

A HISTORY OF DALGARVEN MILL

Dalgarven Mill is unique amongst mills in that it can legitimately claim to have served during its life as an Abbey Mill, a Barony Mill and Town Mill, these being the three categories of Mill found in Scotland.

For the origin of this mill we must go back to the history of KILWINNING ABBEY, founded in 1180 by Richard de Morville who brought monks from TIRON in France and endowed an Abbey on elevated ground above the River Garnock. By 1280, the Abbey owned a considerable amount of land in the district and also had the income from twelve parish churches in Ayrshire and Renfrewshire. Most importantly it is recorded at that time that they had built three mills, one of which was a waulk mill on the River Garnock at Groatholm. This we now know to be Dalgarven the site of the present mill.

Sadly only scraps of the records of Kilwinning Abbey survive. Timothy Pont, the famous historian and map maker, observed them in 1608, and they are recorded as being in the care of the Earl of Eglinton in the 18th century. Fortunately among the remaining documents are two which relate to "the walkmyln of Groatholm".

In the first dated 1537 Margaret Rankin, widow of William Walker, the first known tenant of the mill, disposed "half of her goodes and geir in the Walkmyln of Groatholm" to her brother in law Adam Walker.

In 1566 her descendant also William Walker took the Walkmyln in feu. The Feu Charter signed by Gavin Hamilton, Commendator of the Abbey, also survives and we have a facsimile of it translated into Scots from the original Latin.

It is interesting to note that the Walker family at this period intermarried with the Miller family of Bridgend Mill, Kilwinning, the Abbey Corn Mill both WALKER and MILLER being two of the earliest occupational surnames in Scotland.

In November 1617, William Walker, beset by financial difficulties

sold the Waulk Mill to Bryce Blair of Blair, the local holder of the Barony of Blair. The Walkers remained as tenant's however, and the sale was not confirmed and registered by William Walker's widow Agnes Hamilton until 1622.

Many families were forced to sell because of the peculiar custom of dividing land and property into, halves, quarters, eights or even sixteenths and handing these over to sons, grandsons, widows and even cousins. Eventually the land or property could not support all these claims and creditors would force it's sale, and it took Agnes Hamilton from 1617 until 1622 to reclaim the whole title to the property.

The Blairs or Blares are an ancient family in this district, mention having been made of them as early as the middle of the 12th century. They took part in all the fueding and fighting for power that characterised the 13th century in Scotland. Their main adversaries being the Montgomeries (Earls of Eglinton), the Boyds (Earls of Glencairn), the Cunninghames and the Boyles (Earls of Glasgow). By 1202 they had built a strong fortress on an escarpment a mile from Dalgarven, called the Place of Blair, and from there they administered their estate and the surrounding land through a BARONY Court. Unusually, descendants of the Blairs of Blair are still in possession of the house and the estate.

The house, which boasts one of loveliest Renaissance wings in Scotland, built by Sir William Blair of Blair and his wife, the Lady Margaret Hamilton, in 1660. Further additions have been kept in scale and the house is of exceptional architectural quality.

The Blairs needed to have a corn mill on their estate, and by buying the Abbey waulk mill from William Walker, and by building a corn mill on the site, they could make their estate lands more attractive to both settlers and craftsmen. It was also an important source of income since the estate could then enforce the feudal right of "thirlage" which bound all tenants and estate workers to take their oats or barley (bere) to the Lairds mill for grinding into meal. In return for this the Laird extracted MULTURE in the form of a portion of the meal produced, this could then be sold on the open market, and a substantial income generated. The miller paid rent to the estate and also obtained his income by remaindering a portion of the ground oats, this was

commonly a "gowpin" or a double handful per boll of meal.

This form of payment did not make the miller a popular member of local society, since he was responsible for extracting payment for both the Laird and himself and tenants had no redress against the amount of meal they received at the end of the day .Neither could they control whether the meal they received came from their own grain or from the inferior crops of others. Many suspected the miller of tricks and sleight of hand in manipulating the output of the mill to his own benefit. however if they were "thirled" to a particular mill they had no choice but to use it. One might say that the system lead to the continuous malignment that millers have received in poetry, prose and song over the centuries.

Many did not appreciate that the process of drying, shelling (removing the husk) and milling removed almost a third of the original weight of the grain, so that the final bulk of meal looked unconvincing.

If a mill was important to a landlord, it was essential to the populace, since oatmeal or barley meal made up over 95% of their diet. Furthermore meal was the chief item of currency; diverse people, from servants and tradesmen to the ministers of the Kirk were paid in this manner, the latter in the form of TITHES or TIENDS.

As their estate prospered, the Blairs built two further mills one in the town of Dalry, known as Tofts Mill, and another not far from Dalgargen known as Blair Mill, but Dalgargen continued to serve the south western area of the estate for another three centuries.

To return to the tenants of the mill and its continuous growth , from the Blair of Blair records or MUNIMENTS now in the Scottish Records Office, we know that the Walker family remained as tenants until the late 17th century, We have no precise date when they gave up the tenancy but we know from Parish records that a child baptised William, was born to Thomas King and his wife Margaret Miller on the 17th of July 1709 at Dalgargen Mills, the father Thomas King being described as a "Miller and Millwright". It is interesting that Mistress King was a Miller from Kilwinning, this was the family that the WALKERS had also

married into, and it is possible that she was a relative of the original owners and tenants.

The King family remained at the Mill through many generations, and were still there at the 1841 census. From their family history we know that their descendants tenanted both Sevenacres Mill at Kilwinning and Tofts Mill at Dalry. A cottage in the village known as Rosebank was built by a Thomas King in the late 1700's on land feud by him from the Earl of Glasgow. In the feu document he is described as a retired miller and mill wright. His descendants lived in this cottage until the 1950's when the last members of the King family bequeathed the property to the Ferguson family, who were by then owners of the Mill.

Strangely the Kings reinforced Dalgarnen's link with the Abbey, Thomas King's daughter Margaret married William Connell of Beith and the couple built a cottage known as Townfoot adjacent to Rosebank. Their son Matthew is recorded as living there in 1804. Until recently there was a gateway from Kilwinning Abbey serving as an entrance to the garden there, recent renovations also revealed pieces of carved and chamfered oak built into the structure during its construction .

In 1787 the present Kilwinning Parish church was being built adjacent to and on top of the ruins of the ancient Abbey. William Armour was contracted as a wright by the Heritors. Armour lived and had his workshop in Dalgarnen and may he not have purloined a few extra bits and pieces for his other contract? The arch fragments remain in the village as do the gate pillars shown in this photograph. By the time that the 1861 census was taken the King's had been replaced by Matthew White and his wife Marion Kennedy, the daughter of a local farming family. Matthew White was at this time only twenty three, but had the financial backing of his father, also Matthew, who owned or tenanted the valuable Bishop's Mill on the River Kelvin in Glasgow. The White's prospered and had several children, the youngest of whom John was to prove the most interesting, but more of him later.

In 1869 the Corn mill and the Miller's house were hit by disaster, as an article in the Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald of the 17th of November in that year reveals. The Mill, its contents, and the

Miller's house were destroyed by a huge blaze, which, feeding on the large stock of grain in the mill burned for two days and nights. Despite valiant attempts by the tenant and villagers to extinguish it, it was only on the second day that a fire pump arrived from Irvine and managed to save some of the grain . Typical of many newspaper reports, it would appear to be in error, in that it describes the owners as Messrs. Andrew Wilson and Son however , research has found no confirmation of this, and all other sources confirm that the tenants were Matthew White and Sons, and the owner was Captain William Blair of Blair RN to whom the Fire Assurance company paid £2,300 in compensation.

The fire is important, in that it generated the redevelopment which resulted in the present layout of buildings, and it also left traces in charred lintels, beams and joists which have allowed us to surmise on the original form of the pre-1869 mill and Miller's house.

How long the enlarged mill, the new stables and the Miller's cottage took to build is unknown, but there is some evidence to suggest that, temporarily, the waulk mill building on the south side of the courtyard was converted into living accommodation. The handsome fireplace, now in the coffee room , was removed from the first floor chamber. The ceiling joints there are planed and chamfered, and the walls plastered, the only outbuilding to have received this finish. We can then assume that the White family moved into the old Mill while the remains of their former home were being incorporated into the new Mill, and their handsome cottage at right angles to their existing building was being constructed.

The greatest unsolved mystery is why Captain Blair should have decided to so greatly enlarge the Mill at Dalgarven when, following the abolition of THIRLAGE, most other owners were closing them down or adapting them for new uses. The answer may lie in two new advances in transportation. The main Glasgow to the Ayrshire coast Railway was to be built immediately above the Mill and early plans show that there was proposal for a freight spur or siding on the flat land belonging to the Mill, and also the Earl of Eglinton had proposed an Adrossan to Glasgow Canal, which followed the river valley and passed extremely close to the Mill to the west. To the Blairs these must have offered the

opportunity to bring in large quantities of wheat, peas, beans, maize and other commodities, and to benefit from the income generated by both storage and milling. To this end the new mill was extremely large, having copious storage space, grain washing and drying facilities and eight pairs of millstones, three pairs in what had formerly been the waulk mill and five pairs arranged in sequence in the newly reconstructed mill.

As it happens, neither the rail spur or the canal construction took place, and the Mill had to revert to bringing grain ships into Irvine harbour and bringing the grain or other material to the Mill by the laborious process of horse and cart. John White the youngest son of Matthew and Marion Kennedy was by all accounts a child prodigy, he was DUX of Kilwinning Primary School, DUX of Irvine Royal Academy and achieved a Bachelor of Divinity Degree and a Doctorate of Divinity at Glasgow University.

He was renowned as Minister of the Barony Church in Glasgow and became Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. We are indebted to him, because his autobiography chronicles his childhood at Dalgarnen Mill and we have a unique and accurate picture of how the mill worked. When a freighter arrived at Irvine a messenger brought news to the Mill, the miller summoned as many horses and carts as he could muster from the local farmers or carriers and they set off to Irvine. The too-ing and fro-ing went on for as many days as were necessary for the ship to be emptied and its cargo taken to the Mill. Grain was stored in the Mill for future milling but beans, peas were first washed in the river by diverting the lade through a cage. They were then bagged, wheeled on a small railway across the mill yard, taken up by hoist to the second floor, poured down a chute onto the floor of the kiln, dried over several days. Once dried they were bagged and made the return journey to the old waulk mill, were taken up by hoist to the top floor emptied into vats and then trickle fed into the mill stones in order to crack the shells.

This process continued overnight, a dangerous procedure given the capricious nature of both mill stones and water wheels. To mitigate the danger, John White writes that "I or one of my brothers slept in the attic under an open skylight, so that any change of tone in the noise of the millstones might waken us and

allow us to fetch our father in the bedroom below. Once shelled the beans kernels could be returned to the main mill for grinding.

Matthew White is recorded as the miller in the 1881 census, but shortly after it was taken he died suddenly, and in 1883 his widow offered the tenancy to one of her millers John Ferguson, and moved to Glasgow. The Fergusons had been millers for at least two generations, this John Ferguson was born at Overends Mill at Ayr.

In 1893 John and David Ferguson formally took over the tenancy from their father. David remained a bachelor whereas John married a local girl , Lillias Hannah who bore him eleven children, the eldest of whom, John Ferguson, was the last working miller at Dalgarnen. The size of this family, although common, was probably the reason why it was David Ferguson who purchased the mill from Blair of Blair in 1922 thus ending exactly three centuries of ownership.

In 1938 the Mill passed to John Ferguson and Alfred Ferguson, eldest and youngest son respectively of the second John Ferguson, and they plied the business of cattle food or provender milling until old age and changing methods of cattle husbandry rendered the work unprofitable. From it's closure in 1972 the mill lay empty for ten years , its condition deteriorating, until it lost part of its roof and the water wheel and the out buildings fell into ruin. Although listed, the building was not thought unique enough to grant aid repairs, and it was generally agreed that it would in time require to be demolished.

In 1984 Alfred Ferguson and Mrs John Ferguson; widow of the last miller; gifted the buildings and land to Robert Ferguson, the youngest son of John Ferguson ,who being an Architect immediatly resolved to rescue it, and attempted to raise the funds and sponsorship needed to restore the Mill and to convert the remainder of the buildings into a Museum of Ayrshire Country Life.

In 1985-87 some fifty tradesmen and labours sponsored by the Manpower Services Commission and Cunningham District Council with capital provided by Mr & Mrs Ferguson, began the

ambitious programme of conservation. In parallel, the Fergusons began augmenting their large collection by visiting local farms and cottages for additional material to expand the exhibits. The contents of the mill are testament to the generosity of many such local families.

From 1987 until 1994 Mr and Mrs Ferguson ran the mill as a family concern until it's popularity outstripped their ability to continue on a part time basis; after long negotiations with, and financial support from Cunninghame District Council, Enterprise Ayrshire and Strathclyde Regional Council, Mr and Mrs Ferguson handed over control of the buildings, the land and the collection to a new Charitable Trust in September 1994. Thus ending a family connection stretching back to John Ferguson's arrival in 1883. The Trust has been able to carry out a considerable amount of landscape and renovation work since it's inauguration, and the Trustees look forward with confidence to another century or more in the history of this fascinating and irreplaceable piece of our Industrial Heritage.

Robert Ferguson
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