

Dunfermline's Industrial Past

Hugh Elder & Son, Grain Merchants & Millers Queen Anne Street & City Mills, Inglis Street, Dunfermline

Invoice from

HUGH ELDER & SON

MILLERS, GRAIN AND SEED MERCHANTS

FEEDING STUFFS AND FORAGE

ARTIFICIAL MANURES + OIL CAKES

Mr. D. Anderson,
East Bank,
Crossford.

CITY MILLS, DUNFERMLINE

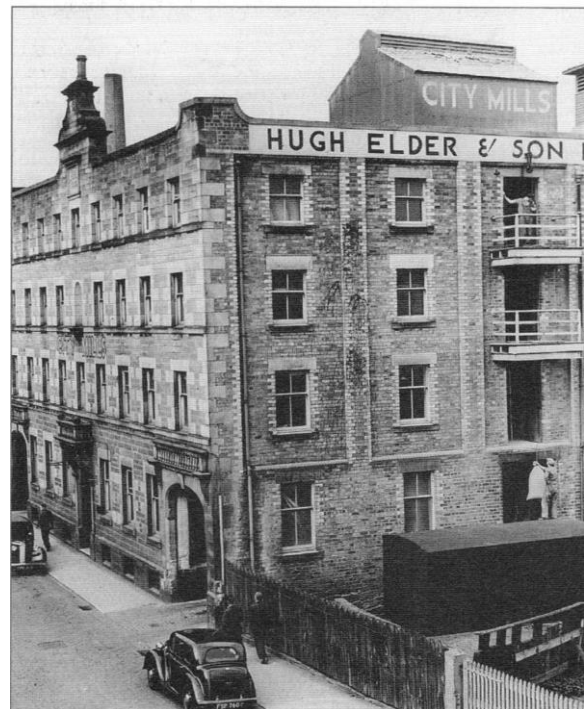
Agents for ALEX. JACK & SONS
Agricultural Implement
Makers, MAYBOLE

Distributors for
THE WELL-KNOWN B.O. & C.M.
DAIRY AND CATTLE CAKES

Born in Dunfermline in 1806, David Elder, the founder of the above firm, is described as being 'a man of common stamp'. Apparently cast upon his own resources in early life (Dunfermline Press of 23rd July, 1870) Mr Elder learned the weaving trade, and maintained himself by it, at the same time embracing every opportunity that presented itself for the cultivation of his intellect until, by degrees, he wrought himself into the position of assistant to Mr Haxton, Principle of the High School, and thereafter taught successfully in Pittencrieff Street for 13 years. Poor health cut short his teaching career and, in 1834, whilst King William IV was still on the throne, Mr Elder went into business for himself, firstly as a grocer with a house and shop at the corner of High Street and New Row. Most grocers of the time also dealt in grain and this soon led to him opening a granary on the south side of Queen Anne Street (situated opposite the later premises of John Goodall & Co). The granary was apparently purpose built and is likely to have been the premises later occupied by The City Bakery for many years.

David Elder died on 16th July, 1870, at

High Street, Dunfermline (see Note 1), and his son, Hugh, took over the running of the business. The name Hugh Elder & Son was then applied to the firm and it would be known as such for the next 100 or so years. Around this time Messrs Elder were also operating a small flour mill at Oakley.



Elder's Inglis Street City Mill c. 1950. Note the sacks being hoisted on right from a railway van.

In 1905, Hugh Elder built an extensive mill and office premises, known as the City Mills, in Inglis Street, together with several huge buildings for grain storage purposes. These premises were located at the north end of Inglis Street, adjacent to the railway goods yard of Dunfermline Upper Station, and had their own railway siding providing the business with ready access to rail transport. The Queen Anne Street granary was given up at this time.

In 1906, Hugh Elder's son, Archibald, joined his father in the business and both men built up a sound business with a wide-ranging supplier and customer base.



C. 1910 photo of an Elder's horse drawn lorry at the City Mill dressed up for an agricultural show with probably members of the Elder family at the rear.



C. 1925 and Elder's form of transport has moved on to a motor lorry.

The principal product from the new premises was oatmeal, which was a new venture for the company but one which would, over the ensuing years, prove to

be very successful. In addition to the milling business however, Elder was a principal supplier to the farming industry throughout east/central Scotland of animal feeding produce, artificial manures and oil cakes. They were also agents for agricultural implements, etc. This involved a significant number of sales staff who travelled throughout the farming areas seeking orders for the firm. Names of travellers that have been mentioned as being with the firm over the years were Jimmy Torrance, Willie Strang, Fred Lees, Jack Hutchison, Charlie Cope, Tom Brough, David Wilson and Eddie Gordon. Most of those mentioned were with the firm for a good number of years with Jimmy Torrance and Charlie Cope having served from the 1930s and were directors when the business finished up in 1968.

Hugh Elder died on 13th May 1933 (see Note 2), aged 83 years, having earlier that day spent time at the mill. His family home for many years had been Walmer House (now the office premises of Malcolm, Jack & Mathieson, Solicitors), Walmer Drive, Dunfermline.

Archibald Elder (better known by his staff as A.J.) then took control, becoming managing director when the firm became a limited liability company in 1942. By this time the family had built up a large business, with grain interests extending over the greater part of north-east Scotland.

Flora Cope (m/s Ferrier) – interviewed in 2011 – started work in 1944 as a junior in Elder's office and worked her way up to company book-keeper by the time she left on her marriage to Charlie Cope in 1963. She said there would be about 12 staff in Elder's office when she started but, by the time she finished some twenty years later, this number had diminished to 4 or 5. Flora spoke highly of A.J. Elder, describing him as a very popular boss with both the mill and office staff and

always ready to help anyone with a problem. Hugh Elder Jnr., however, was much quieter and more remote.

In a feature article in the Dunfermline and West Fife Journal of 25th May, 1949, recalled the early days of the Inglis Street works and also the situation in 1949:-

“Mr A.J. Elder, representing the third generation of his family in the business continued the policy of expansion, keeping it abreast of modern development and scientific knowledge, with the result that it is now one of the most important firms of its kind in Central Scotland.

In the early years of the present century the milling of oatmeal was only a small part of the general business of grain merchants.

Then came the 1914 -18 war and imports of food from abroad were severely cut and the demand for home produced oatmeal rocketed to heights previously un-known in the history of the industry. But the boom was short-lived. At the end of hostilities and the return to normal trading conditions the Scottish oatmeal millers found they could not compete with the prices offered by their competitors in Canada, Ireland and the Continent. The market for oatmeal slumped.

However, along came World-War-Two in 1939 with the intensive blockade of Britain’s overseas food ships by the German U-boats and once more the cry went out for home-produced oats. Production was stepped up to record figures and at the City Mills, Dunfermline, the plant worked almost continuously for 144 hours each week turning out meal for human consumption, not only to augment civilian rations, but for use by the British and Allied forces. Butchers and bakers used it and flour millers bought it as a diluent for flour, while it also replaced rice

as a dusting material in biscuit factories. Between 1942 and 1945 the City Mills was turning out some 5,000 tons of oats each year for human consumption.

After the 1939-45 war history repeated itself. With the abnormally high war-time consumption of oatmeal gone, the demand slumped again. Furthermore, the market is now flooded with prepared breakfast cereal.

The majority of the oats used by Messrs Hugh Elder & Son for milling come from the eastern farming counties of Scotland. Preference is given by the Dunfermline firm to the various types of thin-skinned oats, but difficulty has been experienced in persuading the farmer to grow these, as the yield is greater from other varieties.



A sack of oatmeal being weighed at the mill by Alec Ogilvie. Others (left to right) are James Pringle, Sam Somerville, Jack Scott and Neil Williamson

‘Past generations of farmers have been inclined to look upon the grain merchant as a necessary evil,’ said a director of the firm, ‘but with more scientific methods of farming and greater opportunities for agricultural education, the agricultural community now realises that the many and varied functions of the grain merchant are a valuable part of the agricultural industry, and can be of enormous benefit to every farmer.’



James Torrance (left) and Hugh Elder examine the quality of hay in the vast hay shed.

Seventy workers are employed by the firm at the City Mills and in 1943 the firm was incorporated into a private limited company to enable certain of the employees to take up shares on a profit-sharing basis.

Oldest employee is 67 year old head miller Jack Scott, 78 James Street, Dunfermline, who has been with Messrs Hugh Elder & Son for forty years.

Let us follow the actual processes which are necessary before the oats are turned into oatmeal ready for sale in the shops.

The sacks of oats are brought direct to the City Mills by road, or in some cases by rail to a special siding alongside the mill building near to Dunfermline Upper Station. The oats are then taken to the top flat of the mill by elevator where they are fed into a hopper before passing through three cleaning machines which remove impurities in readiness for the drying kiln.



This photo was taken from the roof of the City Mills looking down the outside hoist by which sacks were unloaded from railway wagons. Jock Young and Sandy Henderson are seen unloading.



Willie Appleford and Hugh Brown stack bags of oats on their arrival at the top of the elevator.

The drying of the grain is one of the most essential features of oatmeal milling and it is important that the correct moisture content is left in the oats. This moisture content of 7 per cent maximum is tested three times every twenty-four hours. In addition an automatic temperature recorder produces a chart showing the temperature of the kiln throughout the period.

In the old days of milling the drying was done in kilns, the oats being continuously turned by hand to allow the hot air from the furnace below to pass through the grains. Today, however, Messrs Hugh Elder & Son have an automatic drying kiln into which the oats are fed at the top, gradually passing through a series of perforated plates and heated by a draft warm air until they emerge at the bottom

ready for milling. The kiln can deal with an average of between 25 and 30 cwt. of oats an hour.

After drying, the oats are passed through a further cleaning process eliminating impurities before they enter the shelling machines where the husks are removed from the grain. It will be noticed that this process of 'de-husking' takes place after the kiln drying and is the sequence adopted by the Dunfermline firm in common with other Scottish millers. In England, however, the process is reversed, but the Scottish method appears to be better, for Scotch oatmeal can always be sold against the English product, even at a price difference.

Although the husks have been removed the oats are still not ready for grinding. The dust and husks have still to be removed from the bulk, and this is done by sifting and shaking the grain and fanning it with strong currents of air.

A special separator called a 'Paddy' machine then takes out any oats which are still unshelled or any other impurities remaining in the groats as they are called after the removal of the husk.

Finally, the groats go to the cutting rollers or to the meal-grinding stones, which grind them into the required grade of oatmeal. When the grinding process has been completed the oatmeal is elevated and dropped down a chute and into a sack where it is drawn off and weighed."

Archibald Elder remained in control of the firm until his sudden death in March, 1953, aged 66, at his home, Pitbauchlie, Aberdour Road, Dunfermline (now the Pitbauchlie House Hotel) – see Note 3.

Archibald's son, Hugh, succeeded his father as managing director, working with fellow directors David Marshall, James Torrance, Charles Cope and Daniel S.C.

McNeill. David Marshall was Elder's company lawyer and a partner in the Dunfermline firm of Stevenson & Marshall, Solicitors; Jim Torrance and Charlie Cope were commercial travellers with Elder, whilst Daniel Stewart Clink McNeill was the company secretary. Daniel McNeill had joined the firm in 1941 when he returned to Scotland from Burma where he had worked with a tea company in Rangoon.



The above photo shows some of Elder's staff in 1949 with those named by Flora Cope as follows:- back row, Neil Williamson, Sandy Henderson, Flint Harrower and Jimmy Williamson, who was the maintenance engineer. Front row: Andrew Hendry, Margaret Russell, Irene Stenhouse, Margaret Penman, Jack Scott, who was head miller, not known, Flora Cope and Betty Edwards. Those in the middle row could not be identified.

During the late 1950s/early '60s, with the advent of 'ready to serve' breakfast cereals and the medium of television advertising, oatmeal declined in popularity with the result that the market began to fall year on year. Elder's workforce also fell from a peak of around 100 during the war years to about 20 by the 1960s.

It came as no surprise when the Dunfermline Press of 18th May, 1968, featured an article stating that the Elder

firm was going into voluntary liquidation. Mr Elder was quoted thus, *“After much discussion and with great regret my co-directors and myself came to the decision some months ago that our old-established firm, which was founded in 1834, would have to go into voluntary liquidation. This was necessary in the interests of the shareholders because, for some time, the return on their capital was inadequate. We also feel that to continue might endanger the value of their shares.”*

Mr Elder went on to state that it was his intention to start up a new enterprise, likely to be named Hugh Elder (Dunfermline), Ltd. He explained that the new company would trade directly in purchasing cereals from farmers, and supplying their needs where necessary in feeding stuffs, cereal and grass seed. The business would be conducted from Mr Elder’s home at ‘Tighnult’, Kinnesswood, Kinross.

It is thought that this venture did not, in fact, get off the ground and that Mr Elder instead went into the hotel business in the Oban area.

The City Mills building, not being particularly suitable for any other type of industry, was demolished in the 1970’s. The site was later incorporated into the Carnegie Retail Park, with the firm of B&Q occupying the area where City Mills once stood.

The only legacy left in the town from Hugh Elder’s days is the block of houses, still known as Elder’s Buildings, in James Street. This block was built in 1898? to house Elder’s employees.

City Mills, like most Fife businesses of the time, closed completely for the ‘fair fortnight’ in July each year. Whilst closed during this period the opportunity was taken to seal off all doors and windows of the premises, then pump gas

into the building in order to kill off the large number of rodents that had taken up residence during the previous year.

Note 1 - David Elder, founder of the above firm, was born in Dunfermline on 6th September, 1806, the son of Hugh Elder, a damask linen weaver and his wife Anne Anderson. On 17th December, 1844, David, then described as a merchant in Dunfermline, married Catherine Connar, then residing in Glasgow. The couple were married in Glasgow by the Rev. John Gray, Minister of St Andrews, Glasgow. David died, aged 63 years, on 16th July, 1870, at High Street, Dunfermline (probably at his home there). His widow, Catherine, died on 28th October, 1893, aged 82 years, at 153 High Street, Dunfermline.

Note 2 David’s son, Hugh, was born on 23rd August, 1849. On 17th September, 1878, at The Orchard, Old Luce, Wigtonshire, Hugh, then 29, a grain merchant residing at High Street, Dunfermline, married Mary Roxburgh Jack, then 25 years and a school teacher, residing at Old Luce. The couple took up residence at Walmer House, East Port, Dunfermline, where they had two sons, David Stanley Elder and Archibald Jack Elder, and a daughter Mary Mabel Jack Elder. David died when only 6 months old. Archibald went to run the family business – see Note 3, whilst Mary became an active member of the Fife Voluntary Aid Detachment. Hugh Elder died, aged 83 years, on 13th May, 1933, at Walmer House. Hugh’s widow, Mary, died aged 82 years, on 23rd March, 1935, at Walmer House. Outside his business, Hugh had very few interests, although, in his younger days he had been an enthusiastic volunteer. Walmer House is now (2010) the offices of solicitors, Malcolm, Jack & Mathieson.

Note 3 – Captain Archibald Jack Elder (known as A.J.) was born on 29th August, 1886, at Walmer House,

Dunfermline. On 16th September, 1914, at Oakbank, Rose Street, Dunfermline, Archibald, then 28, married Hannah Longmuir Richmond Marshall, (23), daughter of James Marshall, Bleacher, Oakbank, Rose Street, Dunfermline, and his wife Margaret. The witnesses to the marriage were Anne H. Marshall and Geo. G.S.G. Russell. The Marshall family owned Clayacres Bleachworks in Foundry Street, as well as Headwell and Newmills Bleachworks. The couple had two children, Hugh and Margaret, both born at 30 Viewfield Terrace, Dunfermline. Margaret married Lieutenant Commander P.A. Whitehead. R.N. Archibald Elder died, aged 66 years, on 15th March, 1953, at his home, Pitbauchlie (now Pitbauchlie House Hotel), Aberdour Road, Dunfermline. His wife, Hannah, had died on 10th June, the previous year. Her death was registered by her son, Hugh Elder, Craighall, Aberdour.

Captain Elder's obituary in the Dunfermline Press of 21st March, 1953, stated that he had been educated at Stanley House School, Bridge of Allan. He was prominently involved with agricultural affairs, being a director of the Royal Highland Agricultural Society and a former president and honorary vice-president and member of the committee of the Western Division of the Fife Agricultural Society. Owner of the well-known Touch herd of large white pigs, he was also a great lover of horses and for a time was a member of the Fife Hunt. Mr Elder was chairman of the Dunfermline Burgh National Liberal and Unionist Association, a position to which he was elected in 1949. When he took over the reins of office, the prestige and influence of the Association were at their lowest ebb. Since then, it had been built up to a strong position, mainly due to Mr Elder's efforts, and, under his chairmanship two difficult Parliamentary elections were fought in support of the candidature of Mr Stuart J. Kerr, Chalfont St Giles, Buckinghamshire. In 1951, Mr Elder was

elected to the committee of the Scottish Conservative Club, Edinburgh. Many years' association with the Fife and Forfar Yeomanry began in 1907, when he served as a trooper in B Company. Commissioned in 1916, he served in the 1914-18 war with the 16th Highland Light Infantry and the 9th Black Watch in Belgium and France. He was twice wounded. He re-joined the Fife and Forfar Yeomanry when it re-formed as a Territorial Army unit in 1921, and served until 1928 as second-in-command. During the 1939-45 war, he held the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Home Guard. A staunch supporter of the Dunfermline branch of the British Legion, an organisation to which he rendered noteworthy service during the early years of its existence, Mr Elder was for many years its joint secretary.

Note 4 – Hugh Elder was born on 22nd February, 1919, at 30 Viewfield Terrace, Dunfermline. He married Rosalie Anne Frielinghaus. The couple had two of a family, David and Frances. Hugh died, aged 78 years, on 23rd November, 1997, at Raigmore Hospital, Inverness, his usual residence being Kerrow Lodge, Cannich, Beauly, Inverness-shire. His occupation was shown as Retired Grain Merchant and Hotelier. His death was registered by his son-in-law, Sandy McLennan, 39 Feddon Hill, Fortrose, Ross-shire, IV10 8SP.

Note 6 – Hugh Kennedy's (ex Goodall) father was manager of the City Mills during the early part of the 1900s. Hugh was also employed there in the office, during his younger days.

Note 7 – Check M/D for David Elder and same for his sister Frances, probably married to Sandy McLennan. It would appear that both David and Frances were adopted by David & Rosalie Elder.

Note 8 – Check with Flora Cope, 62 Victoria Terrace, Dunfermline – Tel

723359 re. Dave Wilson, who might have been a traveller with Elder. Who was Tom Brough? Where did Hugh Elder run the hotel? Any knowledge what happened to Hugh Elder's wife, Rosalie?