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Taken into State care: 1978 (Ownership)

Last reviewed: 2013

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

NEW ABBEY CORN MILL



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Any enquiries regarding this document should be sent to us at:

Historic Environment Scotland

Longmore House

Salisbury Place

Edinburgh

EH9 1SH

+44 (0) 131 668 8600

www.historicenvironment.scot

You can download this publication from our website

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NEW ABBEY CORN MILL

SYNOPSIS

New Abbey Corn Mill (also known as 'Monksmill') stands beside the New Abbey Pow at the west end of the picturesque village of New Abbey, on the A710 6 miles south of Dumfries. The property comprises a three-storey mill building with an attached two-storey kiln and former miller's house (now the visitor reception), together with its associated water-works (mill lade, mill pond, launder and tail-race).

The present corn mill probably occupies the site of the medieval mill built by the Cistercian monks of **Sweetheart Abbey**, situated at the far (eastern) end of the village. The stone-lined lade bringing water down from Loch Kindar, on the north-east slope of Criffel some $\frac{3}{4}$ mile to the south, may well be substantially medieval in date. The present corn mill was built as a two-storey mill in the 1790s but heightened by a storey in the mid-1800s. It produced oatmeal, for both human and animal consumption, until finally closing in 1946. It was restored to full working order in the 1970s by Charles Stewart of Shambellie and first opened to visitors by Historic Scotland in 1983.

CHARACTER OF THE MONUMENT

Historical Overview:

- **1273** – Lady Dervorgilla founds the Cistercian abbey of **Sweetheart**. The monks probably build a corn mill on the site of the present building, using water channelled down from Loch Kindar. The existing stone-lined mill lade may substantially be that built by the monks.
- **c.1560** – the monastic mill is variously referred to as 'the mill of Dulci-Corde (Sweet Heart)' and 'the corn mill of Lochkinderloch'. By this date (the Protestant Reformation), the abbey estates are progressively being feud out or sold off, and it is possible that the corn mill passes to one of the Broun family, related to John Broun, the last abbot of Sweetheart.
- **1627** – a family called Stewart acquires the estate of Shambellie, to the north of the corn mill. The 17th-century house beside the mill pond, now known as 'The Old House', may be their residence, for one of its window lintels is incised with 'I S 16-2 R B', for J Stewart and his spouse R Broun (RCAHMS).
- **1790** – William Stewart of Shambellie purchases the mill and associated water-works from Messrs Oswald and Russell for £600. He demolishes the mill building and constructs a new mill, the lower part of the present three-storeyed building, in its stead. (William Stewart is also instrumental in saving the abbey church of **Sweetheart** from demolition in 1779.)
- **1799** – The Thirlage Act deregulates milling in Scotland, abolishing laws dating back to medieval times, thus ending the mill owner's virtual monopoly on food provision.
- **1825** – the first miller on record is a Thomas Miller. His son, Alexander, follows in his father's footsteps in 1837, aged just 19.

- **1851** – Alexander Miller, his wife and two daughters reside in the Crown Inn, in New Abbey, together with a visiting millwright from East Lothian, whilst a plasterer, Edward Wallace, stays in the mill house. It therefore seems likely that the heightening and internal re-ordering of the mill building date from this time.
- **1856** – the Stewarts of Shambellie build a new residence, the present Shambellie House, to a design by David Bryce.
- **1860** – Robert Welsh takes over as miller, continuing until the end of the century. He employs three men and a housemaid. He too makes alterations, including adding the provender [animal feed] stones on the first floor.
- **1918** – John Clingan, a local policeman, takes over as miller.
- **1948** – John Clingan dies and the mill closes for business.
- **1970** – the derelict mill building and associated water-works are purchased by Charles Stewart of Shambellie, whose ancestors had once owned it. He sets about restoring the building to full working order, including reinstating the waterwheel. The ‘Solway salmon’ weathervane on top of the kiln vent is also his.
- **1978** – Charles Stewart entrusts the mill and associated water-works into state care. The restoration work continues under the MOPBW, including clearing the mill pond and constructing the timber launder. The oat bruiser and most of the hand-tools are brought from two derelict mills in Lanarkshire, and the hay cart is retrieved from another Kirkcudbrightshire farm and restored.
- **1983** – Magnus Magnusson, chairman of the Ancient Monuments Board, officially opens the restored mill to visitors.

Archaeological Overview:

Little archaeological excavation has taken place at the corn mill itself. However, it is doubtful if any archaeological deposits remain that might determine whether the present building has a medieval predecessor.

After the property came into state care the mill pond was cleared as part of a Manpower Services Commission-granted scheme and under the archaeological supervision of Mike Yates. Little of archaeological significance was found. However, investigation of the ground to the north of the mill pond found evidence to suggest that archaeological deposits may survive in that area, including the possibility that the area was used as monastic fish-ponds. The so-called medieval ‘fish pond’ immediately to the west of the corn mill was investigated in more detail but no evidence was found confirming its medieval date; indeed, local information suggests that it more likely originated as a curling pond in the 18th or 19th century, used by the lady curlers (the men’s curling pond was beside Loch Kindar, where their curling hut still stands).

The lowest stretch of the mill lade, immediately up from the mill pond, was cleared out, again under archaeological supervision, but no construction date was forthcoming. However, the construction details, most notably its base, composed of large, dressed red sandstone slabs, point to a probable monastic origin.

Recent work

Work undertaken in 2006 (HSCO-90323-2006-01) uncovered evidence of a terracotta drain 9m to the south of the present pond, along with indications of an earlier watercourse - possibly an alteration to the course of the present New Abbey Pow.

Architectural/Artistic Overview:

New Abbey Corn Mill comprises the three-storey mill, and a two-storey kiln and former miller's house attached to its north side, all surviving as one continuous building.

The mill

The present mill structure dates substantially from the mid-1800s, but incorporates much masonry from the original mill built in the 1790s. It stands three storeys high, the top storey being in the form of a loft. The entrance doors (east-facing) are placed asymmetrically, that at ground level (the miller's entrance) with a small-paned fanlight, that at first-floor level (for loading and unloading) a large featureless opening. The white-washed granite-rubble structure has small-paned windows, mostly sashes, straight skews with a ball finial over the south gable, and a Scotch slate roof.

Internally, the mill retains almost all of its original machinery. Only the oat bruiser, itself a relatively late addition to the mill judging by the concrete base it sat on, was missing in 1970; the present one was brought from a former mill in Lanarkshire in 1981. The ground floor houses the power machinery, the first floor the three sets of grinding stones, and the loft the sack hoist machinery, feed-hoppers and storage space. It is this completeness that makes New Abbey Corn Mill so special.

In addition, there are features that give New Abbey Corn Mill that extra-special place in the catalogue of Scottish mills. These include: (1) the mechanism for operating the waterwheel from within the building, using an old curling stone; (2) the boulting machine (rotary sieve or 'reel' in local parlance) on the ground floor, an exceedingly rare, if not unique, survival; (3) the grading sieve on the first floor, its shaking motion created by the eccentric cam on its drive-shaft; (4) the three-sided cam on the shelling stone, nicknamed the 'damsel' because it made a persistent 'clacking' noise so that the miller could hear that the stones were working properly from wherever he was in the mill or grounds; (5) the provender stones, supported on a timber substructure helpfully inscribed with the name WELSH, the surname of the miller who added them in the later 1800s; and (6) the 'Heath-Robinson' water-powered sack-hoist in the loft, a testament to the ingenuity of the country miller.

The 'pitch-back' waterwheel against the outside west wall of the mill, restored in the 1970s using parts found lying in the wheel-pit, is of conventional construction. Measuring 1.5m wide and 4.4m in diameter, it is composed of cast-iron rings and hubs and wooden axle, buckets and spokes; it is unusual in having nine spokes rather than the standard eight or ten, and the wooden axle, whilst common in Galloway, is rarely found elsewhere. The adjacent wooden

launder, restored in 1980 and replacing two fire-clay pipes installed c. 1900, has no archaeological pedigree.

The kiln

The two-storey kiln is of the standard form, a ground floor housing the brick-built fire-box and funnel, and an upper drying floor constructed of perforated cast-iron plates supported on wrought-iron bearers. The cast-iron fire-box door is marked 'CALDOW AND MCKINNEL DUMFRIES'.

The miller's house

That the miller's house is physically attached to the mill and kiln is most unusual. In almost all other respects it has little of architectural interest.

Social Overview:

Other than being a popular visitor attraction, New Abbey Corn Mill currently plays no social role in village life. However, its presence contributes significantly to the 'picture postcard' qualities of the village (see Aesthetic Overview below).

Spiritual Overview:

New Abbey Corn Mill has never possessed a spiritual role. However, its popular name of 'Monksmill' harks back nostalgically to the medieval age, and to the probability that the monks of **Sweetheart Abbey** built and operated a mill on the site.

Aesthetic Overview:

New Abbey Corn Mill is a prominent and distinctive local landmark, its white-washed structure nestling within a dip on a bend in the road, just over a hump-backed bridge at the entrance to the 'picture-postcard' village from Dumfries. The building undoubtedly contributes significantly to the ambience of the place, which was voted 'Scotland's Best Small Town' in 2012.

The picturesque complex seems to have an almost organic form, indicative of having grown up over an extended period.

The buildings are little altered and, especially when the machinery is working, the visitor receives an authentic experience, complete with smells and sounds, of a working corn mill. The miller's house, by comparison, now in use for visitor reception, lacks authenticity.

The immediate garden ground, waterwheel and tail-race are attractively laid out and provide a good viewing area from which to see the wheel itself turning and creaking and splashing.

The associated water-works, particularly the mill pond with its sluice-gates and duck-island, and the so-called 'fish pond', provide a most attractive and peaceful setting for the mill, and a nice place to have a picnic.

What are the major gaps in understanding of the property?

- Was there a monastic corn mill on the site of the present structure? It is just possible that a combination of archaeological excavation and documentary analysis may yet produce evidence for a monastic origin.
- Was the ground to the west of the corn mill used by the monks as fish ponds? The small-scale archaeological excavations produced tantalising evidence for this possibility, and given the dearth of evidence in Scotland for such monastic activities, it would be worth considering investigating this area in more detail.
- What was the milling history at the site in the centuries following the Reformation? A thorough investigation of land titles etc., might well cast further light on the story of New Abbey Corn Mill and its associated water-works.

ASSESSMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Key Points

- New Abbey Corn Mill is a poignant reminder of a type of industrial building that was central to human life for over 1000 years but of which few intact examples now survive. Along with the church and laird's house, the corn mill played a central role in people's lives, for until the later 1800s almost every mouthful of food was supplied by the humble mill.
- The existence of the mill is largely down to the local laird, William Stewart of Shambellie, who did much to create the present village of New Abbey in the later 18th century.
- The present three-storey height of New Abbey Corn Mill reflects the considerable increase in grain production resulting from the agricultural improvements introduced from the later 1700s.
- The existence of the mill, kiln and house as a single structural unit is rare.
- New Abbey Corn Mill is a testament to the ingenuity of the country miller. It can help us to understand how these craftsmen invented, manufactured and maintained quite complex pieces of machinery.
- New Abbey Corn Mill and its associated water-works form a key component in the picture-postcard village that is New Abbey.

Associated Properties:

(other locally related places) – Loch Kindar; Shambellie House; **Sweetheart Abbey**; the Stewarts of Shambellie burial enclosure

(other water mills in Scotland still in working order) – Barony Mills, Birsay; Barry Mill; Blair Atholl Watermill; **Dounby Click Mill**; Preston Mill; Quendale Mill; Shawbost Norse Mill

Keywords:

grain; water power; machinery; millstone; water wheel; kiln; lade; pond

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