

Largo Spinning Mill, drg. no. 1, flax cultivation, site history & spinning mill construction. John Band. 2019

Flax was grown in Scotland until the 1950's. It was valued partly for the oil crushed from its seed (linseed), but more for its yield of a fibre stronger than any other natural fibre and the oldest known to be used in textiles. The cultivation of flax was encouraged by the state with the formation of The Board Of Trustees For Fisheries & Manufacture in 1727 who provided financial incentives to growers and land owners. The board was instrumental in introducing new or improved methods of both cultivating and processing flax, sending men to Holland to learn new techniques. The construction of lint mills (mills which processed the flax prior to spinning into yarn by individual spinners in their households) was also encouraged by financial incentives. The first lint mill in Scotland being set up at Monnyton Mills, Edinburgh in 1730 by James Spalding.

In Scotland flax growers preferred clay-loam or clay land that has been enriched with manure for the cultivation of flax. The general opinion being that flax should not be grown in ground that is too wet or too dry, nor that is very poor or very rich. Ground similar to good wheat land being ideal. The sowing of oats as a lea crop and flax as a second crop was preferred. The land should be ploughed at the end of January/ beginning of February, the ground is then harrowed prior to sowing no sooner than the last week in March. The preferred seed for sowing and producing the best crop being imported from Riga, with some seed kept for sowing the following year. From April to June the crop is hand weeded when the flax reaches 2 inches (950mm) in height, this is important as weeds may cause the plant to grow bent causing wastage during the processing stage. The flax is pulled by hand when the stems become a little yellow and the lower leaves have dropped but never when the plant is damp as this can lead to spoiling by rubbing & handling.

The crop when pulled is "rippled", the process for removing the "bolls" or seed heads by drawing the stems through a rippling comb. After being bound in sheaves and stoked it is ready for "steeping" or watering in pits (retting ponds) specially dug for the purpose and measuring 8-10 feet (2.4-3.0m) wide by a maximum of 3 feet 6 inches (1.0m) deep, filled with soft water, free from minerals. Historically flax was steeped in any available stream or pond, however this was outlawed from a very early period as this contaminated the water and caused illness or death to animals drinking from it. The bundles of flax were weighted down in the ponds to ensure total submersion and left for several days, after 5 days samples were taken to test whether the flax fibres were separating from the woody stem or pith, if not the process was left to continue until a satisfactory sample was obtained, after which the bundles of flax were removed from the pond and left to dry on the adjacent grass. Over retting of flax could cause damage to it by rendering it weak resulting in the breakage of the flax fibres.

The first flax spinning mill in Scotland was constructed by Walter Sim & Walter Thom in 1787 at Inverbervie, Kincardineshire, the machinery being obtained under licence from the patentees, Messrs Kendrow & Porthouse of Darlington. At this time no flax tow spinning was carried out, tow being considered as a waste material from the heckling process.

During the early 1800's the demand for flax grew to such an extent that it had to be increasingly imported from the continent. The pier at Largo was built circa 1815-20 by the Durham's of Largo estate, I presume to provide a landing for the imported flax and export of the finished yarn to Dundee, Kirkcaldy and elsewhere that the large weaving mills existed by this time.

The flax spinning mill at Largo was built in 1798 on the site of a barley, lint & waulk mill then under a 999 year lease from Largo estate by William Russell, the mill being indicated on Ainslie's map of 1775 and let by William Russell from as early as 1780. Russell advertised the mill to let in January 1798. The construction of the earlier lint mill and the reconstruction to form a flax spinning mill by the Durham family of Largo estate who were both very popular and always keen to improve their estate and the work prospects for their tenants and villagers more than likely took advantage of the financial incentives provided by the Board Of Trustees as mentioned above. The flax spinning mill being advertised for let in 1801 and described as 2 1/2 years old. The

construction of the mill, I suspect was carried out by the first to lease the premises ie Alexander Leslie (1754-1835), architect & builder in Largo and his brother James Leslie (1756-1834), farmer and recorded as a flax grower at Chesterstone farm by Upper Largo. The photographs of the buildings clearly show the mill house as a crisp structure alongside the much older heckle house on one side (closest to the viaduct) and the building later to be converted to a gas works & forge on the other. The Leslie's themselves appear to have been the spinners at Largo employing a manager James Davidson in 1828, however after this date they sub-let the premises to several mill spinners culminating with Messrs Swan Brothers of Kirkcaldy & Kinghorn in the 1850's by which time James Leslie Junior (1801-1889), son of Alexander and famed as an engineer on many of Scotland's docks such as Leith & Dundee was the lessee.

An excellent description of Largo spinning mill is recorded in a precognition document of 1842 when the then tenant David Leslie (no known relation to the lessees) attempted to burn down the mill by leaving the gas taps open and using a trail of burning gun powder in order claim on the £1500 insurance. This failed, Leslie was found guilty but absconded prior to standing trial at Perth. Along with the description of the mill house, heckle house and gasworks (installed circa 1835) the building behind the mill later to become a cottage circa 1860 is described as the "counting house" with flax store beneath. The precognition also describes David Leslie's residence/byre stable and its distance from the mill which appears to fit perfectly with Bridgend House, adjoining the Railway Inn. Prior to the construction of the railway viaduct in the early to mid 1850's a large flax warehouse stood on the site at Drummochy (now grass), this was also part of the Largo mill complex, having its own access from the ford crossing the burn, part of this access can still be seen today alongside the viaduct pier.

The following floor plans and section of Largo spinning mill have been produced with the assistance of the 1842 precognition document, advertisements for its let; O.S. Maps and research into the process & machinery employed in flax spinning of the period.

Location (enlarged 1854 O.S. map traced)

