

THE MILLS OF BLAIRGOWRIE AND RATTRAY

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The waters of the river Ericht flowing out of the Highlands once drove a remarkable series of 14 spinning mills. Originally working with flax but later mostly changing to spin jute these enterprises brought employment and prosperity to the Blairgowrie and Rattray area through much of the last two hundred years. The water wheels have stopped turning and the mills have fallen silent but a walk along the leafy riverbank provides a fascinating glimpse of this once vibrant early industrial landscape.

Flax spinning

Flax is amongst the oldest crops in the world. It has been grown since the beginnings of civilisation, primarily for its use in linens, though the seed (linseed) is also a valuable source of oil. Burial chambers in Egypt, dated back to about 3000 B.C., depict flax cultivation and clothing made from flax fibres. The plant grows well in Scotland and linen has been produced locally for many centuries. The processing of flax involves stripping off the seeds and then soaking the plants in water for a couple of weeks to soften the outer layers of the stalk. 'Retting ponds' where this process was carried out are common in the Scottish countryside. The flax was then beaten with wooden knives to separate the unwanted bark from the long inner fibres (scutching) and then combed through a set of iron spikes to split and straighten the fibres (heckling). These processes were originally carried out by hand, as was the subsequent spinning of the fibres into thread and then weaving this into linen cloth.

Linen

By the middle of the 18th Century mechanical scutching machines driven by water power were developed and a large number of new Scottish 'Lint Mills' were built in which they were installed. This was followed, in the latter part of the century, by the development of spinning machines. Blairgowrie and Rattray, with their considerable water power, were obvious sites for building spinning mills employing the new technology. The mills of Blairgowrie were built by a series of entrepreneurs eager to take advantage of the business opportunities offered by the mechanisation of the textile industry. The earliest known spinning machinery was installed in a lint mill in Rattray (which later grew into the Erichtside works) in about 1796. This was followed by the construction of a new purpose built mill in Blairgowrie (the Meikle Mill) just above the Bridge of Blair in 1798. Mill construction after this was infrequent until about 1830 by which time a new generation of more sophisticated and reliable spinning machinery had become available. Some seven new mills were then built between 1830 and 1845. As the power from the river was however limited and not really sufficient to drive heavy power looms the Ericht mills concentrated on spinning thread. Machine weaving was carried out in the large Dundee mills which were powered by steam engines.

Jute

Not enough flax was grown in Scotland to satisfy the demand from the Scottish spinning mills and most fibre was imported, much of it from Russia where production costs were low. Competition arose, however, when the East India Company started to import a somewhat similar but rather cheaper fibre – jute from India. It was not until 1832 that the problem of spinning this more brittle fibre on conventional spinning machines had been

overcome (by softening it first in whale oil). From then on most of the Blairgowrie and Dundee linen mills progressively switched over to spinning the new material. The linen industry in north east Scotland had traditionally produced coarse linen cloth and adapted easily to the production of coarse jute fabrics.

The jute industry began to decline at the start of the 20th Century, mainly due to competition from mills in India where labour costs were much lower. The Ericht mills became progressively uneconomic and started to close. Despite minor booms during the two world wars and experiments such as spinning artificial fibres, the last working mills on the Ericht were forced to shut down in 1979.

The workers

Between the years 1801 and 1881 the combined population of Blairgowrie rose from less than a thousand to over seven thousand. This was directly attributable to the growth of the spinning industry which, at its peak, employed about two and a half thousand people. Unskilled workers came from many different places including Ireland (escaping the famine), Highland Scotland (victims of the clearances), and from the slums of Glasgow and Dundee. Skilled workers were highly prized; many of these had travelled widely between different textile manufacturing centres in Britain and on the continent.

Working conditions were harsh by today's standards, especially in the early 19th Century. The working week consisted of six days from 5.30 am to 7 pm with an hour off for breakfast and another for lunch. The factory floors could be cluttered and hot with dust and oil fumes which led to the spread of respiratory diseases such as bronchitis. The machinery was also very noisy and many workers went deaf.. Quite young children were employed, working similar hours to their parents. Conditions improved slowly over the years but even during the first world war the working week was still five and a half ten-hour days, starting at 6 am. By this time, however, laws had been passed requiring children to spend a certain portion of their week attending school.

Many of the workers lived in houses and hostels belonging to, and sited close to the mills. A few of these still remain.