



HERITAGE

THE SPINNINGDALE COTTON MILL

It was built in 1792 by George Dempster of Skibo **with the aim to improve social and economic conditions in this area** and as an alternative to clearing lands for sheep.

It's hard to imagine what people in 1792 thought when they first saw the ambitious project of a cotton mill at Spinningdale. The idea was devised by George Dempster in conjunction with the Balnoe Company. Robert Burns referred to Dempster as 'a true-blue Scot' and Dempster certainly had the reputation of having a philanthropic heart. George Dempster was a Member of Parliament and was influenced by the great thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment, he was noted to have a benevolent, warm, and humorous personality.

Nestled beside the Dornoch Firth, the mill was an attempt to provide jobs and a living for the Skibo tenants at a time of upheaval, clearance, and migration. Rapid industrialisation was sweeping the country in the late 1700s and Dempster wanted to prevent the mass migration that had been seen in other parts of Sutherland. His intention was for people who were becoming displaced from the land to earn a living without the need to move to the city or emigrate.

The mill, built by James Boog of Dornoch, was four storeys high and powered by water from Loch Migdale. *"n the morning [...] the miln lead was opened to let the water onto the wheel. The person appointed to this task was regulated by "an Hour Clock set in the Wall of the Cotton Miln above the large wheel, which moves and regulates the Machinery in the different rooms of the Miln". In the evening, a bell announced the end of working for the day and "the water which sets the whole machinery agoing was stopd by the person purposely employed for that purpose."*

Elizabeth Beaton, author of *An Illustrated Guide to Sutherland* describes the outside of the building as having 'a canted stair-tower lit by Venetian windows in the front elevation and a semi-circular latrine tower at the north gable'.



The Spinningdale Mill ruins in a postcard circa 1900. / © TAINMUSEUM.ORG

The mill had 36 machines called Spinning Jennies. The jennies enabled one person to work up to 8 spools at a time. Each jenny at Spinningdale had 136 spindles and the mill employed about a hundred people. It is thought that the mill processed cotton and perhaps imported flax. Dempster built cottages for the workers in the small settlement named on the 1747-52 William Roy map as Inverochin or Inveruchin. The name of the actual village Spinningdale has nothing to do with the word 'spinning', though. It comes from the Old Norse *Spenja-dalr*, meaning 'attractive dale' and variants of this name had been recorded as early as the 1400s (*Old-lore miscellany of Orkney Shetland Caithness and Sutherland*, Vol II, 1909).

THE ENTREPRENEURS

Dempster was joined in the project by, among others, David Dale and George MacIntosh, prominent Glasgow mill owners. David Dale had founded the influential New Lanark mill complex in Lanarkshire alongside Richard Arkwright, the inventor of industrial cotton spinning. Interestingly, during Historylinks Sutherland Longhouse Proj-

ect we investigated the diary of John Matheson from Strath Carnaig. John was an economic migrant who left Sutherland for Glasgow in 1799. He worked at Barrowfield Dye Works, a mill owned by Dale and MacIntosh.

There is also evidence of a mill at Newton Point, a place that was already established for the importing and exporting goods. Just for a moment it must have seemed like this kind of industrialisation was going to prosper on Dempster's estate. However, it was not to be, and the mill at Spinningdale proved to be unviable.

Mills were dangerous places to work and the Blantyre Mill near Glasgow burned down no less than four times. Spinningdale Mill suffered the same fate, and in 1806 it was destroyed by fire. The mill had not been successful: workers absented themselves at lambing, peat cutting and harvesting times, and it was also difficult to compete with prices further to the south.

Dugald Gilchrist bought Spinningdale (mill and village) in 1808. Repairs were made but the mill was given up in 1815. ■ by Lynne Mahoney, Historylinks Museum Curator. With info from Malcolm Bangor-Jones