

Leitir Corn Mill, Donegal

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Photos by Keith and Ruth Andrews

We thought we had failed to find any open mills to visit in Ireland but as we were driving back to our holiday cottage at Lettermacaward we came across a prominent roadside notice declaring 'MILL OPEN DAY SATURDAY'.

Unfortunately it was only Friday but we could see a couple of men raking a huge new car park. So as always we stopped to inquire if we could have a sneak preview.

The mill building (*arrowed*) is to the left of the tree. The view below shows the front of the mill.



We were enthusiastically welcomed inside and shown around by the owner Michael Ward, who had donated the mill and mill house on a long term lease to the community, along with a field to develop into a coach and car park. This car park, costing a reportedly €250,000 is the latest stage in the Leitir Corn Mill conservation project, which aims to redevelop the site as a working heritage mill.



Launched in 2015, the project was divided into 5 phases, of which the car park is phase 3. Rebuilding the wheel, repairing internal machinery, and refurbishing the 19th century miller's cottage to include that all-important café and souvenir shop will make up the final phases.

After several years of writing about mills Keith and I now know that we can usually find historical details on the internet, and Leiter Mill in south east Donegal is very well documented: see www.leitircornmill.com ; unlike Collooney Mills! (see page 12).

The two-storey stone mill with blue Bangor-slate roof dates back to the late 1700s and was refurbished around time of the Great Famine (1845-49), and again in 1862 when a new corn-drying kiln and machinery from Stevenson's foundry in Strabane was installed. There is a good record of millers right up to 1954 when Columbus Ward, father of the present owner, took over. In his own words "*It was on its last legs*" and apparently only 188 bags of oats were milled between March and May. The mill then stood idle for 67 years, but although silent, it was not abandoned, but was kept in good repair.

The oats for milling were grown locally on small farms and brought to the mill by horse and cart, often with a supply of turf (*peat*) for the drying kiln [1].



The dried oats were tipped into a small hopper [2] before being transported up the corn elevator and through a corn cleaning sieve, the dark wooden object at the lower left of the picture [3].



From here it passed into the eye of the shilling (*shelling*) stones. They are grey granite quarried at Lettercran, Pettigo in County Donegal, 4ft 6in in diameter [4].

Here the husks were flaked off and the groats (*hulled kernels*) transported up a groats elevator and through a fanner/winnower [5] to remove the husks.



The groats were then transformed into meal in a second pair of stones made of French burr [6]. The cast iron plate on these meal stones reads KAY AND HILTON, FLEET STREET, LIVERPOOL, 1863, and they are also 4ft 6in in diameter.

Finally the meal was put through a meal sieve [7] before being sacked; note the pedestal chute under the sieve..



All of the machinery is in its original position complete with connecting belts and chains, apart from the cast iron perforated plates of the kiln, which are stacked below the fanner/winnower [5].

We were pleased to see that the pit wheel, wallower, and great spur wheel had not been enclosed (yet!) in a visitor-proof corral [8].



The metalwork was all cast in Strabane in 1862, including the 17ft 6in diameter 5ft 2in wide high breastshot waterwheel, which will soon have 48 new buckets when the next stage of the restoration happens.



As the Donegal Diaspora website www.donegaldiaspora.ie/project says :

"Few of Ireland's traditional corn mills have survived to the present day with this level of preservation and intactness. This site is an important part of the 19th century industrial heritage of not alone Kilcar, but of the county and entire northwest region. The grain milled was grown throughout this locality and served to provide for some of the food needs of Kilcar, Carrick, and Killybegs. It also catered for the corn crops of small farmers in Glencolmcille, Killybegs, and Teelin. Self-sufficient farmers brought their cut corn to the mill. They also supplied turf for the kilns used to dry the corn. This is really an outstanding reminder of the industrial/agricultural heritage of the area."