

Mitcham Mills (Later Grove Mill and Crown Mill), Mitcham

These mills were situated on the River Wandle a short distance upstream from Mitcham Bridge, where a bypass channel formed an island. There was originally one mill on the site, later three mills, and finally two -- the Grove Mill and the Crown Mill. There were also two mills nearby on the Morden bank, a snuff mill and a paper mill. What little is known about them is given separately at the end of this account.

This was probably the site of one of the two Domesday mills of Mitcham. By 1362 it was owned by William Mareys, Lord of the Manor of Ravensbury. Two centuries later the property was in the ownership of Thomas Smythe of Mitcham, who on 7 July 1572 was required by the Surrey and Kent Sewers Commissioners to repair the river bank on the "southe side of the flash gate of micham mille". [1]

Thomas Smythe died three years later, and by his will proved in 1576 he bequeathed two-thirds of his properties in Mitcham to his wife "Ellynore", and one-third to his eldest son George. After his wife's death, her share was to go to George [2]. A year later Eleanor married Bartholomew Clerke, and her property passed to him, but reverted to Eleanor after his death in 1589 [3]. Eleanor Clerke died in July 1594, and bequeathed her share of the Mitcham mill, and other properties, to her son George Smythe, in accordance with her first husband's will [4].

This mill was one of the three corn mills on the Wandle reported as being held by "Smyth Esquier" in 1610 [5]. The property was within the Manor of Reigate, and held of the manor as a freehold tenancy upon the payment of an annual rent. A survey of the manor in 1623 recorded that "George Smythe, gent., holdeth also of this Manor one Tenement, a water Milne and 30 acres of marsh ground lyinge at Mitcham". [6]

In fact by that date the mill, together with other properties, had been granted by George Smythe to his son Thomas as a settlement on his marriage to Sarah Landford, by an indenture dated 1 September 1618. The mill was described therein as "that Corne Mill commonly called Mitcham Mill also Wickford Mill also Marris Mill together with the high drying room or loft to the same adjoining". It was said to be then occupied by John Pope [7]. This grant was confirmed by George Smith (then so spelt), in his will proved on 25 October 1638 [8].

Thomas Smith by his will proved on 20 March 1658/9 bequeathed his properties in Carshalton and Mitcham to his eldest son George [9]. The succession thereafter has not been ascertained, but probably passed to a son of George Smith who subsequently died leaving the properties to his widow, being the one mentioned in a further survey of the Manor of Reigate made in 1700 as "Smith of Mitcham, widow". She then held "one Messuage or Tenement with a Water Mill now used for the working of copper and a parcel of marsh ground thereunto belonging situate and being at Mitcham and containing 30 acres". [10]

This copper mill had been established some time before 1698, when a Swedish visitor, Thomas Cletscher, described the Tower Copper Mill at Mitcham. The works then contained a small re-melting furnace, a forge and a rolling mill, and was engaged in producing blanks from which farthings and halfpennies were struck by the Royal Mint. A condition of the

licence was that only English copper could be used [11]. The Mint at that period was housed in the Tower of London, which no doubt accounts for the name given to the mill.

The name of the tenant of the mill was not given, but was probably Charles Parry or his father whom, Charles stated, had "lost £7000 in bringing copper in England to perfection". This statement was contained in a report made on 12 February 1712/13 on a petition presented to the Warden of the Royal Mint by Charles Parry, who was

"the proprietor of the Tower Mills at Mitcham, where he makes great quantities of copper plates for the braziers and where most of the blanks for halfpence and farthings were made under the last patent; proposes to roll, cut and finish the blank pieces prepared for coinage, for 3 pence per pound weight if he may be permitted to furnish 100 tons of blanks in three years and what shall be further wanted; and to deliver the blanks at the Tower of fine hammered copper at 18 pence per pound weight; by his way of working it is impossible to adulterate the copper; otherwise [proposes] to supply the Mint with blanks for halfpence and farthings of fine hammered copper of the goodness of those made to King [Charles II's] reign at 18 pence per pound: or with fillets ready for the roller at 15 pence per pound weight, taking back the sizzel at 12 pence per pound; or with blanks of fine cast and rolled copper at 15 pence per pound of such size and weight as shall be thought fit; to be paid for the same in halfpence by tales after the coinage of his first 100 tons." [12]

It would seem that Parry's petition was unsuccessful, for in 1717 the English Copper Company was awarded a contract for coining copper into farthings and halfpennies [13].

Montague tentatively identified the Tower Mill as that in which Andrew Niblett manufactured the ball and cross to surmount the new St. Paul's Cathedral, in 1708 [10]. However, it appears much more likely that the Parrys were in continuous occupation from at least 1698 until about 1726.

On 24 June 1718 George Clarke "at the Priory in the County of Berks" insured the copper mill at Mitcham with the Sun insurance company [14]. The "Priory" reference suggests a connection with the copper works known as the Temple Mills at Bisham, where one of the proprietors in 1718 was John Parry [15], perhaps a relative of Charles Parry.

In the 1700 survey of the Manor of Reigate, previously quoted, it was implied that the former corn mill had been converted to copper milling, but it seems that in fact the copper mill was a new building. For on 9 June 1718, two weeks before Clarke had insured the copper mill, Francis Parry, possibly Charles Parry's cousin, had insured his goods and merchandise in his corn mill in Mitcham [16].

In 1724 another Swedish visitor, Heinrich Karlmeter, listed six copper mills on the Wandle without including the Tower Mill, but merely referring to "works of former importance at Mitcham" [11]. Francis Parry of Mitcham, dealer in corn, was declared bankrupt in June 1726 [17], and it seems likely that Charles Parry then took over the working of the corn mill, and converted the copper mill to corn milling also. He was named on a list of those liable to pay a sewer rate, dated 3 May 1739, wherein "Wm. Myers and his tenant Chas. Perry [sic]" were rated for a mill in Mitcham [18].

William Myers had, in 1714, inherited certain properties in Surrey from George Smith, who had probably succeeded "widow Smith" as owner [19]. But Susanna Smith, George's cousin,

had also bequeathed her properties to Myers in 1724 [20], and it could have been that the mills were included in her estate. Also uncertain is the relationship of Myers to the Smiths. In both wills he was described as the testator's "kinsman".

On 24 December 1741 Charles Parry, miller, took out an insurance policy with the Hand in Hand company on "Mitcham Corn Mill", said to comprise an oat mill house and a corn mill house, with appurtenances [21]. On 2 December 1743, he renewed the policy at a valuation of £1,000 as against the £600 on the previous policy, indicating that some extensive rebuilding or extension works had since been carried out [22].

Charles Parry died in December 1748 and was buried at Mitcham. In his will, proved on 17 January 1748/9, he directed that his assets be sold and the proceeds be invested to provide an income for his wife and children [23]. When the insurance policy on the mill was renewed on 16 August 1749, it was in the name of Edward Nash, miller [24], who had evidently purchased the lease from Parry's executors. Nash renewed the policy on 12 May 1756 at the increased valuation of £1,200 [25], and again on 11 May 1763 at £1,300 [26].

William Myers had died in 1742 and was succeeded by his eldest son, also named William [27]. He, together with Archibald Stewart, granted a one-year lease of the mills at a peppercorn rent to Robert Cochran, a local apothecary, on 21 March 1764 [28]. Archibald Stewart, a wine merchant who had previously been M.P. for Edinburgh and had moved his business to London in 1743, lived in nearby Wandle Grove. His interest in the mills is not known; possibly he was a mortgagee. The lease indenture was obviously the first document of the usual process of sale by lease and release, whereby the property was sold to the lessee on the following day. The premises sold to Cochran comprised a mill house, three water corn mills, and other buildings and land. Presumably the third mill had been built at some time by Edward Nash. On 7 August 1765 Robert Cochran granted a 47 1/2-year lease of the premises to Edward Nash [29], presumably as an extension of the lease Nash had bought from the executors of Charles Parry.

There was another change of ownership on 28/29 October 1768, when Robert Cochran conveyed the mills premises to his brother-in-law, Rowland Frye of Wallington [30].

On 16 September 1772, Edward Nash granted a sub-lease of one of the mills for 99 years to Lionel Gregory, miller [31]. A condition of the lease was that Gregory was to maintain the mill for corn milling, and it was mentioned in a schedule to the deed that part of the mill was "now or late" used as a snuff mill. The implication seems to be that Gregory was to discontinue the snuff grinding, presumably established by a previous tenant of whom there is no record.

It was also mentioned in the above indenture that John Chesterman was Nash's tenant in another part of the mill buildings, and in fact Chesterman had been in occupation there since at least 1768 [32]. It seems that Edward Nash remained in occupation of the third mill.

Lionel Gregory died in 1773 and by his will proved on 9 March of that year he bequeathed his estate, apart from a few legacies, to be divided equally between his brothers and sisters [33]. On 29 July 1774 his executor Joseph Bethel assigned Gregory's lease of the mill to Richard Glover, who was a relative of Edward Nash [34]. On 25 April 1775 Richard Glover insured his "third part of a Water Corn Mill at Mitcham" and the utensils and stock therein, together with a dwelling-house, stable and granary, with the Sun insurance company [35]. He

renewed this policy on 16 July 1779, which included cover for other buildings elsewhere in Surrey, on 2 November 1780, and again on 3 June 1783 [36].

John Chesterman died early in 1784, and by his will proved on 16 February 1784 he bequeathed certain properties in Mitcham to his wife Elizabeth and his son Caleb, but the "lease of the Corn and Flour Mill that I now hold in Mitcham" was to go to his son Samuel [37]. On 1 June 1785 Jeremiah Batley, a miller of Lewisham, insured his utensils and stock contained in Chesterman's corn mill at Mitcham [38].

Edward Nash died early in 1786 and by his will proved on 6 February 1786 bequeathed the lease of the mills to executors in trust to use the rents received to provide an income for his three children [39]. Richard Glover evidently then took over the mill previously occupied by Nash and converted it to snuff milling. When he renewed his insurance policy on 19 June 1786, the mill premises were said to contain corn mills and tobacco mills [40].

James Edwards, writing in about 1789, noted that "Mr. Glover has corn and snuff mills" near Mitcham Bridge. He also mentioned separately Mitcham corn mill, which "was burnt down in the year 1788, and is now rebuilding. It is the property of W. Fry Esq. and was lately occupied by Mr. Samuel Chesterman." [41] It would appear from the locations Edwards indicated, and the map contained in his book, that Chesterman's mill was situated on the main river on about the site of the later Grove Mill, while Glover's two mills were nearly opposite, on the bypass channel that formed the island, about where the later Crown Mill stood.

The "W. Fry, Esq." mentioned by Edwards as being the owner, was William Frye, brother of Rowland Frye who had died in 1777 and bequeathed all his real estate to William [42].

Samuel Chesterman, in addition to the disruption caused by the fire, was, in May 1789, faced with demands from the Mitcham Vestry for the payment of arrears of poor rates owed by his late father [43]. He relinquished the business within a few years, and by 1795 Richard Glover was in occupation of all three mills.

By 1792 Henry Hoare, a Fleet Street banker who was then living in Wandle Grove nearby, had acquired the head lease of the mills, presumably from Nash's executors. On 5 November of that year he insured with the Sun company what was referred to in the register as a water corn mill, with its machinery, but which must have covered all three mills, as the valuation was in the large sum of £1,200 [44].

Henry Hoare and Richard Glover were shareholders in the Surrey Iron Railway Company, incorporated by Act of Parliament on 21 May 1801 (Geo. III cap. 33) and empowered to build a horse-drawn goods railway from Wandsworth to Croydon, with a branch from Mitcham to Hack Bridge. The course of the railway through Mitcham crossed London Road a short distance to the north of Mitcham Bridge, where the present Tramlink passes under the road, and it is evident that Glover made use of the railway. He held the lease of a warehouse at the Surrey Iron Railway terminus at Croydon from 1810 to 1818 [45], and apparently had his own wagons. In 1930 R. Thurston Hopkins stated that several of the wheels used on the railway wagons had been "set up in the stream to form a breakwater to protect the walls of the mill building". [46] These subsequently disappeared, but a broken wheel was found in the bank there in the early 1960s which is now displayed in the Wandle Industrial Museum, and in October 1969 a complete wheel was recovered, which is now at Guildford Museum.

William Frye, the owner of the mills, died in 1795 and his real estate was inherited by his niece Elizabeth Newton. By 1803 the properties had passed to her son William Morris Newton, who changed his surname to Frye on entering into his inheritance. He died in November 1820, and bequeathed his properties to his brother-in-law Henry Leigh Spencer. After his death in 1829, the estate passed to his widow Elizabeth Frances Spencer.

Richard Glover carried on his various activities of corn and snuff milling, together with paper making (of which more later), and was joined by his sons during the 1820s, his eldest son Richard in the snuff grinding business, and John at the corn mill. Richard senior died in 1824 or early in 1825, and by his will proved on 11 January 1825 he bequeathed "all my leasehold messuages, mills, lands and tenements" to his sons Richard and John in equal shares [47]. Richard then took over the working of the snuff mill and John took the corn mill.

Henry Hoare died in 1828 and his estates were then sold by his executors. The Mitcham estate, including the head leases of Wandle Grove and the mills, were offered for sale, in lots, at an auction held on 19 June 1828. In the sale catalogue, the "Two Capital Water Corn Mills" were said to be four storeys high and working five pairs of stones. Both were in the occupation of John Glover, one held on a 91-year lease from Michaelmas 1772 at the rent of £95 per annum, and the other on a 21-year lease from Lady Day 1814 at the yearly rent of £180. The snuff mill in the occupation of Richard Glover was held under a 76 1/2-year lease from Christmas 1787 at the rent of £150 per annum. A manuscript note in the auctioneer's copy of the catalogue indicates that these mills, together with other premises, were sold for £2,440, but the name of the purchaser was not recorded [48].

In June 1835 Richard Glover, "formerly churchwarden of the Parish of Mitcham, Surrey, Snuff Grinder", was in a prison for insolvent debtors, and he presented a petition for discharge on 13 June [49]. Presumably his creditors agreed, and he went back to work. He was named as a snuff miller at Lower Mitcham in directories for 1839 to 1845.

However, the schedule to the Mitcham Tithe Map dated 24 February 1846 recorded the mill as being unoccupied. A few months later it was announced that the sale by auction of the machinery and effects in the mill would be held on 30 September 1846 [50]. Richard Glover was declared bankrupt on 2 November 1846 [51]. In February 1848 it was advertised that the "extensive and elegant Premises, at Lower Mitcham, so well known for many years as the Snuff Mills", which contained a "new 16-foot breast wheel of admirable construction", together with ancillary buildings and a dwelling house, were available for letting by private contract [52].

The lease was probably then taken up by Richard Jones, a felt manufacturer, who was named as such in a Post Office directory for 1851. The premises were later to become known as the Crown Mill. Richard Glover died on 4 November 1858, aged about 67.

John Glover carried on corn milling at what was later to be called the Grove Mill, and was described in the 1851 Mitcham census returns as a master miller employing two men. In the same census Aaron Ashby was also named as a master miller, employing four men, and evidently working in the adjoining mill. This arrangement is confirmed by entries in a Post Office directory for 1851, which named John Glover and Ashby Brothers as millers at Lower Mitcham. (The brothers were then Aaron and Joshua Ashby.) Also, Frederick Braithwaite in 1853 referred to the three mills as Mr. Jones's felt mill, Mr. Glover's corn mill, and Mr.

Ashby's corn mill. The mills had, respectively, water wheels of 23 horsepower, 24 horsepower, and 20 horsepower [53].

John Glover died on 8 October 1860, and was succeeded by his son, also named John, who was noted in the Mitcham census returns for 1861 as employing one man. He relinquished the business soon after, and Joshua Ashby then worked both mills alone, his brother Aaron having moved to the Lower Mill at Carshalton. It seems likely that the mills were rebuilt as one structure at about this time.

Aaron Ashby returned to Mitcham in about 1872, but died on 27 February 1876. Joshua Ashby again carried on alone until his death on 22 June 1888 at the age of 68, and was succeeded by his son Ernest Walter Ashby.

Richard Jones's felt works were said by Hillier to have made boots and other articles in 1855 for the British troops in the Crimea [54]. In about 1860 Jones was succeeded by Whitehead and Company, who were also felt makers. By 1868 the name had been changed to the Wandle Felt Company (Whitehead and Company), and by 1878 to R. R. Whitehead Brothers Limited. They moved in about 1905 to Endell Street, Long Acre, London.



The mills in 1895.
[102kb]

At the Grove Mill, Ernest Walter Ashby decided not to renew the lease when it expired in 1902. With the end of the lease in sight, the owners arranged for the mill to be advertised as available for letting from Michaelmas following. During the period from July to October 1901 a notice was published weekly to this effect, wherein the "three storey water corn mill" was said to contain a breast-shot water wheel, six pairs of grinding stones, dressing machines, and other machines and equipment [55].

Despite the fact that the mill was fully equipped for corn milling, when the lease was eventually taken up, in 1903, it was converted to other uses by the new lessees, the Patent Horse Hair Company Limited, makers of artificial horse hair. This material, used for the filling of mattresses and upholstery, was made from treated vegetable fibres, and was promoted as being more hygienic than the animal product it replaced. It was given the name Lyxhayr, and in 1905 the company was renamed Lyxhayr Limited [56].

In 1910 the company also took over the Crown Mill, which had been mostly disused since Whitehead's departure, and at that time was reconstituted as Lyxhayr Manufacturers Limited. There was another change of name in 1919, when it became Mitcham Fibre Mills Limited, and at about the same time the company purchased the freehold of both mills from the landowner, Sir Frederick Fowke [56].

The owner last recorded in this account, Mrs. Elizabeth Spencer, had died in 1848, and her estate was inherited in equal shares by her daughters, Elizabeth, the wife of Charles Thomas Freer, and Sarah, wife of Sir Frederick Thomas Fowke. The properties were later solely in the possession of the Fowkes, and after Sir Frederick's death in 1897 passed to his grandson Frederick, together with the title. It was this Sir Frederick Fowke who sold the mills.

The fibre company was re-formed as the Mitcham Hair and Fibre Mills Limited in 1948. At this date, they were working only at the Crown Mill, having leased the Grove Mill, in about 1930, to R. F. White and Company Limited, toilet soap and perfume manufacturers. The fibre

company vacated the site in 1959, and the Crown Mill was then taken over by C. S. Walker (Sacks) Limited, and the Associated Jute Company Limited.



The mills in c. 1932.
[101kb]

The Crown Mill was destroyed by a fire on 9 August 1964. It was said to have been the biggest fire in Mitcham for several years. The building was gutted and almost the entire stock of sacks, over a quarter of a million, was destroyed in the blaze. The mill building was not rebuilt but Walker's continued to operate on other buildings on the site [57].

R. F. White and Company Limited vacated the Grove Mill in January 1975 with the loss of 70 jobs, and moved production to Peterborough [58]. In 1977 Footman and Company Limited, which, appropriately, manufactured chiropody equipment and accessories, moved into the Grove Mill. They were there until 2003 when a redevelopment scheme was begun to provide housing accommodation over the whole site. The Grove Mill was retained for conversion into flats.

Mention was made at the beginning of this account of two associated mills, on the south bank of the Wandle in Morden parish, a paper mill and a snuff mill. Very little has been found out about either of them.

The paper mill was situated at the west end of a straight channel formed to the south of the river from a point just north of the bend called Bennett's Hole, and turning to flow into the river nearly opposite the Crown Mill site. Its course was through the present Watermeads National Trust property.

The paper mill and the channel to supply it were undoubtedly built by Richard Glover, but when is not known. Glover, as recorded previously, was first associated with the Mitcham mills in July 1774 when he took the lease of a corn mill. In 1778 he was granted a 76-year lease of the land on which the paper mill was later to be built [60].

Crocker gave the tentative date of 1782 as the start of Glover's career as a paper maker, without attributing the source of this information [59]. It would seem more likely to have been ten years later. The head lease of the land on which it was situated was probably acquired by Henry Hoare in about 1792 when he purchased the head lease of the Mitcham corn and snuff mills. Eric Montague suggested that Hoare may have supported, and possibly financed, Glover's enterprise [60]. The building of the mill soon after 1792 would be consistent with the earliest positive date found for paper making at Morden, an "R. Glover" watermark of 1795 [61].

Richard Glover was listed in Holden's directories for 1802-4, 1808, and 1809-11 as miller, paper maker and snuff manufacturer at Mitcham. On 31 January 1814 he insured his paper mill at Morden, "near Mitcham Bridge", with the Sun insurance company [62].

Following Richard Glover's death in 1824 or 1825, his son Richard evidently took over the working of the paper mill. He was named as the occupier, "under a lease for 85 years from Midsummer 1778 at a rent of per annum £15", in the sale catalogue describing the properties of Henry Hoare to be auctioned on 19 June 1828 [48].

The paper mill was recorded in a description of a perambulation of the boundaries of Mitcham made in May 1833 [60]. The last reference found was in the schedule to the Morden Tithe Map dated 5 August 1837, where it was described merely as a large building, in the occupation of John Glover. The ownership of the mill throughout was the same as that of the Mitcham mills, and Mrs. (Elizabeth Frances) Spencer was duly named in the schedule. The subsequent history of the mill, and the date of its demolition, have not been ascertained.

The snuff mill on the Morden bank was situated about 25 yards above Mitcham Bridge. As in the case of the paper mill, it was established by Richard Glover, and its date of construction is not known.

Eric Montague, on the basis of the Morden land tax records, which indicated that the land on which it was to stand was occupied by Richard Glover from 1784, surmised that the mill may have been erected by him in about 1804, when the valuation of his holding was substantially increased [60]. Henry Hoare had acquired the head lease of that land in about 1782.

The earliest reference found to the mill was the registration of an insurance policy taken out by Henry Hoare with the Royal Exchange insurance company on 3 March 1809. This covered a snuff mill in Morden with its machinery and utensils, in the occupation of Richard Glover [63]. Glover, as previously recorded, had converted one of the Mitcham corn mills to snuff grinding in 1788.

After Richard Glover's death in 1824 or 1825, his son Richard took over the working of the snuff mill. He was named as the occupier, held under a 76 1/2-year lease from Christmas 1787, in the sale catalogue of Henry Hoare's Mitcham estate, which was sold by auction on 19 June 1828.

Richard Glover was still in occupation in August 1837 when on the schedule to the Morden Tithe Map he was named as the tenant of Mrs. (Elizabeth Frances) Spencer, occupying a paddock and a snuff mill. As previously recorded, Richard Glover was declared bankrupt on 2 November 1846, and vacated the snuff mill on the Mitcham bank, and he probably left the Morden mill at the same time.

In 1853 Frederick Braithwaite mentioned "the small snuff mill" just downstream from the Mitcham corn and felt mills, and the implication is that it was still at work, but no further information was given [53].

The building remained standing for many years, and was said to have been used in connection with the breeding of trout by the Wandle Fisheries Association in the 1870s [64], but this has been disputed [60]. It was described by Dewey-Bates in 1889 thus: "the deserted [snuff] mill on the Wandle near Mitcham, its wheel gone, the shaft overgrown with moss and ivy, but beautiful in its decay, with the clear river reflecting its grey walls, the old bridge and ford on the right ... ". [65]

Montague Guiseppi wrote in 1905 that "just above Mitcham bridge there are the ruins of a very old and long disused snuff mill". [66] The remains of the mill are said to have been demolished soon after 1924 [64]. Hillier in 1951 recorded that the mill had been "pulled down within the memory of the fibre-works foreman, who in fact dismantled the wheel, an old wooden one, as it was becoming dangerous to the children who played about it". [54]

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