

Dunfermline's Industrial Past

Hills of Fife - Dunfermline & West Fife Laundry Halbeath Road, Dunfermline

This business had its origins in Cowdenbeath where, in 1897, Mrs Janet Hill began a small hand washing enterprise in Moss-side Road. A short time later, Mrs Hill was joined in the business by her husband, Charles Hill, with the enterprise then becoming known as Charles Hill & Co, Moss-side Laundry and Cleaning Works. Mr & Mrs Hill, in the early years, worked a 16 hour day in order to establish their small business.



'PHONE No. 69.

CHARLES HILL & CO.,
Moss-Side Laundry,
COWDENBEATH.

HIGH-CLASS LAUNDRY WORK.
SHIRTS and COLLARS a Speciality.

AGENTS for the well-known Firm of W. & J. BOWIE, Dyers, French Cleaners,
Carpet Beaters and Carpet Renovators, CLYDE DYE WORKS, Glasgow.

Early Charles Hill & Co. Advert

It was with remarkable foresight that Mr and Mrs Hill set up their business in the midst of what was then predominantly a mining area – though it expanded much more quickly than even they could have visualised. In those days part of the business was the cleaning and starching of stiff collars, as the people didn't have the facilities to do them at home. Mr Hill would boast that 'during Communion

Week', the firm would do about 1000 starched collars for the Kelty area alone'.

By 1908 the laundry at Cowdenbeath employed about 30 people and cleaning processes were becoming more mechanised and more efficient. Even in the early days, there were washing machines of a type, but all the ironing was done by hand – the average woman ironing 11 or 12 shirts an hour.



Charles & Janet Hill on holiday in Wales c. 1920

In 1918 Mr & Mrs Hill acquired much larger premises in the shape of Dunfermline & West Fife Laundry Ltd., which had been started in Halbeath Road, Dunfermline, in 1912 - See Note 6. Two years later, in May 1920, the Cowdenbeath laundry was closed and the whole operation was established at the Dunfermline premises with the business name changing from Charles Hill & Co., to Dunfermline & West Fife Laundry.

The business built up quickly over the next ten years with the use of motor vans replacing the horse-drawn vehicles and making it possible to collect more garments for cleaning in a shorter time.



Dunfermline & West Fife Laundry – c.1940

By this time Mr & Mrs Hill had been joined in the business by their three children, John, Greta and James.

Charles Hill died in 1930, with the running of the business passing to his sons. Mrs Hill survived until she was 89 and, until her latter years, still took a keen interest in the business she started, retaining the position of chairman for many years.

STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSE'S MOUTH

Do You Have Worries?

We have, with about 80 per cent. of the work we receive.

WHY?—
Because, we respectfully suggest, you don't perform a simple task.

RESULT—
Delays, lost articles, annoyance to yourselves, and unnecessary worry to us.

SOLUTION—
Simple! Just please put your name, address and all articles on the list we provide in each clean parcel. Then tie up securely before handing to our representative—and Thank You for your Custom!

DUNFERMLINE & WEST FIFE LAUNDRY LTD.
HALBEATH ROAD, DUNFERMLINE. Tel. 149

Early Halbeath Road Advert.

The business continued to prosper and expand at Halbeath Road and, in 1932, the St Clair Laundry, 30 Church Street, Kirkcaldy, was acquired with James Hill managing this concern and John Hill continuing to look after Dunfermline. It had been agreed at this stage that the Kirkcaldy area and the Dunfermline area should, to a certain extent, work independently of each other, and each with its own managing director.



John Hill with his mother, Janet

In 1938 John Hill's son, Gordon (Charles Gordon Hill), joined the business, becoming the third generation of the family to be involved. A few years later James Hill's son, Alan, also came into the firm.

During the years of the 1939–45 war, the company played their part by handling the laundry of some 2000 troops per week, and the premises were fully equipped to do de-contamination work, should the need have arisen.

Jenny Ferguson (m/s Morrison) – 95 years of age in 2009 – started work at Hill's on leaving school, aged 14, in 1928, remaining there until 1942. She recalled that, at busy times, she started work at 6 a.m., had a 15 minute break during the forenoon; 30 minutes at lunch-time, and a further 15 minutes in the afternoon, before finishing at 6 p.m. For this she earned 15 shillings (75p) per week. She also recalled the massive amount of laundry carried out at that time for the Royal Navy at Rosyth Dockyard.

Jenny started out in the washroom at the laundry but soon progressed to the ironing room where gas irons were used to put the finishing touches to the laundered items. When she started out at the laundry the flooring in the various departments was wood and each Monday all work stopped at 3 p.m. and the employees donned packing sheet aprons, got down on their knees, and scrubbed the flooring

clean. This task was later eliminated when new cement finished floors were installed.

Jenny recalled the names of some her work colleagues of that era thus:- Jimmy Rooney from Cameron Street was in charge of the washroom where he was assisted by Ella Bathgate from Dunfermline and Nettie Denholm from Hill of Beath. Isa McIntosh sorted out the incoming laundry. In the ironing room were Jessie Brown, Fordell; Mary Young, Bessie Pollock and Jessie Wardrope, all Dunfermline; Susan Japp, Isa Moffat, Isa Thomson and Isa Parker, all from Cowdenbeath. Jean Brown (sister of Jessie) and Anne Anderson were in the calender room where a machine pressed bed linen etc. Chrissie Beveridge from Moodie Street did all the starching of collars. The packing and despatch room was operated by Jean Symons, Liz Herdman, Mary Parker and Chrissie Wardlaw. Bessie Martin (sister of office manageress Jane) operated the pressing machine in the dry-cleaning section.

Jenny recalled that during the period prior to the war Hill's had three or four delivery vans on the road and the drivers were Archie McLeod, ? Rigby and Bert Hutton (nephew of Jane Martin), all from Cowdenbeath.

During the war Davie Syme, from Kings-eat, was the watchman at the laundry, whilst all employees did night-shift stints on fire-watch.

Jenny Ferguson worked at Hill's for 14 years during which time her weekly wage did not exceed £2. She recalled Janet Hill as being a very polite and well spoken lady whilst her husband Charles was a quiet man who 'liked a blether'. Jenny was of the opinion that Mrs Hill was the one who drove the company. Jenny said she enjoyed her time at Hill's but that the work was hard and repetitive.



Gordon and James Hill in London

There was one shop set up in Cowdenbeath, just before the war, for the receiving of dry-cleaning, and in 1946, an associate company, named Hills of Fife, was formed to operate shops, eventually throughout Fife, for the receiving of dry cleaning and laundry. Over the years these shops would be fitted out with dry-cleaning machinery which would make them self-contained units.



Van Driver Guy Thomson with John Hill & Van Boys

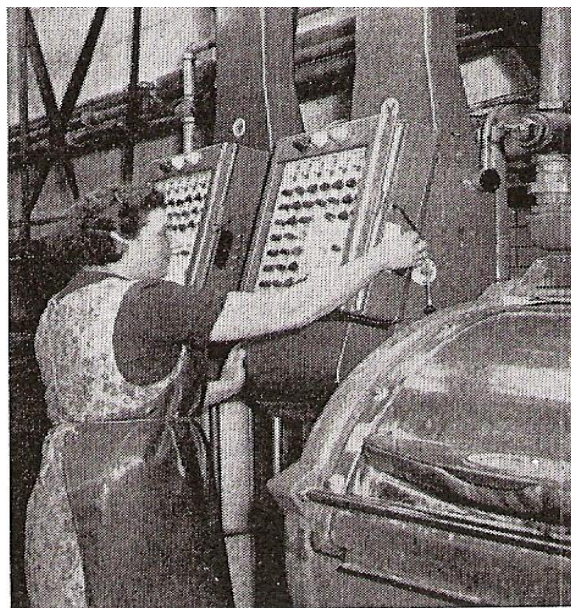
An article in the magazine "Power Laundry" of 24th January, 1958, describes the

modernisation of Dunfermline & West Fife Laundry in the post-war years, thus:-
The creation of the modern Dunfermline & West Fife Laundry began in 1945 when, with an eye to the future development of the laundry business, steps were taken to improve the plant section by section. The directors took the view (an unusual view in 1945) that maximum importance must be given to the quality of work and this policy has dictated the direction of many of the developments in the business. At this time there has been a refreshing readiness to use personal initiative and ingenuity throughout the plant. A simple illustration of this is the early introduction, at a time when it was difficult to obtain such equipment, of mechanical stoking equipment which was made on the spot at a cost of a few pounds. An exterior brick-work hopper was built by a local builder but this was the only part of the stoker carried out by an outsider. Into this hopper was fitted a travelling belt equipped with buckets and covered by sheeting taken from the older buildings nearby. This home-made elevating stoker feeds into twin overhead hoppers and has given good service over a period of seven years.

Another interesting example of the ingenuity of the management is the tropical plant house which Gordon Hill has constructed at the rear of the boiler room. A pipeline has been extended from the boiler room to the plant house in which are grown tropical plants for window displays in the firm's shops.

Every Year over the past 12 years a new machine, a change in layout and a new method has been introduced into the laundry. The calender section was modernised in 1948 and new presses have been installed from time to time so that today the modern press room is equipped with four Twin Rapid presses of the latest type. The sorting and marking department has recently been given attention and three new Polymark machines have

been put into use. Another recent development has been the conversion of the washroom from manual to automatic control which again emphasises the continuous search for new efficient methods. In the same way the dry-cleaning department has been developed over the last year or two and it is at present being given major attention.



All these developments have been linked to a work study programme which was introduced in 1953. Like other managements the Hills found their wage percentage rising dangerously and steps were obviously necessary to bring the wage structure to a much lower figure. In this situation the firm called in John Hendry & Staff Ltd. Hendry's experts spent some months in the laundry during which a complete survey was made of the operations and detailed proposals advanced for re-organisation. These proposals have been gradually put into use and have had the effect of providing a sound economic basis of operation.

The most recent improvement has been the mechanisation of the washroom. Previously the laundry had a battery of seven manually operated washing machines. Increases in the prices of fuel,

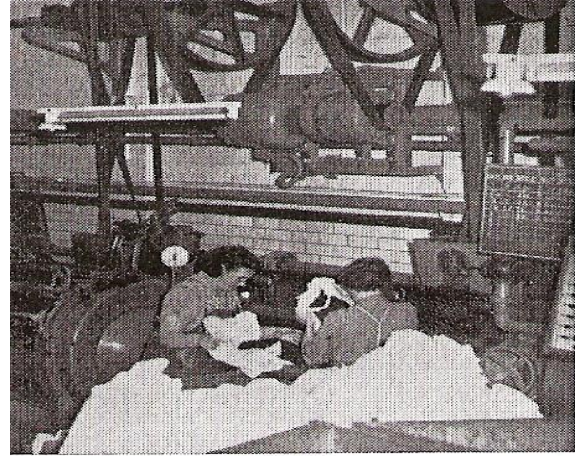
soap, water and labour, and problems resulting from the variations inevitable with manual operation decided the firm to introduce automatic control. The difficulty of obtaining male labour for washroom work was another factor here.



The washroom is now fitted with Fisher control units by Process Units (Halifax), Ltd. Three Major units and two Minor units have been installed and, according to the directors, they have been responsible for an economy of water (an important factor in these days when water charges are increasing), decreased soap utilisation, a reduction in fuel consumption and a reduction in the labour necessary to operate the department. There is the added advantage that the washroom work has been made so simple that it can now be done by female labour. The laundry has also gained an increase in washroom throughput from 25% to 33% over previous hand-operated methods, because of the provision of the control timing and the continuous utilisation of equipment.

Another interesting development at the laundry has been the extension of their engineering shop. The growing mechanisation of the operations at the laundry has meant that a qualified plant engineer to handle maintenance and to undertake specialised production work should be employed on the premises. As a result a good deal of the jobbing work previously carried out by firms outside the laundry is

now handled in the engineering shop in which the production of specialised equipment, racks, trolleys, panels, etc., is now carried out.



Further improvements are pending at Dunfermline and the firm's consultants are currently reviewing the efficiency of their earlier planning results to assess the effect of the new automatic controls in the washroom. The Dunfermline & West Fife Laundry impressed me as being one which is well on top of current problems and the stated policy of the management, namely, "keep up to date, plough back earnings and mechanise wherever feasible," strikes me as being one which will keep it on top for a long time to come.

Mrs Hill, the founder of the company, died in 1956, at which time the chairmanship passed to her eldest son John. Sadly, John died two years later with his brother James succeeding him in the chair. At this time John's son, Gordon, became managing director at Dunfermline, with James's son, Alan, fulfilling the same role at Kirkcaldy.

In 1961 St Clair Laundry absorbed the business of Woodburn Laundry, St. Andrews, with the work from that laundry being processed at Kirkcaldy. In 1964 the Kirkcaldy Steam Laundry (which included Leven Steam Laundry and Burntisland Laundry) was also absorbed into the Hill

enterprise with the work of these laundries being processed at Kirkcaldy and Dunfermline. In 1970 they also acquired the business of Charlestown Hygenic Laundry, which had been in the Fotheringham family for over 60 years.



Guy Thomson with Bedford Delivery Van c. 1950

In 1963, following complaints from neighbours about the smoke emitting from the laundry chimney stack, the management at Dunfermline decided to change from coal to an oil-fired boiler. This proposed use of oil brought about a threatened boycott of the laundry from miner's wives in the area. The threatened action made headlines in the national newspapers of the time and forced Messrs Hill to think again. The power of the people had prevailed and the company decided to stick to coal but were forced to install a new boiler, at a cost of £5,500, which pre-heated the coal, thereby reducing the smoke nuisance.

By 1964 the company had 11 receiving and dry-cleaning shops throughout Fife, some 22 vans on the road, and a total of 150 employees.

Employee satisfaction appeared to be a priority within the Hill organisation and no one illustrated this more than Manageress, Jane Martin who served with the firm for 66 years, retiring in 1974 when she was 80. Jane joined Hills at

Cowdenbeath in 1908, on leaving school, aged 14 years. She was then employed in checking and packing the cleaned clothes, working from 6 am to 6 pm, for 4 shillings a week. She commented at her retiral in 1974, "*I wouldn't want anyone to go back to those days. It was hard work. Everything was done by hand, the ironing and the pressing, and we used gas irons. There are very few irons used today. There were no shops in those days, and deliveries were made by horse-drawn vans.*"



Jane Martin and John Duffy

Miss Martin worked through the various departments of the firm until 1918, when she was promoted to manageress, having remained with the laundry through the years of the First World War, when they were called upon to deal with the personal washing of the Forces stationed nearby. Jane recalled the move to Halbeath Road at the close of the war where she continued in the role of manageress. She remained in this role until 1932, when she moved to Kirkcaldy to oversee the running of St Clair Laundry. She recalled, "It was a small business when they took it over. It had to be built up - there was a lot to do." Nine years later Miss Martin returned again to the firm's main offices at Halbeath Road as company manageress - a position she held for a further 35 years. A final significant comment from Miss Martin at her retiral presentation, "*I thought about retiring two or three years ago, but then I thought, there's*

nothing else to do, so I carried on. I decided after my 80th birthday in August, to retire - and I'm looking forward to it, although I'll miss the company a lot. It has been my life."

Interestingly, the new manageress at Halbeath Road was to be Miss Martin's niece, Miss Betty Martin, who, at that stage, had only been with the firm for 35 years.



Tom Stewart – Laundry Engineer



Hill's Laundry Delivery Van c. 1955

In September, 1984, two significant events took place in Hill's history; firstly, Gordon Hill, who had managed the Dunfermline enterprise since the death of his father in 1958, decided to retire for reasons of ill-health, and secondly the company announced that, as a measure of rationalisation, the laundry operation would be transferred from Halbeath Road to Kirkcaldy. The dry-cleaning shops were retained in the area and, for a time, dry-cleaning, office facilities and garaging of the firms vehicles was maintained at Halbeath Road.

By late 1985 however, the site at Halbeath Road had been sold to developers, Fraser Gray Contractors Ltd., who went on to build 43 retirement flats on the site. The development was appropriately named Hill Court.

In August, 1993, it was announced that, following the retirement of the then owner and managing director, Alan Hill, the remainder of the business had been sold to New Wave Laundries Ltd., the workforce of Hills at this time being in the order of 50.

Note 1 – Janet Beveridge Allan or Hill was born at Cluny Mains, Kinglassie on 23rd January, 1869. Her father, James Allan, was an agricultural labourer. Her husband, Charles Hill, was born on 22nd July, 1864, at Back of the Dam, Dunfermline. His father, John Hill, was a labourer. The couple married on 5th December, 1890, at the Abbey Church Manse, Dunfermline. At that time Charles was a cloth lapper and Janet was a domestic servant. Both were resident in Dunfermline, Charles at 50 Inglis Street, and Janet at 20 South Inglis Street. They had three children, John, Margaret and James (see notes 2, 3 & 4). Charles Hill died, aged 65 years, on 6th March, 1930, at his home, 44 Garvock Hill, Dunfermline. Janet Hill died, aged 89 years, on 19th March, 1956, also at 44 Garvock Hill, Dunfermline. Mrs Hill was a member of St Columba's Church for many years and took an active interest in the work of the Woman's Guild. She was also a member for some time of the Dunfermline Branch of the Electrical Association for Women.

Note 2 – John Hill was born on 11th September, 1891, at 54 Pittencrieff Street, Dunfermline. On 6th June, 1923, John, then 32, married Gladys Evelyn Russell, (25), a housekeeper, residing at 37 Frederick Crescent, Dunfermline. John Hill died on 28th October, 1958, at 18 Eglinton Terrace, Edinburgh. His home ad-

dress at that time was 5 Garvockhill, Dunfermline. His widow, Gladys, died on 8th January, 1971, aged 73 years, at Dunfermline & West Fife Hospital, Dunfermline. The couple had one son, Charles Gordon Hill (known as Gordon).

Note 3 – James Allan Hill was born on 14th September, 1908, at Allanhill, Moss-side Road, Cowdenbeath. This was probably the appropriately named home of the Hill family whilst operating the Moss-side Laundry. On 15th September, 1934, James, then residing at 44 Garvockhill, Dunfermline, married Janet Simpson Stronach, (23), 66 Thistle Street, Dunfermline, at Queen Anne Street Church. Janet's father was a well known engineer in Dunfermline. James Allan Hill died on 26th December, 1985, at Victoria Hospital, Kirkcaldy. His home address at that time was 4 East Fergus Place, Kirkcaldy. James and Janet had one son, Alan Charles Hill

Note 4 – Margaret (Greta) Muir Hill, was born on 17th March, 1897, at 37 New Row, Dunfermline. Her father, Charles Hill's occupation was given as a Cloth Lapper. On 30th November, 1920, at Lyndhurst, Garvockhill, Dunfermline, Greta, then 23, married John Baxendale, (26), an iron-founder from Chorley, in Lancashire. The witnesses at Greta's wedding were, Helen W. Bissett, Jessie Walker and R. Baxendale. It would appear that Greta's husband, John was a member of the Baxendale family who produced the world famous 'Baxi' fires and central heating units.

Note 5 - Charles Gordon Hill was born on

26th March, 1924, at 43 Halbeath Road, Dunfermline, the son of John Hill, Laundry Manager, and his wife Gladys Evelyn Hill, m.s. Russell. On 12th August, 1950, at Brucefield Hotel, Dunfermline, Gordon, then 26 years of age and designated a laundry director, residing at 5 Garvockhill, Dunfermline, married Christina Wood MacPherson, (26), a school teacher, residing at 85 Dewar Street, Dunfermline and the daughter of James MacPherson, a hotel proprietor.

Note 5 – In the 1911 census Charles and Jessie Hill, along with John (19), Margaret (17) and James (2) are residing at 21 Moss-side Road, Cowdenbeath. Charles's occupation is given as Steam Landry Proprietor.

Note 6 – Dunfermline & West Fife Laundry Company was founded in 1911 by a group of local businessmen, including:- William Black, owner of Touch Bleachfield; William Mungall, Transy; R. Husband, Solicitor; James Norval, Photographer; Andrew Martin, Cashier and Robert Steel (probably owner of Caledonia Linen Works). The premises in Halbeath Road opened in 1912, managed by a Mr A. J. Reid, and operated as such until 1918 when the business was purchased by Charles and Jessie Hill.