

Historic Scotland podcast: Episode 7 transcript

Chapter 1

Sarah:

Hello, and welcome to the Historic Scotland podcast. My name is Sarah MacGillivray. I'm an actor and writer with a passion for people, place and story.

Each episode, we will be travelling across Scotland to a different site, unearthing their surprising tales. Today, we're at Stanley Mills.

Once a thriving cotton mill, powered by the River Tay, it has witnessed centuries of change, from the rise of the textile industry to its eventual decline.

Fiona's been learning about their stories.

Chapter 2

0:40

Fiona:

So she came up and she went, "oh that's my wiring table" and I went "oh is that yin, was that like the yin you worked on?". And she went "no that is my wiring table".

Sarah:

We're also chatting to Hannah and Frankie, both investigating and interpreting Stanley's textured past.

Hannah:

And they really wanted children to work in factories because they were smaller and they had smaller hands and that worked much better with the machinery.

Frankie:

You should be clear about the fact that the exploitation of enslaved people in the Caribbean and in the Americas was fundamental to Britain's Industrial Revolution and also Scotland's kind of rapid industrialisation towards the end of the 18th century.

Chapter 3

01:24

Sarah's intro:

Nestled on the banks of the River Tay, Stanley Mills was founded in the late 18th century and became a centre of innovation during the Industrial Revolution.

For over 200 years, its workers spun, wove and powered the machinery that helped drive Scotland's textile industry.

The Mills adapted through changing times, surviving economic shifts and technological advances, before finally closing their doors in the 20th century.

The site isn't in operation any more, but it remains an incredible testament to human ingenuity.

Its well-preserved buildings still ring with the sound of industry, while the rushing river that once powered its machines continues to flow past its red-bricked walls.

Deep inside Stanley Mills, in a room that's usually closed to the public, I bumped into someone who could shine more light on not just the building but, more importantly, the people who worked here.

Fiona:

So I'm Fiona Davidson and I'm a Learning Officer in the Learning and Inclusion team at Historic Scotland. And I was the first person to hold the post of Learning Officer here at Stanley Mills.

Sarah:

So you are the right person for us to be talking to.

Fiona:

Hopefully.

Sarah:

Do you think you're now the keeper of most of the knowledge of Stanley Mills?

Fiona:

Maybe one of a few people who've been here long enough to have met former workers, seen the changes and developed quite a depth of knowledge of different aspects of the mill's history.

Sarah:

Do you feel quite attached to it in some ways? I suppose it's been... so much of your working career has been with Stanley Mills. Do you feel quite attached to the place?

Fiona:

Absolutely. I think the phrase is 'in with the bricks'. Yeah, really emotionally attached to the place. I love it. It's got a fantastic history.

And I think the former workers have kind of been part of that attachment. It's so unusual to meet folk who worked at a historic site when it was active.

It's so unique and their stories have just been amazing. I feel really privileged to have met them actually.

Sarah:

Yeah, that's amazing. And are they still connected with the place now? Is there still quite a lot of contacts? Because obviously the mill stopped working in 1989. Is that right?

Fiona:

Yes.

Sarah:

Oh yes, good. Are there still workers in the village and things or former workers here or family?

Fiona:

Yeah, there's still folk who used to work in the mill and they either live here in Stanley, some live in Perth, others have moved to other areas, Tayside or Midlothian, but they're all getting on in life now because, as you say, the mill closed in 1989 so even the youngest workers at the time are now getting on in age. And we've lost a few who've made it to their 90s and even 100.

Sarah:

Amazing. Amazing. Where are we? Because you've just taken us to this very special room. So downstairs, what was underneath? Was it the main reception? Oh no, we're two floors up, aren't we?

Fiona:

Yes, so we were on the ground floor to start with, which is where most visitors come in. And then the floor above is the spinning room, which is one of the best-preserved Arkwright rooms in Europe, in the Bell Mill.

And we're on the floor above, which is the artefact room, and this is where what's left of the collections are kept and stored and conserved that relate to when the mill was operational. And it's quite an eclectic mix of bits and pieces, but they've all got a story to tell.

The room is set out with shelving on the right-hand side with smaller items and on the left-hand side are much bigger bits of machinery and bits of kit that were used at the mill. So one of the first objects you see when you come in on the left is the opening machine, which has got several parts and has a nod towards Wallace and Gromit in terms of style of inventions, and it was used to break open cotton, and it was also used to recycle cotton.

Sarah:

To recycle it? So what, cotton would come back in...?

Fiona:

Yep, and it could get like broken up, combed out, dirt removed and, yeah, reused for other things. So that's our biggest machine.

Sarah:

And how would people have used this?

Fiona:

It's all mechanised so it would have been loaded at the left-hand side with whatever material and then be drawn up via conveyor belts and put through a drum motif that would card it and break it up and comb it and then it would come out the other side. The machines that we've got the most of are these specific little table looms, table-style looms, which were used for weaving a really narrow band of cotton tape and that was a key product that was developed at Stanley Mills in 1916 and it was made right through until 1976.

And it was supplied to cigarette factories, so a very niche product, but during World War I and World War II cigarette consumption goes up because soldiers are getting cigarettes in their comfort packages. Smoking was much more prevalent, so it was a really key product for the mills and a highly guarded secret as to how it was made, and it was made across the road in the North Range, opposite the main mill building, which was called the band room.

Sarah:

Okay. And it was a secret? Is that because it was like, because obviously it was a big business for them.

Fiona:

Yeah, they didn't want any other businesses getting their hands on it and then profiting from it. So the windows of the North Range were painted halfway up to prevent other folks seeing in. And then rumours would circulate about strangers appearing in the village pub and offering to buy drinks for workers.

Sarah:

No way, really? A trade-off for the secrets.

Fiona:

Yeah, industrial espionage.

Laughter

And that's only known about through the oral history.

Sarah:

So the oral history, so that means that you've captured a lot of recordings, have you?

Fiona:

Yeah, as part of the restoration of the mills initially, which was back in the mid-90s, there was an oral history programme undertaken.

So I think 10 former workers in total were interviewed. That's obviously nowhere near the amount of workers that were around and are still around. But they just provide a massive insight into working conditions, working environment, relationships, housing, clothing, even

relationships with machines and stories that we would never have been able to find or information we would never have been able to uncover if it hadn't been through oral interviews and conversations and stories.

And they just bring the place to life. They provide colour and context and everybody's got a story to tell.

Sarah:

Yeah, yeah. I suppose it just brings that human aspect to it, doesn't it? Like the actual working life, what it was like to work here.

Fiona:

Absolutely. And that's what interests us. It's human-interest stories. We've all generally had work experience, so you can immediately relate to being in a working environment, whatever form that takes. And that's what stops this being quite maybe a dry experience.

Without the stories of people, you're looking at bricks and mortar and technical machinery. And that's of interest to some folk, but it means the stories give it a much broader appeal.

Sarah:

Yeah. Could you share some of your favourite stories?

Fiona:

Absolutely.

Sarah:

That would be amazing.

Fiona:

Where do you want me to start?

Chapter 4

09:45

Sarah:

The villages and communities around Stanley Mills are incredibly close-knit, and many of the people that worked here are still local.

We're about to share some incredible and heartwarming stories with you, but in order to protect some of the people who worked here and who live nearby, we've censored some of their names.

Fiona:

So I've brought with me an object, an artefact from the collection.

Sarah:

So it looks like a yellow... I'd say that looks something to do with hair. Am I right? A yellow tube with a little pin through it. Is it plastic?

Fiona:

It is.

Sarah:

And it looks like a hair curler. Am I right?

Fiona:

Yes, good detective work

Sarah:

I've tried to use these before and failed. So it reminded me of the thicker ones.

Fiona:

So it's quite an unusual artefact to have in our collection, given the rest is all massive, like bits of cast iron machinery but... and this little thing tells a whole aspect of the mill's story. Social life is such an integral part to factory life, whether of mines or textile mills or, you know, whatever industrial setting, and partly because it's hard work and often monotonous and folk want to let their hair down.

But you're also living and working within the community so the social life at the mill was no different. So on a Friday, in the band room...

Sarah:

There was a band room?

Fiona:

Yes, so that's where they made the cigarette tapes.

Sarah:

Oh, I was thinking like a pipe... like a jazz band, or get the guitars out.

Fiona:

No, it's linked to that, because they would organise dances. So there'd be band room dances organised by the band room in a local hotel, for which they would sell tickets to other workers.

Sarah:

So the band room was sort of a social hub for the organisers...

Fiona:

Partly because a lot of younger women joined the mill and started work there.

Sarah:

Right.

Fiona:

So, when I say young women, folk were starting here aged 14 in the late 1960s and early 70s. So one of our former workers left school aged 14 on the Friday and started at the mill on the Monday.

Sarah:

What?

Fiona:

As well as having to be working alongside much older women who'd been there a long time, who were in their 50s or 60s. But you had this gathering of women who wanted to socialise or gossip. So on a Friday, they would go to the dancing on a Friday night.

So to get ready, they would start doing their hair at their machines. Machines like these, the tape weaving machines.

Sarah:

That sounds a bit dangerous. What if you got your hair caught in one of the machines?

Fiona:

Well, it was a dangerous place to work. We're in an era before really strict health and safety. So the women would do each other's hair using rollers like this. Maybe tie their hair up in a head scarf so they wouldn't get too stourie before they went out.

Sarah:

Stourie, I love that word.

Fiona:

Dusty.

Sarah:

Dusty.

Fiona:

Stourie. Stour is a great Scottish word, but it kind of describes the working environment.

Sarah:

Yeah, it does a good job.

Fiona:

A word in stour. But yeah, and one of your former workers, one of the younger yins at the time, so that's the late 1960s, she talks about the younger lassies kind of laughing at one of the older women and the way she used to do her hair, which was to spit on her hand and curl her hair round the roller. And this was referred to as the hairdo.

Sarah:

So have you decided to use that technique of spitting and rolling?

Fiona:

I've never personally tried that. I think I'll stick to my straighteners.

Sarah:

At least it's a natural substance.

Fiona:

But that aspect of socialising, there'll be no formal record of that. Business records don't give a flavour of that, but that's where the oral histories come into their own and make the stories relatable.

Sarah:

Yeah, makes it real, doesn't it?

Fiona:

Yep, yep.

Sarah:

And you said... was there lots of women then that worked in the band room, for example?

Fiona:

Yeah, it was pretty much all women, apart from maybe a mechanic or an engineer that was assigned to repair any machines that broke down.

Sarah:

And why was that? Like, is it just...

Fiona:

The mills have always had a really strong female presence and I guess your mill work... when you were way back to when cotton mills were established, it was cheaper to employ women and men were employed to do the heavier aspects. Children were employed back in the day as well. Pre-1833, under-nines could work so, yeah, the Mills is a massive employer locally and so, yes, you had a mixture of all men and women working here, but it was predominantly women doing the weaving and creating the wires for the weaving and the men undertaking the much more manual, heavy-duty work and the engineering and mechanic roles.

Chapter 5

15:11

Sarah's intro:

I was fascinated about the day-to-day lives of the people who would have worked here. So Fiona and I wandered down from the room we were in and toward what would have been the factory floor so that I could get a glimpse of what working here might have looked, or rather, sounded like.

Fiona:

Isn't the smell in here amazing?

Sarah:

Yeah, what is that smell? Just the machines?

Fiona:

Yeah, so there's like kind of grease oil to keep the machines in good condition. It might be wax actually. So if you want to hear the carding machines at full volume, you can press the red button.

Sarah:

So, what are the carding machines? What would they have done?

Fiona:

So these combed the cotton. So on one end you would have a big roll of cotton and the carding machine's got a drum in the centre with lots of little strips of teeth that go around it and they tease out the cotton fibre so they all run in the same direction. And that's effectively the first stage of cotton on its way to becoming thread. So you'd get this fat rope of cotton that would come out one end and it would go into these big slubbing cans. That can would go to another machine which was the roving frame, which would make it thinner and twist it. It would then go to the drawing frame, it would then go to the spinning machine, so it's getting thinner and thinner each time. But the picture there shows the size of the rolls of cotton.

Sarah:

Oh massive.

Fiona:

Yep, so that goes on the far end. So it'd be loaded by the blokes and the women would be working at this end, managing the machine

Sarah:

So a lot of heavy lifting, a lot of labour for the men.

Fiona:

Aye, aye.

Sarah:

So what do we do here? So we press the red button...

Fiona:

Yes, and that lets you hear the four of the carding machines at full volume. So this is the working environment that women, like in the photographs, would have been working in day to day.

Sarah:

And did they have any sort of ear defence?

Fiona:

No. No ear defenders, no dust masks.

Again, it like pre-dates... Lots of folk complain about health and safety nowadays, but it's there for a reason, and it would have prevented all manner of illnesses and impact on hearing that the workers are now having to deal with in later life.

Sarah:

Shall we experience it? Shall we press the button and experience four of the machines?

Fiona:

Go for it.

Sarah:

So this is what they would have experienced when they weren't working?

Fiona:

Yeah, and there were 30 machines in this flat originally, so the wall wouldn't have been there. They would have went right through. So this is four of them.

Sarah:

This is four and it would have been 30.

And how long a shift would this have been, that you'd be in here and then you'd finish?

Fiona:

I mean, you'd be talking at least seven, eight-hour shifts with a break. Potentially more, depending on orders and things like that.

Sarah:

Right. Ready? Let's press the button. I'm gonna do the honours.

Machine noise

Sarah:

THAT WAS LOUD. That is really loud and that was only four machines.

Fiona:

I need to show you this table before we go because it's a cracker. So these are ... so to make the cigarette bands there's like a four- or five-step process and this is quite early on in the process, which is the wiring part. So to create the weave, a pattern had to be created

using wires that threads were put through. So it would create the pattern. So the tables were always in pairs, so you would have a worker standing there and a worker standing here and you had these springs that they would put across and hook on to the wires in the centre to allow them to thread. And you're talking really long lengths of warp thread going through them. So you know one of our former workers who were involved in some of our learning projects, I said to her, "you should come up and see the artefact room, Yindi," so she came up and she went, "oh that's my wiring table" and I went "oh is that yin, was that like the yin you worked on?". And she went "no that is my wiring table". And it's got a number on it that she recognised and then on the surface...

Sarah:

There's graffiti.

Fiona:

Yeah, so these are all laddies' names and they you know... so they've got numbers next to them. So we never quite got a definitive answer about how the names relate to the numbers, but it was clearly guys that she was winching or going out with.

Sarah:

And it was the order of preference? Did she marry any of them or anything?

Fiona:

Aye.

Sarah:

Do you know which one?

Fiona:

Yeah, so one of the names – I'm not sure if I'm allowed to say...

Sarah

No that's okay and was that his, was his score quite high? Was his number relevant? That's fantastic.

Fiona:

That kind of puts a hell of a different light on these tables and she also said the process was mechanised at some stage and they moved from the wiring tables to the reeling machines which did the job for them and they were motor driven and actually that really affected her working conditions, her working environment, because you could talk to your pal across the table, you could gossip about the dancing on the Friday night, or what not. As soon as that was mechanised, the noise completely put a stop to that. You were working on your own and suddenly you're just a cog in a wheel. And so it completely changed the working environment, and she really missed that setup, kind of thing.

So yeah, that was amazing.

Sarah

Did she carry on working at the mill?

Fiona:

Yeah, she moved away eventually. A lot of folk went into nursing, a lot of the workers. We've got at least three former workers who became psychiatric nurses. Complete career shift.

Others went to other mills or factories. Somebody went back to like laundry. Dewars in Perth were a big employer so a lot of folk ended up there when the mill was kind of nearing its end. But, as I say, some folk were only here for a few years and didn't like it. Some were indifferent, some absolutely loved it, and would still be here if it was still operational.

Sarah:

It must be quite strange for her to have seen her working table now like a sort of museum artefact. Like how times have changed. It's incredible.

Fiona:

She was just astonished when she came in.

Sarah:

The work you must have done on capturing these oral histories, or the team has done, means that we have these stories. I suppose it's not so much through any written documents, it's all through this oral history that was captured before. And is that still ongoing? Is the oral history at the moment still being captured?

Fiona:

There's no active programme at the moment and we are aware that there are still... we're still lucky enough to have workers, who we know of locally, who'd be in a position to tell more stories, shed light on other aspects of the working life of the mill, particularly related to its final days and what happened there and just the wider working environment. So it's really important that we don't lose these. As we mentioned, the folk are not getting any younger and they'll have information that we couldn't find anywhere else. They'll have stories that won't be found anywhere else and it might just be one tiny piece of information that the person you're speaking to might not consider important. To a researcher that might unlock an entire understanding of a process or a part of a machine.

Sarah:

Yeah.

Fiona:

So absolutely vital.

Sarah:

And there must be so many stories there, that are just...

So if people are still alive and they can tell us these stories... yeah, it's vital, isn't it?

Fiona:

Oh yeah, I mean, if people could get in touch, that would be amazing because we dinnae ken who is all out there. We know of some folk, there'll be at least that amount again who we've yet to meet but who could have really significant stories to tell.

Chapter 6

24:18

Sarah's intro:

The stories of these workers, ordinary people just like you and I, going to work and living their lives, but in this community that revolves around the factory, is fascinating.

But there's also a set of stories about people, also like you and I, that are slightly harder to find.

And these are the stories of people who were enslaved, those who toiled under brutal conditions to produce the cotton that fed the looms of Stanley Mills.

Their forced labour was essential to its prosperity. Stanley Mills, like many industrial sites of its time, was part of a wider global network, profiting from the transatlantic slave trade.

Its success depended on a supply chain that began with enslaved labour on distant plantations and ended with finished goods produced here.

Working to tell their stories is a team of people from Historic Scotland.

This is Hannah Brown, and it's a pretty tough task.

Hannah:

I always like to think if we've done our job quite well, nobody really knows we've been around. Like it should be quite, you know, not very obvious.

But yeah, it comes with... I think recently I've realised like how much power you have when you're deciding how we tell stories and also which stories we tell and which stories we decide not to tell. And it comes with kind of a weight of responsibility. And what I've really

been trying to do is ask more people, you know, like, what do you see? What's the value in the site to you? And what do you think about the site? And what stories do you think we should be telling? Because actually it's better that that's shared out and we get more responses from people, rather than it just coming from quite a small team.

So we're changing the way that we work a little bit and looking at more community participation and co-curation and all of those really big, buzzy words.

Sarah:

Yeah, nice. So you would ask Historic Scotland, the wider team, as to what stories should we tell?

Hannah:

And also people outside Historic Scotland, like the visitors who come, the people who are local, like the people who use the site, you know, and see what it means to them.

Historic Scotland has Statements of Significance for every site, so that says why the site is significant, that's why we look after it. But there's often more to it than that, and it's interesting to dig a bit deeper into that.

Sarah:

And what's the work you're doing at the moment with regard to interpretation panels?

Hannah:

So at the moment, we're looking at... Well, at the moment, a couple of years ago, we released a report on Empire and our properties in care, looking at how there have been interactions between the British Empire and our sites. And Stanley Mills, as a cotton mill, obviously had quite a lot of interaction with the Empire through transatlantic slavery and colonialism and that kind of global colonial project.

Cotton is grown in those parts of the world that are warm, like India and like southern US and the West Indies, and was picked by people who were enslaved.

So, we're looking at how we tell that story as part of the story of Stanley Mills. You can't really have a cotton mill without the global context.

And the original exhibition was put in about 15 years ago and doesn't really go into any detail on that. So we're basically just adding in stuff that should have been there in the first place and telling that story a bit kind of within the wider global context.

Sarah:

Yeah. That's really exciting to see that being told and see it come through. What sort of challenges has that thrown up for you?

Hannah:

Yeah, it's quite interesting. I think you're always trying to think about things like, we were talking about the colonial gaze. So, you know, we're choosing new images for the panels. And like, do you want to put a picture of an enslaved person? Is that just kind of, we're just looking at something that maybe they didn't agree to have that photo taken.

There's also challenges thinking about, you know, people are coming here for a day out. Like, you know, where do you bring in this quite like traumatic history? We're currently training our staff to be able to talk about traumatic histories and talk to visitors about it.

And, you know, trying to make sure that we're balancing telling as truthful history as you can, and the history as we know it right now, with people coming and kind of having a good day out. So that's a balance.

And then also making sure that it's not just my narrative voice as well. Like we're including other people being able to tell their stories. So it's not just coming from one person, which is something I'm quite aware of.

Sarah:

Are there any stories that jump out for you around the mill that you've found?

Hannah:

Yeah, we were just talking earlier about... I'd been reading a lot about the factory reports that they did. They went around all the factories in the UK and they looked at what the working conditions were like. And I'd been reading about that, kind of looking at whether or not there were accidents or people were getting ill from being in the factories.

But one thing that came out a lot was how many children were working in factories. And they really wanted children to work in factories because they were smaller and they had smaller hands and that worked much better with the machinery.

Sarah:

Right. So is this when they first opened?

Hannah:

This is when they first opened, yes.

So back to the 1780s, they brought in workers from like Lowland Perthshire, Highland Perthshire, and an awful lot of them were children. And they also brought in like seven, eight, nine, like really quite young, obviously going up to being 14, 15.

And a lot of women worked in the factories as well. Obviously a little bit smaller than men.

But they also brought in children from the workhouse in Perth, who were orphans. So they had orphans working here, which I think was quite a common thing in a lot of the earlier mills.

But what this factory report did was it kind of highlighted that young children were working in the mills and that they weren't learning to read and they weren't going to school as much. So they brought in the Factory Acts, which brought in laws like children under nine, which seems crazy now, but children under nine weren't allowed to work in mills.

Now you're kind of thinking, well, that's so young. It should be much older than that. And also they would finish work at like three o'clock so they could go to school.

So those laws seem quite insane to us now, like that's all they got. But actually it was a major thing at the time. And it's led to a lot of the kind of workplace reform that we have.

But yeah, it was kind of the very start of that. And then gradually children were phased out and they weren't really using them, and when the machines got bigger, more men could

work the machines and more women could work the machines and eventually there were no children working at Stanley Mills at all. Hopefully by the 1980s... But yeah, so I found that really interesting but so much of this work that was being and so much of the profit was coming from these children working these machines and having to be fast and having to pay attention.

Chapter 7

31:30

Sarah's intro:

All of this was ringing in my ears. How can we have such positive, friendly stories of people working at Stanley Mills set against a backdrop of child and enslaved labour?

To help me answer that question, I spoke to Frankie. He's one of the people working very hard to update the display boards at Stanley Mills to better reflect the voices we don't hear as often.

Sarah:

You must be quite familiar with Stanley Mills then, are you? Have you spent quite a lot of time here?

Frankie:

Yes, I've spent quite a lot of time here. I actually came here the week before I started my PhD and I came up here just to see what I would be studying. I knew absolutely nothing about the mills at the time and it was kind of a sign of kind of you know the site that I was going to study and what was to come, and it was great.

And I was really surprised by the actual landscape around it. Compare it to cotton mills in Manchester. It's like these really dark... they're called the satanic mills.

But yeah, I was shocked by how kind of idyllic the landscape is outside and the river running past. Not what I imagined at all, but it's strangely kind of beautiful as a historic site.

But obviously I knew there was a lot of the history to be unearthed.

Sarah:

Yeah. And how did you get involved with Historic Scotland?

Frankie:

So my PhD is a collaborative PhD. It's primarily at Stirling University, but I also have a supervisor from Strathclyde in Glasgow. And Historic Scotland provided two supervisors: Laura Harrison and Fiona Davidson as well.

Two of my supervisors there. So I did an internship with Historic Scotland last year when I was in my second year of my PhD, where we basically worked on updating the signage at Stanley to reflect the site's connections to slavery and Empire. And that signage should be updated coming in April, I believe.

Sarah:

Yeah, I think that's what we've heard as well, for reopening in April.

Frankie:

So that was kind of a whole new skill learning set of trying to learn how to write. Going from academic writing to writing for interpretation was completely different but it was a really good learning experience and it changed how I think about how to communicate things that I've learned and, you know, my own research and stuff to the wider public as well.

Sarah:

Yeah, so some of your interpretation work will be on display here?

Frankie:

Yeah, so I've got a few panels. I've been working really closely with Hannah to talk about, you know, what kind of things do we want to say? What should my particular panel say about these connections to transatlantic slavery?

And also, how can we get this information across in a way that's accessible to the public as well? Because it's the first thing you see when you come into the site. So I think it's a really important thing. And I felt like a certain sense of responsibility from doing it.

So yeah, hopefully that should be updated soon and you'll get to see the new panels.

Chapter 8

34:40

Sarah's intro:

Like Hannah said, there's a weight of responsibility there. It's a powerful thing to stand in a place like Stanley Mills, somewhere so connected to Scotland's industrial story, while also understanding the much harder truths that underpin its success.

Frankie:

Yeah, I think it's really important to be clear about this because there's been some debate in the historiography over time.

But you should be clear about the fact that the exploitation of enslaved people in the Caribbean and in the Americas was fundamental to Britain's Industrial Revolution and also Scotland's kind of rapid industrialisation towards the end of the 18th century.

To give a kind of broader picture of the cotton industry in Scotland at the time, and its ties to slavery, I think it's really important to take note of the fact that in 1785 Scottish mills were processing around 627,000 pounds of raw cotton from the Caribbean.

So that sounds like a large number, but by 1800, 15 years later, this was about two and a half million pounds of raw cotton coming in from the Caribbean and it's like you can see the kind of growth in that industry just from the amount of cotton that was being imported.

Now it was called white gold at the time because the flow of it into Scotland's factories would create so much wealth but, unfortunately, it was clearly enforced by the barbaric treatment of enslaved people in the West Indies. And we know that planters would basically capitalise on fear to ensure that enslaved people would remain at work for long hours. We actually can see from accounts from planters in the Caribbean, first-hand accounts that describe how fear was instilled daily into enslaved people by things such as whipping, flogging, mutilation, and kind of all of these other completely gruesome and inhumane acts.

And the reason I want to talk about it is because I don't think that we as historians should sidestep around the fact that this was basically the price of Britain's industrial development. Now, kind of because of the rapidly increasing demand for cotton from the Caribbean, from around 1800, the main source of cotton really switched to the Americas, and that's where you find this new frontier of cotton plantations in the American South. And basically, like the southern states with these kind of massive, vast swathes of land and warmer climate, it was actually really well suited for cotton production. And there was also this access to enslaved labour as well. Now, as you can imagine, the expansion of this industry into the US had dire consequences for enslaved people. And in places like South Carolina, the proportion of enslaved people actually grew from around 18% of people in 1790 were enslaved, and in 1860, it grew to around 61% of the population in South Carolina was enslaved.

And I think it's important to highlight this kind of broader picture because Stanley Mills was essentially complicit in this trade as it sourced cotton from different parts around the world. And this is what we're trying to kind of get through with this new interpretation.

So I want to talk a little bit more about Stanley, if that's okay.

Sarah:

Yeah, absolutely.

Frankie:

Because its connections to the slave trade itself evolved over time, and it kind of reflects how colonial wealth came into the factory.

So, as you may know, the mill opened in the 1780s, and it was partly funded by colonial wealth that was tied directly to slavery.

So one of the early founders was a man named George Dempster, who was MP for Perth and a founder of the mill, and he was also an investor in the East India Company. Now for people who don't know anything about the East India Company's history, they essentially facilitated the movement of enslaved people via the Middle Passage, which was a really horrific journey that enslaved people were forced to take from the coast of West Africa to the Caribbean. Now Historic Scotland have just released an Empire report where they revealed that this founder of Stanley, George Dempster, received around £1,300 from his business in the East India Company. Obviously, that doesn't sound like a lot of money but, with inflation rates added, this kind of equates to around £110 to £190,000 in today's money.

And obviously this is significant because George Dempster, as an early investor, was instrumental in the foundation of the mill, but also his company, Dempster and Company, financed the mill's early operations until 1808, which obviously demonstrates the flow of this colonial wealth directly into Stanley.

Another key figure you may have seen in this signage all around on the front as you come in is Richard Arkwright, who you may know as the man who is very much celebrated as the man who revolutionised cotton production with the invention of his spinning frame. And it basically meant that cotton could be produced on a larger scale, which obviously has consequences for enslaved labourers in the Caribbean. And it's arguably one of the reasons why the cotton frontier had to expand into the southern states of America.

Arkwright was a central figure in the foundation of Stanley Mills. It was actually his desire to kind of capitalise on the power of the rapids and he had the idea that it could be used to like open a cotton mill here in Perthshire. But the connections to this kind of wealth go back you know, like I say, it changes over time, depending on who owned the mill and who was financing the mill.

So in 1801, a man named James Craig bought the mill. Now he had financial backing from another person called David Dale. David Dale was the founder of the mill at New Lanark. And so that's a very famous site. Now Dale has a kind of interesting relationship with slavery because he was actually the Chair of the Glasgow Abolition Society, which as someone who built his wealth in the cotton industry can seem like a kind of bit of a contradiction. It's kind of... imagine like a modern oil tycoon leading the Just Stop Oil movement – it's that kind of level of contradiction, and people are very unwilling to talk about that because he's known as quite a strong industrialist at the time. But I think it's definitely worth recognising when we talk about this kind of history as well that there are these kind of contradictions.

And I do want to talk about the period from around 1823 onwards when the mill had been going through a period of, you know... it was closed for quite a while from, I think, it was closed in 1813 and it didn't reopen until 1823 when it was purchased by a Glasgow West India merchant firm called Denniston Buchanan and Co. I don't know if it's been mentioned yet. So basically a Glasgow West India firm, to give you like a basic definition, they were basically a business organisation made up of a series of small partners and all of these partners would have business interests in different colonial industries – so the sugar industry, the rum, tobacco and cotton, which is why they ended up purchasing the mill here in Stanley Mills.

Now, the wealthiest partner of this firm was a man called James Buchanan of Dowanhill. Now, you'll see James Buchanan's name kind of dotted around the panels at Stanley as this

really nice industrialist who invested in Stanley Mills, and he actually built one of the mills over there. Now this man was a subscribing member to the pro-slavery Glasgow West India Association, which is basically a lobbying group that campaigned against the abolition of slavery. And you can obviously make your own guesses about why he wouldn't have wanted slavery to be abolished. Now his firm invested £160,000 in the mill, building things like a new water-power system and even actually a church in Stanley Village. And it obviously shows how slavery-derived wealth directly shaped Stanley and Scotland's industrial development.

And I think really it reminds us that kind of the industrial progress in Scotland was deeply tied to these systems of exploitation. And I think it's really kind of important that we use our work so that we don't forget that.

Sarah:

How do you navigate celebrating the people who worked here and the changes in industry? How do you navigate that with also the fact that it's intrinsically tied to such a horrific part of history?

Frankie:

Yeah, it's very, very difficult. And it takes a lot of kind of thought and care. Because I think I mentioned there how Denniston Buchanan and Co invested in a church in the village and they built new housing in Stanley Village.

How do you go to a community where the mill has been central to their life for so long and say that it was built on wealth that was generated in these exploitative systems?

And I think the question is, you just have to be honest and be direct about it, because the story of Stanley Mills isn't... it's not a one-off story. It's not, you know, this is a case in region... I mean, the Industrial Revolution in Britain was a regional story. So all regions have these connections to this kind of history.

And I think you have to... it does take a certain kind of courage because I've had times in talks where people have said like, you know, what about, what about this? And what they normally hark back to is how poorly treated the workers were in British factories.

But the point is that, even though you've got these different sites of exploitation, this kind of 'what aboutery' where you take the focus away from enslaved people isn't how you approach this history. It's important to tell both stories and that's hopefully what we'll be able

to do. And you'll have spoken to Hannah and Fiona who are telling the workers' side of this story, but I think the only thing you can do is be honest. I mean I have it worth telling history where I'm from in Newcastle and I'm sure it's the same, especially if you're a historian in Lancashire where they also had their own massive textile industry. But I think because it's much more recent in Scotland that we've started to talk about this kind of aspect of Scottish history, so you still get a little bit of resistance. But, like I say, the historians that are writing it are brilliant and their work's brilliant so I think it's actually changing and people are getting more kind of used to talking about these kinds of histories as well.

Sarah:

I had to ask Frankie whether the workers here would have known that the cotton they were spinning and the textiles they were making was the product of this global slave trade.

Frankie:

We were just... this is the tricky kind of thing about doing a history of workers' attitudes because you don't have a lot of source material to go on.

But me and Fiona were talking about this before. So the way I kind of tried to figure that out – obviously I'm writing in the kind of early 19th century, up to the 1860s at the minute. And there were two anti-slavery societies in Perth: the Perth Anti-Slavery Society and the Perth Female Anti-Slavery Society.

We know that the meetings were reported in the Perthshire Courier, which would have been distributed by workers here.

But at the minute, there's not much way of telling whether they were actually, whether people from Stanley were present at the meetings, mainly because of like, you know, if they're working in the factory all day, you have to have a certain... like anti-slavery societies are usually run by middle and upper class people because they have time. And they can go to meetings and they can canvas and they can campaign.

It's not solely a middle-class pursuit, but regularly that's normally what you find, even in regions. So that was the first point of call, was looking at how much did the people at Stanley know about the Perth Female Anti-Slavery Society and the Male Anti-Slavery Society.

I should actually say that in Perth, rather uniquely, the female society was the leading society. They were the ones that were in charge of inviting American abolitionists over to speak.

Sarah:

That's great.

Frankie:

Yeah, so they had William Lloyd Garrison, who's the leader of the abolitionist movement, and Frederick Douglass, who was an enslaved man who basically gained his own freedom, to put a long story short. And they came to Perth to speak. And the only society that was formed at the time was the women's society, which suggests that it was them who wrote to the abolitionists. And the men's society actually formed about a month after the Americans had already visited.

Sarah:

No way! Really?

Frankie:

Yeah. And that's actually what I was doing mainly in America was the women from Perth had written quite a few quite instructive letters to women in America about protesting American slavery and their letters are kept at the Boston Public Library. So they're all kind of stored there and you can actually see them online. They're all on the internet archive as well so...

Sarah:

So that's what took you over.

Frankie:

That's what initially took me over, yeah, and then I read a book about the cotton industry when I just got on my PhD and the book was amazing. I was like here was this guy, I need to get in touch with him and he was a professor called Sven Beckert so I flicked to the end of the book and it was like, oh he's a professor at Harvard, and I was like just forget about it, just go home, just put the book down and go home. And then after a few weeks of thinking about it, I got the courage to send him an email and tell him about my work in Stanley and that I was producing a thesis on Perthshire, and he said that he would supervise me if I could get the funding to come over and it all just started from there.

That was about, I think that was about this time last year that I sent him an email. He got back to me about three weeks later and then it was very quickly kind of getting the funding from the Scottish Graduate School of Arts and Humanities, who fund my PhD and get the funding from them and then, yeah, and then applied to the fellowship at Harvard. And that was how it all took off, but it was crazy.

But it did kind of really inform my understanding of the history here. I took a course on global capitalism, the history of global capitalism, and it was all about kind of thinking globally about these kind of histories. And I was talking to my supervisors about how I want to write a history of Perthshire that places it within these global networks of trade because there's a few regional histories being written about Perthshire but they're very kind of insular and kind of stick to their own patch and they're written for people who live around here, which is great but unfortunately, you know, you want more people to read about this history so connecting it to the wider context will probably help with that a little bit.

So that's what I'm hoping to try and produce eventually, if I ever get my act together.

Sarah:

Yeah, it's like, I love that. It's just like putting it in a wider global context because we never exist just in our own bubble. We're all part of a much wider web, aren't we?

Chapter 10

50:28

Sarah:

Stanley Mills is a place of resilience. From the roar of the river powering its looms, to the voices of workers captured in the objects that rest here, it stands as a testament to human ingenuity, industry and the communities that built their lives around it.

But it's also a place of reckoning, a site woven into a global story of labour, exploitation and cruelty.

Today, its machines are silent, but the stories they tell still shape our understanding of the past and of the people who lived it.

This has been the Historic Scotland podcast.

It was produced and edited by Adam Stoner. I'm Sarah MacGillivray.

Next time, it's the season finale and we're off to Kildrummy Castle.

Playing a pivotal role in the wars of Scottish independence, it was attacked, besieged and betrayed. But even in ruin, it stands as a reminder of Scotland's fight for freedom.

See you then.