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## Kennetpans Distillery - Clackmannan



## The 'water of life'\* downed by boom and bust

*By the water's edge on the North bank of the River Forth, lie the enigmatic ruins of the once mighty Kennetpans whisky distillery. Established around 1777 by John Stein \*\*, Kennetpans consumed locally produced grain and coal to produce distilled spirit, mostly for the London gin trade.*

*The production of distilled spirits is universal and age-old. Distilling drinks from excess cereal harvests became commonplace in the late medieval period in the UK and elsewhere. Many countries have their own version of distilled alcoholic beverage widely known as 'aqua vitae'. Whisky is Scotland's version. The industrial-scale production of whisky 'took off' in the 18th century. Whisky is now synonymous with Scotland - a market worth some £5 billion per year to the Scottish economy.*

*The Kennetpans site consists of the ruins of a once vast complex. The main block, standing up to three storeys in height, would have been where the whisky was made. This was achieved by milling malted grain (usually barley) to produce a meal which was put through the 'mashing' process (the ground grain being heated in hot water, known as 'liquor' in the trade). The resulting liquid (wort) was then fermented, distilled and put into wooden casks (maturation process) for transport by water. Moving shipments by road in 18th century Scotland was extremely difficult due to their poor quality. The rest of the complex consisted of kilns (where the grain was dried to halt germination), kiln stores (for the grain), workshops, and storage areas for empty casks. There were also secure warehouses in which the whisky would be kept prior to duty being paid as well as to ensure a supply ready to be dispatched to customers.*

*Along with the output of the nearby Stein family distillery at Kilbagie, the whisky produced was shipped out in barrels from the now silted up harbour at Kennetpans. The former harbour and its wharves, represented by the remains of rotted wooden posts belying the scale of the enterprise, would have taken several ships at a time. This industrial complex included a canal linking Kilbagie Distillery (the first distillery to export spirit in Scotland) and Kennetpans. This mile long canal can be traced in the landscape to this day. This part of the River Forth would have been a hive of activity in the late 18th century alongside the other harbours and wharves by the shores of the estuary.*

*Kennetpans Distillery also had an early example of a Boulton and Watt steam engine (1786) which replaced a windmill used previously for grinding the kiln-dried malted barley. This engine was obtained from their Soho Works in Birmingham and was replaced by a second engine from the firm in 1806. Such engines were the cutting-edge technology of their time and iconic signifiers of what became termed the First Industrial Revolution.*





## Whisky, bribes and London monopolies

*The whisky produced at Kennetpans, as at any distillery, was extremely valuable both to the producer and to the tax man. With the Act of Union in 1707, the tax on whisky and malt became permanent, encouraging evasion through the illicit trade. However, in the latter part of the 18th century, there was a dramatic growth of exports to England for all Scottish distillers, including the Steins. By 1788, the export tax on Kilbagie and Kennetpans (levied on spirits sent to the English market) was greater than the total land tax for the whole of Scotland. Changes in the taxation laws during this era increased the returns to the Exchequer, but trammelled the whisky producers in Scotland. At the same time, English spirit traders lobbied the Parliament at Westminster to do something about the volumes of whisky flowing into London resulting from the booming Lowland whisky production. When times were hard, distilleries would be sequestered, as happened at Kennetpans in 1788, when the Lowland Licence Act stopped the making of whisky for 12 months at all Scottish lowland distilleries supplying the English trade. Kennetpans reopened in 1791 after it was bought by two businessmen and leased back to John Stein Junior. The Distillery finally closed after John Stein died in 1825.*

*Bribery and corruption was also a part of the whisky story in the 18th century. One such scandal directly touched Kennetpans and the Kilbagie Distillery. The County Magazine reports on a trial that took place at the High Court in 1786, where James Stein of Kilbagie Distillery 'stood indicted ...for the crime of bribing, or attempting to bribe, Mr John Bonnar, Solicitor of Excise, by thrusting into his pocket, on the 2[n]d of September 1785, a paper parcel, containing 500l. sterling, in Bank notes, with the following words wrote on the inside of the cover, 'this is to be repeated once a year'.' The jury found that 'the delivery of 500l. sterling to Mr John Bonnar proven; but do not find the intention of seducing and corrupting the said John Bonnar proven.' One could say that James Stein was extremely lucky: tax evasion and bribery charges against distillers were not unknown at this time. He, in his turn, sued for lost business. Chutzpah, indeed!*

*Today the ruins of Kennetpans are in a parlous state but they are perhaps more intact than those of any other late 18th century distillery in Scotland. The present owners of the Kennetpans Distillery complex are keen to celebrate and publicise this 'forgotten' industrial venture with the setting up of a local Trust and the remains were designated as a Scheduled Monument in 1991.*

*\* 'Whisky' has been corrupted from the Gaelic, usquebae (various spellings) and is the equivalent of aqua vitae or 'water of life' - a generic term for distilled alcoholic beverages. Aqua vitae were originally taken as a tonic, although the convivial effects of drinking the 'tonic' no doubt soon outstripped its imagined medicinal value.*

*\*\*John's brother, James, founded the Kilbagie Distillery, a mile to the north, around the same time. During the late 18th century, the Stein family ( or rather the Stein dynasty) owned and operated the Kilbagie and Kennetpans distilleries in Clackmannanshire, the Canonmills and Lochrin distilleries in Edinburgh and the Kincapple distillery in Fife. They controlled a significant chunk of both the whisky-making and whisky trade in Scotland at this time - along with the Haigs, who married into the Stein family in the 1750s.*

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<https://canmore.org.uk/site/48117/kennetpans-distillery>  
<http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/SM5012>  
<http://www.kennetpans.info/>



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