

Milton of New Tarbat

This is the 'mill town' of the estate of New Tarbat. A 'town' or 'toun' is the Scots name for a small settlement – not a large one, as suggested by the modern sense of town. The estate was named New Tarbat after George Mackenzie bought it, in 1656, and moved here from the original Tarbat, further north near Portmahomack.

The settlement first grew up under Munro lairds, who built their castle near here around 1500. In 1642 a fire started in a jackdaw's nest in a chimney and largely destroyed the building. George Mackenzie replaced it with New Tarbat House (c1670) and this was again replaced by a magnificent mansion, simply called Tarbat House (1784–87). This now stands in ruins.

The tenants on an estate such as New Tarbat were thirled (bound) to the laird's mills. They had no choice but to bring all their grain, mostly oats and bere (a form of barley), to be ground here and so the 'mill town' was an important source of estate income.

When George Mackenzie became hereditary sheriff and 1st Earl of Cromartie he administered his lands and held his courts at New Tarbat. He also added to Milton's importance by making it a 'burgh of barony' (a small commercial town), with weekly markets held around the mercat (market) cross. Milton's prosperity continued and many of the buildings bordering this open market place were built in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Among these buildings is the Drovers' Inn – a reminder that Milton once lay on one of the routes by which cattle were driven south. Cattle were the main source of a cash income for tenants throughout the Highlands. The cattle droves took the animals to the local market at Muir of Ord, and then on to the great fairs or trysts at Crieff and Falkirk in central Scotland. Here they were bought by English dealers and taken over the border to satisfy the great English appetite for roast beef.

Today Milton's community managed woodlands offer the opportunity to walk by the water courses which powered its mills.