Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald, Friday 4 December 1953, p.3 cols.a & b

(I)

Although even some modern guide-books describe Dalry as an ironworking town, very few people are still alive who remember these activities. Yet the Ironworks at Dalry occupied a prominent part in the Scottish iron industry and the story of their rise and rather short existence is most interesting.

The iron trade in Scotland was of little consequence before 1828 when J.B. Neilson took out his patent for the hot-blast which greatly lowered the cost of production by leading to a reduction in the consumption of fuel, especially when raw coal was used instead of coke after 1831. In Lanarkshire the trade rapidly developed through the use of the black-band ironstone in the thirties, but in Ayrshire, apart from the outpost at Muirkirk, specialising in the manufacture of bar-iron, there was little development until after 1840. By that time the better seams of the black-band in Lanarkshire were being exhausted and mineral royalties there were rising steeply. At first they came to Ayrshire. The Bairds of Gartsherrie, who were later to own five Ayrshire Ironworks - Blair, Eglinton, Portland, Lugar and Muirkirk - investigated the possibilities at Dalry first of all in 1844, and built the old railway line past Pitcon to Swinlees. Merry and Cunninghame came from Carnbroe to Glengarnock in 1842 and later to Ardeer, and in 1846 the Houldsworths extended their activities from Coltness to Dalmellington. These are the proprietors who became well established in Ayrshire in the memory of many, but the chequered history of the Ironworks in Dalry before they were purchased by the Bairds in 1852 is not well known.

For the first quarter of the nineteenth century the inhabitants of the town of Dalry were engaged in the textile industries as were most towns of the West of Scotland. At the end of the eighteenth century some had been engaged in silk, but by 1840 they were all weaving cotton goods for the large merchants of Paisley and Glasgow, of which cotton was still the staple industry. The foundation of the Blair Ironworks in 1839 changed the character of Dalry parish.

These were the first to be founded in Ayrshire after the hot-blast was used in Scotland. The Cessnock Works at Galston followed Blair almost at once but they were dismantled five years later. Leases for the minerals on the Blair estate were first arranged by a Glasgow civil engineer, Andrew Craig, in 1838 and he also made arrangements for the erection of Ironworks, but in 1839 transferred his interest to Mr Macdonald, a writer in Glasgow. Great prosperity for the town and parish was expected as a result of the proposed development, and Dalry was expected to become a second Coatbridge. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that when Macdonald arrived in the town he was welcomed by the tenantry on the Blair and Glasgow estates, on which he had leased the minerals, each of the tenants driving a load of stones to help to build the new Ironworks; and in the midst of great rejoicing the foundation stone of the works was laid with great pomp and ceremony by the Masonic Lodges of the neighbourhood on an August day in 1839.

The omens seemed favourable. In the previous years the low-cost Scots producers had been able to undersell the English and Welsh producers and had made good profits. Moreover, in June 1840, the stretch of the Glasgow and Ayr Railway passing through Dalry was opened and the whole line for goods traffic later in the year, with all the potentialities that came from the new method of transport. A contemporary described the prospects for Ayrshire as ‘most flattering’ and Blair should have been able to take all the opportunities available.

Smelting first commenced at Blair on the 27th of January 1841, under the management of John Condie, one of the several improvers of the hot-blast, but from then on prospects darkened. From the autumn of 1839 the whole country had been experiencing depressed conditions caused by the need for large grain imports, and a drain of bullion to America. The foreign demand on which the Scotch pig iron trade was always heavily was low, and the inauguration of an increased American tariff in 1842 made matters worse. Throughout 1841 stocks were heavy and increasing so that the ironmasters agreed to reduce output by 25 per cent for six months beginning on 1st January 1842. Blair did not enjoy the period of high prices of 1836 which enabled some of the earlier established manufacturers to survive. Macdonald had, in these circumstances, insufficient capital to carry on and the leases fell into the hands of his creditors; so in the spring of 1842, along with similarly situated works such as Cessnock and Househill the three furnaces at Blair were out of blast. Fortunately, unlike the other two, Blair was to survive for thirty years more before its final extinction.

However, a year later, on 10th May 1843, the Blair ironworks were put up for auction and so began the connection with Blair of Alexander Alison, who purchased the works and also the estate of Pitcon about the same time, and whose failure in December 1847 was to precipitate the fall of the company then owning the works. Alison was a speculator who seems to have lost heavily during the railway mania, one railway transaction being reported to have cost him £9,700. His most interesting enterprises, however, were in journalism, as he was the proprietor of “Tait’s Magazine”, the “National Advertiser” and the “North British Mail”, which he founded at the beginning of 1847 and which lost £9,000 in the first eight months of its existence. Alison now became the managing partner of the Blair Iron Company which took over the Blair

Ironworks, but by December, 1843, even although there were then distinct signs of a revival in the iron trade, still no furnaces were in blast at Blair.
From then until the French Revolution in 1848 the Scottish iron trade enjoyed comparatively good prosperity, although stocks were heavy most of the time. Blair par-
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ticipated in the general revival. the existing three furnaces were put in blast once again, and in the summer and winter of 1846, it was proposed to erect five more, two of which were finished by the spring of 1847 and actually went into blast, but this was the total and it never rose above five.

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(II)

The character of Dalry and the neighbouring parishes of Beith and Kilbirnie now began to show a definite change. Instead of textiles, the heavy industries were beginning to predominate in the local economies as new ironstone and coal mines were sunk all over them, and the Blair and Glengarnock Ironworks were in full operation. There was no shortage of labour. Apart from the Irish who arrived in droves during these years of the potato famine, the traditional weaving industries of the North Ayrshire parishes were dull most of the time, and consequently released labour, especially young men to the pits or to the Ironworks themselves. Consequently, the difficulties which many of the weavers were experiencing in these years missed the parishes of Dalry and Kilbirnie only to be met with in Dalry when the Blair Ironworks ceased temporarily in 1848.
In 1847 the home demand for iron was falling alarmingly and only foreign demand kept the Scottish industry active, but even at this time the iron trade in Dalry was developing in new directions. The Scottish iron trade did not develop malleable iron production along with the rapid rise of pig-iron production, partly because Scotch pig, owing to its greater fluidity, was more suitable for foundry purposes, but especially because at first there was a sufficiency of demand for the pig without bothering about further manufacture. In the middle forties this was no longer so obviously the case, and moreover at this period there was great demand for railway iron which was being supplied from Wales, where Scotch pig went to be mixed with Welsh produce to make railway iron.
The Scottish ironmasters, therefore, took steps to increase their own production of malleable iron, and in January 1847, the Ayrshire Malleable Iron Company was floated. The works were to be situated in Dalry and had to be supplied with pig from the Ayrshire blast furnaces, the surveying engineer being so confident of success that in his report he prophesied a rate of return of 20 per cent. Like many other expectations of the forties it was gravely disappointed and although the site was laid off at Carsehead the works never seem to have been built.
It is unlikely that this Company would have succeeded but when it joined with the Blair Iron Company to form the Ayrshire Iron Company in the spring of 1847 it was inevitably involved in the downfall of December of that year. By December the state of Dalry was gloomy. The wages of the miners in the area had been reduced in stages from 5/- to 2/11d a day. There were riots and a strike for a fortnight. Moreover, cholera appeared in the parish and the smothering of the furnaces for four days in December, together with the failure of Alison and the commencement of the investigation of the affairs of the Ayrshire Iron Company, caused considerable distress among the people. Although four of the five furnaces at Blair were in blast again at the beginning of 1848 the respite was only temporary. In January the workers were paid off and the furnaces extinguished.
Although the years from October 1847 to 1852, especially 1847 and 1848, were difficult for the whole economy, the failure of the Ayrshire Iron Company was the only one in the Scottish iron trade. It caused slight panic at first in Glasgow, and led to some selling of shares in other companies at the time, but the propriety of the company was extremely respectable and wealthy, so that, even before a full investigation of its affairs had been made, Glasgow iron merchants were expressing the belief in their circulars that its liabilities would be met in full. This proved to be true and arrangements were quickly made to pay off the debts, although the total liabilities were in the region of £250,000, the net deficiency being about £80,000. Confidence was, therefore, soon restored and there were even rumours in the spring of the works starting again but presumably being once bitten, the proprietors were twice shy and the works were offered to sale in May 1848 at £65,000 and a year later for £50,000, but there were no offers. The iron trade in Scotland was now in a state of depression.
The exact reasons for the failure of the Ayrshire Iron Company are hard to disentangle. Some blamed it on the expansion of the works out
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of all proportion to the capital and the buying of iron on credit and selling of it for cash at a “ruinous sacrifice”. Certainly the association with Alison was not helpful. He became bankrupt in December 1847, claims against him were reported at about £82,000 with a deficiency of £68,000. Moreover the Glasgow

newspapers were circulating reports, denied by Alison, that he owed the Ayrshire Iron Company £15,000, £1,600 of which he drew out on the 3rd December. Naturally these were enough to destroy the confidence in the Company in the rather excited circumstances that followed the monetary crisis of October 1847.

Although, as a result of the able way in which Ayrshire Iron Company reconstructed its affairs confidence was not shattered, the company did not indulge in active operations again, but it was not able to sell the works until March 1852, when the Bairds bought it for £20,000, although the original cost was between £90,000 and £100,000. During the interim the works had been controlled by Thomas Biggart of Dalry, a name well-known in other enterprises in the town.

In 1852, therefore, the Blair Ironworks entered on a comparatively peaceful period of twenty years until they were finally put out of blast in the early seventies. By that time the Cleveland iron industry had taken the place of low cost producers from the Scots and in Dalry the ironstone was more thoroughly worked out than in any of the other neighbouring areas. And so ended the hopes which had been so highly entertained of making Dalry a centre of the iron trade.

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