Roan Spinning Mills, showing Mill Row terrace.

ROAN SPINNING MILLS, COALISLAND, CO. TYRONE
1 ROAN SPINNING MILLS
The Roan (or Roughan) Spinning Mills were built on the Derryvale Road, Brackaville, Coalisland, beside the River Torrent and nearby to a series of bleach mills. The earliest mention of the mills is in 1842 when the Stevenson family are listed as proprietors. In 1848, the mills were among the first in the area to be mechanised. Power was provided by a 12 horse-power condensing steam engine and a large boiler almost 10 metres long. An even bigger 40 horse-power engine was installed in June 1850 as the mill increased production and employed more local people.

By this time, there were two spinning mills at Roan and they initially contained a combined total of 4,000 spindles, with enough capacity for 6,000 more. Both mill buildings were two storeys high and 130-150 feet long and they employed a workforce of over 140 people.

One of the owners, John Stevenson, appears to have been an inventor and innovator. In 1850 he patented a new process for “improvements in machinery for spinning flax and other substances”. In 1852, a prototype of the new spinning frame was built under Stevenson’s instruction and demonstrated in the Combe & Co. Foundry, Belfast. It was credited with producing “30% more spindle and 50% less waste” than the spinning frames in use at the time. The newspaper reports were full of praise and believed it was “most satisfactory that the merit of the invention is due to an Irishman, who is also known as one of the best of employers”.

2 TROUBLED TIMES FOR THE STEVENSONS
However, all was not well with the business. In 1853, John Stevenson was prosecuted at the Dungannon Petty Sessions after a factory inspector found that some of the mill workers were exceeding their permitted labour hours each day. It is not clear if Stevenson had coerced his workers into exceeding the limitations of their shift but he was fined £15; a
charge of £1 for each worker reported by the inspector. Then, in February 1854, the Roan Spinning Mills were put up for sale and the owners were declared bankrupt months later.

3 THE WILSON FAMILY
The mills were bought by John Wilson in 1857 and, on his death ten years later, the business was taken over by his son, Henry. As often happened, Henry married into another linen family in 1874; his wife, Jane (or Jennie) Stevenson¹, was the daughter of John Stevenson, the joint owner of Stevenson & Clark, the weaving factory in Coalisland.

On their wedding day, the staff at the weaving factory presented Jennie Stevenson with a gift of furniture and published an address in the Belfast News-Letter wishing the couple every happiness. When Jennie died of a stroke at Roan House in March 1891, aged only 41 years old, she was fondly remembered as generous and kind by the workers at the spinning mills:

“...She took great interest in the young women in the employment of her husband...She was known by her beneficence to a very large circle of the poorer classes whose lots had fallen in less pleasant places.”

As the work force expanded, a terrace of houses called Mill Row was built close to the mills, providing convenient and comfortable accommodation for the staff. Just like nearby Sion Mills, Roan Mills also had its own cricket club, with Henry Wilson complimented as a “superior bowler”.

4 THE LOCK OUT
In 1917, a devastating dispute with the workers almost destroyed the mill. At the time, wages were low compared to other mills, despite the fact that Roan Mills had become increasingly profitable. For this reason, among others, the relationship between workers and management was poor. At the beginning of May, Henry Wilson offered to raise wages by three shillings a week for men and two shillings for women. This was rejected, with workers’ representatives demanding four shillings per week for the men – this would bring all the employees to the recognised standard of wages within the industry. The situation quickly escalated and 21 men were ‘locked out’ of the mill and refused entry unless they agreed to the terms.

After two weeks, the dispute was attracting attention in parliament at Westminster. Joe Devlin, the Irish Parliamentary Party MP for the Belfast West constituency, had raised the subject of the lock out in the House of Commons and asked if the mills had received work orders from the Admiralty. Devlin knew that, if Roan Mills had been undertaking priority orders for the government, the company was expected to pay higher wages to staff, as specified by legislation called the Fair Wage Clause. Unfortunately, this was not the case but Devlin kept applying pressure in support of the workers.

Everything changed on 17 May. The mill was running at a reduced capacity and, with no new orders, Wilson decided to lay off some of the girls from the reeling room. With tensions high, their colleagues refused to work unless the girls could return to their jobs. In response, the mill took drastic action and locked out all 300 employees. Wilson and his managers believed that their workers would eventually return because there was no welfare support in 1917 and families would soon be destitute. Unlike his late wife, Wilson appeared indifferent to the welfare of his workers.

¹ Possibly relatives of the Stevenson family who previously owned Roan Spinning Mills.
Once again, Devlin raised the issue in Westminster and he was told that a representative from the Chief Industrial Commission was on his way to Coalisland to negotiate between the two parties. However, Wilson refused to accept any outside arbitration.

On 30 May, a public meeting was held in the centre of Coalisland. Over 400 people attended, including a parade of women workers who marched from the mill into the town. The assembled crowd was addressed by trade union representatives and notable local figures and there was unanimous support for the following motion:

“That this public meeting of the workers and inhabitants of Coalisland hereby pledges the moral and material support of the people of this district to the application of the Roan Spinning Mill’s workers for a living wage.”

The strike had widespread public support and the workers remained defiant. Roan Spinning Mills were silent throughout the summer. Eventually, Wilson had to accept arbitration and Reverend Quinn, the Parish Priest, and Henry Patterson, a local businessman, convinced him to back down. The employees returned to work in early November. In the end, Wilson agreed to pay more than the workers had first demanded, offering a rise of five shillings for the men and three shillings for the women.

Roan Spinning Mills never recovered. It had lost a valuable hold in international markets and suffered massive losses. By 1920, it had ceased production. In June 1922, the company went into liquidation and the mills, manager’s house and 40 workers’ houses were later put up for sale for £7,000.

5 THE END OF THE MILLS
For a brief period, it appeared that the mill might be saved. Sir Samuel Kelly was opening a large coal mine nearby at Annagher. He was confident that, as the pit got larger, it would eventually employ thousands of men and in January 1923 he decided to buy the Roan Spinning Mills to create jobs for the women and other members of the coal miners’ families. Sadly, with a recession in the Irish textile markets, the mills never became a going concern and they closed after less than two years. Kelly’s Annagher coal mine also closed in 1926. This double blow left hundreds of local people without work and the Council and other agencies were forced to introduce relief schemes and provide much needed support.