

7. Renfrewshire Site Under Threat Busby Cotton Mills

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Busby Cotton Mills were among the earliest in Scotland. The Upper Mill (1778-80) was demolished in 1900 and the Lower Mill (1790) burned down in 1968. Despite the loss of the buildings, the water power system remains largely intact, as an example of one of the earliest in Scotland. Back in 1991, the Forum successfully objected to a proposal to develop the Upper Mill site. At the time of writing, the Lower Mill site is now under threat, and the Forum has written in support of a proper investigation of the site. The mills have been the subject of various publications (see below), but this note focuses on the surviving water power system.

The mills were built on very difficult sites, purely to capitalise on the dramatic fall in Busby Glen. Having the highest fall on the White Cart made it an obvious location for the earliest cotton mill in Renfrewshire. Building a large cotton mill on the narrow site involved major engineering works, to dig into and support the slope above. The supporting stone terraces still survive, although the site is badly affected by tipping of rubbish. Later the gorge at the falls was widened by blasting, which damaged the **Fortification** on top of the opposite cliff (see Welsh above). Originally known as Newmill, the site supported a **Meal Mill** for centuries, and a **Lint Mill** was added in the mid eighteenth century (see also Welsh above). The substantial rectangular foundation directly in front of the falls at NS 5795 5673 may include part of one of the earlier mills.

The lade system begins at the weir a short distance upstream of the falls (Figure 10). The weir marks the spot of the traditional fording point of the river, before the construction of the first Busby bridge in the mid-1780's (shown in 1787 survey of Busby for Maxwell of Williamwood). A sluice gate survives in good condition at the west side of the weir at NS 5798 5669. Beside the weir is an arched entrance (concreted up) marking the start of the water power system, at the entry to a small storage reservoir. At the north end of this pond a large iron pipe replaces the original elevated wooden channel which led to the 4.6m diameter by 0.9m wide upper wheel. The stone-lined wheel pit survives at NS 5795 5672. A brick arch in the east side of the pit may mark the exit of the original tailrace, however by 1790 the lade was extended downstream to power the Lower Mill.

The lade continues in a stone-lined tunnel with a shallow arched roof, becoming a high brick arch, until the short open section at NS 5793 5676. From the opening, the brick culvert carries on until it reaches a rocky spur, where it continues in tunnel through whinstone. Below the spur lies the cut-down Lower Mill dam and remains of fixings for the sluice which controlled a culvert feeding into the rock tunnel.

The tunnel opens out at NS 5791 5680 into a lade above the river which continues in a sinuous curve for 100m to the wheel pit of the Lower Mill (visible in 1970's, but now buried) at NS 5783 5689. The large iron pipe (c.1m dia.) discharging to the river here suggests that a turbine latterly powered the mill. However to maximise the fall at the original waterwheel the tailrace continued for a further 150m, originally partly open, but now fully buried, before discharging to the river beyond the Gas Works at NS 5782 5700.

Opposite the Lower Mill lie the lower courses and substantial lade of **Busby Waulk Mill** (17th century or earlier) whose water rights were protected at the time of building the cotton mills (See Welsh above).

Published Material

Welsh T.C.: 'Busby Cotton Mills', SSIA Newsletter, (Sep 1975); 'Eastwood District History & Heritage' p.163-5 (1989).

Nisbet S.M.: 'Three Scottish Mills', Scottish Industrial Heritage Society Newsletter (Jul 1988); 'An Early Scottish Cotton Mill', Scottish Archaeological Gazette No.19 (1989); 'Newmill an Early Scottish Cotton Mill', Scottish Industrial History 11-13 (1990); 'Busby and Dovecothall Mills', RLHF Journal Vol.2 (1990); 'Busby Mill - Early History' & 'Mill or the Loss', The Extra, 20th & 27th June 1991.

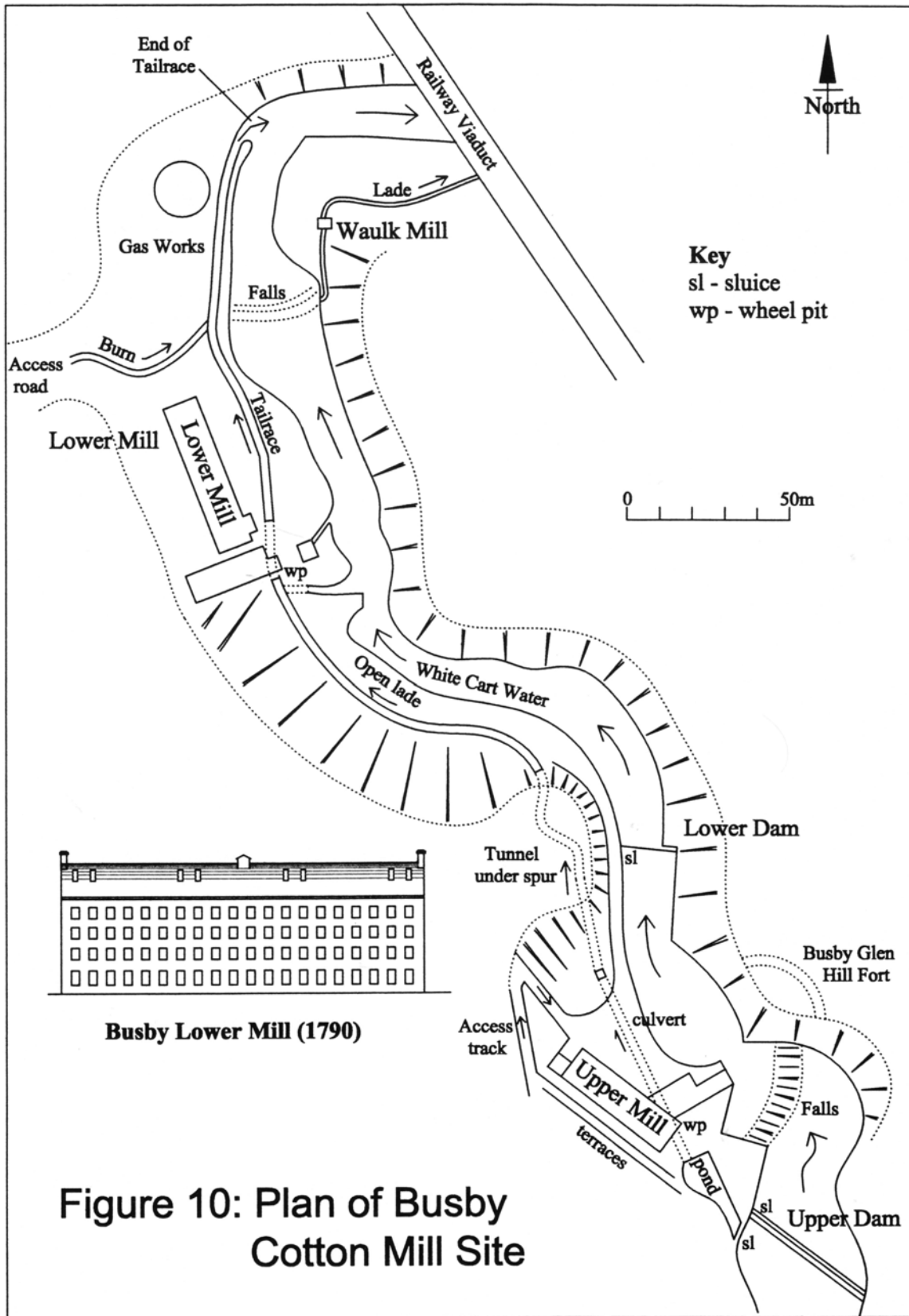


Figure 10: Plan of Busby Cotton Mill Site