

Seanchas Ìle

HERITAGE ARCHIVE

Whisky distilling

NF: Neil Fergusson

EE: Emily Edwards

NF: When I first came to work here, when I first came to this town... there... were thirty-four working. Well, they were on the payroll anyway, though a few weren't doing much... (*laughs*). Usually there were thirty-four working in the distillery at that that time. Now there are only seven. That's all there is. And a pair of them, there's a manager and a clerkess in the office and that only leaves five and then if you come into to the... if you come inside there, there's only one person...

EE: Aha.

NF: ... that runs every part... and when you are cleaning the appliances in there, you use chemicals and things like that but if you put the computer on, there's a program on the computer and that will clean everything and you don't need to worry about using the chemicals. You don't need to do anything else. It does everything. But, when you are working, when you are making whisky like that. There's a man on shift, he's in control. He's, well, he goes about pressing buttons here and there. But these buttons they turn on pumps and open valves and things like that. There's not a bit of work running around for them there but shutting this and opening that.

EE: That's a shame.

NF: They're just pressing buttons and they do the work. It is very easy even though there's only one person doing it. We make five thousand gallons... a day. Twenty-four hours.

EE: Five thousand?

NF: They're working all the time, you know. But, five thousand gallons, do you want that in litres?

EE: M-hm.

NF: Twenty-three thousand five hundred. Now that's a great deal of whisky! For one person at a time, one person on the shift. They work eight hours, you know, someone goes out for six o'clock in the morning and he is finished at two o'clock, two o'clock in the afternoon and someone else starts at two o'clock. He is finished at 10 o'clock and someone else comes out for the night shift at 10 o'clock and he finishes at 6 o'clock in the morning. There is only one person in the place.

EE: Aye.

NF: Well, some work the day, the last man is out at half past four and there's only one person running the whole place then until eight the next morning.

EE: That's a shame, isn't it?

NF: O, yes, it is a shame.

EE: What job did you have when you started with Caol Ila, what job did you have?

NF: I used to work in the malting barn. We'd begin with barley, you know, barley seed. And we'd bring it, the barley, there are tons and tons of it and we'd soak it in water for... I'm not sure how long it took, thirty six hours and you took the water, say, half-way between that time. You ran off the water in which it was soaked and you'd fill it up with other water. There were big tanks and you'd put it there. Tons and tons of it. And then you'd drain it away, the water, from there and you'd take it and spread it out on a big concrete floor, over your shoulder just like that and... but big, a big building... they would put two or three inches of grain in depth. And you'd just leave it. Anyway it was wet and when you leave it to heat and it grows warm and started growing. And when it started growing, you'd see the wee white bits, like hairs coming out of the wee bits of barley. You'd see... well, there would be one kind coming out one end from the roots – the roots – and the other from the leaves like that and as time went on they'd change longer and longer until they were like this. You'd have to turn them with a wooden shovel... Maybe you've seen one once. But...maybe you've not seen one. We'd turn it because you had to keep turning it over. If you didn't do this when they grew longer and longer, these wee hairs, that form on it, they'd knit together and you'd almost be able to lift it like a carpet [?]. They'd stick together, you know. Therefore you'd keep turning it over all the time so that they didn't mesh together.

EE: I see.

NF: And that was going on, all the time, all through the night. More than during the day too and you'd do that and while you did that they were growing, germination stage, germination process. They were in the barley, it had swollen up with the water and it absorbed it. They'd make sugars and starches inside there and enzymes of sorts. I don't know. Anyway there were enzymes and they were made inside and the those sugars [?]... That is what you convert to alcohol when you are done [?]. But when you are malting like it would only take four days. It would only take four days or something like that. When you can lift one of the parts of the barley, the ears and you'd write your name on the wall with it. Now... that is ready for the next stage. And it would be taken from there and you'd put it into the kiln to dry. And I would spread it out on the floor. A bigger mash and then you'd set a peat fire underneath it with maybe a wee bit of coal too, coke, to heat it up. And the heat from that peat fire went up through the floor that was up above the mash. There was a mash up there and it would dry the barley [?] the malt that was up on the roof there. And you'd have to go in there every day. Those are the pagodas there. The pagoda roofs, that is were the kiln is. You'll see smoke coming out of there every day.

EE: When did you start just doing the tour guides...?

NF: Just since...Well, I've been doing that job for twenty years or more, because I never had a problem communicating with anyone! (*laughs*) And the man who was down here at the time he knew me. He was an another Islayman. Most of them are Islay folk down here.

EE: That's good.

NF: It is Oh, that's the way it has always been. And when I was inside there you'd hear as much Gaelic as you would anywhere. Names for what was going on. Malt you know. And like that there were Gaelic words for everything that went on too. The stills. In the still house. And ... I heard [?] whisky also and other things. Burnt beer, have you heard that?

EE: No.

NF: Burnt ale, pot ale. There you go that is how it is. It is left after it is taken off and there were other word for everything you did. You had Gaelic words for it. And anyway when we worked we'd be speaking Gaelic.

EE: Did you always speak in Gaelic?

NF: Yes, we'd speak amongst ourselves in Gaelic. I don't if there is anyone now that speaks Gaelic. I am sure they know Gaelic very well.

EE: They do.

NF: But like most of the younger people they won't speak it although they are, they understand a good bit of it and it is the same way down here.

EE: It is. It is. What sort of words do you have for different things?

NF: Well, for the stills... When you put it inside... there you have it that's wash. I spoke about the malting room. '*Bràch*' is 'malt', '*bràch*'. You start with the barley and you malt it, through the malting process. And then you put into the kiln.

EE: Aye.

NF: That's the place where you dry it in the kiln.

EE: I see.

NF: Then that's ready for the next stage. And then you put it into the '*dabhach*', or mash tun. The '*dabhach*' that's what they call it. And you mix that with hot water. You put it through the mill before that and mill it down. It's not difficult to get... But you'd send it to the mill first and then you put it into the mash tun with hot water. And the hot water you put on it that draws off the sugars and starches that were made at germination, germination stage, the malting stage. As I was saying then you draw off the sugars and the starches and the things in it when you put it in the mash tun. Then you put it in the '*tunnaichean*', tuns, T.U.N. That's vats. Big wooden vats.

EE: Aye, I know, aye.

NF: They're made out of wood. And ... but before you put it in there. You have to cool it down because you are going to mix yeast into it. Yeast to start fermentation. And you put yeast into it...to start it going. You put this kind of yeast into every... that's the way... eighteen thousand gallons at a time. We mix in yeast and that starts fermenting up, you know. And that stays in there for three or maybe three and half days and that's ready. They call it '*caochan*', wash, '*caochan*'.

EE: '*Caochan*'. Aye.

NF: And when it is ready - fermentation, fermentation stage - it is like beer that's a wee bit strong. It's seven percent then. It is really fine and many of them like it but they grew too fond of it. Now they put that stuff into it, the *caochan*, wash as they called it. And then you put that into the still, the '*caochan*', and you boil it up. And when it starts heating up a vapour comes off it, steam. It goes up into the stills, into the condenser. And it condenses and what do they call the stage. In English they call it low wines but I can't remember. I can't remember now the Gaelic name they had for it. But there's the first stage of the distillation and that stage takes it up to twenty-eight percent alcohol.

EE: Uh-huh

NF: Then you send it up to the other stills, spirit stills. And when it begins boiling there, when it starts coming off it is up at, as high as maybe seventy-three percent alcohol. You run it as spirit three times [hours?].

EE: Aye.

NF. Three times [hours?] and it gets as times goes by, it goes down at the end of the three times [hours?] you are down to sixty percent alcohol. That is above whisky and you run it off. They call it faints. That's the only name I have for it. But it is getting weak then, further down until at last it is just as weak as maybe one percent alcohol. After that it doesn't cost money. And well, it's Scots that they have in there. Anyway, they always get the best of it when it comes to spending money. If you come to... down to one percent. He'll put off the still, he'll fill it up and be at it day and night for one week... when you are yourself [?] But every day, you know, every bit, 24 hours, five thousand gallons. Twenty-three thousand five hundred litres.

EE: Five thousand?

NF: That's a lot of whisky (*laughs*).

EE: That's great, I can't believe that! (*laughs*)

NF: More than I could drink! But it is wonderful and they come from all of the world to see how we make whisky.

EE: They do.

NF: And a fool like me going round telling them what it is that is going on...
[15.52]