

Towards an Oral History of the Stanley Mills, Luncarty Bleachworks and Ordie Shuttle Mill, Perthshire

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This paper focuses on the textile industry in Perthshire from the 1730s to the 1990s, in particular Stanley Mills (1786–1989), Luncarty Bleachworks (c.1730–1998) and the Ordie Shuttle Mill (1844–1953). Though the history of the industry has been widely researched and documented via the *Statistical Accounts of Scotland*, estate papers, company records and other manuscripts, few publications have given voice to people who worked in these industries. Since the closure of the industries, there has been an increased interest in local history among residents of the area, resulting in the formation of the West Stormont Historical Society. Members include former workers who agreed to be recorded while sharing their work experiences and expertise in textile operations and bleaching. This paper uses the ‘interplay of the written word and the spoken word’ to illuminate aspects of the industry and the community, giving a more balanced view of the history.

In the eighteenth century the manufacture of linen became one of Scotland’s most important industries, with thousands of hand-loom weavers working from their homes to supply world markets.¹ As newly woven linen is a light brownish colour, to meet popular demand the cloth was bleached by laying it out in sunlight. By the early 1700s there were bleachfields in the villages of Luncarty, Huntingtower, Pitcairngreen, Stormontfield and Tulloch, all within ten miles of Perth.

The introduction of power looms revolutionised the industry, particularly in Perthshire where the fast-flowing River Tay had potential to power waterwheels to drive machinery. Situated on the northern bank of a bend in the river, Stanley was the ideal site to build a mill, which opened in 1786 and employed a large workforce.² Under the direction of Lancashire inventor and entrepreneur Richard Arkwright, the Stanley Mills were fitted with machinery for carding, spinning and weaving, and workers were trained for every stage of production, from the raw material to the woven fabric.³ For the final stage – bleaching – carters were hired to transport cloth to a nearby bleachfield.

¹ In the mid-1800s an estimated 100,000 people worked as flax-spinners and hand-loom weavers: M. Lynch, *Scotland: A New History* (London, 1990), 381.

² Numbers fluctuated over the years so in 1933, for example, there were 885 employees: A. Cooke, *Stanley: From Arkwright Village to Commuter Suburb, 1784–2015* (2nd edn, 2015), 136.

³ A. J. Cooke, ‘Richard Arkwright and the Scottish Cotton Industry’, *Textile History*, 10:1 (1979), 196–202.

The planning of the Stanley Mills included provision of housing for the workers, with churches as well as schools, a community library, social activities such as a Singing Club, an Instrumental Band, a curling club and other 'rational praiseworthy amusements'.⁴ The mill operated for over two hundred years, with a workforce drawn to Stanley by the promise of a regular wage and better social conditions than they had known elsewhere.⁵

In the 1950s, Scottish universities set up Extra-Mural Studies departments with outreach to rural communities and educational opportunities to participants from all walks of life. According to one of the first tutors, Eric R. Cregeen:

Extra-Mural classes stand or fall purely by their cultural values ... It is learning for its own sake, for the pleasure it brings, for the sanity and balance it can give to life. These are healthy things and help to safeguard civilised values ... Whenever an extra-mural class exists it stands for the triumph of curiosity over passivity, of constructiveness over mental sloth.⁶

The idea was welcomed in Stanley and from 1975 to 1977, Dundee University Extra-Mural Studies lecturer Anthony Cooke ran evening classes for adults interested in local history. The group learned how to research the history of the village and the textile industry through the *Statistical Accounts of Scotland* and other books and manuscripts in the Perth and Kinross libraries and archives. Members of the class wrote essays which contributed to a booklet edited by their tutor, who also wrote an introduction, *Stanley: Its History and Development*, published in 1977 by Dundee University Extra-Mural Studies Department.

People from surrounding villages who relied on a bus for transport were unable to attend evening classes.⁷ And so, by popular demand, from 1979 to 1983, Dundee University Extra-Mural Studies Department offered a series of classes in Luncarty, with Anthony Cooke as tutor. The group of twenty shared an interest in the history of Luncarty as many had family connections to the village and the bleachworks, which was in full operation at the time. The class researched recommended sources to learn that Luncarty owes its growth to William Sandeman, a linen manufacturer, who cleared and levelled farmland in the 1730s to create a bleachfield. By 1752 it had expanded to one of the largest in Britain, with planned housing accommodating over three hundred workers and their families.⁸ The *Statistical Accounts* of 1845 reported that over two million yards were bleached annually by workers, 'all of whom are resident

⁴ Cooke, *Stanley*, 133; *Perthshire Courier*, 28 January 1836.

⁵ Former millworker Nell Hannah experienced the poverty and social conditions in rural Aberdeenshire: M. Bennett and D. Rougvie, *Nell Hannah: Aye Singin an Spinnin Yarns* (Ochertyre, 2013), 44–6.

⁶ E. R. Cregeen, 'Extra-Mural Venture', *MacTalla, Argyll Education Committee Teachers' Magazine* (1954), 8.

⁷ Nell Hannah in Bennett and Rougvie, *Nell Hannah*, 61.

⁸ Sir John Sinclair, *Statistical Account of 1791–99* (hereafter OSA), XV, Parish of Redgorton (County of Perth, Presbytery of Perth, Synod of Perth and Stirling) (1795), 531; John R. Hume, *The Industrial Archaeology of Scotland*, II: *The Highlands and Islands* (London, 1977), 280.

on the company's grounds, and the greater part of whom have been born and brought up on the place'.⁹

Classes ran for three years and members selected special interest topics which they researched and documented for a booklet about their community, *A History of Redgorton Parish*.¹⁰ The annotated essays were introduced and edited by Anthony Cooke, with photographs from family collections and a short Appendix consisting of an essay by George Miller, who was born in 1900 and had worked in the bleachworks.

The enthusiasm generated by the extramural classes gave momentum to further research, and later to the formation of the West Stormont Historical Society (covering the villages of Stanley, Bankfoot, Luncarty, Murthly and Pitcairngreen). Since the Stanley Mills shut down in 1989 and Luncarty Bleachworks in 1996 there has been a growing interest in the history of the industries that were once at the heart of their communities.

With the closure of the Stanley Mills in 1989 the village changed forever as the factory lay silent and the lades became choked with weeds. There was cause for celebration, however, when the buildings, machinery and lades were restored by Historic Environment Scotland (hereafter HES) to create a world-class museum of living history, featuring all aspects of the industry.¹¹ During the restoration, HES recognised the value of engaging with former millworkers and in 2005 commissioned an oral history project to audio-record them.¹²

Although the textile industry is well documented in print, yet questions arise which can only be answered by those who worked in the industry. As Glasgow University's former Extra-Mural Studies tutor Eric R. Cregeen pointed out, government statistics, company records and estate papers do not record the day-to-day experiences of workers or their families.¹³ He drew an example from one of his own lectures in Argyllshire, the history of droving, when his main reference was A. R. B. Haldane's *The Drove Roads of Scotland* (London, 1952). Attending the class in 1956 was 'a frail old man of ninety, the last of the Highland drovers', who gave 'the finest and fullest account of the life and work of a drover that has ever been made'.¹⁴

⁹ *New Statistical Account of Scotland*, X, Redgorton, County of Perth (1845), 188.

¹⁰ A. Cooke, *A History of Redgorton Parish* (Dundee, 1984).

¹¹ <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/stanley-mills/>. The visitors' guidebook was written by historian Anthony Cooke.

¹² Conducted by Loughborough University student Emma Robertson, the recordings and transcriptions are held at Longmore House, Edinburgh. For further information contact interpretation@hes.scot. Current exhibitions make use of audio recordings as visitors can listen to the voices of millworkers. Fiona Davidson discusses the importance of these recordings in 'The Fabric of Life', *Historic Scotland* (Spring 2023), 42–7.

¹³ E. R. Cregeen, 'Adult Education in the County of Argyll', *Scottish Adult Education*, 30 (1960), 14–21.

¹⁴ Cregeen deposited a copy of the recording in the School of Scottish Studies Archive (SA1958/194). He combines the oral history transcription with written records in

Social and economic historian Anthony Cooke also draws on oral history in the second (revised) edition of his book on Stanley Mills (2015). In quoting former employees recorded during the 2005 HES oral history project, Cooke gives voice to people who worked in the Stanley Mills, such as Kate Gairns who described ‘the shuttles going backwards and forwards ... clatter, clatter ... Oh it was a terrible noise.’ Former engineer John Robertson attributed his deafness to the incessant din, recalling ‘there was no health and safety at work, we never wore earmuffs ... There was no facemasks, everyone was breathing in the dust – you just got on with it.’ He recalled the perpetual fire hazard of cotton dust ignited by sparks from machines, the dangers of cleaning out tar tanks, carrying dripping buckets amid fumes of white spirit used for cleaning inside the tanks. ‘Again, no facemasks or nothing ...’ he said, remembering Nat, a Ukrainian worker who had been overcome by fumes.

We’d been cleaning the walls and he started staggering about and I panicked and went back up the ladder and gave some of the boys a shout ... we took him up and sat him in the fresh air for a couple of hours.

Then there was the worker who was hit by the steel tip of a shuttle flying off the loom,

I can remember one coming out and hitting him on the side of the head while he was changing the bobbin on another loom yards away and he was knocked unconscious and taken off by ambulance.¹⁵

In his use of ‘interplay of the written word and the spoken word’, Cooke not only included detail that cannot be found in manuscripts but also added a vitality to the history.¹⁶

In 2010 former employees were invited to the official opening of Stanley Mills Museum. Among them was eighty-year-old ‘mill lassie’ Nell Hannah, who shared her memories at a get-together with friends and agreed to be recorded.

They wanted to have the ones who’d been there in the 1940s ... Oh my, have I got to curtsy? If I get doon I winna get up again! When he arrived at the mill wi John Swinney, Prince Charles was in the kilt, Hunting Stewart tartan, an he was wearing the most beautiful, blue wool socks. ... It was such a special day! I wonder what my mother would have thought, her daughter meeting royalty? It’s over seventy years since my mother an my sister Margaret an I came to Stanley ... From the age of thirteen and a half I [had been in Turriff] at the mercy of some old women that today would be charged with child abuse ... working in the mill was like a new lease of life for me because you were free.¹⁷

‘Recollections of an Argyllshire Drover with Historical Notes on the West Highland Cattle Trade’, *Scottish Studies*, 3:2 (1959), 143–63.

¹⁵ Cooke, *Stanley*, 179.

¹⁶ R. Samuel discusses this technique in ‘Headington Quarry: Recording a Labouring Community’, *Oral History* 1:4 (1972), 107–22, 107.

¹⁷ Nell’s memories of her life in Stanley are recounted through verbatim transcriptions of recordings in Bennett and Rougvie, *Nell Hannah*, 60–69.

Visitors to the Stanley Mills can listen to the voices of former millworkers as they are part of the multimedia exhibitions on each floor. Further oral history sessions have been organised by HES Education Officer Fiona Davidson, whose recent article in Historic Scotland's magazine discusses the use of audio recordings in education as well as in exhibitions.¹⁸

Today there is nothing left of the row of brick buildings once containing machinery for every stage of the bleaching industry, or of the two brick chimneys that dominated the village skyline.¹⁹ All have been demolished, yet among the members of the West Stormont Historical Society, the history of Luncarty is well known, thanks to earlier research with Anthony Cooke and the resulting publication.²⁰ There are no personal memories, however, apart from the appendix by 84-year-old George Miller, whose great-grandfather conveyed cloth from Dunfermline to Luncarty by horse and cart. His short essay adds information not found in any of 'official histories' or manuscripts. He attended Redgorton School and on leaving school in 1914 began an apprenticeship in Luncarty Bleachworks. He recalled the declaration of the First World War, and the Scottish Horse and Black Watch Regiments in the village square. George earned five shillings per week, worked from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. with breakfast from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. and dinner from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m. The beetling mills operated twenty-four hours a day and workers lived in company houses, though were evicted if they quit. Water was from the village pumps, 'the sanitation was terrible ... just pails and twice a week a cart came round and emptied them ... in a field overrun by rats'.²¹

Mr Miller had been well known in the village and continued to be remembered by fellow members of the history classes, including John Mackay, an industrial chemist who moved to Luncarty in 1954.²² Former General Manager of the bleachworks, in retirement Mackay studied for an honours degree in history at Stirling University and later published a book about the industry, *The Bleachfields of Perth: A Short History of the Bleaching Industry around Perth, 1735–1998* (Perth, 2008). As he enjoyed meeting up with long-time friends and fellow workers, he continued to attend the West Stormont Historical Society (hereafter WSHS).

In 2013, at an event in the 'Local Studies' section of the A. K. Bell library in Perth, I had the good fortune of meeting Mr Mackay and other members of the WSHS. I asked if the group had recorded the likes of George Miller during their years of research. It was not an approach they had previously taken, but as I had just begun a community oral history project to record former industrial

¹⁸ Davidson, 'Fabric of Life', 42–7.

¹⁹ For map location and J. Hume's photographs of the buildings and machinery, see <http://canmore.org.uk/site/26797>.

²⁰ Cooke, *History of Redgorton*.

²¹ Ibid., 58–9.

²² Mackay trained with Scotland's biggest firm in the bleaching, finishing, dyeing and printing industry, United Turkey Red Co. Ltd, Alexandria, Dunbartonshire: J. Mackay, *Bleachfields, Printfields and Turkey Red: A Short History of the Bleaching, Dyeing and Calico Printing Industry in the Vale of Leven 1715–1960* (Renton, 2012).

workers in Perthshire and East Fife, they invited me to ‘do a talk’ for their Society.²³ Preparation for the session relied on Mackay’s book (2008) which is a well-informed history of chemical bleaching, with technical descriptions of the processes involved, photographs of machinery and a few snapshots of fellow workers, including one of the memorial plaque ‘being unveiled by the author’. Standing beside him is the Provost with representatives of the firm that bought the site on which they built houses.²⁴

The ‘talk’ took place on 12 May 2014, and on my arrival the chairs in the church hall had been set out in a circle. The Chairperson welcomed everyone, adding that most of the group had grown up in or near Luncarty and had connections to the bleachworks. I explained I was interested in learning more about their work in the bleachworks and asked permission to audio-record the session. All consented, so I placed a multidirectional digital microphone in the centre, switched it on, and returned to my seat, directing the first question towards retired engineer Michael Farquhar.²⁵

MB: Michael, have you lived in Luncarty for long?

Michael Farquhar: I’ve lived in Luncarty all my life – so far. I was born here, and my father was born in Luncarty ... We grew up with the bleachworks. My father was an engineer and my grandfather and my great-grandfather before that. So, I’m the fourth generation of Farquhars to work in the bleachworks. The first one started in 1881 and the last one finished in 1996, when it closed ... There’s quite a few families served long-term – Jean [Dickson] there, her family were the same. I remember being in the workshop when I was seven, because I hurt my hand. I caught my finger in a vice, but I never did it again – a good way to learn, well, after the pain was away. I served an apprenticeship at the works, starting in 1956 when I left school. I was seventeen and the apprenticeship was for five years.

I remember my very first day ... aye, it was good, I worked for Jean’s dad. He was my journeyman and I can remember the first job he gave me to do: Tightening joints on a steam pipe that we were putting up. Never done it in my life before, but that was it!

Jean Dickson: My father was an engineer at the bleachworks – he worked with Mike and his father and his grandfather. In fact, both my parents worked there – my

²³ Titled ‘The End of the Shift’, the project recorded over seventy former workers who experienced the shutdown of one of Scotland’s industries, such as coal mining, brickmaking, the textile industry and precision engineering. Recordings and transcriptions are archived in the Perth and Kinross Archives (hereafter P&K Archives) and Kirkcaldy Archives, with a selection of photographs, soundbites and transcriptions on the website of Grace Notes Scotland (the Scottish charity dedicated to ‘Handing on Tradition’): <https://www.gracenotesotland.org/index.php/oral-history-folklore/industrial-heritage>.

²⁴ Mackay, *Bleachfields of Perth*, 31.

²⁵ Recordings and verbatim transcriptions can be accessed via P&K Archives, ACC21/12, M. Bennett Collection, 12 May 2014. As the transcription is over 7,500 words long, a short extract is included here. For the sake of brevity most of my questions (prefaced by MB) have been omitted.

mother was at the sewing machines, though she wasn't working when I was a child ... Both my grandfathers and my great-grandfather worked at the bleachworks. My grandfather was David Patton – he was foreman damper; that's one of the ones that put the cloth out on the fields to bleach. His brother William was Betty's grandfather, so we have the same great-grandfather and he was the store-man at the bleachworks ... My grandmother was one of the beetlers and her sister worked there too – a lot of them went deaf because of the noise. I could show you a photo of them, sitting with all the beetlers wi their white pinnies.

Michael: We had to wear overalls, but you supplied your own. The cloth-workers got overalls supplied, but the engineers had to buy their own. In those days there was no protection, protective wear, for your hands or your eyes or your head. And right from the start they expected you to work – you weren't in there just to make up the numbers! We began work at half-past seven and worked until five o'clock. It was an eight-hour day, so we had an hour off at dinner and a break in the morning and a break in the afternoon. The day didn't seem that long – not when you're eighteen.

MB: Were there any jobs that you specially liked?

Michael: No, I liked them all actually. Some jobs, like the ones where you come close to chemicals, you just had to be wary of what you were doing. But there were none that I didn't like, just some that needed extra care. No day was ever like another because it was maintenance work we were doing – on machines, so it all depends what required sorting ... whatever was needed to maintain the machinery ... Well, the machines were peculiar to the bleachfield ... Generally, the cloth came in in a grey woven state and it was then singed to take the hair off the cloth. It went through a gas flame. Well, the original one was a petrol flame that we had. And it was passed over the flame – took the hair off it. Fire was always a problem ... And then it was bleached ... basically boiled in soda, wasn't it, John?

John Mackay: Limed.

Michael: Aye, limed and then bleached in soda in a big keir under pressure and then dried.

MB: What's a 'keir'?

Michael: [It's a] big tank with a closed lid ... then after it was bleached it would go away to the finishing – it went through a scutcher ... then to the blueing shed ...

John Mackay: Cotton isn't pure white. It's slightly yellowish, so it went through a blueing agent.

Michael: I was on the engineering side; it wasn't anything to do with production, apart from keeping the machines going ...

Ann Farquhar: Well, I started in the hemming room and I was there for maybe six months and then John [Mackay] came and asked if I would like a job in the lab. So I went there, never having done anything like it in my life. The finished cloth had to be tested for its durability, colour fastness, shrinkage, abrasion, tearing, tensile. We got training [in the lab] so you name it, we did it.

The discussion continued with explanations about processes such as singeing, blueing, scutching and beetling, and other aspects of the industry.²⁶ The conversation ranged across several topics (including working at the berries and 'lifin tatties') with reminiscences of 'back then' sparking off further information. As Jean Dickson had already mentioned that she and Betty Robertson were related to each other, I asked if they'd like to tell us a bit more.

Jean: We were both 'Patton' before we married. Our grandfathers were brothers, so my father and Betty's father were cousins. Betty's father worked in the shuttle mill.

MB: Where?

Betty Robertson: The Ordie Mill. That was the ones that made the shuttles. My Granddad worked there and my Dad as well and my brother worked there. But that closed way back, I think it was Fifty-something it closed. It made shuttles for the mills in Dundee.

Jean: Our local historical society did a wee booklet about it.

The WSHS meeting (and the recording) ended with the group's 'customary tea and conversation', and an opportunity to plan a return visit to record Jean and Betty. Thanks to Ros Pearson, who offered to host an afternoon visit, the date was set and Jean and Betty looked forward to a day out. They would bring photo albums, memorabilia and a copy of the research about the shuttle mill.²⁷

The history of the flying shuttle dates to 1733, when Lancashire inventor John Kay patented his 'wheeled shuttle' which allowed hand-loom weavers to work on wide looms without assistance. By the late 1700s they were widely used by hand-loom weavers, transforming the cottage industry as well as manufacturing businesses all over the world. According to the *Statistical Accounts* of 1791, 'The *fly shuttle* is commonly used, and allowed to be a great improvement.'²⁸

The Ordie Shuttle Mill on the outskirts of Luncarty was founded in 1844 by John Menzies of Logiealmond. It was situated on the site of a former mill by the banks of the Ordie Burn, a tributary of the River Tay. There is no mention of it in the second *Statistical Account* (1845), as the Rev. Liston submitted his report in 1837, six years before John Menzies set up the mill. It is, however, featured in the second of two handwritten notebooks in Betty Robertson's family collection which she shared with the WSHS. They were written between 1884 and 1932 by Thomas Wylie, who was born in 1846 and farmed near Logiealmond (about six miles from Luncarty). Looking back on when he was 'just a laddie' he remembered William Nairn, 'a man of great business ability', and John Menzies, 'the shuttle maker', as two 'notable men' from his village:

²⁶ Recording, transcriptions and digital copies of photos, P&K Archives, ACC21/12, 19 March 2015.

²⁷ The WSHS research was written by Rae Imrie and printed in the 2006 Newsletter, mimeographed and distributed to group members.

²⁸ *OSA*, Kilsyth, Stirling, 18 (Edinburgh, 1796), 310.

Perhaps the best known was John Menzies, the shuttle maker. He had a wonderful gift for handicraft and mechanical invention. He was bred a wheelwright ... However, Menzies had a more valuable gift than even his deftness of hand. In his own trade he was supreme. He was the inventor of the side-tipped shuttle, which has for long been the standard power loom all over the world. I have been told that previously the shuttle used to fly out of the loom often causing serious injury to the weaver ... he moved to Ordie Mill on the Ordie just where the Dunkeld road and the railway crosses, and established a shuttle factory. I have been told that he, ultimately, produced a machine by which a beech block sawn to the proper size could be fed in at one end and a perfect shuttle would come out at the other. He has been dead for many years, perhaps fifty or more, but a few months ago I read an article in the 'Dundee Courier' about this shuttle factory at Ordie Mill. It stated amongst other things that the bulk of their output went to India to supply shuttles for the jute and cotton looms of Bombay and Calcutta.²⁹

By the mid-1800s, there was a vast demand for shuttles not only for the mills in Stanley and Dundee but also overseas. An advertisement for the Ordie Shuttle Mill printed in the Scottish Post Office Directory (1868) contains information about John Menzies which (to date) I have not been able to locate elsewhere.³⁰ After his apprenticeship with a shuttle-maker in Logiealmond, he later became the senior partner in Logiealmond Shuttle Mill along with William Nairn. The firm was one of several set up in Perthshire, Angus and Fife to meet the increased demand for fly shuttles in power loom mills.³¹

In textile mills all over Britain, profits soared, thanks to the efficiency of these new inventions. Mill owners employed thousands of workers but, apart from the men who supervised operations and those who carried out maintenance, women and girls formed most of the workforce. Photographs taken inside textile mills testify to the close proximity of the looms, with row upon row of women and girls operating power looms. While the fly shuttle and power loom increased production and profit in all the mills, there was one huge disadvantage to Kay's

²⁹ Thomas Wylie, 'Recollections and Traditions Chiefly of Logiealmond, written between 1884 and 1932', two unpublished notebooks. From a typescript transcription of notebook 2, produced by the WSHS, 40–2.

³⁰ Scottish Post Office Directories: Scotland, 1868, 1878 – Slater's (late Pigot & Co.'s) Royal National Commercial Directory and Topography of Scotland (1878), Part 2.

³¹ A. G. Highland, 'Gateside Mills: The Scottish Bobbin and Shuttle Trade in its British and International Setting, 1860–1960' (PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 1989), <http://hdl.handle.net/10023/2689>. Although the focus is a mill in Fife, founded by one David McGregor (born 1840), Highland extracts a handwritten letter from the archive of the firm that refers to Menzies, the master shuttle-maker: 'The letter (written 24 December 1935) traces the [McGregor's] apprenticeship with a shuttle-making firm, Menzies of Ordie Mill at Stanley in Perthshire' (p. 32). Note that the location is inaccurate: a sense of place is important to sense of identity and as far as the Luncarty shuttle-makers were concerned they did not work in Perth or Stanley.

design, with its central metal tip: if the tension of the thread did not remain constant, or if too much thread unexpectedly unravelled, the shuttle could fly out of the machine. In the setting of the cottage industry, the weaver would stop work, make necessary adjustments and replace the shuttle but, apart from the annoyance of interruption, was in no danger of harm. In the mill, however, a shuttle flying out with such speed and force would hit the weaver working on the adjacent loom, inflicting horrific injuries such as the loss of an eye, permanent facial disfigurement, or even death. The newspaper reports of the time make grim reading.³²

In constant danger, undoubtedly many of the mill lassies lived and worked in fear of being the next victim. Yet it was to take many years before factory owners were called to task over health and safety issues, and even in the late twentieth century millworkers had little or no protection from danger.³³

The matter was of concern though to Logiealmond shuttle-maker John Menzies and mill owner William Nairn. They solved the problem by improving the design of the bobbin to make it more secure and by creating a side-tipped shuttle with a flat metal end which, if suddenly released, would stop as it hit the end of the machine.

Menzies perfected the design and built the Ordie Shuttle Mill close to Luncarty. His advertisement carried a drawing of the new design and a brief sales pitch for mill owners (Plate 1).³⁴ The shuttles they made at the Ordie Mill were originally carted to Stanley and Perth, and later transported via the railway. The Luncarty railway station opened in 1848, the same year as the stations in Stanley and in Perth, and in 1857 a station opened at Strathord.³⁵ There was a big market in Dundee, where managers of jute and cotton mills saw a vast improvement in the safety standards for power loom weavers. In recognition of Menzies' contribution to the textile industry, on his retirement in 1878 they

³² L. Leneman, 'Lives and Limbs: Company Records as a Source for the History of Industrial Injuries', *The Society for the Social History of Medicine*, 6 (1993), 405–27. In her PhD thesis Emma M. Wainwright notes that 'The jute industry was known as one of the most dangerous of the textile trades.' She discusses the findings of the *Royal Commission on Labour, The employment of women, conditions of work in various industries in England, Wales and Scotland* (London, 1893), which reports 'recorded accidents in a number of Dundee works between November 1891 to July 1892 ... [The] inquiry showed that accidents caused by the operation of machinery were common': E. M. Wainwright, 'Gender, Space and Power: Discourses on Working Women in Dundee's Jute Industry, c.1870–1930' (PhD thesis, University of St Andrews, 2002), <http://hdl.handle.net/10023/12450>.

³³ In 2005 Emma Robertson of Loughborough University recorded John Robertson whose fellow worker in the Stanley Mill was 'knocked unconscious' when hit on the head by a steel-tipped shuttle: HES Archive, quoted by Cooke, *Stanley*, 179.

³⁴ Menzies advertises his location as Redgorton, near Perth, using the name of the parish which includes Luncarty. Local folk talk of the Ordie Mill in Luncarty.

³⁵ Strathord Station was closed down in 1931, Luncarty Railway Station in 1951 and Stanley Junction in 1956.

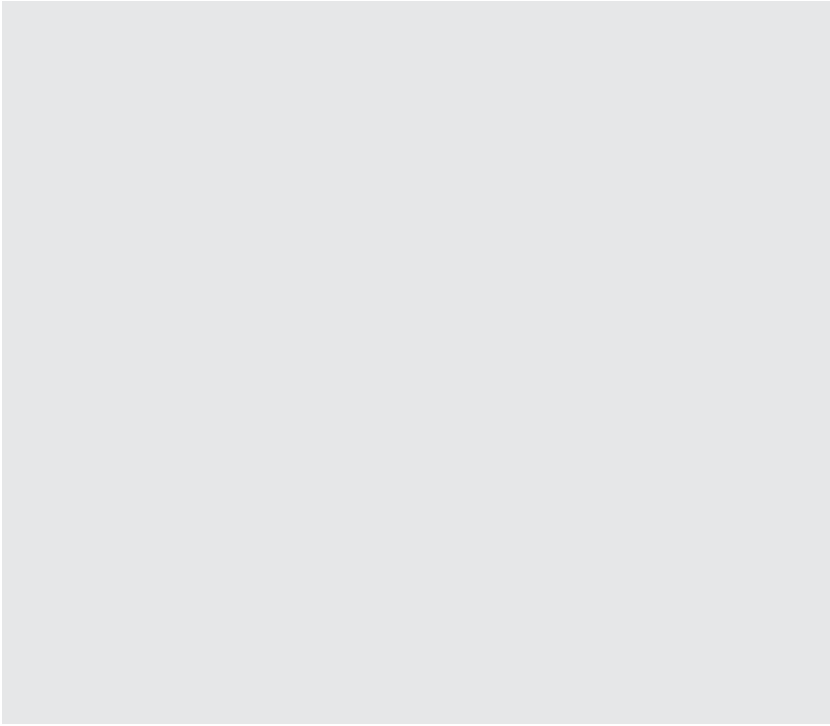


Plate 1 Advertisement for the Ordie Shuttle Mill printed in the Scottish Post Office Directory (1868).

presented him with a silver trophy, which is now in the National Museum of Scotland.³⁶ It is inscribed as follows:

Presented with a purse of sovereigns to Mr John Menzies, Shuttle Maker, Ordie Mill, Perthshire, by a number of manufacturers and factory managers, to commemorate the various improvements he has made on shuttles, particularly the introduction of the side-tipped shuttle, which has made power loom weaving a safe calling to those employed therein. Dundee, November 1878.

In 2014, while showing a photograph from her family album, Betty Robertson said ‘This is a photo o the Ordie Mill at the far end o Luncarty – that’s the

³⁶ The silver shuttle is in the National Museum of Scotland (on display, Level 3), Museum reference: H.MEQ 1104. WSHS member Rae Imrie notes that ‘Provost Robertson of Dundee made the presentations to Mr Menzies, described as a modest, hard-working man, ripe in experience and rich in ideas, with whom the Provost, with much satisfaction, had transacted business for a period of thirty years’ (no source given).

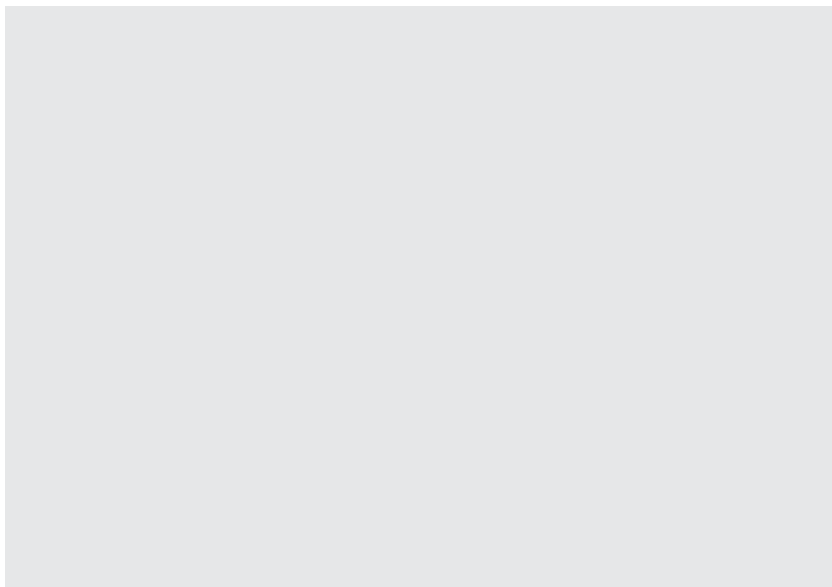


Plate 2 Ordie Mill, established in 1844.

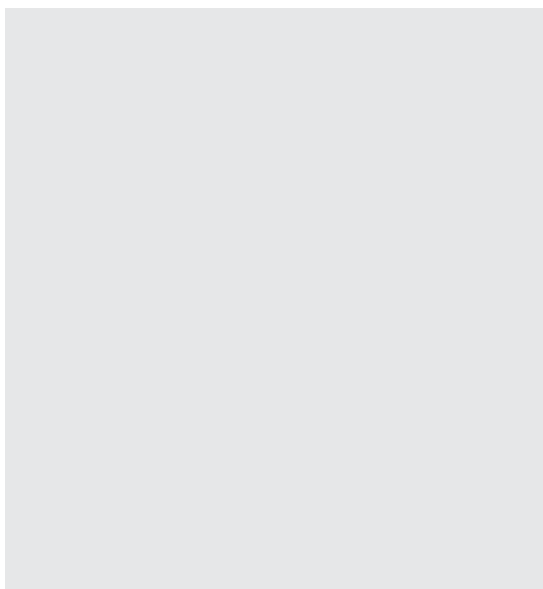


Plate 3 Newspaper article celebrating William Patton's seventy years at work, 1940.

one that made the shuttles ... My Granda worked there for seventy years and my father worked there for a good lot o years' (Plate 2). Betty then displayed a small, faded newspaper cutting, dated 16 November 1940, with a photo of her grandfather, illustrating a short article entitled 'Seventy Years At Work' (Plate 3).

This is Mr Wm. N. Patton, Downhill, Luncarty, who this month completes 70 years' employment at the Ordie Shuttle Mills, near Luncarty. In his 82nd year Mr Patton has lived at Luncarty all his life. He was a veteran member of the old Perth Volunteer band and he was on parade at the famous 'Wet Review'.

The report, clipped from an unnamed newspaper, recorded another piece of history, not only of Betty's family but also of the Ordie Mill, as we can deduce that William Patton started his apprenticeship in 1870, probably at twelve years old, which was the school-leaving age in his day. Though Betty did not know exactly when her grandfather was born, she estimated 'it must have been around 1858'. As the owner of the mill and master shuttle-maker, John Menzies, ran the business from 1844 until he retired in 1889, William Patton served his five-year apprenticeship with Menzies and then worked for him for twenty-six years. He continued to work for a further thirty-nine years for Peter McFarlane, who took over the Ordie Shuttle Mill. Like Betty's grandfather, McFarlane had served his apprenticeship with John Menzies.

Too young at the time to remember her grandfather's retirement, Betty did recall her father coming home from working in the shuttle mill, where he too had served his apprenticeship:

They had a big water wheel, you know, that drove machinery, but a lot of it was done by hand as well ... There was usually six of them worked there, two journeymen shuttle-makers, one apprentice and three labourers. We've got a photo ... That's my grandfather on the far right; he's holding one of the shuttles he made. They used different woods – a lot o mills used beech, but they said the best one was persimmon. I still have one of the shuttles! (Plates 4 and 5)

Jean Dickson pointed out the building situated on the left-hand side of the bridge, which bears Peter McFarlane's name (Plate 2) adding that 'his sons later joined the business, and they were a very enterprising family ... they hired out bicycles and horses ... Luncarty was a busy place'.

The Patton family was to have two more generations learn the craft of shuttle-making as Betty's father, also William, became a shuttle-maker. When he left school he worked as a woodcutter, as Betty explained: 'My uncle had a woodcutter's business and he (my father) worked there a few years before he went to the Ordie Mill. But none o that wood was used in the shuttle mill.' When William was taken on at the shuttle mill, he was apprenticed to his father and worked there when Betty was young. She remembers, however, that when war was declared in 1939 a lot of the men were called up, including her father. Nevertheless, the shuttle mill still operated as thousands of shuttles were needed in the Dundee jute-mills and the Stanley Mills, where wartime workers were

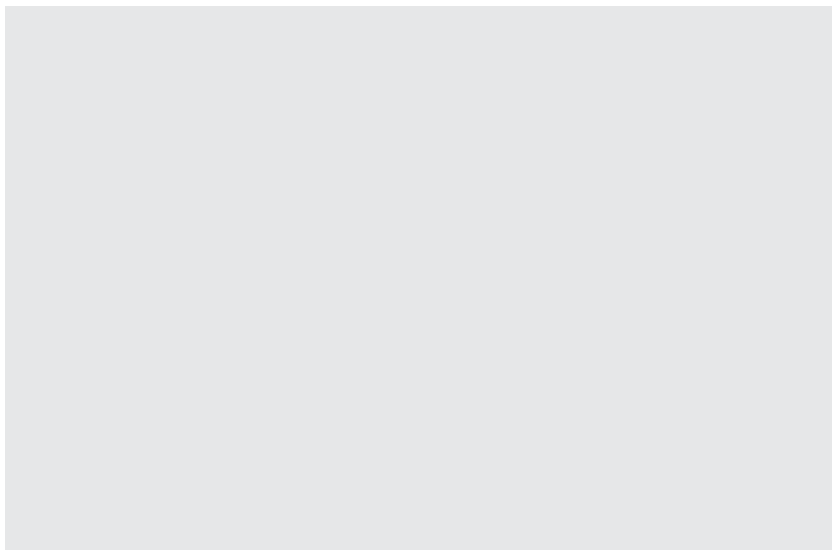


Plate 4 Luncarty shuttle-makers with Betty Robertson's grandfather far right.

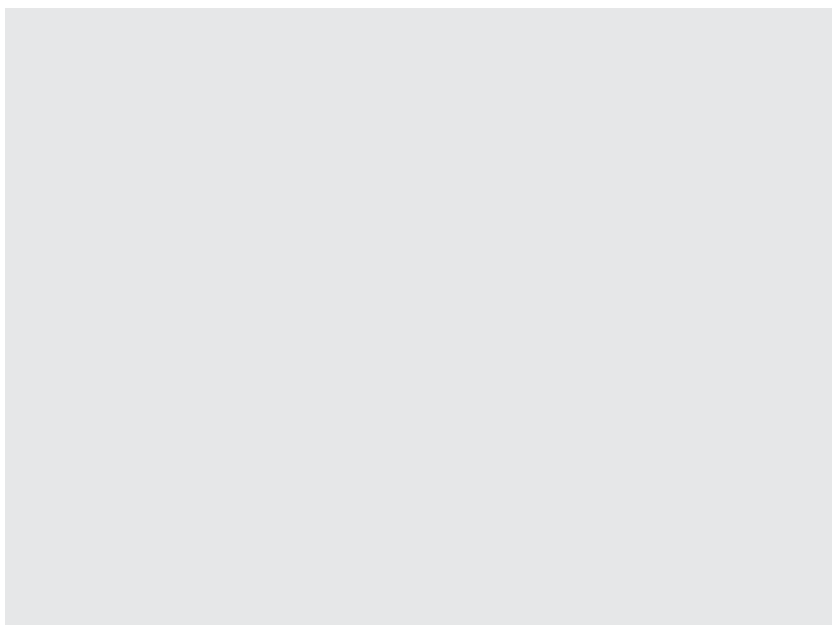


Plate 5 Betty Robertson holding her grandfather's shuttle.

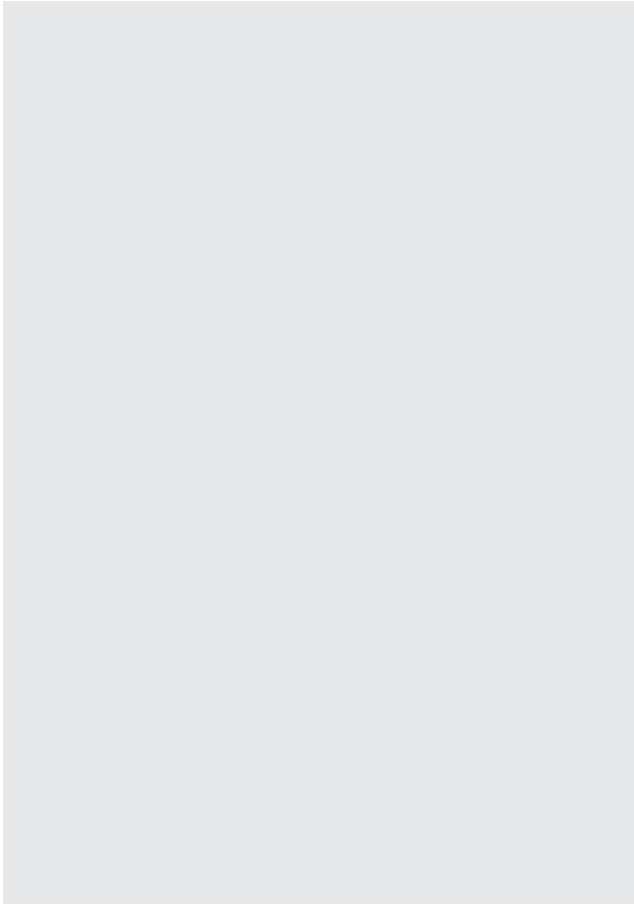


Plate 6 Letter relating to the apprenticeship of William Patton, 21 March 1947.

retrained to make jute webbing for military uniforms, spats and belts, as well as machinery belts.³⁷

At the end of the war, Betty's father returned to work in the mill and in 1947, when her brother James left school, he became the third-generation Patton to train as a shuttle-maker. In his letter of agreement, employer Peter McFarlane set out the terms of the apprenticeship, including his rate of pay (Plate 6). James had no sooner served his time, however, when he was called up for two years National Service. On returning home in 1953, he was disappointed to

³⁷ Former millworker in Stanley, Nell Hannah, was recorded talking about the wartime work: Bennett and Rougvie, *Nell Hannah*, 60–71.

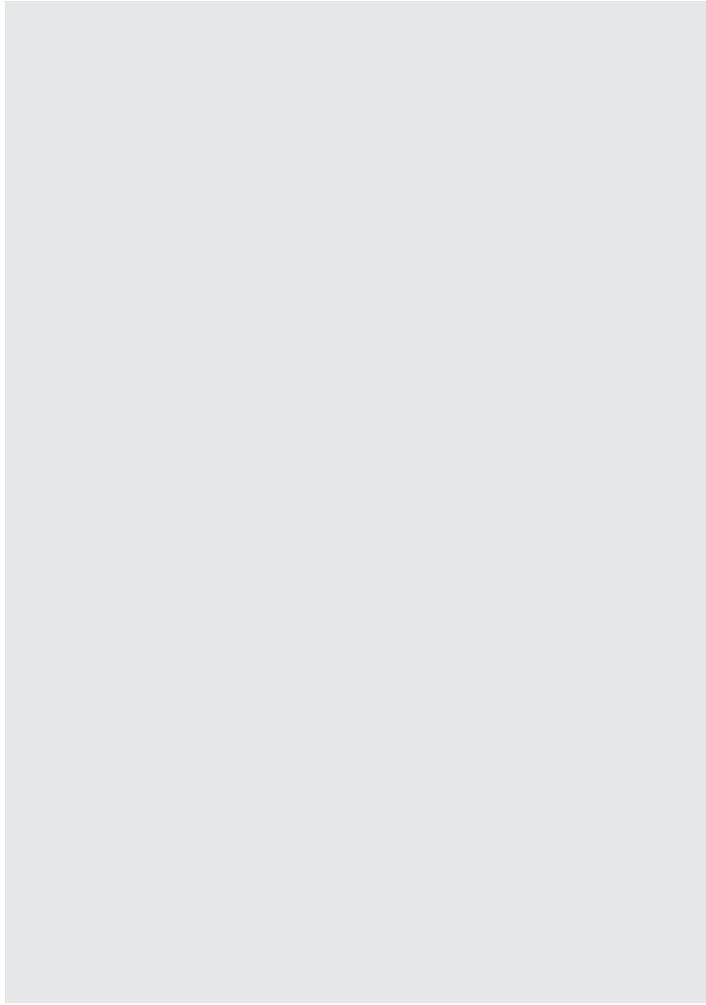


Plate 7 James Patton painting Luncarty clock.

find that the shuttle mill had closed down, ending his hope of carrying on the family tradition.

‘We have a picture of James,’ Jean said, turning a page of her album (Plate 7).

‘He used to paint the Luncarty village-clock,’ Betty added, ‘because everyone who worked in Luncarty went by that clock. And that’s James painting it.’

‘Whereabouts is the clock tower?’ I asked.

‘I’m afraid they knocked it down when they closed the bleachworks ...’

‘And the Ordie Mill?’

‘That’s gone too.’³⁸
Apparently, there was no longer a need for the village clock.³⁹

In recording their family memories, members of the West Stormont Historical Society have added considerably to the history of bleaching and shuttle-making, and to the history of their own community. The transcriptions of recordings not only add to their manuscript-based research but also the recordings conserve the voices of those who worked in the mills. The scope of this paper does not extend to a complete transcription of topics recorded relating to the way of life of the bleach-workers or shuttle-makers. Many were active in local organisations such as the tennis club, the bowling club, the local orchestra, the choral society, the amateur dramatic club and other groups. Luncarty was a truly vibrant community.⁴⁰

One of the aims of this paper is to demonstrate the value of oral history in the understanding of ‘official histories’ already documented in print and manuscript. The participants in these conversations, John Mackay, Michael and Ann Farquhar, Jean Dickson and Betty Robertson, demonstrate how the spoken word – their oral history – fulfils that aim. As founding member of the Oral History Society (1973), Eric R. Cregeen observed when invited to address the newly formed Scottish Oral History Group in 1978:

Oral History is not something for the social and economic historian only ... Oral History presents us with a rich and diverse store of source-material ... it mirrors the thoughts, attitudes, and experiences of people from all walks of life. It is as near as you can get to the history of everyman and to everyman’s history.⁴¹ But this does not make it an easy option exempt from the control of disciplined thinking ... On the contrary they demand from those who use them not only enthusiastic and wide sympathy for the human condition but an alert and critical judgement and sufficient detachment to weigh the recorded testimony ... The recordings we make now will be a powerful aid to future generations living in a much-changed society.⁴²

³⁸ Summarised from the conversation, 10 March 2015. P&K Archives, ACC21/12.

³⁹ John Hume photographed a similar clock situated at Huntingtower Bleachfields (<http://canmore.org.uk/site/26798>).

⁴⁰ For transcriptions and photographs, see <https://www.gracenotesotland.org/index.php/oral-history-folklore/industrial-heritage/bleachworks-luncarty>.

⁴¹ Leslie Harris advised fellow historians not to ‘become overly committed’ to manuscripts and documents for ‘[i]f we are to rely entirely on the written record, we may well be sadly disappointed ... there will almost certainly be no such record. And yet, [in oral testimony] the evidence will exist’: L. Harris, ‘Without Strap Nor String’, introductory address to the Canadian Aural/Oral History Association, in (ed.) N. V. Rosenberg, *Folklore and Oral History* (St John’s, 1975), 9–10.

⁴² Cregeen’s speech was originally printed in the newsletter of the Scottish Oral History Group: *Newsletter*, 1 (1978), 1–2. After three *Newsletters* the publication was renamed *By Word of Mouth*. See also M. Bennett, ‘The Growth of the Oral History Movement in Scotland: The Life and Legacy of Eric R. Cregeen’, *Oral History* (Spring, 2009), 42–51.