

Caithness Field Club Bulletin

2007



Telford's Mill Lade at Wick (by Jenny Bruce)

Background

In June 2005, working from the transcribed letters of Thomas Telford, a small group comprising Fred McBoyle (ex- water engineer), Garry Robertson (local historian), David Scott (film maker) and Jenifer Bruce (local artist) walked and filmed Telford's water course from Hempriggs Loch into Wick, noting the state of it. Following this investigation and further archive work, plans were set in motion to organise a heritage walk. So in September 2006 as part of Scottish Archaeology Month and as a Caithness Arts Festival event, the walk and exhibition was organised to explore Telford's water scheme or "mill lade". 16 people participated, walking part of the negotiable paths to Barns of Hempriggs where Mr Dane Budge gave his account of his family's connections and use of the mill. After lunch the group proceeded by car to view newer developments at the Distillery and the [District Heating Scheme](#), finishing at McKay's Hotel where a Telford Tea was supplied and the archive exhibition was displayed.

Telford's Mill Lade

Thomas Telford, Scottish architect, civil engineer and road, bridge and canal builder of the 18th and 19th centuries, is renowned for his remarkable achievements throughout Britain. However the town of Wick is indebted for his technical genius in planning not only roads in the county but also but also the harbour, town and water scheme of Wick 200 years ago.

Through the influence of his wealthy patron, Sir William Pultney and the British Fisheries Society, Telford, in his report of 1790 recommended that Wick was the most suitable place on the North-East coast for development as a fisheries station. In order to ensure economic stability a settlement was needed for the workers and work space for the trades. Hence the concept of building the settlement of Pultneytown on the south side of the Wick river and the need for a plentiful water supply.

Although Telford had taken the levels of Loch Hempriggs in 1804 and seen that the water could be transported with ease, it was not until March 1807 that the feu contract was completed between the British Fisheries Society and the landowner, Sir Benjamin Dunbar. One condition of the contract was that the new watercourse should also supply the corn and barley mills of the Dunbar estate. In July 1807 development started on the construction of the harbour, town, main bridge and the watercourse.

The lade channel is constructed exactly as stated in Telford's original letters using Caithness slate laid in horizontal dyking and is still in use today. Drainage from adjacent fields does not pollute the course as all surplus water runs into underground culverts below the level of the channel – another of Telford's ingenious concepts.

The rise on the surrounding ground also creates an optical illusion, as the water appears to run uphill at one point. The mill lade, as it is known locally, fed the subsequent corn and barley mills, the mill pond, the brewery and the distillery before flowing via an underground culvert to emerge at the Harbour Bank and possibly a fountain where the fishermen could draw fresh supplies of the salubrious water of Hempriggs. You can still see evidence of where the water drains into the harbour at this point.

It was not until 1845 that piped water was fully available in the settlement and the Albert Reservoir was in operation. Later, in 1906 Loch Yarrows was connected to Loch Hempriggs to cater for the increasing population of Wick and a new piping system installed.

The lade, until recently, was used in the washing and cooling processes of Pultneytown Distillery, but with new filter tanks installed the lade water is being used directly for the production of whisky. In 2006, in order to accommodate the new wood-burning District Heating Scheme, a diversion of the channel meant that a new culvert had to be constructed to ensure a regular flow.