

# Wade House – General Wade and Wadeslea

Researched and compiled by Graham Johnston

Wade House, situated at the eastern part of The Terrace in Elie, had had reputedly associations with General Wade whose enthusiasm to thwart the Jacobites was legendary.

The conventional wisdom was that General Wade during his time in Scotland spent time in this house and was reputed to have a lookout post at the top in order to watch for Jacobite ships coming up the river Forth. This was what gave rise to naming of the house Wade House. However, there is a problem in relation to this especially in so far as Wade's involvement.



We know that at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century there was an attempt to look at the possibility of enlarging the harbour to compete with the other harbours of the East Neuk which were heavily involved in international trade. Furthermore it is conjectured that General Wade on the instructions of the king had made investigations in relation to the possibility of establishing a deep water naval base at what we now call Ruby Bay. As a result the area acquired locally the name of Wadehaven or Wades Bay.

The first problem we encounter with this legend is that whilst Wade spent a considerable length of time in Scotland he actually, so far as we are aware, did not spend any of it in Elie at all - far less Fife. Thus it would have been pointless for him to be on the lookout for Jacobite ships in Elie when he had never stayed there. The second problem is that according to the records the current property at Wade House was built round about 1756 or thereby. Whilst there may well have been an earlier property on that site the historical records do not record its size or its provenance. Since General Wade died in 1747 it seems highly unlikely that he would have stayed in that house. None of the biographies of Wade refer to any period of time spent in the East Neuk of Fife.

However it is postulated that Wade might have stayed in a similar establishment when he was apparently surveying Ruby Bay as a possible deepwater anchorage for the British fleet. We are not certain as to the date in which he is said to have made the survey but if it happened it was probably during the first quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. If that is correct it is surprising that there is no mention of that visit in any

of the histories of East Neuk. Walter Wood makes no reference to it and none of the other contemporary writers notice his involvement. Even the OS name book of 1853 one would have thought would have mentioned that connection with Woodhaven Bay. We have concluded that this is a misattribution. It may have been that the area was surveyed and looked at as a possible deep water port but it seems unlikely strategically to have that significance. Wade's involvement in the East Neuk of Fife is therefore discounted as probably folklore.

What, therefore, is the provenance of the name Wade house? In addition we have Wades Lea - Lea being the name for a field and Wadehaven also known as Woodhaven itself. It seems strange that the house should be associated with an agricultural holding approximately half a mile to the east.

Is there perhaps a more mundane explanation for Wade House, Wadeslea and Wadehaven? The question might be answered by an examination of the word "Wade". There is a possibility that the word is a corruption of woad. In the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries woad was a valuable commodity. After certain processes the plant produced a rich purple dye much sought after in the clothing trade at that time. It was also expensive. There were two ways in which this dye could be acquired. The first was from the grinding of whelks. There is a small sack in a welk beneath the shell which contained contains a very rich purple dye. This dye was acquired by gathering shells crushing them and obtaining the liquid. Of course that might have been associated with whelks collected from the beaches around Elie and Earlsferry. However, there is probably a better explanation. The other way of acquiring this much sought after dye was from the woad plant. The plant was cultivated and then dried and then mixed with human urine and made into hard balls which required to be ground down to a fine powder and water was added the deep purple dye ensued.

Some time ago the History Society received an e-mail from France making an inquiry. The correspondent referred to a passage that he had discovered in the Practical Mechanics Journal of 1863. In that article after describing a new type of windmill on the horizontal construction this sentence was added "*several mills in the horizontal construction had been in use in the town of Eli [sic] in the litigious Kingdom of Fife at the end of the last century, and were employed in grinding indigo but they have long since been removed.*" In our records we have no information in relation to any horizontal windmills in this area or for that matter the cultivation of woad. On the other hand with the existence of Wade House, Wadeslea and Wadehaven it might be conjectured this refers to woad. It was referred to Carol Biggam a professor at Glasgow University. Her conclusions are appended to this article.

If that is the case then it seems highly likely the Wadeslea was the farm at which woad was grown, Wade House was the property from which the business was administered and Wadehaven might well have been the location of these windmills. The additional adminicle would be that if these horizontal windmills were situated at Shepherd's Law above Wades Bay then there is a considerable windy updraft there which would be useful for grinding the indigo. Of course during this period both Elie and Earlsferry had a thriving weaving industry and the association with the woven linen and that purple dye is not to be ruled out. Further research in relation to the practical mechanics journal have been unsuccessful although we are of the view that the author of the article in 1863 who is simply designed as "J. A. Of Woolwich" might well have been the one time commandant of Woolwich Nautical College and therefore have carried some weight.

### INDIGO MILLS AT ELIE, FIFE

C. P. Biggam

Following a query from Etienne Rogier about "indigo mills" at Elie, and discussion with Graham Johnston of the Elie and Earlsferry History Society, investigations were carried out as far as the evidence allowed.

The source of the information is a brief paragraph in the *Practical Mechanic's Journal*, series 2, volume 8, page 231, of 1863, in an article entitled 'Power of Wind as Applied to Flour Mills' by J. S. of Woolwich (full name unknown). After describing a new type of windmill "on the horizontal construction", J. S. adds this sentence: "Several mills on the horizontal construction were in use at the town of Eli [sic.], in the litigious kingdom of Fife, at the end of the last century, and were employed in grinding indigo, but they have long since been removed". This statement was repeated by later authors but no-one supplied references to support it.

The indigo dye, technically known as *indigotin*, can be obtained from certain shellfish, namely, whelks, and from certain plants, usually referred to as *indigo* or *woad*, and it produces colours which are mostly blue or purple. There is a tendency to use *indigo* for the tropical plant which produces quantities of blue dye, and to use *woad* for the less productive native plant of Britain and western Europe, but this terminological distinction has never been well observed.

Mr Johnston and the History Society know of the growing and milling of flax in Elie as late as the early 19th century, and there was a cottage industry of linen weaving in Earlsferry between 1820 and 1890, but there was no record of dye production in the area. Intrigued by the mystery of the disappearing mills, I tried to investigate further but without any real success. However, one matter caught my attention, and that was the name of a small bay at the east end of Elie, which was separated from the main bay of Earlsferry and Elie by a rocky promontory. The small bay was named Wadehaven, but the alternative names of Wadd's Haven and Woodhaven also occurred. Although the usual explanation given was some connection with General Wade, I wondered whether there could be a connection with woad, especially as woad-workers were often called wadmen. The fact that Wadehaven is on the eastern edge of town is also significant since woad-

workers were usually made to live and work away from settlements because of the smell of their product. I approached a colleague in the University of Glasgow, Carole Hough, Professor of Onomastics, and she was able to supply some more information.

To stand a chance of successfully identifying the origin of a place-name, the researcher has to find early spellings but the earliest recorded form of Wadehaven can (so far) only be dated to 1775. For this reason, and the low number of occurrences recorded of the name, Prof. Hough and I are only offering suggestions but we cannot be sure of any explanation. The prime source of information is *The Place-Names of Fife*, vol. 3: *St Andrews and the East Neuk*, by Simon Taylor with Gilbert Markus (2009), pages 280–281. Under Wood Haven, the following occurrences are listed:

Wood Haven 1775

Wadehaven 1790s

Wood Haven 1828 and 1855

The discussion of this name includes the following: “The first element may be Sc wood. This was certainly the view proposed by the OS Name Book in the 1850s, which stated that it was called Wood Haven because it was ‘where vessels usually discharge wood’. But the two forms from the 1790s raise doubts about this origin. If we accept the explanation... involving the personal name Wade, there may be a connection between Wood Haven... and nearby Wadeslea, a street-name at the east end of Elie burgh”.

While looking up this name for me, Prof. Hough caught sight of something interesting in *The Place-Names of Fife*, vol. 2: *Central Fife between the Rivers Leven and Eden*, by Simon Taylor and Gilbert Markus (2008), pages 473–474. In a charter in the Cartulary of Dunfermline Abbey, the boundaries of a land-grant include “and thus northwards as far as the stone which is called Woadstane (Wadestan) and thus to the place which is called Knockmadder (Knokmadyr)”. The bounds start on the south-eastern side of Largo Law. In his comments on these names, Taylor points out that closely located names with (probably) woad and madder “suggests that at around this time (the first half of the fourteenth century or earlier) this north-west corner of NBN [Newburn] was especially involved in the production of cloth-dyeing plants”.

If woad had been grown locally in the medieval period, it is possible that, when such a crop was no longer viable (because of the import of exotic indigo) people turned to importing indigo themselves to continue an activity with which they were familiar. However, much of this is speculation.