

Scotland's Oldest? Some Examples of the Use and Misuse of Archives in the Writing of Scotch Whisky History¹

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Introduction

Marketers have appreciated the value of business archives and related historical documents for decades, as sources of inspiration for storytelling and establishing the 'authenticity' of their brands. As with all sources, however, the information contained in corporate and other archive collections is open to misinterpretation and can be misleading when presented out of historical context. The problem is particularly acute when the records are interpreted by copywriters and staff at creative agencies with limited historical knowledge of the subject and periods concerned, and who have the prime objective of promoting a particular brand or company.

Misleading claims can become common currency and impede understanding of historical events. For example Alexander, 4th Duke of Gordon is often described in academic as well as popular histories as playing a leading role in the reform of the UK's distillery laws, making a landmark speech in the House of Lords about 1820 which proved highly influential in the shaping of the Illicit Distillation (Scotland) Act in 1822 and the Excise Act in 1823.² Yet there is no record of this speech in Hansard nor in the newspapers of the day. The source of the information appears to be The Glenlivet's brand story. It rests entirely on a creative interpretation of remarks made by one of his tenants, George Smith – none of which refer to a speech in the House of Lords. The

¹ An earlier version of this paper was published online by the Edinburgh Whisky Academy, 31 January 2024.

² See for example Ross Wilson, *Scotch Made Easy* (London: Hutchinson, London, 1959), p.241; Michael Moss and John Hume, *The Making of Scotch Whisky* (Edinburgh: James & James, 1981), p.70; Philip Morrice, *The Schweppes Guide to Scotch* (Sherborne: Alphabooks, 1983), p.50; Charles Maclean, *Scotch Whisky: A Liquid History* (London: Cassell, 2003), p.80; F. Paul Pacult, *A Double Scotch: How Chivas Regal and The Glenlivet Became Global Icons* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2005); and Chris Brousseau, *The Story of The Glenlivet* (Dumbarton: privately published for Chivas Brothers, 2003), p.49.

Duke's central role in inspiring legislation which had a dramatic effect on Scotland's economic development appears to be fictitious.³

The Duke of Gordon myth is just one of many examples of the ways in which the history of Scotch whisky is sometimes distorted by misinterpretations of historical sources. The origins of some of the various claims to be Scotland's oldest distillery provides other case studies of the ways in which 'facts' are often extracted from archives and interpreted in such ways as to create an unreliable narrative of events or trends in the history of one of Scotland's most important industries.

Why Age Matters to Marketers

The whisky industry's fascination with the 'oldest' claim derives in large part to the business objective to establish a unique selling proposition (USP) for a brand or product in an increasingly mature and crowded market. 'Oldest' status is believed by many marketers to set a business apart from its competitors, offering proof of its rich heritage and its status as a market leader.⁴ However, unlike other absolute superlative claims – the smallest (distillery), the tallest (stills), the peatiest (whisky), the most northerly or westerly, etc. – the verification of a distillery's claim to be the 'oldest' can only be achieved through historical research. Fortunately, for nearly 40 years, many companies have invested significant sums in establishing archives and commissioning historians and others to investigate the histories of their brands. So why does so much confusion exist?

³ *London Scotsman*, 19 September 1868, p.6. However, references to the phantom speech and the Duke's alleged significant influence on the drafting of the legislation had become an integral part of The Glenlivet's brand story by the 1920s – see for example Aeneas Macdonald, *Whisky* (Edinburgh: Berlinn, 2016, originally published by The Porpoise Press, 1930), p.42. The story was consistently presented to the public in brand advertising thereafter – see for example 'The Glen of Whisky' feature in the *Weekly Scotsman*, 23 March 1967, p.19.

⁴ T. Baumert and M.D.L.M. de Obesso, 'Brand Antiquity and Value Perception: Are Customers Willing to Pay Higher Prices for Older Brands?' (2021) 123, *Journal of Business Research*, pp.241-54; F. Pecot, A. Merchant and V. de Barnier, 'Why and When is Older Better? The Role of Brand Heritage and of the Product Category in the Evaluation of Brand Longevity' (2022) 140, *Journal of Business Research*, pp.533-45.

The Moss and Hume Effect

The publication of Michael Moss' and John Hume's groundbreaking history *The Making of Scotch Whisky* in 1981 had a profound long-term effect on the marketing of single malt whiskies. The book appeared just as single malt was taking off as a premium sub-category of Scotch whisky, in a market that had been dominated for decades by blended Scotch brands such as Dewar's, Bell's and Johnnie Walker. Marketers had begun exploring ways to emphasise not only the difference and 'superiority' of single malts over other types of whisky, but also to identify a USP which would provide the consumer with a memorable reason to choose a particular brand over those of competitors.

Moss and Hume demonstrated that research in the archives of distilleries themselves, and others kept by landowners and local authorities in the areas in which the distilleries were located and by government agencies which regulated and taxed their owners, could uncover a wide range of compelling, authentic stories about each individual distillery and the people who have lived and worked there. The industry took note.

Since the early 1990s, dedicated company archives employing archivists and brand heritage specialists have been set up by Diageo, Chivas Brothers, John Dewar & Sons, William Grant & Sons, The Macallan Distillers and The Glenmorangie Company. Other companies including Whyte & Mackay, Suntory and Highland Distillers have deposited their historical records with Glasgow University Archives for safekeeping, with arrangements for company marketers and creative agencies to visit and carry out research.⁵ These archives have proved indispensable for researchers working on published histories of the whisky industry as well as individual distilleries such as Laphroaig and Ardbeg.⁶ They have also provided a goldmine of inspiration for the in-house teams and specialist agencies which have created marketing strategies and

⁵ 'Whisky Industry: Sources', University of Glasgow Archive Services, <www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_60319_smxx.pdf> accessed 3 December 2024.

⁶ Marcel van Gils and Hans Offringa, *The Legend of Laphroaig* (Odijk: Still Publishing, 2007); Gavin Smith and Graeme Wallace, *Ardbeg: A Peaty Provenance* (Thatcham: G.W. Publishing, 2008).

advertising campaigns for brands such as The Glenlivet, Cardhu, Ardbeg, Highland Park and so many others in the recent past.

However, a growing appreciation of the value of archives as a source and inspiration for authentic brand stories has not always been accompanied by an understanding of the historical context of the evidence uncovered. This has resulted in the perpetuation of many myths which have muddied popular understanding of the history of Scotch whisky. One striking example is in the profusion of distilleries claiming to be in some way the ‘oldest’ in Scotland.

The Glenlivet and Royal Brackla

Some assertions of ‘first-hood’ in the industry are iron-clad, based on easily verified evidence. For example, surviving records of the Scottish Excise Board and among the Duke of Gordon’s estate papers confirm that in 1824 George Smith was indeed the first to acquire a distillery licence in Glenlivet [but not in Scotland, as was widely reported in the 1990s!].⁷ Newspaper reports and advertisements of the day indicate that Captain William Fraser of Brackla was the first distiller to obtain a Royal Warrant for his whisky, in 1833.⁸

Sadly, other claims are not nearly so clear cut.

The Glenturret

The Glenturret is one of the most assertive claimants, declaring unequivocally on the brand website that it is ‘Scotland’s oldest working distillery’. To the credit of the owners,

⁷ National Records of Scotland [NRS], Gordon Castle Muniments, CR6/18 Glenlivet Estate Office letterbooks, 10 November 1824: ‘[George Smith] told me today that he had the intention of going to Elgin this week to obtain the requisite licence.’ NRS, CE 2/43, Scottish Excise Board, minute book, 25 January 1825: John Anderson, Collector of the Elgin Collection, informs the Scottish Excise Board in that the Drumin Distillery is ‘about to commence’.

⁸ *Inverness Courier*, 4 September 1833, p.3: ‘We are glad to understand that His Majesty has been graciously pleased to allow Captain Fraser of Brackla Hall to use the Royal Arms on every thing connected with his distillery. Owing to the fine quality of the spirit made at that work. This is the only instance in the Kingdom of a distiller being permitted to use this privilege.’ The announcement appeared in many other newspapers in Britain and Ireland, and advertisements for ‘Royal Brackla’ subsequently referred to it as ‘The King’s Own Whisky’.

they commissioned a research project to establish the evidence for this bold statement and have shared some of its findings on their website. The investigation discovered a document in the Ochertyre estate papers from 1763 referring to a distillery recorded with the name 'Thurot'. According to the website, 'Thurot is the earliest known name for The Glenturret'.⁹ Yet the document records that the no rent was paid for this distillery in 1763 as it had 'been waste for several years.' Not only was it silent by 1763, but no record has been found to indicate it started up again under that name or any other. Is there evidence to suggest that today's The Glenturret was subsequently built on the site, or is in some other way the direct descendant of the Thurot Distillery?

No one has yet been able to establish the precise location of Thurot Distillery on the extensive Ochertyre estate in Perthshire. Many distilleries had opened there by the 1820s, including Hill of Burn, Hosh, Hosh Mill, the first Glenturret and Turret Bridge. None has any known links with the eighteenth century Thurot Distillery, other than that they were all located in various places on the same estate. In addition, Turrit – presumably another spelling of the placename Thurot – was in the 1790s recorded in the estate records in a different part of Ochertyre from Hosh.¹⁰ Which begs the question – what are the verifiable origins of today's The Glenturret?

The Glenturret stands on the site of the old Hosh Distillery (its name was changed to Glenturret in or shortly after 1873, after the closure of another distillery of that name, which had been founded in or about 1814). In 1887 the journalist Alfred Barnard gave the foundation date of Glenturret as 1775, presumably based on a conversation when he visited Hosh more than a hundred years later, but if there is evidence to support this legend it has not been published. Hosh Distillery only appears in the Scottish Excise Board records from 1816. It had a chequered history and closed several times over the years, most recently in 1923; the stills and other equipment appear to have been removed in the 1930s and one of the buildings was subsequently repurposed as a

⁹ The Glenturret website at <<https://theglenturret.com/pages/about-us>> accessed 3 December 2024. A copy of the relevant page from a document 'Rentall of the Barony of Ochertyre ... Crop 1763' is displayed on the brand website. The original document is held in the National Library of Scotland (NLS), MS21120/15. In subsequent rental documents, Hosh is recorded with the properties on the Calander Estate and 'Thurot'/'Thurit' (Turret?) on the Ochertyre and Monniva Estate: see MS21120/50-53.

¹⁰ NLS MS21120/15, 23, 50, 52 and 53.

mushroom farm. In the late 1950s, businessman Andrew Fairlie refurbished and re-equipped the old buildings, reopening a distillery on the site and resurrecting the Glenturret name.

Littlemill

The Littlemill Distillery closed in 1994 and was subsequently demolished. Nevertheless, the brand owners have continued to release vintage bottlings to appeal to connoisseurs and collectors. They proclaim that Littlemill is 'Scotland's first and oldest licensed whisky distillery' with a foundation date of 1772.¹¹ As with Glenturret, some of the documentary evidence gathered to support the claim has been shared on the brand website. And just as in the case of the Perthshire distillery, the published facts do not back up the brand story.

The first of the claims is easily disposed of. Littlemill cannot be Scotland's oldest distillery – it burned down in 2004 and no longer exists. Nor can it ever have been Scotland's oldest, even if it had been founded in 1772 – many of Scotland's 'lost' distilleries were founded before that year, including those at Kilbagie, Gilcomston, and, from at least the 1690s, on the Ferintosh estate in Easter Ross. Meanwhile, the historical documents that have been uncovered by the company's researchers appear, perversely, to contradict the second part of the claim, that Littlemill was Scotland's 'oldest licensed distillery.'

Their key evidence was found in the minutes of the Dumbarton Justice of the Peace Court, referring to licences granted in 1773 to 'Robert Muir of Little Miln' and others. However, distillers' licences were granted by the Scottish Excise Board, under government legislation of 1784 and 1786. Justices of the Peace were responsible, rather, for the licensing of local inns, shops and other outlets to sell beer, spirits and other alcoholic beverages. Like many of the men named on the Justices of the Peace's list of licensees in 1773, Muir's occupation is given in the minutes as 'change keeper', not as a distiller. Change houses were establishments which provided travellers with facilities

¹¹ <www.littlemilldistillery.com/pages/history> accessed 3 December 2024.

for rest and refreshment, as well as a change of horses to enable them to continue their journeys. It is apparent that Muir was not granted a licence to distil whisky on his premises at Littlemill but (in the words of the document) to 'retail Ale, Beer and other excisable Liquors' as a licensee in what we still call 'licensed premises' today.

While a building at Littlemill is said to have exhibited a datestone for 1772, it is likely to have been one of the old mill buildings which stood on the site. The location of an Excise office nearby would be consistent with the role of the Excise in stationing officers in industrial areas to collect duties on goods manufactured by local businessmen such as cotton printers. Like Glenturret, Littlemill has a proud and eventful history which can be traced back in the Excise records to 1816. However, no historical evidence has been published to indicate it was either Scotland's first or its oldest licensed distillery.

Bowmore

Bowmore, reputedly founded in 1779, has long been described by its owners as the oldest distillery on Islay.¹² It might be touted as the titleholder for all of Scotland if the claims of Glenturret were to be found wanting. Yet no contemporary documentary or any other evidence from the eighteenth century has yet been published to indicate there was a distillery in Bowmore from that date. The man said to have founded the distillery, David Simson, does not appear in the lists of rentals in Bowmore in the 1770s and 1780s, although he appears in the 1798 records as the tenant of 'McCuaig's Acres' in the town. There is another tenant called Simson listed in Bowmore in 1778: but Miss Lily Simson occupied a public house, not a distillery.¹³

¹²The claim has been made for more than a century, although without substantiation: the earliest reference I can find is in the *Oban Times*, 11 December 1909. It has been accepted in various histories of Islay including Margaret Storrie, *Islay: Biography of an Island*, second edition (Islay: The Oa Press, 1997), p.196, and Neil Wilson, *Scotch and Water: An Illustrated Guide to the Hebridean Malt Whisky Distilleries*, second edition (Colonsay: Lochar Publishing, 1985), p.69. The words 'Estd 1779' has appeared on Bowmore bottle labels for many decades. See also the brand website <<https://bowmore.com/en/our-history>> accessed 3 December 2024.

¹³Freda Ramsay (ed.), *Day Book of Daniel Campbell of Shawfield, 1767: With Relevant Papers Concerning the Estate of Islay* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1991), p.212.

A distillery at Bowmore is listed in the Excise records in 1816 (the owner is not identified) and the Scottish Excise Board minutes in January 1824 recorded that John Johnston's distillery was 'about to commence' in Bowmore. Bowmore's supposed foundation date of 1779 remains apparently undocumented and unproven.

Strathisla

Strathisla's claim to be 'the oldest working distillery in the Highlands' would be contradicted by The Glenturret's story if the latter were accurate, as both distilleries are in the Highland whisky region. But while The Glenturret has not been able to establish its eighteenth-century credentials, Strathisla's claim is a convincing one. A charter from 1785, held in the National Records of Scotland, relates to a tack (lease) of land for a distillery at Milton in Keith, Banffshire, to Alexander Milne of Chapelton and George Taylor, merchant in Keith. Recently, a researcher discovered a set of accounts held in the University of Aberdeen's Special Collections, which contains a detailed record of the building costs incurred by George Taylor 'for the distillery at Milntown' during 1786, and for sending out the first consignments of whisky at the start of the following year.¹⁴ Like most of the old-established Scottish distilleries Milton had a chequered history. It fell silent during hard times on several occasions over the centuries before its acquisition by Chivas Brothers in 1950 and its renaming as Strathisla. The distillery still occupies the site on which it was built in 1786.

As no reliable evidence has been presented to support claims that Glenturret was founded at some time before 1763, Littlemill in 1772 and Bowmore in 1779, should the title of Scotland's oldest distillery belong instead to Strathisla?

Conclusion

Inevitably, there are some jokers in the 'oldest' pack. Today, Glen Garioch's owners claim only that it was founded by John Manson in Oldmeldrum in Aberdeenshire in

¹⁴ NRS, GD1/1001, Tack to Keith Distillery Company, 7 March 1789. Aberdeen University Library, AUL, MS3175, 'Account of Expenses Laid Out for Distillery at Milltown, November 13 1787'.

1797. However, T. Simpson advertised in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* in December 1785 that he would begin selling whisky from his distillery in the town that month; an entry in the *Statistical Account of Scotland* in 1794 mentions a single distillery in the town, and in 1799 two distillers – John Manson and Thomas Simpson – are recorded as working there. The subsequent story of the distillery is tortuous, and the evidence is far from conclusive, but there is a (slim) possibility that Thomas Simpson may have founded what is now Glen Garioch in 1785.

Meanwhile, a still, worm and stand were listed in an inventory of the possessions of the one of the tenants of Lagavulin on Islay in the early 1780s.¹⁵ Is this evidence that today's distillery may have been founded much earlier than 1816, the date celebrated by its owners today? Or simply of 'private distilling', legally or otherwise, which was once common all over Scotland?

As with all claims regarding the story of Scotch whisky and of individual distilleries, historians must rely on the available primary sources. Whisky industry corporate communications and advertising are designed primarily to sell a particular brand or product and should be treated with caution. Today, Strathisla certainly appears to have the strongest case to be identified as Scotland's oldest distillery. However, no one can predict what records and game-changing information might come to light in the future, shedding more light on the early history of the distilling industry in Scotland. The role of archivists in facilitating further research into the authentic history of Scotland's whisky distilleries, companies and brands, is crucial.

¹⁵ Glasgow City Archives, TD1284/5/1/1, Inventory of Duncan Campbell... 1 June 1784.

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