

A BREIF HISTORY OF THE STRATHAVEN TOWN MILL.

Built in 1650 by William, the Second Duke of Hamilton, then resident in Strathaven Castle, the Town Mill was to play an integral part in the working life of Strathaven for three and a quarter centuries.

After 1714, Strathaven Castle ceased to be occupied and soon fell into disrepair; but The Mill was kept in operation until, in 1820, the original building was destroyed by fire.

Rebuilt with a slate roof, The Mill was given an added storey in 1877 to make room for a larger water wheel. In 1902 an iron gangway was built to connect the main building to the grain store. Water-wheel drive was replaced by a hydro-electric installation in 1935.

After production ceased in 1966, The Mill fell quickly into disrepair. In 1972 a section of the roof fell in when the building was consumed by fire.

Such was its state of dilapidation, when, in 1974, Strathaven Arts Guild conceived and commenced its ambitious programme of converting the dilapidated Mill into an Arts Centre.

Strathaven Arts Guild was formed in 1971 with the object of promoting and encouraging the arts in Avondale. Its founder and secretary was Robert P. Currie who had enlisted the aid of the Rev. James Greig of Rankin Parish Church.

By 1974, Strathaven Arts Guild had a membership of approximately 450. Among its many activities it:

1. Introduced the highest class of professional music, art and drama into the town in conjunction with the Scottish Arts Council.
2. Acted as an umbrella organisation for at least a dozen associated amateur groups including Ranking File Drama Group, Strathaven Folk Club, Strathaven Art Group and others such as Strathaven Choral Society which it had helped to form.
3. Hoped to stimulate a lively interest in the arts among the younger members of the community by welcoming five local schools as corporate members.

At a press conference in April 1974, the Chairman of Strathaven Arts Guild, Sherriff Nigel Thomson, announced the old Town Mill for conversion into an arts centre. At that time The Mill had lain empty for eight years and had been derelict for two. The projected cost of the operation was £63,000. It was expected to take two years.

Purchase of the property was eased by the fact that its owner, Mrs Jessie McCracken, was herself an Arts Guild member who had originally proposed the idea, and was willing to sell the mill to the Guild for a nominal sum.

All that remained was to turn the dream into reality.

Reconstruction

In the autumn of 1974, the Guild's Director of Works, John Vince, and a group of Arts Guild volunteers began seriously upon the priority task of repairing The Mill Roof. In the next year and a half more than 600 voluntary man-hours were spent on a wide variety of operations: roof-building, dismantling and repair of walls, shaping doors and sawing joists.

With John Vince as Managing Director, Mill Restorations Limited, a non-profit-making private company was incorporated in March 1975 and began work on the site in April.

In February 1976, Community Industry became involved. A team of twenty young workers on an officially sponsored scheme worked side by side with volunteers. Later that year, Community Industry were joined by a Government Jobs Creation Scheme. Work on the scale required could now proceed.

Club and Theatre

The first phase of the renovation programme was completed in October 1976 – the Arts Guild Club – rooms were opened in the basement of The Mill. The tone walls and wooden beams of the original had been retained – combined with a distinctively lights and modern décor.

Inside a year, the second phase of The Mill campaign was completed with the official opening of The Town Mill Theatre on Saturday October 8th 1977: a small intimate theatre of the first rank, with comfortable accommodation for 130, fully equipped with lighting system, cinema facilities and dressing rooms.

The first performance was given by a well-known Scottish actor Leonard Maguire, in a show entitled “The Foreman, The Traveller and The Bottle”.

The dilapidated building with the fallen roof had become a theatre, and very soon a home for performances by 7.84 Company, Scottish Ballet and a succession of well-loved performers from the Scottish theatrical world.

To-day and To-morrow

In August 1985, four arts promoters, two full-time and two-part-time were hired through MSC by Strathaven Arts Guild to ensure that The Mill's completed and nearly completed facilities would be fully utilised; and to explore its potential as an Arts Centre catering to the whole community of Avondale.

The promoters efforts have been various and have culminated in the highly successful February Festival of the Arts in Strathaven (attracting over 800 people to the complex in 4 weeks); and in the equally popular Scottish Drama Season during April and May.

The future for the Centre now looks bright.

The Town Mill Arts Centre entirely owned and administered by the Strathaven Arts Guild will ensure that the completed Town Mill Arts Centre fully realises the dreams of its founders and its many members and repays their dedication over so many years.

As it is, Strathaven already has an Arts Centre of which it can be justly proud!

TOWN MILL AREAS

Theatre:

The Theatre has been open since 1977. We put on a range of shows to cover different ages and tastes within the local community. Folk acts such as The Tannahill Weavers and John Malcolm. We also feature upcoming Lanarkshire and local bands such as De Rosa and the Black Rats.

Thomson Hall:

The newly refurbished Thomson Hall offers a unique and cosy space for birthday parties, exhibitions and acoustic perfection for bands to practice. Recently used for a christening celebration, fund raisers and local street dance club.

Granary Exhibition Area:

Throughout the year a wide range of professional and amateur exhibitions are held. Other events also prove highly popular such as the craft fairs / classes. Recently used by the Avon Artists who put together a very successful art exhibition.

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