

Calico Printing Works At Merton Abbey, Merton (Later Liberty's)

These works were situated on the east bank of the River Wandle just south of the present Merantun Way. A water wheel, and a few buildings formerly occupied by one of the last textile printers on the site, Liberty's Ltd., remain, and the buildings are now used by some of the traders of the Merton Abbey Craft Village.

According to Lysons, writing in 1792, "In the year 1724, a manufactory for printing calicoes was established upon the site of Merton Abbey, which still exists upon the same spot." [1] The site of these works can be identified with that of the later Liberty's works, but no contemporary reference earlier than 1753 has been found.

The first activities in the area, close to the site, and connected with the textile trade, were by whitsters, engaged in the bleaching of linen and calico. The first of these of whom a record has been found was John Jacob, who was recorded in the Merton Hearth Tax register of 1664 [2]. The land he occupied was to the south-east of the printing works site, between the present Liberty Avenue and the stream that runs behind the houses on the north side of Runnymede Road, and extending from Christchurch Road down to the Wandle.

John Jacob died in 1678, and by his will proved on 10 October 1678, in which he was described as "of Merton, Whitster", he left cash bequests to his sons and daughters, and the remainder of his estate to his wife "Hanna" [3]. One of his daughters, Margaret, was married to John van Cammell, also "of Merton, Whitster", who may have been associated with him in his business.

Hannah Jacob died in 1689, and by her will bequeathed most of her estate to her son James [4], who had no doubt carried on the business after his father's death. James Jacob died on 5 December 1720 at the age of 80, and was buried at Merton where it was recorded on his tombstone that he "lived a housekeeper in the parish 58 years" [2]. By his will, after cash bequests to his brother-in-law John van Cammell and various nieces and nephews, he demised the remainder of his estate to his brother Benjamin Jacob [5].

Benjamin later changed the surname to "Jacobs", and under that name he took out three insurance policies with the Hand in Hand company on 1 September 1724. One was for his dwelling house and two warehouses "situate at the East End of the Whiting Ground within the walls of Merton Abbey". The others covered a nearby barn and stables, and another warehouse on the south side of the whiting ground [6]. He renewed the policies on 28 August 1731 [7].

Benjamin Jacobs died in 1732, and by his will bequeathed his leasehold estate and his "stock in trade, utensils and all other things used in my trade as a whitster" to his eldest son James. He mentioned that his leases were held of the heirs of the late Sir William Phipard [8]. He had purchased the Merton Abbey estate in 1709, and at his death in 1723 bequeathed that estate to his sons William, John, and George in equal shares. Benjamin Jacobs's younger son John was also a whitster, who worked at grounds in Mitcham.

Following Benjamin Jacobs's death the insurance policies were assigned to James Jacobs on 15 March 1734. He renewed these on 24 August 1738, 16 August 1745, 14 August 1752, and 7 September 1759 [9].

James Jacobs died later in 1759, and after some cash bequests left the remainder of his estate to his son Benjamin [10], but there is no evidence to indicate that Benjamin carried on the business. It was probably taken over by Jonathan Meadows, who was named in a list of those liable to pay a sewer rate in Merton dated 11 August 1763 [11]. A map of 1805 shows the site as "Late Meadows Thread Field and Stake Ground".

Jonathan Meadows died in 1780 and by his will proved on 10 February 1780 bequeathed his estate for the remainder of the leases to William Fenning and Solomon Ward in trust, to provide an income for his daughter and her husband and son [12]. William Fenning at this date was in partnership with James Halfhide and others at calico printing works situated a short distance to the north, just south of Merton High Street. That firm then probably made use of the bleaching grounds, but later they became associated with the adjoining calico printing premises which are the main subject of this account.

The earliest reference found to a calico printing works on the site of the later Liberty works is to John Cecill (sometimes spelled "Cecil") of "Merton Abbey, Callicoe Printer", who on 30 November 1753 insured the Abbey House located "about 300 yards south from the road" (i.e. Merton High Street) [13]. This house, on the west bank of the Wandle immediately south of the present Merantun Way, survived until 1914.

John Cecill was in partnership with his son-in-law John Arbuthnot by November 1755 when they jointly agreed to take the lease of calico printing premises at Ravensbury in Mitcham [14]. Arbuthnot then managed the works at Ravensbury, while Cecill carried on at Merton Abbey until his death in April 1760.

The next reference found to an occupier is to Robert Maxwell of Merton Abbey, calico printer, who in about 1774 engaged an apprentice [15]. On 25 April 1776 Maxwell insured his dwelling house, water mill and printing shop adjoining, blue house, block printing shop, compting house, drug house, copper house, sour house, white house, warehouses and other buildings, and his utensils and stock therein [16].

His name appears in the Merton land tax records from 1780 to 1783, but in 1784 he was replaced by John Leach [17]. Soon afterwards Leach was in partnership with James Newton, John Rivers and Richard Howard, but Rivers and Howard left the firm on 30 June 1786 [18]. They were later, in 1793, in partnership together at calico printing works at Phipps Bridge.

Leach and Newton carried on at Merton Abbey, and it would seem that Newton became the senior partner. In about 1789 James Edwards noted a house at Merton Abbey "in the possession of Mr. Newton, who, in partnership with Mr. Leech [*sic*] has here a calico manufactory" [19]. On a map contained in his book, "Newton, Leech & Co." are named.

The ownership of the Merton Abbey estates, last mentioned in this account as being in the hands of the sons of Sir William Phipard, had descended in part to John, later Sir John Phipard, to whom his brother William had assigned his share. The third share had been sold by George Phipard to Joseph Chitty on 26 May 1737 [20]. Sir John Phipard had died in 1774, and bequeathed his properties to his niece Mary Cleeves. She later married Richard Fezard

Mansfield, who thereby acquired a two-thirds share of the mill. The ownership of the other one-third share at this period has not been ascertained.

James Newton and John Leach had been joined by William Hodgson, a linen draper, by 1792, when Lysons reported that the printing works were "at present in the occupation of Messrs. Newton, Hodgson and Leach, who carry on a very extensive trade" [21]. By 28 July 1785 Charles Greaves, another linen draper, had joined the firm, when the lease of their mill was renewed [22].

In about 1800 John Leach built a mill, with workshops and other buildings, a little to the south of the original works, on the side stream that runs at the rear of the houses on the north side of the present Runnymede Road, and about 70 yards east of the main river. There he established a separate firm, under the name John Leach and Company, and took into partnership Thomas Bartlett, William Keatch, and his son-in-law Thomas Bennett, who had married his daughter Sarah. William Keatch left the firm on 30 June 1801 [23]. The two undertakings are distinguished in Holden's directories for 1802-4 and 1809-11, where the listings include "Newton, James & Co. calico printers, Merton-abbey" and "Leach, John & Co. calico printers, Merton-abbey".

By 1803 Charles Smith had acquired the one-third share in the ownership of the Merton Abbey estate not held by Richard Fezard Mansfield, who still retained his two-thirds share. In April of that year they commissioned a report and valuation of the mills on the site, which included the "Callico Ground and Premises Lett to Messrs. Newton, Leach, Greaves and Hodgson". The mill premises were described separately therein, the original "Part occupied by Mr. Newton", and the new "Part occupied by Mr. Leach".

Newton's premises included printing and pencilling shops, print room, drawing shop, blue house, drug house, colour house, calendering room, copper house, white house, squeezing room, and ash and sour house. There were various ancillary buildings and some dwelling houses. The mill house contained an undershot water wheel.

Leach's premises consisted of colour house, printing shop, print room, copperplate printing shop, plate presses, handkerchief plate shop, white, finish and drying lofts, blue house, copper house and other workshops and sheds. There were a number of cottages, and a larger house occupied by one of the partners, Thomas Bartlett [24]. On 7 February 1805, Bartlett insured his household goods in this house with the Sun insurance company [25].

John Leach later took on another partner, Isaac Hellier, who had previously been in partnership with Richard Howard and others as calico printers at Phipps Bridge, but on 30 June 1809 the partnership of Leach, Bennett, Bartlett, and Hellier was dissolved [26]. The business was then carried on by John Leach and Thomas Bennett.

Meanwhile, at the original site, Charles Greaves had died in November 1800, and William Hodgson had resigned from the partnership about the same time. James Newton had taken on new partners, James Collin and James Anderson, but it was announced that this partnership had been dissolved on 30 June 1806, and that James Newton would carry on the business alone [27].

Newton subsequently went into partnership with William Simpson, Robert Kelham Langdale, and his son James Newton junior, but on 20 September 1812 he assigned his quarter share in

the business to William Simpson [22]. James Newton's retirement was publicly announced in a notice dated 30 September 1812, wherein Langdale was referred to as "Robert Kelham Kelham (heretofore Robert Kelham Langdale)" [28]. On 24 June 1814 Robert Kelham Kelham left the partnership, leaving William Simpson and James Newton junior to carry on [29].

On 22 October 1819 William Simpson sent a notice to his landlords, Charles Smith and the Rev. William Mansfield (son of Richard Fezard Mansfield who had died in 1812), of his intention to quit the premises at the termination of his lease on 25 March 1821. By February 1820 he had taken the lease of the calico printing works at Wallington where James Newton senior had formerly worked. By June 1820 the firm had removed most of the plant and machinery from Merton Abbey to Wallington and were erecting additional buildings there, but were still using the Merton Abbey premises for bleaching and dyeing. They had fully removed to Wallington as planned by March 1821 [30].

Two months later it was advertised that the Merton Abbey premises were available for letting from Michaelmas 1821 [31]. It would seem that the lease was then taken by the brothers George and Joseph Ancell; Joseph Ancell had taken over the occupation of the Abbey House by 1822 [32]. The Ancells had previously been in business at calico printing works at Rushy Meadow, Wallington, from about 1805. George Ancell left the partnership on 1 July 1824 [33], but Joseph carried on the business for a further ten years or so.

At the later works premises, John Leach and Thomas Bennett carried on the management together until Leach retired, probably in 1813 when he purchased a house at Great Bookham, Surrey, which had once been the home of the novelist Fanny Burney, and where he died in 1818 [34]. Bennett then carried on alone, and it was at this time that the mill became known as Bennett's Mill. Later he took his son John Leach Bennett into partnership. Thomas Bennett retired on 20 July 1827 [35], and died a few months later, bequeathing all his property to his son [36].

John Leach Bennett carried on at the works for a few years, but in September 1832 it was announced that he was "retiring from business" and that the lease of the "Merton Abbey Print Works", together with the plant and machinery, would be offered for sale by auction on 4 October 1832. The following description was given in the notice:

"The buildings are numerous, well-arranged and complete, and include commodious plate printing shop, capable of working eleven presses, a madder mill (which in itself is a source of great profit), mill house, calender house, wash wheel house, preparation house, copper house, madder house, drying mount, finishing lofts, waggon house, &c.; a block printing shop for 36 tables, three stories high; engraving, drawing and pencilling shops; colour houses, and various offices ... "

There were also 17 dwelling houses and cottages [37].

The outcome seems to have been that John Leach Bennett retained the head lease, but sub-let the premises to Edmund Littler in 1833 [38]. The book of reference to a Deposited Plan dated November 1834 named Bennett as the lessee and Littler as the occupier [39].

Edmund Littler was of a large family of calico and silk printers, which had works at Waltham Abbey and West Ham. He seems to have maintained an interest in the West Ham works after he moved to Merton.

Littler later acquired the head lease, possibly by 1835, when he began negotiations with Joseph Ancell for the purchase of the lease of his premises, which were then said to be in a dilapidated condition. He was in occupation of them by early 1836, when he obtained a reduced rateable value because of their poor state [38]. Thereafter he operated both the works, converting them to silk and woollen printing.

Edmund Littler died in 1842 and by his will proved on 24 May 1842 he bequeathed his estate to his wife Mary Ann [40]. She carried on the business, and in the 1851 Census returns for Merton was said to be employing 70 men, 31 boys and 29 girls. Of this workforce, Braithwaite recorded in 1853 that "twenty men are constantly employed in rinsing dyed goods". The water was supplied through a 5-inch diameter pipe, and "this water runs off extremely foul", containing sulphuric acid, alum, and other chemicals [41].

Mrs. Littler was employing 80 men and 30 boys and girls in 1861, when her sons William and James were works managers, and her other son Edmund was "chemist to the works". Ten years later, she had retired, and her eldest son William was the proprietor. The business had evidently diminished, as he employed only 30 men and 18 boys at this time.

Mary Ann Littler died early in 1875 at the age of 75. By 1876 William Littler was in partnership with his brother Edmund, trading as Littler Brothers, until William's death on 3 July 1889 at the age of 62. Edmund then carried on alone until the works were taken over by Liberty and Company Ltd. in 1904. He died on 18 January 1909 at the age of 77.

Arthur Liberty had opened a draper's shop in Regent Street, London, in 1875. In about 1877 he began to employ Littler Brothers to print silks and cashmeres to his own designs, and eventually all of their production was for Liberty's.

The firm, which had been registered as a public limited company on 1 November 1894, bought the lease of the Merton Abbey premises from Edmund Littler in 1904. During the next few years they demolished most of the existing buildings and erected new workshops to accommodate the various processes. They retained the water wheel, however, though it is not known when this was originally installed.

Sir Arthur Liberty (he had been knighted in 1913) retired in 1914 and died on 11 May 1917. Having no children, his heir was his nephew Ivor Stewart, who changed his name to Stewart-Liberty. He was succeeded by his son Arthur Stewart-Liberty, who was the chairman of the company when the Merton Abbey works were sold in 1972.

At some time in the 1950s the textile printing division of Liberty's was named Merton Printers Ltd., and the new owners, Vita Tex of Slough, retained that name. At some time they sold the "Bennett's Mill" buildings to the Construction Industry Training Board, who demolished them and built new workshops.



The works in c. 1870.
[79kb]

Vita Tex vacated the site on 31 July 1977, and the lease was taken by Rustichina, which operated the works under the name Riseline Ltd. This firm went into liquidation in June 1981, and the works closed. In August 1981 they were re-opened by the new occupants, Daneshaw Products, under the name of Merton Fabrics Ltd. Following a fire in July 1982, which damaged much of the machinery, the works finally closed down on 24 December 1982 [42].

The buildings were in danger of being demolished in 1983 to make way for a new development, but the scheme was abandoned. The buildings remained empty, but it was later reported that plans were in hand for their refurbishment by the owners, Savacentre Ltd. Eventually, in 1989, the renovated buildings were occupied by the traders of the Merton Abbey Craft Village.

References

- 1.** Daniel Lysons, *The Environs of London*, vol. 1 (1792), p. 345.
- 2.** E. N. Montague, *A Study of the Textile and Printing Industry in Mitcham and Merton from 1590 until 1870* (1992), p. 121.
- 3.** London Metropolitan Archives, DW/PA/5/1678/27.
- 4.** National Archives, PROB 11/394 q33.
- 5.** *Ibid.* PROB 11/577 q256.
- 6.** Guildhall Library, MS 8674/29 p. 143.
- 7.** *Ibid.* MS 8674/43 p. 156
- 8.** National Archives, PROB 11/652 q168.
- 9.** Guildhall Library, MS 8674/56 p. 24, MS 8674/67 p. 343, MS 8674/79 p. 330, and MS 8674/92 p. 237 respectively.
- 10.** National Archives, PROB 11/851 q403.
- 11.** London Metropolitan Archives, SKCS 46.
- 12.** National Archives, PROB 11/1061 q94.
- 13.** Guildhall Library, MS 8674/82 p. 54.
- 14.** Minet Library, Deed 3380.
- 15.** Surrey Record Society, *Mitcham Settlement Examinations 1784-1814* (1973), p. 26.
- 16.** Guildhall Library, MS 11936/247 No. 368374.
- 17.** E. N. Montague, *op. cit.* p. 78.
- 18.** *The London Gazette*, 11-15 July 1786.
- 19.** James Edwards, *Companion from London to Brighthelmston (c. 1789)*, Part II, p. 25.
- 20.** Surrey History Centre, Deed 804/1.
- 21.** Lysons, *op. cit.* p. 345.
- 22.** Croydon Local Studies Library, *Catalogue of Surrey Deeds*. This deed is said to be at the Surrey History Centre, but I have not been able to locate it. The information given is abstracted from the catalogue description.
- 23.** *The London Gazette*, 7-11 July 1801.
- 24.** Minet Library, 63/719 S.505 S.R.
- 25.** Guildhall Library, MS 11937/64 No. 773693.
- 26.** *The London Gazette*, 16-19 September 1809.
- 27.** *Ibid.* 1-5 July 1806.
- 28.** *Ibid.* 29 September-3 October 1812.
- 29.** *Ibid.* 11 October 1814.

- 30.** Merton Heritage Centre, William Simpson's Letter Book 1818-1857.
- 31.** The Times, 11 May 1821.
- 32.** E. N. Montague, op. cit. p. 85.
- 33.** The London Gazette, 31 May 1825.
- 34.** S. E. D. Fortescue, People and Places: Great and Little Bookham (1973), p. 50.
- 35.** The London Gazette, 24 July 1827.
- 36.** National Archives, PROB 11/1731 q567.
- 37.** The Times, 21 September 1832.
- 38.** E. N. Montague, op. cit. p. 127.
- 39.** Surrey History Centre, QS6/8/164.
- 40.** National Archives, PROB 11/1962 q345.
- 41.** Frederick Braithwaite, "On the Rise and Fall of the Wandle ... ", in Institution of Civil Engineers Proceedings, vol. 20 (1861).
- 42.** Information relating to the post-Liberty's occupation was abstracted from David Luff, Trouble at Mill (2002).