

# Robert Watson “Bobby Bell” the barber of Cellardyke

by Harry D. Watson



There were many kenspeckle characters in the Cellardyke of my youth, none more so than our local barber Bobby Watson, better known as “Bobby Bell”. Bobby inherited his nickname from his father, another Bobby Watson, who among other things was our local town crier, ringing a handbell to announce that he had important news for the townspeople. A photo survives of him standing at the market cross in Anstruther with John Doig, who seems to have been delegated to read the announcement.

Bobby the town-crier was also caretaker and usher at the Empire picture-house in Anstruther. One day in June

1945 he was cycling in the vicinity of Kingsbarns with a consignment of posters advertising coming attractions at the cinema when he was knocked off his bike by a military staff car. He was rushed to the Royal Naval Sick Quarters at nearby Pitmillie House, where he died of multiple injuries. His death was registered by his friend Martin Gardner of 29 James Street.

With the death of Bobby Watson senior, his son “Young Bobby Bell” became the “Bobby Bell” of my generation.



Having served his apprenticeship with a barber in Anstruther, Bobby was enabled to start his own business when a lady he had helped look after in her old age left him a house on the north side of James Street. The haircutting was done down in the basement, and only the legs of passers-by could be seen from the window. Bobby was insatiably curious about the owners of those legs and would stop his ministrations to rush to the window and crane his neck to see who was *gaun ist* (deeper into Cellardyke) or *wast* (along to Anstruther).

This could of course affect his concentration on the job in hand. My father went down once for his usual short back and sides and came home afterwards with one side of his head shorn and the other side untouched, Bobby had blethered so much. If there was another customer sitting waiting his turn, the conversation could range far and wide and time seemed to stand still.

As a toddler I sat on a plank stretched across the arms of the chair. Twenty-odd years later, home for the weekend from my studies at Edinburgh University, I would sometimes save my

gory locks for Bobby's scissors and clippers. Once when I told him how much I had paid for a haircut in Edinburgh he dropped his scissors in amazement. He complained more than once that cutting my hair was like cutting wire, and it sparked into his eyes.

I always seemed to be amazing Bobby in one way or another. One thing I never managed to explain to his satisfaction was why, having been brought up speaking a variety of English from my earliest age, I was spending four years at university doing a degree in English.

Bobby was no stranger to Edinburgh himself. Every year he awarded himself a week's holiday in the metropolis. All these years later (I am now 77) I still remember that his holiday was spent in the Maranatha Christian Guest House, Lygon Road. He was incredulous when I told him I had heard of neither the guest house nor for that matter Lygon Road. They were obviously off the usual student beat.

During the war he had been conscripted into the army and had crossed the Rhine, something he never tired of mentioning. I believe that as a young man he had been notorious for his profanity but then he "got religion", and after trying out all the local churches, of which there were many more in those days, he found his spiritual home in Pittenweem Baptist Church where the minister and his wife were very good to him, having him round for meals.

His routine was pretty invariable, and part of it involved breaking for lunch every day at 12.30. Anyone who dared to come in for a haircut as the witching hour approached risked a volley of wrath. I remember a woman coming in one day with a young boy at the back of twelve o'clock and Bobby almost chased her back up the stairs again.

His lunch was taken at the Royal Hotel in Rodger Street, Anstruther, and his meal of choice was tomato soup followed by fish and chips.

Although the whole town knew him as Bobby Bell, it was more than your life was worth to use that name to his face. Once when a customer did just that Bobby pulled him out of the chair, yanked him up the stairs to the pavement, pointed to the faded sign above the door saying Robert Watson, and said, "Does that say Bobby Bell? No! It says Robert Watson! That's me!" Or words to that effect.

Sometimes when I descended the stairs into his lair there would be no-one else in and Bobby would be sitting quietly in the corner, his hands in his lap and his head cocked on one side, waiting patiently for a customer.

A haircut always ended with an application of a sweet-smelling spray that Bobby referred to as "heest-ye-back", the implication being I suppose that it would start your hair growing back in and ensure that you would be paying a return visit before too long.

Bobby was a canny soul who never married and had no descendants to mourn him when he died in 1979 at the age of 62, but he is remembered with affection by Dykers of a certain age.