

Robert Wyllie
1792-1843

Robert Wyllie's career, though cut short by his sudden death when only 50 or 51, covered a period of new jetties and the imminent arrival of a railway wharf. The new jetties were recommended, in about 1832, by a Mr Gibb, already experienced in improving the Harbour of Aberdeen, which like Irvine had a shallow river mouth. Prior to 1835, when they started to take effect, it was common to see men and women on the Harbour Bar raking for sand eels in only a foot of water. After 1835, the effect of the jetties was to enable the river to scour the harbour much more effectively. Incoming ships were encouraged to bring in stone as ballast instead of gravel. Stone was also carted from Dunton Knoll Quarry to near the Academy, loaded on punts, and moved down with a receding tide. The benefits of deeper, and also calmer, water were clear by the time of Wyllie's death. (The railway spur to the harbour was constructed by the Glasgow & S.W. Railway in 1845; we do not know whether Wyllie would have known of plans for that development.)

Wyllie's death provides a link with another entrepreneur of that day, James Beaumont Neilson. Neilson had developed the Hot Blast system of smelting and, when rivals copied his system, went to court to defend his rights. Capt Wyllie died very suddenly in Edinburgh in March 1843 after giving evidence in one of those many cases, in which it was established that Mr Neilson had first applied his Hot Blast technique to fires or furnaces in Irvine - which Capt Wyllie had seen. Neilson will in due course have his own page on this site - as Strawhorn (p.120) records, his Hot Blast revolutionised the iron industry.

The 1841 census records that Wyllie lived on Bridgegate, his age being given as 45 since, in that first census, adult ages were rounded down to the nearest five. He was one of the founders of Irvine Burns Club in 1826, and was already Harbour Master by that date.

The activity of the period is well described by John Paterson, which will in due course appear on this site. Another description by a Wm Black will also appear in due course; part of it records that: "During the winter vessels arriving in Irvine with stone ballast were berthed at the end of the quay, opposite the present Harbour Office. The ballast was carried ashore in hand-barrows and piled in a heap till the summer time came, when it was taken down to the jetties. The Harbour paid 10d [4p in today's coinage] per ton for these stones, which partly paid the expense of discharging."