

Amery Mills, Merton

The site of these mills was on the final part of the curved course of the Wandle where it turns to run eastwards alongside Merton High Street, and about 100 yards west of Merton Bridge. Just to the south-east was the site of Merton Priory, usually called Merton Abbey.

The priory was established in about 1117 by Gilbert Norman, and he arranged for an existing mill thereabouts to be resited [1]. This was probably one of the two mills at Merton included in the Domesday survey. The next reference to the premises found was on 4 November 1534, when two mills on the site, called Amery Mills, were leased by the incumbent prior to William Moraunt for the term of 27 years [1].

Following the surrender of the priory property to Henry VIII in about 1540, the mills became separated from those estates. In 1558 John Pennon was granted a 27-year lease of the mills, but remained there until about 1600. Edward Ferrars acquired the property on 19 May 1609, and it later passed to Richard Burrell, who sold the mills to Sir Francis Clerke. Sir Francis also acquired the priory estates, and thus the mills became once more part of those estates [2].

On 19 June 1624 he conveyed all his estates at Merton to Rowland Wilson, a London vintner. Wilson died in 1654, and by his will proved on 1 June 1654 he bequeathed the properties to his wife Mary [3]. They subsequently passed to her grandson Ellis Crispe, who in 1668 sold them to Thomas Pepys [2].

On 10 May 1669 Pepys granted a 51-year lease of the mills to Jonathan Welch of Southwark. The mills then comprised a brazil mill, a colour mill (both probably in the same building), and a corn mill. Jonathan Welch died in 1678, and bequeathed the lease of the mills to his sons Jonathan and Joseph in equal shares [4].

After Thomas Pepys's death the mills and other properties passed to his widow Ursula, Sir Edward Smith, and others [2]. Sir Edward Smith apparently later acquired sole ownership of the mills, and became involved in a court case concerning them, heard at the Surrey Assizes on 26 January 1692/3.

The plaintiffs were his tenants, Jonathan and Joseph Welch, who claimed that the flow of water to their mills was obstructed by a new mill which Sir Edward Smith had built a short distance upstream. The verdict was given in favour of the plaintiffs, and Sir Edward was ordered to pull down the new mill. He appealed to the House of Lords, where on 3 March 1692/3 the verdict was upheld [5].

In 1696 the Priory estate, including the mills, was sold to Susanna St. John, who sold it to William Hubbold in 1701. "William Hubbold Esq. or his tenant Joseph Walsh" (sic) were duly named on a list of those liable to pay a sewer rate in respect of a mill in Merton, dated 17 June 1704 [6]. After Hubbold's death in 1709 the properties were purchased by Sir William Phipard [2].

It is not known for how long the Welch brothers worked the mills, but it may have been until the expiry of their lease in 1720. The next reference found relating to the tenancy of the premises was in that year, when on 24 August David Blanker took out three policies with the

Sun insurance company, covering his dwelling house, a nearby corn mill, and a nearby brazil mill, all "near Martin Abbey" [7].

Later, Blanker changed his insurers, and on 12 May 1727 he took out a policy with the Hand in Hand company on "a Mill building being part a dwelling house and part a Brazeel Mill", with ancillary buildings, "at Martin Abbey" [8]. The mill was described as abutting "north on Brightred", and three weeks later, on 31 May, Samuel Brightred & Company insured a workshop and copper mill "on the south side of the road at Martin Abbey" and abutting "south on David Blanker" [9]. Thus it is clear that the copper mill was on the north bank of the Wandle, opposite the brazil mill on the south bank. Samuel Brightred was an "armourer and brazier" based in Southwark, who had taken over the business on the death of his father in 1719. Presumably it was he who converted the former corn mill to copper working, some time between 1720 and 1727.

Both policies were renewed on 21 June 1734 by their respective holders [10]. David Blanker died in 1739 and by his will proved on 14 June 1739 he bequeathed a cash settlement to his wife and directed that the remainder of his assets was to be divided equally between his four children [11]. They evidently sold the lease of the brazil mill to Brightred, for the register entry of Blanker's policy of 21 June 1734 has a note added stating that "this policy is in the possn. of Mr. Saml. Brightred".

Brightred renewed the policies on both mills on 2 July 1741 [12], but on the next renewal date, 2 July 1748, he insured only the copper mill [13]. It would seem that some extension or rebuilding work had been carried out in the interim for the valuation in 1748 was £325 as against £150 in 1741. The brazil mill remained empty, or at least uninsured, until the following year, when on 18 April 1749 John Corner, a dyer of Southwark, renewed the policy [14]. It was noted in the policy register that the mill was in the occupation of one Wiseham, and that the premises included a printing shop, so apparently John Corner had converted the mill to the purposes of his dyeing business.

The record of Samuel Brightred's 1748 policy was annotated "Void April 1752". This followed on his death in mid-April 1750. By his will proved on 26 April 1750 he bequeathed his estate to his wife Barbara and his four daughters [15], and they evidently later discontinued the use of the copper mill and sold their interests in it.

John Corner died on 27 August 1755. By his will dated 10 January 1736/7 he bequeathed all his real estate to his wife Elizabeth [16], but she had died during the intervening 18 years and he had remarried. So when the will was proved on 6 September 1755, administration was granted to his second wife Mary. Thus it was in the name of Mary Corner, widow, that the insurance policy on the former brazil mill was renewed on 29 April 1756 [17]. On 15 December 1756 she assigned the policy to Thomas Corner, the late John Corner's brother, who was also a dyer.

Mary Corner subsequently remarried, but died not long afterwards and final administration of John Corner's estate was granted to Thomas Corner on 6 June 1760. He renewed the insurance policy on 19 May 1763, when the mill was still in the occupation of Wiseham [18]. This seems to be the final policy taken out by Thomas Corner on this mill, but he carried on working at his dyehouse at Southwark until his death in 1774.

The Hand in Hand registers give no further information about the copper mill after 1752, or the former brazil mill after 1763, until 1769, when a policy covering both mills was taken out by William Thoys. He was a coppersmith based at Whitechapel, who had earlier worked at a copper mill near Hack Bridge, Carshalton, from some time in the 1730s until about 1743, when he moved to another mill at Carshalton, located opposite the end of Willow Lane, Mitcham. He was there until about 1753 and may have moved to Merton soon afterwards. A list of those liable to pay a sewer rate, drawn up on 25 March 1756, names "William Thoits [sic] for mills" at Merton [19].

The policy taken out by Thoys, on 18 March 1769, was for both mills, referred to as "new" and "old", so perhaps he had converted the former brazil mill to copper working shortly before that date. On the same day he also insured a nearby dwelling house [20]. He renewed the policy on the mills on 15 December 1770 following a fresh survey, which increased the overall valuation from £750 to £1,000 [21].

William Thoys died in 1773, and by his will proved on 26 November 1773 he bequeathed all his possessions to his son John [22]. John Thoys did not enjoy his inheritance for long, dying less than 18 months later, probably in March 1775. By his will, proved on 4 April 1775, he directed that the business be continued at Whitechapel and Merton as a "Trust Estate" to provide an annuity for his wife Mary and to finance the upbringing of his three sons, then all minors under the age of 15. The trustees were to be his wife, his friend Richard Rook, his brother-in-law Richard Burfoot, and his "Assistant in Trade", Peter Robinson [23].

Peter Robinson, who had worked for William Thoys and had been bequeathed £100 by him, was to receive £500 a year "for carrying on the said trade", until John Thoys's eldest son William was 24. In fact, Robinson carried on for much longer, and effectively controlled the business for the next 25 years or so. In August 1779 he took on an apprentice, and another in about 1785 [24].

He insured the dwelling house near the mills on 18 March 1776, on 11 Mach 1790, and again on 7 March 1797 [25]. The register entries for the last two renewals noted that the house was "occupied by the workmen of Messrs. Thoys & Co." He insured the mills on 9 December 1777, 15 December 1784, and, for the last time, on 20 December 1798 [26]. He died the following year, probably in September.

The mills at this date were largely in the ownership of Richard Fezard Mansfield. Sir William Phipard had died in 1723 and bequeathed his estate in equal shares to his sons William, John and George. George Phipard sold his share to Joseph Chitty on 26 May 1737 [27], and at some time William assigned his share to his brother John. He, by then Sir John Phipard, died in 1774, and bequeathed his estate, including his two-thirds share in the copper mills, to his niece Mary Cleeves [28]. She later married Richard Fezard Mansfield, who thereby acquired that share. The ownership of the remaining one-third share at this period has not been ascertained.

After Peter Robinson's death in 1799 the management of the business was taken over by Francis Morgan, who was paying the land tax in 1802. In April 1803 a survey and valuation of the mills on the Merton Abbey was prepared. The copper mills were then described as a copper rolling mill worked by an undershot water wheel, and a hammer mill (the former brazil mill) with two hammers worked by two undershot wheels. There were also two "small water wheels" which worked the bellows. The ancillary buildings included a copper house

and millwright's shop, charcoal house, timber house, sheds and stables, and there were two dwelling houses [29]. At this date two-thirds of the property was still held by Richard Fezard Mansfield, and the other one-third was in the possession of Charles Smith.

On 9 July 1812, Francis and James Morgan insured the millwork, machinery and utensils in a "range of buildings" at Merton with the Royal Exchange company [30]. A change of occupiers had taken place before 15 January 1816, when Shears and Son were named as the tenants [31]. Successive members of the Shears family were to continue in occupation of the mills for the next 50 years or so.

In December 1831 it was advertised that the freehold of the "Capital Copper Mills on the River Wandle at Merton Bridge" would be offered for sale at an auction to be held on 24 January following, "by direction of the Executors of Henry Taylor Esq." The property was described in the notice thus:

"All those Capital and very extensive Copper Mills on that well-known and powerful stream the river Wandle, with three large water wheels, driving several pairs of rollers, large hammers, shears, &c.; five heating furnaces, three refinery furnaces, two pairs of blast cylinders, a steam engine of 36-horse power, and every other requisite for conducting a concern of the very first consequence, with superintendent's dwelling, counting house, stabling, smith's and millwright's shops, yards, garden, and two workmen's cottages, held for nearly eleven years, at a low rent." [32]

Evidently no sale resulted from this auction, for in November 1832 it was announced that the premises would be sold during the following January, "pursuant to an order of the High Court of Chancery" [33]. This auction did not in fact take place until 13 August 1833, which was advertised in June 1833 [34].

The late Henry Taylor's role in the ownership has not been ascertained, nor the circumstances which led to the court action, and the outcome of the auction is not known. But the property continued to be held by the Mansfield and Smith families, in the persons of the Rev. William Mansfield, son of Richard Fezard Mansfield, who had died in 1812, and Rear Admiral Isaac Smith, the brother of Charles Smith, who had died in 1827.

Isaac Smith died on 2 July 1831, and bequeathed his properties at Merton to his nephew Isaac Cragg, who had added Smith to his name [35]. He died some five months later, on 7 December 1831, and bequeathed his estate to his nephew Charles Mackrell, when he came of age, provided he also take the surname Smith [36]. "Mansfield and Smith" were duly named as the owners of the mills in November 1834, when the occupiers were Daniel Towers Shears and James Henry Shears [37].

Frederick Braithwaite in 1853 recorded the copper mills of Messrs. Shears and Sons, with three water wheels equal to 40 horsepower. He also remarked that "This mill works day and night, and being not infrequently short of water, there is an additional steam engine of 40 H.P." [38]

Shears and Sons had previously had trouble with their water supply. Back in January 1822 they had brought an action against Peter Wood, the proprietor of a silk mill upstream at Phipps Bridge, which was heard in the Court of Common Pleas. Their complaint was that Wood had diverted the water of the river to better serve his mill, resulting in an irregularity of

the supply to their mill, which was "particularly injurious to a copper mill". Judgement was given in favour of the plaintiffs, and Wood was ordered to lower the dam he had erected [39].

Directory entries from 1851 to 1866 name James Shears and Sons as the occupiers, and the William Shears who was, in 1864, involved in a local railway undertaking, was no doubt one of the sons. On 29 July 1864 an Act of Parliament was passed authorising the construction of the Tooting, Merton and Wimbledon Railway (27 & 28 Vict. c. 325). This was to run from a junction with the Wimbledon and Croydon Railway at Merton Park station south of Wimbledon, to Tooting station on the Peckham Rye to Sutton Railway. This proposed railway, the Merton Abbey Loop, was to run across the Merton Abbey estate on the route of the present Merantun Way. There was another loop, running from north of Wimbledon station to Tooting station via Haydons Road station.

The four leading promoters and subscribers were named in the Act. In addition to William Shears, these were John Smith Mansfield (son of the Rev. William Mansfield who had died in 1854), Charles Smith, and John Leach Bennett, who were to be the first directors of the company. (Bennett, who had earlier worked as a calico printer at "Bennett's Mill" just upstream from the copper mills, was married to Charles Smith's cousin Maria.) Section 31 of the Act specifically authorised the building of a "proper siding from the said Railway No. 1 [i.e. the Merton Abbey Loop] to the Copper Mills in the Parish of Merton in the Occupancy of Messieurs Shears and Sons".

However, the following year the company was dissolved, by an Act of 5 July 1865 (28 & 29 Vict. c. 273), and all the powers given by the former Act were vested jointly in the London and South Western Railway Company and the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway Company. The railway was completed by these companies and opened on 1 October 1868, but it is not clear when the siding was constructed. It is not shown on the Ordnance Survey maps of about 1870, which show the main railway, but was presumably built soon after. It must have been used by Shears and Sons for only a short period. The last directory entry found for them was in 1868, although the 1871 Merton census returns name a few copper workers.



*The copper mills in c
1870 [111kb]*

A directory for 1874 names the occupiers of the mills as the Merton Flock & Wool Company Limited, manufacturers of drummed and carded wools for upholsterers and saddlers (F. H. Relch, manager). In 1876 this became the Merton Flock & Wool Company, Smith and Jones, and in 1882, the last directory reference found, the firm was the Merton Flock & Wool Company (J. Smith & Company).

John Smith, who was the proprietor of both companies, evidently got into financial difficulties, and on 16 January 1885, he was declared bankrupt [40]. The following year, on 2 February 1885, a 21-year lease of the "carding mill" was granted by John Smith Mansfield and John Mackrell (son of Charles Smith who had died in 1882) to John Foulston and Charles Court. They surrendered the lease on 17 February 1886 [41].

The mill apparently continued in use as a flock mill for a few more years. In an article about the River Wandle published in June 1889 there was reference to "the disused copper mill in the High Street of Merton, now a flock mill" [42]. By 1892 the mill had been converted to paper making; in that year the Metropolitan Paper Company, paper manufacturers, were recorded at "Merton Abbey Mills".

The Metropolitan Paper Company made "printings, news, cartridges, common and superfine middles, railway tickets, etc., on one 90 inch machine using steam and water power" [43]. In July 1895 a store and about 250 tons of waste paper were destroyed by fire. The amount of the damage was estimated to be about £1,000 [44].

On 16 January 1896, C. J. Bill, the proprietor, reconstituted the firm as the Metropolitan Paper Company Limited, with a capital of £12,000 in £1 shares [45]. The new company was soon in financial trouble, and in February 1897 a meeting of their creditors was held "to consider the present state of matters". The company's difficulties were said to have been due, in part, to the cost of a new steam engine and boiler, and other machinery, and the trading losses resulting from the interruption of production while the plant was being installed [46].

In April 1897 it was reported that the lease of the mill had been bought by Alfred E. Reed on behalf of the London Paper Mills Company, of which he was a director. But it seems that the shareholders of that company refused to accept the purchase, and so Reed retained it in order to work the mill on his own account [47].

The completion of the sale of the lease to Reed did not take place until the late summer of 1897. In July of that year it was occupied by a "syndicate" represented by Henry Spain, but it was stated that the mill would "probably change hands within the next few weeks" [48]. The Metropolitan Paper Company Limited was formally wound up on 13 October 1897, when Henry Spain was appointed as liquidator [49].

The firm of Alfred E. Reed and Company had been established in 1894, when they took over the working of the Upper Tovil Mill at Maidstone. Soon afterwards they acquired paper mills at High Wycombe, and later at other locations. On 28 May 1903, the company was reconstituted and registered as Alfred E. Reed and Company Limited, with a share capital of £100,000 [50]. They remained at Merton for 20 years, until they moved out in 1917.



*The pepper mill in c 1894
[126kb]*

In October 1917 it was reported that the lease of the Merton paper mill had been acquired by Hugh Stevenson and Sons Limited, cardboard box manufacturers [51]. This firm had been established in 1859 and incorporated in 1898, and by the time they moved into the Merton Abbey mill they also occupied works at Manchester and Birmingham, and some in Scotland. In about 1898 they had taken over the working of another mill on the Wandle, at the end of Riverside Road, Summerstown, Wandsworth, where they initially traded as the Corruganza Manufacturing Company. The firm was reconstituted and registered as a public company in September 1920, with a capital of £1,000,000 in £1 shares [52].

At the annual general meeting of Hugh Stevenson and Sons Limited held in February 1923, it was announced that the company had incurred a loss of £97,000 in the year ending 30 September 1921, although this was reduced slightly by a trading profit of about £2,000 in the following year. It was in connection with their financial situation that a separate company had been formed to take over the working of the Merton Abbey mill [53]. This was named Merton Board Mill Limited, which was registered on 26 April 1922 with a capital of £210,000 in £1 shares. Among the first directors were Albert Hugh Stevenson and A. Stevenson [54].

The following month the new company took out a Government loan of £100,000 "for the purpose of completing the erection and equipment of a board mill", under the provisions of the Trade Facilities Act 1921. This Act (11 & 12 Geo. 5 c. 65), passed on 10 November 1921, authorised the Treasury to "guarantee the payment of loans to be applied towards the carrying out of capital undertakings, or in the purchase of articles" and was intended to generate employment [55].

In June 1922 it was reported that the company had made arrangements with regard to their future production, and that it was intended to supply at least 500 tons per week [56].

The company would seem to have expended the whole of the Government loan on the erection of new buildings and the installation of new machinery, and probably some re-routeing and extension of the railway siding was carried out at this time. However, they had apparently taken no steps to repay the loan, and in August 1924 a receiver was appointed on behalf of the Treasury to carry on the business "with a view to its disposal as a going concern, or possible reconstruction" [57].

There were also a number of contractors and suppliers who were owed money by the board company, amounting to about £23,000, and one of the creditors, Sturtevant Engineering Company Limited, presented a petition for the winding-up of Merton Board Mill Limited to the High Court of Justice on 3 December 1924 [58].

This petition was heard on 16 December, but the proceedings were adjourned as the receiver was in negotiation with the company and other creditors [59]. Further adjournments followed, as a number of the creditors were opposed to the winding-up [60], but eventually, on 3 March 1925, the winding-up order was made [61].

Following this, the solicitor for the Treasury, as the receiver, obtained a High Court order to authorise the sale of the company's assets, and in June 1925 it was advertised that the freehold of the mill was on offer for sale by tender. The premises were described in the notice as "containing an area of 3 1/4 acres with substantial brick and concrete buildings having a total cubical capacity of above 1,850,000 ft." The offer was to include the plant and machinery which would provide an output of 300 tons per week. Tenders were to be submitted by 20 July 1925 [62].

The premises and plant were not sold, however, until the following year, when they were purchased by the Inveresk Paper Company in July 1926. The chairman of this company, William Harrison, had embarked in 1924 on a policy of buying or obtaining a controlling interest in a number of other paper mills. Soon after his acquisition of the Merton mill, he founded a company to work it, New Merton Board Mills Limited, which was registered as a public company on 13 July 1926 with a capital of £120,000 in £1 shares. One-third of these were owned by the Inveresk Paper Company, and William Harrison was the first chairman of the new company [63].

The mill had been bought for £37,500, and the company spent a further £80,000 on remodelling work. Production started in April 1927, and in February 1928 it was stated that the company "has now established its products on the market" [64]. New Merton Board Mills Limited were to work on the site for the next 30 years.

The mill buildings were badly damaged by enemy action in the Second World War, and when Sam Grindlay was appointed as manager in 1945, he found that he was "faced with the task of starting from scratch and completely rebuilding the entire mills". Also new machinery was installed and eventually the mills went into full production [65].

By 1961 the company had become a subsidiary of E. S. & F. Robinson (Holdings) Limited, later reconstituted as the Dickinson Robinson Group, and the mills were then known as the DGR Board Mills.

On 20 March 1966 a fire broke out in a "1500 ton mountain of paper" on the premises. About 300 tons of paper were destroyed, worth "a few thousand pounds" [66]. A few months later, on 18 August 1966, the same thing happened again, when about 1,000 tons of paper valued at £10,000, were destroyed by fire. The main buildings were untouched, and production continued as normal [67].

In February 1980 it was reported that the company had "just invested £4 million" on modernising the works, and that that could now process nearly 60,000 tonnes of recycled paper a year [68].

Some two years later, in March 1982, it was announced that the board mill would close down at the end of May, with the loss of 200 jobs. The closure was said to be "a result of a crippling decline in the fibreboard market", whereby the company had lost £2 million a year for the previous three years. The closure applied only to the main works, fronting Merton High Street, and the container works, situated to the southeast, would continue in production [69]. In November 1982 it was reported that the latter works would be reduced in extent, production being confined to one building, with the immediate loss of 35 jobs and probably more to follow [70].

By this date negotiations for the sale of the whole site were in progress, and it was reported in September 1982 that London Transport were interested in acquiring the property in order to build a bus garage thereon, and were in discussion with Merton Council. At the same time, Savacentre Ltd. had decided that this was the most favourable site for a hypermarket they wanted to build in the neighbourhood, and they were also holding meetings with the Council to explain their proposals [71].

Talks continued between Savacentre Ltd. and the Council, and by April 1983 it was apparent that detailed proposals were being drawn up. Savacentre Ltd. had already bought the site, and in March 1984 it was recorded that the board mill was being dismantled. Following provisional planning consent from the Council, and a public inquiry, approval in principle was given by the Secretary of State for the Environment in November 1986 and full planning permission was granted in April 1987. The hypermarket was opened in 1988.

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