

The Waulkmill, Blackford

The Waulkmill lay just over a kilometre to the South West of Blackford. It was a complex comprising a mill building, a dyer's shed and a large building containing the miller's residence, offices and workrooms. Artisans brought cloth and yarns from the cottage industry of spinning and weaving from a wide area to the mill for finishing.

Three farms to the west of Blackford include "panholes" in their names : e.g. Mains of Panholes. Panholes were pits in the ground, filled with water for soaking the flax to obtain the linen fibres and could also be used for obtaining the fibre from hemp. Wool came from the farms on the Ochils. These were small and farmers were unlikely to afford to buy the improved breeds. The hairy wool was brittle and was combined with the linen for the linings of jackets. There is a 18C plaid jacket in the National Museum of Scotland which has such a lining.



These combs photographed in Romania in 2009, are similar to those used to prepare the fleece and flax for spinning.

Weaving wool and linen was common throughout Scotland, but in the Middle Ages the quality of the fibres available was generally poor and quite a lot of fibre, yarn and cloth was imported. King James VI was concerned about this and took measures to encourage the improved production of Scottish fibres. He arranged for Flemish workers to come to Scotland and share their skills with workers in the textile trade, hence the presence of so many people called "Fleming". He also passed the 1686 "Act for Burying in Scots Linen" to say that Church Ministers should ensure that people were buried in shrouds made from Scottish linen. The cloth at this time would have been made from imported flax.¹



Drop spindles in a market in Romania in 2009.

Wool was spun on a drop spindle which was a stick with a whorl of wood or stone fitted to one end. Some of the whorls were decorative and were given as love tokens. When a spinner (spinster) completed a spindle, she would remove the whorl and attach it to a new stick. The big houses had large spinning wheels which took up a great deal of space. The traditional spinning wheel is relatively modern. Some yarn would be made into skeins which were known as “hesps”. The weaver’s servant would collect the wool. A vast amount of wool would be needed to complete a length of cloth on one loom. Wool was traded in the markets. The fleece usually arrived “in the grease” and Thomas Gilfillan found that one lot of yarn weighed 21lb “in the grease” but was 17lb 1oz when scoured and dyed.²

Following the Battle of Culloden, Highland dress was adopted by the Scottish regiments of the government army. Highlanders were banned from wearing tartan. It was permitted in the Lowlands and by 1820, Wilsons of Bannockburn had an agent in New York where it was fashionable.³ Paton’s Mill in Tillicoultry, now adapted as flats, was trading successfully. The new mills had spinning machines and were able to buy fleece, so the demand for spindles and hesps ceased.

On 31st July 1830, Thomas Menzies of Blackford wrote the following to Wilson’s Wool usually means yarn, but in this case may have been fleece.

Dear Sir

I was informed by my neighbour Malcolm Finlayson that your servant was to be weighing our wool next week if he be at not me on or before Thursday I cannot wait upon him as I have to be at Stirling on Friday and goes from that to the south for two weeks so that I will have very little time next week after that at Glendevon Market being on Thursday week so that if he comes not before or on Thursday morning next to me you must refer it for a fortnight

Your most Obt. Ser. Etc.

Thomas Menzies



Collection: Richard Beith

The letter was posted in Auchterarder as there was no Post Office in Blackford before 1845. The roads around Blackford were very poor and the post went to Stirling from Auchterarder via Bridge of Ardoch (now Braco).⁴ Envelopes were not used at this time; the letter was folded with the writing inside and then addressed. On the photograph of the letter above, the writing on the reverse of the sheet of paper is just visible.⁵

There was a dyer's shed next to the Waulkmill. It is commonly thought that tartans were dyed using plants and lichens collected in the wild. This myth is not without foundation as some plant material could be used. Lichens require ammonia as a mordant to fix the colour. This was produced by leaving urine to stand for as long as six months. Urine was also used to make gunpowder and in the 18th Century when two armies were fighting in the Ochils it would be a precious commodity.

The availability of cochineal from the New World created a fashion among the Highland aristocracy for scarlet plaids; chiefs of every clan decked themselves in vast quantities of crimson which looked magnificent with their white wigs. The imported dyestuffs were extremely expensive. Paintings of many of the lairds are in the National Portrait Gallery of Scotland showing that their bright plaids proclaimed their wealth and power. They were often clad in so many yards of plaid that they were unlikely to be able to move.⁶

Once weavers could obtain the dyes from the New World, they were prepared to go some distance for them. The carpet weavers in Barnard Castle in County Durham bought their dyes from a merchant in Kendal which shows the extent that weavers were prepared to go to obtain these new colours. The merchant had the cost of carriage from a port.⁷

Wilson's of Bannockburn obtained dyes from a Glasgow merchant who used the Forth-Clyde Canal.⁸ In the period from 1764 to 1770, Thomas Gilfillan, a Stirling carpet weaver, obtained some dyes from Thomas Johnston of Glasgow and had a madder delivered to Alloa Docks and to Bo'ness by paqueboat. The quantities of dyestuffs needed amounted to several hundredweight, but Gilfillan records selling some of his alum, fustick and logwood.⁹ It may have been possible for the owners of the Waulkmill in Blackford to buy some dyestuffs from Stirling Market.

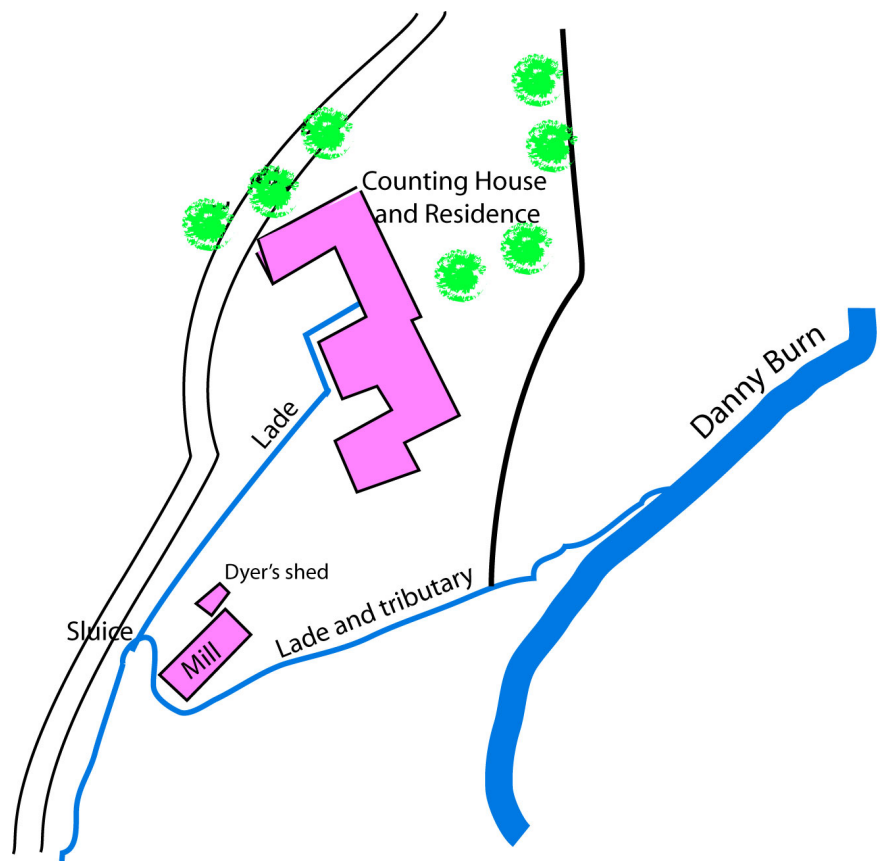
When cloth has been woven it may need to be worked to draw the threads closer to keep out the wind and the rain as far as was possible. Before the invention of the waulkmill, this was done by walking on the wet cloth to give the amount of shrinkage needed. The waulkmill, or fulling mill, replicated the walking movement.



The “feet” of the waulkmill at Helmsore Mill in Yorkshire.

The mill building and dye house which lay along side a tributary of the Danny Burn was demolished in the 19th century, some time after the 1866 ordnance survey map, which names it ‘Wauk Mill’, was published.¹⁰ According to the 1841 census, there were two women of independent means living in the house: Ann McLauren aged 35 and Janet McLauren aged 30.

Later, house was occupied by farm workers, the last of these being a family called Stewart who moved out sometime around 1960 when the building was demolished*.



Fortunately, a brief description of the mill in 1739, when John Davidson was the miller is recorded in a collection of the family memories of Kathleen Steuart:

Every week, a hundred workers passed through the front garden from the mill, with its fifteen windows in a row, and were paid at the open window of the counting house, a large room on the ground floor. Upstairs, an apartment of corresponding size served as a parlour for the family. On both flats were a number of other good rooms.

The Ordnance Survey map of 1866 shows the property as Wauk Mill. It is clear that the mill building is just over 60 ft long, which would be large enough to require 15 windows. There were waulkmills in Perthshire from early in the 15th century. From 1732 there were many of these on both sides of the Ochils built by James Steuart of Lawhead, a house and workshop where Bridge of Allan Station now stands. If the Blackford Waulkmill had been built by James, Kathleen would have been aware of this. It seems likely that the mill was built before 1732.¹¹

According to local people, linen was brought here to be finished and laid out on the hillside to bleach. Bleach was not available until the 19th Century and linen was washed and dried in the sun several times. The fine white linen which was used for gentlemen's cravats could be washed and dried for as much as nine months to get it white. The large mill building could have housed other machines for finishing the linen. Callendering machines were large rollers covered with a heavy wet paper on which the finished linen was laid. It was then smoothed with a piece of heated glass. Paper for this was made in Airthrey Mill and the glass was available from various producers in Fife or from Alloa. The Waulkmill had Blanket Fairs when local people could bring their blankets to be washed. The blankets were hung on lines.¹¹

About 70 years ago, a local farmer sent his son to work on the land at Buttergask. He came across a young Dutchman who was camping there. The young man had walked across the Ochils from Tillicoultry to the Waulkmill to trace the path taken by weavers to have their textiles treated.* Today we think of Tillicoultry as being 20 miles away by road, but the Heritage path is less than 8 miles from the mill. The route taken by the weaver's agent was probably longer, but it was possible to do it in relays via the cottages. The footprint of some of the cottages can be seen today.*

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- Contributions from members of Blackford Historical Society are marked with an asterisk.

The author is happy to receive any information regarding errors and omissions.