

A Collection of Historical Information about Kinghorn's Mills

Introduction

Around the end of the 18th century Kinghorn was described as “*one of the meanest and most irregular towns in Fife*” It has since evolved into a modern, attractive, coastal Burgh. The town’s recovery was in part due to the 70 year period of prosperity generated by Kinghorn’s Spinning Mills.

The following paragraph from the 1843 New Statistical Accounts shows the impact of the Industry on the town: “*Few places have undergone such a transformation during the last thirty years as Kinghorn. Its streets were then almost impassable, they are now levelled and well paved. Its public buildings were mean,—they are now good. The former town-house was an ancient ecclesiastical building, the present town house and jail is of Gothic architecture, which cost the burgh £2500. The schoolhouse was formerly a plain unpretending building; the schoolhouse now, and the grounds adjoining would do honour to the metropolis*”

There were grain mills in Kinghorn centuries before the arrival of spinning, notably Craigencalt, Overmill and Nethergate.

Extract from Old Statistical Accounts 1794 for Kinghorn - written by the Reverend John Usher.

“*Within these few years, however, a manufacture has sprung up, which promises fair at present to render Kinghorn one of the most flourishing towns upon the coast of Fife; this is, the teasing, and rolling, and spinning of cotton and flax, by means of the Arkwright and Darlington machinery.*

Through the middle of the town there runs a stream of water, which issues from a lake called the loch of Kinghorn, and distant from it only about half a mile. Upon this stream there have already been erected, and set a-going, 4 mills for the purposes above mentioned; a sixth is to be built this summer, and there might still be falls of water found for one or a more.

The number of hands which these mills will employ, must amount to some hundreds; but the 3 largest of them, which were built last season, owing to the shock which has been lately given to public credit, and the consequent stagnation of all business, have not as yet been completely fitted up, and filled with machinery by the proprietors. Before adventuring too far, they wish to see what turn affairs may take.

Already, however, the beneficial effects of these works are to be seen by all; and they are sensibly felt by almost every description of people in the place. Young women, who before were not able to earn by the needle, or by the knitting of stockings, or by the spinning of flax, above 1s. 6d. or 2s. in the week, can now easily earn between 5s. and 7s. 6d. in the same space of time. Little girls, between 8 and 12 years of age, who before were a burden to their fathers and mothers, by engaging at these works, are not only able to support themselves, but to assist their aged and indigent parents.

The boys, who before thought of nothing but the sea, or of running about idle, or, which was little better, of running about the country at the horse's heels, as horse-hirers' servants, have now generally turned their attention to the loom, and bind themselves as apprentices to the weaver.

Such are the effects of capital well employed! Such are the effects of regular, and well directed industry! But the command of water for working machinery, is not the only advantage which Kinghorn enjoys: Besides the stream already mentioned, there are two other rivulets, one at each end of the town, by means of which bleachfields might be formed, and, it is to be hoped, will in a little time be formed, for further facilitating the operations of the manufacturer....”

Note: 1s = 5 pence and 6d = 2.5 pence so, for example, 7s 6d = 37.5 pence.

Social Change

The Reverend Usher's rather utopian view does not mention that the Mills working conditions were not suitable for children. It is hard to imagine that they had to work 6 days a week, 9 to 12 hours per day in Mills that were poorly lit, noisy, full of unguarded belt driven machinery and breathing air that was contaminated with small fibres from flax-dressing. An occupational hazard was Flax Dresser disease (a chronic obstructive pulmonary disease caused by inhalation of particles of unprocessed flax).

Eventually in 1832 a parliamentary Investigation was ordered into working conditions in the textile industry. [Interviews of Workers under Oath](#), is an extract from the evidence taken by Michael Sadler the Chairman of the parliamentary committee. The outcome of this investigation was that in 1833 the Government passed a Factory Act to improve conditions for women and children working in factories. The basic act to protect children was as follows: No child workers under nine years of age.

Employers must have an age certificate for their child workers. Children of 9-13 years to work no more than nine hours a day. Children of 13-18 years to work no more than 12 hours a day. Children are not to work at night. Two hours of schooling each day for children. Four factory inspectors were appointed to enforce the law.

Kirkcaldy/Kinghorn Mill owners James Aytoun and William Swan had a dispute with the Factory Inspector over procedures for interviewing their employees. [Click here to read their correspondence](#).

Here are answers to queries made by the Factories Inquiry Commission 1833. The respondents are William Swan, who had just purchased the Upper Mill, and John Arthur (it is not clear which Mill John Arthur is referring to). Noting that Charles Arthur & Co. owned the Nethergate Mills at that time however they had just sold the Upper Mill to William Swan (noting that William had been a partner in the Arthur's business).. [Click here to read their answers](#).

An extract from an 1808 report by J. Watt on installed Boulton and Watt engines

“Kinghorn Loch was speedily drained by three mills built in the 1790s, so in 1800 Walter Fergus and Co ordered a 12hp from B&W for a cotton mill, but it was converted to flax in 1808: “very indifferently kept, turning only 450 spindles with a waterwheel to help it”. They propose to order another from us to replace an atmospheric engine (a coal-work engine installed by James Aytoun before he left in 1802 now at work in another of their mills in Kinghorn). The last sun and planet wheel to be seen in the country was until lately at the Low Mills (i.e. the tenement opposite Kinghorn Town Hall). “Prior to its removal, which was only a few years ago, visitors from all parts of the country came to see...this exceedingly ingenious but somewhat complicated arrangement.”

Extract from New Statistical Accounts January 1843 - written by the Reverend Fergus Jardine.

"The only manufacture carried on in Kinghorn is the spinning of flax. The raw material is imported, and it undergoes here all the processes from the dressing of the flax, up to the final preparation of the yarn and thread, for the loom and other purposes.

There is an extensive bleaching field at Nether Tyne, about one and a-half mile to the eastward, belonging to the proprietors of St Leonard's mill, which enables them to prepare the thread and yarn in a purely white state for the market. These gentlemen employ daily at their mill 200 females, 54 males, flax-dressers, 21 mechanics, or machine-makers, and 12 males who superintend and have other duties in the mill. About 70 are employed in the bleaching of yarn.

There are two other mills in Kinghorn, at both of which are employed about 130 females, and 50 males, including 36 flax-dressers. There are thus connected with the spinning mills, 330 females; 137 males; 70 of both sexes in the bleaching department; total, 537. Girls above fourteen years of age, who are spinners, earn from 4s. to 6s. per week. Mechanics have from 12s. to £1 per-week. Flax-dressers are paid by the hundred-weight of dressed flax; they get a fair price for their work, and can make a good livelihood fully employed.

The spinning-mill adjoining the town house has undergone of late great improvements, and has been much enlarged. This improvement has taken place since it came into the possession of the present public spirited proprietors, Messrs Swan of Kirkcaldy. Its extensive front, and well kept shrubbery, make it a great ornament to the place."

Extract from 1846 Topographical Dictionary

"The chief trade carried on here is the spinning of flax, for which there are three extensive mills; the machinery is partly impelled by steam, and partly by water-power, the latter derived from the loch of Kinghorn, about half a mile from the town. In these mills 470 persons are employed, of whom more than 300 are females. There is also a bleachfield, in which about seventy persons are generally engaged; and a considerable number of the inhabitants are occupied in hand-loom weaving".

London Gazette April 24th 1857 - "Edward Taylor a Kinghorn Hecklemaker was awarded a Patent for: *Improvements in gill heckles or combs for treating fibrous material.*"

Extract from 1862 Westwood's Directory

"There are 2 spinning mills and a bleachfield at Tyrie at which great numbers of the inhabitants are employed. There is also a brewery, a large corn & flour mill and an extensive glue manufactory in the town. (Swan Brothers, are listed in the Directory as Flax Spinners, Flour & Corn Millers, and Corn Merchants, Kinghorn)

Extract from 1882 Gazetteer (F H Groom)

"Two flax-spinning mills, a bleachfield, a glue factory, and an iron shipbuilding yard, employ a large number of hands; but fishing engages only 20 men with 11 boats".

Extract from 1887 Gazetteer (J. Bartholomew)

“The inhabitants of Kinghorn find employment in two flax-spinning mills, a. bleachfield, a glue factory, and an iron-shipbuilding yard”.

The PeaceHavens Project

This site is an ongoing project involving the daily finding and identification of Russian Lead Flax Bale Seals and Lead Trading Tokens from the disused Northern Flax Mills.....and Kinghorn Mill in Fife. For many decades in the 18th & 19th centuries, Russia was by far the world's greatest exporter of flax plants via St Petersburg, Archangel, Riga, Port Narva, Reval, Pernau, Libnau, Memel and Great Britain was Russia's major customer. [Click here to visit their Kinghorn Mill pages.](#)

Mill Locations and links to References & further information

Kinghorn Historical Society Chairperson Ginny Reid and her team have been researching the history of Kinghorn's Mills and they have been able to establish many facts along with a very relevant and interesting paragraph on Water Rights. [Link to Kinghorn Historical Society's Mill info](#) I have updated the following Mill location information accordingly. The Historical Society's research is highlighted.

Craigencalt/CragncatCraigencat/Kirncat (grain) Mills - The first mention of a Mill at Craigencalt was in 1583. Blaeu's 1654 Map shows the (grain) Mill and names the Loch as Cragncat. Ainslie's 1775 map identifies the Mill as Kirncat Mill. Around 1800 a new mill was built. It was a Threshing Mill and it was commercially linked to Grange Distillery in Burntisland. It ceased production around 1860 and it is shown on the 1855 Map. [Click here for Kinghorn's Old Maps.](#) A separate Corn Mill was in use between circa 1680 and 1790. Both of the original Mills' buildings are still intact. Marilyn Edwards has written a well researched and detailed History of Craigencalt. The link to her Booklet can be found below. A separate summary of the Loch Mills' history by Marilyn is also there.

Little Dam - Ginny Reid has established that contrary to popular belief there was **never** a Mill built at the Little Dam. Indeed, the first industrial buildings on this site were the Candleworks built in 1887 (part of the Burntisland Shale Oil Co.). This produced paraffin burning oil and wax, lubricating oils and sulphate of ammonia. It has been estimated that 200-300 men were employed in the Candle Works. It closed in 1894. Fife County Council Archive have a sketch plan of the candle works at Little Dam. It is included in Item No. B/KH/3/1/2 in their collection. The Little Dam site eventually became a Tannery and remained as such for many years.

Over Mill (Ginny's research indicates that this (grain) Mill was granted to Alexander Lyon along with the Castle and mill lands in 1493). (See Water Rights). Converted to spinning mill 1790 and then may have become a heckling house where they removed the tow and combed the flax to the required fineness). Purchased in 1881 by James Oswald and used as a joiner's shop taken over by James Hay (senior) in 1921 and continued as a joiner's shop. It was bought and converted to a house in 20??.

St Leonard's - Upper Mill - “Joseph Russell built the final spinning mill in Kinghorn in St. Leonards Place. It was a large mill and it was completed in 1794”. It was taken over by Messrs Swan of

Kirkcaldy. Swans improved the works in 1843. By 1845 St Leonard's flax spinning mill employed over 300 workers. However, flax spinning ceased here in 1865. It remained unused until 1900 then became a Wood and Flour Mill (shown as such on the 1914 Map). The wood was pulverised and went to Kirkcaldy to be used in the manufacture of linoleum. During the First World War (1914 - 1918) the Mill was also used as a store by the Admiralty. It is shown as disused on the 1947 Map. It became derelict and was demolished in 1966.

By 1845 Swan Brothers owned the Upper, Cuinzie, Middle and Lower Flax Mills and the Tyrie Bleachfields. The company went bankrupt in 1886.

Cuinzie Neuk Mill - A mill at Cuinzie Neuk, initially built in 1790 by Henry Hallows and Walter Fergus as a cotton spinning mill. It was rebuilt just before 1832 as a tow mill. The rebuilding was probably due to the water tanks which were built underground at this time – probably to supply the gasworks at the Lower Mill next to the harbour, now known as Barton Buildings.

Middle Mill - “A mill at the site of the playpark above the viaduct, built in 1792/3 by Henry Hallows for spinning cotton. Known as the Middle Mill, Henry Hallows went into partnership with a very young James Ayton to set the mill out with the latest spinning technology”.

Nether Mill - An ancient grain Mill (see Water Rights) located at the bottom of South Overgate.

Lower Mill - “Walter Fergus purchased a building by the harbour and set about extending it into a spinning mill in 1792. In order to extend his mill he had to alter the entrance to the harbour and build up the sea wall at the ‘Gang’.” It was located where Barton Buildings is now. It is shown on the 1855 Map as a Corn Mill (Owned by Swan Bros. ? - they are listed in Westwood’s 1862 as Corn Millers).

The History of Craigencalt at Kinghorn Loch by Marilyn Edwards - [Click here to read](#)

Craigencalt Mills Heritage by Marilyn Edwards - [.Click here to read](#)

The Industries of Scotland - Linen & Jute Manufacturers - [Click here to read.](#)

RCHAMS - Mill Photos & Site Details - [St Leonards Mill\(1\)](#) - [St Leonards Mill\(2\)](#) - [Nethergate Mill](#)