

On the trail of Scots in Northern Poland

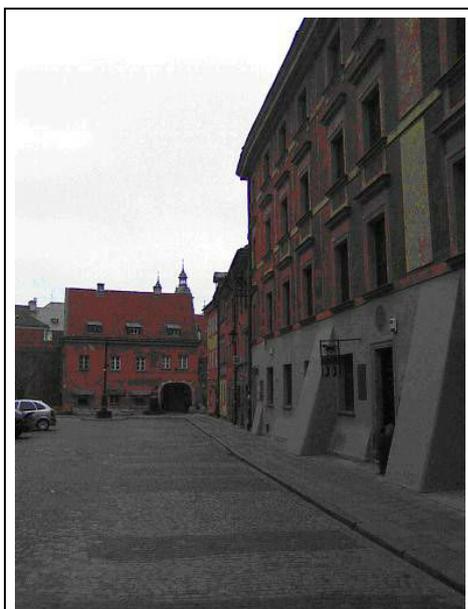
About six years ago I moved from Glasgow to Poland. I am married to a Polish woman from Olsztyn, in the north. In the last few years I have become increasingly interested in the history of 16th/17th Scots in the area and have found myself searching out some of the places where they lived. In most cases there is very little left, however, in a few places there are real treasures.

I first became interested in the subject while helping some Germans look for family roots. I was looking through some church archives for names in the local villages around Olsztyn. During one archive search I was amazed to see my own surname, Hill, in the parish book of a little village which I knew. I knew Hill might be a German name (many of the villages had German inhabitants before the war) but I started to look for information about Scots in East Prussia. It was through this I found Fischer's books on Scots in Germany and Prussia on the [Electric Scotland](#) website, as well as a book about Scots in Poland. I found that there were a number towns and villages in the region around Olsztyn which had once had Scottish residents or communities.

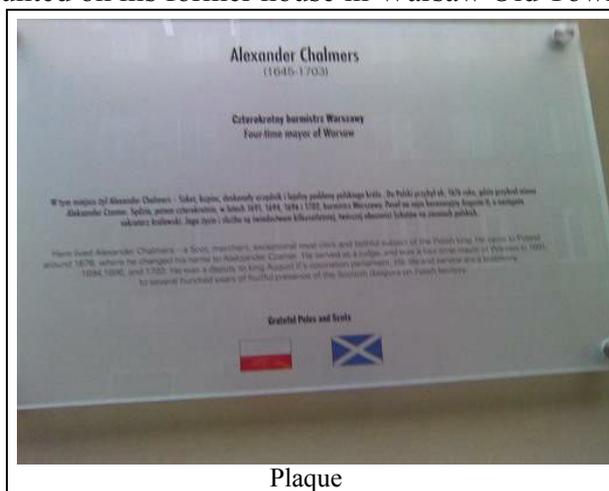
Obviously, big cities like Gdansk were major places for 16th/17th C Scots to arrive and live. Even today there is a district of the city known as Nowa Szkocja. 14th C Scottish knights had even helped the Teutonic Order with their crusades in Prussia. One, Lord Douglas, was killed by English knights in Gdansk. Further south, I found there was a little village called Szkotowo ("Scots-ville"). I haven't found out much about it, but it is near a Teutonic castle town, Nidzice, and dates from around the same time (14thC). Nidzice certainly has Scottish connections, as James VI once petitioned the local authorities on behalf of a Scottish resident of the town.

James seems to have had a lot of communication with the Polish kings. On one occasion he demanded the execution of a gentleman who had written some scathing comments about the Scottish and Scotland (in revenge for being laughed at in Scotland because of his German/Polish clothes). The texts were destroyed and the gentleman was beheaded in Kętrzyn. James also persuaded both the German and Polish authorities to allow Scots to stay in Germany, Prussia and

Poland. Many Scots were traveling peddlers and had a bad name for flouting trade laws and undercutting local merchants, particularly by avoiding payment of import/export taxes between Prussia and Poland. James made the Scottish communities form into 'Brotherhoods' and many major cities (Torun, Gdansk, Krakow, Warsaw and Lublin) had one. Indeed, one Scottish resident of Warsaw, Alexander Chalmers, became Mayor of Warsaw. A plaque was recently mounted on his former house in Warsaw Old Town.



Alexander Chalmers' house, Warsaw.

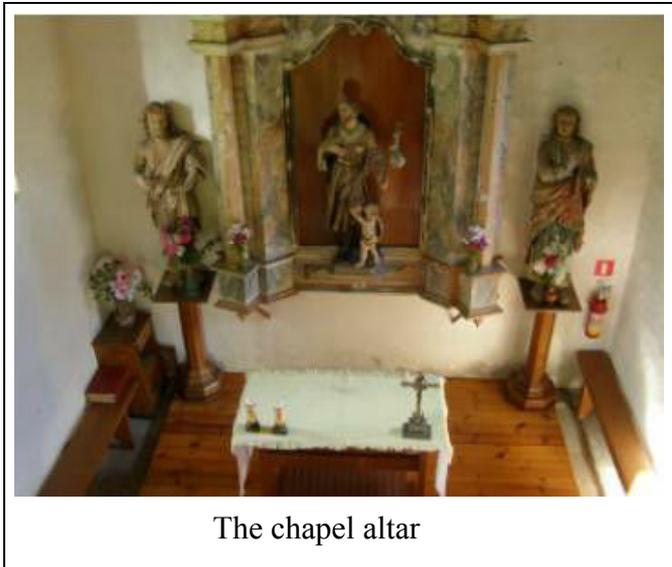


Plaque

It was whilst reading about this that I made one of my major finds. In Fischer's book there is a story of a Scottish merchant who, whilst traveling between two towns (Orneta and Dobre Miasto) met a young Scots ploughboy working in the fields. He took the boy to the Jesuit college in nearby Braniewo (co-founded by a Scottish Jesuit) and got him educated. The young boy went on to become a successful merchant and returned to the little village and built a chapel to St Rochus in 1617.



Chapel of St Rochus, Lubomino



The chapel altar

While reading the story I had to translate the German names of the villages (as in the text) into Polish. I was amazed when I realized where the village was (Lubomino) and that weekend I hurried there to see it. I later managed to gain access to the chapel and see the interior (sadly it was damaged during the wars but is still intact).

I keep finding new places and new information (new to me, anyway) and I enjoy visiting these places. Often there is no sign that the Scots were ever there, but as an immigrant of Scottish descent (my father was Scottish) it somehow makes me feel part of my new home, knowing others have been there before. This was brought home to me when I was speaking to a Polish colleague and I mentioned about the huge economic migration of Scots in 16th/17thC (and the smaller one in 19thC). "And they're still coming... you're here now!"

I haven't been able to find out anymore about the Hill families in the local villages (although I did locate a descendant in Germany), although, funnily enough, an old map of the village where I now live, shows the house across the road was once owned by a "Joseph Hill". I have also found a reference to a Scottish Mr Hill in Gdansk who died owing money. I hope nobody comes knocking on my door asking if we're related. The interest after 300 years would be huge!

TREV HILL (March 2009)