

## **The Garrabost Meal Mill**

### *History*

Shortly after the meal mill at Willowglen in Stornoway (Latta's Mill) was burned down, Lady Matheson granted a Charter in 1893 for ground at Allt-nan-Gall in Garrabost upon which to build a Meal Mill. Allt-nan-Gall would supply water for driving the Mill Wheel (roth mor a'mhuilinn). A sluice-gate was fitted to Loch Drollabhat near Swordale, and two earth dams were constructed, one near the Mill and one about 100 yards further up the burn from the main road.

The Mill was built at Garrabost for the benefit of crofters in the Point area. A Mill continued to operate at Gress to service the villagers on the other side of Broad Bay for a short time after the opening of the Garrabost Mill.

All the crofts in the various villages of Point, and indeed all over the island were fully cultivated producing considerable quantities of Oats, Barley, Potatoes, and Turnips. By far the commonest cereal crop at the turn of the century and until the Second World War was Barley or Bere.

The Mill buildings are constructed of stone quarried at Shader, Point, and the kiln and stable buildings of bricks manufactured at Claypark, Garrabost. The Garrabost brickworks had ceased production, but a ready supply of bricks was still available.

Shortly after the commencement of the First World War my late father, Angus Graham Morrison, originally of Habost, Ness, came from Vancouver to take over the running of the Mill. At that time, in 1914, the Garrabost Mill was very busy, often working day and night producing Barley Meal and Oatmeal. The Kiln peat fire was kept burning from Monday morning until Saturday evening during the season when most crofters came with their grain - October to February. The writer can well remember some crofters kiln-drying and milling as many as 10 or 12 sacks of grain each winter during the 1920s. From 10cwts (10 x 50 kilograms) of Barley Grain one could expect as much as 6 bolls (7.5 x 50 kilograms) of Barley Meal. The amount of meal produced from the same weight of Oats is considerably less.

The grain crop was threshed either by suathadh (rubbing the grain with the feet), or by using the suist (flail), or with the aid of a small hand-powered threshing mill. The grain was winnowed on a day when there was a good breeze of wind, which carried away the loose chaff, small straws, and dust. Having cleaned, prepared and bagged the Barley or Oats, the sacks were then marked by sewing onto each sack a piece of coloured wool or cloth. It was then taken to the kiln at the Mill where it was dried using good dry peats. This process took 4-5 hours, the grain being turned over at intervals to prevent burning. In some villages there was a small kiln and the writer can remember one at Aird and another at Portvoller.

### *Kiln Drying*

The Barley or Oats must be dried for 4-5 hours until all the moisture is removed and the grain so hard that it can be cracked under the teeth. The kiln is fired with good dry peats. The grain is then re-bagged and transferred to the upper floor of the Mill.

### *Shelling and Sifting the Grain*

The grain is first emptied into the hopper (an drabhailt) of the Shelling Stones (a mhuilinn sgilidh) on the upper level. As the grain falls through the eye of the stones (suil a mhuilinn) it passes between the rotating upper stone and the stationary nether stone. These are separated just sufficiently to crack the husk. Thereafter, it falls to the lower level down a chute onto the shelling sifter or rattler (criathair), which separates the dust (dudan) from the kernels or groats. This dust used to be in great demand for feeding to cattle along with boiled potatoes, though small by itself in energy value.

### *Winnowing*

The Grain falls over the end of the sifter into a strong breeze of wind, produced by a large fast-rotating fan, which carries away the husks (sgealbach). Sgealbach or chaff was sometimes fed to animals but has little nutritional value. It was also commonly used for filling pillows and mattresses.

### *Milling*

Having finished the shelling, sifting, and winnowing processes, the grain is now transferred back upstairs by an elevator to the hopper of the milling stones. The upper millstone weighs about 1 tonne, and as the grain passes between the runner and nether millstones it is ground into very fine meal. The coarseness or fineness of the meal can be varied by fractionally raising or lowering the upper millstone. The coarseness or fineness of the meal is judged by the miller between thumb and palm.

### *Sifting the Meal*

The small amount of husk left adhering to the grain after shelling falls along with the meal into the meal sifter. This sifter (criathair na mine) moves with a rapid circular motion and separates the sids (ca) from the meal. The meal passes through two sifters incorporated into one frame-box, the end result is meal that is pure, clean, and free from any sids which fall into a separate bag. The bag of sids was always taken home along with the meal as it was considered good animal feeding.

The Garrabost Mill was constructed at a time when water mill technology had reached its peak. The dusty sifting and winnowing is screened off from the miller's working area with the winnower having an external outlet (an important health consideration). The grain requires no handling whatsoever from the moment it is emptied into the shelling hopper until the full bag of meal is lifted away from the chute below the meal sifter. Consequently, although two men were needed to start the large oil engine, one man is sufficient to keep the mill running.

### *Motive Power*

Because there was a scarcity of water at times, a Simplex Oil Engine was purchased in 1908 and fitted to the Mill. This engine, manufactured at Leysmill near Arbroath, is a single piston engine burning Paraffin fired by the early technology of hot tube ignition, and runs at 200 revolutions per minute. The piston diameter is 11 inches (280 millimetres), and stroke about 22 inches. It has been maintained in full working order. It is believed to be the only engine of its make still in existence, and one of only a few of its type. It is almost certainly the only engine manufactured in 1908 still occasionally used for the purpose for which it was originally installed. The mill dam, which was constructed of stone, gravel and clay failed around 1932. This marked the end of water-power at Garrabost.

### *Memories*

The writer well remembers how satisfied and thankful crofters were as they went home from the mill with three, four or even six bolls of meal. (A boll is 10 stones, or about 63 kg.) This represented the produce of a season's work, and a year's bread. Quite often, one boll or more was exchanged at the mill for a similar quantity of wheat flour. During the years around the 1920s, the Garrabost Mill was kept very busy serving the local crofters. One record kept in the year 1917 by my late father, Angus Graham Morrison, shows that 1,700 bolls or 106 tonnes of meal was produced in that year from locally grown grain for the people of Point. These were times when people were, of necessity, content with considerably less than is the case today. They were, however, in the writer's judgement, happy; and a community spirit of interdependence was a strong factor in this respect.

After the Second World War, the Lewis economy entered a period of rapid change. Crofts in rural Lewis ceased to be cultivated as men found other forms of employment. The Mill at Garrabost, in common with many up and down the country, was no longer needed and ceased production in 1956. It was restored to full working order in 1988 and many people now find it of interest. Some still enjoy the Barley Meal it produces.

John Morrison, Miller.

1989.