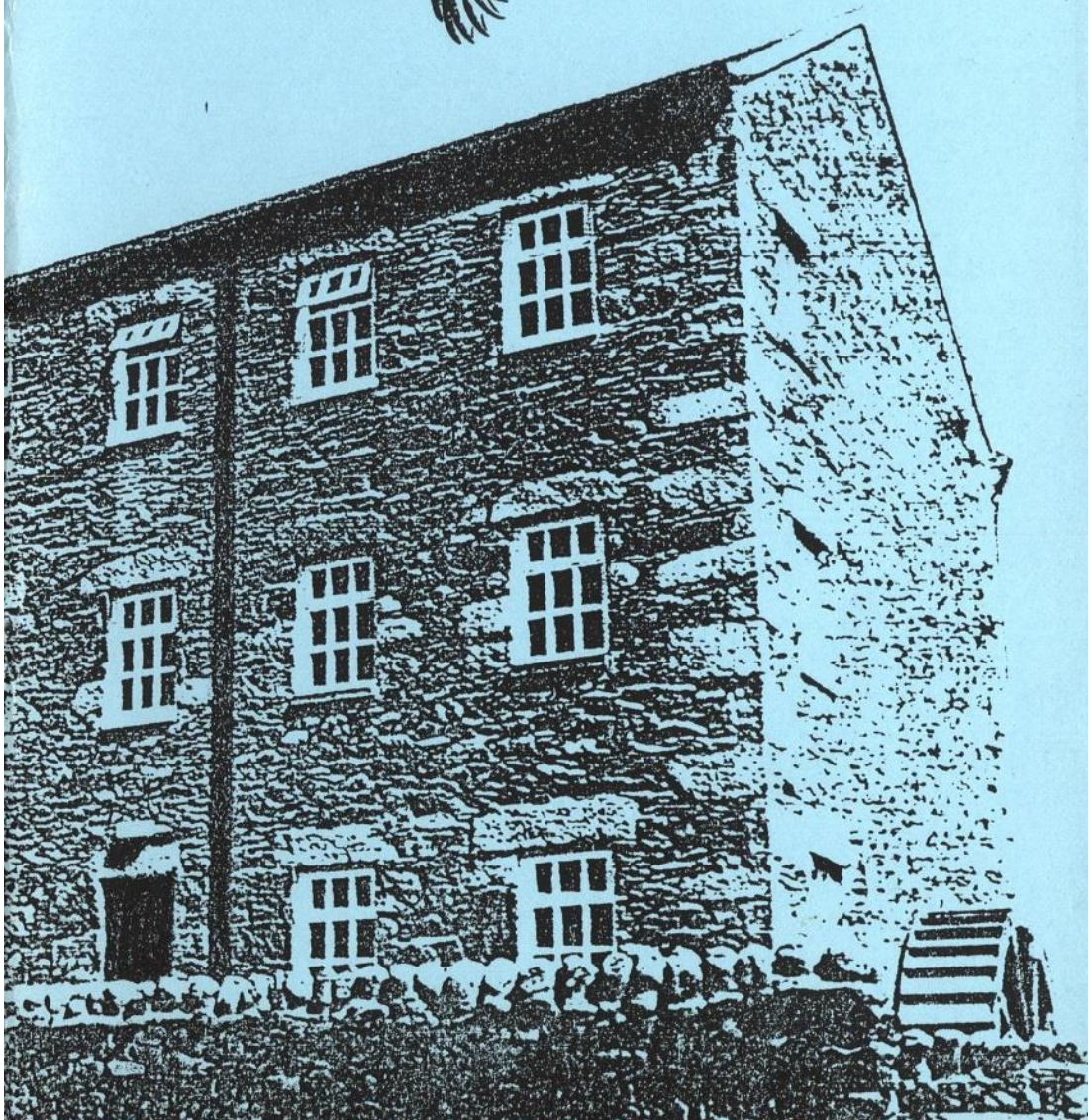
The Story of Gatehouse of Fleet



The Story of Gatehouse of Fleet

Contents

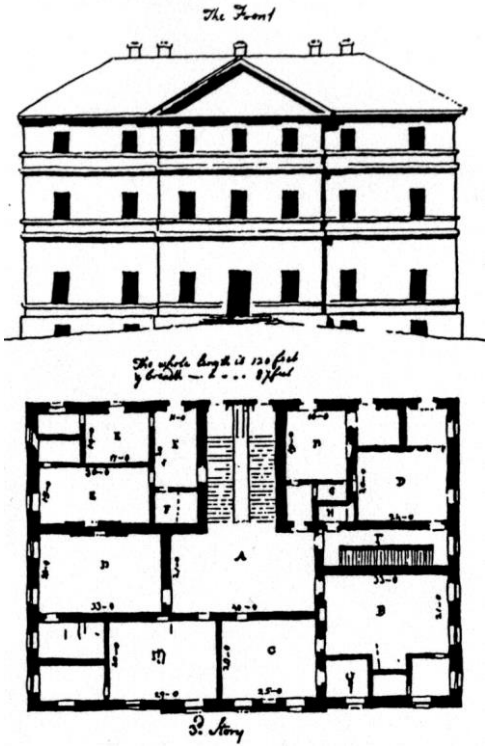
The Laird

James Murray was in his early thirties at the time Cally House was being built. He was wealthy, educated and well travelled.

His family had come from Ireland and married the local gentry. James' brother-in-law was Lord Garlies, who was later to become Earl of Galloway.

With money and influence James soon became an important figure in South West Scotland. He was Member of Parliament for the Stewartry of Kirkcudbright for twelve years, Receiver General of various rents and taxes for King George III, and founder of the town of Gatehouse.

The house that James built



In 1759, the year of Robert Burns' birth, work began on a grand mansion that was to be the new home of the laird, James Murray, and his wife Catherine. It was called Cally House.

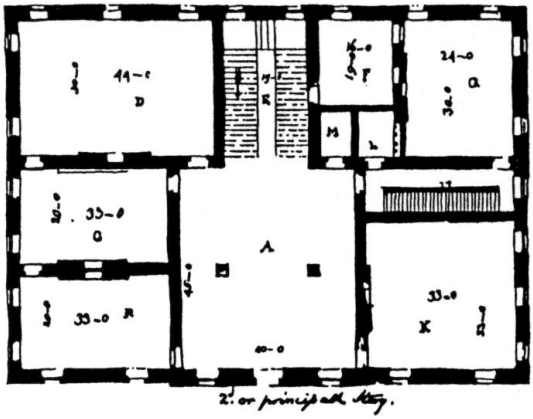
At this time, no town or even a village existed here but the building of this fine three-storey house was the beginning for Gatehouse of Fleet.

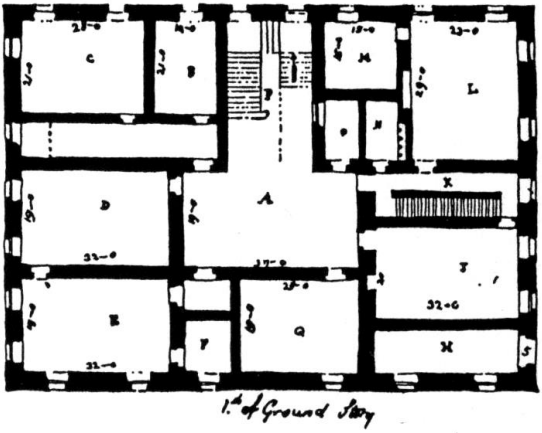
It was six years before the Murrays could move into the completed house. Both James and his son, Alexander, made a few home improvements', which included the addition of a portico and a marble 'lobby'.

"The marble lobby is new in Scotland, and beautiful ... adorned with some very fine sculptures and tables and mosaic."

James Murray's house is now the Cally Palace Hotel.

The Architect





Robert Mylne was a brilliant young Scottish architect who studied in Rome and won there a first prize for architecture. He was only 26 when he returned from Italy in 1759.

Mylne drew the original plans for Cally House while he was still in Rome. Lord Garlies acted as a go-between for his brother-in-law and the architect.

"*... I have sent, as you advised me, a sketch for Mr. Murray's house, which I am hopeful he will be so good as to think that a house should be built upon."*

During the early stages of the building, in 1760, Mylne learned that his design for Blackfriars Bridge had won an open competition and been accepted by the City of London.

Family and guests

As Member of Parliament, James spent much time in London. Sometimes Lady Catherine would join him there. Occasionally they took trips to Europe.

Back in the peaceful Galloway countryside, the Murrays would socialise with friends and relatives, inviting them to visit the Estate for house-parties and sporting weekends.

"In the evenings, the men played card games or billiards. The ladies would entertain themselves separately, playing music or reading in the well-stocked library".

They furnished their house with beautiful and expensive articles and commissioned work from important artists of their time, such as Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Domestics

Like any other 18th Century mansion, Cally House needed a whole army of domestic servants to run it.

The main servants were the Housekeeper, Cook and Butler. Other servants included an under-Butler and a host of house, kitchen, scullery and dairy maids to do their master's and lady's bidding.

The domestic life at Cally House was kept separate from the family:

"The first floor is for the use of all servants who work in the house. It holds the kitchen and all the nauseous places that should not be seen or smelt by company."

In 1771 the Murrays employed a French chef called Jean Moulet to cater for their fashionable tastes.

Fruitful pleasure grounds

The grounds of the Estate were extensive and well laid out to offer colour, form and visual variety. They were managed and cared for by a steward, with the help of gardeners and estate workers.

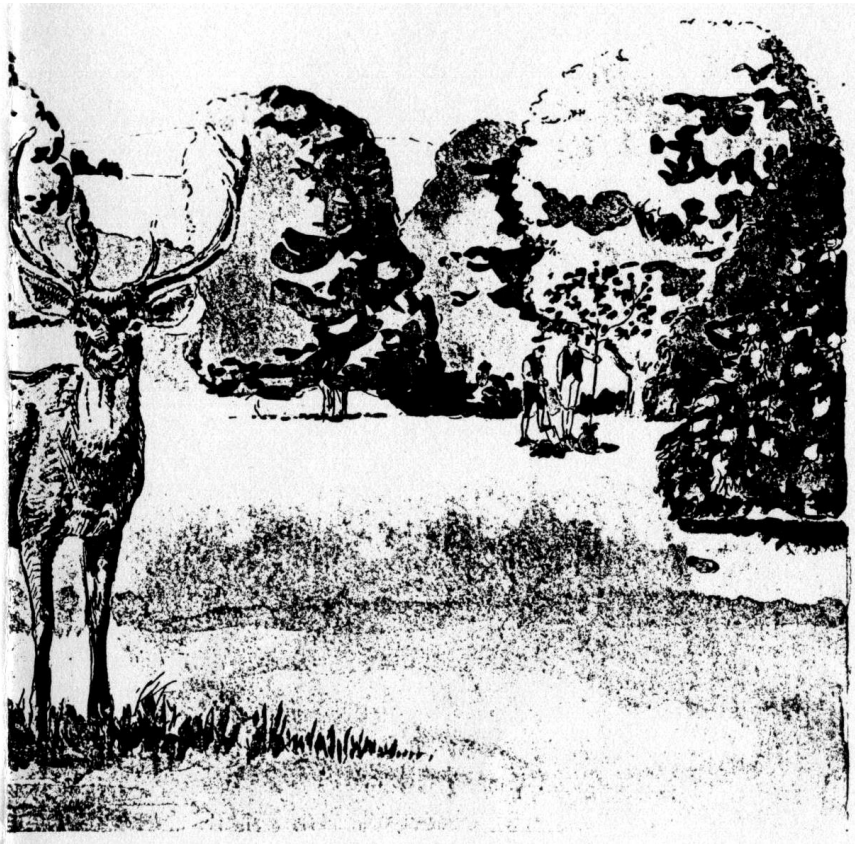
An orchard and a walled garden ensured a plentiful supply of herbs, vegetables and fruit.

"*When the family reside not here, all the country around are supplied with abundance of the fruits from these gardens."*

James was eager to landscape his Estate and planted oak and beech trees. These pleasure grounds provided guests an opportunity to 'take the air' in an atmosphere of gentility.

"Every deformity within these grounds is concealed or converted into a beauty by wood."

Deer Park



Woodland, a deer park and a well-stocked lake provided James Murray and his guests with a variety of sport, including fishing, shooting and stalking. No doubt the Estate was also highly regarded by the local poachers!

Red deer had been oommon in mediaeval Galloway but were hunted almost to extinction by the end of the 18th Century. Seeing an opportunity, James introduced red deer to his Estate, along with fallow and roe deer and pheasants.

Although his motive was purely to provide sport for himself and his guests, James, and others like him, played a major role in the conservation of red deer in Galloway. It is largely due to the creation of deer parks such as the one at Cally House that the species survived in this area.

Royal Charter

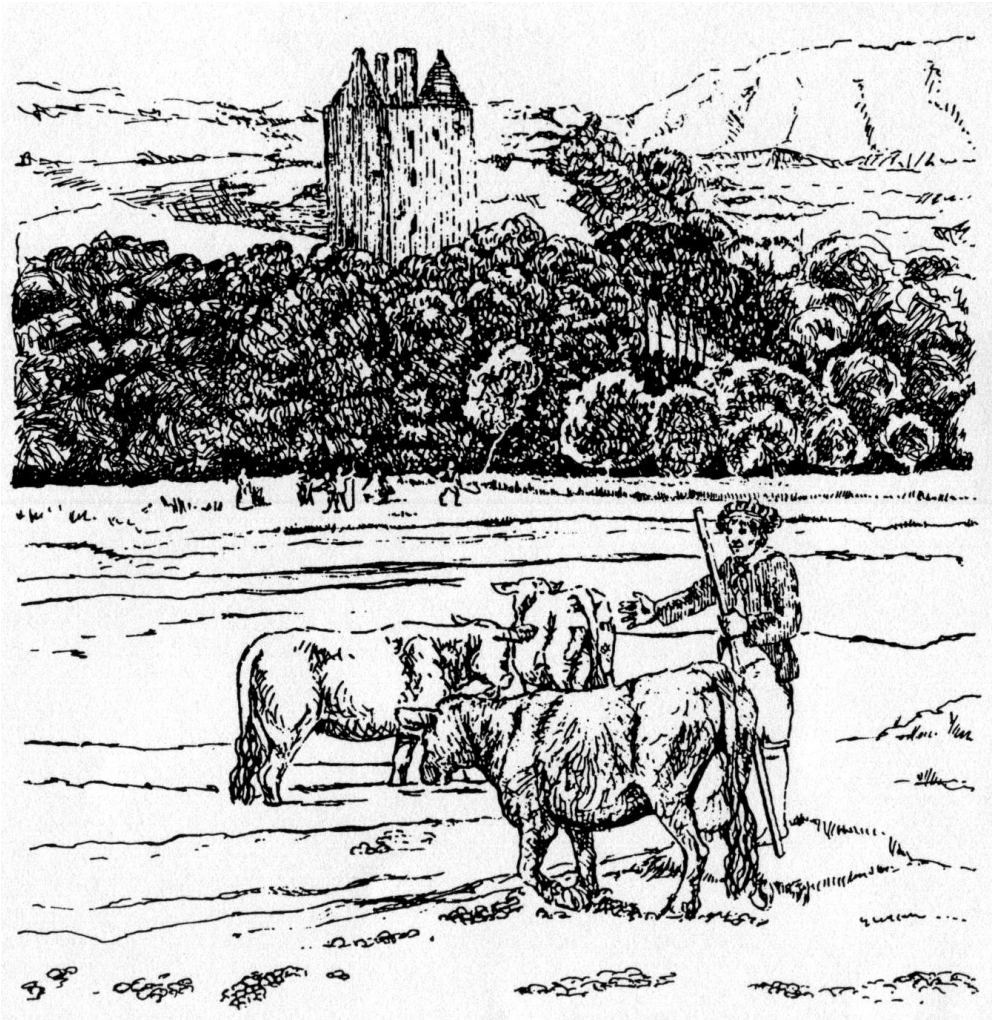
In 1795, thirty years after moving into Cally House, James Murray petitioned King George III to make Gatehouse of Fleet a Burgh of Barony.

The Charter the King granted brought the new town recognition, status and local control - from this time on, Gatehouse was governed by a provost, two bailies and four councillors.

The Charter also gave the town the right to hold a regular fair and market.

In thirty years, a place that had been little more than a name on a map had become a thriving town - the town that James built.

Gaithouse



Gatehouse of Fleet existed as early as 1619 but very few people lived in the area. Its importance was as a river crossing point. The only buildings of note were the ‘Gait House” or coaching house, the old house at Cally, and Cardoness Castle.

What people there were lived in small ‘farmtouns’ or clachans. They fed and clothed themselves from their own resources, growing crops such as oats and barley in the Fleet Valley, whilst on higher ground sheep, cattle and goats grazed.

Village to town

Soon after work began on Cally House, James Murray started to place orders for the building of houses in Gatehouse of Fleet. Why was he so keen to develop the town?

Other local lairds were doing similar things. Both Castle Douglas and Newton Stewart were developed in this way, by William Douglas. Murray's 'in-laws' created Garlieston. By establishing a thriving community on the land he owned, a laird could improve the value of his land and earn more from rents. Meanwhile, by enclosing farming land they were forcing people out of their farmtouns and into their towns, looking for work and a place to stay.

So James became the catalyst for the growing town and encouraged builders, craftsmen, manufacturers and tradesmen to settle here.

In Trade

Like any community, Gatehouse of Fleet needed tradesmen and craftsmen to supply its needs and a wide range of industries were quickly established.

Plentiful local barley was used to produce a strong ale. This was served in the fifteen or so inns.

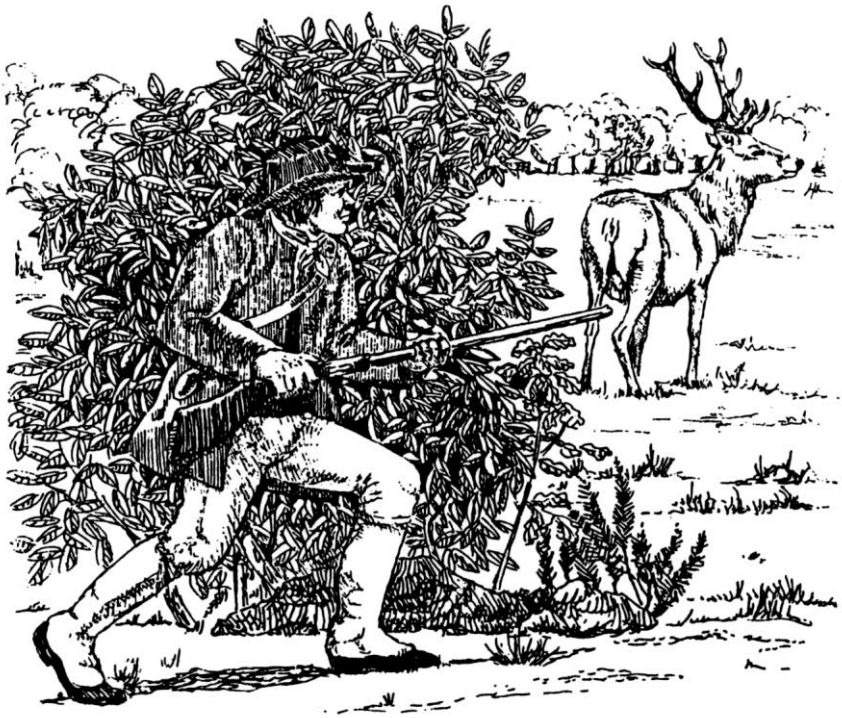
Tanning of cattle hides produced leather for the local saddler, glover and shoemakers and for trade in the market.

The soapworks, established in 1793, was later accused of polluting the river and damaging salmon fishing.

Butchers, bakers, tinkers and tailors - as the community grew so did its need for service industries.

In 1792, eleven hundred and fifty people supported thirteen shopkeepers - but only one barber!

Crime – and occasionally punishment



Until the early 19th Century, the smuggling of tea, spirits and wine from the Isle of Man and Ireland was common all along the Galloway coast. James Murray discouraged this crime. If a tenant of his was caught smuggling, the tenant would lose all rights to his house and be evicted.

With James' Estate well-stocked with deer, pheasants and rabbits, poaching was popular and also difficult to control.

Other than these traditional crimes, the people of Gatehouse of Fleet were model citizens. There was a small lock up' in the town but it was seldom used.

"The duties of morality and religion are on the whole scrupulously practised; and instances of crime or gross immorality are very rare."

Rev. George Murray 1845

Market town

The Royal Charter granted by George III gave

"full power and liberty to the said Burgh ... of holding and having one weekly market within said Burgh on Saturday, and also of having four yearly fairs (February, June, October and November) each of the said fairs lasting six successive days..."

The market was held in the High Street. Over the years market day varied. This rather confusing definition appeared in 1823!

"a market for good fat kin kept on the Friday, after the first Thursday, which is after the first Monday of November, and so every Friday thereafter till Christmas"

Cattle, horses, sheep and pigs were exported from Ireland to Portpatrick and from there passed through Gatehouse of Fleet on the main droving route to the markets of England.

Cattle to Cotton

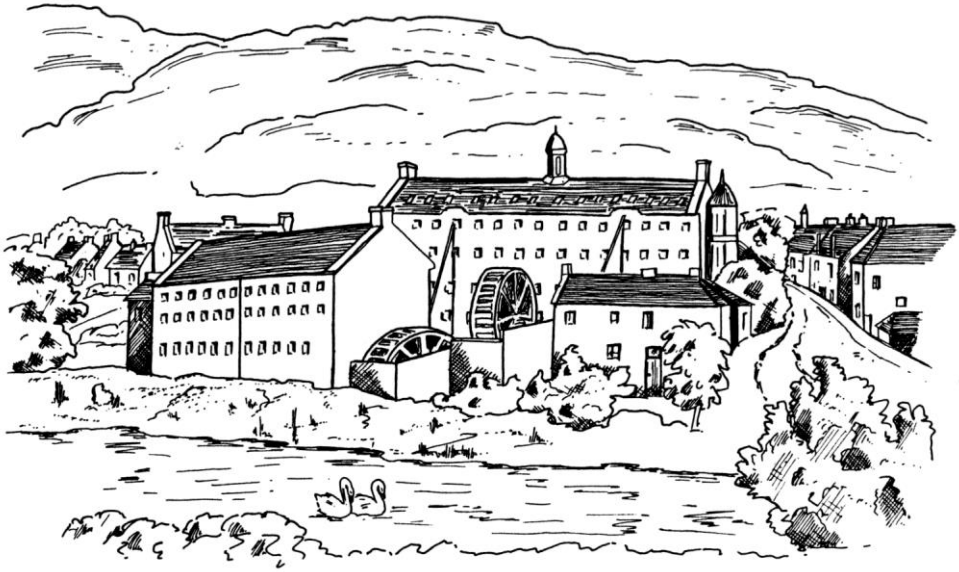
Galloway has also been an important area for cattle.

Two centuries ago it attracted a family called Birtwhistle from their Yorkshire base to Kirkcudbright. They were cattle dealers, merchants and professional men. They leased land at Balmore, by the River Dee and quickly established themselves in the area.

Alexander Birtwhistle, described by Burns as “roaring Birtwhistle”, became Provost of Kirkcudbright.

The Industrial Reveolution had begun, and in a search for new business opportunities they turned their attention to cotton.

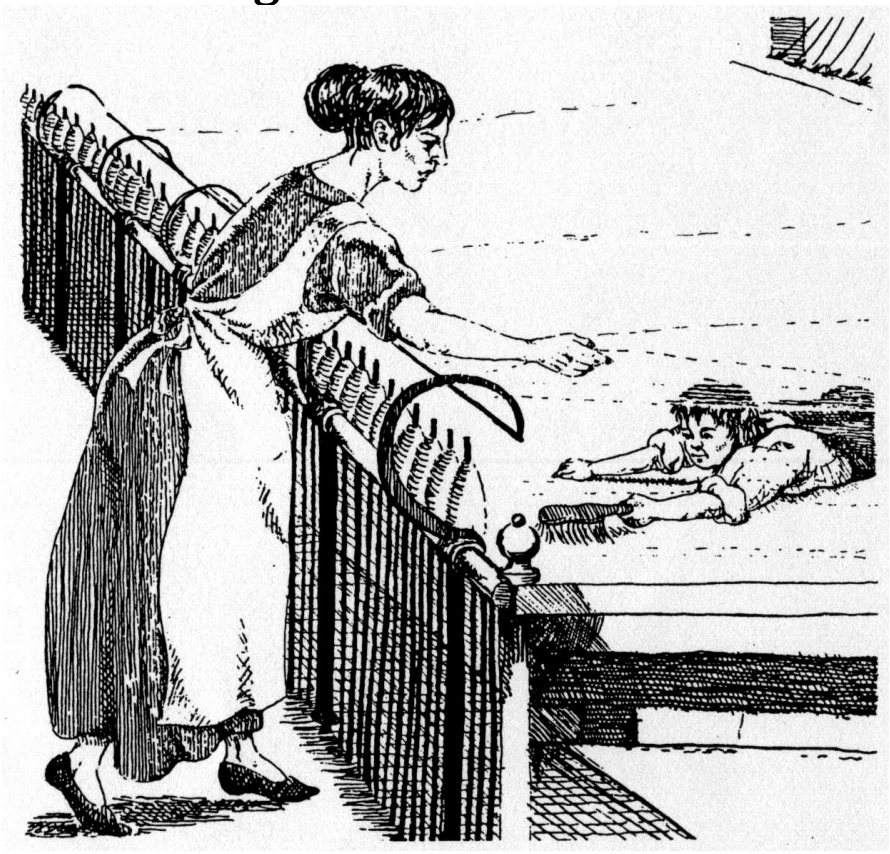
Cotton comes to town



The Birtwhistles met with James Murray to discuss their plans for cotton.

They needed land to build. James, eager to bring industry and progress to Gatehouse, recognised the potential of their idea. In 1785 a deal was struck and the first cotton mill was built. Gatehouse had not been the Birtwhistles' first choice. They had tried to build a similar mill complex on their Kirkcudbright estate. The laird, the Earl of Selkirk, had refused as he was worried that his mansion might be disgraced by the vicinity of an establishment of manufacturing industry."

Cotton is king



The Birtwhistle cotton mills were soon followed by others, owned by McWilliam, Scott & Co., and Papple and Smith.

Gatehouse of Fleet was ideally situated to benefit from the boom in cotton manufacture. Water from the Bush Moss and Loch Whineyon turned the water wheels, in those days the only practical source of power. The Water of Fleet provided a highway for the large sailing ships which brought raw cotton and carried away finished yarn and cloth to Liverpool and Glasgow.

Initially the labour required came from local people who had been spinning and weaving wool and flax in their own homes, and those who had been forced off the land by enclosures. Later, additional experienced labour was imported from the textile areas of England.

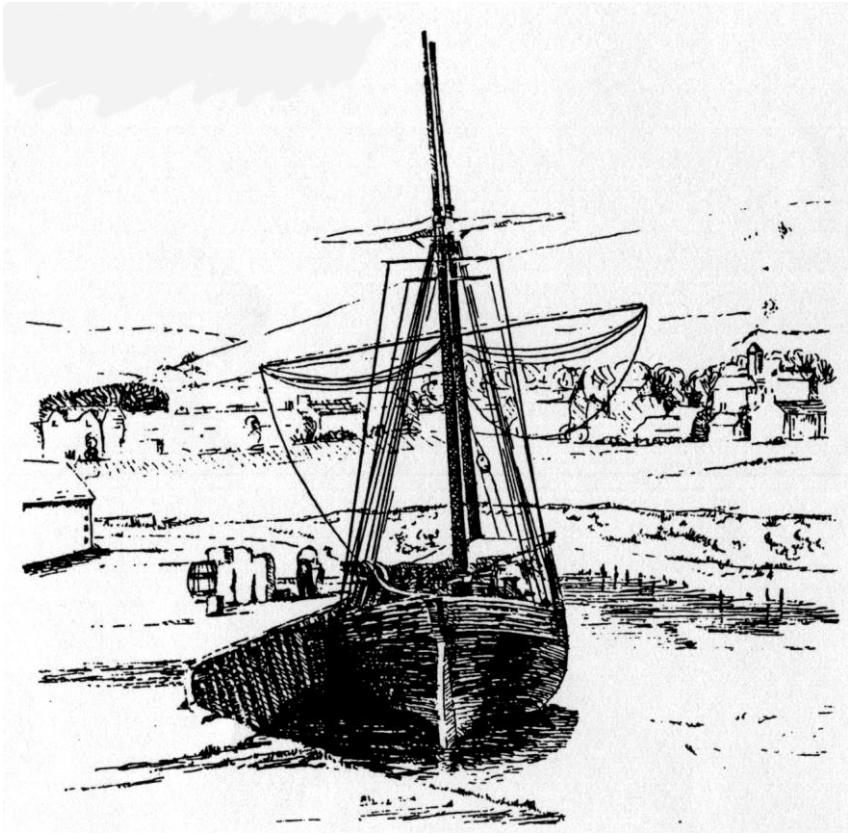
Water for the wheels

Cotton, and the other new industries encouraged by Murray, needed power and he had the land, resources and capital to supply **it.**

His agreement with the Birtwhistles obliged Murray to provide a water supply to power the new mills. He, therefore, arranged for a complex system of 'lades', or channels, to be constructed to divert water from Loch Whinyeon and Bush Moss to the various mills and their water wheels.

One of these man-made streams ran through the centre of the town to supply the brass foundry, brewery and the Birtwhistle mills. A second lade passed down the east side of the town, to Scott's Mill and the tanneries. Altogether, five miles of lades were cut, the use of which was rigidly controlled by Murray, the landlord.

Port McAdam

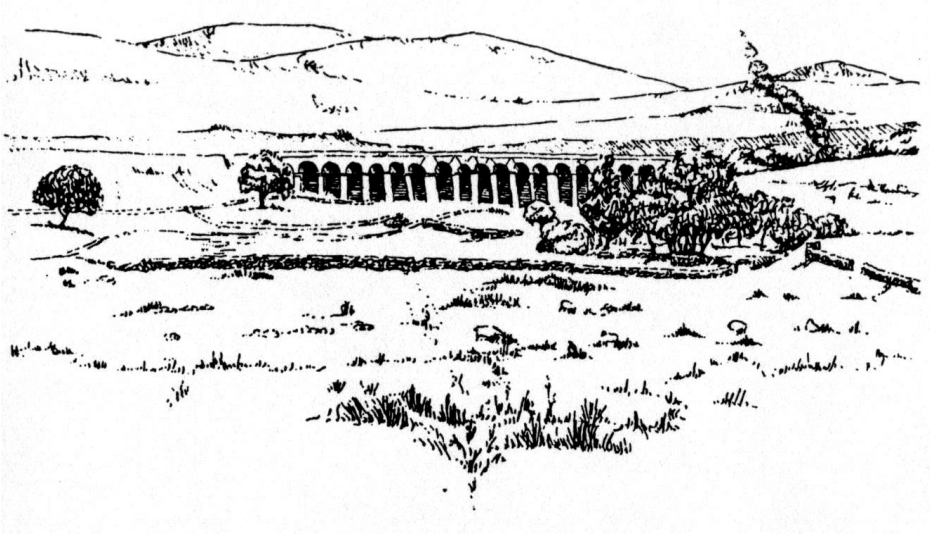


As Gatehouse grew, it depended more and more on the boats that brought vital supplies and carried away the produce of mills, mines, farms and forests.

A canal was cut to improve access to the town's Boat Green but larger vessels needed deeper water. In 1836 a local merchant, David McAdam, was given permission by Alexander Murray to construct a wharf further down river to take vessels of up to 300 tons. This the merchant modestly called Port McAdam.

For a while, the port, and McAdam, prospered with trade, but the railways were coming and water transport was in decline. The fate of Port McAdam was bound up with the industrial fate of Gatehouse. Trade slumped, industries failed and, twenty years after building his port, McAdam was facing ruin.

The Railway



Throughout Britain, the growth of a railway network enabled goods to be transported faster and more efficiently. The age of steam brought in its wake new opportunities for commerce and industry. Except in Gatehouse of Fleet, a transport revolution was in process.

Not until 1860 did a branch of the Portpatrick Railway arrive in the area on its journey between Castle Douglas and Stranraer. Gatehouse at last had its station, but six miles away in the Galloway Hills! Had the railway come nearer, and sooner, the town's story could have been quite different.

Who was to blame? Local landowners, including James' son, Alexander Murray, who were unwilling to sell land? Or was a coastal route just too expensive? Whatever the reason, without the railway, industry in Gatehouse of Fleet was no longer competitive.

The fall of King Cotton

The cotton industry transformed Gatehouse of Fleet, but whilst its heyday was dramatic, it was also short-lived.

The mill owned by the local surgeon, Mr. Papple, at 29 Fleet Street was the first to close in 1795, only four years after opening.

Scott's mill followed a few years later, around the turn of the century.

In 1810, Alexander Birtwhistle died. He was the younger brother of the three Birtwhistles who built the first mill, and with him the mills died. With no heir, the mills and his mansion were sold.

There was a brief but important revival of the Birtwhistle mills under Davidson and Company in the 1830's and 40's, but by 1858 this had also failed and the mills and their contents were auctioned off.

The death of James Murray in 1799 heralded the decline of the cotton industry in the town he had created. Although it did not last long, the cotton industry in Gatehouse was successful in its day. It brought prosperity and employment to the town. Why did it fail?

The Birtwhistle mills were by far the largest and most successful of the Gatehouse mills, but compared to those of Lancashire, Paisley and Glasgow, they were tiny. Bigger mills made bigger profits.

Most raw cotton came from America, brought by sailing ships to the Atlantic ports of Glasgow and Liverpool. Gatehouse was too far from these ports.

The town depended too much on water transport when the emerging railway system presented a more efficient way of getting goods to market.

Nearly half of the population of Gatehouse of Fleet was employed in the variou.s cotton works at their peak. The money they spent from their wages provided employment for many others.

The closure of the cotton mills was a disaster. Those who lost jobs and had no money put by had to rely on the charity of others. Many were reduced to begging from door to door.

Alexander Murray and his wife, Lady Ann, made contributions of money and supplied vegetables from the Cally gardens to a soup kitchen in the town. Local farmers gave out free oatmeal.

Poor Dan McKeachie:

"*Death was occasioned by want of food, and by exposure to the keen frost so early in the morning*".

New Life for the Mills

Surprisingly, the death of the cotton industry was not the end of the mills.

Scott's Mill was bought by Messrs. Haliday and Spiers. They converted it into a water-powered saw mill for the Cally Estate. There was a great deal of timber growing locally and this became a major centre in the developing Galloway timber trade. This former mill is now a private house.

James Davidson's revival of cotton production here at the Birtwhistle Mills did not last long.

In 1850 they were sold to Thomas and William Helme, who converted them into a complex producing wooden bobbins. The large upper mill, now a total ruin, housed all the machinery for making the bobbins - it was the actual 'Bobbin Mill'. The lower building was used as a bark mill and store.

A need for bobbins

Bobbins, or pirns, gather cotton thread during the spinning process. Until perhaps thirty years ago, they were usually made of wood and the spinning industry used great quantities of them.

Gatehouse of Fleet had several advantages as a location for bobbin manufacture - an empty mill building, good quality local timber, a strong textile tradition, and skilled employees. The source of power was still the water wheels, although elsewhere steam was taking over as the motive force of industry.

Gatehouse quickly became a major centre for the making of bobbins, supplying the main textile producing areas of Glasgow, Ulster and Lancashire. By the time of the First World War the entire output of the Bobbin Mill was going to Coates of Paisley, whose cotton products are world renowned.

Making bobbins

There were six separate stages in the making of a bobbin:

Cutting

The wood is de-barked and then cut into manageable lengths whilst still wet. In Gatehouse, the bark was taken away to be used in the nearby tanning industry.

Boring

The tops are cut to the length required and then a hole is bored through the centre.

Roughing

The bored tops are trimmed on a lathe to the rough shape required, ready for the final accurate turning on the finishing lathe.

Drying

Up until now, the wood is still ‘wet’ with sap. Finishing is easier with dry wood, so the roughed bobbins are placed in a drying kiln.

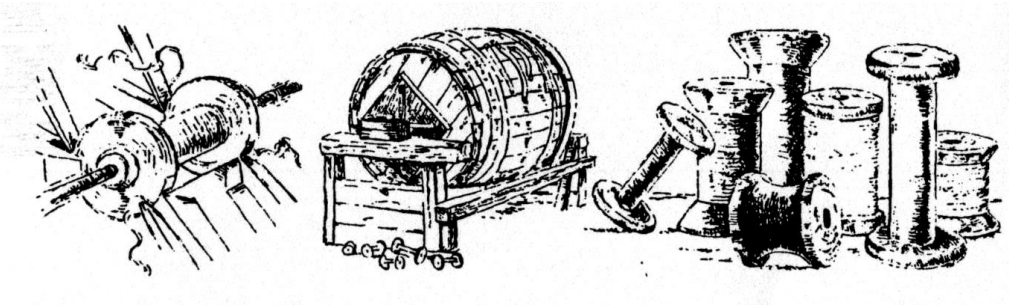
Finishing

Once dry, the bobbins are turned on finishing lathes, with the final shaping achieved using a variety of cutting tools.

Polishing

The finished bobbins are placed in a polishing barrel, into which a lump of lard or paraffin wax has been placed. After 20 - 30 minutes rotation the bobbins will have a varnish-like finish.

A story of success



The Bobbin Mill operated successfully for almost eighty years, until the Second World War, although production was stopped several times by *fires,* and one mill had to be rebuilt.

As well as providing employment for up to thirty men and women, the Bobbin Mill also kept the local population well supplied with cheap firewood! The local forestry industry benefited from having a ready market for its timber, which created more employment.

The Gatehouse of Fleet bobbin industry did not, however, survive the war. Although the British cotton industry picked up, the demand for wooden bobbins never recovered. New materials were being used, such as treated paper and plastic. The mill buildings were left empty and once more the water wheels were still.