

5. Eaglesham Cotton Mills

Stuart Nisbet

Introduction

The old Kirkton of Eaglesham was rebuilt from 1767 onwards as a planned village. Despite its rural situation, industry in the form of Cotton Spinning formed the basis of employment during the first century. Recent research has strengthened the industrial origins of Eaglesham, confirming the tradition of a second major Cotton Mill in the village.

Until now there has been little data available regarding the first three decades of Cotton Spinning in Eaglesham. It was assumed that there was only ever the one Cotton Mill in the village, i.e. the mill in the centre of the Orry, which went on to be the main employer in the 19th century. The sole piece of evidence for another mill was in Robertson's Description of the Shire in 1818.

Robertson made 3 claims:

1. That there were two Cotton Mills in the village.
2. Each mill had already been burnt down.
3. The mills had separate owners.

Eaglesham's Mills

At first glance Eaglesham appears to be a typical rural Renfrewshire Cotton Mill settlement similar, for example, to Lochwinnoch. With a 200 foot fall through the village and an expanse of waterlogged moorland above, Eaglesham would appear to have been the perfect location for a Cotton Mill. However this was not the case.

Firstly, despite the almost unlimited head of water, finding level sites upon the fall proved to be very difficult. Secondly, and more importantly, the Kirkton Burn was the very last watercourse on which anyone would have conceived of building Cotton Mills. Unlike Lochwinnoch's Calder Water, the Kirkton Burn was a mere trickle. In fact it was supplied by the smallest Cotton Mill catchment in Renfrewshire.

Eaglesham had three traditional mill sites, at Millhall, Walkers and Rossmill (Fig. 1). These were situated on substantial streams, the Earn and Polnoon Water. By contrast, the Kirkton Burn, running through both the old Kirkton and newly planned village, was much smaller. With only a tenth of the catchment area of either the Earn or Polnoon, it had never been considered for powering a mill, even a modest grain mill.

Despite this chronic lack of water, Eaglesham's Cotton Mills were to be driven by the Kirkton Burn. The reasons for this are tied in with the industrial origins of the new planned village.

Industrial Eaglesham

The new Eaglesham was planned a decade before the arrival of Cotton Spinning in Scotland, thus it is unlikely to have been conceived as an industrial village. However the tradition is that the Earl of Eglinton built the first Cotton Mill himself to encourage industry to the new village. Thus during Eaglesham's formative years, industrialisation became the objective.

There is other evidence to support this tradition. In 1775 the Earl received a grant towards a Spinning Mill at Eaglesham from a Government body, the Board of Trustees for Manufacture. The scale of this early mill is unknown, but such direct involvement by the landowner was the key to the siting of the Cotton Mills within the village.

The Earl's plan for Eaglesham involved abolishing the old fermtouns and congregating the rural population of the parish in his new village. If a large Cotton Mill was built on a stream outwith the village, it would have created an alternative settlement competing with it. This could have ruined Eaglesham at the outset, turning it into a ghost town.

Thus if Eaglesham was to have Cotton Mills, they would have to be built within the village, and therefore on the Kirkton Burn.

The Early Cotton Mills

There were two Cotton Mills in the village.

1. The Old Cotton Mill

This was at the top end of Eaglesham, at Townhead. For two decades it was the largest Cotton Mill in the village (128 ft x 28 ft). Its title suggests it was also the first.

Several sources mention the building of a Cotton Mill in the early 1790's. Until now this has been taken as referring to the Orry Mill, down in the centre of the village. However the location of the mill, described as "towards the higher end of the village" is more likely to refer to the Old Mill. Unfortunately the Old Mill was outside the original Townlands shown on Ainslie's 1789 plan, and is thus less well documented than the Orry Mill.

The Old Mill utilised the best site, a level plateau directly below Picketlaw Dam. It was powered by a fall of over 20 feet, driving 28 Jennies and 9 Carding engines. For the plan area of the mill, the number of machines indicate a building at least 4 stories high. The mill was advertised in 1808 by the owner, a Cotton Spinner residing in Anderston, Glasgow.

By 1818 the Old Mill was burnt down. Shortly afterwards part of the building was converted to a dwelling house. The remains were advertised again in 1822 claiming that the fall of water could easily be increased to 30 feet. There were two ways of achieving this, by raising Picketlaw Dam or by cutting into the whin bed of the burn. Unfortunately these options were either impractical or too expensive, and the Old Mill was never rebuilt.

The outline of the Old Mill building and the storage pond above the wheel appear on the 1860's O.S. plan. Part of the mill site latterly became Picketlaw House.

Once the reservoirs were constructed for the Old Mill it was natural for another mill to follow further down the fall. Unfortunately finding a level site for a second Cotton Mill proved to be very difficult

2. The Orry Cotton Mill

Mapped evidence indicates that the first Orry Mill building was on the west side of the burn, above the present mill hollow. An early lade also survives as a footpath through Gamekeeper's Park. In the 1790's the mill was owned by Glasgow Merchants Strang & Lennox. It was four storeys high and driven by two water wheels, 20 & 22 feet diameter.

Like the Old Mill, the Orry Mill also suffered a major fire, and was partly ruined in 1813. It was gradually rebuilt in 1814-16 on a similar plan with a slightly longer frontage. Unfortunately the expense was too much for the owner, James Gilchrist. He was declared bankrupt in 1816, before he had the opportunity to recoup the capital cost of rebuilding. His sequestration papers give details of the mill properly at the time, including dwelling houses in the village. The Orry Mill was subsequently sold to Gilchrist's brother Hugh, who had been a Cotton Spinner in Glasgow since 1792.

Until this time the Old & Orry Mills were independently owned. Shortly afterwards both mills were purchased by John White, who concentrated spinning at the Orry Mill, making substantial improvements. He decided to exploit the potential head of water to the full, with one of the largest water wheels in the country at the time. He installed a wheel 45 feet diameter, equal in height to the 5-storey mill building. This effectively doubled the available power without further need for increase in water supply, and solved Eaglesham's power requirements for the next sixty years. From this time onwards the Orry Mill is well documented.

The Reservoirs

The reservoirs were the key to the operation and survival of the Cotton mills. It would have been impossible to drive a Cotton Mill on the Kirkton Burn without some form of water storage. Picketlaw is believed to have been the first reservoir, dating from the founding of the Old Mill (Fig. 1).

By the time Mid and High reservoirs were completed the potential storage within the Kirkton Burn catchment was exhausted. Both Mid and High were rather vain attempts to increase storage. Mid Dam in particular had very limited capacity, with an average depth of only 6 feet. The survival and expansion of the Cotton Mills depended on finding substantial additional sources of water. To achieve this required a far-sighted engineering solution.

Land was acquired two miles to the south on Dunwan and Braehead farms, within the Polnoon Water catchment. On this site a much larger reservoir was constructed. three times the area of Picketlaw, Mid and High Dams put together. Water was abstracted from this adjacent catchment by a long man-made lade or 'cut", flowing through the farms of West & East Revoch into Picketlaw reservoir (Fig. 1). This lade, named the Revoch Cut, was a very early example of a major water management scheme, predating Robert Thorn's works at Rothesay and Greenock. This scheme overcame the original inadequacy of the Kirkton Burn Catchment.

The exact date of founding of each dam is unknown, however all four reservoirs, i.e. Picketlaw, Mid, High and Dunwan were in use by 1814.

There was further proof of the lack of potential in the Kirkton Burn catchment in 1819 when a second cut was formed, running westwards to trap the headwaters of the Borland Burn. By this time the moor had literally been wrung dry. The subsequent major increase in power at the Orry Mill from 1820 onwards was catered for by doubling the diameter of the water wheel, rather than by any additional water storage.

Postscript

A third mill was built on the Kirkton Burn in 1822, lower down the village below the Orry Mill. This was a purpose-made Corn & Barley Mill. designed to replace the traditional parish grain mills of Millhall and Rossmill.

Millhall became a small-scale Cotton Mill spinning candle wicks. Rossmill was more isolated and despite being advertised for several years was subsequently abandoned to ruin.

The mystery of Eaglesham's water powered industry is still not completely solved. According to tradition there was another mill at Townhead, on the opposite slope of Picketlaw Road from the Old Mill. This was reputedly the starting point for candle wick spinner Ludovick Gavin before he moved to Millhall in 1837. Whether this tradition actually refers to another mill site or is simply confusion with Townhead Mill is a subject for further research.

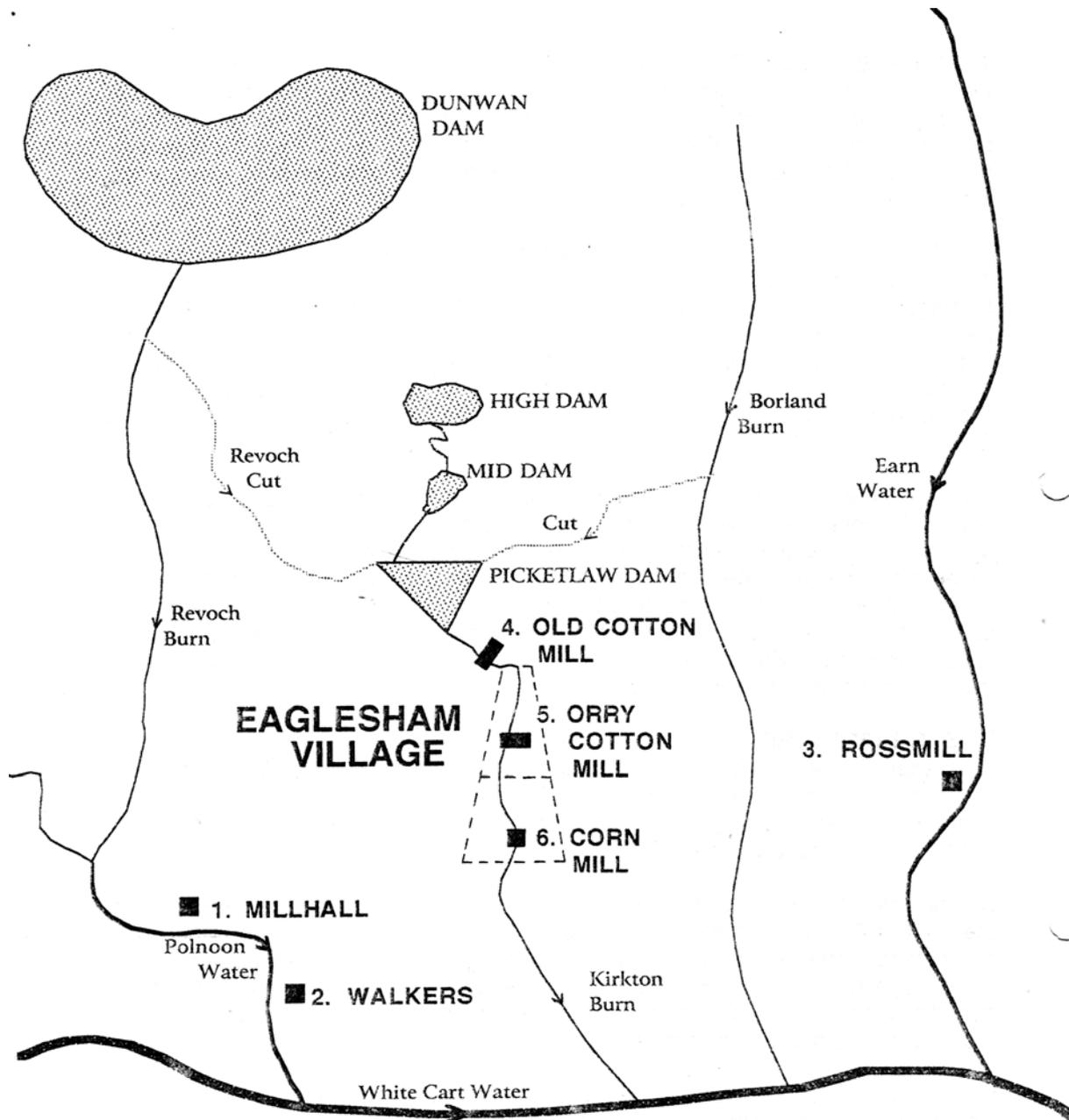


FIG 1: MILLS IN EAGLESHAM PARISH

1. Millhall
2. Walkers
3. Rossmill
4. Old Cotton Mill
5. Orry Cotton Mill
6. Corn Mill (REPLACED 1 & 3)

(MAP IS SCHEMATIC AND NOT TO SCALE)

References

Twist Mill: Scottish Record Office (SRO) NG/1/21 (8.3.1775).
Gilchrist Papers: SRO CS/96/3520 (1817) Transcript by A. Hill.

Early Mill Adverts (Glasgow Advertiser/ Herald)
1 Jan 1799, 9 Dec 1808, 28 Feb 1814, 29 Apr 1816, 28 Aug 1816, 16 Sep 1816, 18 Jul 1817, 5 Mar 1818, 12 Jul 1822, 19 Jul 1822, 20 Aug 1824, 18 Nov 1824, 11 Feb 1825, 25 Feb 1826, 24 May 1830, 22 Aug 1833.

Revaluation of Reservoirs: SRC Archives THH-81 (1887).
Orry Mill rental: SRC Archives THH-79 (1844) Transcript by A. Hill.

Secondary Sources Relating to Mills: 'General Description of the Shire of Renfrew', G. Robertson (1818) 'Rural Eaglesham', C.R. Brown (1966); the post-1820 Cotton Mills are documented in 'Eastwood District History and Heritage', T.C. Welsh (1989).

As Eaglesham was rented from the Earl of Eglinton, there are few deeds recording changes of ownership. The following backdated Renfrewshire Sasines document early water management: 915/6 (19.5.1876), 1178-1183 (8.6.1896). Many Glasgow sasines record the industrial enterprise of Hugh & James Gilchrist from 1792 to 1820.

Maps: John Ainslie Plan of Townlands (1789); Plan of Eaglesham Village (1789); Eaglesham Farm Plans (1789); Plan of Renfrewshire (1796); William Crawford's Plan of Eaglesham Parish (1834).

Thanks: To Dr. & Mrs Antebi for their kindness in allowing access to explore their property at Townhead. To Alistair Hill & Tom Welsh for sharing sources in this ongoing detective trail. To my son Douglas for drawing the map.

Stuart Nisbet