

Merton Mill, Wimbledon

This mill was situated on the River Wandle about 400 yards north of Merton Bridge, where the present Byegrove Road crosses the river, and where the last mill building on the site still stands, now converted to housing accommodation. Although generally called Merton Mill or Mills the site was actually in the parish of Wimbledon.

The river here flows in a straight channel, obviously artificial, from Merton High Street Bridge to a point just north of the mill. The former course of the river was on the east side, now represented by a stream following a serpentine course through Wandle Park. It appears likely that the first mill in the vicinity was situated on the original course of the river, on a site close to the northern confluence with the later straight cut. This supposition will be explained later.

The original mill may have been one of the two mills recorded in the Domesday Book of 1086 as being in the Archbishop of Canterbury's manor of Mortlake, which included Wimbledon. In the 13th century, the De la Mare family is said to have owned the mill, followed by the Meleward family in the 15th century [1].

Hugh Lingard occupied the property from the early 1550s. He worked three mills, all apparently on this site, two for fulling cloth, and the other probably for grinding corn, as he was a farmer who cultivated lands in Wimbledon and Putney [1]. On 14 March 1569, "Hughe Linger" was ordered by the Surrey and Kent Sewers Commissioners to carry out works to the banks of the river near his "mill Pende" [2]. Possibly by this date, and certainly before 1586, the mills were held on lease by Nicholas Rutland, who died in the latter year and by his will bequeathed to his son Francis the lease of "Martine Mylls" [3].

Francis Rutland died in 1592 and bequeathed his lease of "Martin Milles" to his wife Mary and after her death to his son Nicholas [4]. A year or two before his death, Francis Rutland had built, or agreed to the building of, a new mill called Armor Mill situated about 80 feet from Martin Mill, but on a "contrarie course from the use of Martin mill", which was situated on the "Anncient ryver." The miller at Martin Mill, Edward Thornton, later complained to the Commissioners of the Surrey and Kent Sewers that the water was drawn away from his mill by the new channel, causing "great hyndrannce" to its working. A jury of the Commissioners accordingly directed that the miller at the new mill, John Pywell, should from 1 January 1595/6 restrict the flow of water to his mill to 4 inches in depth [5].

The "contrarie course" of the river, formed on land leased to Francis Rutland, could very well be the present straight length of the Wandle. Assuming that this is the case, and that the new Armor Mill was built on the site of the later Merton Mills, then the original Martin Mill would have been located on the old course of the river just before the confluence point, just to the north of the present Byegrove Road.

Hugh Lingard, the owner of Martin Mill and presumably also of the new mill, died in 1596, and bequeathed his properties to his son William. He died of a plague in August 1603, and the rest of his family succumbed soon afterwards, except for his son Bryan [1]. He was probably the "Bryan Lynger" recorded in 1610 as the owner of a corn mill [6]. He died in 1612, and in 1617 his properties were said to be owned by "the heirs of Lingard" [1].

Evidently Nicholas Rutland, who had become the head lessee, later purchased the freehold of both mills and the adjoining lands, and subsequently sold them to Rowland Wilson, a London vintner. In his will, proved on 1 June 1654, Wilson referred to property which he had bought from Nicholas Rutland on 15 March 1642, which he bequeathed to his grandson Samuel Crispe [7]. By a deed dated 19 November 1662, Samuel Crispe conveyed the property to his brother Ellis Crispe [8]. This deed named Joseph Muston as one of his tenants, and on 1 August 1661, Muston, a potter of Redrith (i.e. Rotherhithe) had been summoned for stopping up a watercourse near Merton Mill, "so that it overflows onto the highway there to the grave damage ... of the liege people of the king" [9].

Ellis Crispe died in 1684 and his properties passed to his widow Mary and son Samuel [8]. By this date the original Martin Mill had been demolished and the Armor Mill had been extended or rebuilt, to become Merton Mills. When, on 10 March 1690/1, Mary and Samuel Crispe sold the property to William Knight, there were two adjoining mills, one of which was said to have formerly been a fulling mill but was now converted to corn milling, and a former brazil mill which had been converted to a colour mill, providing colours for the glazing of whiteware pottery [10]. The latter was presumably the mill formerly occupied by Joseph Muston.

William Knight, a renowned potter, was in partnership with John Campion at Hermitage Dock, Wapping, by 1672, where the firm specialised in the making of delftware. On 16 February 1685/6 Knight, together with other potters, presented a petition to the Customs Commissioners, complaining that an embargo on the importation of "painted earthenware", imposed in 1676, was being disregarded [11]. Some three years later, on 30 April 1689, he was among other petitioners making the same complaint, who claimed they had "arrived at such perfection in the art of making those wares as to be fit for services", but that foreign wares were still being imported [12].

A map drawn by Walter Henshaw soon after Knight's purchase is the first map known which shows the straight length of the Wandle and the mills thereon [13]. On 21 July 1693, William Knight bought from Ellis Crispe 35 acres of land adjoining the east side of the river opposite his mills [14].

The mills were evidently in the management of William Knight's son John by May 1700, when the Commissioners of the Surrey and Kent Sewers required him to make a tumbling bay in the river "leading from Merton Bridge to the Courlour and Corne Mills". Apparently he took no steps to implement this order and the Commissioners, having inspected the site in July 1701, confirmed that a 12-foot-wide tumbling bay should be made on the north side of Merton Bridge [15]. Evidently the work was later carried out, but ten years later, on 27 September 1711, the then occupier, John Seaton, was fined by the Commissioners for "stopping his tumbling bay". [16]

John Knight acquired the ownership of the mills after his father's death in 1708. He died in 1723 and bequeathed his properties in Mitcham, Wimbledon, and elsewhere variously to his wife Roberta, his daughter Elizabeth, and his sisters Sible Flower and Rose Welch [17]. Elizabeth acquired the Merton mills, and in about 1736 she married the Rev. William Lucas, rector of Bennington, Hertfordshire, and he then assumed ownership. A list of those liable to pay a sewer rate, dated 3 May 1739, gives the assessments for William Lucas and his tenants William Grover and Thomas Goodwin in respect of the two mills [18]. The function of the mills at this time was not revealed.

The Rev. William Lucas died in 1753, and by his will proved on 22 October 1753 he bequeathed his estate to his wife Elizabeth in trust for their son William and daughters Ann and Frances, who were all then minors [19]. A further sewer ratepayers list, drawn up on 25 March 1756, indicates that Elizabeth Lucas was the owner of the mills and that William Grover and Thomas Goodinge (probably the same man as the former "Goodwin") were still the tenants [20].

By 21 September 1758, however, the mills, then consisting of a corn mill and a stock mill, were in the occupation of William Walker when he insured them, together with the utensils and stock therein, with the Royal Exchange insurance company. Also included were some nearby houses, one of which was occupied by Thomas Gooding, miller [21]. William Walker had also taken the lease of a calico printing works a short distance downstream from the Merton Mills, a few years earlier, probably in 1750.

On 7 September 1780, William Walker's daughter Ann married Robert Nettleton, a miller of Merton. By then, the mills had been combined as one corn mill, and Walker sub-let it to his son-in-law, who insured it together with its appurtenances and some nearby houses, with the Sun insurance company, on 27 April 1781 [22]. He insured the premises again, together with the stock and utensils in the mill, and the household goods in his dwelling house, on 24 January 1782 [23].

William Walker died early in 1791, and by his will proved on 19 March 1791 he bequeathed his estate, apart from a few cash bequests, to Ann and Robert Nettleton [24]. Nettleton thus acquired the lease of the mill, but continued to work it only until 1795. The following year the leaseholder was James Perry [25].

James Perry was born in Dundee in 1756, and moved to London in about 1780. He took up journalism, and in 1789, together with James Gray, he purchased the Morning Chronicle newspaper, and also became its editor. He had a house in London, but on 22 June 1791 he took out an insurance policy on a house in Wimbledon [26], which he perhaps occupied as a country home.

Soon after taking the lease of the mill, he converted it to the manufacture of patent cloth, and insured it with its appurtenances and its stock and plant, which included "Carding and Patent Engines", with the Sun insurance company on 2 January 1797 [27]. This enterprise was short-lived, and when the mill was rebuilt in about 1798, to the design of the engineer John Rennie, it was as a corn mill.

As regards the ownership of the mill, William Lucas, son of the Rev. William Lucas, had duly entered into his inheritance, which he shared with his wife Elizabeth. Subsequently, their eldest son, also named William, and his wife Elizabeth Huntley, whom he had married in 1802, became involved. Thus it was the elder William and Elizabeth Lucas, and the younger William and Elizabeth Huntley Lucas, who jointly sold the mill and some other nearby properties to James Perry on 26 August 1804 for £14,166-13s-4d [28]. It was probably at about this date that Perry arranged for a private branch, or siding, to be built from the Surrey Iron Railway to serve his mill.

James Perry was a shareholder and member of the first committee of the Surrey Iron Railway Company, incorporated by an Act of Parliament on 21 May 1801 (41 Geo. III cap. 33) and empowered to construct a horsedrawn goods railway from Wandsworth to Croydon, with a

branch from Mitcham to Hack Bridge. The railway was opened throughout on 26 July 1803. The course of the railway crossed the present Byegrove Road a little to the west of its junction with Mead Path, and Perry had the branch built from that point along the course of Byegrove Road to the mill.

James Malcolm in 1805 noticed "the very spacious flour mills belonging to Mr. Perry of Merton". He went on to state:

"These mills work seven pairs of stones, and the whole interior of the works, machinery, &c. are said to be the most complete of their kind in England; and in order that a constant supply of water may be had at all seasons to assist the river in carrying on such an extensive concern, the proprietor has dug out the soil from an adjoining field and formed it into a large basin of some acres in extent, which, being full of springs, contributes greatly to the supply. This gentleman grinds for hire only, according to my information." [29]

The meaning of the final sentence is probably that Perry granted short term leases to various millers. One such lessee was Thomas Brown, a miller from Peckham, who on 17 October 1801 insured his stock and utensils in "James Perry's New Water Corn Mill" [30]. A later tenant was "Cook Esq." who was listed as the occupier in the Wimbledon Poor Rate Book for 1810 [31].

A longer tenancy was that of "Messrs. Atherton and Mackerill", so named in John Hassell's account of the river, published in 1817 but written a few years earlier [32]. Thomas Atherton and Robert Mackerell dissolved their partnership on 25 December 1820 [33]. They had probably quit the premises before the dissolution, for in March 1820, it was announced that the "extensive flour mills" were available to be let on lease, together with an adjacent dwelling house. One advantage cited was the "easy access by an iron railway, to the Thames". Applications were to be made to James Perry at 143, Strand, London [34]. The offer was later taken up by Joseph Ward, who in September 1821 entered into a 21-year lease of the mill premises [35].

James Perry died soon afterwards, on 5 December 1821, at the age of 65. By his will proved on 19 December he bequeathed his properties in Wimbledon and elsewhere to two trustees, who were directed to sell the same and allot the proceeds equally to the use of his sons William and Thomas Erskine Perry, who were then minors [36].

Accordingly, the following year it was advertised that, by direction of the executors, Perry's estate at Wimbledon would be offered for sale, in lots, at an auction to be held on 24 July 1822. In addition to the "water corn-mill, erected by Mr. Rennie, at an expense exceeding £20,000", the premises included the calico printing works downstream, Perry's former dwelling house, many other houses, and 160 acres of land [37].

Some lots were purchased at this auction, but not the corn mill, the nearby dwelling house, or the calico printing works, and these were again offered to be sold, at an auction to be held on 10 June 1823 [38].

The mill and dwelling house were still unsold four years later when, in May 1827, they were advertised to be let on lease [39]. The public were informed that possession could be had at Michaelmas next, so it seems that Joseph Ward had announced his intention of terminating

his lease. In fact, he remained in occupation until about 1832, the last year his name was included in Pigot's Directory, and in the Wimbledon Poor Rate Books.

A further effort to sell the mill and house was made in 1828, when it was advertised that they would be auctioned on 28 August 1828. The notice stated that the mill "is capable of and has frequently ground, 60 loads per week. There are four pairs of capital French stones, a complete machine for cleaning wheat, and in short, every appendage that ingenuity could devise with a view to carry it on successfully; and store rooms to hold 1000 quarters of corn." [40] The date of the auction was later deferred until 11 September 1828 [41], and again no acceptable bids were forthcoming.

Joseph Ward was probably succeeded as tenant by Charles Baker, who was there by November 1834 [42]. At this date the owner was Thomas Erskine Perry, who had taken over from the trustees appointed by his father. Charles Baker, miller, was declared bankrupt on 21 January 1837 [43], and soon afterwards it was announced that, by order of his assignees, his effects would be offered for sale by auction on the premises on 16 February 1837. The items to be sold consisted mainly of his household furniture, but also included sacks of bran, flour, and meal, and "various useful mill tackle and effects" [44].

Yet another attempt to sell the mill and dwelling house was made in 1837. In May of that year it was announced that the mill, as Lot 1, and the "delightful villa residence" as Lot 2, would be offered for sale by auction on 6 July [45]. The auction was later deferred until 11 July 1837 [46]. The house, later known as Wandlebank House, was then purchased by Henry Pollard Ashby, an artist [31], but the mill remained unsold, and in August 1837, it was again advertised to be available to be let [47].

By 1838 the mill was being worked by John Child, a corn miller, who may have taken it on lease initially, but later purchased the freehold. On 24 April 1846 he was described as the proprietor, in partnership with his brother Edward, when they petitioned a committee of the House of Commons against part of a Bill then under consideration, to authorise the dissolution of the Surrey Iron Railway Company and the sale of its assets [48]. Their objection related to the site of the railway where it crossed the road leading to their mill (now Byegrove Road), and their concern was allayed by a clause introduced into the subsequent Act, passed on 3 August 1846 (9 & 10 Vic. cap. 133). Clause 17 enacted that John Child and his successors should have the perpetual right to pass over the site of the railway where it crossed the road, after the sale of the railway land.

The book of reference to the Wimbledon Tithe Map of February 1848 also named John Child as both owner and occupier. John and Edward Child were listed as the proprietors in directories from 1860 to 1866, and later John Child only, after Edward went to work a mill at Worpleson, where he died in 1874.

In the 1861 Wimbledon census returns John Child had been recorded as a miller employing seven men. One of these was his nephew, Charles Robert Elphick, who was then living with him. After John Child's death on 22 September 1880, at the age of 65, Elphick carried on for a time, being recorded as a miller living in South Road, Wimbledon, in the 1881 census returns.



*The mill in c 1894
[114kb]*

He was succeeded by James Bristow, who was named as the proprietor in directories from 1887 until 1890. He had probably taken over the mill soon after he left the Upper Mill in Carshalton in April 1886. From 1898 until 1913 the name listed in directories was James Bristow and Son. James Bristow retired in 1896 and moved to Worthing where he died on 9 March 1914 at the age of 88. The management of the mill had been taken over by one of his sons, who retained the name, and worked there until about 1918.

An occasional reference has been made in this account to calico printing works situated a little way downstream from the corn mill, which were also part of James Perry's estate. In about 1838 these were converted into a leather japanning works, which by 1851 were occupied by James Paxton, and by James and Henry Paxton, until at least 1895. The works were later taken over by Connolly Brothers, leather dressers, who were there by 1905.

In 1919, following Bristow's departure, Connolly Brothers took over also the corn mill, and converted it to their purposes. The brothers were Samuel Frederick and John Joseph Connolly, who had set up as leather dressers in London in 1878. They came to specialise in preparing leather for use in motor cars, especially in Rolls Royce and Jaguar models. The firm continued in operation at Wimbledon for some 75 years, latterly trading as Connolly Leather Ltd.

In 1994 the company moved to a new factory in Kent. The mill building was soon afterwards converted into housing accommodation, as part of a new housing estate named Kendall Court, covering adjacent land.

References

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- 2.** L.C.C., *Court Minutes of the Surrey and Kent Sewer Commissioners*, vol. 1 (1909), pp. 15-16.
- 3.** National Archives, PROB 11/69 q32.
- 4.** *Ibid.* PROB 11/81 q15.
- 5.** Extract from *Minutes of the Surrey and Kent Sewer Commissioners* (per Peter Hopkins).
- 6.** Montague Giuseppi, "The River Wandle in 1610", in *Surrey Archaeological Collections*, vol. 21 (1908), p. 190.
- 7.** National Archives, PROB 11/233 q41.
- 8.** *Ibid.* PROB 11/377 q123.
- 9.** Surrey County Council, *Surrey Quarter Sessions Records. Order Book and Sessions Rolls 1661-1663*, vol. 7, p. 104.
- 10.** *Victoria History of the County of Surrey*, vol. 4, p. 376.
- 11.** *Calendar of Treasury Papers*, vol. 8, Part 2, p. 598.
- 12.** *Ibid.* vol. 9, p. 100.
- 13.** Surrey History Centre, 4079/1.
- 14.** Minet Library, Deed 5844.
- 15.** London Metropolitan Archives, SKCS 42, pp. 77, 87.
- 16.** *Ibid.* p. 548.
- 17.** National Archives, PROB 11/592 q147.
- 18.** London Metropolitan Archives, SKCS 44, p. 429.
- 19.** National Archives, PROB 11/804 q274.
- 20.** London Metropolitan Archives, SKCS 46, p. 28.

- 21.** Guildhall Library, MS 7252/7 No. 34894.
- 22.** Ibid. MS 11936/291 No. 442703.
- 23.** Ibid. MS 11936/299 No. 454960.
- 24.** National Archives, PROB 11/1203 q162.
- 25.** Eric N. Montague, "Merton Mills and Wandlebank House", in Surrey Archaeological Collections, vol. 83 (1996), p. 143.
- 26.** Guildhall Library, MS 11936/377 No. 584924.
- 27.** Ibid. MS 11937/18 No. 663350.
- 28.** Wimbledon Society Collections, Deed A34.
- 29.** James Malcolm, Compendium of Modern Husbandry, vol. 1 (1805), p. 7.
- 30.** Guildhall Library, MS 11937/42 No. 722792.
- 31.** Eric N. Montague, op. cit. p. 149.
- 32.** John Hassell, Picturesque Rides and Walks, vol. 1 (1817), p. 121.
- 33.** The London Gazette, 13 January 1821.
- 34.** The County Chronicle, 14 March 1820.
- 35.** Surrey History Centre, 85/2/1/147.
- 36.** National Archives, PROB 11/1651 q683.
- 37.** The Times, 11 July 1822.
- 38.** Ibid. 24 May 1823.
- 39.** Ibid. 22 May 1827.
- 40.** Ibid. 31 July 1828.
- 41.** Ibid. 4 September 1828.
- 42.** Surrey History Centre, QS6/8/164.
- 43.** The London Gazette, 24 January 1837.
- 44.** The Times, 9 February 1837.
- 45.** Ibid. 31 May 1837.
- 46.** Ibid. 15 June 1837.
- 47.** Ibid. 19 August 1837.
- 48.** Journal of the House of Commons, vol. 101, p. 550.