

Article 9: Whin mills

by Ann Raeburn

What a golden sight on the hillsides! During this wonderful spring, gorse is flowering a month early, flaming the rough ground a brilliant yellow and filling the air with that heady scent of coconut. It is a stunning sight!

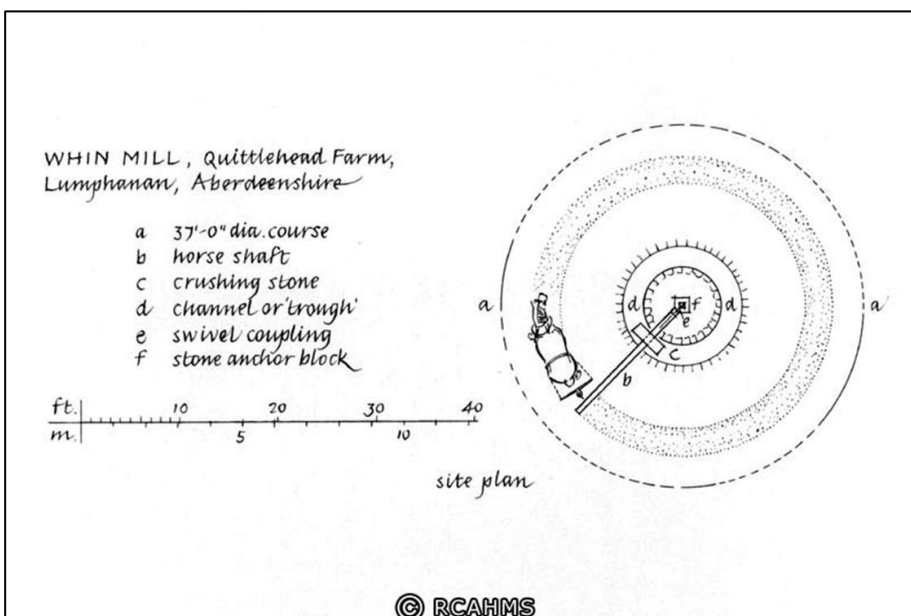
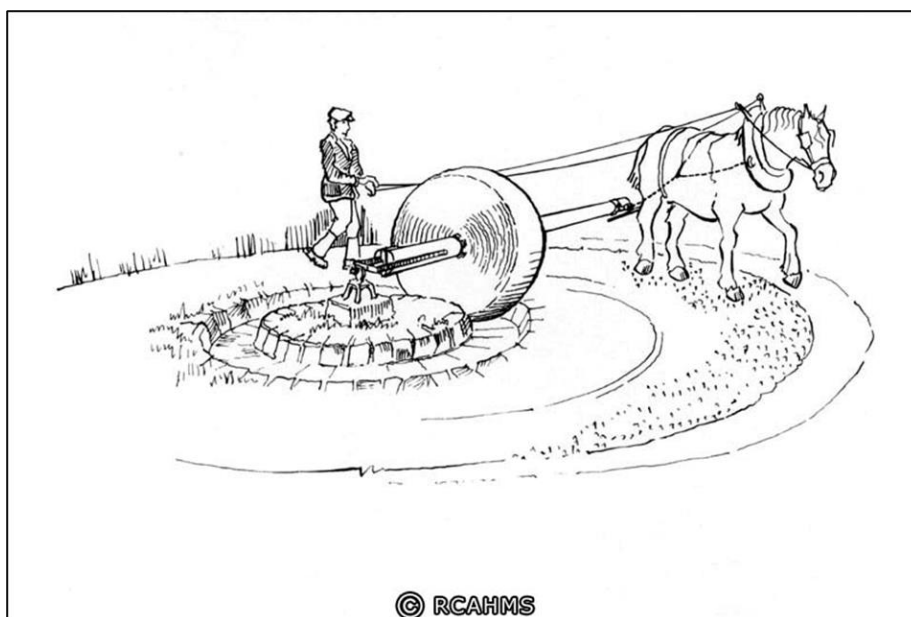
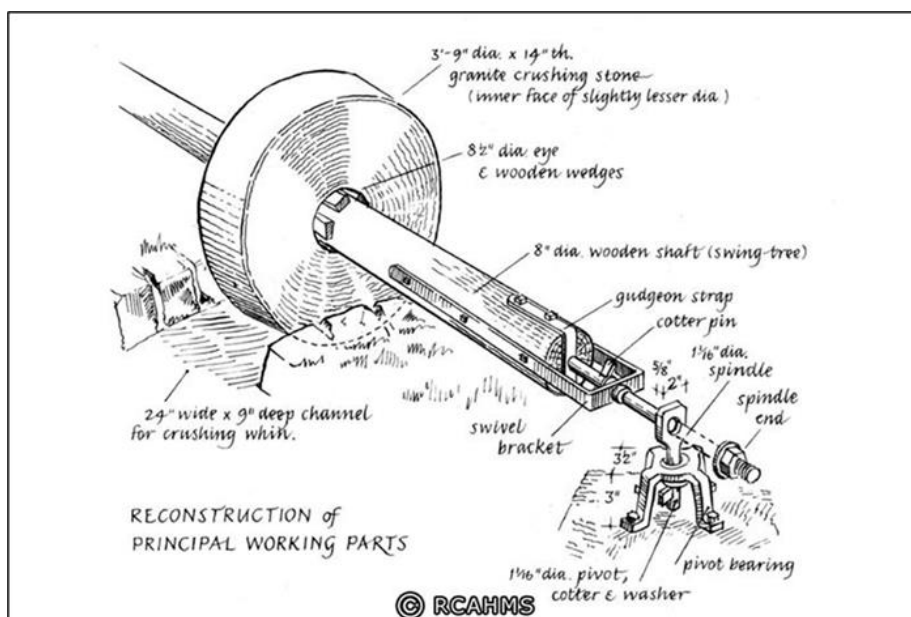


Time travel back to the late 1790s and another picture emerges. You are one of about 45 farmers in the parish of Lumphanan trying to eke out a living from the ground. In the hard months as winter recedes, you will be praying for a sign of Spring. There is snow on the ground and still hard frost at night. The promise of a bite of fresh green grass for your few lean cows, shut inside, seems a hopeful memory. Turnips as a crop are unknown until the late 1700s. Oat harvests produced short straw and a low grain yield compared to today's varieties.

The prospect of a bad harvest, rain or even snow falling come harvest time is never far from your thoughts. Surplus grain from one district could not be moved easily on the rough and rutted roads to a needy area. Many cattle were so debilitated and starving that with neighbouring farmers you would band together for a 'cattle lifting'. Weakly cows would literally be lifted from their stalls and carried out to gain strength on the fresh spring pasture. How could you keep your beasts alive until they could be turned out to enjoy grass in May?

In the early 1800s the answer was gorse! The tips and new growth of this prickly bush were highly nutritious and full of protein but animals could not be expected to gnaw their way through mouthfuls of spikey ends! The solution was to crush the gorse to make it palatable and so the whin mill was invented!

How did a whin mill look? As the diagrams show, a large granite wheel with a wide circumference was used, the width of the wheel allowing for as much crushing to take place as possible. The wheel was placed upright in a circular trough of flat stones. A central iron pivot held a wooden beam which went through the middle of the wheel. Gorse was cut and thrown into the circular trough and a horse was attached to the wooden beam and made to walk in a circle, pulling the wheel round over the gorse. Water was frequently sprinkled into the trough to speed up the crushing and once all the gorse was a pulp with no prickly spines, it was fed to cattle and horses.



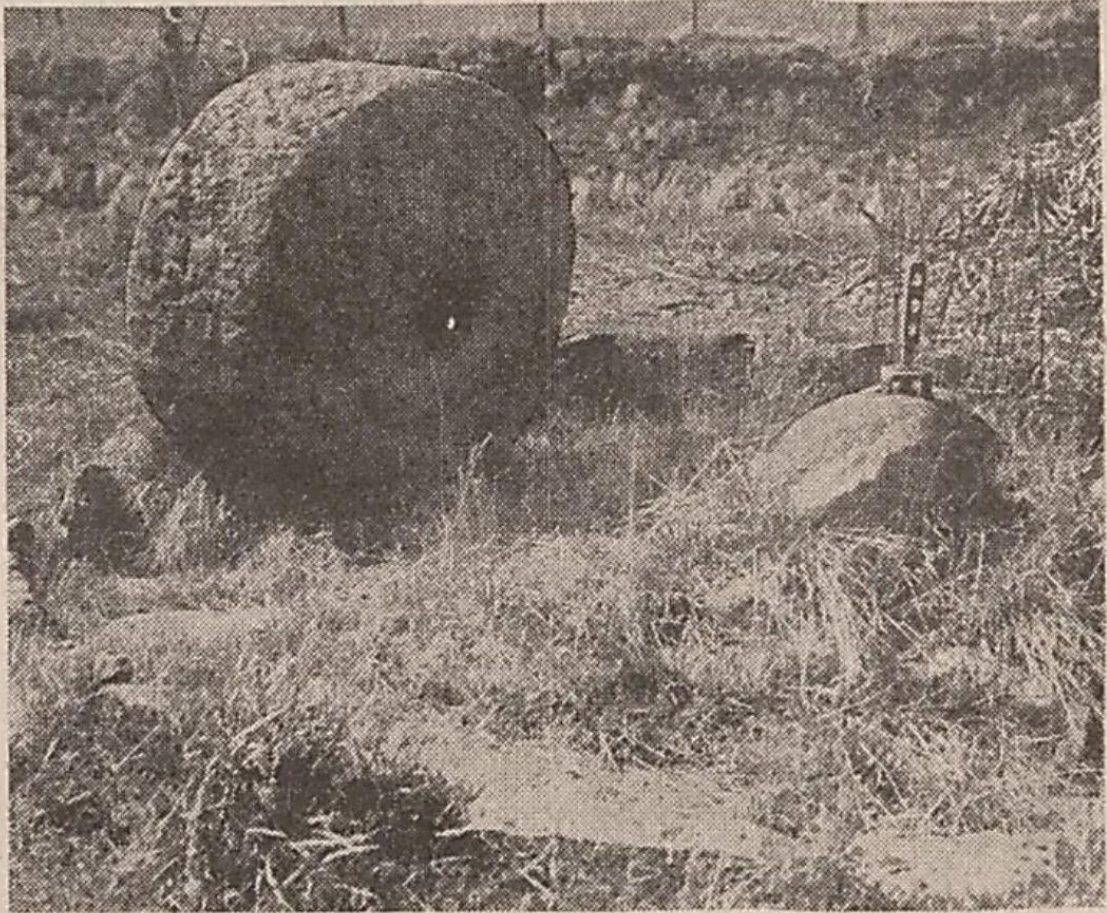


The Quittlehead whin mill



The pivot on Quittlehead centre stone.

There was quite a nucleus of whin mills in the Lumphanan area. The farms of Tillyching, Quittlehead and Roseburn on the Deeside Way all owned a whin mill. Small crofts who could not afford such a piece of equipment would have resorted to using a hand flail which required much brute strength to crash it down on the cut gorse.



Old whin mill at Tillyching, Lumphanan, Aberdeenshire, which was recently excavated by Mr W. A. Wilson. It is complete with the exception of the wooden pole-axe. "P. & J." copyright.

Tillyching. P&J Newspaper cutting dated 1936

Surrounded as we are in Aberdeenshire by gorse on all the hillsides, it seems amazing that various parts of Britain actually sowed crops of gorse in March to crush for feed in the Autumn!

The Roseburn whin mill, right by the Deeside Way, had a much larger crushing stone, deeper trough and an interesting history before it was re-purposed as a whin mill. This mill was originally used to crush lime to build the railway viaduct by the Beltie Burn, west of Torphins and was probably situated near there. The viaduct finished, it was bought by the Roseburn farmer and re-built near his farm to crush whins. The railway was operating from Aberdeen to Aboyne from 1859 so whins must have been used as a feedstuff at least until the 1860s.



Whin mill, Roseburn. 1993

As agricultural methods improved, turnips became widely grown, grain harvest yields rose, the use of manure was better understood, wages of farm labourers increased and so the whin mills fell out of use. The great granite mill stones sat in their troughs, redundant, slowly consumed by weeds and gorse. Some were moved against steading walls and the troughs broken up. Much later, in the last 30 years, many had their mill stones removed to become garden ornaments.



Roseburn whin mill site today and Roseburn.

It would be a tribute to this once important piece of farming life, this machinery which kept many farmers from near starvation, if one whin mill could be reconstructed with an information board to tell its tale. The Roseburn whin mill, right by the Deeside way would have been an ideal candidate. Sadly the wheel was removed sometime after 1993.