

4. Grain Mills In Neilston Parish

Martin Hughson

My researches into grain mills in Neilston Parish have raised more problems than they have solved. One reason for the difficulties is that most of the grain mills ceased to function during the century or so commonly referred to as The Industrial Revolution, and contemporary observers were more concerned with describing the new age than with commenting on what it replaced.

I have, after much thought, decided to publish my results so far, partly because I have exhausted my sources for the present, and partly in the hope that this paper will lead to some discussion and, ultimately, a better understanding of the subject.

Map of water system in area

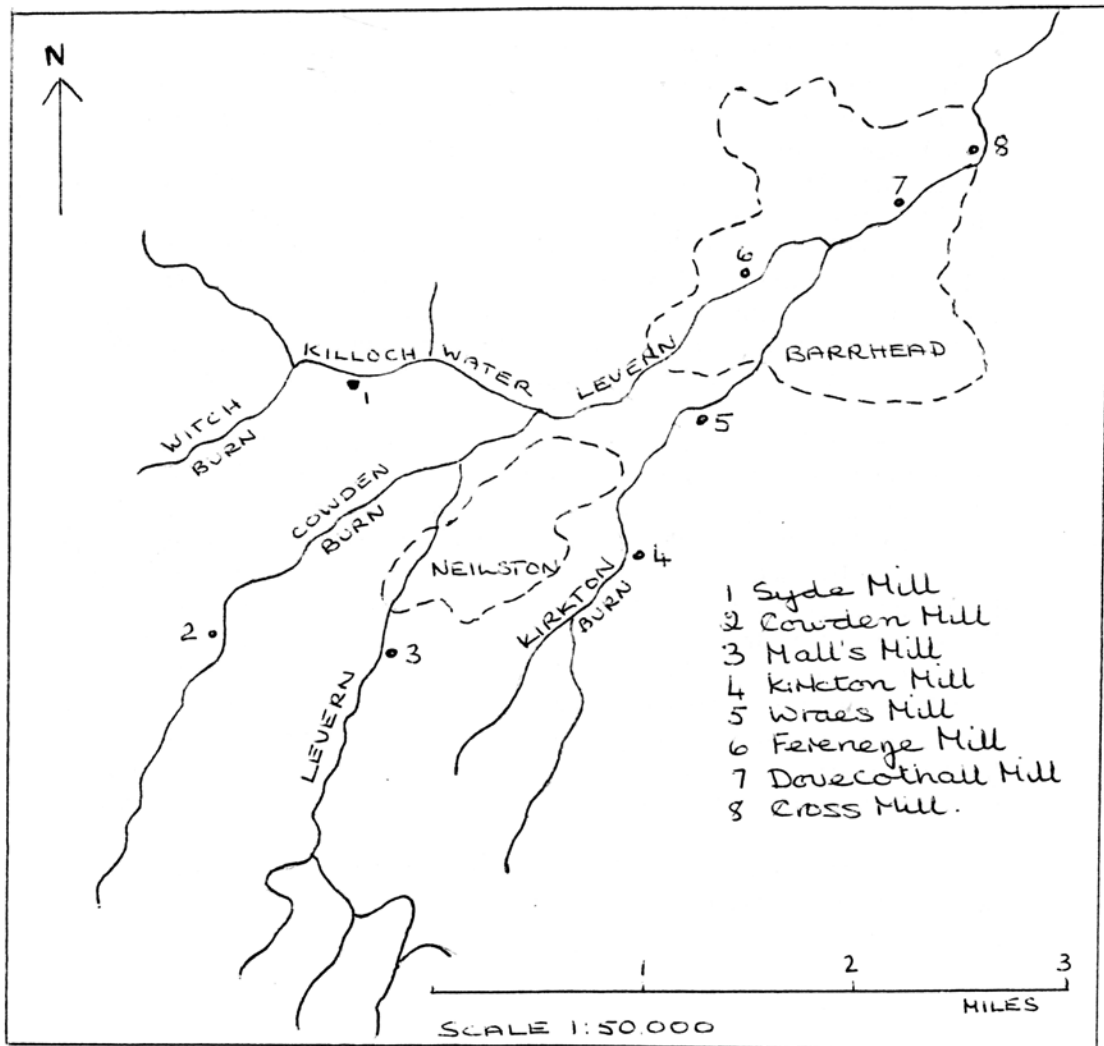


Fig: Map of water system in area

I have established that there have been eight grain mills in the parish, although they were not necessarily functioning during the same period. The eight mills were: Malls Mill - sometimes known as Neilston Mill - on the Levern at the top of Midgehole Glen (NS467560); Ferenze Mill - sometimes known as Chappel Mill - on the Levern at Chappelfield (NS495587); Dovecothall Mill on the Levern near the roundabout now at the East end of Barrhead Main Street (NS506594); Cross Mill on or near the present site of Spillers' factory (NS513597); Kirkton Mill (NS486567) and Wraes Mill (NS492578) on the Kirkton Burn; the Mill of Syde, South of Capellie Farm, on the Witch Burn (NS464582); and Cowden Mill near Shilford on the Cowden Burn (NS454563).

The Rev John Menteith discussing grain mills in "The First Statistical Account" in 1791 produced one of his most stylish, but alas, not one of his most informative paragraphs:

"Corn mills are despised, or forgotten, even by their proprietors. Two have been allowed to go into total disrepair; one of these has been advertised for a cotton work; and a third, though in good repair has been actually superseded and is now an appendage to a cotton mill so that there are at this time only two corn mills in the whole district, to the no small inconvenience of the farmers."

Some grain mills seem, therefore, to have disappeared so long before 1791 that John Menteith did not even consider them, and it seems likely that the mills which disappeared early were Cowden Mill, Mill of Syde, Cross Mill, and Ferenze Mill.

Cowden Mill was a very old mill indeed. It is shown on Pont's map as revised in 1610. There are also early testaments of millers there: William Lohead in 1634, Thomas Lohead in 1662, and it is recorded on Lord Ross's land in the 1695 Poll Tax Roll. Crawford and Semple in their "History of Renfrewshire," published in 1782 say it was then the property of Captain William Mure of Caldwell, owner of the lands of Cowden. After that it seems to vanish from History. Charles Taylor's "Levern Delineated" of 1831 does not mention it, although Cowden Hall is discussed extensively. There is a reference in David Pride's "History of the Parish of Neilston," published in 1910 to a saw mill at Shilford; but whether this used the site or the machinery of the old grain mill, there is no way of telling. There are traces of a lade near Cowden Mill Cottages; but there is no positive evidence for a darn and no trace of a mill building.

Mill of Syde was, also, an old mill; for there is a record of a bond taken by David Brown, Mill of Syde in 1669 and a testament of Robert Lohead, miller at Sydemyln, Neilston Parish in 1742. It has been suggested that this address could refer to Waterside; but I can find no evidence for a grain mill there, although there was a large bleachfield, and I think the name "Sydemyln" more likely to be a version of "Mill of Syde." It is at least certain that Crawford and Semple refer to a corn mill on the lands and barony of Syde then the property of Robert Napier of Milliken. There is no mention of Mill of Syde in "Levern Delineated" and David Pride refers to it simply as "the old mill." Traces of it, however, survive: the cart track to it from the road between Foreside and Mossneuk can be easily followed and much of the lade and the dam

site is visible; there are also some foundations of the mill building. The site was recently surveyed by A C F A on behalf of Renfrewshire Local History Forum.

My speculation is that Cowden Mill and Mill of Syde ceased production before the Industrial Revolution was well under way, simply because there were too many small mills and too little grain.

The fate of Cross Mill was, I think, different. It too was an ancient mill; the earliest reference to it is the testament of James Cross, miller there in 1607. It appears on Pont's map, and there is a testament by James Cross, Corsemyle, Paisley (presumably a careless address) registered in 1640. Finally, a John Corse at Corse Mill took out a bond in 1668. I assume it was the same John Corse who took out a bond at Wraes Mill later that year. That is not conclusive evidence for the mill ceasing operations so early. However, while it appears on Ainslie's map of the 1790's as used by John Wilson in his "Review of the Agriculture of Renfrewshire" published in 1811 the author does not mention it. Robert Murray in his "Annals of Barrhead," published in 1942 refers to Turkey Red dying on the site by the 1780's and in "Levern Delineated" Corsemill is referred to only as a printfield. The available evidence - admittedly little enough - suggests that the grain mill was absorbed into a textile works early in the Eighteenth Century. There is, of course, no trace of it now, the site being occupied by Spillers.

Another mill which seems to have been an early victim of industrial development was Fereneze Mill. Very little information is available concerning it and I must hypothesise a little. It is mentioned in the Poll Tax roll of 1695; but I can find no later specific reference to it. Once again Charles Taylor is the most interesting commentator: he mentions "Chappel Bleachfield, formerly a Print Works" on the site "where there is a machine for grinding dye woods." Such a machine could well have been an adaptation of the old grain mill, and in "Fowler's Commercial Directory of Renfrewshire" for 1832-33 only a bleacher is mentioned at Fereneze. Another reliable source - Robert Murray - states that the first bleachfield at Chappelfield was opened in 1733. The date seems early, especially in view of Charles Taylor's statement that it was preceded by a print works; but it is probably correct; because it is likely that the site was a bleachfield, then a print works, and finally reverted to a bleachfield. However that may have been, it is reasonable to conclude that industry had obliterated the grain mill by the mid Eighteenth Century. There are only vestigial remains of building there now - mostly on what is, in effect, a minute island in the Levern and it is impossible to trace a laide.

A likely candidate for the mill referred to in "The First Statistical Account" as "now an appendage to a cotton mill" is Dovecothall Mill. It was, again, a very old mill, the earliest reference to it being in a testament of 1667. There are several other references to it throughout the Seventeenth Century, and it is recorded in the Poll Tax Roll of 1695 on the lands of Lord Ross. In the "Annals of Barrhead" Levern Corn Mill with the Miller's Cottage is mentioned as part of Dovecothall which was incorporated in the town of Barrhead in 1750; but I can find no later reference to it as a corn mill. In "Levern Delineated" it is stated that the corn mill at Dovecothall was then used as a dwelling house. Furthermore the Rev Alexander Fleming writing in "The Second

Statistical Account" of 1847 discusses extensive re-building of Lavern Mill on the site of the old corn mill at Dovecothall. All later sources refer only to the famous Lavern Mill on the site; and it, therefore, seems fair to conclude that the Dovecothall Corn Mill vanished under the development of Lavern Cotton Mill, and that all trace of it was lost when the later building was demolished. The final phase in Lavern Mill's destruction was in the late 1960's; but some of it had gone long before that.

To be thorough, I should record a single reference from "A History of the Parish of Neilston" by Adam Semple, written apparently in the late 1960's, but not dated. He discusses "an old grain mill at Gateside owned originally by John Pinkerton which came into the possession of the Dunlop family through marriage in 1760, and by 1820 had been converted to a cotton mill." Unfortunately he does not give his sources, and the history related closely resembles that of Dovecothall which also came to the Dunlops by marriage. If such a mill existed, it may have been the one mentioned in The First Statistical Account," as an appendage to a cotton mill. So far, however, I have been unable to find any record of it.

Of the remaining three mills known to me Malls Mill and Kirkton Mill survived well into the Nineteenth Century and Wraes Mill operated until the late 1960's.

Crawfurd and Semple say Malls Mill was on the lands of Alexander Speirs of Elderslie; in "Lavern Delineated" it is mentioned as a corn mill at the top of Midge Hole Glen and David Pride refers to it as a ruin. Turning to Fowler's "Directory of the Parish of Neilston" it is found that John Lohead is listed as a miller at Malls in 1831-32, 1832-33; but not in 1834-35. It would seem obvious that the mill had ceased production by 1834. Yet the Rev. Alexander Fleming writing in 1847 refers to "a corn and chipping mill" on the Lavern, and Malls Mill is the most likely candidate. It is possible that the mill still functioned after it ceased to be listed in Fowler's, because trades-people paid to be included in it, and there is also the possibility that Malls Mill went out of business temporarily. One certainty is that there is little trace of it now - only a long-overgrown platform beside the river, and no evidence for a lade system.

In "Lavern Delineated" Kirkton Mill is said to be "upwards of one hundred years old formerly the property of the Laird of Glanderston" and it is therefore likely to be the mill on Glanderston Lands mentioned by Crawfurd and Semple. Forrest, miller Kirkton Mill, is listed in Fowler's Directory from 1831 to 1837 and, as the one corn mill on the stream flowing from Kirkton Dam referred to in "The Second Statistical Account" is most likely to be Wraes, I deduce that Kirkton mill's demise was either in or soon after 1837. Although Pride refers to it as a grain mill he does not say it was working, and it is doubtful whether the economy in 1910 could have sustained two mills as close to each other as Kirkton and Wraes. The dam was drained in the late 1980's and, although the breached earthen wall and the dam area are still readily identifiable, the rest of the site is not easy to interpret. The old road to the mill can be traced, and Kirkton Mill Cottage is obviously a restored building; but it appears that the original mill was nearer the river. There is no trace of a lade and the valve now standing redundant in the middle of the burn was probably installed in the late 1920's after the Bleacher's Association acquired the water rights.

The last mill to be considered here is - the survivor - Wraes Mill. The earliest reference I have to it is the bond, already discussed, taken out by John Corse in 1668 and the next reference, much later, is by Charles Taylor who simply notes its existence on the Kirkton Burn. Gray and Whitelaw, millers Wraes Mill, are listed in Fowler's Directory from 1830 to 1835, and David Pride merely mentions it as a point of reference on the burn. The later history of the mill is, fortunately, more readily accessible. Neilston Farmers Milling Company was registered in 1908 and they purchased the mill from Henry James Barr Dunlop in 1916, although it is likely that that they were already leasing it because Mr Paton was miller there from 1912 and he was followed by his son, Mr William Paton, who continued in charge of the mill until May 1967. During their tenure it developed into a large grain mill with its own kiln, four sets of millstones on the first floor, and smaller equipment on the ground floor. One of its most interesting features was an iron "winnowing fan" - still on site - used to separate the chaff from the grain.

The machinery was originally powered by a large overshot enclosed water wheel. It was twenty-eight and a half feet in diameter and approximately five feet wide, of metal construction with wooden spokes and buckets. Somewhat unusually the tail-race ran under the road. In 1921, however, the mill and lands were acquired by grain merchants in Glasgow who sold them to The Bleachers' Association in 1926. They were interested only in the water rights, and the mill was promptly leased by Mr Paton, to be driven first by a Tange Paraffin engine, and subsequently by a 40 hp Ruston-Hornsby Diesel. One of the engineering problems to be overcome was that while the engines ran at 200 rpm the maximum speed of the mill-stones was 120 and the later hammer-mill ran at 300. The changes in speed were effected - space being limited - by an ingenious system utilising lay shafts and V-belt drives.

The hammer-mill was installed, after the usual wrangle with bureaucracy, in 1941 and during the Second World War an incredible quantity of cattle-food was produced from imported beans, maize, and anything else that could be converted. Moreover imports had to be processed whenever a cargo arrived; staff frequently worked all night and every available space was packed with materials. That was the period of the "self-steering barrow" which was used so much to transport production to the loading bay that it cut deep grooves in the concrete floor.

Mr William Paton continued as miller until 1967 and, even at that late date, the mill was not closed because of lack of work; but because of alterations required to meet new regulations, and because Mr William Paton had no obvious successor. He was very proud of a letter from the owners congratulating him on the condition in which he had left the premises.

The mill was then sold to Rank Precision Industries. They and their subsidiaries used, and maintained, it for science-based industrial purposes during a brief period. But by 1980 the building was in ruinous condition when it was purchased by private individuals who began work on conversion to a dwelling house; the work has been continued sympathetically by successive owners and it is now a very comfortable modern house although easily recognisable as a mill building. The kiln is still there, an old bridge, though much repaired, still carries the road to it; the dam wall is readily identifiable; the perimeter of the dam and the lades can be easily traced; the pit and

housing for the water wheel, with the brackets which supported the engine-driven shafting, are in situ; the grooves made by the "self-steering barrow" are visible; and the supports for the original gear-casing are a feature of the luxurious lounge. The millstones, incidentally, were ultimately used to grace The Water Mill Hotel in Paisley.

I have seen my task here as primarily to record. But I believe the Historian should attempt to draw some conclusions, however tentative, and I suggest that the mills which ceased operations very early did so because of lack of supplies during the poor harvests from 1770 to 1790. The erosion of the Multure System after 1799 may have contributed to the demise of others. The final blow was, however, struck by The Industrial Revolution, which demolished grain mills because the sites could bring higher profits from the textile industry. Not surprisingly, the textile factories were converted or dismantled in their turn when other uses for the sites - such as engineering, supermarkets, and housing - became more remunerative. Finally, the centralisation of grinding on one large mill is part of the evolution of industrial practice that is not only continuing, but also rapidly accelerating.

Note on spelling: I have standardised and modernised spelling, except where it is possible that the versions in the original documents could influence interpretation.

Acknowledgements: My main printed sources are mentioned in the text. But all who attempt to discuss water mills are indebted to Dr John Shaw for his magnificent "Water Power in Scotland" (John Donald, 1984) and I am more in his debt than most, because he made his notes freely available to me. Again, like all who write on the area, I am deeply indebted to the staff of Paisley Central and Barrhead Public Libraries. I am also much indebted to Mr Ian Graham, a recent owner of Wraes Mill and, most importantly, to my friends - the late Mr William Paton, the last miller at Wraes, and his sister Annie. But for Mr Paton's recent decease my discussion would have been more accurate and more interesting. I am also, as always, indebted to my wife - Irene for drawing the map, providing map references, acting as chaffeuse, and putting her considerable knowledge of the area at my disposal, and to my daughter - Sarah Grant for many valuable suggestions. I alone am responsible for the errors; and that is not merely a polite form of words. I am by no means certain that I have the story straight and criticism, constructive or otherwise, will be welcome.

Appendix

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6. More on Corn Mills

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In response to my article in the last issue of the Journal, I have received a most interesting and welcome letter from Stuart Nisbet. I shall here abstract, and attempt to comment on, the points he has raised.

Kirkton: Stuart suspects this is a separate site from Glanderston, which seems to have been further downstream Glanderston Mill appears almost opposite Kirkton Bleachfield on Roy's

map. He found an advert for the sale of Glanderston Mill in the Glasgow Mercury for April 1780.

Stuart may very well be correct in his suspicion; but, after studying the colour copy of Roy's map, I am not totally convinced that I was wrong to treat Glanderston and Kirkton as one of end the same corn mill. Certainly the map shows it further downstream; but maps of the period can not be relied on for absolute accuracy. More work is required at this point is to be settled.

Dovecothall: Stuart points out that this Corn Mill was still in existence after the construction of the first Cotton Mill.

'The remaining years of a lease of Dovecot Hall sucken thereof.....for 38 years' was advertised for sale in November 1787.

1787 is a much later reference than any I found; but the corn mill was, ultimately, absorbed as the textile mill was extended,

Cowden: The Bleachfield here is advertised several times in the 1790's. In July 1797 an advert mentions the former corn mill.

Again, this is a later reference than any I found; but we still do not know exactly when the corn mill ceased production. The reference does illustrate a point, also made by Stuart that 'the demise of many of the mills is tied up with the growth of the Bleachfields.'

4 Hollows: I do not mention a Corn Mill here, although it is shown on Ainslie's map. There was a Lint Mill at Hollows (Hollos) in the 1770's. Stuart found a reference to it in the Board of Trustees Records in the SRO. In a 1772 survey there were three Lint Mills in the Paisley area: Blackhall, Hawkhead and Hollos ('half a mile from Neilston on the Levern Water.') Presumably this was an additional Lint Mill to the one shown farther upstream on Ainslie. Such proximity is not uncommon – e.g. at Busby there are 2 Lint Mills and 2 Waulk Mills close to each other. Hollows Lint Mill is probably that referred to as Crofthead Lint Mill, which appears in the Renfrewshire Sassine No 3577 (1793). There could, possibly, have been even another Lint Mill on the site of Crofthead Cotton Mill. There is much work to be done on the Lint Mills in our area. And Lint Mills are often well documented.

Certainly Ainslie shows both Crofthead Mill and a Lint Mill further upstream; but I have no evidence that there were corn mills on either site, although it is by no means unlikely that the water-power there, as elsewhere, was first harnessed for the production of meal.

Stuart also makes valuable suggestions concerning sources: for example – a colour copy of Roy's map (circa 1750) in Giffnock Library, adverts in the Glasgow Press and the Renfrewshire Sassines (abridgements in SRC Archives) have most useful to him.

As Stuart remarks, a great deal remains to be learned about local mills – particularly Lint and Waulk Mills, and there is always more to history than appears at first sight. The best way to discover old mills is by walking the ground that, unfortunately, is not always possible in a heavily industrialised area such as the Levern valley once was. At present, it seems unlikely that I, myself, shall return to the subject. I am tolerably satisfied that Stuart and I have at least broken a trail which others may develop.