

MORISON'S HAVEN

by ANGUS GRAHAM, M.A., F.S.A., F.S.A. SCOT.

MORISON'S, or Acheson's, Haven lies less than a mile SW. of Prestonpans, to seaward of Prestongrange Colliery and Brick and Fireclay Works (NT 372738). It formerly served the sea-borne trade of the burgh, and of the local industries and coal-field.¹ In the eighteenth century it was held to be one of the safest harbours in the Firth.² It fell into disuse, however, after the first World War, land-reclamation has largely swallowed it up, and what remains of its pier is being battered to pieces by the sea. The time has come to write an obituary notice.

The story of the harbour begins in 1526, when the king gave Newbattle Abbey 'licentiam specialem unum portum in loco nuncupato Gilbertis-draucht infra dictas terras [i.e. de Prestoungrange] edificandi'.³ The grant was made 'quia piscatores super littus maris infra terras de Prestoun-grange . . . dampnum sustinuerunt, et ex ipsis quamplures tempestate in mari demersi sunt defectu boni portus'.⁴ The name Gilbertis-draucht suggests a fishery stance,⁵ no doubt lacking shelter for boats. When construction began is uncertain, but in 1541 the king confirmed the charter of 1526 together with one granted by the Abbey to Alexander Atkinsoun (Acheson), its 'servitor'⁶ and an indweller in Salt-Prestoun (Prestonpans), giving him in feu-ferme 'ripam vulgariter dictam Gilbert-draucht situatam infra fluxum maris, ad effectum fabricandi portum, et extendentem ad dimedietatem acre terrarum campestrium, pro navibus et cymbis locandis et hospitandis',⁷ and also another half-acre of adjoining garden or paddock, 'lie grene', for the necessary buildings. The harbour thus cannot have been large, as the Scots acre was only larger than the modern statute acre by about one quarter. Acheson was also allowed to build tide-mills inside the harbour.⁸

The name 'Acheson's Haven' thus seems to have been attached to the harbour from the first, and it is commonly used in later documents – as, for example, in 1587, when the Abbey properties were transferred to Mark, Lord Newbattle,⁹ or in 1617, when the lands and barony of Prestongrange were sold to Alexander Morison, advocate.¹⁰ 'Newhaven of Prestoun' was evidently used concurrently in the sixteenth century,¹¹ and 'Newhaven' is said to have survived until the beginning of the eighteenth.¹² 'Milhevin' is used as an *alias* in 1607.¹³ By 1698, however, the name of the new owners was evidently coming into use, as one document of that year calls the harbour 'Atcheson's haven' in the earlier manner¹⁴ while another adds '*alias* Morisons haven'.¹⁵

¹ Some facts about the trade of the harbour at different periods are given by Snodgrass, C. P., in *The Third Statistical Account of Scotland: the County of East Lothian* (1953), 210–13.

² *Stat. Acct.*, xvii (1796), 72.

⁴ *R.M.S.*, loc. cit.

⁶ This word may imply that the Abbey employed Acheson as manager of its Prestongrange property.

⁷ *R.M.S.*, 1513–46, No. 2362, p. 540.

¹⁰ *R.M.S.*, 1620–33, No. 331, p. 111.

¹² *Stat. Acct.*, xvii (1796), 72.

³ *R.M.S.*, 1513–46, No. 351, pp. 78 f.; *A.P.S.*, II, 312 f.

⁵ *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue*, s.v. Draucht, 6.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *A.P.S.*, III, 513a.

¹¹ *Ex. Rolls*, xviii (1543–56) to xxiii (1595–1600), *passim*.

¹³ *R.P.C.*, VII (1604–7), 671.

¹⁴ *A.P.S.*, X, 179b.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 180 a.

Further development of the harbour is not recorded until 1700, when William Morison of Prestongrange petitioned for an 'imposition' – perhaps a stent payable by neighbouring heritors or other interested parties¹ – 'for building an harbour at Morisons haven'.² The nature of Morison's work is not recorded, but the use of the word 'building', rather than 'repair' or 'extension', suggests something like wholesale reconstruction. Repairs were again undertaken in 1753, when the heritors obtained an Act imposing a local duty on ale, part of the proceeds of which were to be devoted to that purpose³; and further improvements were made and the size of the harbour was increased in 1875–7.⁴ A tide-mill was at work in 1796, grinding flint 'for the use of the potteries',⁵ which may or may not have been lineally descended from those mentioned in Acheson's charter; the name 'Milhevin' (*supra*) suggests a close connection between mill and harbour, but the 'sea-mills' mentioned between 1587 and 1622⁶ are described as 'adjacent' to the harbour and not, like Acheson's, as 'infra fluxum maris infra bondas dicti portus',⁷ and so may not in fact have been tide-mills at all. Nothing of the kind existed during the last phase of the harbour's life.⁸

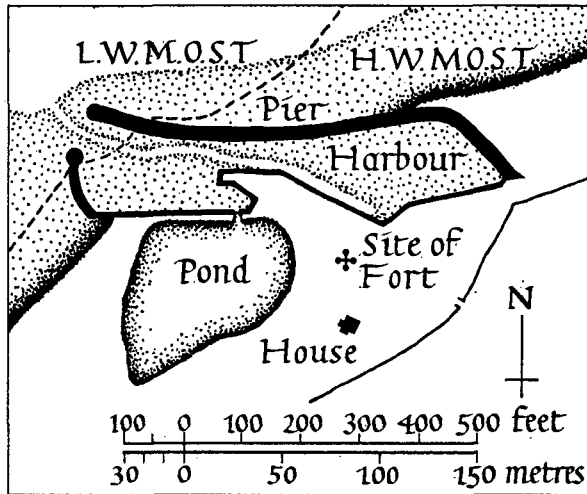


FIG. 1. Morison's Haven in 1913-14, after the O.S. 25-inch map. The interrupted line shows the present position of high-water mark, resulting from land reclamation

The only surviving plans of the harbour are those of the Ordnance Survey. The one revised in 1913-14⁹ shows that, in its final phase (fig. 1), the harbour measured about 720 ft. by up to 160 ft. internally, and covered an area of 1.974 acres.¹⁰ The

¹ For a parallel case see *R.P.C.*, 2nd series, VIII (1544-1660), 187.

³ *Stat. Acct.*, XVII (1796), 76 n.

⁵ *Stat. Acct.*, XVII (1796), 74.

⁶ *R.M.S.*, 1580-93, No. 1307, p. 443; 1609-20, Nos., 1704, p. 619 and 2126, p. 771; 1620-33, No. 331, p. 111.

⁷ *ibid.*, 1513-46, No. 2362, p. 540.

⁸ Information from Mr G. Russell, Prestongrange Colliery.

⁹ 1:2500 scale map Edinburghshire IV, 8, Haddingtonshire VIII, 5, ed. 1914; resurveyed 1893, revised 1913-14.

¹⁰ The figure of 4 acres given by *The North Sea Pilot*, pt. II, 5th ed. (1895), seems to be a simple error.

entrance was 70 ft. wide. The N. and NE. sides were enclosed by a stone-built pier, with mooring-posts and a crane, and at the W. end, S. of the entrance, by a short and slightly curved masonry barrier. At the end of this last there was a concrete base for a light. To the S. of the outer part of the harbour a large pond received water pumped out of the pit, and this was used for flushing silt out of the harbour. The greatest available depth does not seem to have exceeded 12 ft.¹

Of structure only the following remains survive. (i) The concrete base just mentioned, which clearly dates from the later nineteenth century. (ii) The curved southern pierhead, the outer face of which is visible for a length of some 50 ft. It is very well built, without mortar or metal cramps, of large, well-cut blocks measuring up to 3 ft. 9 in. by 5 ft. 1 in. on their faces, some of which are broached. The masonry (Pl. LVII:1) compares well with work of the later eighteenth century, and on this showing the pier-head might perhaps have been built or rebuilt with funds obtained by the heritors in 1753 (*supra*). (iii) The northern, or main, pier, the seaward stretch of which survives, though breached at high-water mark, for some 315 ft. The terminal of this, though now ruinous, stands higher than the rest (Pl. LVII: 2); it is rounded and seems to be an addition, but frequent repairs have obscured its structural history. The masonry is rougher than that of the southern side of the entrance, and many of the stones, which are a mixed lot, show broaching, punching or pick-marks. Facing-stones set as 'headers' extend as much as 4 ft. into a core of large rubble and boulders. The pier proper, where it joins this terminal, is of more regular construction, and on its outer side shows blocks measuring up to 4 ft. 3 in. on face, and a slight basal plinth. On the inner face the blocks are much less accurately cut and fitted, and, while their appearance (Pl. LVII: 3) may be partly due to exceptional weathering, they still suggest something other than a late eighteenth-century style. It is tempting to see in them evidence of work done by William Morison about 1700. This type of construction continues all along the inner side of the pier, one of the largest blocks measuring 4 ft. 1 in. by 1 ft. 8 in. by 11 in. Above the present high-water mark, where the pier has been breached by the sea, the outer face is invisible, being covered up with shingle, but its upper surface (Pl. LVII: 4) is clear for some 210 ft. (iv) The facing of the south-western side of the inner part of the harbour, visible for about 90 ft. This consists of large, well-cut blocks, stands about 10 ft. high and is heavily battered. In front of and above it are the remains of piles and staging, once parts of a wooden wharf at which cargoes of coal were loaded.² Behind it there is an embankment, apparently of earth and stones. This part of the harbour is probably of fairly recent construction.

In conclusion may be mentioned some miscellaneous facts which emerge from the earlier records.

The Ordnance Survey marks, near the head of the harbour (fig. 1), the site of what seems to have been a defensible building.³ In 1853 the minister of Prestonpans

¹ Information from Mr G. Russell.

² Information from Mr G. Russell. The remains of some similar wooden construction, shown in Pl. LVII: 2 disappeared from the end of the pier during the winter of 1962-3.

³ Name Book dated 1853 to Haddingtonshire Plan 8 D (East Lothian No. 37), p. 36. I am indebted for this information to Mr A. L. F. Rivet, M.A., F.S.A., the Survey's Archaeology Officer in Scotland.

informed the Survey's officers that this was built about 1547 by a certain John Acheson, serving in the Scots Guard in Paris and sent over by the King of France with a recommendation to Mary of Guise. The name Acheson, in such a close connection with Prestongrange, lends the report some credibility; but no evidence has been found to support either it or the associated story that Cromwell destroyed this 'fort' after the battle of Dunbar. The foundations could still be seen in 1853.

Customs were collected at Acheson's Haven from the outset. Alexander Acheson presented an account as *custumar* in 1542,¹ and the goods handled in 1544 are recorded as fish, hides, salt, tar and lead.² *Custumars'* accounts occur regularly in the sixteenth century; but in 1599 the *custumar* was put to the horn for failing to present accounts,³ and in 1602 Acheson's Haven appears in a list of unfree ports and ports having no *custumar*.⁴ Coal seems to have become an important article of export by 1624, as in that year the Commissioners for the Burghs complain of the 'havie hurt and prejudice that this our Kingdom sustenis by the exportatioune of coale, especiallie at the portis of Cockannie, Achesonis Heavin, Fisherrow and Mussilburgh'.⁵ The fear of a shortage, which lay behind this complaint, may well have been more natural than it seems today in view of the difficulty of keeping pits free of water with equipment which was still primitive.⁶

A village evidently existed at Morison's Haven, though the date of its origin is unknown. It is marked on Adair's map of 1682, and a glass-factory, which proved unsuccessful, was operating there in 1698.⁷ A weekly market and a yearly fair were authorised in 1701.⁸ A small two-storeyed house with crow-stepped gables and cavetto skew-puts, which stands just S. of the fort-site, is most probably a survivor from this village; it originally contained three storeys, but the lowermost one has been engulfed through the raising of the level of the ground.⁹

I desire to thank Mr J. Stevenson, formerly manager of Prestongrange Colliery, for facilities which he kindly gave me; Mr G. Russell, formerly foreman-joiner to the Colliery, and Mr W. Hepple, who supplied much local information; and Mr I. G. Scott, D.A.(EDIN.), F.S.A.SCOT., who prepared fig. 1.

¹ *Ex. Rolls*, xvii (1537-42), 458.

² *ibid.*, xxiii (1595-1600), 512.

³ *ibid.*, xiii (1622-5), 555, 844.

⁴ On this see National Coal Board, Scottish Division, *Scottish Coal-Mining Industry*, 40, 42.

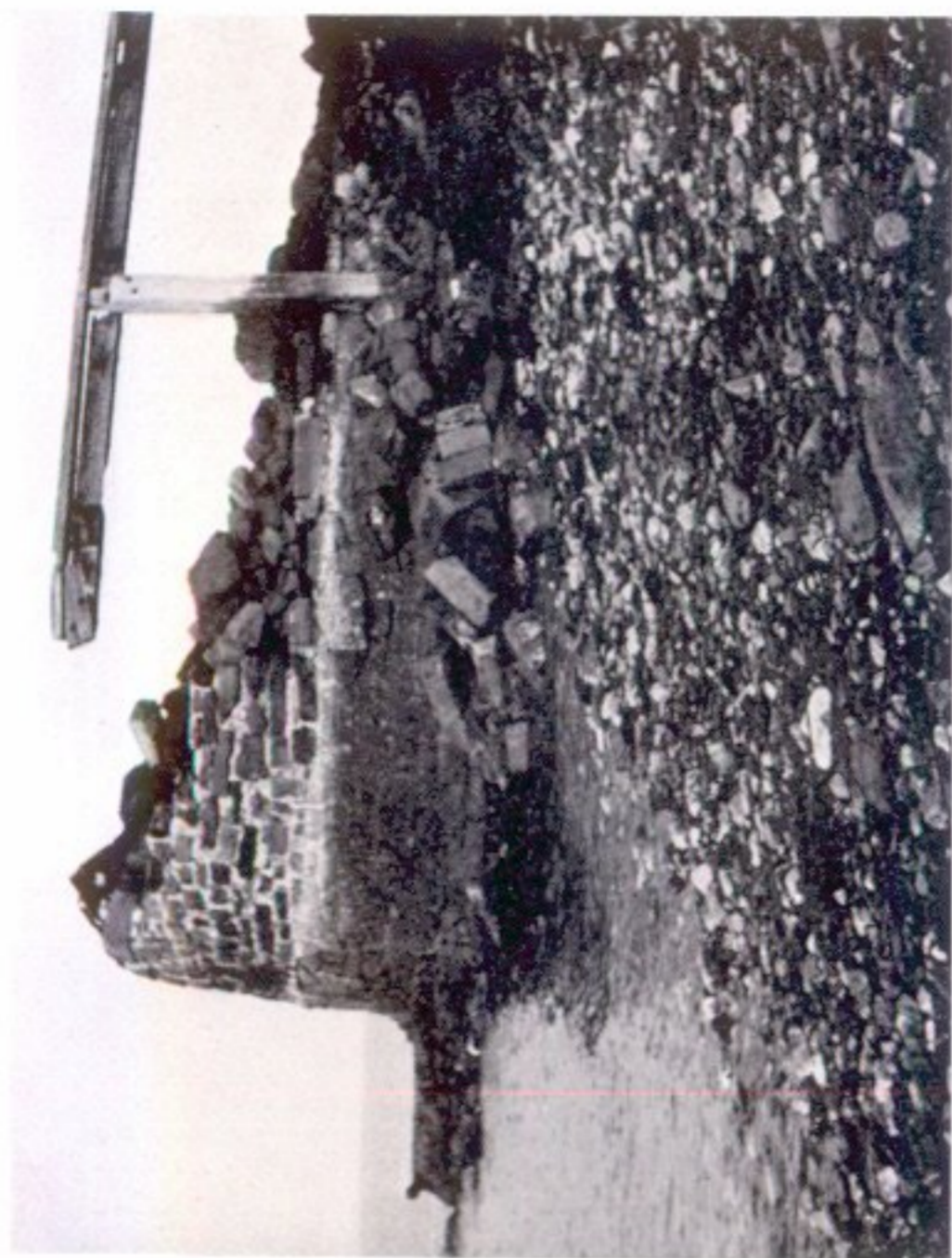
⁵ *A.P.S.*, x, 337 b.

⁶ *ibid.*, xviii (1543-56), 68.

⁷ *R.P.C.*, vi (1599-1604), 373.

⁸ *A.P.S.*, x, 179 b., 180 a; *Stat. Acct.*, xvii (1796), 67 n.

⁹ Information from Mr G. Russell.



2. Terminal of the main pier at low tide, from across the entrance



4. The main pier, from seaward



1. Masonry of the outer face of the southern pierhead



3. Masonry of the inner face of the main pier