

## A Lug tae the Groond

The archives in the town of Berwick upon Tweed hold the ancient accounts of the Corporation. These fragile old books, with their flaking pages and hand-written entries, make reference to many of the characters who lived in the town and how they earned a living. Edward Collins, mole catcher, was one such character. The account books show that he was working for the Corporation in the 1740s and 1750s and that he was paid a penny a mole for his labours. The work was highly seasonal; the accounts for 1755-6 list weekly payments from March to July. There is no record of how he made a living for the rest of the year. Edward's birth and death are recorded in the parish registers of Ford in Northumberland. He was born on April 12<sup>th</sup> 1726 and died on January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1802. The burial record states: *Edward Collins, Branxton, late gamekeeper at Ford Castle (d2nd) aged 77 years.*

Edward Collins lived in Berwick during a turbulent period in Britain's history. The events of the period are well documented, but the details of the daily life of Berwick's mole catcher do not appear anywhere in the historical record. To discover more about Edward, his family and his neighbours it is necessary to employ a little imagination.

*An Account of the Receipts and Disbursements of the Revenue of the Town of Berwick from Michaelmas 1746 to Ditto 1747.*

*3<sup>rd</sup> March 1747: To Edward Collins for 145 moles: 12s1d*

Ah was up checkin' mah traps at High Cocklaw last night. Ah was just aboot tae pack in, when ah heard a voice ahint me. Ah turned tae look and there was an owld man standin' there. He was no much above four feet tall and he had a grey beard doon tae his waist. His face was as wrinkled as a mole that's bin hingin' in the sun ower much; a scarlet hat rested atop his heid and he had a right evil gleam in his eye. He was a Redcap. It's weel kent they'll suck every last drop o' blood oot o' ye if they git the chance. The owld de'il started tae come at me, so ah kibbled him wi' mah spud. He was away in a flash. Ah'll no be lookin' ower them traps so late in the day the next time.

*11<sup>th</sup> March 1747: To Edward Collins for 98 moles: 8s2d*

Ah can hear things other folk canna. It's on account of the thoosands o' moles that hev passed through mah hands ower the years. Last night ah was checkin' mah traps along Ratten Raw when ah heard some Scots voices. They was toastin' the "little gentlemen in black velvet waistcoats." Ah know what they was meanin'. Ah reported it tae the Sergeant. He likes tae be told aboot what's goin' on in the toon. He knows ah've always got mah lug tae the groond. Sees me right he does. Ah canna feed the bayrens on a penny a mole. Folk divvent notice me, y 'see. Think ah'm sackless they do.

*21<sup>st</sup> March 1747: To Edward Collins for 74 moles: 6s2d*

Ye've got tae admire the wee creatures. No bigger than the palm o' y'hand, and ah swear they can dig a tunnel twenty yards long in a single day. There's no a collier at Scremerston can dig that fast. Ah cuddint spend aw day underground like those poor de'ils. The only time ah'm goin' doon there is in a wooden box when ah pass. And

even then ah want a rope in mah hand, with a bell on the end, so's ah can call for help if the little gentlemen in black velvet come efter me, tae avenge their deid brothers.

*29<sup>th</sup> March 1747: To Edward Collins for 109 moles: 9s1d*

Ah was settin' mah traps along Marygate this morning, just by the Toon Guard. The wee de'ls git everywhere. Thomas Scott makes mah traps for me. Guid 'n strong-made o' ash. No like the pot yins mah father used. Ah progged around wi' mah spud tae find a tunnel and dug into it ready for the trap tae go in. Ah always gie the trap a guid rub doon wi' a fresh skin afore ah drop it in. Ah swear them clever creatures can smell me a mile off. Ah strung the trap and dropped it in the hole, put the earth back and stamped it in. Ye've got to gan canny. The tunnel can easily cave in. Ah was just peggin' the stick, when Mr Mayor pulled up beside me on his horse. He looks doon at me and says, "What in God's name are ye doing man? Ye're blockin' the way." "Beggin' ya pardon, ya honour," ah says, "But the little de'ls is doon there and they've bin known tae kill a king. Ah divvent think they'll show any more respect to the Mayor o' Berwick upon Tweed." Ha! That telt Mr Fenwick Stowe esq.

*7<sup>th</sup> April 1747: To Edward Collins for 78 moles: 6s6d*

The sergeant came tae see me this efternoon. Asked me if ah'd heard or seen anythin' of a deed bayren on mah travels. Ah telt him ah'd seen yin up at the De'il's Causeway. It was lyin' in a dyke, on a bed of rowan and witchwood. Ah was feard tae touch it. It had the look of a changelin'. Ah telt him that it'd be gone b'now, and if it wasn't he'd best leave it be. He says, 'Ye've tae come wi' me Collins and show me the exact spot.' Ah wasn't s' keen, but he says he'd hev David Forster gie me a night in the toon gaol if ah didn't. The bayren was still there. Ah was surprised the craas hadn't had it's eyes, but it hadn't been touched. If it wasn't s' deathly white ye'd hev thought it was sleeping peaceable. Ah left the sergeant tae it. He called me a feardy cush, but ah didn't care; ah didn't want that Redcap efter me agen.

*12<sup>th</sup> April 1747: To Edward Collins for 116 moles: 9s8d*

St George's dragoons arrived in the toon the day. They was a bonny sight in their orange waistcoats and breeches. Isable Sheriff and her clecken was there tae welcome them. They was shootin' and squealin' and liftin' their skirts. It was a shameful sight. It took the sergeants and aw the constables and beadles tae whip them oot. Ye should've heard them bawlin'. They was kicked oot through the Scotch Gate, but ah saw them aw back inside the walls again afore the hour was done. It's as well we hev the new barracks. Ah've never seen it s' full. Aye, it's no like it was a few years ago when we had them billeted aw ower the toon. Mind yee, the publicans divvent sell as much ale as they used tae.

*16<sup>th</sup> April 1747: To Edward Collins for 53 moles: 4s5d*

The beadles lit a bonfire the night tae mind the Battle o' Culloden. They set torches tae the tar barrels and they went up right bonny. The bells were ringin' and the waits was jiggin'. Ah'm no so sure about aw this jaisterin'. There's plenty of folk in the toon who divvent go wi' what's been happenin' this past year.

*22<sup>nd</sup> April 1747: To Edward Collins for 129 moles: 10s9d*

Ah went tae the Tolbooth for mah dues this efternoon. Mr Todd doesn't like me goin' in there. Ah divvint think he likes the smell of mah waistcoat. It takes more than a

hundred moles tae make a waistcoat as canny as this. There's many a gent in London who'd pay highly for yin like it. Mr Todd looks at me frae under his poodered wig and says, "That's a lot of moles ye've been catching Collins. I sent David Forster up tae count them and he said there were only 120 on the line." Ah looked him straight in the eye and says, "Had away man, there's craas and buzzards up there. And what's more," ah says, "Ah wuddint put it past the wee men in velvet tae come up efter dark tae gie some of their deid brothers a decent Christian burial." He looked at me ower the top o' his spectacles. "That's blasphemy Edward Collins," he says. Ah got paid mah full dues though.

*27<sup>th</sup> April 1747: To Edward Collins for 27 moles:2s3d*

There was another bonfire last night. For the Duke o' Cumberland's birthday this time. Mr Mayor was there in aw his finery. Raised a glass tae the prince and tae the king. The ale hooses in the toon was busy and the dragoons was out in force keepin' an eye on the goin's on. The sergeant has asked me tae keep mah lug tae the ground in case there's any trouble brewin'.

*4<sup>th</sup> May 1747: To Edward Collins for 63 moles:5s3d*

There was a muckle commotion alang Ratten Raw this morning. A company of the St George's Dragoons was searching aw the cottages. They didn't wait tae be invited in. They was yellin' and bawlin' and knockin' doon doors. They took some of the Scots lads away. They didn't go peaceable. David Forster's got them in the gaol. He says they're thought of bein' in wi' the rebellion. Ah wuddint like tae be a Scot in Berwick at the present time.

*17<sup>th</sup> May 1747: To Edward Collins for 33 moles:2s9d*

The waits were in good voice last night. Ah opened mah window and shooted doon, "haud ya wheesht," but that just made them blow their horns and bang their drums aw the looder. There's a heavy mood in the toon. Even with the gates barred and guarded, it's still good tae hear that aw's well. Ah lit mah pipe and went doon for some crack with mah friends. John Oswald's a bletherskite! It's wonder he has the puff left tae scrape his fiddle. He telt me there's a woman in the gaol accused o' witchcraft. The deid bayren that ah foond in the hedge belanged to her, and the sergeant thinks she offered it tae Owld Nick. Ah said like as no it's a changelin' and that she was sendin' it back tae it's rightful kin in Elfhome. They canna hing her for being a witch, but she'll be swinging on Gallows Knowe for killing her bayren. At least she'll hev a bonny view of the Tweed afore she draws her last breath on God's Earth.

*23<sup>rd</sup> May 1747: To Edward Collins for 101 moles:8s5d*

Ah've telt our Eleanor tae keep away frae the barracks. She's been hingin' around there ever since St George's Dragoons arrived. There's tee many lasses in this toon has fallen for a bonny lad in uniform only t'be cast aside when they march off tae some other place. Ah've telt her tae mind what happens tae loose and idle women. There's plenty honest, hard-working lads belangs Berwick for her tae take her pick

of. Ah'll ask the minister tae hev a word wi' her efter the meetin' on Sunday. He'll put the fear of God intae her. We'll see if that helps.

*30<sup>th</sup> May 1747: To Edward Collins for 33 moles:2s9d*

High and mighty Mr Todd refused tae pay me mah full dues the day. He said he'd heard ah'd only killed 33 moles, and that was aw the Corporation was willin' t'pay me for. Ah told him if he wanted molehills aw ower the toon and the boonds so be it, but ah wasn't goin' tae catch the little de'ails if ah wasn't paid mah full dues. Ah git little enough as it is for mah labours, and there's no an honest man in the toon than Edward Collins- anybody'll tell ye that. It's aw right for Mr James Todd, sittin' up there in his high chair, with his black fingers and dusty books. "Anyway, Collins," he says tae me, "Mr Mayor doesn't think the toon will require ya services for much longer." Ah says, "Oh, his honour has a soft spot for the little men in black velvet does he?" "Watch ya tongue Collins," he says, "There are men rottin' in the town gaol for using language like that." He stared doon at me ower the top o' his spectacles. "The toon is going tae be paved, man. No mole on God's Earth can tunnel through solid sandstone." It's no just. Ah'll no be treated like that. Ah'll take it tae the Guild. They'll see me right.

*10<sup>th</sup> June 1747: To Edward Collins for 90 moles:7s6d*

John Oswald gev me some poor news the day. He says he saw our Eleanor walkin' arm-in-arm with yin o' them dragoons frae the barracks. As bold as brass he says she was. If father was still alive he'd hev clipped her wings. Ah'll no be standin' for it either. She'll no be steppin' out wi' anybody efter ah've finished wi' her.

*14<sup>th</sup> June 1747: To Edward Collins for 37 moles:3s1d*

Ah lost two of mah traps the day. Ah went tae Marygate tae check them and the road was blocked wi' carts. They were laden wi' muckle big slabs o' stone. Ah tried tae git through tae mah traps but they'd already put a slab on top o' them. They must've been able tae see they was there. Cost me dear those traps. Solid ash.

*27<sup>th</sup> June 1747: To Edward Collins for 119 moles:9s11d*

The Guild says that David Forster's tae check mah work and pay me mah dues. He's a gudyin. Ah'm sure he'll treat me honest. It was Fairday yesterday and ah decided tae hev a day oot. In truth, ah took a few tee many draughts of ale and was fair puggled b' noon. The Scots lads must hev been let oot of the Gaol, 'cause they was hinging around the toon. They approached me and yin of them called me a claip and gev me a fair dunch. Then the others joined in. Ah ended up wi' a right keeker. Ah'll mention it tae the sergeant, but ah'm sure that'll be the end of it.

*4<sup>th</sup> July 1747: To Edward Collins for 27 moles:2s3d*

Our Eleanor ran off last night. Ah searched the toon, but there was no sign of her anywhere. Ah asked efter her at the barracks, but the guards just laughed in mah face. Our mother's nivvor stopped greetin'.

*12th July 1747: To Edward Collins for 62 moles: 5s2d*

We've sent Eleanor away t'Ford t'stay wi' mah brother's family. She's no safe in this toon in the present times. Mah brother says they're lookin' for a game keeper up at the castle. He says the pay's no much, but there's a cottage and a patch o' land. Ah'm sore tempted by it. Ah've bided in this toon since ah was a bayren, but it's no the best o' times for a mole catcher in Berwick just noo.

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