

2. Renfrewshire Snuff Mills

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Water Powered Snuff Mills ground tobacco into snuff. Snuff Mills are a rarity, but this relative obscurity makes them all the more fascinating. There were ultimately around thirty in Scotland, but very little is known about their technology. Although tobacco products had been introduced to this country around 1560, Snuff Mills did not appear until the 1740's.

The West of Scotland had at least six water powered Snuff Mills, all in the Glasgow area. Two were on the Kelvin, at Clayslaps and Dawsholm (both established in the 1740's), and one on the Molendinar at Townhead (established 1762).

The remaining three were tucked away in the north east corner of Renfrewshire on the White Cart Water at NETHERLEE (NS 581 588), MILLHOLM (NS 587 597) and CATHCART (NS 586 601). Netherlee Snuff Mill was the earliest in Renfrewshire. While it has only recently been rediscovered, it has proved to be the best documented of the early mills.

The appearance of Snuff Mills coincided with the Clyde's huge increase in Tobacco imports, and it may seem obvious to conclude that this was the main reason for their growth. However, for several reasons, it is not that straightforward.

Firstly, 75% of Snuff Mills were established in the east of Scotland, well away from the Clyde. Secondly, a very rapid growth in snuff consumption (or snuff exports) would have been required to sustain such a growth of mills. Thirdly, snuff was a low volume, high value product consuming only a tiny percentage of Tobacco imports. Thus the increase in the volume of imports may not be a significant factor in the growth of Snuff Mills.

The rapid growth of Snuff Mills in the 1740's may simply have resulted from the move to water power, away from other types of milling. This was triggered by the revolution in technology at the time in the prelude to the Industrial Revolution. Similar growth occurred in other types of mills in the same period, particularly Lint Mills.

By the time Netherlee Snuff Mill was established, there had been two previous ventures on the site. At the beginning of the century a Paper Mill was established at Netherlee by James Hall, the apprentice and son-in-law of an immigrant French Papermaker. When the lease of his family's initial Paper Mill at Newlands expired in 1730, Hall's son John quit both sites and consolidated his papermaking at Millholm, mid-way between Netherlee and Newlands.

Netherlee was then converted to a Waulk Mill by prominent local tenant John Ralph, who had previously worked a Waulk Mill at Waulkersland on the west bank of Linn falls, a few hundred metres downstream from Netherlee. When the Snuff Mill came along, the site at Netherlee was ready made with dam and lade.

It is important to ask why anyone would wish to establish a Snuff Mill and choose a

particular site. The reasons are complex, but at Netherlee research in a variety of sources has built up a clearer picture.

The most obvious need when setting up any type of mill was a fall of water to provide power. However the power requirement of Snuff Mills is believed to have been modest and this was not the principal consideration when choosing a location. The site at Netherlee did not have a natural waterfall adjacent, but the dam already in place for the earlier Paper and Waulk Mills was employed by the Snuff Mill.

In Snuff Milling, the tobacco drying stage was just as important as the grinding process. Before the widespread use of wheeled transport, proximity to a fuel supply was essential. Shallow coal seams are present at Netherlee and were worked in the area in various ventures stretching over several centuries. Thus proximity to a supply of coal is likely to have been the main reason for locating at Netherlee.

A sympathetic landlord was also required who was receptive to industry. Most were, as the rents from mills could be significant, often equivalent to that from a small farm on their estate. The landowner at Netherlee was James Maxwell of Williamwood. He was approached in 1749 by James Edmond, an official of the Glasgow Baking trade who wished to set up a Snuff Mill. It is perhaps typical of a baker to envisage the potential profit from a new kind of mill.

Newcomers did not set up mills at random. There were nearly always connections involved. Edmond's appearance in the area was not a chance occurrence, he had at least two connections.

Firstly, his friend and fellow official in the Glasgow Bakers, Zacharius Allason, was brother-in-law of John Hall the earlier Paper Mill owner at Netherlee. Secondly, Edmond had access to the latest milling technology through his brother Joseph who was chief wheat miller at the Glasgow Bakers' meal mills. Edmond had a further advantage. Glasgow Town Council had recently set up their own Snuff Mill at Clayslaps, a short distance upstream from the Bakers' Partick Mills, which would have been of great interest to Edmond. In fact twenty years later Joseph Edmond was instrumental in the Bakers' purchase of Clayslaps to expand their own mills.

In 1749 James Edmond rented the site at Netherlee, including the existing Waulk Mill and 6 acres of grazing, and began building the Snuff Mill. He ran out of money half way through construction, but secured loans of £40 and £20 from the Incorporation of Bakers to install the machinery.

Netherlee mill contained four machines for grinding snuff. These were driven by two relatively low-powered horizontal water wheels. Despite this modest power requirement the machinery was heavy. A contemporary builder converting a Glasgow malt mill on the Molendinar Burn to a Snuff Mill required 'very strong joisting laid on the walls to bear the strain of the machinery in the grinding room and the weight of the tobacco in the drawing room'.

The tobacco at Netherlee was stored in a 'convenient close room, floored and lofted'.

It had a special fireplace for drying the tobacco, served by the adjacent coal pit. The mill shared its power source with the Waulk Mill and was described as having a tight dam, sluices & lead.

James Edmond died in 1761. The Snuff Mill was carried on by his brother Joseph, in partnership with another official of the Glasgow Bakers John Barclay. Barclay & Edmond worked the Snuff and Waulk ('skin') mills until at least 1766. They were assisted by James Edmond's son-in-law John Muir. In 1771 Muir started up a second papermaking venture at Netherlee and shortly after the Snuff Mill moved a short distance downstream to the existing Paper Mill site at Millholm.

Netherlee had further uses on a much larger scale in the following century, including a print and dye works, at peak employing 300 workers. The site was levelled in the 1960's and the only remains are the footings of the large weir, and foundations stretching along the riverbank.

The second Snuff Mill site at Millholm also began life as a Paper Mill when John Hall moved there from Netherlee in 1730. As early as 1768 it was known as the 'Mid Paper Miln of Cathcart'. Initially the site was rented from James Hamilton of Aikenhead. Hall expanded the operation, setting up a printing business in Glasgow with his brother-in-law Robert Urie. By 1760 Hall actually owned the site, including a small piece of land on the opposite bank of the river, 'whereon the east end of the dam is laid'.

Millholm was converted to snuff in the early 1780's. This was a relatively short-lived operation and it was converted back to paper at the turn of the century. This change back and forth from paper to snuff is a feature of all three sites in the area and is a bit of a puzzle. There is no obvious connection in milling technology between Paper and Snuff Mills. One reason may be that the snuff trade was a convenient diversion during lulls in the paper market.

The large dam at Millholm was breached in the winter of 1983/84 and has deteriorated since then. This gradual erosion has revealed that about half the height of the dam is a natural rock weir.

There is evidence that the entire site was raised at some point in its early history, to increase the available head of water, and the original natural weir may have been used prior to this improvement.

Millholm survived as a Paper Mill into the present century, becoming a large scale branch mill of Wiggins Teape. Its main limitation was the cramped site and steep access and it had finally closed by the 1930's. The only remains are the 19th century gatehouse and traces of lead and tail race.

The third Snuff Mill was at the best known site at Old Cathcart Bridge. This mill was originally one of the Meal Mills serving Cathcart Parish from early times. By the late 18th century such traditional grain mills had to find additional means to supplement their income. The Cathcart miller, John Hall (a relative of the Halls of Netherlee and

Millholm), added first a Barley mill, then in 1770 a Flour Mill but by 1785 he was bankrupt. At the beginning of the next century the mills were converted to making paper and snuff.

The mill ownership initially included Archibald Muir, grandson of James Edmond. In 1811 he was assisted by Solomon Lindsay an experienced papermaker, who had been employed at a failed Paper Mill at Valleyfield in Penicuik. Snuff manufacture commenced around 1814. Lindsay later became the major partner. His son David took over in the mid-19th century and worked the mills until his death in 1902.

Cathcart Snuff mill was powered by a man-made weir on the river, constructed of massive stone blocks, of which fragments remain. The mill buildings survived to the late 1980's when they were converted to luxury flats. Unfortunately the river had the last word, and in October 1989 the completed flats were damaged by flooding, and have lain empty since.

As a postscript, in August 1858, plans were made for a fourth Snuff Mill in the area. Snuff Merchant Stephen Mitchell offered the laird of Williamwood, James Stewart, £300 for a riverbank site on Netherlee farm to establish a Snuff Mill. Unfortunately Stewart was an absentee landlord at the time, serving in the 16th Lancers in London, and refused even to consider the proposal. The fourth Snuff Mill was never built.

Notes

- Clayslaps: Shaw (see below), P.145
Dawsholm: Glasgow Mercury, M.L., 22 Jun 1794
Townhead: Glasgow Mercury, M.L., 24 Jan 1787
Records of the Burgh of Glasgow, M.L., Vol. VII (1760-80);
Snuff Miller Ninian Bryce left Dawsholm and set up at Townhead.
- Netherlee: Glasgow Incorporation of Bakers Minute Books, S.R.A.;
T-TH7-1/2, 9 April 1750, 12 May 1750, 27 July 1750, 7 Jun 1751.
Records of the Burgh of Glasgow, M.L., Vol. VII (1760-1780).
Maxwell of Williamwood Papers (1623-1805), S.R.O., GD1/31 1-21.
Stewart of Williamwood Papers (1835-1870), S.R.A., T-AG/16 1-11.
Glasgow Journal, M.L., 3 June 1751.
Glasgow Commissariat Register, S.R.O., CC9/7/6l James Edmond.
Burgess & Guild Breth. of Glasgow, M.L., Jas Edmond 29 Dec 1752.
James Hall 28 Feb 1763.
- Millholm: S.R.A., T-PM-124/2 (Newlands Tack)
S.R.O., R.S. 81 Vol. 7/44 James Hall (1760).
S.R.O., R.S. 81 Vol. 9/292 James Hall (1768).
- General: Shaw, J.: Water Power in Scotland (1984), Ch.27.
Welsh, T.C.: Eastwood District History & Heritage (1989).

Key: S.R.O. Scottish Record Office; M.L. Mitchell Library;
S.R.A. Strathclyde Regional Archives.

Note: I would be surprised if there were not further Snuff Mills in Renfrewshire. If anyone knows of any, I would be pleased to hear from them.

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