

Castlehill Heritage Centre is located within renovated farm buildings immediately adjacent to the cutting yard and quarry of the now defunct flagstone workings at Castlehill, on the northern outskirts of Castletown. The workings were the brainchild of Sheriff Depute James Traill and were the first in the country to exploit the commercial possibilities of the strong, handsome sedimentary Caithness flagstone.

From small beginnings the works gradually rose to large dimensions - from the employment of thirty men to the employment of three to four hundred men - from the use of hand labour to that of water and steam power, from the slow process of lighters to the construction of a new harbour for the more expeditious loading of ships. The commercial export operations of the Castlehill Flagstone Works put the village of Castletown on the global map.

But the legacy of James Traill goes well beyond the flagstone industry. When he inherited the Castlehill Estate in 1788 he set about a series of improvements to local agriculture and farming processes. Farms were combined to allow modern husbandry on new larger farms of between 120 acres and 400 acres as at Murkle. Traill was willing to experiment with his land. He planted trees at Castlehill and experimented with new fertilising methods. Before Traill's time the cattle of Caithness were considered inferior to those of the rest of Scotland and he helped to change this by introducing a dairy herd from Dunlop in Ayrshire.

Traill did not rest with agricultural improvements. He realised that without access to markets there was little point in improving yields. As early as 1788, he was a subscriber to an initiative to establish and promote manufactures in Thurso and Wick. By 1793 the first Statistical account records that Traill had recently erected a lint-mill, a barley-mill, a corn-mill and a threshing machine, and all excepting the lint-mill, moved by one wheel, and driven by the same stream.

The remains of the buildings from the Castlehill Estate described within this leaflet stand testament to the works of one of the first great "Improvers" in the north of Scotland.



Castletown Heritage Society

Preserving the character, history and traditions of the Village of Castletown and Parish of Olig.

Castlehill Heritage Centre is operated by Castletown Heritage Society as a visitor experience and educational resource. Themed exhibitions are held throughout the year showcasing the history, heritage, biodiversity and social history of Castletown and the parish of Olig.

The Society also runs workshop and training days featuring local and vernacular skills such as rope making, wood chip carving, drystone dyking, craft crafts, limestone pointing, basket making, creative writing and music making.

Castletown Heritage Society is a community led organisation formed entirely of volunteers.

Registered Scottish Charity
SCO27858

Castlehill Heritage Centre
Harbour Road
Castletown
Caithness, Scotland KW14 8TG

Phone: 01847 821204
Email: castletown.heritage@talk21.com
Web: www.castletownheritage.co.uk

CASTLEHILL HERITAGE CENTRE

CASTLEHILL ESTATE BUILDINGS



Located just a few miles along the coast from the most northerly point on the Scottish mainland, the Castlehill Estate once stood at the very forefront of "Improvements" in the County of Caithness during the late 18th and the 19th centuries.

The fascinating history of the Castlehill Estate is brought alive at the Castlehill Heritage Centre.

Open all year
Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday
2pm to 4pm
Other times by arrangement

1 Factor's House. The estate manager lived here with his family. It also contained the estate office. We are told that stone workers and farm labourers had to queue below the little square window to receive their wages. One of the last farm managers to live here was Mr Meiklejohn, born 1890, whose grand-daughter lives in Wick.

2 Mrs Rogers House. Margaret Rogers was a stalwart of the SWRI in Castletown and kept a neat and productive garden here until the house was vacated in the 1970s. It was used as a home for employees of the Scottish Agricultural College in Thurso.

3 Gardeners Cottage. Recognised as the best of the estate worker homes, it originally housed the head gardener who was responsible for the two large gardens at Castlehill. The quality and quantity of produce from the vegetable garden was the envy of the county. Despite being completely overgrown the layout of the flower beds in the ornamental garden can still be discerned.

4 Pilots House. Initially this house was the home and base for the pilot or harbour-master at Castlehill harbour. So busy was this little port with schooners loading and unloading their cargoes of flagstone, corn, coal etc., that traffic had to be controlled. Later this was known as the Engineers house where two generations of the Maclean family tended the steam engines at the cutting yards. More recently it was Annie's House, as Annie Henderson lived here, nanny to the children in the Big House. Latterly various families were housed here until they could be allocated a new council house in the 1950s.

5 The farm mill. Due to its unstable condition this building should be admired from the road. The mill lade and wheel were visible until a few years ago. The mill loft on the upper storey was floored with flagstones to deter rodents.

6 Harbour. Built in 1825 by engineer James Bremner in 1847 this was the scene of an uprising at which the Riot Act was read allowing troops to be deployed to quell the unrest. At a time when many local families had little to eat, a ship called the "Fisher" of Leith was hired by landowner Sinclair of Freswick to transport a cargo of corn for the south. Men from Dunnet marched to the harbour to stop the ship leaving. They succeeded for a time but at a cost to themselves and their families.

7 Boat Shed. In this boat shed was kept the sloop "Soda", owned by landowner James Traill and built here at Castlehill. Note the lintel above the door which is made of a shaped ship's timber. Before the harbour was built there were many shipwrecks in Dunnet Bay.

8 Kennels and runs. Castlehill and Rattar estate contained hill and moor land providing good game and sport. After the Traill family the house was bought by the Crum-Ewing family who continued to enjoy the game, fish and fowl the area offered.

9 Gamekeepers Cottage. Containing the gun room and accommodation for the ghillie or gamekeeper who would see to the gun-dogs and firearms.

10 Stables. Before motor vehicles arrived at the Big House, the stables would house the riding and driving horses necessary for transport. The stable man would live above the stable. In the early 1900s he was replaced by a chauffeur and the stables became the garages.

11 Coal and Lime shed. On the return journey the Castlehill schooners would bring coal and lime as cargos. Estate workers and tenants were obliged to purchase coal from the estate. James Traill imported lime from the Firth of Forth for building purposes and for fertilising the fields.

12 The former rear entrance to Castlehill House. All that remains of the mansion house which burned down in 1967 are two basement rooms on each side of the main gate way which is now all bricked up. During the war the RAF officers were billeted here and aviation fuel was stored in the basements. Later these spaces were used as storage for fishing gear.

13 Ice House. The grassy mound between the wall and the sea contains the remains of the ice house. Fish and other perishable goods would be stored here in ice collected in winter from nearby fresh water ponds.

14 The corn mill of Castlehill. Built by George Traill in 1819 it is one of the largest and most imposing mills and grain stores in the North. The corn mill was one in a succession of Traill enterprises, harnessing the water power of one stream—the Garth Burn—to operate a lint mill, barley mill and a thrashing mill. The path of the wooden mill lade on flagstone stilts is still visible.

