

# BLACK MOUNTAIN LINEN INDUSTRY

The Black Mountain, and indeed the rest of the hills surrounding Belfast played an important role in the developing linen industry throughout the 18th and until the late 19th century in the Belfast area. On the outskirts of the West of the city at that time, many bleaching greens and linen mills stretched from Colin Mountain as far as Ligoniel and Cavehill. On the Colin Mountain, one of the most prominent of these, was the bleaching green and linen mill owned by Luke Teeling. Luke Teeling was one of the leaders of the United Irishmen and the bleaching green was situated on the site of what is now Poleglass housing estate. Both bleaching green and mill were destroyed by yeomanry as a reprisal after the '98 rebellion.

Another linen mill stood close to where Colin Glen now is and belonged originally to the McCance family who lived at Suffolk House and were one of the most influential linen merchants in Belfast at the time. The old building at the bottom of the Suffolk Road, which was better known by locals as 'the pig factory' and which now houses several community groups was once part of that linen mill. This linen mill as sold by McCance to a man named Roberts in 1820 who continued linen production for many years after.

Further study of ordinance survey maps at that time, particularly 1832 and 1837, show various other bleaching greens and beetling mills, stretching right across the foot of the Black Mountain.

The 1857 Ordinance Survey map shows a large bleaching green and beetling mill which occupied the land, where Belfast city cemetery is now. The map shows two large mill ponds, where part of Turf Lodge estate and Whiterock Leisure Centre now stand. The rivers which run through the cemetery and Falls Park, down into Milltown (which was also a mill, bleach and Dye works) and the Bog Meadows was a culmination of a series of arteries of spring water running down the mountain.

Above and to the right on the same map, is shown the site of Whiterock Beetling Mill and Bleaching Green. This site occupied land above and where Moyard and part of New Barnsley now are.

The mill dam, shown on the map, and known locally as "the Green" or "Rock dam" was only filled in with rubble in the early 1970's. An old building which still stands on the site and known by generations of West Belfast children as "the old castle" once housed a water wheel used to power the beetling machinery in the mill.

It was this closeness to the Black Mountain and subsequently the spring water running downhill, which made the mountain so important to the production of linen at that time in the industrial revolution, before steam.

Indeed it could be safely said that the entire Black Mountain area must have played a significant part in the overall development of Belfast at that time. Given the fact that many dairy and other farms occupied the mountain, providing milk, beef and sheep to an ever growing population. Forestry, planted on the lower slopes in the 17th century, was also in demand, for developing industry. The beech and sycamore particularly, were sought, for the ever expanding beetling mills. The sycamore being used for the great beam of the engine while the beech was used for the verticle beetles themselves.

'The Whiterock Beetling Mill and Bleaching Green' and what later became 'The Springfield Dyeing and Finishing Co. Ltd' were models of how both systems should work. Linen manufacturers and later these involved in all forms of dyeing, travelled from all over Britain to see the processes used.

Beetling and Bleaching the linen - Whiterock Beetling and Bleach Green.

Both bleaching greens, Whiterock and that on the site of Belfast City Cemetery were situated on fields on a slight incline facing east in order to get the full benefit of the sun throughout the day. The wind and rain also played a part, and the webs of linen were laid out in long stripes while still brown in colour, to be bleached by the elements. Linen of course was very valuable and theft of it carried the death penalty and both were fairly common in the 18th century.

This is a typical extraxt from Belfast Newsletter at that time, 11th April 1783 reporting such convictions for robbing bleach greens.

Belfast

At the assizes for the county of Down which ended on Wednesday last, the following persons were capitally convicted and received sentence as follows, viz. - Patrick Gordon, otherwise McGurnaghan (to be executed at Drumbridge on Thursday next, the 17th inst.) and Stephen Gordon, otherwise McGurnaghan (to be executed at Castlewellan on Monday next, the 14th inst.) for stealing linen out of the bleach green of George and Watter Crawford of Balleiry; George Brown (to be executed at Downpatrick, 1st June next) for stealing linen out of the Bleach Green of Samuel McAleester of Lismore.....

(Domestic Industry in Ireland W.H. Crawford)

Eventually of course bleaching of linen in this manner became obsolete, and chemicals were used to achieve the same results.

The process of beetling or finishing the linen of course, was of the utmost importance in the whole production. As this signified the finished article, and provided that shine, and smoothness of cloth which made Irish linen world famous.

Initially, her and her friend Patsy, worked in the 'Frame House' while at other times, she worked in what she describes as the 'Bleaching Green' examining the linen for any flaws or black thread which they 'picked out'.

Most workers started at 8.30a.m. and worked to 6.00p.m. and the highest wages she ever received was 24 shillings per week, with an occasional four shillings extra if she worked overtime. There was a tea-break in the morning, with one hour for lunch during which time they remained on the site. "Sometimes we used to go up and take our lunch by the dam and paddled our feet while we did so. We never went in for a swim, or anything like that, but the dam would have been packed with people on summer nights and at the weekends, in swimming, picnicing and fishing. The dam was really popular then with people coming from all over for a swim in the good weather".

In those same times during the war, the company did most of the dyeing for the khaki uniforms and occasionally parachutes. They also dyed the hankies which Maureen and the other girls hated doing, because they were so flimsy and slipped out of the dyeing clips which meant that the girls had to keep doing all the time to catch them falling out and also putting them back in.

This job in the frame house involved her sitting on a stool at the frame putting the cloth into clips. The cloth which was met, then went through the heat and was rolled up as it came off the other end dry, and then put on the 'ratch'. The 'frame house' itself wasn't wet or damp as was the 'dye' or 'bleaching house'.

In the bleaching house, the large Jigs put the cloth through the dying or bleaching process. Webs of cloth were fed into the big Jigs and as they came out of the bleach or dye, wet, they were then 'shaddled'.

The cloth was dyed, by making up the dye and putting it into the Jigs, which were like large basins with a roller at the bottom. The webs were then fed through the bottom roller and out. After being 'shaddled' and dried they were taken to the beetles for finishing. The pounding of the beetles was deafening, and a bang, bang, bang of the beetles went on all day, but was essential for the shine and finish.

Maureen's father, Mr Jones was obviously a very important worker in the factory, and making of the various dyes was a very skilled job requiring a deep knowledge of all the dyes used. He was very secretive about all the ingredients used for specific dyes which he told no-one else. In his early years at the factory he had lost two fingers while working at a Jig, for which he received £100 compensation.

At one stage just before he retired, the company employed a new dyer to do a particularly new type of dyeing, and moved Mr Jones. However, after a short period, the new man was unable to do the work, and the firm had to move him back to the dyeing. Mainly, because he was the only one who knew all the ingredients of the dyes which could achieve the new dye required, which he did.

Maureen also fondly thinks back on the great atmosphere in the place where she worked from she was 18 until 26 years of age, finally leaving in 1948.

"It was a great place to work, and Mr Archibald, the owner was a really nice man who always spoke kindly to all the workers". She says, "I remember one particular occasion when we hadn't much work on, with only one frame in 5 working, so we rotated the work 20 minutes and 40 minutes off. We chatted away and did a bit of embroidery while we were 'off'. My friend Agnes Proctor had been in to town to see the latest new picture, just out, "The Wizard of Oz" and there she was at one stage, showing me some of the steps from the dances in the film, and Mr Archibald was standing behind her, where she couldn't see him, and I couldn't tell her, because she was dancing away in front of me. But, he never said a word just turned and walked out, killing himself laughing. "It's a pity the place ever had to close, and an even greater pity that the Rock Dam is no longer there. When I think of all the happy hours spent up at 'The Green' and people in swimming and having picnics. It's a shame that the children nowadays never had that, and probably never will".

Springfield Dyeing and Finishing Co. Ltd finally closed in 1967 but had continued for many years after Maureen had left in 1948. The first sign of difficulties came in 1959 when the process of winding down the company became obvious through a number of advertisements which appeared in daily papers. These adverts were regarding plant machinery, office equipment and indeed the factory site. It is not known when exactly the last workers were finally laid off, but the company was formally wound up on Friday, the 6th October, 1967 and the Belfast Newsletter carried the following statement.

"At an extraordinary meeting held at 2 Donegall Square East, Belfast 1 the following resolution was passed as a special resolution, - "That the company be wound up voluntarily and that George Edward Cameron of 2 Donegall Square East, Belfast 1 will be appointed liquidator for the purposes of winding up".

Signed Mr Lawlor Archibald

Specific reasons for the closure of the dye works are not clear but it is safe enough to assume that market forces were ultimately responsible.

As stated earlier, the Rock Dam itself which had given so much pleasure to the people of West Belfast was finally filled in with rubble in the early 70's. The reason given, was that the stretch of land from the mountain loney to the Ballygomartin Road, on part of which the Rock Dam was located, was to be converted into a series of all weather football and hockey pitches. Thankfully the conversation never took place. The wisdom of the city planners at that time wasn't questioned, but it is hoped that present environmental awareness will never allow this once beautiful patch of green countryside in its urban setting, to be covered with tarmac in the future.

At the present time, Black Mountain Environmental Group have submitted a preservation and development plan for the area concerned, more

in keeping with the beautiful natural setting of the locality.

This plan proposes the reconstruction of the Rock Dam with proper safety and monitoring of the site. A number of small islands on the Dams are suggested to encourage wildlife, with the surrounding area planted with natural shrubbery and trees for the same purpose. Picnic areas and pathways would also be a feature.

The water wheel would be reconstructed with pathways and viewing area alongside a coffee/tea house and snack bar.

The plan further proposes an extensive craft, and heritage centre which would not only cover the history of linen, bleaching and dyeing (with contemporary machinery on view) in the area, but also but also other heritage of the Black Mountain area. Planners have also been asked to consider a swimming facility on one of the dams in keeping with the social and local history of the dam.

Further Noterecorded that the famous Belfast Clonard swimming club, which went on to win many All Ireland swimming and water polo titles, had its origins at the Rock Dam. In 1921, a group of young men from the area had organised a football match at Short Strand, and were unable to play because of disturbances at the time. They went to the Rock Dam on the day for a swim instead, and ended by deciding to start a swimming club, which became Clonard S.C.

## Power for the Beetles

The water which provided the power for the water wheel, which in turn drove the beetling engine came from three mountain springs which run down from the Black Mountain. They in turn at 3 different points, joined a mill race, constructed by the architects of the whole process, which ran into the 'Rock Dam'. The mill race ran into the first of what was actually a smaller and triangular shaped dam beside the bigger main dam. The triangular shaped dam also had another dam beside it, and all were separated by several sluice gates. Water from the mill race could also be diverted down alongside the main dam nearest to New Barnsley estate, past the dam, or into it as required. This part of the mill race then joined another stream which ran parallel and below the main dam itself. This stream in turn was joined by the water which passed through and powered the water wheel below the main dam. The by now fairly heavy flow of stream then ran down into Ballymurphy estate under the Springfield Road, roughly where Springfield Park estate now starts. It continued on down through the city cemetery and Falls Park where the other mill and bleaching greens were, down past the other mill at Milltown and on into the Bog Meadows.

The continual flow of the mill race controlled by the series of sluice gates into the adjoining dams, ensured that the main and smaller of the two large dams, above the actual water wheel held the correct level of water required to power the water wheel.

In later years water power and the water wheel became obsolete at the Whiterock site through the introduction of steam and the company installed a boiler plant which was capable of providing 22,000lbs pressure per hour.

On the 17th of October, 1927 the entire site was bought over by a Mr Walter Archibald and the new factory was now called, "The Springfield Dyeing and Finishing Co, Ltd". Like its predecessor the company soon achieved recognition and considerable reputation in the art of dyeing and finishing. Business people, again travelled from all over Britain to see what was described as a 'model' factory in the dyeing and finishing process.

The company received formal recognition of these achievements on the 26th July 1951 when an agreement was reached between themselves and the linen industry research association, regarding processes for improving crease resisting properties of textile materials. They also received a royalty. In 1953 they went on to receive a licence between themselves and "Tootal, Broadhurst Lee Co. Ltd regarding certain patent rights in the U.K. entitled "Improvements in the treatment of textile materials" and "processes for improving the crease resisting properties of textile material".

The people from the Upper Springfield were very proud of the factory, which now employed over 56 people from the area.

### "Working in the Dye Works" - some personal recollections

Maureen Brady was born in 1920 and has lived all her life at the top of the Whiterock Road. Her maiden name was Jones and her father was chief dyer in the factory. Her mother who was called Walsh was just above where the Luther Church once was. (Neither house nor the Luther Church still exist). At one stage, her father and brother, sister and sister-in-law, uncle and her cousin all worked in the factory which was the major employer in the area. She was educated in St Catherines School on the Falls Road, next to Cavendish Street and her family lived at Carnmore Terrace, the red brick houses at the top right hand side of the Whiterock Road. At that time, the trams, turned down at the Flush on the Springfield Road and at the bottom of the Whiterock. There were no shops at the top of the Whiterock only a bar owned by Mallons, which later became Kellys. Mallons eventually built the house and shop where the 'Arcadia' is now, while Charlie Curry had a small farm house at the back of Mallons pub, where he kept poultry and sold eggs and milk. Travelling on down the Whiterock at this time, the next house was Mortons just below where the reservoir now is, followed by O'Hares farm at Corrigan Park and then the newly built Whiterock estate. The only other shop was at the corner of Rockdale Street.

After leaving school, Maureen worked for a short time in a debtors office, before getting her new job up at 'the Green' as locals referred to the dye works. Although the community was fairly scattered at that time, they were also very 'close'.

Maureen's best friend was Patsy Bell, who also worked at "The Green" and who lived above the Rock Dam on the lower slopes of the mountain.

Maureen recalls the war years and remembers standing at the house where the 'Arcadia' now is, watching the German planes flying over the Black Mountain to bomb Belfast. On one occasion it seemed to her as though all of Belfast was in flames from the heavy bombs and incendiaries.

There was a small air raid shelter built outside Carnmore Terrace, but Maureen laughs as she says "our family never got into it, as it was always packed with ones from 'down the road'". Irrespective of that, her mother always still took people into her house during the raids. People came from all over Belfast, though mainly from down the Falls and the Donegal Road and it never mattered what religion you were, people were more concerned with saving their lives. The mountain used to be black with people when the sirens went and the bombing started, and one other thing I remember", she adds, smiling, "was that the poor wives were left to trail the children along way behind the men, they were always first up on to the hill".

Going to work, Maureen would have just walked down the Springfield Road most times, but in the summer, she would have cut across the fields where New Barnsely and Moyard are now, and this would have brought you where the 'finishing house' stood beside Beatty's farm, which was slightly below where Finlays box factory now is, at the back of the houses at Springfield Park.