

The War of Orange

In 1859 the herring industry was peaking, bringing hundreds of extra boats and thousands of migrant workers to Wick. With so many people crammed into one northern town, tensions were running high. Local legend suggests that a breaking point was reached when two young men, a Gael and 'Weeker' started a brawl over the last orange in the market - a seemingly small altercation which sparked a 'war'...



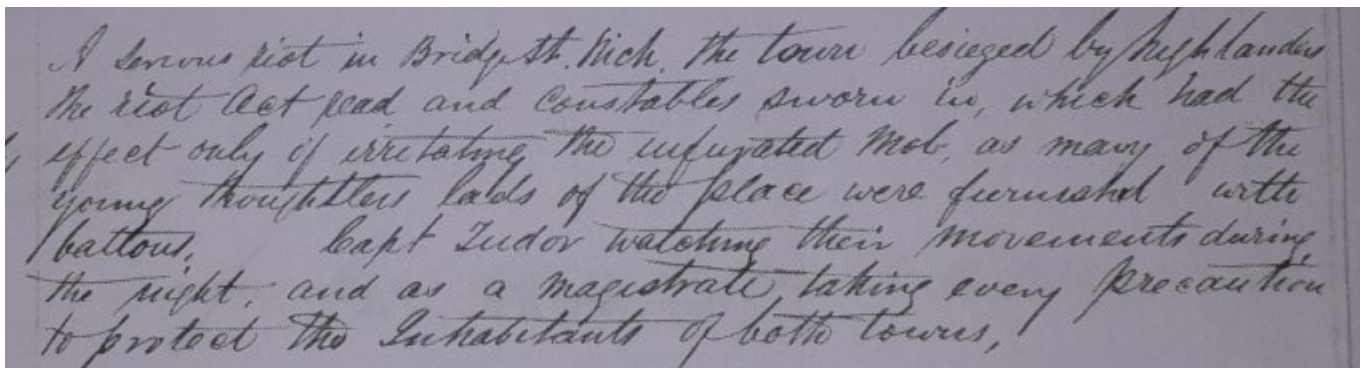
The fight rapidly got out of control with some 300 people joining in within a few minutes. Market traders were dismayed as their stalls were demolished for weapons. On arrival the police arrested Robert MacDonald, from Lewis, the suspected ringleader and - with considerable difficulty - extracted him to the courthouse. This infuriated the crowd, who then stormed the courthouse and police station. One skipper, Donald Mackenzie, from Laxay on Lewis, took his crew to dismast their boat and use it as a battering ram to set MacDonald free!

As evening set in Rev. Mackay, Tongue, made a stalwart attempt to pacify his congregation, many listened and went home, but still a group below Rosebank house charged towards the courthouse again. However, the police were prepared, The Riot Act was read and the mob heading over the bridge was met by Special Constables with batons. Several people returning to their lodgings in Pulteneytown were assaulted running the gauntlet of these youths, especially if they were wearing the distinctive Highland Bonnet! As twilight approached, 20 men arrived from the Fishery Protection vessel "Princess Royal", and the police (numbering 7 in total), resumed their duties. 6 men in all had been detained. All bar 2 were released by Monday morning. At last, it was Sunday and all quiet in respect of the Sabbath.

Rioting began this morning at 9.30 A.M. numbers of the Highlanders thronging Bridge Street, and threatening vengeance against the parties using the batons on Saturday evening. numbers were maltreated in High Street and Bridge Street Wick, in the fore part of the day. The mob thereafter congregating in great numbers in the Shore road and McArthur Street Pulteney town in the afternoon, upwards of 22 persons struck and abused before 6 P.M. no available force able in any way to check the violence offered.



However, peace on Sunday was short lived and by 7am on Monday morning a large mob had gathered outside the Courthouse, some armed with clubs. In an effort to diffuse the situation, the remaining prisoners, including Robert MacDonald, were released. Despite this, the crowd grew to nearly 4000 and brawls ensued. Fortuitously, a party of Army reservists were marching onto Bridge Street heading to the Riverside: they joined the crew from The Princess Royal and a slither of order was restored. Needless to say, there wasn't much fishing done that day (or the next!) and an emergency meeting was held at the Town Hall where 60 Special Constables were sworn in.



By Wednesday 31st of August, 270 Special Constables were in action, 5 patrols for the Wick side and 8 for Pulteneytown. The following day, boats went to sea and some of the Highland crews left for home. The town, however, was still on edge and reinforcements were likely a welcome sight on Friday when 100 soldiers of West Yorkshire militia arrived by sea on the Prince Consort and HMS Jackal and proceeded to set up camp in the Academy School.

Sheriff Fordyce now resolved to re-arrest Robert MacDonald but he was warned and made a run for it. He went on foot to Thrumster where a carriage passed him refusing to stop. He chased it and managing to throw the driver and passenger off - he drove away! (He then made it back to his home island of Lewis where he was re-arrested but escaped again in 1867).

Meanwhile in Wick, the Special Constables were stood down and people were told to stay off the streets. Regardless, a few scuffles continued and one Highlander was hit with a candlestick. However, at 10pm that Friday news spread that 4 men had been stabbed in Pulteneytown and mobs were starting to form. It looked like the whole thing was about to flare up again - but this time the law was ready. On pre-arranged signals the troops arrived and 60 "Bluejackets" came up from the ships in the harbour to clear the streets.

In all that night, 11 men were stabbed in Breadalbane Terrace, Argyle Square and Dunbar Street. Local youths had been running up and down the streets stabbing any unfortunate person standing in a doorway. Although some injuries were serious there were no fatalities. With all the bloodshed, the Highlanders were organising to counter the mob, but, on seeing the aftermath of the attacks, local people threw down their weapons and rushed to help. This diffused the situation and was effectively the end of the War of (the) Orange. Only one man was arrested and charged with serious assault.

