

EARLY INDUSTRIES ON THE  
LEITH

By W. H. DAVIDSON

The picturesque Water of Leith was put to good use by the people in the early settlement days.

Leith Valley, through which the stream flows, and the surrounding hills were heavily clothed with native trees suitable for timber, posts and firewood. From earliest times the Woodhaugh bush was drawn upon to supply firewood and spars for sailing vessels. The Leith had considerable potential water power handy to Dunedin, so that early industries which had to use water-wheels were set up on its banks.

There is something romantic about an old water-mill of long ago, so this article is written to remind us of some of those which worked on the Leith.

The first of these was built for W. H. Valpy, who arrived from England in January, 1849, with his family, his farm and house servants and chattels, amongst which he had machinery for a sawmill and a flourmill. This plant was set up in Lower Woodhaugh by two millwrights, Jas. Adam and Jas. E. Brown, who, despite difficulties of no ordinary kind, had the sawmill working on 11th May, 1850. The logs were dragged into the mill by bullocks, but, owing to a shortage of water at the time, about only 400 or 500 feet of timber could be cut per day. The *Otago News* was "much gratified with an inspection of Mr. Valpy's flour and sawmill—the first erection of this kind in the district of Otago." It is presumed, then, that Dunedin's industrial development began in Leith Valley.

The exact date when the flourmill started is not known, but it was later than 22nd June, 1850. After Valpy's death in 1852, the mill passed to Edward McGlashan, who enlarged it, while behind the mill had been built a large house and two whares, these being the first buildings in Leith Valley and possibly the only ones at the time. It would seem that McGlashan leased his mill, for, while in possession of Anderson & Mowat, it was burnt to the ground on July 4, 1871.

At some later date, a new and larger mill, built of bluestone, was erected on precisely the same spot as the burnt one. A steel wheel, fed by a new and well-built flume, was installed to drive it. One night in the '80's while the miller was alone on night shift, the water-wheel stripped its pinion and ran away, nearly wrecking the concern with the vibration until the water could be shut off at the weir, a considerable distance upstream. The Anderson family and its partnerships ran this mill, which was quite a large affair with its own wagon and teams, but it, too, became a total loss by fire on 22nd January, 1894. The picturesque stone ruins stood for many years until the property changed hands. Nowadays, the mill foundation supports a large and handsome dwelling. Who in these days could say exactly where the first flour-mill in Otago was built ?

About 1860, William Reid Douglas set up a small sawmill at the confluence of the Leith and School Creek. Its wheel was driven by water from the Pine Hill Creek, picked up at the site of the present bridge over the creek. This business ran under various names and conditions until 1870. The first steam ship built in Dunedin was turned out by Kincaid McQueen for Douglas' Woodhaugh sawmill. Built in 1862, it was launched on 16th June of that year by Douglas' sister, who named it *Betsy Douglas*, after the owner's wife. The same foundry built another steamer, *Lady of the Lake*, for Douglas, who had acquired these vessels for his timber trade.

However, by 1867 timber production had dropped and the business was known as Douglas' bone crushing mill. Bones of whales and animals were being carted here to be made into bonedust, which sold in town at a per ton. A proposal to start a flockmill fell

through and latterly the business became the Woodhaugh Bone and Flaxmill Company. On 12th December, 1870, W. R. Douglas, Wm. Taylor, Jas. Souness, Jnr., and Edward Campbell signed a dissolution of partnership agreement and a liquidator was appointed to wind up the company.

Soon afterwards, another sawmill was established at the junction of the Leith and Pine Hill Creek. This was Davidson's mill. Its giant water-wheel rumbled for 50 years, during which time the business became a large trading concern. James Davidson, with his sons, came from Orepuki in 1876 to start up here. They built the water wheel, which was 34 feet inside diameter in the pit around the spindle, taking six weeks on the job. About 50 h.p. could be developed with sufficient water, but very seldom was there enough.

The mill had a pictorial quality, attractive to artists and photographers of all kinds, and many fine sketches and paintings on paper and canvas are in collections here and there. The original slab building was soon improved, and by 1900 iron had replaced the old timber roof. Logs came in at one end of the mill, being paid for at 4/- a hundred feet, and timber was sold at the other end for 8/6 a hundred. One of the sons made naves for dray wheels out of kowhai wood, and at some time starch was made at Davidson's mill, also after some moulding machinery had been installed a few men made joinery there. In the '90's the business was being run by Robert Davidson, who added a stone crusher to the plant, not a large one, but it had elevators and screens with several bays underneath for loading drays with metal of various sizes. Primitive methods were used to supply spalls from the quarry opposite the mill, some 200 yards distant. A narrow gauge tramline with light steel rails ran from the face to the crusher and two men pushed a little truck loaded with stone all the way to the machine. In 1914, Davidson's machinery was taken out and re-erected at a temporary site near the source of the Leith to cut timber for use in building Sullivan's Dam. Here it was electrically driven. This was probably the first electric bush sawmill in Otago and if so Leith Valley can claim this honour as well as having had the first water-driven one. In due course the machinery was replaced in the old building to run for some years longer.

Davidson's mill had ups and downs and serious setbacks. It had been built close to the Leith in front of a bend in the stream's course. Every flood took away the weir, necessitating a replacement. The flume crossing the Leith at the mill was completely demolished several times in floods, but in spite of these misfortunes repairs were carried out to make a fresh start. Major floods in the 1920's wrecked the buildings and fluming. Debris covered everything, and water and stones entered the owner's house, slewing it on its foundations. Shortly afterwards the plant was abandoned, and after demolition of the buildings the ubiquitous broom and bramble took possession, leaving not a trace of this once busy and well-known institution—perhaps the most picturesque and best known in the north end of Dunedin.

After removal of the main buildings the great water-wheel stood for a long time—black, forlorn, alone. A great pity that someone had not made an effort to preserve this interesting link with the old days. It would almost certainly have come under the care of the National Trust had it been in existence at that time.