

Venetian Glassmakers in the Prestonpans Area in the Seventeenth Century

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In the early seventeenth century the Scottish economy relied heavily on imports, a situation the government sought to remedy by encouraging the establishment of new industries requiring not just economic and social incentives, but the acquisition of foreign expertise. During the century the manufacture of three new industrial products was established: soap, sugar and glass. Glass is the subject of this paper, which concentrates on the difficulties of obtaining and retaining the very specialised skills of men who could produce high-quality table glass, in this case the Venetians. What had begun in 1610 as a modest venture by the ambitious entrepreneur, Sir George Hay of Netherliff, soon escalated into a burgeoning fine glass industry, thanks to intervention from England. For economic and political reasons, the glassmaker Leonardo Michellini was funded to establish a glassworks in Prestonpans, employing a large group of his fellow Venetians accompanied by their families. This paper discusses the available information about this group and their legacy.

This paper concerns the events leading to the presence of Venetian glassmakers and their families in a small community on the south coast of the Firth of Forth in the early seventeenth century and the response of the Kirk Session to having Catholics in their midst. A patent of monopoly to make iron and glass had been granted in 1610 to Sir George Hay of Netherliff, who required a skilled workforce to manufacture the glass. Huguenot and Venetian glassmakers had already settled in England, and in the 1620s, thanks to a conspiracy by some English glassworks owners against Sir Robert Mansell, holder of the English patent, funding was given to the Venetian Leonardo Michellini to establish a glassworks near Prestonpans and to pay for his fellow countrymen to leave Mansell's employment to work in Scotland.

The Scottish economy in the early seventeenth century was weighted heavily in favour of imported goods, a situation amply illustrated in *The Book of Customs and Valuation of Merchandises in Scotland, 1612*.¹ Imports, including all types of glass, occupy 48 pages, exports just five. The economic and political implications of such imbalance led those in power to adopt two major policies, described by W. R. Scott in his book *The Constitution and Finance of English, Scottish*

¹ (ed.) C. Innes, *Ledger of Andrew Halyburton, Conservator of the Privileges of the Scotch Nation in the Netherlands, 1492–1503; together with The Book of Customs and Valuation of Merchandises in Scotland, 1612* (Edinburgh, 1867), 288–340.

*and Irish Joint-Stock Companies to 1720*² as the encouragement of home fishing and the attempt to establish Scottish manufactures. Measures to achieve the latter were taken on an ad hoc basis throughout the seventeenth century, often in response to individual requests, and included the imposition of import tariffs, granting of patents of monopoly, and a wide range of other inducements.

It was deemed particularly important to encourage ‘the practice of tradis not formarlie knowne’,³ for which the acquisition of foreign expertise was recognised as essential. Flemish and English weavers, dyers, spinners and waulkers⁴ came to Edinburgh to improve the cloth industry, as did Huguenot silk-weavers, while the sassanach’s graveyard on the shore of Loch Maree bears witness to the English iron smelters who worked there. The newly established sugar-houses depended on the expertise and equipment of Dutch and German sugar-makers, and without the positive enrolment of English and European experts throughout the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth century, there would have been no glass manufactured in Scotland.

The 1681 ‘Act for encouraging trade and manufactures’,⁵ which consolidated earlier legislation,⁶ also brought together the piecemeal assistance previously offered, confirming the same rights to foreigners who brought in new skills and capital as those possessed by native Scots, so acknowledging the need for their expertise. The Act exempted imported raw material from duty for nineteen years and employees from military service for seven years, as well as forbidding the importation of luxury items such as fabrics, shoes and carpets, all important incentives to local industry. The administration in Scotland was not always able to enforce the restrictions on imported goods, however, something from which the glass trade suffered.

No industry can take root without major investment in men and materials, while the availability of fuel, transport and a market for the goods produced are clearly also vital. Glass manufacture had its own particular requirements, some of which were readily available in large areas of Scotland. A glass furnace once lit remained in operation until it required repair, so a steady supply of coal was crucial, as it was for other industries. Because production had to be constantly maintained and start-up expenses were high, sufficient capital was often a problem, as was the cash flow, which could only be maintained by regular sales. Early investment often came from the owners of the estates on which coal mines operated, while merchants were often shareholders. The Scottish

² W. R. Scott, *The Constitution and Finance of English, Scottish and Irish Joint-Stock Companies to 1720* (Cambridge, 1911), 123.

³ G. Donaldson, *Scotland: James V to James VII* (Edinburgh, 1965), 244.

⁴ To waulk is to ‘make cloth thick and felted by a process of soaking, beating and shrinking’ (Scots Dictionary).

⁵ (ed.) T. Thomson and C. Innes, *Acts of the Parliament of Scotland 1124–1707*, VIII, 1670–1686 (Edinburgh, 1820), 384.

⁶ ‘Act for Erecting of Manufactories’, in (ed.) T. Thomson and C. Innes, *Acts of the Parliament of Scotland 1124–1707*, VII, 1661–1669 (Edinburgh, 1820), 261–2.

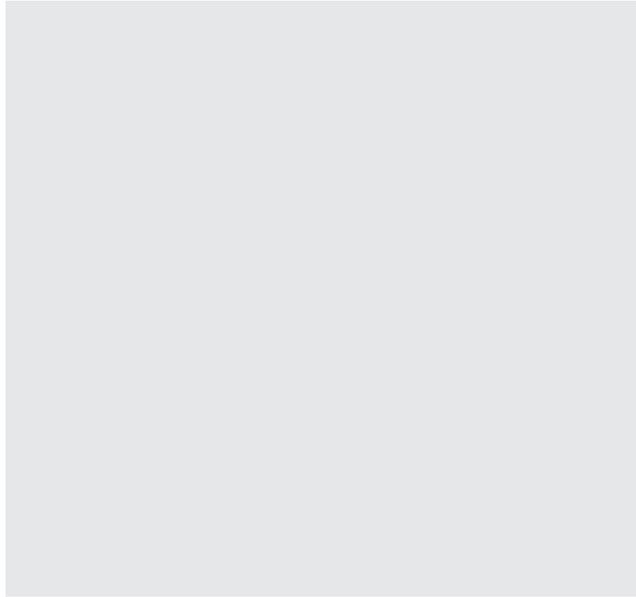


Plate 1 A fine bottle seal found in Cockenzie. Archibald Robertson was a shareholder in the Port Seton glassworks and brother-in-law of William Adam. Private collection.

market was always too small to support the industry, so the ability to trade elsewhere without restriction was vital – and was of considerable importance in the negotiations prior to signing the Act of Union in 1707.⁷ The only viable means of distribution at the time was by sea, so it is no surprise that a number of early glassworks were set up along the coast of the Firth of Forth, an area rich in coal and with a number of harbours between Leith and Port Seton.

The development of strong, dark green bottles during the early seventeenth century enabled them to become the mainstay of the industry. Claret imported into Leith was decanted into bottles, requiring the employment of ancillary workers: corkers, die-makers for seals indicating ownership of a bottle and its contents (Plate 1), porters, packers, etc. The industry itself required highly skilled employees – all male – to produce the molten glass, blow the bottles or, at the highest level, to create wine glasses, decanters and other table glass for the very wealthy. Such knowledge did not exist in Scotland.

⁷ See T. C. Smout, *Scottish Trade on the Eve of the Union 1660–1707* (Edinburgh, 1963), C. A. Whatley, 'Economic Causes and Consequences of the Union of 1707: a Survey', *Scottish Historical Review*, 68, no. 2 (1989), 150–81; J. Turnbull, *The Scottish Glass Industry 1610–1750* (Edinburgh, 2001), 175–86.

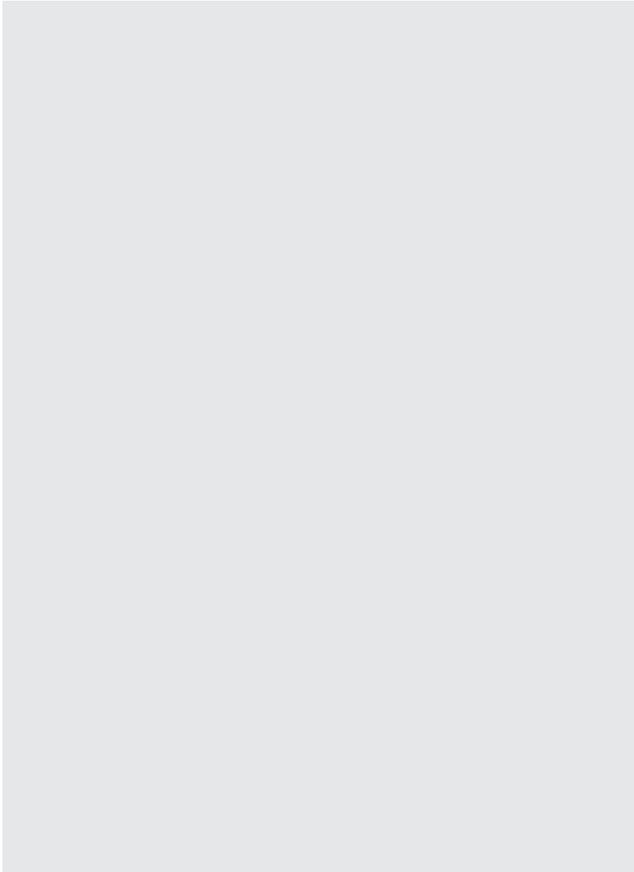


Plate 2 The memorial of Sir George Hay, Lord Chancellor of Scotland, situated in a small chapel in Kinnoull, Perthshire. Crown copyright: Scottish Historic Environment SC672413.

The Scottish glass industry began in December 1610 with the granting of a ‘Commission and licence [to] mak yrne and glass within the kingdom of Scotland’ for 21 years to Sir George Hay of Netherliff (1570–1634), later the 1st Earl of Kinnoull and Lord Chancellor of Scotland (Plate 2). Effectively a patent of monopoly, the original ‘commission’ was granted in Whitehall and later confirmed by an Act of Parliament in Scotland in October 1612, both of which were published in *Acts of the Parliament of Scotland 1124–1707*.⁸

⁸ (ed.) T. Thomson and C. Innes, *Acts of the Parliament of Scotland 1124–1707*, IV, 1593–1625 (Edinburgh, 1816), 515.

Having obtained his patent of monopoly, Hay and his licensees had to deal with the lack of skilled manpower. No one in Scotland had any knowledge of how to set up a glassworks nor how to make glass – such expertise was in England in the hands of the Huguenots and Venetians who had established glassworks there from the 1560s. Their knowledge was very valuable, passed from father to son, and closely guarded. Unlike many other artisans, glassmakers were of high status and were remunerated accordingly.

The story behind their arrival in Scotland would be familiar today – commercial sabotage, underhand dealings and political intrigue. With its own government and legal system, Scotland was not bound by law to burn only coal to produce glass, while in England wood-burning furnaces were banned in 1615. There was fierce opposition to this ban among a number of interested parties in England who plotted to undermine Sir Robert Mansell, owner of the English patent of monopoly, by setting up rival glassworks in Scotland and selling the glass made there in England more cheaply than his. Much of the information about the period comes from official and legal sources which have been preserved, although occasionally letters and other more personal material has survived. Since Sir George Hay was Lord Chancellor of Scotland he appears in official records, and there is some extant information about his business life in patent records. (English Patent Rolls are housed in diverse institutions but can be traced through The National Archives UK website.)

Sir Robert Mansell was first and foremost an Admiral of the Fleet, which meant that, whatever his commercial interests, the Navy had first call on his presence. He was, however, represented by his able and persistent wife, Lady Mansell, who in 1621 was supervising her husband's business while he was away at sea fulfilling his duties. She presented a petition to James VI and I describing in detail a plot emanating from those opposed to Mansell and the ban on burning wood, who were funding an important glassworks at Morison's Haven, now Prestongrange:⁹

Sir Wm Clavill, Worrell a broker, Dines a glazier and Bunger the sonne of an alien glassmaker (whoe hath in open audience vowed to spent 1000li to ruine your petitioner's husband) joining with the Scottish patentee, taking the advantage of your petitioner's husband's absence, thinking your petitioner a weake woman unable to followe the business ... have inticed 3 of her workmen for window glasse ...

She claimed that an English glassworks owner, Sir William Clavell, had enticed some of Mansell's workmen to abscond to Scotland as part of a concerted plot to undermine his business. She was correct, and similar plotting and enticing away of the skilled workforce continued for over twenty years, bringing Venetians and Huguenots to Scotland. One of the chief protagonists in England, Isaac

⁹ National Archives UK SP16/521/206, 'Petition of Lady Elizabeth Mannsell weife to Sir Robert Mannsell Knight'.

Bungar, was a leading glassmaker of Huguenot descent. The earliest known foreign glassmakers in Scotland were Samuel Chaisse (1617), John Maria del Aqua (1620), Bernard Tamerlayne (1620) and Leonardo Michellini (1622).¹⁰

Venetians were not supposed to take their skills out of the country, and a report to the Council of Ten in 1622 from the Venetian ambassador in England defended his efforts to persuade them to return to Venice. His letters have been published in *The Calendar of State Papers ... Venice*. He described Leonardo Michellini as a Venetian of low birth and a thorough rascal, adding ‘they have already set up new furnaces in Scotland’. He was clearly under pressure because he went on: ‘I assure your Serenity that I have even given my own money to some [glassmakers] in order that they might return to Murano as they professed they wished to do; but afterwards learned that they had gone to Scotland’.¹¹

The evidence for his complaint can be found in a document, dated May 1623, which states that every week since October 1622, Sir William Clavell had paid Michellini ‘now resident in Mylnehaven beside Prestonpans’ cash amounting to £400 sterling to set up a glassworks at what later became known as Morison’s Haven. William Dick, a well-known merchant burgher of Edinburgh, acted as middleman.¹² It was agreed that the glassworks should be held as security for any further cash advances. Michellini was to send his glass down to Clavell’s London agent, Archibald Boyle, for sale in England, undercutting Sir Robert Mansell and trying to put him out of business (Plate 3).

This document can be found in the Register of Deeds in the National Records of Scotland (NRS), a very important source, and particular to Scotland. The Register records all manner of agreements which needed to be legally binding, from loans to prenuptial arrangements, and from contracts of co-partnership to other business deals – a very wide range. It can be tricky to find them because the deeds were usually not registered on the date they were signed. They are, however, indexed by their registration date, which was when the agreement was implemented – which might be twenty or more years later. Most are indexed after 1661 but there is a gap between 1715 and 1750. After 1812, listed as RD5, they are being digitised and are available as virtual volumes on the computers in Register House. There is a research guide on the NRS website.

Venetians continued to yo-yo between England and Scotland for the next twenty-plus years. In 1630 Mansell complained again, naming fourteen of his Italian glassmakers who had absconded.¹³ Most eventually returned to England

¹⁰ Turnbull, *Scottish Glass Industry*. All known glassmakers are listed.

¹¹ *Calendar of State Papers and Manuscripts relating to English Affairs, Existing in the Archives and Collections of Venice 1621–1623* (London, 1911), 308.

¹² NRS, RD11/150, Contract between Leonardo Michellini and William Dick registered 3 May 1623.

¹³ *Acts of the Privy Council of England, XLV, 1629 May–1630 May* (London, 1960), 336.

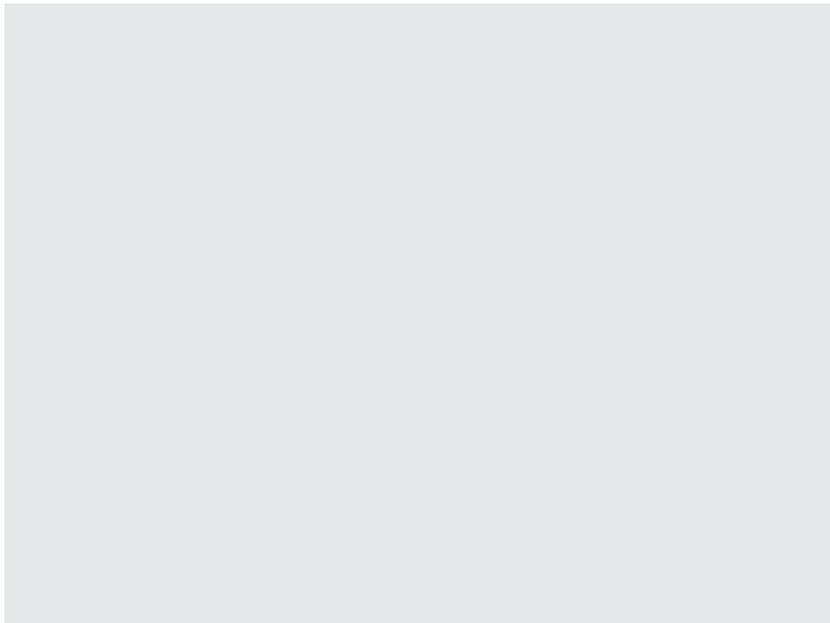


Plate 3 Extract of a contract between Leonardo Michellini and William Dick, merchant in Edinburgh. Crown copyright, NRS, RD11/150.

but at least one, Cornelius Visitella, eventually settled in Scotland. Sir William Clavell ended up in the Marshalsea debtors' prison.¹⁴

That was not the end of glassmaking at Morison's Haven, however. The new owner was Sir Philibert Vernatti, a Dutchman who originally came to Britain to assist with draining the Fens, and is well documented in a range of English archives.¹⁵ His brother Maximilian Vernatti became the manager at the works, a fact discovered because his small daughter, her nanny and a servant were held on a ship moored off Prestonpans, which had been quarantined because it was suspected of carrying the plague.¹⁶ Passengers who disembarked without permission could be shot. He was granted permission to have them quarantined on shore, a story recorded in the *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, another gold mine of information.

¹⁴ National Library of Scotland, ADV MS 33.1.1, vol. 10, no. 98, Sir Robert Aytoun in London to Sir George Hay, 11 July 1623.

¹⁵ See The National Archives UK Discovery website: <http://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk>.

¹⁶ (ed.) P. Hume Brown, *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland*, 2nd Series, VI, A.D. 1635–1637 (Edinburgh, 1905), 273.

A name like Vernatti is a gift for the researcher and in this digital age should be easy to track down, but there is, of course, a problem. Spelling in the seventeenth century was far from precise, and transcribing foreign names was especially difficult, leading to endless variations on a name such as this. Contemporary documents yielded eight variations: Vernat, Vernate, Vernatty, Vernattie, Vernattois, Vermitty, Vermitti and Bernatti, but there are probably more, so they are not easy to find on the average website.

In 1635 eleven Venetian glassmakers were working for Vernatti, their names being recorded as Giacomo Lepomanno, Francisco Maxalao, Christopher Farsy, Valeria Biondi, Francisco Biondi, Francisco Ballanato, Giovanni Riggio, Johne Rouse, Charles Martine, Basteanne Nicoll and Johne McAcombla; five of them had also been listed (some with different spellings) in 1630. All had worked for Mansell but insisted that they were free to work where they wished at that time.

These men would have been the main glassblowers, each with an unnamed, experienced assistant – a *serviteur* – to work with him. One at least would have known how to set up a furnace and manufacture the glass itself. We know the manager, Maximilian Vernatti, had at least a nanny and servant in his household but there were undoubtedly others. Thanks to another very important local source, we know the glassmakers' families were with them – since they were Catholics, they caused concern to the local Prestonpans Kirk Session, whose records are extant. It is no surprise that the kirk elders were not happy to have so many Catholics in their parish, so when something too blatant occurred, they felt obliged to act. The Session records show that the glassmaker Christopher Fiarlie [Farsy] was called to appear because he had had a child baptised by 'a popish priest, contrair to the laws of our Kirk'. Farsy's answer was that he had done it twice before in England and thought it would be 'tolerated as well here'. He was told he must not look for such liberation in Scotland, and that he must name the priest. This he did – a John Inkyt (again a challenging spelling) whom he knew in London and who 'happening to come to his house shortly after his wife's delivery, was asked to baptize the bairn'.¹⁷ A somewhat unlikely excuse.

The Venetians and their families remained in Prestonpans for a further eleven years. They were particularly fortunate in being able to pursue their religion because the Earl of Winton, an important and wealthy local landowner, was a staunch Catholic, enabling the glassmakers to take mass at his home, Seton House.

Sir Philibert Vernatti died in about 1643 and the glassmakers had left Morison's Haven by November 1646, a fact recorded in the personal details of one young local woman in the Kirk Session accounts in the NRS. Janet Irvine had a child by one of the glassmakers and was granted £5 10s., 'having

¹⁷ NRS, CH2/307/5, Account marriages and baptisms, Prestonpans Kirk Session 1646–1680.

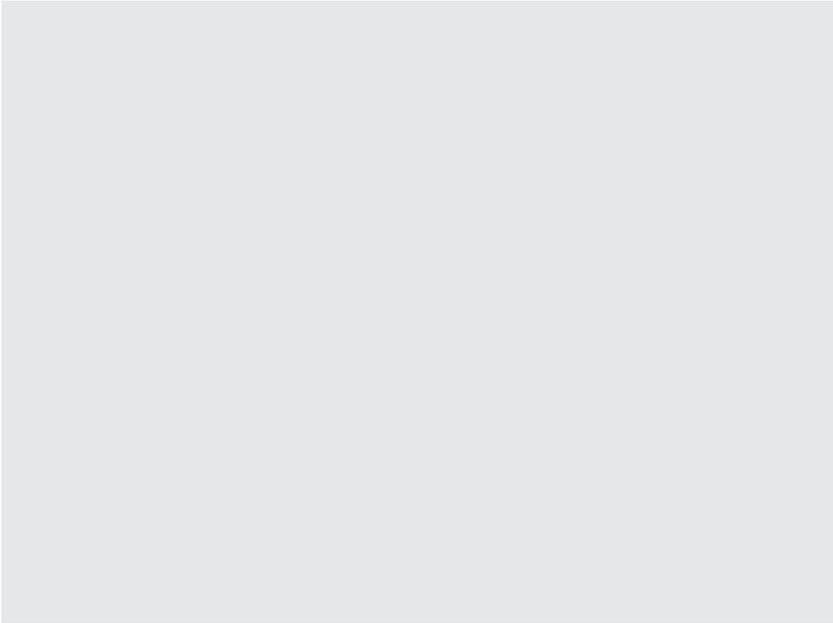


Plate 4 Extract from the Prestonpans Kirk Session showing the entry donating money to a young resident who had a child by a Venetian glassmaker. NRS, CH2/307/5.

nothing wherewith to transport herself with the child to England'.¹⁸ This brief detail about one young woman, with her baby, leaving the small and relatively remote parish of Prestonpans to travel south in search of its father, really brings history to life. It is also the only information which has come to light about the Venetians' departure (Plate 4).

One Venetian glassmaker remained in the Prestonpans area. On 2 August 1647, Sir James Hope of Craighall described a meeting he had with several eminent Scots and a glassmaker called Cornelius Vesintello or Visitella, whose name was on the 1630 list that Mansell gave to the Privy Council, and who appears to have branched out on his own.¹⁹ Interestingly, an artist called Isaac Visitella lived in Edinburgh in the mid-seventeenth century.²⁰

Cornelius Visitella wanted to set up his own glassworks at 'the pans'. The exact site is not specified, but there is some evidence it was at Westpans, just to

¹⁸ NRS, CH2/307/5, Account marriages and baptisms, Prestonpans Kirk Session 1646–1680.

¹⁹ 'The Diary of Sir James Hope, 1646–1654', in (ed.) Sir James Balfour Paul, *Miscellany of the Scottish History Society*, III (Edinburgh, 1919), 127.

²⁰ D. Macmillan, *Scottish Art 1460–1990* (Edinburgh, 1990), 81.

the west of Morison's Haven. A few days before the larger meeting, on 29 July 1647, he presented a comprehensive costing to Sir James Hope.²¹

The Hopetoun House archive is listed in the National Register of Archives of Scotland (NRAS) in Register House and details can be found in an online catalogue available in the search room. It is then possible, by prior arrangement, to visit the archive at Hopetoun House, now administered by volunteers, or for papers to be examined in Register House. The NRAS holds the catalogues of numerous private collections, which can be extremely useful and well worth investigating.

Among Visitella's details are notes added in another hand, perhaps that of Sir James Hope, that it would cost £10 to bring in one master [glassblower] and one *serviteur*, and that he [Visitella] and his *serviteur* were here already. He also says that he could make glasses 'to as great a degree of purity as Venice glass' but there would be a smaller number of them, so he suggested production of cheaper beer and wine glasses.

The original information came to light in *The Diary of Sir James Hope*, published by the Scottish History Society, which contains most of the original version but not the extra notes, emphasising the importance of going back to primary sources.²²

No further evidence about Cornelius Visitella has been found, but in 1662 a Jacob Visitella was described as a 'glassmaker at Westpans' when he borrowed some money (the Register of Deeds again) – so he was presumably from the second generation of the family.²³ In 1707 a Jacob Visitell was working in a glassworks in Leith,²⁴ so the family remained in Scotland for probably three generations, but like all the other makers of table glass had to move to England or elsewhere when production of table glass ceased in Scotland between c.1734 and 1777. The name persists in England, with entries in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, one describing a British-Italian publisher called Henry Richard Vizetelly, who died in 1890 and had been a correspondent for the *Illustrated London News*.

The 1662 bond signed by Jacob Visitella was witnessed by Edward Dagnia, also an Italian glassmaker from a well-known family, and brought by Sir Robert Mansell from Altare in about 1630. The Dagnias settled in England and found their way to Scotland in the 1660s. Edward married a Joanna Coe, and their children were called Onesiphorus, Edward and John.

The Venetians, like other skilled glassmakers, were often on the move, travelling to wherever they were offered work. Eventually they, and their Huguenot counterparts, who made window glass and bottles, passed on their

²¹ Nation Register of the Archives of Scotland, S888 bundle 3477, Hopetoun House archives.

²² 'The Diary of Sir James Hope', 140.

²³ NRS, RD4/6/290, Bond dated 1662.

²⁴ NRS, CS18/188.

knowledge to local men. Whatever their nationality, glassmakers were, and remained, the most highly paid in any industry, something which was to cause their employers considerable difficulty in the highly competitive world of the late nineteenth century.

Researching the history of an industry in the seventeenth century is challenging. Published official sources are obviously vital to provide the legal and financial framework but are clearly not sufficient. Sometimes, however, surprisingly personal – and invaluable – material can be found in unexpected places such as state papers. One example is the story of the plague ship recorded in the *Register of the Privy Council of Scotland. The Calendar of State Papers ... Venice* does not sound very exciting, but the Venetian ambassador's angry frustration when he wrote to his employers speaks volumes. It is always worth a look.

By the end of the seventeenth century, three new industries had been established in Scotland – soap, sugar and glass. Despite general economic stagnation, the Scottish glass industry was actually boosted at the end of the century by the consequences of tax imposed on its English counterpart. In 1695 the English parliament decided to impose excise duty on glass, stone and earthenwares, tobacco pipes, coal and culm (coal slack) to pay for the war with France. Its glass industry suffered instantly, with numerous petitions presented to parliament. In 1696, for example, a petition from the Stourbridge glassmakers claimed that if the tax continued 'the Petitioners and their Families must starve, or be maintained by their Parishes'.²⁵ It is probably no coincidence that two new glassworks were established in Scotland at that time, taking advantage of fact that, unusually, English glassworkers were seeking employment elsewhere.²⁶

One lesson learned from nearly 30 years of research is that nothing happens in isolation and events outside Scotland often have profound effects within it.

²⁵ *The Journal of the House of Commons 11, 1693–1697* (London, 1803), 605.

²⁶ Turnbull, *The Scottish Glass Industry*, 175–6.