

# THE HOUSE OF FAA: SCOTLAND'S LOST GYPSY ROYAL DYNASTY

**Calum Cunningham** takes us back to the late 17th century as he looks at the royal Gypsy dynasty, whose reign flourished in the Borders for more than two centuries

## **Y**etholm and the Borderlands

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, the itinerant and outlawed Scots Gypsy community established itself in the small villages of Kirk and Town Yetholm, nestled in the Cheviot Hills on the Scottish side of the border.\*Yetholm later became the setting for the restoration of a long-lost Gypsy royal dynasty under the sovereignty of the age-old Faa family. This association with Yetholm did not come directly from the Faas but instead from the Youngs, another Gypsy family. Tradition states that Captain William Bennett of Grubbet, laird of Kirk Yetholm, a politician and soldier who took up a position in King William II and III's army during the Nine Years' War, was saved by a Gypsy named Young at the crucial siege of Namur in 1695. Early in the 19th century, *Blackwood's Magazine* recorded this episode by stating

*Tradition affords no intelligence respecting the time when the first Gypsey colony fixed their residence at Kirk Yetholm [...] The tribe of Youngs are next to the Faas [or Falls] in honour and antiquity. They have preserved the following tradition respecting their first settlement in Yetholm [...] On returning to Scotland, the laird, out of gratitude to his faithful follower, Settled him and his family (who had formerly been wandering tinkers and heckle-makers) in Kirk-Yetholm, and conferred upon them and the Faas a feu of their cottages for the space of nineteen times nineteen years [that is, 361 years or until 2056] – which they still hold from the Marquis of Tweeddale, the [then]*



The coronation of Charles Faa Rutherford Blythe, last monarch of the Royal House of Faa

*present proprietor of the estate.*

## **A kingdom within a kingdom**

The Faas claimed that their right to reign over all Gypsies within the Yetholm commune (and larger Scottish realm) stretched back 200 years to the last-known Scots Gypsy King, Johnnie Faa, who had been granted protection and given the authority to do so throughout Scotland by King James V. The first recognised leader of the Gypsy metropolis at Yetholm was Patrick Faa. Still, he never made any claims to kingship regarding this previously sanctioned status. This Gypsy King in all but name and his wife, Jean

Gordon, had twelve children, and the power they maintained over their tribe was absolute. The presumed Gypsy predilection for criminality resulted in the Faas becoming feared across the borderlands.

In 1714, however, their lawlessness returned to haunt them. So concerned were the local authorities that they made some arrests in the event of future crimes committed. Justice of the Peace Sir William Kerr of Bridgend, Kelso, had Patrick, Jean and several others, primarily women, taken to Jedburgh gaol to await trial. Patrick's elderly mother, Janet, had pleaded with Kerr to spare them, to no avail. Hearsay was enough to have Janet arrested too, being suspected of having arranged the burning of a mansion at Bridgend on the night of 25 March 1714. Retribution was swift. Patrick and Janet were flogged and had their ears nailed to the mercat cross. Patrick then had both ears cut off. He was later banished to the Carolinas and never heard from again, whilst the women were set free.

Though acknowledged as the new Gypsy leader at Yetholm in her husband's absence, Jean's woes continued when some of her children predeceased her. She lost her three remaining sons alongside two of their wives in 1730 for sheep stealing. A jury member is said to have woken up during their trial and cried 'hang them all', which duly occurred. Desperately resorting to thievery once more, Jean found herself in court and only escaped severe punishment by promising to leave Scotland.

Jean was exiled to the English side of the border, and by 1747 she

had made her way to Carlisle. As a supporter of the Jacobite cause, she pledged her support for Charles Edward Stuart publicly on a fair or market day that year, possibly in connection with the Jacobites' treatment in that town. Having vented her treasonable political views before a baying English crowd, and likely in response to the Yetholm Gypsies' tameness in surrendering to Charles Edward's army in the course of the Jacobite rising of 1745–46, the locals decided to take matters into their own hands, irrespective of such illegality. After a life filled with criminality, Jacobitism engendered Jean's demise. The crowd led her to the River Eden, where she was brutally 'ducked' (drowned) to death. Putting up a brave fight, Jean reportedly used her last breaths to proclaim, 'Charlie yet! Charlie yet!'. Sir Walter Scott later used Jean Gordon as the real-life basis for his Gypsy character, Meg Merrilies, in his second Waverley novel, *Guy Mannering*.

### Gypsy royalty restored

The Gypsy monarchy had been formally re-established at Yetholm the previous year in 1746, when the battle of Culloden took place. As Jean's legal woes ensued and her authority faded and having claimed direct descent from Johnnie Faa, another family member, King William (Wull Faa) I, was proclaimed the first restored Gypsy King of the whole tribe



Gypsy royalty, including having local dignitaries served by twelve young handmaidens at these events. When he died at Coldingham in 1784 at over 80 years old, hundreds gathered from each side of the border to honour him. Wull I's funeral train was impressive and comprised 300 asses, with many mourners lining the roads on his final journey back to Kirk Yetholm for burial. The king had been so well liked that his wake lasted for three days and nights.

Wull I was succeeded by his son and namesake, King William

A 1959 re-enactment of Charles II's coronation, as performed by Yetholm villagers. Another ceremony was held in 1983, re-enacting Esther's coronation to mark the centenary of her death

victorious, and the 33-year-old Wull was hailed as king. This outcome had been helped by the fact that he was held in high regard as an accomplished fighter and gained this status by once defeating a fellow Gypsy in a fight lasting an entire summer's day. He often jumped the queue when filling his cart with coal at Etal to deliver to Kelso or Jedburgh, and few would dare to challenge him due to his fearsome reputation.

Like his father, Wull II was an inconspicuous man, an innkeeper by trade and an avid footballer. However, he was also a renowned smuggler and gang member involved in the trafficking of contraband emanating from the Northumbrian port village of Boulmer. In any case, when Wull II died in Kirk Yetholm aged around 92 in 1847, his obituary in the *Kelso Mail* reported that he was 'always accounted a more respectable character than any of his tribe, and could boast of never having been in gaol during his life'.

**When Wull I died at Coldingham in 1784 at over 80 years old, hundreds gathered from each side of the border to honour him**

north of the border with England.

Wull I was an eccentric but quiet man and his reign, though long, was certainly humdrum in comparison to his relatives' tribulations during the first half of the 18th century. Nevertheless, the christenings of his children (at least 24 by three wives) were on a scale befitting

(Wull Faa) II. Still, the transfer of royal power was not automatic, as entitlement to the Gypsy crown was challenged by another family amongst the Yetholm tribe. A short civil war broke out, only to be resolved in a bloody clash on Yetholm Green. The Faa family and its followers emerged

### Notable interest

Wull II had not married or fathered any children, so the crown passed to his sister Esther's almost 72-year-old English husband, King Charles



(Faa Blythe) I. Charles I's life prior to his royal ascent had been eventful, and he boasted proudly about having been personally acquainted with an intrigued Sir Walter Scott. Charles I sometimes called on him at Abbotsford House 'just doon the valley on the other bank' and vice versa, with Scott visiting the previous Gypsy King's 'palace' in Kirk Yetholm on several occasions. As the Victorian age of wonder flourished, an unknown correspondent of Charles Dickens also visited the now 86-year-old pauper king a few months before the latter's death in August 1861. This individual was given a guided tour around the Gypsy settlement. Shortly thereafter, in October of that year, Dickens released a periodical titled *At the Court of the King of the Gypsies*, wherein he recounted this individual's experiences there and discussions with Charles I. They wrote:

*I had considered hiding my WatchGuard but after a glance at the place I assured myself it was as safe there if not safer than in the main street of Edinburgh. The king was anxious to inform me that he was not a Fa'a by birth but acquired the title from marriage to the lady who was the oldest representative of that family. His handsome daughter was the true Fa'a and heir to the Royal Dignity [that is, Charles I's youngest child, Helen, more commonly called Ellen], who had looked after her father in his old age. He himself was a Bligh a good old Egyptian family [Gypsy being a derivative of Egyptian] who had come over with the Pharaohs daughter*



Part of the large crowd gathered in Town Yetholm High Street to witness Charles II's coronation, held on 30 May 1898

*[whom the old king claimed had brought the Stone of Destiny with her from Egypt, 'fu of diamonds and such']*.

The dead king's eldest son, David, inherited the rightful claim but decided to renounce it in favour of his sister, Ellen, likely in respect of their father's fondness for her and his death-bed wish that she succeed him. It was contested almost immediately by Charles I's eldest daughter, also Esther, who insisted that the crown was unquestionably hers as she bore the royal name of Faa and was next in line after David. Another public dispute occurred, this time between the two sisters, and the younger waived her claim following a public catfight in which Ellen got herself 'so weel and fairly lickit'.

The mysterious Gypsy settlement remained popular initially on the tourist route to the Highlands, and Queen Esther (Faa Blythe) received Victorian gentry on occasion at her new 'palace' – the cottage across the road from her father's. Nevertheless, general sightseeing interest in Gypsy royalty had dwindled by around 1867. As many of her subjects moved away from Yetholm, the Gypsy Queen found herself frail and, like her father, impoverished, especially following the loss of her

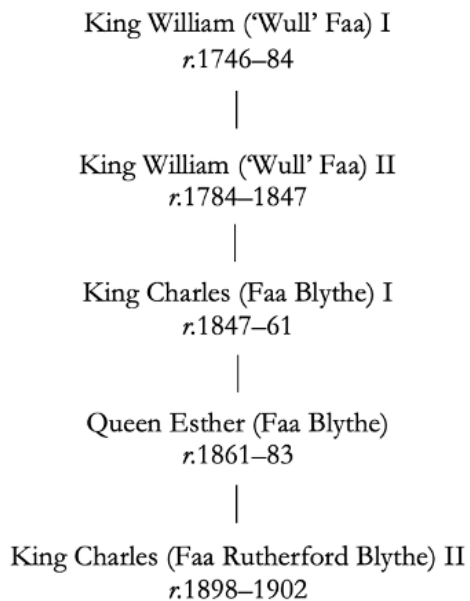
devoted husband, John (or Jock) Rutherford of Coldstream. Jock was sentenced to transportation for seven years in Australia for violence and theft but died on a Thames prison hulk before deportation. Declining an offer of admittance to the poorhouse, Esther spent her remaining years living with her daughter in Kelso until she died in July 1883. News of the queen's death spread quickly throughout Britain and across the Atlantic. The following day, *The Scotsman* reported: 'Yesterday forenoon there died, in a second storey room of a dilapidated house at the foot of Horsemarket, Kelso, Esther Faa Blythe, Queen of the Yetholm Gypsies'. Like her predecessors, the funeral procession from Kelso to Kirk Yetholm attracted large crowds of spectators, and thousands reportedly gathered in the Gypsy village to pay their respects and say final farewells.

### The end of a dynasty

When the queen passed away, it seemed like the Faa dynasty had ended. As the Victorian era drew to a close, reinterest was sparked in the Gypsy monarchy when Esther's over 70-year-old son, Charles, reluctantly assumed the crown as King Charles (Faa Rutherford Blythe) II in 1898 –



'The Palace', home of Esther and her son, Charles. The last 'King of the Yetholm Gypsies' died here in 1902

**Faa Royal Family Tree**

fifteen years after his mother's death. He had travelled extensively on the open road, and such an arduous lifestyle often led him to sleep under his cart's tilt. The exact reasons for his initial disinclination and eventual acceptance of the Gypsy crown remain unknown. It certainly did the local economy no harm for a short time, considering Charles II's enormous coronation ceremony on 30 May that year. In a new age of photography, such pageantry drew copious media attention from north and south of the border, with national newspapers covering the event attended by several thousand people, Gypsy and non-Gypsy. A local man, Robert Christie, stated in 1935 that there were 'ten thousand folk there [and] two hundred cuddies'. As a band played old Jacobite songs, the royal procession made its way to Yetholm Green and the following proclamation was read out:

*It is having been found that the Royal and ancient people of Little Egypt are in trouble and becoming scattered from the royal villages of Yetholm.*

*From having no ruler to guide and protect their Kingdome; they, with the help of the people of the old villages of Town and Kirk Yetholm, have declared for a King, lest they become a forgotten race; and, having considered the hereditary rights of Charles Faa Blythe, have agreed that he shall be crowned*

The Faa royal family tree

*King of the Yetholm Gypsies, with all the honours due to a prince of the royal gypsy blood. Challenge who will!*

Following Gypsy tradition, 'there, they put a tin crown on [Charles II] and broke a bottle of whisky over his head, then bound a hare round his neck'. The shy king remained silent, but one of his heralds then proclaimed:

*I am commanded by His Majesty, the King of the Yetholm Gypsies, to thank his loyal subjects for the honour conferred on him this day and to say that it will be his honest endeavour to rule his people wisely and well, and he trusts that his subjects in the villages of Town and Kirk Yetholm will live in peace and prosperity under his sway.*

However, the gradual exodus of the Gypsy race continued during Charles II's short reign, and the king died peacefully in his 'palace' just four years later in April 1902. With no outward desire amongst its Yetholm community to crown another king or queen, Scotland's Gypsy royal dynasty was lost again and is unlikely ever to return. Still, coronation re-enactments took place in Kirk Yetholm into the late 20th century.

### Conclusion

This brief chronicle of the Royal House of Faa and the Yetholm Gypsies has highlighted a fascinating, self-contained community that also coexisted within mainstream Scottish border society for over two centuries. Despite this integration, the ancient Gypsy customs, culture and way of life continued to shape this tribe's identity, individually and collectively, which preserved their settlement at Yetholm for such a lengthy period. In microcosm, the Faa family's sovereignty represents the bonds of tradition and fidelity that have united and sustained kinship groups, peoples and states throughout the British Isles across several epochs. The royal dynasty's longevity and rule over this small Gypsy commune make their story worthy of recognition in the annals of Scottish history.

\*The exonym Gypsy has been used in its historical context within this article. Now considered derogatory and offensive, the word Traveller is more commonplace and socially acceptable. Since the 19th century, the collective term Romani/Roma has described this widespread Indo-Aryan ethnic group more accurately.

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### FURTHER READING

*Scotland's Other Royal Family* (Tolworth, 2019), L. Hendry Lennen

'Forgotten Kings and Queens: The Lost Gypsy Dynasty of Scotland', A. Cowie at <https://bit.ly/hsancient>

'The Gypsy Kings and Queens of Kirk Yetholm', S. Robb at <https://bit.ly/yetholm>

*The Gypsies of Yetholm* (Kelso, 1884), W. Brockie (ed.)

'Capturing the Flag: How Gypsies in the Scots Army settled at Kirk Yetholm in 1695', M. Jardine at <https://bit.ly/jardinehs>

*The Kirk Yetholm Gypsies* (Hawick?, 2004), A.V. Tokely

'The Death of Queen Esther', G. Watson at <https://bit.ly/estherhs>

'Charles Faa Blythe – The Last King of Scotland's Gypsies', L. Gray at <https://bit.ly/fieldhs>