

Possible Bobbin mill, Drumsallie

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Resulting from interpretation of the account of the Salen Pirn Mill fire, at one time it was thought that the owners of the Salen Pirn Mill, John Clark Junior of Glasgow, had a second bobbin mill at Drumsallie. However, a review of all the evidence available suggests that this was not in fact the case.

The Full Description of this mill provided on the Highland HER website states that:

Part of the lade is quite well defined however not much remains of the building. In the account of the Salen Mill fire, a second water powered Pirn Mill was mentioned at Drumsallie. Exact location unknown, J Lawson, Kinlochmoidart, believes it to be still standing. J Dye, Acharacle, info passed on by G Clark, Treslaig (ref 18).

Each element of this evidence bears further examination.

Account of the Salen Mill fire

During the enquiry into the fire which destroyed the Salen Pirn Mill, William Davidson, the manager of the mill, was reported to have been working at Druimsallie, "superintending the cutting of timber" when the fire broke out.¹ John Dye, a local historian, who made information about the Salen Mill fire available online, took this to indicate "the same company operated a second mill at Druimsallie. It is assumed that the Druimsallie mill also closed in 1854. The Druimsallie site is now occupied by a salmon hatchery and there is no discernible sign of the old pirn mill".²

However, an examination of the evidence now suggests that while birch trees were cut at Druimsallie, they were transported to Salen for use in the mill there, rather than being processed at a bobbin mill at Druimsallie itself.

A report of the centenary celebration of the 1745 Jacobite rising, told of the barges used to transport birch wood to "Clark's bobbin factory" being requisitioned,³ which suggests that the timber for the Salen Pirn Mill was transported down Loch Shiel, and therefore could easily have been extracted at Drumsallie.

Moreover, although a Bobbin Mill at Drumsallie is mentioned in a number of secondary sources, these all appear to be based on the John Dye's original webpage, rather than on primary sources. Indeed, there are also discrepancies between the different sources regarding the location.

If John Dye was correct that the bobbin mill's site is now occupied by a salmon hatchery that would place it at grid reference NM934804, which appears as the site of Drumasallie Mill on both the 1st edition (survey date 1872) and 2nd edition (revised 1899) OS maps. Notably, however, Drumasallie Mill was identified as a "corn mill" on the 2nd edition OS map, but is shown as Drimsallie Mill on the modern OS map.

Archaeological Survey including Drimsallie Mill

An archaeological survey of the area around Drimsallie Mill, conducted in 2013, pointed out that "a saw mill was operating at Drimsallie in the 1940's or 1950's" and suggested that "it is possible that it had the same function in the mid-19th century" and hence that "the original mill may have been a sawmill".⁴ The report noted that according to the census, the Drimsallie residents included a 'sawyer' in both 1851 and 1861, though not thereafter. Indeed, there was also a 'woodcutter' and two other men 'working at wood' in 1861.

The presence of woodcutters and sawyers in 1851 and 1861 may well indicate that wood was being extracted in the Drumsallie area at that time, and may suggest the presence of a sawmill. However, it seems unlikely that Drumasallie Mill would have originally been built as a sawmill and only later converted into a corn mill, since historically it was more usual for rural mills to progress being from

being corn mills to sawmills, as the requirement for local corn mills diminished. If a sawmill did exist, it was probably in addition to Drumasallie Corn Mill.

Evidence from the archaeological survey and census does nothing to support the idea of a bobbin mill at Drumnasallie, since none of the occupations listed in the census were directly related to bobbin making. There is no record of any mill at Drumsallie, whether corn mill, sawmill or bobbin mill in the valuation rolls.

Information from George Clark of Treslaig

George Clark of Treslaig, near Fort William collated a list of water mills in Lochaber during 1999-2001. In addition to the Pirn Mill at Salen, this list included two mills at Drumsallie, a meal mill and a bobbin mill, both at the same grid reference (apparently erroneously recorded as NM834804 rather than NM934804).⁵

However, the inclusion of these the bobbin mill in George Clark's list appears to have resulted from John Dye's reference to such a mill in the report of the Salen Pirn Mill fire. The list does not include any supporting information, and gives no explanation of why the Drumsallie Mill was thought to be a bobbin mill. Moreover, no additional information is available from George Clark, whose widow does not have any records from the research he undertook.⁶

Information from Jean Lawson, Kinlochmoidart

The description of the Drumsallie Bobbin Factory on the Highland HER website states that J Lawson from Kinlochmoidart believes the mill to be still standing.

Unfortunately, however, it has not proved possible to substantiate this statement, which appears to have resulted from a misunderstanding. In 2015 Highland HER staff reported not having any additional background information to support their online record and not being aware of any corroborating evidence for a bobbin mill at Drumsallie.⁷

When asked to clarify the reason for her view that the bobbin mill at Drumsallie is still standing, Jean Lawson referred to a mill that is still standing at Strontian, though it was not a bobbin mill, and said that the name Drumsallie did not mean anything to her at all.⁸

Photographs provided by Martin Briscoe

The HER website lists the Drumsallie Bobbin Factory not at NM934804, but rather at NM9819 7886, which pinpoints a location between the A830 and A861, at the end of Loch Eil, near the property called Drumsallie. So, a quite different location from the one identified by John Dye.

On the original OS maps the property appeared as Drumasallie and the area identified by grid reference NM9819 7886 was shown without features, just above what is marked as the level of the "highest point to which ordinary spring tides flow" on the 1st edition OS map.

The images provided of this area (added to the Highland HER website in 2012) are reported to show the remains of a mill lade plus "what looks like the remains of a corrugated iron building". However, John Dye has suggested that the flatness of this area of land raises the question of whether it would be "worthwhile building a long lade to reach it when there were so many nearby sites on good burns", and when he asked the farmer at Drumsallie Farm whether there was ever a bobbin mill locally, he said he did not know of one. ⁹

This information raises doubts about the interpretation of the evidence shown in the photographs as the remains of a bobbin mill, or indeed of any sort of mill. Another possible interpretation of the "mill lade" photographed may be that it was a drainage ditch.

Summary

In summary, there is no clear evidence to suggest that there ever was a bobbin mill at Drumsallie, and the idea this was the case appears to have stemmed from John Dye's original interpretation in

his report on the Salen Pirn Mill fire. Having reconsidered the information available, John Dye has in fact changed the text on his webpage to read “the same company operated a second mill at Druimsallie, apparently this one was simply a sawmill used to produce cut timber for transport to Salen and converting into bobbins. It is assumed that the Druimsallie mill also closed in 1854. The Druimsallie site is now occupied by a salmon hatchery and there is no discernible sign of the old mill.”¹⁰

Unless further documentary evidence comes to light, it therefore seems probable that there never was a bobbin mill at Druimsallie though there may have been a sawmill at grid reference NM934804. There does not appear to be any evidence at all of either a bobbin mill or a sawmill at grid reference NM9819 7886.

Notes

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- 1 John Dye, The Mill Fire at Salen, 1854, www.moidart.org.uk/datasets...
 - 2 John Dye Notes on the History of Salen, <http://www.moidart.org.uk/d...> (original version)
 - 3 St Finan’s Isle = Eilean Fhianain, It’s Story, Alastair Cameron, North Argyll, printed at the Oban Times, 1949
 - 4 An Archaeological Survey for the Dubh Lìghe Hydro Scheme, Fassfern Estate, Loch Eil, Lochaber, Highland. April 2013, p.10 Jennifer G. Robertson, referencing Gibson, John G., Back O’ The Hill, 2008, p.34 <https://her.highland.gov.uk...>
 - 5 George Clark, Water Mills/Water Power, 2001
 - 6 Margaret Clark, via John Dye, personal communication, 5th November 2015
 - 7 Ian Scrivener-Lindley, HER Officer / Historic Environment Team / Highland Council, personal communication, 20th and 26th October 2015
 - 8 Jean Lawson, personal communication, 29th November 2015
 - 9 John Dye – personal communication, 4th January 2016
 - 10 John Dye Notes on the History of Salen, <http://www.moidart.org.uk/d...> (current version)