

## **Calico Printing Works at Merton Abbey, Merton (Later William Morris's Works)**

These works were originally situated on the north side of the River Wandle where it flows in a wide bend from the present Merantun Way to turn to run parallel to Merton High Street. They were first established on both sides of a copper mill which had been built in the 1720s, but were later confined to the west side of that mill, at about the mid-point of the bend in the river. Later still, the main buildings were rebuilt on the opposite bank.

The works were, according to Lysons, established in 1752 [1]. They were certainly in use by 19 May 1755, when Anthony Brown, "citizen and fishmonger", took out a policy with the Hand in Hand insurance company on premises at Merton on the south side of the road "a little West from the Bridge". These were then in the occupation of James Loten, a calico printer, and included a copper house, printing shop, and warehouse [2]. This policy was renewed on 20 May 1762 [3], but previous to this, on 17 May 1756, a policy was taken out by Anthony Brown, James Loten and Henry Clare on premises including a printing shop and liquor house, also on the south side of the road but further to the west, "being the 2nd. House West from the Copper Mills". On the same date, the firm took out four other policies on nearby properties. One was for four tenements, "on the North side of the road called Abey Row, west side of the road by the Abby Wall". Another was for four adjacent tenements, a third on two tenements "on the East side of the River at the end of Abby Land", and the fourth was on a barn about 100 yards from the latter tenements [4].

On 25 May 1758, Brown, Loten and Clare insured a third group of buildings, including a madder house, mill house and copper house, situated again on the south side of the road, but "a little eastward from the Copper Mills" [5]. They renewed this policy on 28 July 1760 in consideration of a "fresh survey" and evidently further buildings had been erected, as the valuation on this policy was £1,400 as compared with the value of £600 on the previous policy [6]. The firm renewed the five policies on the properties to the west of the copper mill on 19 May 1763 [7].

Henry Clare "of Merton, Callico Printer", died in May 1765. He appointed Anthony Brown and James Loten as two of the executors of his will, and bequeathed part of his estate to the children of James Loten, who was his son-in-law [8].

Brown and Loten renewed the policy on the premises to the east of the copper mills on 12 November 1766 following a "fresh survey" which increased the valuation from £1,400 in 1760, to £2,300 [9]. The register entry of the policy covering the first property "a little West from the Bridge", referred to previously, dated 20 May 1762, was marked "Void Nov. 12 1766" [3], so it seems that those premises were absorbed into the enhanced property which had been freshly surveyed.

James Loten, "of Merton, Callico Printer", died probably early in 1767. From his will, proved on 25 February 1767, it appears that his first wife, the daughter of Henry Clare, had died and he had subsequently remarried. He bequeathed most of his estate to his second wife and her three children, and a lesser amount to the two children by his first marriage, in consideration of the fact that they were provided for under the terms of the will of their grandfather Henry Clare [10].

Anthony Brown carried on the management of the business alone for a while, but on 17 August 1769 he assigned the insurance policies on all the premises, and evidently the leases and the business at about the same time, to Benjamin Vaughan the Elder, Benjamin Vaughan the Younger, William Fenning and James Halfhide.

Fenning and Halfhide had previously been in partnership with John Munns as calico printers at Crayford, Kent. This partnership was dissolved on 31 December 1768, Munns then carrying on the business there alone. The announcement was not made until 17 June 1769 [11], and presumably Fenning and Halfhide were winding up their affairs at Crayford and making arrangements with the Vaughans during the interim.

The new partnership, having been assigned the policies on the buildings in August 1769, insured their utensils, stock and goods contained in some of the buildings with the Sun insurance company soon afterwards, on 23 September 1769 [12]. On 7 June 1770, they renewed the insurance policy on the buildings [13].

The policy covering the contents was renewed on 23 February 1775. The register record listed the buildings on the premises, which included a mill house, white house, calender house, copper house, colour house, madder mill and kiln, cutting shop, printing shop, engraving shop, copper plate room, stables and granary. They also insured their goods in a warehouse at Wandsworth [14].

The policy taken out in June 1770 was renewed on 5 June 1777 [15]. The register entry of this was marked "Void July 14, 1784". It was probably at about this period that the Vaughans resigned from the firm. They do not seem to have been directly involved in calico printing, and may only have provided financial backing as an investment.

William Fenning was declared bankrupt in April 1788 [16]. A year or so later he took over a calico printing works at Ravensbury, Mitcham, which he managed successfully for over 20 years. James Halfhide carried on alone at Merton Abbey, but he had been joined by his son James before 19 June 1797, when they insured two copperplate printing shops and the utensils and goods therein [17]. Another son, Edward, had joined the firm by 22 June 1802, when all three were declared bankrupt [18].

In April 1803 the owners of the Merton Abbey estate, namely Richard Fezard Mansfield, who held a two-thirds share, and Charles Smith, who held the other one-third share, commissioned a report and valuation on the mills on the estate. These included "The Callico Grounds and Premises Lett to Messrs. Halfhide." The premises described consisted of a large colour shop, three dyehouses, a copper house containing eight furnaces, printing rooms, drying house and white house, another printing and drying room, drawing shop, drug room, and ancillary buildings including wheelwright's shop, carpenter's shop, blacksmith's shop, warehouses and stables. There was also a dwelling house occupied by James Halfhide senior, and another occupied by James Halfhide, and several cottages in which lived labourers at the works. There was an undershot water wheel said to work "a set of machinery by which many operations in the Manufacture are performed" [19].

In November 1803 it was announced that the creditors of the Halfhides should meet the assignees on 1 December 1803, "to take into Consideration the Propriety of adopting Proceedings for the Recovery of the Bankrupts' Premises at Merton, which the Landlord claims as having been forfeited, under the Terms of the Lease" [20]. Details of the outcome

are not known, but soon afterwards the premises were in the occupation of William West and James Stubington Penny, calico printers.

They were evidently in possession before 27 May 1805, when a further report on the premises was drawn up. The dwelling house formerly occupied by James Halfhide was now in the possession of Charles Smith, and William West now lived in the house previously occupied by Edward Halfhide. Many of the factory buildings had been renovated or repaired, and a new mill house had been built. This had a new breastshot wheel, "extremely well constructed and in every respect much better adapted than the former one for the purposes to which that was applied - connected with it are mills for grinding colours, &c. and in calendering machines, a washing wheel &c." A new reservoir had been formed adjoining the mill [19].

John Stubington Penny left the partnership on 30 June 1805 [21]. William West then carried on alone, but a few years later he was in financial trouble. On 21 January 1812 a summons was issued against him by the West Brixton Justices of the Peace for the non-payment of his Merton poor rates. Another summons for the same offence was issued on 23 October 1812 [22]. On that same day he was declared bankrupt [23].

In November 1812 it was advertised that the lease of his premises at Merton would be offered for sale at an auction to be held on 1 December next, "by direction of the Assignees". The property was described thus:

*"extensive Calico and Bleaching Grounds, with every appropriate and well-arranged buildings, suitable for conducting a business upon a large scale, with stables, waggon and cartsheds, a spacious yard, a comfortable and genteel dwellinghouse, a counting-house, and other offices. The premises are admirably supplied with water. The grounds, yard, house and offices comprise altogether about 13 acres."*

On the same day West's furniture and other effects were to be auctioned, and on the following day his plant, utensils, and stock in trade, in lots [24]. The auction of the lease was later postponed to 2 December [25].

Following William West's departure, Gilman & Company were recorded as being the occupiers in 1816 [26], and they were succeeded by Thomas Allchin, a silk printer, who insured his mill "worked by water" and a nearby dwelling house at Merton on 18 August 1819 [27].

Thomas Allchin worked there for several years, but he was evidently experiencing financial difficulties by 3 April 1827, when he came to an arrangement with the Merton Vestry regarding the back payment of his poor rates, and was excused the payment of one quarter's rate "on account of the Factory not being at work for some time" [28]. His works had closed down, or were about to close, by 4 August 1830, when it was agreed that his apprentices should be transferred to Peter Wood, a silk printer at Phipps Bridge [28].

In August 1831, a notice was published advertising the sale by auction on 24 August of the lease of the premises, together with all the machinery, plant and fixtures, and articles in trade, "under distress for rent from Mr. Thomas Alchin" [29].

The lease was probably bought by Edward Reynolds, a silk and calico printer, who was recorded as being the occupier in November 1834 [30]. The owners at this time were the Rev. William Mansfield (son of Richard Fezard Mansfield who had died in 1812), and Charles Robert Smith (grand-nephew of Charles Smith who had died in 1827). Edward Reynolds was declared bankrupt on 25 July 1843 [31]. He may have been succeeded by James Keymer, John Gibson and Thomas Muir, "silk and woollen printers at Merton", trading as James Keymer and Company. Their partnership was dissolved on 22 May 1844, to the extent that James Keymer resigned [32]. On 9 July 1846, Thomas Welch was granted a 21-year lease of the premises by Mansfield and Smith [33].

Thomas Welch specialised in printing table cloths, and some of his designs were displayed at the Great Exhibition in 1851, when he was awarded a prize medal [34]. In the Merton census returns of that year it was recorded that he employed 38 men and women and 19 boys. Two years later Frederick Braithwaite visited "Mr. Welch's print works, which employ a wheel of 8 H.P. ... There is a rinsing wheel worked by the mill power in the main stream, and ten men are constantly employed in rinsing the goods." [35]

When the 1861 census was compiled Thomas Welch's workforce had increased to 45 men, 2 women and 19 boys. This was probably at the peak of the firm's production. Thomas Welch died on 8 February 1871 at the age of 81, and his sons George and Henry carried on the business under the name Welch Brothers. There were then only 40 employees in total. From the mid-1870s George Welch alone was the proprietor, and when the 1881 census was taken, he had only 16 employees. Later that year, in June, George Welch wrote to his landlords saying that he had assigned his lease to William Morris. On 16 June 1881 Mansfield and Smith granted a new lease to William Morris [36].

William Morris, writer and artist, had joined in establishing the firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Company, to produce various furnishings, in April 1861. The partnership was dissolved on 25 March 1875, and the firm was reconstituted as Morris & Company under William Morris's sole proprietorship.



*The works in c. 1894.*  
[79kb]

Early in 1881 Morris began to seek a site for a new factory where all the various products of the company could be made. In March 1881, accompanied by William de Morgan, he inspected George Welch's works and decided that they would be suitable. He retained the old buildings, renovating and adapting them as necessary, and production then started on the site. The firm flourished, and Morris maintained his connection with it until shortly before his death on 3 October 1896.

Following Morris's death the company carried on in the same tradition, with various changes of directors and name, becoming Morris & Company Decorators Limited in 1905, and Morris & Company Art Workers Limited in 1925. During the early 1930s production was being reduced, but tapestry weaving, fabric dyeing and printing, damask weaving, and stained glass manufacture was still being carried on, though other activities such as carpet making and wallpaper printing seem to have been discontinued [37]. However, their worsening financial situation forced the directors to close down the works in May 1940 [38]. The company was officially wound up and a liquidator duly appointed on 29 August 1940 [39].

The premises were later purchased by the proprietors of the adjacent New Merton Board Mills, and the buildings were demolished to make way for a post-war extension of the board mills.

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### ***References***

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- 34.** The Illustrated Exhibitor and Magazine of Art, vol. 2, no. 30 (July 1852), p. 53. Copy in Merton Local Studies Library.
- 35.** Frederick Braithwaite, "On the Rise and Fall of the Wandle ... ", in Institution of Civil Engineers Proceedings, vol. 20 (1861).
- 36.** Surrey History Centre, 3057/1/8.
- 37.** An interesting account of these processes, and the buildings in which they were carried out, was given by Douglas Griffiths, who was one of the last apprentices of the firm, working at Merton from 1934 until 1939. See article, "Morris and Company at Merton Abbey; One Man's Memory of the last Days of the Works", in London's Industrial Archaeology, no. 3 (1984).
- 38.** The Times, 8 June 1940.
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