

Polerth – The Lost Dockyard of James IV

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The Historical Background

Some little time after the battle of Stirling Bridge [Sir William Wallace](#) sent a letter to the merchants of Lubeck. He informed them that [Scotland](#) had been recovered from the English and asked them to resume trading. Evidently, Scotland had enjoyed commerce with Europe prior to 1297. Certainly, a continuous trade with Europe, particularly the Low Countries and France, can be seen to flourish in the following centuries. Although, in comparison with England and much of mainland Europe, Scotland was never a wealthy country, as a result of that trade it had maritime interests less modest than might be assumed. By the fifteenth century this traffic appears to have become vigorous, a fact which is exemplified in a list, compiled in 1457, of the ships using the port of Sluys in Flanders. It appears that not only were numerous Scottish ships among the multitude of small vessels recorded there but, significantly, several of the large vessels also hailed from Scotland. The bishop of Aberdeen had a caravel of 140 tonnes. There was a barge of 150 tonnes and another, skippered by Robert Barton, of 350 tonnes. Over and above these, in all senses, was a barge of 500 tonnes belonging to the bishop of St Andrews which is described in the list as “*a very fine vessel.*” It must be born in mind that this was only one port visited by Scottish merchantmen and, so, it would seem that a substantial fleet of ships was operating at that time. Unhappily, both coastal and deep-sea shipping was vulnerable to piratical attacks. These depredations were often carried out by privateers from countries such as Spain and Portugal but most common were those perpetrated by the *auld enemie*, the English. Although relationships between Scotland and England during the first part of the fifteenth century had been relatively peaceful, there was still sufficient political distance between them to cause the English to be the principal hazard to Scottish seafaring. At best, this peace was

somewhat fragile and, indeed, gave way to war in the years 1480- 82. During the course of the conflict Scotland suffered several naval raids. Perhaps the most damaging of these took place in 1481 when an English fleet penetrated the Firth of Forth and took as prizes boats from several ports on the river. [Blackness](#) was attacked by a raiding party, the town was torched and a vessel of considerable size lying in the haven was seized. Although there are indications that this fleet, commanded by Admiral Howard, was counter-attacked by Scottish ships, such episodes underlined just how ineffective the Scots were in protecting both merchant shipping and coastal features. The loss of Berwick in 1482, never to be recovered, along with the occupation of Dunbar Castle from then until 1486 were events equally humiliating and traumatic in their impact.¹

Following the death of the English king, Edward IV, in 1483, a period of internal unrest and strife arose south of the border. This brought a respite to Scotland, at least in terms of cross-border raids. It was, however, also the time which saw the beginning of yet another of Scotland's internecine conflicts. In this instance it took the form of a bloody affair which was to see its climax on the field of Sauchieburn. In the immediate aftermath of the battle, James III was slain; an act which brought his son, James IV, to the throne. The greater part of his reign was a time of relative peace in Scottish affairs. It was also an exciting time of discovery and invention. James was bound to the spirit of his time. He was a Renaissance man; vision, curiosity and invention were his stars. Sadly, necessity was his spur: the early years of his reign had seen yet another series of forays by English marauders into the firths of Tay and Forth. All that Scotland could muster to stem the raids were a few small ships, notably the **Yellow Carvel** and the **Flower** commanded by Andrew Wood. This doughty skipper had a degree of success for he repelled the invaders twice. He seems also to have played a part in preventing an English force from retaking Dunbar Castle. In 1490, after a long, bloody and protracted battle, Sir Andrew captured three English vessels under the command of Stephen Bull. Despite these heroic deeds, Scotland remained seriously disadvantaged at sea. Another sequence of events was to influence the young king. At this time, the king of Denmark, a kinsman of James, was suffering rebellion and had asked for assistance from Scotland. With the best of intentions, the young king agreed to help. The resulting attempt fell only a little short of fiasco due to the failure of his lieutenants to prepare an adequate fleet to convey the Scots brigade. There can be little doubt that James perceived his international esteem to have been further damaged. These events coincided with an unprecedented period of naval development throughout the maritime nations. Big ships, in the form of *carracks*, had become fashionable and there was rivalry amongst several countries to outdo one another.² It would seem that all of these influences along with the setbacks brought James to the realisation that the only effective means of defending his realm and of establishing his standing abroad, lay in the construction of an effective Scottish navy. To this end he wrote to Louis XII of France:

"We have been busy with the building of a fleet for the protection of our shores and we labour at it with great zeal. Since there is a greater abundance of building material in your realm we have sent our men thither to fetch beams and oakwood from a friendly nation and to bring shipwrights to us."

The first of these French wrights, John *Lorans* or Lawrence, arrived in 1502 and he began work on the **Margaret**, a 21-gun carrack of 600 tons: twice the size of Sir Andrew Wood's **Yellow Caravel**. A thousand oak trees were used in her construction and she took two and a half years to build. The mouth of the water of Leith was chosen as the site of the project but difficulties were encountered at the launch. Large barrels had to be fixed all around her hull. Their purpose would have been to give additional buoyancy and lift; they would also have stabilised the unballasted hull, preventing it from toppling over once she was afloat. This was not only a cumbersome device, it was fraught with the potential for disaster. And

so it was decided that a dockyard should be constructed at a small bay a little way downstream from Leith. A village of sorts, in which the craftsmen and labourers were housed, grew around the perimeter of the dockyard. This settlement came to be known as Newhaven. Teams of horses dragged huge trees from Inverleith to be used in the building of the village. They built workshops for the sawyers and carpenters as well as chandlers' warehouses. There was also a yard with a ropewalk. When the first dock was excavated, the soil from it was used to build a breakwater and to support a pier. Within this dock the keel of the **Great Michael**, or as it was more commonly called, 'the great ship', was laid in 1307. Wood was obtained from all over Scotland: Rosshire, Darnaway. Cawder, Kincardineshire, Loch Ness, Logan and Tulliallan.³ All of the oak woods of Fife, with the exception of the royal hunting forest of Falkland, were felled for the purpose.

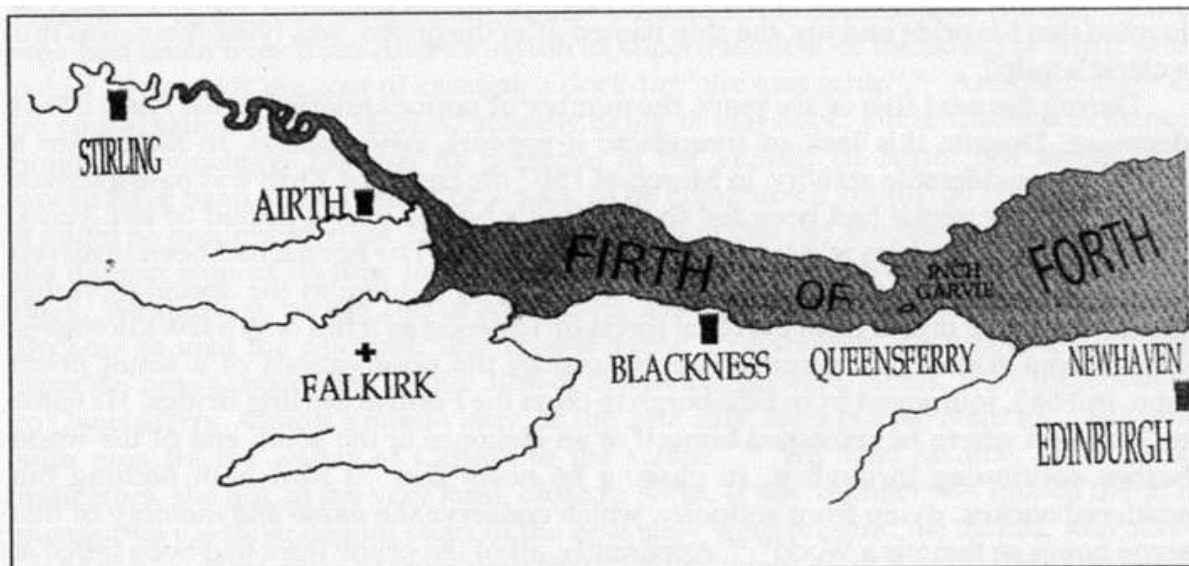
A chapel built at Newhaven, dedicated in 1507, set the seal of permanence on the village. Nevertheless, while the site was admirably suited to the purpose of shipbuilding, it was in a vulnerable place, for it lay at a considerable distance downstream from the defences on the island of Inchgarvie. These had been built specifically to protect the narrows at Queensferry. Potentially, Newhaven was always in danger of attack by English raiders. A safer retreat was needed; somewhere ships could lie in safety while being refitted, repaired and equipped. And so, a second dockyard was established at the Pow of Airth, which place is named in the Treasurer's Accounts as the *Poll of Airth*, or by its Celtic form, *Polerth*.

[Airth](#) had long been recognised as a harbour for shipping. From English records come the earliest recovered notices for such a use. In 1338, for instance, a mandate was issued ordering the people of Yorkshire to provide victual for the garrisons of the castles of Edinburgh and Stirling. This was to be taken to Kingston on Hull from where it was to be shipped to the ports of "*Leth and Erth in Scotia*." Twenty years later Walter Curteys of Ipswich was compensated for the loss of his "*anchors, cables and other furniture of his vessel la Maudaleyne*." He had been employed in carrying supplies for an English army advancing into Scotland. The intention of the invaders must have been to continue on to Stirling. Unfortunately for the skipper and his crew, having been instructed to wait at Airth, someone neglected to let him know that a change of plan had taken place, one that caused the English army to do an about-turn at Edinburgh. This omission resulted in his ship being "*plundered and stripped at Erthe*" with the consequent loss of the articles detailed by Curtis. In the following centuries, the estuary of the Pow Burn continued to be used as a port. Known in the eighteenth century as the south Pow or Newmills Pow it was described in 1757 as : "*a safe and convenient harbour, sufficient to receive ships of 200 tons burden*".⁴

In the nineteenth century we still find notices of cargoes being landed there.⁵ However, for James IV's purpose, not only was the Pow an established seaport, it provided a more secure place for his ships than Newhaven. Airth lies some twelve miles or about 20 kilometres above the Queensferry narrows. These reasons alone might be sufficient to explain the decision to build the other dockyard there. Nevertheless, other factors present a diversity of reasons. Guns were being cast for the navy at Cambuskenneth, which place lies only a few kilometres upstream. Inland a little way from *Polerth* is the ancient royal hunting forest of [Torwood](#); a rich source at that time of oak timber. Two other factors are significant. Of greatest importance, arguably, was that at least some of the land upon which the docks were excavated was Crown land. The other, perhaps, was essentially fortuitous: the adjacent lands belonged to the barony of [Elphinstone](#). Alexander Elphinstone, the son of the laird of the estate, was a member of the royal household. In the course of these duties he met his wife, Elizabeth Barlow. She was one of the maids-of-honour who accompanied Princess Margaret as part of her retinue when she came from England to become the wife of James IV. The king and queen married in August 1503 and Alexander and Elizabeth were married by August 1507. Apparently, Elizabeth was a great favourite of the queen and it would appear that it was largely his marriage to Elizabeth which brought to Alexander Elphinstone many of the honours bestowed on him by the king.⁶ Certainly, following on their marriage,

the Elphinstones had apartments in the palace of Holyrood which were refurbished for them at the king's expense. The greatest distinction given by King James to Alexander came in 1510 when he created him a Lord of Parliament under the title of Lord Elphinstone.⁷ A memorandum from the king specifically states that this honour was bestowed at the time of the baptism of the king's son, Prince Arthur.⁸ It may be that Alexander and Elizabeth acted as godparents on that occasion. Around this time he was also appointed as Chamberlain of Stirlingshire. Part of the remit of that post was to collect the revenues of the crown lands situated in the county and to disburse from these payments on behalf of the king. On two occasions we find him rendering these to Robert Callendar as payment for carrying out his duties as "keeper of the king's ships at the Pow of Erth".⁹ Alexander enjoyed his title for a short time only; three years after his elevation to the lordship he was dead, slain along with the king at Flodden. At the time of the events related here [Airth Castle](#), the home of the Bruce family, although closer to the dockyard, would have been rather small and, no doubt, spartan by comparison with Lord and Lady Elphinstone's nearby abode. We may surmise that the advantage of being sheltered and entertained at Elphinstone Tower on his many visits to view the ongoing work could have been an additional enticement for James to have the dockyard there.

The Contemporary Records



Illus: The Firth of Forth

By 1506, when *Polerth* is first encountered in the context, the dockyard was already up and running. This was only four years after John Lorens, "the Franch wricht that cam first for the schip bigging," arrived in Scotland. The person in charge of the Airth operations at that time was Andrew Ayton. He was Lord Alexander's predecessor in the office of Chamberlain. In 1506 he received two sums of money in part payment for "casting of the dok to the Kingis schip in the poll of Erth".¹⁰ The "schip" in question was probably the **Margaret**; launched in the summer of the previous year she is often referred to at that time simply as "the schip." Named after Queen Margaret, James' wife, this was a significant vessel for its day. It has been compared with the almost contemporary and more famous English warship, the **Mary Rose**, launched in 1509.



Illus: The Margaret on the Forth

Also, in the accounts for 1506, is a payment for “*the wrichts pessand to the poll of Erth for the schip calfuting thare*”.¹¹ This is a reference to caulking, the process of sealing a ship’s planking with tar and tow to make it watertight. Each of the wrights was paid three pounds and twelve shillings for one month’s wage. In total, the sum of ten pounds, sixteen

shillings was paid and, therefore, three men were employed in this task. We might have expected the newly-built ship to be seaworthy when launched, but it is possible that this was remedial work. Certainly, we know that the *Margaret* was in Airth in August of that year.¹² She probably left for sea trials in September and then returned, for a sum of money was paid “*to the men that kepis the schip callit the Mergret at the poll of Erth for the monethis of November, December and Januar*”.¹³ Other activities are noted during this period. Robert Barton, one of three seafaring brothers, prominent in the development of the navy, was involved in 1507 in “*bringing of the harnes fra the schip at the poll of Erth*”.¹⁴ In the following year, Barton superintended “*the doun takin of the takill of the schip callit the Margreit at the poll of Erth*” and paid the wages of children employed in this operation. It was also at this time that he laid out money for coal for use on the *Margaret*.¹⁵ Over and above this, he had to transport the tackle from *Polerth* to Leith and back again.¹⁶ Presumably, it had been damaged and required specialised repairs. Around that time, Jaques Terrel, one of the French shipwrights, rode by horse from Newhaven “*to see the Mergreit at the poll of Erth*”.¹⁷ Amongst those who then visited the docks was the King. He took a personal interest in the development of the navy and seems to have been in Airth quite often following the progress of the work. For instance, on the 24th of September 1507, is found the entry: “*at the poll of Erth, quhair the king drank to the wif.*” Bearing in mind that his pride and joy, the ship named after the queen, was lying there, was this a cleric’s quip?

Doing the next five or six years, the number of notices relating to the Airth docks decrease. Despite this lack of frequency, it appears, nevertheless, to have been a period of considerable activity. In March of 1507 the curate of Airth was paid a sum of money for hay which had been fed to the King’s horses over a period of two years. This takes the activities at Airth at least back to 1505. The horses had been involved in transporting trees to the Pow.¹⁸ It is possible to indulge in the speculation that these were being drawn from the royal forest of Torwood as it lies only a few kilometres inland from Airth. This surmise is enhanced by the observations of a Jesuit priest who, in 1643, journeyed from Edinburgh to cross the Forth at Stirling Bridge. He came to Torwood where he refreshed himself at an alehouse at the south end of the wood before continuing through it. In passing he notes that “*it now hath nothing but scattered oackes, dying from antiquity, which conserve the name and memory of that some tymes so famous a Wood*”.¹⁹ Apparently, all of the prime trees had been felled at some earlier period. On the other hand, good timber was certainly still available and being cut in Torwood at the time of the dockyard. During the course of repairs to the royal palace at Linlithgow in 1513, payment was made for “*ij cartis that past to the Torwood and brocht hame iij gret treis*”.²⁰ Finding wood of good quality was a problem for the Sects from the beginning of the naval project. Not only was timber cut from forests all over Scotland, wood

had to be shipped in from abroad. Of the building of the **Great Michael**, Pitscottie tells us it "*tuik so mekill timber that scho waistit all thc wodis in Fyfe except Falkland wode.*" There are numerous mentions of timber being carried to the docks at Newhaven from Scottish ports; Alloa, for instance, features large. There is only one such mention for Airth, but this is for 1512; too late to fit the events of 1505-7. On the other hand, it may indicate that tree felling continued at Torwood throughout the period. For what purpose was the wood being taken to the Pow? There is no direct evidence to show that shipbuilding, as such, was undertaken there. However, there are indications that parts of ships were fabricated after their launch.²¹ We must remember that one of the principal reasons for setting up the docks at Airth was security. Having constructed a hull at enormous expense, the last thing that would have been wanted was to see it destroyed by raiders. It is possible that after the essential work was completed at Newhaven much of the construction of the superstructures of the new ships was done at Airth. Such an operation would also require good oak wood.

From 1512, there is a resurgence of recorded activity at *Polerth*. This was the year following the launch of the **Great Michael**. The King of France described the **Michael** as "*the most powerful ever found in Christendom.*" A few months after her launch, a pilot, Johnson of Queensferry, was hired to '*seik the deipis and passage to the Polerth*'.²² In the following month Robert Callendar, the constable of Sterling castle, who had taken over from Andrew Ayton as superintendent of the docks at Airth, was paid £10 towards the cost of creating a dock for "*the gret schip*".²³ Although there is no confirmation for the **Michael** actually being in that dock, circumstantial evidence points convincingly towards its presence in the vicinity of Airth. For instance, it would have been uneconomic for a dock to be constructed simply on the chance that it might be brought up river. It must be kept in mind that the **Michael** was described as the biggest ship of its time in Europe and so this would have had to be a massive dock. We find too, on the 2nd of June 1512, a boat being hired to take the king from Bo'ness to visit the **Michael** "*and downe agane*".²⁴ Evidently, he was taken upriver from Bo'ness to board her. On the 30th of that month he went "doun" from the **Michael** to Queensferry. Almost a month later, on the 24th July, there is a payment for "*ane boit with men fra the watter of Caroun to the schipe*".²⁵ We must assume, given these indicators, she got, at the very least, close to Airth. If the **Michael** was indeed there, it means that the three capital ships of the new navy were present: the **James**, **Margaret** and **Michael**. Some idea of their comparative sizes comes from the records of payment of wages to the crews. Evidently, the **Michael** had a crew of 298 mariners and 7 gunners, the **Margaret** 80 mariners and 4 gunners, while the **James** had 56 mariners. In that same year Robert Barton, one of the leading mariners of the king's navy, was paid £37 for work on the **James** "*when she lay in the Powis of Airth*".²⁶ In August 1512 Malcolm Kinross, an employee of Robert Callendar, forwarded an account for "*met, drink, coill, and candill, resavit and deliverit be the said Malcum and Thome of Setoun spendit on lx marinaris beand at the upputting of ane mast in the bark callit the James frae the xj day of Julij to the xxvij day of the saim moneth*".²⁷ On the last day of October of that year, Callendar was given 37 pounds, 9 shillings and 4 pence "*to furneis the werk in the schip callit the James quhen she lay in the powis of Arth*".²⁸ Later in the year he was recompensed for the money he had "*layd down in drink silvir to the maryneris and for thare meit that tuke the Margretis gret mast at the pollis of Erth*". He was also paid for transporting timber for use in both the **Margaret** and the **James** at "*the pow of Arth*".²⁹ The presence of the three great ships would account for the constable being paid for the completion of three docks at *Polerth*.³⁰ One other ship, at least, was there at the time: the constable received payment for his expenses for "*inputting of the Lark in her dok*" on the 15th and 16th of June. He had also to provide meat, drink and coal for her as well as the cost of transporting these to *Polerth*.³¹ That the focus of naval activity had moved from Newhaven to Airth at the time is demonstrated by the presence of Jacques Terrell, one of the principal shipwrights brought in from France to expedite the project. Not only was he there at the time, the king himself was present. During that period he gave alms to poor people at *Polerth*.³² A servant of the laird of Clackmannan brought pears to the Pow for him.³³ On one occasion he went out on a boat with local fishermen from whom he bought

oysters.³⁴ There is a sense of bustle and activity, even from the overtly dry pages of the royal treasurer's accounts. "*Ane rynnner man*" was paid fourpence to go to Stirling with instructions to the constable to "*feche aill, breid and fische to the Polertht.*" Sir Walter Ramsay, who fulfilled the equivalent role at Newhaven to that of Robert Callendar at the Pow of Airth, had the expense of boats and mariners plying between the two places "*at divers tyme.*" There are too a number of entries relating to the activities of the period which have no specific reference to place but fall within this group of notices and the inference may be made that they relate to Airth.

Activities at Airth climaxed at the turn of the year. On the 29th of December 1512, James Makeson, who seems to have been something akin to a clerk of works, travelled to Airth to "*bring doun the James and Margaret*". He made arrangements with the constable of Stirling to employ around thirty-five mariners to bring the rigging for the ships. From the 2nd of January through to the 18th of the month, preparations were made "*to the James for hir furthtakin of the pow of Arth and to bring hir don to the Ferry.*" On the 2nd a hundred rafters and fifty spars were purchased to furnish the "*pantrv rowmes*" for the **James**. There is no indication where they were acquired but there is an item for the cost of carrying and shipping them. Over and above these spars, twelve "*greit*" spars were bought to make "*wynding spakes,*" presumably spokes for turning the capstans. A dozen each of "*buckattis*" and "*stopis,*" that is buckets and flagons, were obtained. Leather to make the valves for the pumps of both the **James** and **Margaret** cost 18 shillings and 4 pence. Six French mariners were sent at the king's command to the two ships. For this event and the voyage down to Queensferry, supplies and victuals for the **James** were arranged. Provision was made for 36 people who were to be on board. Five hundred loaves of bread were brought from Edinburgh via Leith. Seventy gallons of ale in total were put on board. The carcasses of two fattened oxen were sent from the king's own larder along with a thousand herring. A boatload of coal was also supplied. It was not only the **James** that sailed from Airth at this time. Robert Callender, constable of Stirling arranged the preparation and provisioning of the **Margaret**. His account covers the period from the 11th to the 18th of January. On the 19th January John Barton, along with 43 men, was paid to "*pas to bring doun the Margret.*" This took three days. On the 21st of January the **James** was at Newhaven and two days later we find the **Margaret** at [Blackness](#). What might be a further allusion to the **Michael** comes at this time. Walter Paterson was paid for eight "*greit treis to mak sadillis to the greit schip and Margret*". However, this may be a slip of the pen: the **James** was, on occasion, referred to as "*the greit boat.*" Saddles were devices constructed to support ships during their launch. All of the expenses for these particular events were borne by Robert Callendar: further confirmation that they all related to activities at Airth.³⁵ This is the last we hear of the *Polerth* docks. A few months later James, along with most of the powerful and dynamic men of the land, fell on the Field of Flodden. The **Michael** was sold to the French - the Scottish navy, like James and his dreams, was lost.

The Location

Despite the wealth of records for the construction and operation of the dockyard at *Polerth*, the actual site has been effectively lost. The docks have, on occasion, been confused with the later harbour and dockyard situated at the modern village of Airth. The medieval community lay on the hill of [Airth](#), north of the [castle](#) and [church](#). It was only in the seventeenth century that the present-day settlement began to grow around the new harbour being developed on the foreshore. The port serving old Airth lay at the mouth of the Pow Burn. Although the later harbour is sometimes described as 'the pow', the two were distinguished in the eighteenth century when we are informed that the new harbour was sited at "*the North Pow*" and the old one at "*the South Pow*". The narration also states that the latter was known as "*the old Pow, which at Airth is called firth Pow*" Nevertheless, a considerable body of place-name evidence exists from which it may be possible to relocate

the site with a reasonable degree of certainty. Around seventy years after the events in question, Alexander Bruce of Airth received a crown charter confirming him in several properties.³⁶ Along with these was the right of “*the fishing of salmon and grils in the Water of Forth and the Pow of Airth near that piece of ground now called Dockis, with the freedom of set and draw nets (retia ponendi et trahendi) at any part of the said piece of land.*” It is essential to emphasise the use of the phrase “now called Dockis”: obviously, this indicates that the name had only come to be used to define that piece of ground relatively close to the time of the charter. Of additional importance is that the methods of fishing specified in that clause are of a type used only in tidal water. Alexander Elphinstone took possession of the lordship of his estate in 1617 which included “*the lands of Arthe*” amongst which were those “*commonly known as Mylnholm and Heidcruick alias Doikis*”.³⁷ These names are of a type associated with a river or stream; in this instance, the Pow Burn. A *holm* is a level, waterside meadow and the defining element. *Myline*, is Scots for a mill. The mill in question features in an Airth charter of 1619.³⁸ Amongst the holdings itemised in it are, “*lands lying between the damhead called Patrik-Hagings damheid and the Pow going down to the site of the old mill of the said Patrik called Mylnholm*”. On the basis of the mill lade running roughly parallel to the Pow, we may surmise that, of the two pieces of land specified, *Mylnholm* lies furthest upstream. This surmise is supported by an estate plan of 1764.³⁹ On it, to the north of the present main road to Airth (A905), the land between the Pow and an old mill lade is named “The Holms.” A further supposition is that the pieces of land are given in the order that they descend the stream. In the second name, Heidcruick, the element, *cruick*, is the old spelling of *crook*, a term used for the land contained within a meander of a river or stream. The defining element, *Heid-* is the Scottish rendering of ‘head’ and refers, obviously, to an extremity. Throughout the seventeenth century, successive charters repeatedly mention these places and continue to state that Heidcruick and Docks are one and the same place. And the name persisted: in the early part of the following century Thomas Dundas of Fingask, a progenitor of the Earls of Zetland, took possession of “*the five oxengates of land of the Haughs or Halls of Airth commonly called Newmilns or Docks in the Lordship and barony of Elphinstone*”.⁴⁰ Here we have yet another alias for the place called Docks. We are also told that it lay in the Halls of Airth which land lies on the south side of the Pow Burn. This information is reiterated in several sasines throughout the eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century we find further references. Prior to the formation of county councils, road maintenance was a statutory duty placed upon landowners. Their tenants, as part of their tenancy, performed the necessary labour. The allocation of the specific stints of work was recorded and the upkeep of one section of relevant road was allotted in 1811 to “*the tenants in Newmiln and Docks*”.⁴¹ Fifteen years later it was the task of “*the tenant in Newmill and Docks*”.⁴² No doubt, the change from “tenants” to “tenant” was a consequence of the change in agricultural practice taking place at that time but, more importantly, it is evident that the land known as Newmill then incorporated the place called Docks. Newinill, or Newmills, lies within the Halls of Airth. This is the last record recovered for the place-name. That is not to say that none exist, simply that a line was drawn on the search at that point. It must be pointed out that an anomaly exists in the foregoing mentions of Docks: the sixteenth and seventeenth century notices place Docks on the north of the Pow while those of the eighteenth and nineteenth century locate it on the south side.

Newmills: The Site

Obviously, the site takes its name from a mill, or mills, which stood there. The earliest mention of the mill that gave rise to the name comes from 1627 when it appears as:

“the new mill (novum molendinum) of the said Patric Hegin, with is lands viz. the Thorniecruik-waird, an acre and a rood and 26 fallis of croftland between the dams, lands bounded between the house of John Aitkin, the yard of Alexander Guidlet, the

gateway of Thomas Gilmour and others as commonly specified, including thairin the haill salt pans, pow and herbrie”

Evidently, given the final inclusion, this property reached to the estuary of the Pow of Airth, for there was the harbour, and to the coast, where the salt pans would have been situated.⁴³ This information is confirmed in the relevant charter of sasine with minor exceptions. There it is described as, “*the new mill called Patrick Heggins mill*”.⁴⁴ Fifty years later the will and testament of Robert Cruikshanks, “*miller in Newmylns*” was registered.⁴⁵ By the beginning of the next century it appears that Newmills had also developed into a small estate, for in 1707 it is reported to be, “*the seat of Alexander Miln of Newmilns hard by Heggins-nook*”.⁴⁶ It is of interest that his sons, David and Thomas, were on the wanted list of the Hanoverian government for having seised boats to provide “*the rebels passage*”.⁴⁷ Mr Johnston of Kirkland, in 1723 writes:

“a mile east from the house and kirk of Airth stands the house of Newmiln, near the ferry over Forth called Higgens Neuck and upon the south side of Forth and near the place where the Pow of Airth runs into Forth”.⁴⁸

Patrick Higgin’s mill would seem to have fallen into disuse before the middle of the eighteenth century for, in 1757 it was advertised that [Newmills](#) would provide:

“a safe and convenient harbour, sufficient to receive ships of 200 tons burden, and likewise a place where a corn mill may be built to advantage, and there is already built on the side of the harbour, a girnel house, which will contain 2,500 bolls of grain”.⁴⁹

From later evidence it is known that a mill was once again put into operation there. It seems to have been built sometime in the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Correspondence between Graham of Airth and Lord Dunmore followed on a proposed “*excambion of land at the mouth of the Pow,*” that is an exchange of land between the two landowners. In 1786 Graham writes,

“where your Lordship proposes giving me a coall fauld & road connecting it with my own grounds and liberty of a free harbour on the river Forth for shipping coall, landing limestone or other things in lieu of my present harbour between New Miln Bridge and Docks which will be rendered useless if a damhead be thrown across the bed of the river instead of a bridge, and a new bed be made for the river on New Milns or Powfoullis Grounds some hundred yards distance from my ground”.⁵⁰

This is one of the most revealing pieces of information. Evidently, Graham’s harbour lay upstream from New Miln Bridge! Not only that but it was even above the proposed damhead. Here, no doubt, was the “*pow and herbrie*” of the barony of Airth mentioned in 1627. Certainly, the damhead mentioned was built and its remains can still be seen, but the mill had only a short life for the Ordnance Surveyors reported around 1860 that

“The building to which this name applies was formerly a corn mill, but a part of which is now in ruins and the remaining part is occupied as a cothouse.”

Other notices for the period are equally interesting. One from 1792 has “*5 oxengates of the Haughs or Halls of Airth called Newmilns or Docks*”.⁵¹ The relatively small piece of land that contained the mansion house of Newmills and the later mill buildings is on a promontory at the confluence of the estuary of the Pow and the Forth. However, it is on the south side of the Pow and is physically part of the lands of Halls of Airth.

Five oxengates is a substantial piece of ground: about 265 hectares or 655 imperial acres. This portion of land is designed in 1805 as “*the lands and estate of Newmiln & Halls of Airth*”.⁵² It is a common process for a relatively small feature to give the name to a large

tract of land; one that can be observed at its extreme in examples such as [Dunipace](#). There, a relatively small mound gave its name to a major medieval barony and, later, a [parish](#). Although the holding known as Newmills extended well beyond the precincts of the mansion house, the sum of the evidence still puts the place named as Docks close to the mouth of the Pow of Airth. Observation of the site over a number of years, along with a fairly intensive survey in the 1980s, has revealed nothing conclusive. Having said that, there are several intriguing features that do require explanation.

Illus: Pont's depiction of the Pow of Airth with the ship symbols on the right (National Library of Scotland).



Worthy of consideration is cartographic material for the area, of which the earliest is Timothy Pont's map of Stirlingshire, drawn around 1590; some eighty years after the docks were in operation. Despite the fact that it shows Stirling, Alloa and the River Carron, each recognised as ports at the time, it is only at the Pow of Airth that he places symbols for ships. These give it an air of bustle and activity.

Pont lacks the accuracy we associate with modern maps and yet study reveals that much of the information it contains is trustworthy; particularly in relation to water features. Of great interest, therefore, is his depiction of the estuary of the Pow. It will be seen in the extract of his map that it shows a rather complex picture with the Pow running under Abbeytown Bridge and entering in an upstream direction into the Forth, which is what it does. To the south is a lagoon separated from the Pow by a long, narrow spit. The seaward edge of the lagoon appears to have a barrier or breakwater across it. The later map of Stirlingshire by the Dutch cartographer, Johan Blaeu, is of no help here for it is simply an interpretation of Pont's work. A century and a half pass before another map appears: General Roy's Military Survey. A much more accurate map than Pont's and, for the most part, highly reliable, so much so that, with adjustment of scales, it is possible to take a tracing from it and overlay it on a modern chart and match up many of the features. This too indicates that the mouth of the Pow was substantially different in the mid-eighteenth century from what it is today. Again, it shows the Pow flowing into the Forth in an upstream direction but has part of the Newmills headland detached and insular. Newmills mansion house can be seen situated within an enclosure. The Survey shows the feature which was used as the



Illus: Roy's 1755 Map (National Library of Scotland).

lade for the eighteenth-century mill as the course of the Pow. John Grassom's map of Stirlingshire also shows the meander as the active course in 1817. Today it is separated from the stream; the neck of the meander having been cut through prior to 1860 when the first Ordnance Survey

maps for this area were published. As the land within that meander was formerly attached to the lands of Airth, it is highly probable that this was the entity known as Heidcruik. It will be recalled that both Heidcruik and Newmills are given as alternative names for Docks. Assuming that this is Heidcruik, then both places lie contiguous and effectively explains the duality.

Conclusions and Observations

To summarise, contemporary records put the dockyards at the Pow of Airth; slightly later ones equate the place called Docks with a piece of land called Heidcruik while, subsequently, the headland known as Newmills appears as the alias. Two are identifiable: Pow of Airth and Newmills. Conceivably, the third is the land within the now detached meander. The three places all lie together and there can be little doubt that the dockyard was situated in that immediate area. Whether or not it was located within the Pow or lay on the Forth is the foremost question that remains.



Illus: 1861 Ordnance Survey Map showing New Mills bridge. The lost meander of the Pow noted as mill lade may have enclosed Heidcruik (National Library of Scotland).

Although today there are no obvious remains of the dockyard to be seen at Newmills it is possible that archaeology could find some remnants. For instance, we know that the Constable of Stirling Castle got payment for the erection of stabling for 50 horses. Even if this had been the simplest of structures it would have required

postholes to be dug. Given the range of activities recorded at the docks we must also envisage a range of buildings to house the activities of the various tradesmen. A considerable workforce must have been housed and there had to be some provision for the various workmen who travelled there for specific tasks. Just as at Newhaven, there had to be a village of sorts. All of these structures might be expected to leave the kind of traces from which archaeologists are able to reconstruct pictures of the past. What of the actual docks which housed the ships? These were dug and may have been little more than holes in the ground. Given the nature of the ground there it is inconceivable that the sides would not have been supported in some manner; most likely it would have been with timber balks. Even if the timbers were removed later, archaeologists are adept at discriminating between disturbed ground and 'natural'. There must also be at least a suspicion of another structure. The editor of the Lord High Treasurer's Accounts notes several entries relating to "clay barges." He assumes that they were probably used for carrying clay to create dry docks. However, he obviously was unaware that the site in question lies on rich clays. Indeed, there is no other type of strata there. Were he correct, then it would be a classic example of taking coals to Newcastle. A more likely answer is that they were transporting the clay away from the excavations to be used to construct a breakwater. The earth removed from the first dock at Newhaven was used for just that purpose. As well as providing the advantage of that function, had they not removed the clay then the area surrounding each dock would have been impeded by great slippery mounds of the stuff. It would, therefore, be a reasonable assumption to assume that the clay from the Polerth excavations was used in such a manner and so it is just feasible that some indication of a breakwater still lies below the water there. It can only be hoped that, in the not too distant future, archaeology, aided and abetted by the technology now available, will recover physical evidence at this site.

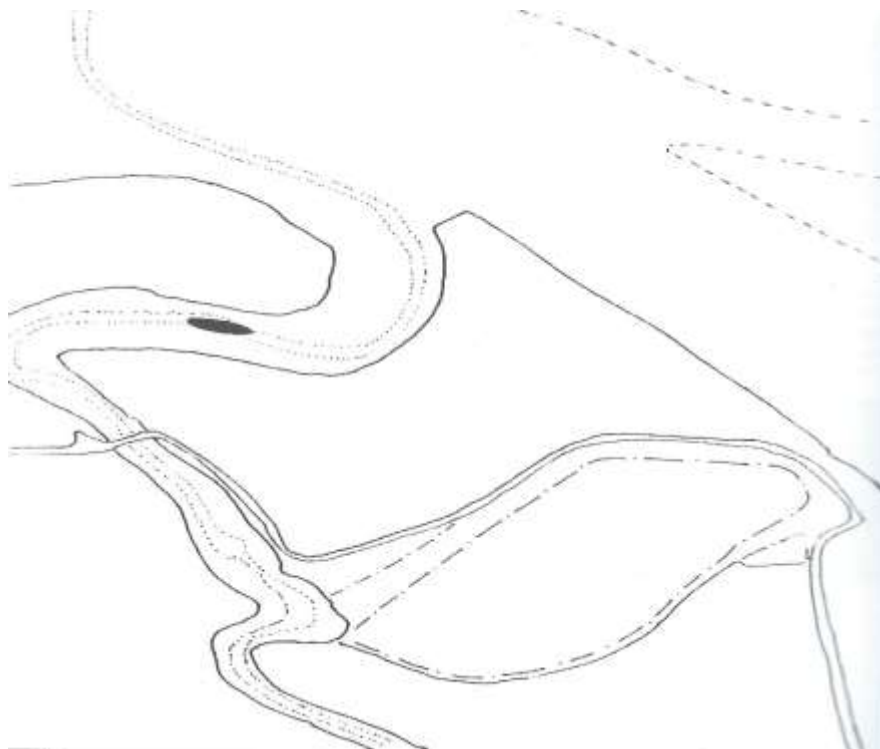
Addendum 1

In the course of researching the dockyard at the Pow of Airth, an additional reference came to light that does not appear to have any direct connection with the facility. Nevertheless, in so far as it may be of general interest or at some later period leads to further insight into the dockyard, it is presented here.

Within the Exchequer Rolls of Scotland are several entries relating to the immediate area (Exchequer Rolls of Scotland, Volume 10, *passim*). From 1488 the sergeant of Stirlingshire was relieved of certain sums of money he was normally bound to collect in respect of the ferry of Airth and the fishing *cruives*. The reason given was for the loss or "decay" of both. At first glance it might have been presumed that the loss was related in some fashion to the warfare that culminated at Sauchieburn, which lies only a few kilometres distant. However, at least as late as 1492 the same relief was being given. Had there been war damage then, presumably, it would have been repaired long before then. An alternative seems more likely: that some natural change had taken place in the area, sufficiently catastrophic to affect both the operation of the ferry and the pursuit of fishing by set nets. Most likely would be a massive change in the river mouth through erosion or by unprecedented silting. Given the evidence for the latter, it would seem the more probable explanation.

Addendum 2

It is fortunate that the remains of the **Mary Rose** were recovered, for they provide excellent



Illus: Silhouette Diagram of the **Mary Rose** superimposed on the mouth of the Pow of Airth

information about ships of the period. In particular, for the present purpose are the dimensions. From stem to stern she was 32 metres in length and her breadth was 11.66 metres. Her draught is estimated to have been 4.6 metres, but this would have been sailing draught. The Treasurer's Accounts contain several entries that show that ballast stones were removed before the ships were put into their docks, thereby reducing the draught. While it is not suggested that the docks were entered from the Pow, in an attempt to relate the proportion of the ships to the dimensions of the river, a silhouette diagram of the **Mary Rose** was superimposed upon a plan of the mouth of the Pow and it is presented here.

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References

1	An excellent account of the events of this period is found in <i>James IV</i> , Norman MacDougall. 1997.
2	Within a few years of each other, the Knights of St John, based in Malta, built the Santa Anna , the Portuguese had the São Joao , the French laid down the Grand Francois and the Swedes, the Stora Karfvel while the English boasted the Henri Grace a Dieu or Great Harry as it was known.
3	Some commentators, following the editor of the Lord High Treasurer's accounts, base stated that timber was also obtained from Cambuskenneth. However, close scrutiny of the text shows that this was a slip on the editor's part. When he wrote "Cambuskenneth" he was in fact making reference to entries which show timber being brought from Cambusnethen in Lanarkshire. However, Cambuskenneth was one of two places where guns for the new ship were cast; the other being Edinburgh Castle.
4	Edinburgh Evening Courant. 10th February 1757.
5	National Library of Scotland, Ms 10877
6	The Scots Peerage (ed.) Sir James Balfour Paul. iii, p530.
7	Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland, iv.
8	Exchequer Rolls of Scotland. P300.
9	ibid. pp.403. 565.
10	ibid. ii.p.342; iii, p.332.
11	Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland. iii p.296.
12	ibid. iv, p.70.
13	ibid. iv, p.68.
14	ibid. iv, p.104.
15	ibid, iv, p114.
16	ibid, iv, p.120.
17	ibid. iv, p.131.
18	ibid. iv, p.103.
19	Fleming. J.S., <i>Ancient Castles and Mansions of Stirling Nobility</i> .
20	Accounts of the Lord High Treasurer of Scotland, iv p.525.
21	ibid. iv, p.463.
22	ibid. iv, p336.
23	ibid. iv p.280.
24	ibid, iv, p.347.
25	ibid. iv, p355.
26	ibid, iv.

27	ibid, iv.
28	ibid, iv. p.444.
29	ibid, iv, p.458.
30	ibid, iv, p.280.
31	ibid, iv, p.281.
32	ibid, iv, p.190.
33	ibid, iv, p.313.
34	ibid, iv, p.313.
35	ibid, iv Appendix I.
36	Register of the Great Seal of Scotland, v 85.
37	National Archive of Scotland, RS58/1 f3v.
38	Register of the Great Seal of Scotland, viii, 1022.
39	National Archive of Scotland, RHP 10654.
40	ibid, GD65/191.
41	Statute Labour Roads Book, 8th or Carron District.
42	ibid.
43	Register of the Great Seal of Scotland viii, 1022.
44	National Archive of Scotland, Register of Sasines 58/4 f120.
45	Commissariat Records of Stirlingshire; Register of Testaments 1607-1800.
46	Sibbald, Sir R., <i>History and Description of Stirlingshire 1707</i> .
47	Love, J., <i>Antiquarian Notes and Queries</i> , IV I, p85.
48	Macfarlane's Geographical Collection, Parish of Airth.
49	Edinburgh Evening Courant 10 Feb 1757.
50	National Library of Scotland, Ms 10877(6).
51	Particular Register of Sasines for Stirlingshire, No. 2323.
52	ibid, No. 4972.