

James Moir & Glenglassaugh Distillery

The ancient burgh of Portsoy on the Banffshire coast prospered in the early nineteenth century with the development of the fishing industry and improvements in the local arable farming. Its wealth increased following the opening in 1859 of the Banff, Portsoy and Strathisla Railway, which provided a direct connection with Aberdeen and markets in the south. The harbour built by the Earl of Seafield in the mid-1820s had been destroyed by a storm in 1839 and never properly restored. Although it could still accommodate fishing craft, it was inaccessible to larger vessels. Serving the needs of the burgeoning community was a general store in the High Street, owned by an enterprising tradesman, James Moir, who acted as a wine and spirit merchant, seedsman, manure merchant, and ironmonger.

He had come to Portsoy from Turriff in 1834 to manage this business, then owned by his brother-in-law, Alexander Morrison. Born in Woodside on the outskirts of Aberdeen, he had trained as a clerk in the town before moving to Turriff. There he had married Alexander Morrison's sister, a widow, Mrs Porter. Shortly after their arrival in Portsoy Mrs Moir died. This tragedy did not prevent him from entering fully into the local community. When the North of Scotland Bank opened a branch in the burgh James Moir was appointed the agent. As a banker he gained a reputation for fairness, willingly giving "his personal security for loans in deserving cases". When Alexander Morrison died, James Moir inherited the Portsoy business, changing its name to his own. Alexander Morrison's son, also Alexander, became the proprietor of his father's similar concern in Turriff. He married a niece of James Moir, Margaret.

In managing his firm, James Moir was always ready to accept new ideas and to support developments that would benefit the trade of the town. He encouraged the development of the fisheries, buying a boat himself in 1859 which he christened the Garmouth, and further vessels in 1865 and 1868. He played a crucial role in bringing the railway to Portsoy in 1859, essential if the fishing industry was to prosper, and was a tireless advocate of the construction of the coastal line eventually completed in 1883. He erected at his own expense a telegraph line between Portsoy, Buckie and Portgordon in 1868 so that the fishing trade of the three towns could be co-ordinated. He also took a stake in a salmon fishery at Macduff, leasing the salmon fishing on the river Deveron and along the coastline between Portsoy and Macduff. In his spare time he played an active part in the battery of artillery volunteers, becoming their colonel in 1865.

Through his store James Moir had a sizeable trade in spirits and like every other wine merchant at the time was anxiously searching for good quality whisky to replace the brandies which were being lost as phylloxera swept through the Charante vineyards. In 1875 he seized the opportunity to build his own distillery and by so doing provided an outlet for barley grown by his customers. Reluctant to embark on this venture single-handed, he went into partnership with his nephew, Alexander Morrison, who in turn persuaded his brother, William Morrison, to come in. James Moir recruited Thomas Wilson, a Portsoy coppersmith, well versed in distillery work. Together they identified a suitable site for the distillery on the Glassaugh estate at the foot of the Fordyce burn, not far from the imposing remains of the Glassaugh windmill.

The ground along with the surrounding 80 acre farm called Craigmills was leased early in 1874 in the name of Alexander Morrison from R. W. Duff of Glassaugh and Feteresso, member of parliament for the County of Banff. The nineteen year lease at a rental of £95 per annum bound the partners 'to farm the lands according to the rules of good husbandry and...keep the same free from weeds and in good heart and condition'. They were allowed to cut peats from the moss of Auchinderrom for use in the distillery at a cost of £1 'per spade's casting'. This was an

excellent location in the midst of a 'fine corn providing district' with 'splendid barley crops'. The waters of the Fordyce burn were considered excellent for distilling, used according to local tradition by several illicit distillers in the years before 1823. The farm was renamed Glenglassaugh and the partners took the name the Glenglassaugh Distillery. They invited William Sellar of Keith who, with his father, had built distilleries in Scotland and Australia, to lay out the plant in collaboration with Thomas Wilson. The buildings were designed by Reid & Melvin, architects at Elgin, to take advantage of the sloping site which made it possible for 'all the workings to be accomplished by gravitation'. The most up to date techniques were adopted, including a German wire-cloth floor to the kiln, a Steel's patent mashing machine and 'an ingenious invention for sparging the grains after the worts had been drained off into the underback'. There were two stills, a 4,000 gallon wash still and 2,000 gallon spirit still, capable of distilling about 100,000 gallons of malt whisky a year. The new distillery was completed by the end of December 1874 at a cost of some £10,000.

Although the partners planned that their distillery would cater largely for the bottle trade in 'self' or single malt whisky of James Moir and Alexander Morrison, they needed to find a market for the large proportion of surplus capacity. They were fortunate to find a customer in the prestigious Glasgow firm of wine and spirit wholesalers Robertson & Baxter, who already acted as agents for the Greenock distillery, McMurchy Ralston, owners of the Burnside distillery in Campbeltown and David Durie, proprietor of the Fettercairn distillery in the Howe of Mearns in Angus. Robertson & Baxter quickly became Glenglassaugh's biggest customer by a wide margin and in turn supplied the whisky in large parcels to another distinguished Glasgow firm of wine and spirit merchants, William Teacher & Sons. These were good times for whisky merchants like Robertson & Baxter who dealt in good quality malt whisky which was much in demand for the newly fashionable blends that were filling the gap left by the sudden disappearance of brandy after the outbreak of phylloxera. Little is known about Glenglassaugh's output or other clients in its first years of operation. Like their competitors in the north-east, the partners built up a trade in England where there was a growing markets for 'self' whiskies sold as such and, unlike much of the whisky consumed within a year of distillation in Scotland, well matured in sherry wood. Customers south of the border included Wyld & Co of Bristol, the Birkenhead Brewery Co, Mackie & Gladstone of Liverpool, John Groves & Son of Weymouth, Ernest Hobbs of Gosport, and Richardson Brothers of Salisbury.

Thomas Wilson, the junior partner, died in 1883, followed to the grave four years later in 1887 by James Moir, who left his substantial fortune of £23,000 to his niece, Margaret, wife of Alexander Morrison. His inventory showed that he had an investment of £5,128 in the distillery and whisky stocks of £862. His shops had customers throughout the area, but mostly in the immediate neighbourhood of Portsoy, Fordyce, and Sandend. He was owed sums of money by a great many fishermen, presumably for tackle; for example, James Smith and his five partners, the owners of the boat *Majestie*, and John Mair (*Bobbin*). He was deeply mourned by the local community. Within the last six years he had been unstinting in his public services, chairing the committee to restore the parish church in 1881, and leading the campaign to rebuild the harbour in 1885.

Having survived the difficult times of the mid-1880's Alexander Morrison decided to re-equip the distillery. During 1887 the two stills were replaced and in 1889 two new washbacks. installed. Three years later in the summer of 1892 the existing three washbacks, were rebuilt and elevators installed to raise the malt to the kiln, and two barley separators acquired for screening and grading the barley. With demand for whisky strengthening, the outlook seemed excellent.

Quite unexpectedly in the late summer of 1892, William Morrison died and at the beginning of September 1892 Alexander Morrison, needing to find the cash to settle his estate, decided 'for family reasons' to sell the business. He wrote at once to Robertson & Baxter to enquire if they were interested. W.A. Robertson and J.C.R. Marshall travelled north to discuss the matter with Morrison's lawyers, Paul & Williamson of Aberdeen, on 13 September, when they expressed interest in buying Glenglassaugh for their sister company, Highland Distilleries. As a result of their conversations, Alexander Morrison wrote on 14 September setting the asking price at £15,000; in return Alexander Morrison agreed to continue buying all his supplies of whisky from the distillery. Although they were interested, Robertson & Baxter and Highland Distilleries were not to be rushed into a hasty decision. A week later William Grant, the manager at Bunnahabhain, was despatched to Portsoy to make a thorough technical survey of the distillery. His report was enthusiastic - 'After due deliberation and considering convenience and stability of the whole works if the produce is of good marketable quality to the best of my knowledge and belief, the place is worth from £14,000 to £15,000. Always cautious, WA Robertson asked for samples of the water used at Glenglassaugh for 'mashing and reducing the whisky' and for cooling to be sent to Glasgow for analysis. The results of these tests were far from satisfactory; one sample was discovered to contain oxidised sewage products and another was considered to be 'much too hard for either mashing or reducing'. Only one of the samples was thought to be suitable. As a result Robertson & Baxter were only prepared to offer £10,000 in cash for the plant, excluding the stocks, which Alexander Morrison grudgingly accepted.

When the deal had been completed, Robertson & Baxter formally invited Highland Distilleries to buy Glenglassaugh for £15,000. The two local directors, Robert Dick and William Grant, hurried off to examine the plant and were 'delighted with the place':

'The deeds should be prepared with as little delay as possible and as we know that R & B are making a profit on this action, which they well deserve, the actual price paid should be the consideration price stated in the deed of conveyance in case the Morrisons might kick did they see that the HD Co were paying R & B more than they purchased the distillery at. I should not mind if they (R & B) made £5,000 out of it. It is cheap to the HD Co. It is substantially built and replete with everything, with ample warehouse accommodation for years to come.'

The Highland board agreed to buy in November and during the following month Glenglassaugh passed under the company's control. With improvements designed to increase capacity and at the same time reduce costs, output climbed to over 110,000 gallons in the boom year of 1898. Thereafter production dwindled to less than 28,000 gallons in 1907. Glenglassaugh was silent from the summer of 1907 until April 1960 when an almost totally new plant was commissioned to meet the seemingly insatiable demand for malt for blending. Unlike the other whiskies made by Highland Distilleries, Glenglassaugh had not been marketed as a single malt since the days of James Moir and Alexander Morrison. In the 1986 annual report of Highland Distilleries, the chairman, J.A.R. Macphail, announced: 'While the overall production at the distilleries was at a satisfactory level it has been decided to mothball Glenglassaugh Distillery as customer demand for this make remains disappointing'.

Footnote: Production was restarted in 2008 after the distillery was acquired by a finance company. In 2013 the company was taken over by BenRiach Distillery, which was in turn acquired in 2016 by the Brown-Forman Corporation of Kentucky, USA. In 2025, Brown-Forman announced that production would again be paused, with the intention of resuming in some years to meet commercial requirements. New warehousing has recently been built, and Glenglassaugh whisky continues to be marketed.