Improvement' underwent a serious check in the middle of the century.

**Sources and Further Reading:** *The Caledonian Mercury*, 11 March 1847; James Hunter, *Insurrection: Scotland's Famine Winter* (2019).

**Image copyrights:** Dingwall Museum; public domain