

Adkins Mill, Wandsworth

This mill was situated on the Wandle just south of the present Mapleton Road, on an island formed by a bypass channel. The site is now part of the premises of the In-Wear Company.

This was probably one of the seven mills of the Abbot of Westminster included in the Domesday survey of 1086. In 1335 it was recorded as a fulling mill [1]. In 1363/4 the monks of Westminster Abbey purchased the unexpired term of the lease of "Adekyns Mill" from Roger Finch, a London vintner, for £66-13s-6d [2]. In 1380 Abbot Littleton granted the "Over fulling mill" at Wandsworth to Laurence Morden, William Romney and John Coadham, to hold for 20 1/2 years at an annual rent of £9 [3].

In about 1539 the mill was confiscated by Henry VIII. A survey of the lands in Surrey which the young Edward VI inherited from his father, compiled between 1547 and 1550, included "Adkynamyle", with four acres of land called Southmeade, occupied by Walter Smyth [4].

The mill had become a corn mill by 1589, when John Storer, a London brewer, leased "Atkyns Milles", with dwelling house and appurtenance, and the four acres of Southmead, to Christopher Hammond, miller, of Wandsworth, for 22 years at £31-10s per annum [5]. In 1610 the mill was in the occupation of Margaret Hammond, Christopher Hammond's widow, on lease from Thomas Jones [6].

Margaret Hammond was still there in 1619 [7], and probably remained in occupation until her death in November 1622. In March 1629 Peter Jones, a London draper, sold to Hugh Jones of Wandsworth his half share in two watermills called Adkins Mills or Upper Mills, together with the Southmead property, for £510 [8].

In 1654 the mills were leased by Walter Pell, the then owner, to a partnership of coppersmiths, Henry Robinson, Richard Wilkes and William Roberts [7], and one of the mills was then converted to copper milling. The other mill remained for a time as a corn mill, and in 1661 it was leased to Henry Chinall, miller [7]. He died of the plague in July 1666. Subsequently that mill also became a copper mill.

Henry Robinson apparently gained control of the mills and they remained in the occupation of his family for many years. James Robinson was there on 13 June 1704, when the leaseholders of the downstream Upper Mill complained to the Commissioners of the Surrey and Kent Sewers that a tumbling bay erected by Robinson at his mill was "very much to their detriment" [9].

A list of those liable to pay a sewer rate, dated 25 March 1756, recorded that the mills were then held by the Governor and Company of the Copper Miners in England [10]. This company, usually known as the English Copper Company, had been incorporated on 3 August 1691, and acquired an interest in other Wandle mills also, starting with the Wimbledon copper mills in 1720. It was a mining, trading and management company, and the copper working was carried out by various subcontractors. A further list of sewer ratepayers dated 11 August 1763 also named the English Copper Company at Wandsworth [10], but it seems likely that the mills were then still being worked by members of the Robinson family. At this time Henry Robinson was working for the company at the Wimbledon copper mills.

In July 1777 James Henckell the younger, a City of London merchant, acquired the lease of the mills [11], probably the head lease from the English Copper Company. He demolished the mills, and built an iron mill on the site. In conjunction with this work, he dammed up the river to provide a greater head of water, which resulted in the flooding of fields upstream from the new mill, and an irregular supply to the Upper Mills downstream.

Complaints from the farmers and millers affected were heard by the Commissioners of the Surrey and Kent Sewers on 19 January 1780, and they ordered that Henckell should take measures to prevent the "penning up of water at the said Mill" [12]. Apparently nothing was done, and complaints continued to be made for several years [11].

It was probably in connection with the water engineering works that in 1779 Henckell engaged John Smeaton, the eminent engineer, to suggest improvements to the operation of the mill. Smeaton proposed a method of adapting the 17-foot-6-inches-diameter undershot water wheel by elevating it to become a low-breastshot wheel, but it is not known if his idea was carried out [13].

In January 1783 James Henckell was declared bankrupt [14], but this does not seem to have affected his activities at Wandsworth. In the 1787 edition of "The Ambulator" his works were described as "a considerable iron-foundry and manufactory, by which government were supplied during the late war".

Henckell later went into partnership with Thomas DuBuisson and George Day. Of these Day was the practical ironfounder, and had been managing the mill since at least 1780, when he was listed as the occupier in the first of the Wandsworth land tax registers. By that date Earl Spencer was the landowner. When the partnership was dissolved on 29 September 1810 [15], George Day continued the business in partnership with his sons George and Samuel. George Day the elder died on 18 April 1812, and the business was then carried on by his sons.

David Hughson in 1808 gave a dramatic description of the activities carried out at the mill:

"At these mills are cast shot, shells, cannon, and other implements of war; in another part of it the wrought iron is manufactured, and the great effect of mechanical power is exemplified in all their operations, in the splitting of iron bars of prodigious length; in a pair of shears which will rend asunder pieces of iron more than two inches in thickness; and in the working of a hammer, which weighs from five hundred and a half to six hundred pounds; the timbers employed are of an enormous size, and the wonderful powers of all the elements are here made subservient in the production of various tools and implements necessary for man in the arts of war and peace." [16]

Sir Richard Phillips in 1817 also described the working of the mill as observed a few years earlier:

"The application of the expansive powers of Nature, as a moving agent in the steam-engine; the means of generating and concentrating heat in our furnaces; the melting of iron; the casting of the fluid; the colossal powers of the welding hammer, the head of which, though a ton in weight, gives a stroke per second; the power of shears, which cut thick bars of iron like threads; the drawing out of iron hoops by means of rollers, and the boring of cannon, are the everyday business of one of these manufactories, all of which I saw going on at the same instant, without bustle or effort. Iron, the most universal, durable and most economical of the

metals, is thus made subservient to the wants of man ... On my remarking to the proprietor of this foundry, that the men mingled themselves with the fire like salamanders, he told me, that, to supply the excessive evaporation, some of them found it necessary to drink eight or ten pots of porter per day." [17]

The porter was, no doubt, obtained from the Old Sergeant public house in Garratt Lane, adjacent to the works, and which, in a later building, still exists on the same site.

Evidently George and Samuel Day's lease expired in 1816, for in April of that year an advertisement was published, inviting tenders, to be opened on 7 May, for the letting of the premises "now in the occupation of George Day and Sons, and used as an iron foundry and forge", "for a term of years from the 26th. June 1816". The premises included a dwelling house and yard, and four acres of meadow land. One of the advantages of the mill was said to be its "communication with the River Thames by an iron railway." This was a reference to the Surrey Iron Railway, which passed in this locality along the east side of Garratt Lane, and which had been opened on 26 July 1803. George Day the elder had been a shareholder and member of the first committee of the railway company. The notice referred to the property as "Atkin's Mill", an interesting revival of its ancient name [18]. Apparently no acceptable offers were received, for the Days continued to occupy the mill, as yearly tenants, for the next 20 years.

Evidently George and Samuel Day were in financial difficulties by 29 August 1829, when they were fined by the West Brixton Justices of the Peace for their failure to pay their last two poor rate demands [19]. They then appealed to the Wandsworth Vestry for a reduction of the rates, and following an inspection the Vestry recorded on 1 October 1830 that the works premises "were found to be in a delapidated condition ... the centre of the north portion of the premises was the only part occupied". The dwelling house was also found to be "delapidated", and the Day's rates liability was accordingly reduced [20].

The Day brothers carried on for a few more years, and George Day was named as the occupier in November 1834 [21]. But in December 1834 it was announced that all of their machinery, tools, and stock (which included a 60-foot-span wrought-iron bridge), would be offered for sale at an auction to be held on the premises on 8 December 1834 [22]. On 11 and 12 January 1836, an auction sale was held of the machinery and articles remaining unsold from the previous sale [23]. A final auction of the remaining effects was advertised to be held on 1 March 1838 [24]. The notice announcing this stated that the sale items had been moved to the Surrey Iron Railway wharf, so it seems likely that the Days had vacated the premises, and that the next tenant, Thomas Creswick, had moved in, and commenced converting the mill to paper making.

Thomas Creswick was a well-known paper maker, who apparently moved to Wandsworth from a mill at Hatfield. In 1831 he opened retail premises in Chandos Street, Charing Cross. In an advertisement published in 1834, wherein he described himself as "paper and card maker to His Majesty", he claimed to be "the original inventor of tinted writing papers, satined writing papers, tinted and white, satined drawing boards, playing cards with coloured backs" [25].

Brayley, in 1850, referred to "the late Mr. Thomas Creswick, whose mills at Wandsworth supplied a considerable portion of the London trade with cards, Bristol boards, drawing papers, tinted papers, &c." [26] Creswick had died ten years earlier, on 17 September 1840, at the age of 66, and in his will proved on 24 October he directed that his business and properties be sold by his trustees for the benefit of his brother William and his daughter Mary Ann Miller. By a codicil, however, he gave the trustees leave to enter into some arrangement for continuing the business [27]. This they did, and his widow Sarah became the proprietor, until her death in early 1843.



The pepper mill in 1838
[78.8kb]

Sarah Creswick's son-in-law, George Miller, then took over, and evidently decided to discontinue the business. In April 1844, it was announced that the lease of the paper mill and its fixed machinery would be offered for sale by auction "on a day to be hereafter named". The premises were described as "consisting of a powerful water mill, mill house, engine houses and every description of suitable buildings for continuing the extensive trade now carried on; with very superior machinery ...". The machinery was said to have been "erected by the late Mr. Thomas Creswick at a cost of many thousand pounds" [28].

No record has been found confirming that an auction was actually held, and the lease was probably sold by private contract, to John Edward Spicer and Cornelius Poulton, who also worked a paper mill in Alton in Hampshire. They were declared bankrupt soon afterwards, on 24 November 1846 [29]. In April 1847 John Henry Spicer took over the mill [30], but was soon in financial difficulties, and later that year it was announced that the stock and utensils of a paper maker in Wandsworth would be offered for sale at an auction to be held on 6 October 1847, "under distress for Excise duties" [31]. On 1 February 1848 a notice was published advertising that the remaining stock and utensils would be offered for sale by auction on the following day, "by order of the Bankrupt's Assignees" [32].

Soon afterwards, the lease of the mill was taken by the partnership of James Easton and Charles Edward Amos, who were named as the occupiers on the schedule to a Deposited Plan dated 28 November 1849, whereon George Miller was named as the owner [33]. James Easton, then aged 18, took over the management of the works. Amos, who was also a partner with Easton's father in an engineering company, probably only provided financial backing.

In 1853 Frederick Braithwaite visited the mill, and remarked of "Mr. Easton's paper works" that "The wheel power is equal to 16 H.P. These works use a considerable quantity of water for bleaching and washing the rags, with the addition of a strong solution of alkali, amounting to not less than 20,000 gallons daily, which is returned into the river." [34]

Easton and Amos left the premises soon after Braithwaite's visit. They were succeeded briefly, in turn, by Robert Blackburn and George Stiff [30], but by 1854 the mill was unoccupied.

On 23 December 1853, a fire broke out at William McMurray's Royal Mills at Esher, which were the largest paper making works in Surrey, and the premises were almost completely destroyed [35]. The following year William McMurray moved to the vacant paper mill at Wandsworth, together with his younger brother James. They gradually demolished the buildings, and built new ones, and at some time extended their premises southwards over the site of former calico printing works. They adopted their previous name, the Royal Mills, for

their new premises, which were worked under the supervision of James McMurray, while William managed the retail side of the business at their London office [36].

William McMurray died on 19 November 1887 at the age of 81, and James carried on the business alone, after the resolution of a difficulty raised by the terms of William's will. He had bequeathed his estate to James, but by a codicil had revoked that bequest in favour of Herbert Spicer, the husband of one of his nieces. James McMurray disputed the will, on the grounds that the codicil had been executed while his brother was of unsound mind. In the ensuing court case, the verdict was given in his favour [37].

In an interview given by James McMurray, published in January 1892, he laid "great stress on the value of the wharf on the Thames, about a quarter of a mile from the mill" [36]. This wharf was not actually on the Thames, but alongside a basin connecting with the Thames by a short canal, situated to the east of the Wandle and just north of the present Armoury Way. This had been constructed by the Surrey Iron Railway Company, and opened in 1803. Following the dissolution of the railway company in 1848, the wharf and basin had been sold to the brewers Watney and Wells. William McMurray had probably purchased the property after Watney and Wells dissolved their partnership in 1861.

By the date of this interview the firm had become a limited company. On 2 December 1891 McMurray's Royal Paper Mills Limited had been incorporated, with a capital of £105,000, to carry on the business. James McMurray was the managing director, the other board members being Sir John Whittaker Ellis (chairman), Frank Green and Thomas Vezey Strong [38]. James McMurray continued with the management of the business until shortly before his death on 2 February 1896 at the age of 82.

Frank Green had resigned on 1 July 1892, and the management was in the hands of Ellis and Strong until Ernest Cooper joined the board on 14 January 1897. On 15 December 1899 Daniel MacMaster, who had been the works manager, was appointed as managing director.

The properties owned by the company probably still included estates in North Africa and Spain which had been purchased by William McMurray, on which tripoli grass and esparto grass were grown, and brought to Wandsworth for use in paper making [39]. Davis in 1898 gave an account of the process by which the grasses were manufactured into paper, as seen by him on a visit to the mill [40].

On the evening of 17 January 1903, a fire broke out at the mill which either gutted or severely damaged 22 of the 39 buildings on the site. The machine room and the offices were saved, but many important buildings were ruined. About £35,000 worth of damage was caused [41]. About 160 men were thrown out of work, and on 2 February the mayor of Wandsworth chaired a public meeting to instigate a fund for the benefit of the unemployed workers [42].

The decision taken by the directors was that the mill should be rebuilt and completely re-equipped, and accordingly it was announced that all the salvage plant, machinery and stock would be offered for sale at an auction to be held on 5 May 1903 [43]. In June it was reported that "practically everything was sold" at the auction, and that the demolition of the ruined buildings was in progress [44].

At the annual general meeting of the shareholders of the company held in August 1903, the directors reported that their insurance company had paid out £35,000, and that the salvage sale had realised about £3,500. They had accordingly arranged for plans and tenders to be prepared for the rebuilding works and for new machinery, to the value of £34,000. It was also reported that Sir John Whittaker Ellis had resigned from his position as chairman and director in May last, and that Thomas Vezey Strong had become chairman and John Ross, the former works manager, had been elected to the board [45].

At about this time, Daniel McMaster, the managing director, went to the U.S.A. to examine the milling machinery and processes used in that country. While he was there, he accepted an offer to manage the Oxford paper mill in Maine. He returned in November 1903 to tender his resignation and make arrangements for the emigration of him and his family, and he departed on 10 February 1904. It was reported in March 1904 that the position of managing director had not yet been filled, and it seems that initially James Bailey, the secretary, performed the managerial duties, and later Joseph Shillinglaw.

By April 1905 the rebuilding works were well advanced, and much of the machinery had been installed [46]. It seems that a limited amount of paper was then being produced, but in December 1905 legal proceedings were started which were to have disastrous effects.

The action was brought against the company by William Guthrie and Company of Glasgow, building contractors, who claimed that the sum of £1,292 was owed to them. The company contested their liability to pay this money, which was mainly on account of extra works carried out by the contractors. On 21 December 1905, judgement was given that the sum of £860 was due to the plaintiffs [47]. Part of this sum was paid to William Guthrie and Company from money paid into court by McMurray's, but there remained the sum of £210 outstanding. On 23 January 1906, William Guthrie and Company, as a creditor, presented a petition for the winding up of McMurray's Royal Paper Mills Ltd to the King's Bench Division of the High Court of Justice [48].

The case was heard on the same day. The counsel for McMurray's pleaded for an extension of time, in order that the firm could obtain improved machinery to replace that installed which could only produce half the potential output of paper. At present, the "business was carried on at a loss". The court agreed that the petition could stand over for four months [49].

Apparently no improvements were made to the production, and the winding-up order was made on 18 June 1906 [50]. Sir Thomas Vezey Strong (he had been knighted in July 1905) and James Bailey, the secretary, then issued a statement of accounts revealing a deficiency of £73,853. The failure of the company to carry on the business profitably was again attributed to the unsatisfactory machinery, and in particular to trouble with the gas engines, which were late in being installed and did not provide the power required [51].

A meeting of the creditors and shareholders was held on 3 August 1906, at which the Official Receiver reported that the company's debts amounted to £14,543. Sir Thomas Vevey Strong was appointed as liquidator, and expressed his hope that the gas engines could be put into working order very shortly [52].

The following year, Sir Thomas was involved in further court proceedings. A case was brought against him, as liquidator, by Williams and Robinson of Rugby, to recover the sum of £1,734 for the gas engines they had installed. Judgement was awarded in favour of the

plaintiffs, but execution was suspended pending the outcome of a counter claim by Sir Thomas against Williams and Robinson seeking £100,000 for damages for breach of contract insofar as the gas engines were inadequate for their purposes [53].

This case was still unresolved in 1909 [54], and the outcome has not been ascertained, but can perhaps be inferred from the contents of an advertisement published in February 1910. This announced that the freehold of the mill premises, and the dock premises, together with the paper making machinery and plant, would be offered for sale by auction on 4 March 1910, by order of the Chancery Division of the High Court of Justice [55]. At the auction, the highest bid was £54,000, and as the reserve price was £60,000, the property was withdrawn from sale [56]. A further auction was held on 26 April 1910, in separate lots [57]. Some of the machinery was then sold, and the dock premises, which were bought by the Wandsworth Gas Company, but the mill remained unsold [58].

Sir Thomas Vezey Strong's troubles in connection with the paper mill do not seem to have affected his business reputation, for in September 1910 he was chosen to be Lord Mayor of the City of London. (It may be of interest to note that he was the third of the first four directors of McMurray's to have become Lord Mayor, at one time or another. Sir John Whittaker Ellis had held the office before the company was incorporated, in 1881-82, and Frank Green after he retired from the board, in 1900-01.)

The paper mill buildings had been taken over by 1914 by Benham and Sons, engineers, and they gradually demolished the buildings and built new ones, on the part north of the Old Sergeant public house. The part of the site south of this was later taken over by the Veritas Incandescent Mantle company. Benhams were still there in 1981, but they had moved by 1985, when it was said that their works were "largely demolished" [59]. Later, the In-Wear clothing manufacturing firm built new buildings on the site.

The former mills are remembered in the names of two nearby roads. Iron Mill Place is a short road off Garratt Lane opposite the site, and formerly extended further to the east. A little to the south of the site, running parallel to Garratt Lane, is Esparto Street.

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