

Dunfermline Industries

Touch Bleachfield, Halbeath Road, Dunfermline

Around 1843, Messrs Ralph Walker (later of Elgin Bleachfield) and David Wilson opened a bleach works on the banks of the Lyne Burn at Touch. Within a decade of opening the field, Mr Walker and Mr Wilson dissolved the partnership, with the former establishing the Elgin Bleachfield on the banks of the same stream at the south side of Dunfermline, leaving Mr Wilson to operate at Touch.

The work of bleaching yarns is as old as the linen industry and, when Mr Wilson and Mr Walker dissolved their partnership in 1851, they were not slow in recognising that as long as Dunfermline was noted for table linen, so long would there be work for bleachers in the area. At Touch, Mr Wilson ultimately took a son, Mr John Wilson, into partnership with him, and for a long series of years the latter was head of the concern.

In the 1871 census, John Wilson, then 48 years of age and residing at Comely Park, Dunfermline, is designated a Master Bleacher, employing some 42 females, 19 men, and one boy. The record shows that John was married to Allison and that they had six daughters, Isabella (15); Kate (13); Alexina (11); Jessie (9); Helen (6); and Mary (4). The family also had two 'general servants' in residence. The Comely Park address (14 rooms according to the census) was, and still is, in a very desirable area of the town and probably indicates that the Touch business was doing very well.

In 1886, a lease of the works was acquired by Mr Robert Black, who a year previous had taken up the duties of manager. Mr Black, a native of Newburgh, had been trained in his profession at Cluniefield Bleach Works, Newburgh. When he entered Cluniefield he took up the humble duty of message boy, and so admirably did he adapt himself to the work of the various departments that, at an early age, he was raised to the responsible post of manager. In 1870, Mr Black was appointed manager of the once famous Haugh Bleachfield, on the River Leven, at Windygates, where he remained until he came to Touch.

In 1889, three years after Robert Black had taken a lease of Touch, the works came onto the market. He purchased the property, and from then the record at Touch was one of uninterrupted progress. During his 30 plus years in charge of Touch, Robert Black gained the reputation of one of stern discipline in his application to his work and to his personal supervision to his business. This trait was seen as a reflection of the hard toil he had endured during his youth. Mr Black, during his time at Touch, practically lived at the works – first in a house on the north side of Halbeath Road (later occupied by his son, George), next at Gowanbrae, overlooking the works from the hill on the south side, and lastly at Clarke Cottage, which he built at the west side of the works.

Even when he was well into his 80s Mr Black was keeping a close and observant eye on all aspects of the works.



Possibly the original residence of Robert Black on the north side of Halbeath Road opposite Touch. Now a veterinary surgery.



Gowanbrae House, Garvockhill



Clark Cottage, Touch.

The above houses are all still in situ, the first is now a Veterinary Surgery (Inglis). Gowanbrae is at the east end, south side of Garvockhill, whilst Clarke Cottage, is now Clarke Guest House on Halbeath Road.



Black family members at Clark Cottage.

In 1899, Mr Black had assumed as a partner his youngest son, Mr William Black, and the company name of Robert Black & Son was adopted. In 1886, when the senior partner started business on his own account, he confined himself to the trade which from the commencement had been associated with Touch, namely that of bleaching linen and cotton yarns sent in by manufacturers. He soon found, however, that some linen manufacturers in place of dealing direct with spinners in unbleached yarns, preferred to buy the finished article from merchant bleachers. Mr Black adapted himself to this new end of the trade, and from the time he took his son into partnership the yarn merchant department developed to an enormous extent. Interestingly, when young William Black married in 1895 his occupation was given as yarn agent. William, during his many years as principal of the company, was a well known and highly respected personality in the textile industry of Fife. He had initially studied medicine at Edinburgh University but the lure of running the bleach works proved too much to resist and his return to Touch was probably a very wise decision as the

business was probably at its peak during the 1920s.



Touch Bleachworks viewed from the south.

The yearly growing trade connections were reflected in the changes made at the works. During the early 1900s numerous extensions were made to the works, which, by 1914, comprised two bleaching houses, five drying stoves (steam), six store rooms, four drying sheds, and two finishing houses. Some years previous several small engines had given way to one large powerful engine, and electric light had been installed in every corner of the works. Maintaining the family connections, Robert Black's brother, William, was for many years employed as boiler fireman at the works.



Entrance to Touch Beachworks from Halbeath Road, now location of Kwik-Fit premises.

When Touch Bleachfield was in full operation it employed close on 70 workers and it handled 1.5 million lbs. of linen and about the same quantity

of cotton each year.

Early in its existence Touch Bleachwork was dependent entirely on the Lyne Burn for its water supply. The Lyne began as far-east as Fordell, and its chief sources of water supply were the Burnside Pit at Crossgates, and the Queen Pit at Halbeath. About the year 1880 the pumping engines at both pits were stopped, and the supply of water in the Lyne Burn became so much reduced in the summer months that the proprietors of works along the banks of the stream found themselves compelled to seek augmented supplies. In addition to having the advantage of the Dunfermline water, which had to be paid for, Messrs Black & Son, drew some 80,000 to 90,000 gallons of pure water from Artesian wells sunk on the premises.

A long-standing employee at Touch was Robert Davidson, a nephew of Robert Black, who served his apprenticeship there and went to manage the works for many years. At the time of his death, in 1954, he was resident at 110 Halbeath Road, Dunfermline.



Touch Bleachworks.

Angus William Black, elder son of Angus Ruthven Black, and great-

grandson of Robert Black, was interviewed in 2010 and recalled his childhood years at Touch Bleach Works. He was of the opinion that the company ceased trading in 1938/39, when it was incorporated into the Bleachers Association, Ltd. of Manchester. Angus recalled that, as a child, he often accompanied the lorry driver, Jimmy Bernard, when he delivered bleached linen to the factories of Messrs Hay & Robertson and Erskine Beveridge, in Dunfermline; Lockhart, Kirkcaldy, and to two other factories at Strathmiglo and Freuchie. Angus was of the opinion that some 45 to 50 girls, mainly from the villages of Halbeath and Crossgates, worked at Touch just prior to its closure. Angus wistfully noted that it was a wonderful place for a young lad to be brought up. He also recalled that the firm employed a joiner, Bob Clark; an engineer, Jimmy Wilson; a boilerman, and a full-time clerkess, Miss (Effie) Wilson. The Touch lorry driver, Jimmy Bernard, lived in the cottage on Halbeath Road, just to the west of the entrance to the bleach works.

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John Gallacher, whose father took over an area of ground to the south of the Bleach Work buildings, for use as a market garden in 1948, is of the opinion that the bleaching business had closed a few years before that.

Most of the buildings were then let out to the following business:- Bernard

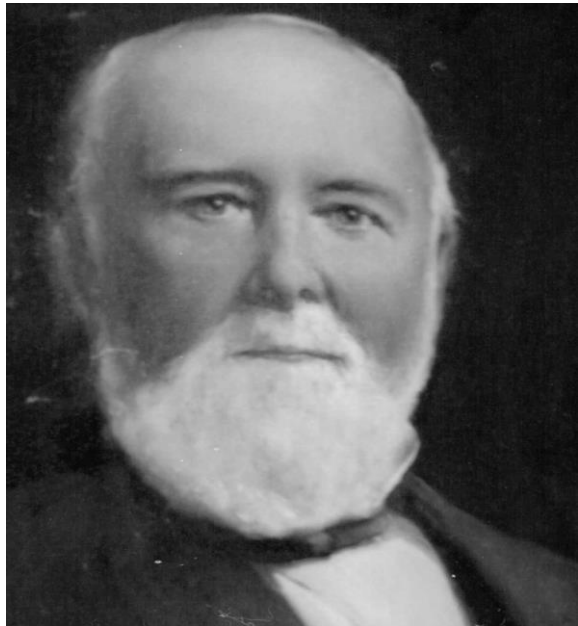
(Mills); Robertson, (Joiner); Drive-on-Air (Tyre Depot); Galloway (Builder); Gallacher (Nurseryman); and Crawford (Fruit Merchant).

Note 1 – David Wilson was born in Dunfermline on 10th April, 1796, the son of Baillie John Wilson, a damask linen manufacturer and his wife, Mary (m/s Black). On 1st October, 1820, David, then a weaver, married Catherine Walker. He died at Elgin Street, Dunfermline, on 8th November, 1874, aged 77 years.

Note 2 – John Wilson was born in Dunfermline on 28th March, 1823, the son of David Wilson, Weaver, and Catherine Walker. The witnesses in the OPR are John Millar and Ralph Walker, probably the brother of Catherine. On 5th July, 1852, John married Alexina Jamieson, then a resident of Alloa parish and the daughter of Alexander Jamieson, a Doctor of Medicine. The couple had the following children:- David, Isabella, Kate, Alexina, Jessie, Helen, and Mary. On selling the business to the Robert Black it appears that the Wilson family moved to Edinburgh. John Wilson died there, at 6 Lonsdale Terrace, on 29th January, 1891, at the age of 67 years. He was predeceased by his wife, Alexina, who died on 1st April, 1889, aged 61 years, at 30 South Bruntsfield Place, Edinburgh.

Note 3 – Robert Black was born on 17th April, 1831, at Newburgh, to parents Robert Black and Helen Tasker. Robert married twice, firstly on 20th August, 1852 to Annie Clark at Newburgh. Annie died on 3rd March, 1894, at Gowanbrae, Touch. On 6th July, 1899, at 25 Dick Place

Edinburgh, Robert, then 68, married Annie Scott m.s. Harley, a widow of 6 Beveridgewell, Dunfermline He died on 8th October, 1915, aged 84 years, at Clarke Cottage, Touch.



Robert Black



Annie Black

Although taking no prominent part in public life, Robert was known as a keen radical and he was able to

discuss privately, with great ability, the important political questions which cropped up from time to time. He was a member of the Church of Christ in Dunfermline, where he was a regular worshipper. He was survived by his widow and four sons and three daughters. His second wife, Annie, was a sister of Honorary Treasurer Harley, Dunfermline. She died 30th January, 1921, aged 81 years, also at Clarke Cottage, Touch.

Note 4 –



William Black

William Black, son of Robert, was born on 9th March, 1871, at Windygates, Fife. On 3rd January, 1895, at the Christian Meeting House, Chapel Street, Dunfermline, William, then 24 years, married Isabella E. Doig, (32), a machinist, from Crossgates. William died on 17th July, 1946, aged 75 years, at his home, Fod Bank House, Dunfermline.

William was pre-deceased by his wife, Isabella, who died on 5th December, 1941, aged 80 years. In addition to owning Fod Bank House, William owned Isla Cottage, Ruthven, Perthshire, possible a holiday home. Following a brief period as a member of Dunfermline Town Council, during which time he was appointed a Justice of the Peace, William was appointed a life member of the Carnegie Dunfermline and Hero Fund Trusts in 1920, and he was subsequently a member of the Executive Committee of the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust. In both the Dunfermline and the United Kingdom Trusts his chief interest lay in music, and he held office as convener of the Music Committee of both bodies. His period of convener-ship of the Dunfermline Trust, which began in 1925, coincided with great developments in the sphere of music in Dunfermline. It was largely because of his interest in the subject that the Trustees revised their whole policy of music, the developments which took place including the acquisition of the mansion-house of Benachie and its conversion into the Music Institute, and the erection, on an adjoining site, of the Carnegie Hall, one of the most lavishly equipped buildings of its kind in Scotland. He also took a great interest in the building of the Music Pavilion and Bandstand in Pittencrieff Park, and for many years was a regular figure at the band performances there. In 1939 Mr Black was a member Music Policy Inquiry Committee of the Carnegie U.K. Trust which produced the epoch-making report from which the whole subsequent music policy of the Trust has been developed.

Note 5 – A lengthy tribute to William Black’s contribution to the above-mentioned Carnegie Trusts is contained in the Dunfermline Press of 27th July, 1946 – copy in Local History Section of Dunfermline Carnegie Library. William also was the main driving force in the creation of the Carnegie Concert Hall, which was built in Dunfermline in 1937. The part played by him is well documented in the booklet “50 Years of Carnegie Hall” by Arthur Allan, a copy of which is to be found in the above-mentioned library.

Note 6 – Angus Ruthven Black, son of William Black and Isabella Doig, was born on 10th May, 1899, at 65 Warrender Park Road, Edinburgh. His father was described at the time as a student of medicine. Angus married twice, firstly on 11th June, 1924, at Dollar Parish Church, to Margaret Dewar Walker, (23), Birchfield, Dollar. Margaret was the daughter of James Walker, Railway Manager, (James Walker had held a high ranking position with the Bengal and North Western Railway in India) and his wife, Margaret Lawrie. The witnesses to the marriage were Lt. P. G. R. Leonard and Bertha L. Black, Fod Bank, the latter being Angus’s sister. Margaret died on 14th September, 1938, aged 37 years, at Clarke Cottage, Touch. On 9th February, 1965, Angus, then 65, re-married at Dunfermline Registrar’s Office, this time to Janet Haldane Mill, (55), a housekeeper, whose address was the same as Angus – Clarke Cottage, Touch. At the time of Angus’s first marriage his occupation is shown as ‘bleacher/manufacturer’,

whilst by the time of the second he is shown as a 'yarn agent'. The witnesses to the second marriage were James D. L. Black, 26 Vivien Terrace, Davidsons Mains, Edinburgh, and Bertha L. Duncan, High Croft, Elphinstone Road, Giffnock. Angus died on 15th April, 1976, aged 76 years, at Stratheden Hospital, Cupar, his usual residence being Clarke Cottage, Touch, Dunfermline. His death was registered by his son, James Black, St. Helens, Ceres. His widow, Janet, died on 24th June, 1977, aged 68 years, at Milesmark Hospital, Dunfermline. Her usual residence was shown as 29 Cleish Road, Dunfermline.

Angus played rugby for Dunfermline in his younger days and, during the Second World War, he was an officer in the Territorial Army.

Note 5 – Bertha Leighton Black, daughter of William and Isabella Black, was born on 17th August, 1901, at Venturefair Avenue, Dunfermline. On 12th March, 1935, at The Abbey, Dunfermline, Bertha, then aged 33 and residing at Fodbank, Dunfermline, married William Dunn Duncan, (50), Printing Works Manager, residing at Ivybank, Langside Road, Glasgow. Bertha died in a Nursing Home at Swindon. Her husband, William, died on 3rd January, 1963, aged 78, at High Croft, Elphinstone Road, Whitecraigs, Giffnock (Glasgow).

Note 6 – Angus William Black, elder son of Angus Ruthven Black, was born on 6th May, 1925, at 94 Rose Street, Dunfermline. On 21st January, 1948, at St Philip's Church, Joppa (Edinburgh), Angus, then 22 years of age and a medical student,

married Margaret White Flett, (25), a Secretary, residing at 8 Thirlestane Road, Edinburgh. Angus studied medicine at Edinburgh University and went on to serve as a physician in the Royal Air Force for 34 years. As a scrum half he was a regular in the Scottish International Rugby team from 1946 until into the 1950s. He was also a member of the British Lions team which toured Australia and New Zealand in 1950. His wife, Margaret, died at the Victoria Hospital, Kirkcaldy, on 1st June, 2002, as a result of cardiac failure. She was 79 years of age and her usual residence was 14 Links Road, Lundin Links. Angus and Margaret had four of a family, Angus Duncan Black, b. c. 1948; Kathleen (Kate), b. c. 1950; David (now residing in France) b. c. 1954, and Robert, b. c. 1956.

Note 7 – James Douglas Lindsay Black, younger son of Angus Ruthven Black, was born on 29th August, 1928 at 94 Rose Street, Dunfermline. On 20th February, 1959, at Dunblane Cathedral, James, then 30 years of age and a Chartered Accountant, married Ann Patricia Fay MacGregor, (27) a Nurse, residing at Killane, Dunblane. James died on 1st September, 1998, at his home, 11 St Andrews Road, Largoward, Fife. His death was registered by his son, ? Black, 74 Dunkeld Road, Sheffield, S11 9HP. James had three sons and a daughter – Douglas James MacGregor Black, b. 17th June, 1960; Peter Ruthven MacGregor Black, b. 9th September, 1961; and Iain Charles MacGregor Black, b. 7th April, 1964, and Catherine, b.....

Note 7 – Check 1) Was Catherine

**Walker a sister of Ralph Walker?; 3)
M/D of John Wilson;**

Note 8 – Touch Bleachfield features in Dunfermline Trades Directory of 1950 but not that of 52/53.

Note 9 – During his time at Touch Robert Black apparently stayed at three houses, 1) a cottage on the north side of Halbeath Road from the bleachfield; 2) Gowanbrae House which overlooked the bleachfield from the south; and latterly he built Clarke Cottage (probably named after his first wife) immediately west of the bleachfield.

Note 10 – Check for family of William Black – Angus (above), Bertha and perhaps James T.L. Black (witness at Angus's marriage to Janet Mill.

Note 11 – Gowanbrae House is at the east end of Garvockhill, not far from the bleachworks.

Note 12 – Check re. Robert Davidson, who was works manager c.1914.

Note 13 – Check if Isla Cottage, Ruthven, still exists.

Note 14 – Keep in mind the story of the skull being found in the old water meter house at Touch c. 1960/64

Note 15 – Angus (Jock) Black. son of Angus William Black tel. 01505 872465.

Note 16 – Check B/D of Euphemia Helen Black & Euphemia Clunie Black both died in infancy. Also John Black who died 6/12/1886, aged 22 years.