

STUDIES IN THE HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF

THE SALT AND COAL
INDUSTRIES
AT
ST MONANS, FIFE
IN THE
18TH & 19TH CENTURIES

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The Rt Hon the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, former Chairman of the East Neuk of Fife Preservation Society

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Abstract

The Newark Coal and Salt Company flourished to the east of St Monans in east Fife, Scotland between 1771 and 1794. Coastal erosion precipitated a rescue excavation of part of the saltpans complex, which led to more extensive investigations. The site has now been landscaped for public display. Archival and cartographic research, combined with the investigation of crop-mark evidence, has allowed a reconstruction to be made of the fugitive industrial landscape, along with the associated colliery and horse-drawn waggonway which linked the complex with a purpose-built pier at Pittenweem harbour.

Keywords: coal, salt, windmill, waggonway, Pittenweem, St Monans, Fife, eighteenth century, industrial archaeology

Foreword

**by The Rt Hon the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres
former Chairman, East Neuk of Fife Preservation Society**

This monograph records a most interesting, pleasing and successful enterprise. It has been achieved through the efforts of local residents, the East Neuk of Fife Preservation Society, the Universities of St Andrews and Dundee, and a number of public bodies led and coordinated by the Fife Council.

A few years ago hardly anyone had heard of the 18th-century coal and salt industry which had existed between St Monans and Pittenweem. There was little visible sign of what had once been a substantial industrial complex – just an unroofed tower, a rock-cut channel running down to the sea, and a few bumps in the dunes, all of which was in immediate danger of being washed away by high tides.

An exemplary co-operative effort between the voluntary and public sectors has changed that. The old wind-engine tower has been consolidated and rebuilt – with impressionistic sails – as a look-out

point for visitors; a panhouse has been excavated and others have been landscaped and grass covered for public viewing; the archaeology and history have been explained on interpretative panels. The engine tower is visited by 5000 people a year and has become a notable feature of the Fife Coastal Path. Now we have this admirable monograph explaining the social and economic history, in relation to the results of the archaeological investigation of the site.

The authors acknowledge the contributions made by many people. A special word of thanks though should be added to record the role of Peter Yeoman of the Fife Council Planning Service Archaeology Unit. His support and interest in early days, his leadership and coordination of the various bodies – and his success in securing the necessary grants – have been of critical importance. The local community has every reason to be most appreciative of his help and achievement.

1. Introduction

Peter Yeoman and Colin Martin

For over 200 years, the coast between St Monans and Pittenweem has been dominated by the tower of the pumping windmill of the St Philips Saltworks. This is a tremendously important monument, which has acted as the key to unlocking the fugitive remains of the lost industrial landscape of intensive coal and salt production, in an area which is now usually only associated with fishing and farming. This is a key site in helping us to understand the role of the capitalising landowner, in this case Sir John Anstruther, in the industrialisation of Scotland at the time of the Enlightenment in the late 18th century. Sir John took what had been a cottage industry – salt production – and elevated it to an intensive level of production by combining risky capital investment with innovative engineering solutions. The investment paid off, although Sir John lived to see the decline of his vision by the time of his death in 1799.

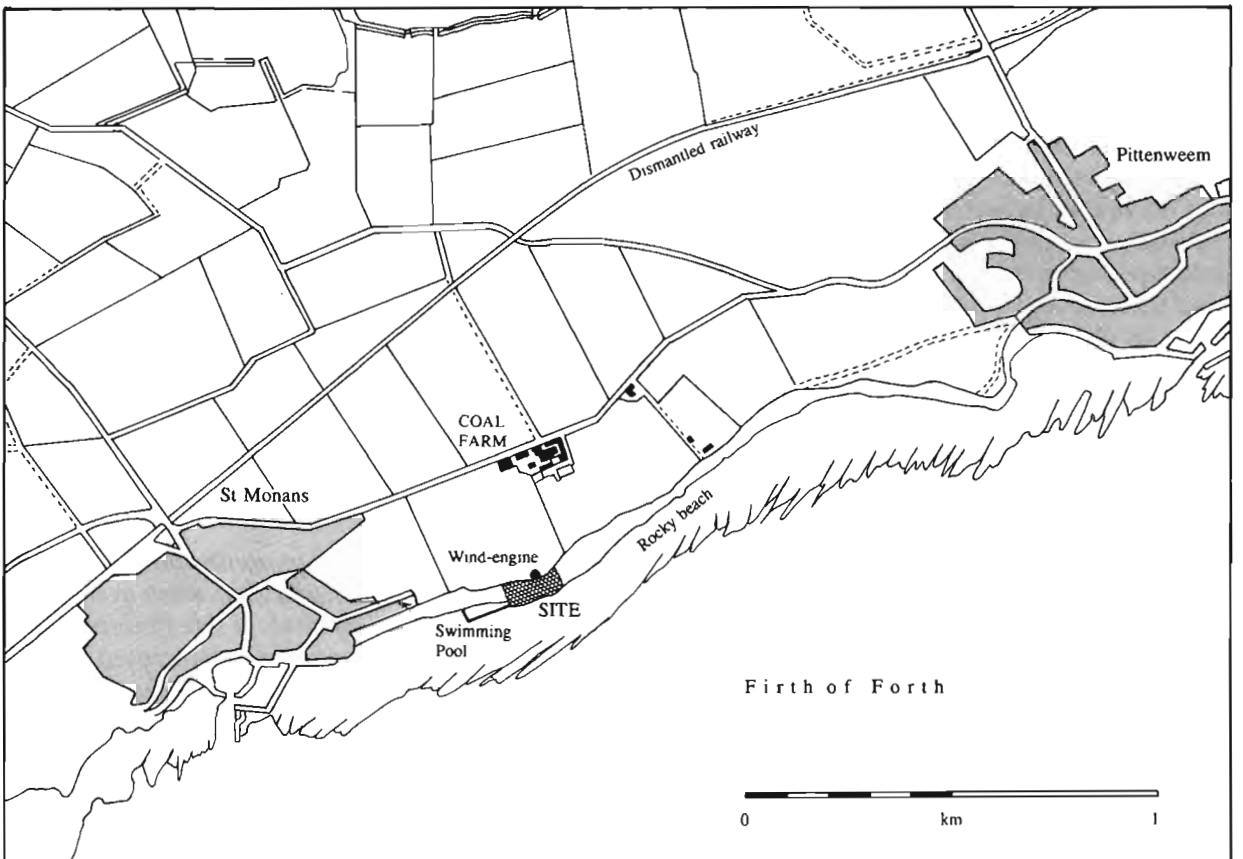
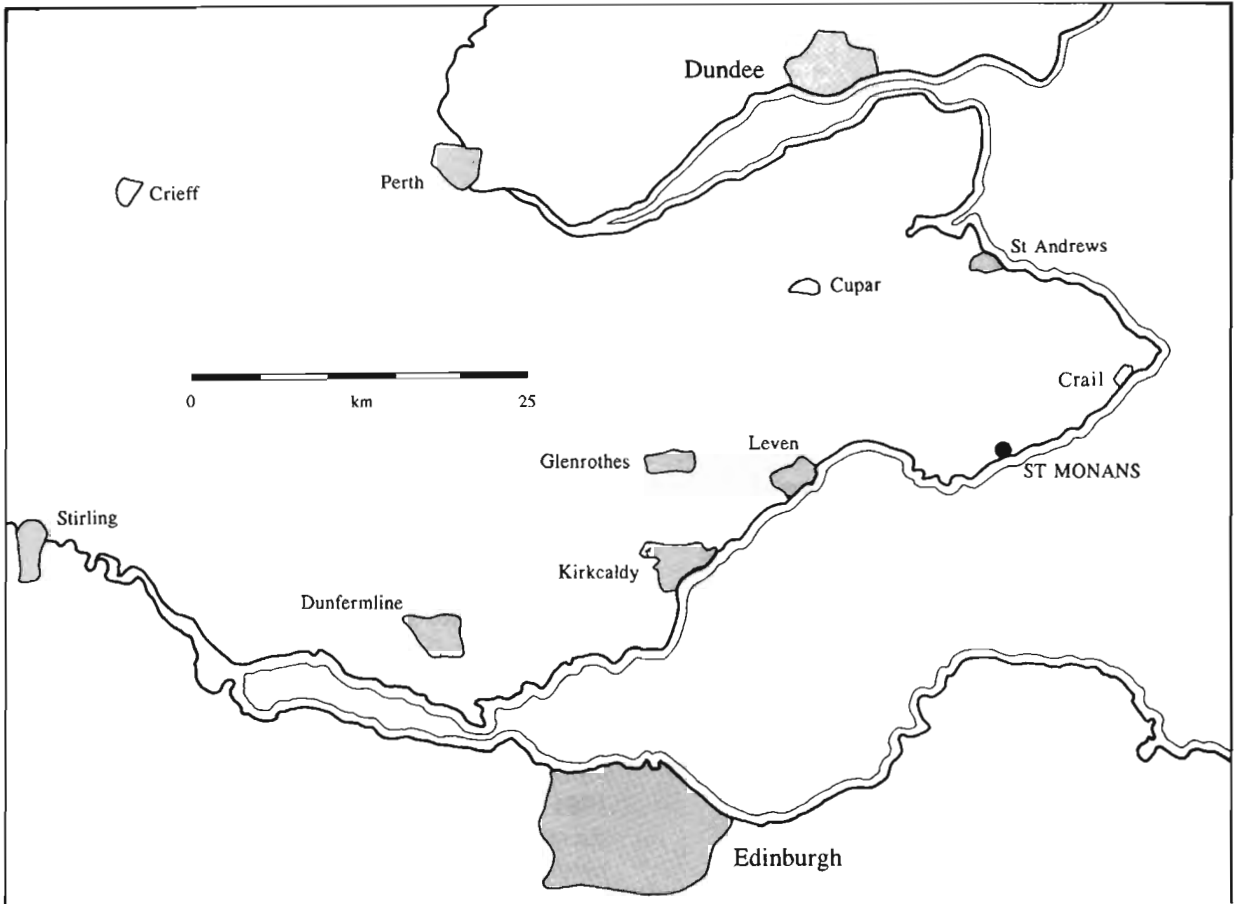
The recognition and interpretation of this monumental landscape did not come easily or quickly, nor did it stem from the application of a single discipline. Neither, in the first instance at least, did the project have clearly articulated ‘professional’ research goals, but was driven rather by a serendipitous interest in the locality by people who lived there. It began with an almost casual recognition by Colin Martin of unrecorded features at the St Philips saltworks site, which led to his identification of extensive rock-cuttings in that no-man’s-land between High- and Low-Water, a zone of rich potential rarely scrutinised by archaeologists. This interest coincided with a growing concern by the East Neuk of Fife Preservation Society about the condition and future preservation of the wind-engine tower. Erosion of the foreshore then revealed a long and informative archaeological section, cut back by each winter’s gales to reveal new features the following spring. The threat to the saltworks posed by erosion led, in turn, to a wider interest in the site, and to the rescue and research excavations sponsored by Historic Scotland and Fife Council. These excavations, conducted by John Lewis and Robin Murdoch of Scotia Archaeology Limited, have now exposed and explained much of the saltworking complex.

A major impetus to the study of the industrial landscape in its entirety was provided by the discovery in the Scottish Record Office of Gavin Hogg’s remarkable survey of 1785. This led to further searches, both on the ground and in the cartographic record, which revealed that much was still there to be found if it could only be recognised and set within the framework of a wider whole. Good fortune also attended the programme of aerial reconnaissance over the area carried out between 1984 and 1991 by Colin Martin under the aegis of the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland, for 1984 and 1989 were years of exceptional summer drought which yielded a rich harvest of crop-mark evidence.

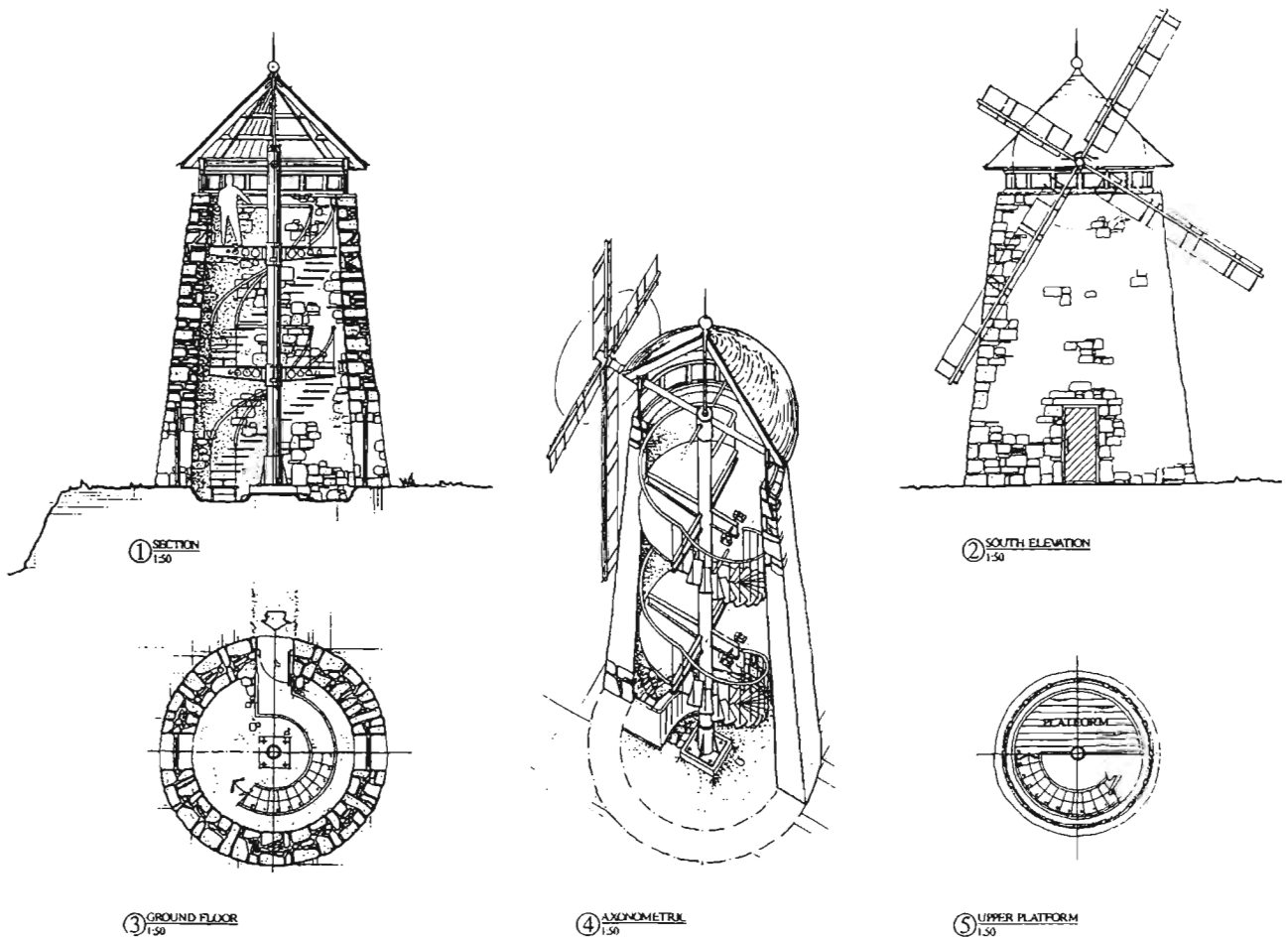
The third and final part of this study was provided by Paula Martin’s exhaustive knowledge of national and local archival sources, coupled with her tenacity to tease out and make sense of what they contained, fleshing the archaeological bones of the landscape with the social and economic realities of the people who lived and worked within it.

Above all, this has been an interdisciplinary study, in which widely differing forms of evidence have been integrated successfully and interpreted within the context of strong community involvement. It is perhaps salutary to reflect, in conclusion, how fragmentary our perception of this remarkable landscape would still be, had each of the disciplines concerned conducted its investigations in isolation, without knowledge of or reference to the others.

This publication also represents the culmination of almost 20 years of conservation work at the saltpans led by the East Neuk of Fife Preservation Society. Their initial concern was prompted by the spectre of coastal erosion. In 1985, erosion of the easternmost panhouse prompted the predecessor body of Historic Scotland to fund limited excavations, directed by John Lewis (Lewis 1989). Following the success of the excavations, the Preservation Society joined forces with East Neuk Ltd, a local economic development company, to prepare a formal strategy for the conservation and interpretation of the saltpans. This was presented to



Illus 1.1. Location plans.



Illus 1.2. St Monans wind-engine and salt pans restoration.

central and local government agencies in 1989. Fife Regional Council and North East Fife District Council became formally involved at this stage. The funding they provided enabled access to be created from the panhouses on the coastal path up to the wind-engine, production of interpretation panels, and publication of an excellent guide booklet written by Paula Martin (1992).

An even more ambitious programme was then developed by the Preservation Society and East Neuk Ltd. This involved the reconstruction of the ruinous wind-engine tower as a visitor centre, complete with an upper viewing platform. The Regional Council agreed to take the lead in fundraising and implementing these works, which were completed in 1992 at a cost of around £75,000, with funding from the local authorities, together with Historic Scotland, the Scottish Tourist Board, and the East Neuk of Fife Preservation Society. This project was led by Peter Yeoman, with Roger Brown of East Neuk Ltd, and Mike Rolland of Hurd Rolland Architects. A Saltpans Working Group, formed by the main funding bodies and the landowner, performed a project management role until 1996, when sole responsibility was taken over by the new Fife Council. The wind-engine is staffed by local custodians each July and August, and a key is available from the local newsagent's

shop throughout the rest of the year. It has proved to be a popular attraction, with around 5000 visitors annually; the wind-engine is now managed by the Fife Council Museums Service (East).

Further excavations were carried out in 1994 by Robin Murdoch of Scotia Archaeology Limited to aid conservation and interpretation of the saltpan houses. These were successful, notably in discovering the remains of wooden water pipes which had been used to supply brine to the pans. The most exciting opportunity for archaeological work, however, came about in 1995–6 when Fife Enterprise realised the potential of the site as a major heritage feature on the Fife Coastal Path, which they were developing at the time in tandem with Fife Council Community Services. Funding was provided to enable the uncovering of all nine panhouses; the best preserved example was consolidated and permanently displayed, while the others were presented as grassy earthworks. New interpretation panels were also produced. Thus, for the first time in over 150 years, it is possible for visitors to appreciate this unique historic industrial complex in its entirety.

Acknowledgements

The authors would wish to acknowledge especially

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Others involved in early research about and investigation of the site include Ian Reekie, former headteacher of St Monans Primary School, N Q Bogdan, then of St Andrews University, and John Hume, then of Historic Scotland. Peter Yeoman is keen to acknowledge the support and expertise provided by numerous colleagues in Fife Council, including Rob Terwey, Geoff Moy, John Bell, Andy Easton, Sarah Govan, Mike King and Jim Hooton. Thanks are also offered for the assistance provided

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NB: All place-names cited in the text without a county suffix are in Fife.

All measurements referring to the historical context are given in imperial units.

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