

BUILDINGS AT RISK

Flail and Fleece – uniting the two mills in Union Mills

Whilst buildings can be lost, their legacy can be hidden in plain sight! This week Priscilla Lewthwaite of the Isle of Man Family History Society looks at Union Mills – and how the village owes its existence and its name to two mills.

Today in the centre of the village of Union Mills stand a few walls, the ruins of what was once a thriving industry and the sole reason for the development of a village in this area.

The history of the mill goes back to our earliest land records, the Manorial Roll 1511-1515, where it states that the tenant of the corn mill paid 9s 8d Lord's Rent.

The tenant, Oates McTaggart, in return for paying his rent, received all the landowners of the district as tenants of the mill. The tenants had to grind their corn at the mill to which they were apportioned and they were also bound to keep the mill in repair.

The repairs could consist of being asked to provide straw for thatch (all the early mills were thatched) or having to help transport new millstones when required.

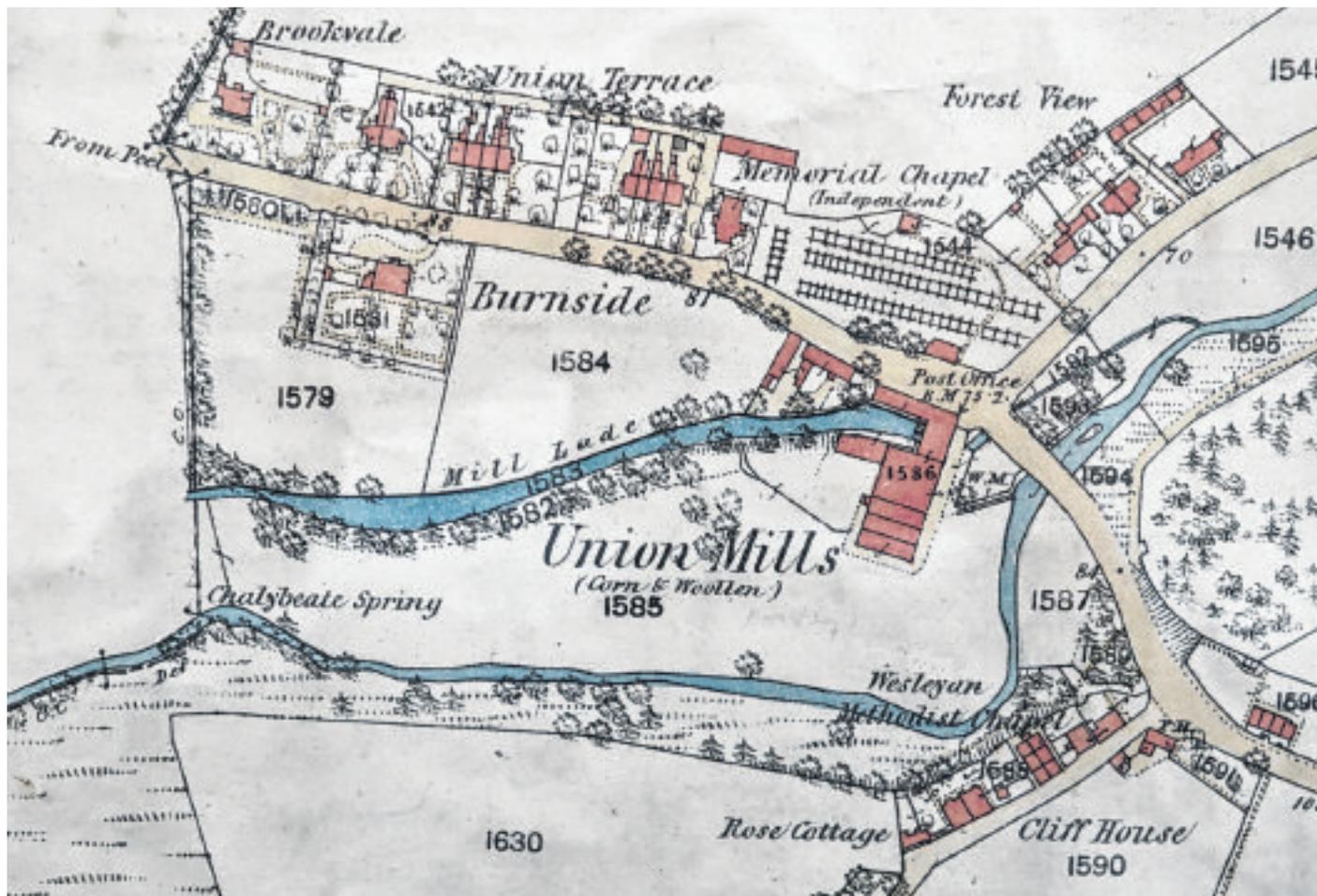
The mill owners lived a precarious life and ran into financial difficulties many times when the mill had to be mortgaged.

John Stevenson inherited the mill, then known as Mullin Oates through his wife, Averick Oates, whose family had owned it for several generations.

In 1665 he had to borrow £16 and to obtain this he had to mortgage half the water corn mill (half belonged to his wife), half the house the miller lived in, and half theircroft.

Thirty-six years later in 1701, when their son William was the owner, he managed to save £16 and finally the mortgage was paid off in full.

The family were still struggling eight years later in August 1709 when William's wife, Elinor nee Parr, lay on her



1868 Ordnance Survey of Union Mills – the mill buildings (no 1586, red), and the tenter-racks in field 1544 on the opposite side of the road behind the Post Office (Manx Museum Library)

death bed. She made her will stating that there would be little left to share after payment of their debts.

The Stevenson family struggled on, passing the mill down from generation to generation, always to the eldest son.

In 1803, William Stevenson's daughter Mary, and her mother inherited the mill and it was purchased by William Kelly, clothier, of Douglas for the sum of £500.

William Kelly proved to be a very progressive man. He was not content with just run-

ning the corn mill and realised that an opportunity existed for wool to be spun and woven on a commercial basis.

He built another mill alongside the existing corn mill, and this new mill became the first factory in the island, being able to carry out all the

processes necessary to turn raw wool into finished cloth.

On June 13 1807 he advertised in the Manks Advertiser for 20 experienced weavers of woollen cloth and also for six lads between the ages of 14 and 16 as apprentices.

In 1808 William was adver-

tising that the public could have their own wool spun into cloth of various kinds and he was willing to accept as little as 10lbs in quantity.

So successful was his business that he issued his own card tokens for small change. One of these still exists at



The Mill and weaving sheds from the south c. 1920s



Five-shilling card money token issued in 1819 by the 'Union Mills Ltd', with their 'Flail and Fleece United' logo on the front and a drawing of the mills on the reverse (Journal of the Manx Museum)



The former mill buildings when used as Cowen's Laundry c. 1920s

(Tony Kneale)



The Mill frontage, 1904

MNH today, showing a picture of the mill on one side and the words 'Flail and Fleece' on the other, with the value shown of five shillings. It was after the building of the second mill that the village got its new name of Union Mills instead of Mullin Doway.

Business thrived, William arranged for carts to visit the major towns every week to collect wool for processing.

But, unfortunately by the 1820s, Mr Kelly's fortunes started to decline.

He came into dispute over tithes with the then Bishop, the Rev George Murray, who pressed charges and sadly William Kelly ended up a prisoner in Castle Rushen in 1827 and the mill and all the buildings were advertised by the coroner for sale by public auction.

The mills and premises were sold to Thomas Harrison and continued working until one disastrous day in November 1828 when the mill caught fire. At half past one in the morning the overseer of the mill awoke to see his bedroom illuminated by flames bursting from the corn mill with 'indescribable fury'.

Although not a moment was lost and every energy was called into action to rescue the property, little could be saved.

The upper floors at the carding room were saturated in oil and any attempt to preserve the machinery was impossible.

At 9.45am the following morning, one of their men was

**TO BE SOLD BY PUBLIC AUCTION,
ON THE PREMISES,
On WEDNESDAY, the 8th of August next,
(By R. COWIN, CORONER OF MIDDLE)**

A LL and singlar that Capital, very Extensive, and Valuable Concern, situate in the Parish of Kirk Braddan, called the **UNION MILLS**, about 2½ miles from Douglas; consisting of a Water Corn Mill, and two Kilns; a Spinning, Carding, and Woollen Manufactory, (the only one of the kind in the Island); a Dye-house and Offices attached; Weaving and Drying-house; a genteel Country Cottage, with a small Garden or Court in front; several Dwelling Houses for Workmen connected with the Mills; the whole of the Machinery, Implements, &c. thereto belonging, complete; and a Variety of Goods and Effects.

At the same time will be Sold,

The ESTATE, LANDS, and PLANTATION GROUNDS in Braddan, belonging to Mr. **WILLIAM KELLY**, manufacturer; on a part of which Premises are constructed, the Mills and Buildings aforesaid.— The Soil is good, and well watered; and the Plantation Trees are in a high, thriving, and flourishing state.

**Auction to commence at 12 o'Clock Noon.
July 24, 1827.**

Auction notice for the 'Union Mills' from the Manks Advertiser August 2 1827

(iMuseum)



The weaving/finishing sheds behind the mill, enjoying a new life

despatched on horseback to Douglas to try to obtain a fire engine to preserve the adjoining buildings. This arrived at 11.15am. Mr Archibald Clarke and his men were praised for their promptitude.

Unfortunately, the mills were badly damaged. The weaving department and dye house suffered considerably, the tuck mill and water wheel were partly damaged.

As the mill was insured it was not long before it was rebuilt at a cost of £1,600 for the building and replacement machinery. By January 1829 the proprietor of the mill advertised in the Sun newspaper that the weaving department

and dye house were back in production in less than 10 weeks after the fire.

The machinery was the latest and most modern invented, and many workmen had been engaged from England to head the different departments at the mill. The men engaged were from Armley in Yorkshire and stayed and married local girls. Descendants today live in the island.

As well as being able to sell the Manx-made cloth at the mill, a warehouse on the North Quay was leased so that the public could inspect and purchase the goods in Douglas.

The partnership of James Dalrymple, James Kelly and Thomas Maltby was formed about 1835 when they took over the running of the corn mill. Dalrymple and Maltby were already involved in the woollen mill and they then ran the combined wool and corn mill very successfully.

On October 31 1843, the villagers were alarmed to hear a large explosion at the mill. A cask of naphtha had caught fire and Thomas Maltby was burned to death trying to save the mill from destruction.

William Dalrymple and

James Kelly were injured in the fire which they eventually managed to put out without it doing too much damage to the mill. By 1851, the mills were employing 40 men including corn millers, weavers, dyers, spinners and cloth dressers.

Work would start after the mill bell had rung at 6am; at 8am the men would stop for half an hour to have breakfast; a short break at noon and the men then worked continually until 7pm before finishing work for the day.

All this for 15 to 18 shillings a week!

Business continued to flourish with woollen cloths, shawls and blankets forming the chief articles to be exported to England as well as sold locally.

Then on June 25 1858 disaster once again overtook the mills. Half an hour after work had finished for the day, a glare of light was seen by the wife of one of the workmen coming from a top window of the woollen department.

Once again, the mill was

threatened by fire! It was fortunate that just after the discovery of the fire a Mr Karran from Peel together with his friend, Mr McCormack, were driving past in a phaeton and they both volunteered to help. Mr Karran offered the use of his horse and vehicle to take some of the men to Douglas to get the fire engine. Mr McCormack drove them in and within a short space of time the Douglas fire engine was on the spot, in the charge of chief constable Sayle with a body of policemen under his orders, who 'rendered all the service in their power'. Captain Higginson of the steamship Mona's Queen gave directions and personally aided everywhere, with complete disregard for any danger he might be in. Some stock was saved from the lower floors but the upper rooms were completely destroyed. The origin of the fire was never discovered, but, as the stock and buildings were insured, the mill itself was soon rebuilt and back in production.

The mill carried on under the management of William Dalrymple, and was most successful until November 1872 when he passed over the busi-

ness to his nephew Dalrymple Maitland.

In 1875, Dalrymple decided to invest in the mills by having the machinery driven by steam instead of water power.

Plans were drawn up by Messrs Clark & Martin engineers from Liverpool, to erect a tall chimney.

Robert Kaye a mason from Marown had the work entrusted to him as he had already erected a similar chimney at East Foxdale Mines.

By June 1875 a chimney a little over 60 feet in height was erected. The scaffolding was removed after completion, and just after the men had returned to work after their mid-day break, Mr Maitland stepped outside, looked up at the chimney and saw the whole structure fall right on top of the roof of the weaving shed. Inside, the shed was completely destroyed by falling masonry.

A great portion of the roof had fallen in and Robert (Robin) Green, who had worked at the mill for many years, was killed whilst working at the carding machine. Two boys were also injured. It took some considerable time before the rebuilding was commenced.

Dalrymple sold the woollen and corn mills in 1887 and trustees purchased the goodwill of the lease and a public company was formed.

The lease covered the woollen mill, dye works, corn mill, cottages and land.

By January 1891, the woollen mill was closed but the corn mill carried on until 1924, before closing for the final time and ending the milling of corn in the village after 400 years. The mill over the years was used for a variety of purposes, from a Sunday School and venue for Manx Tays, to a laundry and a vantage point over the TT course, until the main mill buildings were demolished in 1964.

Some of the weaving sheds remain and have found other new lives nowadays, but the mills' main and enduring legacy is their name – Union Mills.



Advertising card for the mill