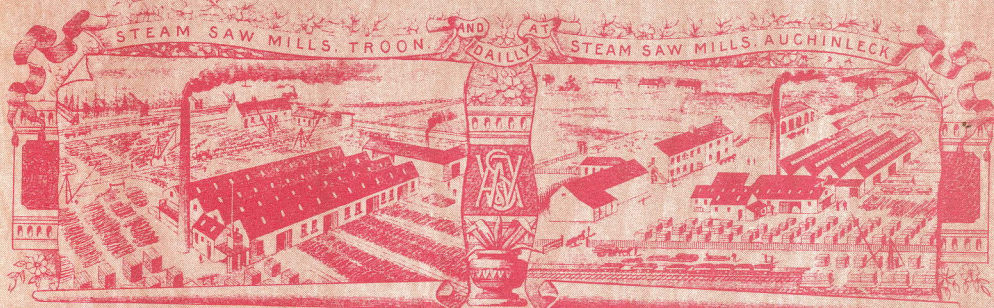


HARBOUR SAW MILLS.

**TROON** October, 1910.

Messrs. Campbeltown Coal Co. Ltd.,

Campbeltown.



**TO ADAM WILSON & SONS.**

**HOME & FOREIGN TIMBER MERCHANTS.**

TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS.  
WILSONS TROON  
TELEPHONE No 198.

Oct.	22.	To 110 Larch Boards : 2'6" x 7" x 7/8"							
		110 " " : 3'8" x 7" x 7/8"							
		= 43 8/9 Square yards	@	1/8d.	£ 3	13	2.		
		105 Larch Boards : 2'8" x 8" x 1"							
		= 20 6/9 Square yards	@	1/10d.	£ 1	17	11.		
		Carriage paid to Ayr; Freight to pay via Ayr.			£ 5	11	1.		
		<u>Wagon No. 13151.</u>							
		<i>Archibald Dunlop</i>							
		<i>Manager</i>							

AUDITED  
J & W. D. H.

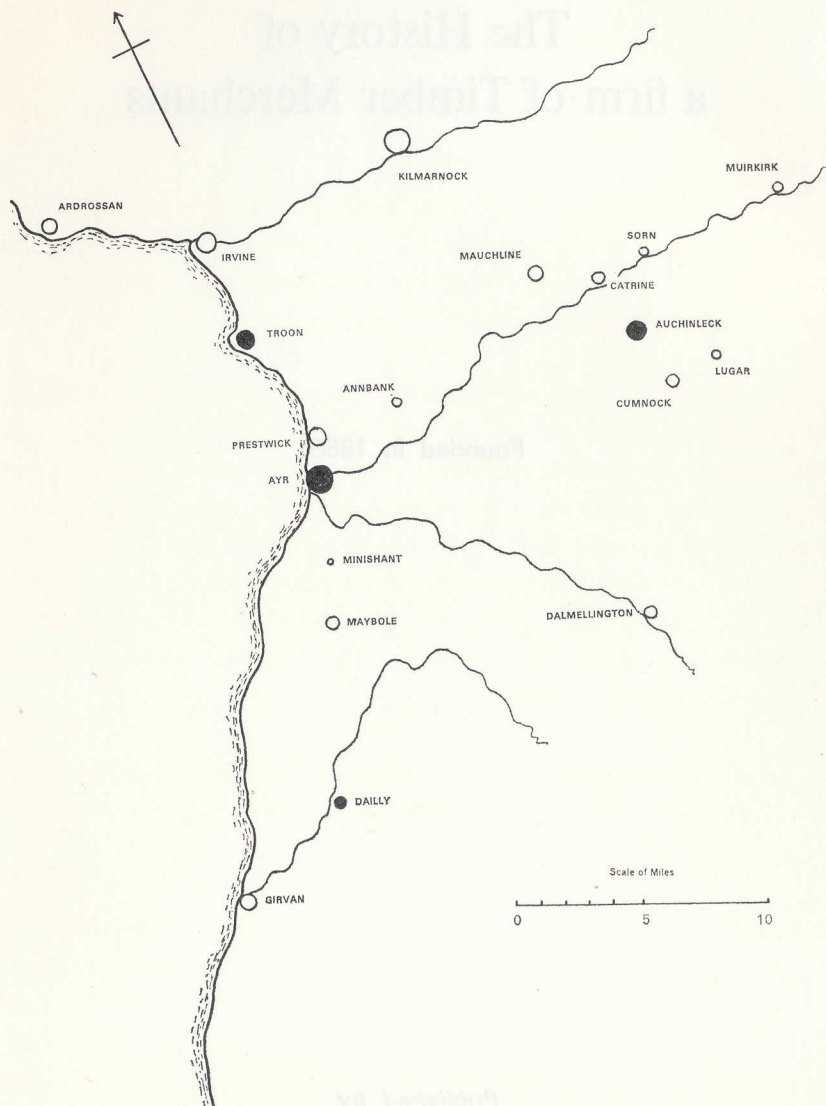


# ADAM WILSON & SONS

## The History of a firm of Timber Merchants

Founded in 1856

*Published by*  
ADAM WILSON & SONS LTD., Heathfield Road, AYR.  
1980.



## FOREWORD

I am happy to present this little account of our Company's history in the hope that it will be of some interest to all those associated with the Company, past and present; and perhaps also to students of local history.

In its preparation the principal part was taken by JOHN S. McCHESNEY, Dip., Ed., H., A.M.N. Inst. E., Graduate I.E.D. Mr McChesney devoted a great deal of time and effort examining the firm's records, seeking out information from knowledgeable persons, and collecting a great mass of relevant material which he assembled into a long and detailed chronicle of the firm's history and activities. This was edited for us by Mr John Mattock and arranged for publication by Dr John Strawhorn. To Mr McChesney and these assistants I offer my thanks.

For safe keeping and future research, the earlier records of the firm have been deposited in the Glasgow University Archives.

R. Finlay Wilson,  
Director.





The Founder  
ADAM WILSON

## I. FOUNDATION

Adam Wilson was born in 1823 in the village of Minishant, about four miles south of Ayr. His father, Gilbert, was a local stonemason, but some restlessness in his son's character caused him to try a number of trades before settling down for a time as a saw doctor with the Troon Shipbuilding Company. Working with timber was clearly to his taste, and in 1856 he took over a small sawmill at Sorn, in the valley of the River Ayr. Apart from the usual needs of the farming community — fencing, gates, carts and so on — the nearby Lugar Ironworks used spruce and Scots fir from the Sorn mill in forming moulds for pig-iron, and the extraction and transportation of the ore itself created a steady demand for a variety of woods. These Lugar Ironworks had been taken over — also in 1856 — by William Baird, the Lanarkshire ironmaster, and were extended as part of his vast exploitation of the iron and coal seams of central Ayrshire. It was clear to Adam Wilson that the future lay in the provision of 'pitwood.' Demand, and Adam's ambition, soon began to outstrip the capacity of the Sorn mill.

It was during the late 1850s and the 1860s, growing in prosperity, that he married and began to raise a family. His wife, Helen (the daughter of one 'Coachie' Bone) bore him four sons and four daughters, and as each son came of age he was required to help Adam in the furtherance of the family business, which in 1876 took them from Sorn to Auchinleck, where Adam set up a new and larger sawmill. Auchinleck, on the main railway line, was at the junction of a branch leading east to Lugar and Muirkirk Ironworks, with a network of mineral lines leading to every colliery. Adam Wilson's Auchinleck sawmill was conveniently and appropriately sited beside the railway, with its own siding for loading and unloading timber.

The Auchinleck mill was of a size and versatility by the 1880s to provide a wide range of woods — spruce, Scots fir, larch, elm, oak, ash — for a variety of applications. As well as supplying the ironworks, the collieries, the farms, and the Glasgow and South Western Railway Company, Adam Wilson had as customers the various manufacturers of the area. These included James Finlay's great Cotton Works at Catrine; George McCartney's of Cumnock, makers of threshing machines and other agricultural machinery for home and abroad; William Smith of Mauchline, widely renowned for his snuff-boxes and other fancy wooden ware. Then in an area of growing manufacturing villages, and with miners' rows being thrown up to house the immigrant colliers from Ireland and beyond, there was a steady market for building timber.

The equipment at the mill, including a band saw and planing and boring machines, was steam-driven, and for a while the problems of the business lay not so much in the securing of orders or the processing of the wood, as in the procurement of sufficient



timber in the round to keep the mill busy and the customers loyal (for at no time did Adam Wilson enjoy an absence of competition). For a number of years the chief sources of supply were the nearby estates of Auchinleck House and Dumfries House, but Adam and his two eldest sons, William and Gilbert, were compelled to search further and further afield as time went by for stands of timber that could be economically exploited and owners who were prepared to sell. There was frequently a strong resistance (some people are too canny for their own good) to the quite sincere and honest arguments of the would-be buyers: that over-crowded forest produces poor timbers, and that timely thinning of the trees protects, rather than diminishes, the value of the whole. It was a persuasive merchant indeed who could prevail upon a well set-up landowner to let the woodcutters in among his precious pheasant, partridge and deer.

The situation was somewhat eased — at least from the point of view of the timber industry — by Death Duty legislation, first introduced in 1889, extended in 1894, and made punitive by Lloyd George in 1909. A great number of landowners felt the pinch, and were forced, for fear of a series of quick successions that might spell the end of their family estates, to begin thinking of their holdings as commercial entities, and of themselves, to a small degree, as businessmen. The timber merchants, rather than approaching the men of property as petitioners, found themselves, in the late 1890s, welcomed, even courted, by landowners eager to sell standing timber at a fair price.

Meanwhile, the Ayrshire mineral fields were booming, creating ever-greater demand for pitwood, a side of the timber industry where profit margins are low, waste during machining is negligible and speed and efficiency of throughput are all-important. In the late 19th century, transport and communications in the upland areas east of Ayr were still developing, and as Adam Wilson and Sons bought up stands of timber more or less remote from their sawmill at Auchinleck, it became apparent that some alternative to the traditional sequence of felling, extraction, transportation, sawing and machining, stockpiling and dispatch must be found. The first 'country sawmills,' keystones of a system of working that was to characterise the company over the next few decades, began operating at this period. The logic was simple: a portable sawmill — one or two saws driven from the flywheel of a stationary engine (steam, in the early days), manned by a gang who had no objection to living in bothies — could do everything necessary to prepare a finished product for the customer at or near the spot where the timber was felled. The savings on handling and transport were considerable, particularly when the ultimate destination of the product was closer to the forest than Auchinleck. The average life of these country sawmills was a few months, after which they were dismantled and moved on to the next stand of timber. Early

locations recorded were Failford (near Mauchline), Dalgain Brae (at Sorn), and Auchlin (southwest of Cumnock).

Perhaps with an eye to the largely untapped resources of the forests well to the North — as far away as Oban and Inverness — and the freighting problems that inhibited their exploitation, a second conventional sawmill was established in 1888: the Harbour Sawmills at Troon. Certainly within a few years of its inception, chartered coastal 'puffers' were bringing timber to this mill, most conveniently placed by the quayside, from Adam Wilson's own country sawmills near Oban, Inverary and Benmore. In time of need, Troon also served as delivery point for wood bought in from other timber firms in all parts of Scotland. And later on Troon would become the headquarters of the firm.

In south Ayrshire, some twenty miles from Auchinleck, there was a heavy concentration both of available timber (Bargany, Dalquharran, Kilkerran and Blairquhan estates) and of customers (Maxwellton, Killochan and Dalquharran pits). In 1893, negotiations with Colonel J. C. Hamilton, Laird of Bargany Estate, secured for Adam Wilson a lease on the sawmill at Dailly. The mill was in disrepair, but it had another great attraction besides its position; it was water-powered from a dam and race on the Water of Girvan. Repairs and improvements were effected, and the Dailly sawmill prospered from the very start.

Auchinleck, with a railway-siding of its own, had an advantage that grew more telling as the increasing prosperity of the area persuaded the railway company to expand and improve their services. Auchinleck remained the headquarters of Adam Wilson and Sons, and during the 1890s, control of it passed to William, Adam's eldest son. Gilbert, the second, was made responsible for the Dailly enterprise, and David and James, the third and fourth, were installed at Troon.

Adam died in 1898, in Mauchline where he had made his home. He left behind him a well-established business, with considerable resources and a growing reputation.





Second Generation  
GILBERT WILSON

## II. SECOND GENERATION

There was no dispute over the succession, nor was there any move to increase the autonomy of the mills at Troon or Dailly. William was in charge, and Auchinleck was head office. It would not have been possible for William to oversee every detail of day-to-day running of the remote provinces of his empire, but all decisions affecting policy or pricing were made by him or at least cleared with him before implementation. The reasons for this centralised structure lay as much in William's dominating personality as in any principle of business, but it seems to have worked well enough. The company continued to grow after Adam's death, with little or no appreciable change of direction, bar a virtual cessation of the practice of buying-in from other firms when supplies had to be quickly augmented. In the second generation, William felt, Adam Wilson and Sons must be big enough to find all its own timber: by the turn of the century, there were no less than six country sawmills working out of Auchinleck. The only exception to the principle of self-sufficiency was the sub-contracting of felling work; and there was little choice in the matter. The work was extremely arduous, and the men capable of it preferred to work for a sub-contractor who undertook felling only, and was paid by the cubic measure of timber felled.

Although William guarded jealously his right to major policy decisions, he quickly built up a team of trustworthy and loyal lieutenants who could be relied on to carry out efficiently and honestly the often tricky work at the country mills. William became highly skilled at drawing up comprehensive agreements to cover every aspect of the work, from the best route and method for extracting the felled timber, and the location of workmen's bothies, to responsibility for repairs, and replanting after completion of the job.

The customers were the same as the company moved into the new century, and the sales records trace, year by year, the proliferation of collieries and, month by month, the rhythms of the agricultural calendar — repairs to rakes and hay-floats before harvest-time representing the seasonal peak for local joiners.

The company itself, in the first decade of the century, expanded and developed the joinery side of its operations at all three of the main mills. There was a healthy market for potato-seed boxes, and production lines were set up to turn them out by the thousand. Gates, step-stiles and turn-stiles were up for sale alongside the straightforward fencing-posts and flakes. For the company's own use, the joiners' shops began to produce Long-Carts and Timber-Wagons, and applied the experience thus gained to the construction of a variety of carts for the farming community. Day-trippers and holidaymakers from Glasgow, their numbers swelled by the improved rail network, became familiar in the early years of the



century with the horse-drawn ice-cream vendors' vans, which graced the greens and beaches of the area. Tailor-made for the job, with a deep U-shaped rear axle, and stowable shafts, they were produced at the Dailly workshop, and continued to dispense ice-cream, sweets and aerated waters until the advent of the motor-van.

Gilbert was in charge at Dailly from 1898 till 1905. It was a world of make-do-and-mend, of trial-and-error. While Henry Ford was changing the face of the manufacturing industries, Gilbert Wilson was grappling with the problem of the hecks — the gratings over the mill-race. Work was often held up when the saws stood idle during repairs to the water-wheels, which had been damaged by some heavy piece of water-borne debris. Solution — a more closely spaced grating. The gratings themselves were often broken, so a change was made from wooden to metal rods. Then, in the autumn, there was a new problem. Fallen leaves and twigs built up behind the gratings to form a natural dam, so reducing the flow of water. Solution — place an order at Burton's smithy for a strong, long-handled instrument with curved tines for clearing the debris. It quickly came to be known as the "heck-rake."

It was an honest world. In designing and building extra drying-sheds to cope with increased output, Gilbert paid scant attention to security; there were locks on the doors, but they were seldom used.

It was a world that moved at the tempo of horse and cart. Apart from occasional contracting out to Mr A. McGarva, all the transporting of felled timbers to the mill fell to the head carter, Jack Rowan, and his team of men and horses. And a team it was. The horses, Clydesdales and Suffolk Punches, were quite accustomed, naturally, to the less printable utterances of their masters, but they were well-attuned to the difficulties of handling clumsy carts, heavy chains, and irregular logs; the command "ease an inch" brought just that — an inch's relaxation of the traces as the horse backed up. And the story goes that the stables seldom needed cleaning, for at the end of a day's work, each horse returned, unaccompanied, to its night's shelter via the manure-heap. The carts they drew were of three main types. The 'pole-cart' was a four-wheeler, whose rear axle could be moved back and forth along the central pole to accommodate loads of varying lengths. The under-slung carts, or 'bummers,' had wheels about ten feet in diameter, and high arched axles, beneath which the largest logs could be lashed and drawn by a team of horses over quite rough terrain. And with the two-wheeled 'longwood cart,' the loading was an art in itself. The horse drew the cart alongside the first of two bundles of timber to be loaded, and was released from the shafts. The cotter-pin (as often as not secured by a bent nail) was removed from the hub of the wheel nearest the load, and the wheel allowed to topple outward. With the inside hub of the wheel acting as an anchor-point for the axle (which now, of course, sloped toward the load) the

horse was taken to the far side of the cart and caused to pull steadily on the chains which were looped about the timber. The timber rolled over the horizontal wheel and up the axle, at which point the horse's pulling-power was transferred to a chain affixed to the top rim of the loose wheel. As it came upright, it slipped back onto the axle, and was secured by the cotter-pin. The same process, in mirror-image, placed the second bundle of logs alongside the first, and the two were lashed together by a sort of tourniquet of chain. So the horse served both as tractor and loading-gear.

It was Gilbert who saw to the succession within the company, as his elder brother, William, had only daughters. Gilbert had married Elizabeth Thomson, who bore him ten children, nine of whom, including five sons, survived infancy. The family were well-known locally, and Gilbert's obituary, when he died in 1905, records him as having been active in the Freemasons, on the School Board, and in the running of local nursing facilities. His membership of the Parish Council gave him ample opportunity to voice his misgivings concerning the supply of gravitation water in Dailly. Braving accusations of priggery and vested interest, he warned that the demands of the sawmill and flush-toilets down one side of the main street were already enough, and that a move away from dry-closets on the other side of the street, or any appreciable increase in population, would over-tax the supplies. It is hard to know whether local respect for him increased when he was proved right.

The management of Dailly passed, in 1905, to a member of the third generation — Adam, son of Gilbert — and it was he who presided over the expansion and diversification of the southwestern operations. Gilbert had, in the seven years of his rule, seen to it that all his sons were given a thorough grounding in every aspect of the business, and as they grew up they witnessed the shaping of the Dailly mill into a form which would make the most of its great natural asset — free water power. From the age of 18 to 25 this was the world in which young Adam served his 'apprenticeship.'

All the sons Gilbert left spent at least some time in the timber business. Young Adam was the most active, and he enjoyed the support, at Dailly, of a number of experienced and loyal staff. Apart from Jock Rowan the carter, Alex McCreadie, Davy Hopson, John Eagleson, John Fulton and W. Scobie all deserve mention. His brother, John Wilson, second son of Gilbert, was despatched in 1913 with two other company stalwarts, David Ross and James Hearton, to set up a Wilson's outpost in Southern Ireland, to the north west of Cork. Based in Birr, they established several small sawmills in the district (the Ghelt and Kinnety among them). Their purpose, it seems, was not to develop the business as a trading concern — Ireland, a net mineral importer, has no use for pitwood, and the run-down agriculture of the country at that time provided a poor market for fence-posts and general joinery supplies — but



rather to exploit the timber resources and ship wood home, in the round, for further processing back in Ayrshire. A diverting enough adventure, no doubt, with David Ross rapidly achieving the status of Local Character, with his pony-and-trap and bowler hat, but for a number of reasons it remained no more than an experiment. Difficulties of transport were not easily overcome, and it was just at this time that expansion of the felling and milling in the north west of Scotland was ensuring healthy supplies via the harbour at Troon, so rendering less attractive the Irish resources. Finally the men were brought home when it became apparent to all that the venture had no prospect of success. In the allocation of shipping, war essentials and foodstuffs took priority over timber that might, or might not, be marginally cheaper than the home-grown product. And at home, attention was shifted perforce from ice-cream vans to ammunition boxes.

### III. FIRST WORLD WAR

The most important single effect of the First World War on the timber industry at large was the degree of control exercised over all its doings by the Ministry of Supply; the freedom to respond to market opportunities, technological change and availability of resources which had characterised the first decades of the company's existence went by the board.

When war broke out, the structure of Adam Wilson and Sons had changed little since the death of its founder sixteen years before. The three mills, at Auchinleck, Dailly and Troon, were of more or less equal importance in terms of turnover (although the letter-paper in use from 1910 omits the mill at Dailly from its heading), and the whole was controlled by William at Auchinleck. A number of anecdotes survive concerning William Wilson at this period, and are generally illustrative of a forceful nature embellished with a dour sense of humour.

For the former: one day he had been given the wrong time for a train back to Auchinleck from Annbank, where he had been inspecting a stand of timber, and missed the train by some four minutes. Rather than fly into a wasteful temper, he set out to walk home, with the line: "Four minutes? Ah, well. If it takes as long to go back as it did coming, I'll be there as soon as it."

And the humour: once his chief sawyer failed to turn up, and, as was his habit on such occasions, he took off his coat and set to work himself. The 'tail-ender' or 'drawer,' whose job it was to receive the cut wood, and so was compelled to keep pace with William, found himself being worked much faster than usual. "Mr Wilson," he said, "if you go on at this rate I shall be half-dead by dinner-time." William immediately adjusted the saw to cut planks instead of the stobs they had been running off. When the worker asked him why, he said, "Well, if you're going to be half-dead by dinner-time, we can expect you dead by tea-time, so maybe we should cut your coffinwood the noo." (Some versions of the story give 'Black Bob,' a cousin of William's, as the 'drawer').

He can never have found it less than irksome to work to any schedule not of his own making, but that is exactly what was required of him by the Ministry of Supply for the duration of the Great War. The war effort required increased metal production, which required greater output of fuel and ores from the mines, which in turn required more pitwoods — none of which could come, as before, from overseas. Nor could the usual volume of foodstuffs, so the farmers had to work harder, and they needed more tools, carts and fence posts. And, of course, as a more direct consequence of the war, timber producers all over the country were called on to supply the wherewithal for barracks, gun-platforms, artillery stores, digging tools, rifle butts, tent poles, tent pegs, duck-boards, ships' decks and stretchers. Whether the timbers



were ordered directly by the Ministry, or simply with the Ministry's approval, the Ministry it was who issued licences to cover every step from cutting down the tree to selling the wood.

Of course, these circumstances obtained for the industry as a whole, not only for William Wilson. The firm he directed was, in fact, knocked less badly off course than were some others in the business. Certainly there was less freedom than previously in the quantities of timber cut and sold, but this was hardly cause for complaint since the effect of the war was to increase demand in the areas in which the company had traditionally traded. The products stayed much the same and so, essentially, did the customers. Any schemes for expansion or diversification were shelved for the duration, however, partly for reasons of government control and partly because, with a steadily rising call-up age, the company was finding itself seriously short-handed.

Many, indeed, did not wait for call up. One John Fulton, after some months work at Auchinleck and at a country sawmill, went to Ireland with John Wilson, James Hearton and David Ross, and on their return promptly volunteered, with a number of his mates, in November 1914. He fought for nearly three years until he was twice wounded in 1917 — first a bullet wound in his elbow, then a piece of shrapnel that spelt the end of his war. After recuperation, he rejoined the company to work under James Wilson, son to Gilbert, at Alton Albany, near Dailly. His story is typical of the period; at the time of research, he was living still in Dailly, and still carrying a piece of shrapnel.

To help him guide the company through difficult times, William had a number of trusted employees who were also friends, notably John McMillan and Alex Mitchell, who had a hand in the running of the Auchinleck sawmill. A third, John Ferguson, had been a ship's engineer until he met William at Troon in 1891 while the latter was running the mill there for his father. William took him on as a maintenance man in the Troon mill, and he was ultimately recognised as the company's saw doctor, travelling from mill to mill putting the equipment to rights. His friendship with William might well have been based on a shared sense of humour. One day, it seems, a friend brought him a double-handed cross-cut saw for sharpening and setting. It was a highly-skilled operation involving many well-regulated blows of a shaped hammer to set every tooth of the saw to the same angle. A piece of wood placed beneath the blade's edge permitted the teeth to bend. The job done, John Ferguson said he would charge sixpence. "Sixpence for a friend?" the other asked. "For a friend," said John, placing the saw on the bare anvil, "here are six extra strokes and I shall charge you nothing." And with six blows of the flat of the hammer he rendered the saw useless again.

John Ferguson ultimately married William's sister Elizabeth, and was to play an increasingly important role in the affairs of the

company in post-war years, when there was a considerable re-organisation of the management.

The re-organisation was made necessary by the death of William Wilson in June 1918 at his home, Larchville, a villa in Auchinleck. The local newspaper, The Cumnock Chronicle, recorded the 'Close of an Industrious Life' in a long obituary:

Seldom has our village experienced such a shock as it did on Monday evening when the news went round with startling suddenness that Mr William Wilson of Larchville had passed away after an illness of only an hour's duration. A large company had assembled at the Bowling Green for the first night's programme of the local Red Cross Week effort, in the arranging of which Mr Wilson, as chairman of the committee, had taken an important part. Mr Wilson was one of the skips and was giving instruction to a lady player when he was seen to stagger. Realising that something was wrong, he was assisted to a seat and there he rested a little. He decided to walk to his home, which was only a short distance away, and willing hands assisted him, but although Dr McQueen was in attendance at the earliest possible moment, he passed away in a very short time.

It is certain that no man, who has passed away from our village in recent years, in truth for many many years, will be so much missed. Looking back over a period of years in the life of our village, one finds that Mr Wilson played a leading part in most of its affairs.

The report goes on to talk of William's work since 1888 on the Local School Board, as chairman of the Parish Council, as representative to the Kyle Union Poorhouse, on the County Road Board and Licensing Board, as a successful chairman of the local Gas Lighting Company, as a director of the Picture House, as an Elder of the Established Church, as a precentor at services, and as prime mover in the Freemasons' Lodge, the Silver Band, and the Bowling Club.

In addition to all this local activity he was at the same time one of the most active commercial men in the West of Scotland. Under his guiding influence the small saw-mill business of his father has extended to one of the largest in the country. Under his direct supervision no fewer than twelve sawmills are working throughout Scotland, from as far north as Oban and scattered throughout Ayrshire, Argyllshire, Dumfries and other southern countries . . . Close on a hundred horses and a small army of men . . . for a time he filled the post of president of the Timber Association of Scotland . . . he was not infrequently called over the border into England to act as arbitrator in timber disputes involving large sums of money and his advice has often been asked for to assist the Timber Commissions and Controllers.



Early in his career William Wilson married Miss Annie Ramsay, daughter of the late Wm. Ramsay of Ballochmyle Smithy and a most worthy helpmate she proved to be. In 1907 Mr and Mrs Wilson celebrated their Silver Wedding . . . To Mrs Wilson and her family of six daughters the sincerest sympathy is extended by the whole district . . . Two of the daughters are married; two are school teachers; one a music teacher and one a nurse, who sailed for France only last Friday.

The Timber Association of Scotland referred to, had William Wilson as its first president. More properly termed 'The Home Grown Timber Merchants' Association of Scotland,' it was formed on October 13th, 1897. Its historian, Sydney T. Campbell, notes:

The Members . . . must have been more litigious than those of today, as there were constant calls on the funds to assist in the defence of Actions at the instance of Landowners for breaches of contract, and Local Authorities for damage to roads by extraordinary traffic.

There seems to be little doubt that the undue number of these calls for assistance brought the Association's activities to a temporary end in 1909, when at the Annual Meeting it was resolved to wind up. (By which time one John Cameron was president).

Fortunately, however, the Association was resuscitated in November 1912, and there was time for a re-organisation (under William Wilson again) before the outbreak of the 1914 war. Those who remember that catastrophe and the awful denudation of our woodlands which then took place will appreciate just how important the role of the Association was during that terrible time.

So when the war ended, Adam Wilson and Sons was without its guiding spirit, and the source of its livelihood, the forests, had suffered an "awful denudation."

#### IV. NEW PROSPERITY

During the summer of 1919, a circular was prepared for distribution to all interested parties in the district — staff, customers, suppliers and the like — giving details of the changes in Adam Wilson and Sons occasioned by the depredations of the war and the death of William. The company would henceforward be a Limited Company, with the following listed as shareholders: Adam, John, James, and 'Bert' (sons of the late Gilbert); William (son of David); John Ferguson (brother-in-law to the late William); and Alex Mitchell (the late William's right-hand man at Auchinleck). There were omissions within the surviving family; in the third generation of such an enterprise it is hardly surprising to find a dilution of interest — sons, brothers and cousins who prefer either to take a passive role in the company's affairs, remaining perhaps a simple employee (Black Bob the sawyer being a case in point), or to make their own way in a quite different field of endeavour. Adam Wilson, as the oldest son of the third generation and its most experienced manager, was to emerge naturally over ensuing years as virtual head of the company, and natural successor to William. John Ferguson was put in charge of the office at Auchinleck, the company's head office, which, in August 1919, was removed to Troon. (The official address from that time was 'Harbour Sawmills, Troon'). Alex Mitchell, with his close colleague John McMillan, was left virtually in control of the Auchinleck branch. Adam, James and Gilbert were based in Dailly, and John and William in Troon, where David, brother to old William, continued to give the benefit of his long experience as yard manager.

Relatively complex as this management structure was, there is no sign in the company records of the early twenties of anything but fruitful co-operation among the branches and departments. A greater burden of administrative work was unavoidable, given the concerns and controls of the Forestry Commission — post-war incarnation of the Office of Forests — which, discovering the dangerous degree to which the woodlands had been over-cropped, instituted a programme not only of licensing and conservation, but of land acquisition and re-forestation. And quite apart from the externally-imposed paper-work this brought, the internal bureaucracy of the company burgeoned, as it became increasingly important for the right hand to know what the left hand was doing. A dip into the files of the period gives an indication of the scope, scale and nature of operations.

A letter from the Troon office to Dailly sawmill, 24th March, 1923:

For: Wm. Baird & Co., Ltd.  
Iron Works Muirkirk, L.M.S. Railway.

1 wagon pit sleepers 3'3" x 5" x 2" wanted very urgently — hope you can dispatch these soon. We sent you order today for same delivery as above for 800 joint-sleepers 3'6" x 6" x 2½". You can make two



wagons of these two orders, sending some of each size in each consignment, which will keep them working.

Signed

John Ferguson.

And on the same day, to the customer, Wm. Baird & Co., Ltd.:

Dear Sirs,

Many thanks for your esteemed order of 23rd inst . . . loaded today . . . a second wagon will follow . . .

J.F.

A 24-hour response time, an understanding of the customer's needs — to 'keep them working' — faith in the ability of the Dailly mill to comply with the request, and the support of a highly efficient postal system and rail network!

Post-war construction was proceeding apace, including work on Girvan Harbour, which generated an order in March 1925 for quantities of: 12" x 12" Walings and cope not exceeding 25ft.; 12" x 6" Cope; 9" x 4" Planking; and 12" x 1½" Cleats. The timber, in a mixture of pitch pine and elm, was shipped on the coaster 'Lythe' within a month. The coasters remained important, both for bringing unworked timber from the North, and for delivering to further-flung customers, including, still, many collieries and ironstone workings. A shipment by the S.S. Rinaldo, for example, was divided among the Summerlee Iron Co., United Collieries, Dalmellington Iron Co., and Ballieston of Tannochside Collieries.

The company was frequently consulted for expert advice on many matters, ranging from recommendations for a reliable fencing contractor (" . . . Mr Thomas Ferguson . . . who does most of our fencing, . . . is a thorough, practical man") to a ruling on a point of litigation over the measurement of heavy oak ("From our experience we would consider timber lying for six months after being cut would run, say, 24 cu. ft. per ton").

The old pre-occupation of finding stands of timber and tying up the legal details was still there in June 1925:

. . . offer of £650 for nine lots on farm of Longmorant, conditions to be arranged on word of offer being accepted.

Signed,

A. Mitchell.

The conditions, as usual, included allocation of responsibility for making good the damages to fences and roadways inevitable during the operation of a country sawmill. Such mills were very active in the early 1920s, and the records are scattered with Ayrshire names like Dalgain Brae, Auchlin, Darnconner Row, Lovestone, Bargany, Kilkerran, Blairquhan, Killochan, Penkill, Auchincruive, Sundrum; and Port Tallon, Taynult, and Minard further afield. Huge quantities of timber were handled, but occasionally an order arrived which compelled the Wilson management to buy in from other concerns.

One such came from an old established customer, the Lugar Iron Works Collieries, on 12th June, 1925:

		Pieces
Peeled larch	4" — 10' to 18' average length	7,500
	5" — 10' to 12' average length	13,000
	5" — 8' to 10' average length	45,000
	5" — 18' to 20' average length	7,500
	5" — 20' to 24' average length	11,000
Slabbed crowns	10' x 5" x 2½"	320,000
Sleepers	3'3" x 5" x 2½"	12,500

However, the late William's philosophy of self-sufficiency lived on, and every effort was made, in all but exceptional cases, to supply all orders from the company's own resources.

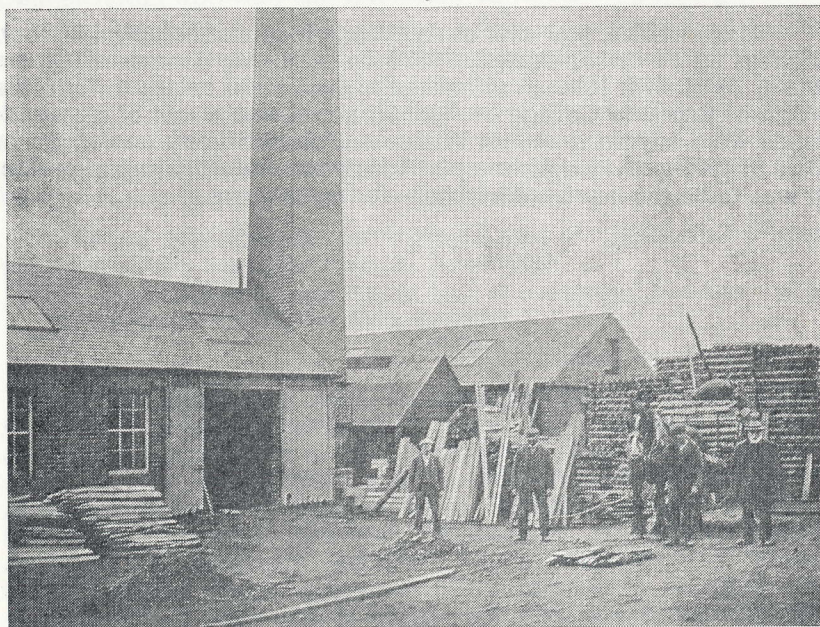
Increasing mechanisation helped, with electric motors and caterpillar tractors making their first appearances, and shrewd purchasing of standing timber placed the company in a strong position by the middle of the decade. The management ranks had been swollen by John Fulton (not the same as the wounded Great War soldier), who was expert in assessing the value and quality of woodland, and by Robert and John Ferguson, sons of the old saw-doctor, who had come into the company after the war and been trained by their father, serving their time at country sawmills, including those on the large Auchincruive estate.

Auchincruive, just east of Ayr, has a long and colourful history, leading up to its purchase in 1925 by John M. Hannah of Girvan Mains farm. Mr Hannah gifted the mansion and estate to form the West of Scotland College of Agriculture. Large tracts of its woodlands were offered to Adam Wilson and Sons and an agreement of Sale in 1926 provided for the purchase price and a sharing of profits. It was to be the last large purchase for some years.





At Dailly . . .



. . . and at Auchinleck

## V. THE DEPRESSION

The miners' strike of 1921 may well have been taken as a warning sign, but it did little to hinder the expansion of Adam Wilson and Sons. On the contrary, many pit bosses took advantage of the brief respite from coal production to see to some overdue repair and maintenance work on surface installations, and the Wilson books were full of orders for timbers outside their common run of production.

It was a different story, however, in 1926. The General Strike closed many pits for good, through flooding, collapse, or because the scant remaining seams did not justify their re-opening. In the early weeks and months, the company tried to ride the thing out by stock-piling against happier days, but worse were to come. Apart from the collieries, the great mainstay had always been local iron companies, and the arrival on the market of cheap iron ore from Spain and Sweden closed a chapter in local industrial history. The Muirkirk Ironworks closed down in 1923 and Lugar followed in 1928. The striking coal-miners, whiling away their days at quoits, were joined by redundant workers from the iron works and, inevitably, workers laid off by the timber companies.

The records make depressing reading.

To would-be vendors of standing timber:

. . . Trade here at present is such that will warrant us not buying . . . if there is any improvement we shall communicate with you.

To erstwhile customers:

We are presently rather hard up for work to keep our horses busy at Minishant. If you can conveniently take a wagon of coverwood we would feel obliged.

To the newspapers:

Please insert the following advertisement in the next three issues of the Ayrshire Post at pre-paid rate and oblige.

For Sale: larch stack-props, potato-boxes, field-gates, flakes, etc., Apply Adam Wilson & Sons, Troon.

And to a local joiner:

With reference to our letter of 26th July offering joiners shop at Auchinleck Sawmill at £20 per annum, we are surprised you have made no reply . . .

As part of the retrenchment deemed necessary to survival, the mill at Auchinleck, birthplace of the company, was being wound down. John Ferguson resigned with honour in 1928, after thirty-seven years' service, and John McMillan was left to oversee the



dispersal of men, horses and equipment and the shutting-down of the plant. In 1930, Alex Mitchell resigned and William Wilson died, leaving a telling gap in the management of Troon, which had been selected by the board as the most advantageously located mill and the focus of greatest attention in troubled times. Adam, who had been working happily and successfully at Dailly, with a brief to phase it out gradually over a period of years (the communications and transport problems there had never really been solved), began to commute by motor-car to Head Office at Troon, and took his place, as eldest brother and chief shareholder, at the helm of a company which, by now, was much slimmed-down and less complex than in its recent boom period. The two Ferguson sons, Robert and John, had left the company at the same time as their father.

(As a sidelight on the close interweaving of family and business concerns: in 1931, the three Fergusons, father and sons, took over the Tam's Brig Sawmills in Ayr from McGregor and Sons. Their partner in the venture was a certain William Wilson — no relation — who had worked as secretary to William Alexander's Sawmills, a company whose fate, as we shall see, was bound up with that of Adam Wilson and Sons. Just as John Ferguson Senior had set the seal on his association with the Wilsons by marrying William Wilson's sister years before, so this other William Wilson married Helen Ferguson, sister to Robert and the younger John).

The last Auchinleck connections died, in 1930, with Annie Ramsay Wilson, who had survived her husband by twelve years. Her home, Larchville, is now the Manse of Auchinleck Parish Church, and the old sawmill buildings, after a chequered history, still stand between the Bowling Green and the Railway. Although only four of her nephews, Adam, John, James, and Bert, remained as shareholders (David by this time having given up his shares, if not his interest in the company's doings), Adam felt that four brothers still spelt 'top heavy' management in a company that was hard put to it to survive, let alone thrive. In August 1931 he offered to buy out the other three. Quite what the outcome was is difficult to determine, as all continued to sign company documents, yet only Adam and James appear thereafter on the company's official stamp. All three certainly continued to work, however — James at country sawmills around Dailly, John at Auchincruive, and Bert at Dalquharran. David was running a sawmill at Mollance in Kirkcudbrightshire.

1932-33 was the low spot in the company's fortunes, and all were grateful for a trickle of orders for cattle shows, poles for leading in electricity after completion of the Galloway hydro-electric scheme, the occasional bridge for improving roads, coach-building, furniture-making and so on. Such varied business, although a great help to the company and interesting in its diversity, was no substitute for the big customer with steady

requirements, and there was no question of a return to full-capacity production until such a customer could be found.

By the middle of 1933, Adam was restarting some of his workmen in response to a large order from the Post Office Stores for telegraph poles, cross-arms, cattle-guards and finials. Among those happy to be back at his old job again ('among the Silvers') was John McMillan, grandson of the John McMillan who worked so closely with William Wilson at Auchinleck. He had joined the company in 1925, at the age of 14, and worked at many of the country sawmills until, from 1931, he was forced to count himself lucky to be driving a bread-van. After his return to the fold, he spent many years with the company in positions of increasing responsibility.

Adam himself was finding the responsibility too much to mix with a daily journey of so many miles, and even as he wrote to a supplier, in September 1933, "... we have now rounded the bend and we are hoping for better times in the future," he was planning to move from Dailly to a place closer to his work.





Third Generation  
ADAM WILSON

## VI. RE-EMERGENCE

Adam Wilson was a local figure in the tradition of his father Gilbert and uncle William. He had been at Dailly sawmill since the age of 18, and in charge since his father's death in 1905. His active participation in village life, from the Annual Flower Show to the Working Men's Club, earned him a civic farewell in November 1933, once he had announced his intention to move away from Dailly. With his wife, Jean Arthur Logan, and his two sons Adam ('Tim'), 21, and Robert Finlay, 19, he set up home in Barns Crescent, Ayr.

Tim was already working in the Troon office, and Finlay was busy with a firm of accountants and stockbrokers in Glasgow. Prospects for the business were good, and with many pits re-opening, Adam and his brothers, together with a new generation of trusted lieutenants, Robert Ewen and William McGhee among them, were again on the alert for attractive purchases of standing timber. The list grew: Daljarrack, Pinmore, Glendoune, Ochiltree, Craigbrae, Tongland, Quashats and Crawfordton. The jewel in the crown was Dalquharran.

The researcher for this company history, Mr John S. McChesney, wrote of Dalquharran in the Ayr Advertiser, 8th March 1973:

Set in a very pleasing corner of the southern part of our county rests the quiet and compact little village of Dailly. It runs along the south-east bank of the River Girvan, which at this point is quite a sizeable stream as Ayrshire rivers go and is capable of holding some of the finest of the much sought-after seasonable salmon and sea-trout. The fairly wide Main Street runs almost parallel to the river bank and some 300 yards away on the further bank, on a commanding promontory, stands what is left of the Castle of Dalquharran, while further down and nearer to the river's edge, we find the ivy-clad scanty remains of "old Dalquharran Castle" . . .

The estate of Dalquharran was large, and well wooded with a variety of trees of excellent quality. The company had been buying trees piecemeal from the estate for some years, but in 1935 they bought it up lock, stock and barrel — castles, gardens and standing timber. Work started immediately on felling and extraction, with the blessing of the Forestry Commission, who were satisfied with Adam's assurances that a comprehensive re-afforestation programme would soon be under way. The responsibility for instituting the scheme was to be his son Finlay's.

Finlay had acquired in Glasgow financial skills that were to prove useful to the company after his arrival there. He quickly got to grips with his first major project. That re-afforestation was commercially viable he was convinced: given enough land of the right sort for a long enough period (owned by the company, in



other words), the technical and financial problems were surmountable. 300 acres lying behind the 'Old' and 'New' castles seemed ideal, and in 1936, Finlay purchased them from his father for £1,500 (about £50,000 at today's prices). The seedlings were brought on in the old kitchen-gardens and formal park, and then transplanted to the hillsides beyond. Considering that it was in an area of endeavour quite new to both the management and the workers, the venture was remarkably trouble-free. This plantation now forms part of the company's forest estates.

The family suffered a personal set-back during 1926, with the deaths of Finlay's mother and Uncle David (Adam's wife and brother). The double blow was bitter, and for a period the business was adversely affected. When the mourning was over, however, the men re-applied themselves with vigour, and the company reached new heights of prosperity and prestige. Quite apart from the re-afforestation programme, the trading side of the company was dealing in matters as diverse as the export of poplar to Sweden and the import of jarrah from Australia. Then, in 1938, Adam himself died, quite unexpectedly, at the age of 58.

The difficulties of a change in leadership — Tim and Finlay taking over with support and encouragement from their three surviving uncles — were somewhat less than those experienced during the handover in the previous generation. This is not to say that Adam was in any way less important to the company and to the family than was Gilbert, but the degree of delegation of responsibility he had permitted, once he had steered the business through the slump, meant that his sons and heirs were well equipped to carry on without him.

Indeed, a whole new area of growth seemed to be opening up. Ayr County Council and the town councils of the burghs were all engaged in a programme of house building and other major projects. There was intense competition to secure valuable local authority contracts. Also in the thirties there was extensive building of private houses in all the Ayrshire coastal towns. As the housing estates sprang up, and the towns, particularly Ayr, expanded, additional developments — garages, shops, cinemas — became necessary, and here too there were rich pickings for timber merchants who chose to concentrate on the building supplies aspect of the business. At the same time the coal industry was reviving. In 1931 Bairds and Dalmellington Ltd. was formed (a combine of two former major iron companies) and began to develop more fully coal production in central Ayrshire.

Adam Wilson and Sons was enjoying its share of this expanding trade, and the management was even contemplating a shift of emphasis away from the pits, in favour of construction, when once again external circumstances brought a halt, or at

least indefinite suspension, to all such plans. Any business, of course, can be studied as a barometer of national fortunes, but this is particularly true of those in the primary sector — agriculture and the exploitation of natural resources. At times of national belt-tightening, of enforced self-sufficiency, the effects are felt first by those who work with raw materials, which become, overnight, much more precious than before the crisis. So it was in 1939, and Adam Wilson and Sons was not exempt.





Fourth Generation  
FINLAY WILSON

## VII. STATE CONTROL AGAIN

Lessons learnt in the 1914-18 conflict stood the company, and the industry at large, in good stead when war was declared again; whatever the strategies of the generals, wherever the fronts were drawn, however the battles themselves were fought, the effects on the timber industry in Scotland were likely to be similar. A virtual cessation of supplies from overseas, growing problems of manning, and absolute government control of what was cut and when and where and to whom sold and at what price — all of these burdens were at least familiar and so, perhaps, less daunting.

The first gap in the company's ranks was caused by the departure on active service of Finlay Wilson himself. He came home for a year or so from 1941 to work a while on the production of timber for war purposes and the continuing afforestation of Dalquharran. He was now living at Fullarton House, Troon, with his wife, Johanna Galle, whom he had married just before the war. Then he returned to war service, till his discharge in 1946. Meanwhile Tim was supervising the work of the firm, which was virtually all undertaken at the behest of the Board of Trade.

Some comfort was to be taken from the establishment in war time of commercial contacts which might bear fruit later. Typical was the supply contract, which the company was required to fulfil, with Greenock Dockyard and Fairfield Shipbuilding and Engineering Co. Ltd. It serves also as an example of the extent of Ministry control. Every invoice, instruction and account bears the number of the licence issued by the Ministry of Supply (Area 12, 29 Park Circus, Glasgow), and the company was even told which haulier to use — one P. Duncan. Nor were relations with the bureaucrats always friendly. From the beginnings of the state of emergency, sawmills were ranked according to the demands likely to be made on them directly in connection with the war effort, with rates of pay pegged accordingly. Despite the proximity — 100 yards — of the Troon mill to the waterfront, from 1939 to 1946 it stayed a 'Town' mill, although Finlay and Tim tried time and again to have it upgraded to the more lucrative 'Port' mill category.

Most initiatives were stifled, if not by direct ministerial intervention, then by the much increased circumstantial difficulty of getting ideas off the ground. For some time the brothers had been toying with a scheme to exploit the so far virtually untapped forests of the Isle of Arran, across the Firth of Clyde from Troon. Considerable correspondence from the 1940-43 period still exists, and the story it tells is of short supplies of everything bar determination. The stands of timber were roughly valued and found to be well worth felling if the transport problem could be solved — and that proved to be the bugbear. Any labour-intensive method was ruled out, and anyway the coastal puffers



were reserved for work more obviously essential than this. The idea of rafting the logs and towing them across the Firth by Railway company tug seemed attractive, and great efforts were made to find men skilled in the techniques, a supplier of chains, and officials sympathetic enough to grant the necessary transport subsidies. The final barrier proved to be the location of a foundry with sufficient spare manufacturing capacity to produce, at an economical price, the timber-dogs needed to grapple the logs together. Foundries had more pressing work, and more than enough of it to keep them busy.

Greater success attended a local solution to the manpower shortage in the sawmills. At Kingencleuch, Mauchline, was a camp full of prisoners-of-war of many nationalities. After a poor start with a number of Italians, who seemed disinclined to work for their captors, the German contingent showed themselves to be a willing, able and flexible labour force when they were transported daily from the camp to Troon. Their positive and cheerful approach earned them many concessions, not least the regular distribution of home baking by Mrs McMillan. One prisoner, known as 'Jeff', admitted that he had not tried particularly hard to evade capture, as he was the only survivor of five brothers, and so heir to the family silversmith business. So touched was he by the warmth of his reception at the sawmill, that he stayed in touch after his return to Germany. He visited Ayrshire and his old friends much later, bringing gifts of silver and many memories.

In all, the war years were of necessity a period of stagnation in the company's affairs; it was all Tim could do to keep things ticking over. Things were to move more quickly with Finlay's return in 1946. Post-war reconstruction, with rebuilding, nationalisation, new technology, and the need, once again, to make up for war-time over-cropping of the forests, were all to have their effects.

Co-operating closely with the Forestry Commission, Finlay set about increasing production of seedlings and young trees — Canadian Sitka Spruce grew best in the high rainfall — at the nurseries of Dalquharran, Dailly, and Fullarton House. (Nursery and planting work remained pretty much his speciality, and his brother and he continued to draw on the experience of their uncles in many matters). That was fine as far as it went, but trees are a slow crop to grow, and in the short term considerable attention had to be paid to finding timber to sell.

Representations were made to the relevant Authorities — and determining which Authority was relevant to which activity was a task in itself at this period — for permission to set up a sawmill near Grangemouth, in the East, where advantage might be taken of the huge tonnage of timber coming out of Germany by way of post-war reparation. The appropriate moment was long past before any such permission was even in sight, and the company never did receive a quota.

Much irritation was expressed by the Home Timber Merchants over what seemed to them to be a greater injustice at the time — the placing of contracts for the supply of pitwoods by the newly-constituted National Coal Board. Complex arguments involving transport costs, National and Regional Agreements, unbreakable two-year contracts and apparent bias in favour of overseas suppliers were bandied about and little was solved. One thing, however, was clear to those with eyes to see: the N.C.B. was here to stay, and the presence of one monolithic customer, for a company almost totally committed to the supply of home-grown timber to the mines, spelt an end to flexibility and independence for that company. Unless a way could be found to diversify rapidly in terms of source of supply, product and market, Adam Wilson and Sons would become little better than an adjunct to the N.C.B.



## VIII. AMALGAMATION

In 1836 or thereabouts William Alexander from Kilkerran (by Dailly) came to Ayr and set up business in Wallacetown Sawmills on the north bank of the river. He gained a reputation for joinery and building work, and soon after in another field of endeavour. With the Disruption in the Church of Scotland in 1843 and the formation of Free Church congregations, those who left Wallace-town church worshipped first in the Sawmill, then in a wooden church William Alexander built, till Ayr Free Church was erected in the Sandgate in 1845. William Alexander, a pillar of the Free Church, was obviously a man with a strongly independent streak and a mind of his own. While in the early years he was involved in joinery and building work as well as sawmilling, he decided to concentrate on the last. Alexander's Sawmills came to specialise in supplying the building trade with a large variety of woods — especially imported woods, in various stages of preparedness. By the First World War, William Alexander and Sons, Timber Merchants, had moved well along a path as divergent as it could be from Adam Wilson and Sons, while remaining nominally in the same field of business.

Between the wars there was occasional collaboration between the companies, and when Finlay Wilson began to search in the late 1940s for a means of spreading the risks of business, he did not have far to look.

The post-war reconstruction, and notably the boom in pre-fabricated houses, was a time of great prosperity for Wm. Alexander and Sons. Their only problem was timber supply. Their channels were open again with vendors of more exotic woods from overseas, but they went frequently to Adam Wilson and Sons for quantities of home-grown softwoods — for which Finlay wanted fresh outlets. The capital equipment of the two firms was to a degree complementary, the one being geared up for rapid throughput of large volumes of undressed timber, while the other was selling mouldings, facings, floorings, linings and shaped rails produced on its own spindles, planers and moulding machines. The standing of both companies was high, and the directors had come to know each other socially. By April 1949 the marriage had been brought about by agreement between Finlay and Mr Murray Alexander, the sole partner of the company.

In the final contract there was a clause to the effect that the partnership would last as long as both these individuals were alive. On the death of either, the survivor would buy all the shares from the deceased's heirs, and so have control of the whole business. Murray Alexander died in December 1949 after only eight months of partnership, and Adam Wilson and Sons entered the second half of the century a bigger, more flexible, and increasingly prosperous concern.

An inventory of the equipment at the country sawmills drawn

up in December 1951 lists fourteen such mills, with a bewildering range of saws, benches, engines, tractors and bothies at each. A workforce of nine or ten at such a mill was typical, and they were scattered over hundreds of square miles. Most of their output was still going to the N.C.B., and the key to profitability in the area of operations has been, ever since, maximum logistical efficiency to squeeze the best margin out of the prices the N.C.B. are prepared to pay — prices that reflect the maxim 'keep your supplier lean but alive'. In the continuing effort to provide the best possible service to the N.C.B., the company's methods have changed, and the 1950s can realistically be seen as the last great days of the country sawmills, with hundreds of separate invoices for varying sizes of order generated from over a dozen different locations each month. As mechanisation increased, and labour became more expensive, breakdown of equipment in remote parts of the forests was costing too much in man-hours lost. The search for alternatives began.

Meanwhile the afforestation activities were going from strength to strength. As well as providing young trees for transplantation on the company's own acres, the Wilson nurseries had taken to selling the seedlings outside, with advice and even labour for their transplantation available as an optional extra service. Tens of thousands of Sitka Spruce, Corsican Pine, Japanese Larch, Sycamore, Contorta and Tsuga were laid out in the hills and valleys in ever more sophisticated patterns as experience accumulated in what would best grow where.

By the middle of 1950s, then, the three chief functions of the company were: felling, processing and selling of pitwoods; importation, processing and marketing of building timbers; and raising and transplanting of seedlings — a healthier spread of profitable activities than at any time in the past. The opportunity was there for experimentation with any one of those functions in the knowledge that the other two would see the company through unforeseen setbacks.

In 1956, after a period of ill-health, Tim died. He had not been active in the company for several years, although he was in 1950 President of the Home Timber Merchants' Association. In 1955 William McCreath had been welcomed to the boardroom, after loyal service to the company since the days of horses and steam. This left Finlay a certain amount of freedom to travel, in Scandinavia particularly, and to cultivate contacts as far afield as Canada and Australia. High on his list of priorities had been the investigation of a new generation of equipment for the bulk processing of timber in the round. Mechanisation was well established, if on a piecemeal basis. With improving road communications, a higher degree of predictability in the pitwood market, and large plantations of trees (scientifically distributed with access and extraction as one of the criteria) approaching maturity, it was time to think of some level of automation.



## IX. THE STORY OF A SAWMILL

Finlay's account of the Cowal Ari Sawmill is brief and to the point. 'I saw one in Söderhamn and bought one like it.'

On 1 October 1952, the assembled directors 'agreed to purchase an Ari Sawmill from Messrs Aktiebolaget Maskinfabriken I Ornskoldsvik, Sweden, at a cost of £3,627.' Finlay had observed a number of layouts in action in their native Sweden, and had blueprints drawn up to optimise the use of machines in the processing of small timbers — particularly thinnings from plantations. Once formal agreement had been recorded, there was plenty to do in the 15 months anticipated waiting time before delivery of the plant.

A suitable site for the mill was not easy to find, and, once found, to secure. Transportation of finished timbers is much easier and more economical than hauling logs in the round, so it made sense to set up the new mill in the heart of a large forest-covered area. Argyllshire seemed ideal. Numerous sites were investigated and rejected, for reasons of cost, or because site preparation was too difficult, or because county authorities refused planning permission. By July 1953 a site had been purchased at Cowal, just outside Strachur, and a company floated.

The Cowal Ari Sawmilling Company had its offices at 90 Mitchell Street, Glasgow. Directors were R. F. Wilson and J. T. Lorimer. Chief source of funds was the Forestry Commission, who agreed with Finlay that an up-to-the-minute sawmill in such a setting was at the very least worth an experiment in marketing. In answer to a question in Parliament later, the Secretary of State for Scotland said:

... One of the main objects is to investigate on a commercial basis the sawmilling, conversion, seasoning and other processes of the increasing supply of small softwood timber from thinnings. This venture is to some extent experimental so far as Great Britain is concerned.

Interest in the experiment was intense in the trade at large, and at Swedish House, where a considerable publicity campaign was awaiting only the start of production. While negotiations with all interested parties, including Custom and Excise, I.C.F.C., and the Board of Trade, were proceeding, William McCreath set off for Sweden to learn how to operate the machinery. He returned with excellent knowledge of the equipment but, unfortunately, no knowledge of the Swedish language. The 15 months delay anticipated had stretched to something over 2 years, and William McCreath set out to try and match the Swedes' own record for installation of such production plant — 8 weeks — with the singular drawback of an engineer appointed by the manufacturers who spoke not a word of English. Add to that an unanticipated

need for metal bases for certain items of equipment, which had to be discussed in mime with the engineer and then ordered from a blacksmith in Dunoon, and the 9 weeks from start to finish of the project represented a creditable performance.

There were problems, too, when it came to staffing the new sawmill. The many applicants who answered the advertisements in the Dunoon Herald, the Oban Times and the Glasgow Herald were whittled down drastically. Many were put off by the apparent sophistication of the equipment, while others found the housing shortage around Strachur an insurmountable barrier. It was with a sense of relief that the directors saw the plant reach full production in late 1955, and began escorting the first of a long stream of visitors around the showpiece sawmill. From the dropping of the logs on the skid-bank, cutting to length, edging, and waste separation, there was virtually no call for man-handling. McCreath was in full charge.

Argyllshire was generally considered to have suffered most from the 100 m.p.h. gales that swept Scotland in the Spring of 1956. When the cost was counted, timber-merchants at least were rubbing their hands at what came to be called 'The Great Windfall'. Millions of cubic feet of timber to be extracted and processed got the Cowal Ari Sawmill off to a flying start, and it paid back the initial investment handsomely in hard cash, as well as prestige and experience gained long before its unhappy demise in 1972.

One morning in February of that year, at the end of a prolonged cold snap, the power was switched on, and within twenty minutes the entire building was engulfed in flames. A subsequent enquiry revealed that several machines had frozen solid overnight, and that the friction of fast-running drive belts against locked pulleys had generated sufficient heat to start the conflagration. By the time its career ended so spectacularly, the Cowal Ari Sawmill was no longer the most advanced in Europe, but it had represented a considerable step forward in its day.





Fifth Generation  
HAMISH WILSON

## X. UP TO THE PRESENT

A Memoir of the company would perhaps most properly end in the middle 1950's — a moment as appropriate for the new directions the business was taking as for the simple fact of the time elapsed since the original Adam Wilson's small beginnings at Sorn in 1856. The last 25 years has seen some threads of the story end, some begin and others interweave in new ways. To gain an impression of the present fabric of the company, and how it holds together, such threads can be taken up at random, singly and in bunches, and followed where they lead.

*Places* first. A visitor to Auchinleck, where Adam first set up a sawmill for himself, would find still standing many of the buildings added by succeeding generations of Wilsons. They were occupied until 1960 by Robertsons Haulage Contractors, and now house the bus fleet of Liddells' Motors. The mill at Dailly, though, has completely disappeared. The lade has been filled in, and serves as an access road; the sluices are gone; a football pitch covers the site of the sawmill itself. The sawmill at Troon, from 1946 to 1972 in the capable hands of John McMillan, has seen great changes. Experience at the Cowal Ari Sawmill (Strachur) and elsewhere had shown the advantages of bold modernisation, so the directors took a deep breath and, in their words, 'bull-dozed everything into the sea.' The ground was covered in tarmac while many of the work-force were engaged in other Wilson plants preparing the timbers for new buildings designed to house the most up-to-date equipment. The ill-fated plant at Strachur was replaced at about the same time, incorporating new features developed at Lochgilphead (Glenbranter Sawmill, or 'Dunadd' to the men, or 'Forestry Enterprises Ltd' in its articles of association), which had been set up in 1959. Quite recently, a new custom-built plant at Dalmellington, established on the principle of 'getting the men out of the forests' — phasing out country sawmills, in other words — has so efficiently achieved its object of turning out large quantities of props, splits and fencing posts with the minimum of fuss that it has earned itself the nickname of 'sausage machine.' The forests themselves, though less disturbed by the sounds and smells of portable sawmills, are much as they were.

A booklet entitled 'Loch Awe — Village History' gives a pleasing account of the importance of the timber industry to that area.

Employment in the district was centred on the Hotel, the Railway Station, the Steamer and the Shop. The Railway Station was the busiest by far and won the district award for the greatest tonnage leaving it. This was owed entirely to the timber coming from Eredine Forest down the Loch in 45 ton rafts and barges unloaded from the pier to trucks. Early in the century the Eredine Forest was bought by Adam Wilson and



Sons, Troon, Ayrshire. In those days the trees were felled by hand operated saws and taken by horses to the sawmills. Steam for the sawmills was derived from waste-wood and sawdust . . .

An adventurous, open-air life, no doubt, but characterised also by unbusinesslike incidents like the total loss of a portable engine travelling, in 1932, from a country sawmill to the pier on one of the rafts mentioned. The waters of Loch Awe are very deep at certain points. Felling is now done almost exclusively by powered chain-saw, extraction by lorries with mounted hydraulic cranes, and processing at conveniently-located but permanent sawmills.

Afforestation and nursery work continue. At Dailly, the Castle of Dalquharran itself was sold long ago, serving first as a Hotel and then a School for Deaf and Dumb. But the extensive plantations are of course retained. The company has continued its policy of purchasing lands suitable for afforestation, adding Stonefield (Argyll), Eliock (Dumfriesshire), Lanfine (Ayrshire) and Avondale (Lanarkshire). This brings the holding of farms and forest land to 9,540 acres. So the company has a reservoir of growing trees, to fell and replant on a forty-year cycle. Fullarton, where the company had a nursery, was abandoned when Finlay and his family moved to Carbieston House, overlooking Ayr. The historic Adamton estate, where considerable felling took place in the 1950s and 1960s, remains virtually bare of trees, lying as it does close to the flight-path of the extended runway of Prestwick Airport.

The most important single change of location occurred in the early and middle 60's. Wm. Alexander and Sons, effectively a subsidiary of the company by this time, fell victim to plans for road and housing developments and have to move from their riverside site in Ayr. The first thought of the directors was to procure a site at the harbour, since so much of the Alexander business was with imported timbers. They were disappointed in this aim, and as recently as 1974 much of their fleet of articulated lorries had to be brought in from the North to unload *The Quebec* (a Canadian ship which was, incidentally, the biggest ever to berth at Ayr), and transfer its cargo to a large, totally custom-built sawmill complex a couple of miles away. This complex, built over an old war-time aerodrome, had been the company's second choice of position, and it had the great advantage of size. So generous was the site, that as well as relocating the old Alexander's functions within its boundaries, the directors decided that all the administrative offices should be placed there, too. And so they have been since 1966, when the letter headings changed to show the Head Office of Adam Wilson and Sons Ltd. as Heathfield Road, Ayr.

The *people* presiding over these changes underwent changes. William McCreath, a director since the 50's, continued in office. He left the Strachur mill in 1959 in the hands of Mr Alex Gallacher, and undertook a variety of tasks on the company's behalf. Always

a solver of knotty problems in the forest or at the sawbench, he brought the same approach to business management. In 1959, Mr John Kerr was welcomed to the board as Company Secretary, and his contribution there soon earned him a full directorship. At the time of the removal from Fullarton House to Carbieston House, Hamish Wilson, son of Finlay, was at Strathallan school. When his formal education was finished, he was sent out into the world to learn all he could about every aspect of the timber trade, a travelling apprenticeship that took him to Sweden, Canada and England. He returned to take a seat on the board, effectively restoring the Wilson family balance.

The growing scale and complexity of the company's operations, together with ever-more standardised working conditions, brought greater responsibilities towards the workforce. Matters that had, in the past, been handled case by case on a 'family' basis, now fell within codes of conduct laid down, for mutual benefit, by the legislature, the unions, the management of the company and years of common practice. The benefits of the pension scheme, inaugurated in 1962, are clear to everybody, but no effort has been spared to make clear to all employees the sense that lies behind, for example, the stringent safety regulations at all places of work, which might so easily be seen as arbitrary coercion and regimentation.

The growth of the company's *business interests* has been considerable. One of William McCreath's jobs in the 60's was to spend a few months reorganising a sawmilling concern in Workington, Cumberland, in which Finlay had taken a financial interest on behalf of the company. That 'few months' became five and a half years, and that 'financial interest' led to R. Finlay Wilson's establishment as Managing Director of Workington Sawmills Ltd. At about the same time, the early 60's, the extension of the company's interests south of the border went one stage further, with the outright purchase of Firbeck Timber Co. Ltd., near Worksop, Nottinghamshire. The Worksop sawmill now figures on the letterhead with Heathfield Road, Lochgilphead, Strachur and Troon, and, sited as it is in the centre of an enormous coalfield, and drawing roundwood from Sherwood Forest, does pitwood business on a scale to make it a substantial contributor to the company's turnover.

Another, more recent, acquisition has been Messrs Mathew Wright and Nephew Ltd., a long established company based in Irvine, and a gentlemanly competitor. They came willingly into the fold in May 1974, heartened perhaps by the absence of heads rolling during and after the other takeovers and mergers that have gone to build the Wilson complex.

The range of *products* has expanded, too. Most of the home-grown timber (85%) goes, with minimal working and minimal value added, to the mines. Profits on pallet-boards are higher, but then so are labour-costs and the waste from each tree felled. The erstwhile waste itself is being made to show a profit, through dealings



with chip-board producers; fertiliser companies (apparently a mixture of ground spruce bark and certain phosphates works wonders for bananas!); and even a mail-order firm which markets log cabins and Wild West forts for children. In earlier days, of course, the waste from the saws would have fed the boilers for the steam engines.

Imported timbers require the strictest attention in management to secure a profit. The buying is all-important, accounting as it does for about 80% of the final sale price, and negotiations with Canadian, Scandinavian and, notably, Soviet exporters are taken very seriously. Once the wood is in, through Ardrossan, Ayr and, less and less, Irvine harbours, it is rigorously controlled through a computer at Heathfield Road, under the direction of John Kerr. The modular hardware, with 60 Kilobytes of storage, is by ITC, and the software specially written to handle stocks under 15 main headings and in an infinity of sizes. Much of the output from the Ayr mill goes to the building trade still, from supplying major contracts generated by the increasingly residential nature of the area as far as Campbeltown, to equipping the joiner or handyman who calls either at Heathfield Road or at the shop by the Irvine mill. The highly mechanised joiners' shop produces cases and crates for local firms, and prefabricated units, such as roof-trusses, windows, partitions and doors for builders requiring upwards of 30 identical units. Much of the timber sold is preserved by a 'tanalising' process — driving a measured quantity of moisture out in a computer-controlled vacuum tank and replacing it with a copper-arsenic salt — and the stacks of cut timber in the yards have taken on end-grain colourings which would have puzzled old Adam Wilson. The fleet of Wilson lorries — up to 32-tonners — has been spoken of as operating 'as far South as Doncaster,' but the net spreads much wider.

Succeeding generations of management have tried to pull their weight in the efforts of the timber trade at large to get the best deal for all its participants. The last few decades have been no exception, and the company has been represented, with greater or lesser eminence, on such bodies as the Home Grown Timber Merchants' Association of Scotland, of which Finlay was President; and the Scottish Timber Merchants and Sawmillers Association, on whose committee he served for over twenty years. Hamish is a member of the committee of the Scottish Section of the Timber Trades Federation.

Changes there have been, and changes there will be, but 'man's first material' will continue to play a large part in our lives. With a permanent staff of over fifty, 300 more on the payroll, huge stocks of a variety of woods, an annual turnover well into the millions, and an eye always to the future, there seems little doubt that Adam Wilson and Sons Ltd. will continue to play a significant part in the industry.



