

Calico Printing Works, Wimbledon ("Merton Bridge")

These works were situated on the west bank of the Wandle, about 100 yards downstream from where the present Byegrove Road crosses the river, where the "Merton Mills" were located. They were often described as being at or near Merton Bridge.

On 20/21 July 1693 Samuel Crispe sold to William Knight, a potter of St. Botolph's, some land at Wimbledon which he had inherited from his father Ellis Crispe. This included the site of the calico printing works, which was at that time meadow land [1]. This was on the north side of adjoining land which Knight had purchased three years previously. The terms of the conveyance allowed Knight to build a mill on the river, and presumably he did so.

However, the earliest reference found to a calico printer on the site was a notice of a commission of bankrupt issued against John Tozer, "of Martin's Bridge, Callico-printer", published in January 1719/20 [2].

Nothing has been discovered about the subsequent occupancy of the site until 24 December 1753, when William Walker of Wimbledon, calico printer, insured his dwelling house and nearby buildings including printing shop, calender house, copper house, colour house and drying room, and the utensils and goods therein, with the Royal Exchange insurance company [3]. The register entry of this policy refers to an earlier one taken out by Walker. The register containing the record of this has not been preserved, but judging from the policy number, it was probably issued in December 1750. William Walker was certainly living in Wimbledon at that time; his daughter Mary was baptised in the parish church on 26 August of that year.

Walker renewed his insurance policy on 22 December 1756 [4], and again on 22 December 1757, when he also took out a separate policy on "a new Building (being 3 Warehouses one over the other)", situated about 80 yards from his printing shop [5].

On 21 December 1758 he insured the Merton Mills, then consisting of a corn mill and a colour mill, of which he had recently acquired the lease, and which he later sub-let to his son-in-law Robert Nettleton [6].

The owner, William Knight, died in 1708 and his properties passed to his son John. He died in 1723 and bequeathed the lands containing the calico printing works to his sister Rose, the wife of William Welch. The Merton Mills were devised to his daughter Elizabeth Knight [7]. Thus it was most likely Rose Welch who was referred to in a list of those liable to pay a sewer rate in Wimbledon, compiled on 25 March 1756, as " ---- Walch [sic] and her tenant William Walker" [8].

Later, ownership of the property passed to William Knight Welch, who was probably Rose Welch's son. On 26/26 February 1784, shortly before his death, he, together with Francis Dance, his son-in-law John Brockbank, and others who had acquired an interest, conveyed some 44 acres of land in Wimbledon, including a 12-acre "callico ground", to Sir Richard Hotham [9]. Sir Richard had purchased some nearby property, including Merton Place and its grounds, in Merton and Wimbledon, in 1764.

William Walker died in 1791, but he had evidently relinquished the lease of the calico printing works, or sub-let them, several years earlier. The next occupants found recorded were Thomas Davidson, John Wagner, J. Harvey, and Thomas Bowness, calico printers at Wimbledon, who dissolved their partnership on 30 June 1785 [10]. On the same day, George Padmore resigned from a partnership of calico printers working at Rushy Meadow, Wallington [10]. Soon afterwards he went into partnership with Thomas Bowness at Wimbledon, and they carried on calico printing there until they were declared bankrupt in October 1788 [11]. A little later George Padmore moved to calico printing works at Wandsworth.

James Edwards, writing at about this time, referred to the "square white house in possession of Mr. Padmore; who, in partnership with Mr. White, has a callico-manufactory here", on the site. "Mr. White" is clearly an error, and in another passage Edwards mentioned a "neat white house ... in the possession of Mr. Bonus [i.e. Bowness] who carried on as a callico manufactory with Mr. Padmore". He also stated that, "these premises are now for sale" [12].

The sale referred to was advertised in a notice published in April 1789, which announced the forthcoming auction of "the valuable lease, fixtures and utensils belonging to the Calico Ground, late in the occupation of Messrs. Bowness and Padmore, situate at Merton Bridge" [13]. The auction was later advertised to be held on 2 July 1789 [14].

On 22/23 June 1792, Sir Richard Hotham conveyed all his Wimbledon and Merton properties to Charles Greaves, a linen draper, in conjunction with William Hodgson, James Newton and John Leach, with whom he was in partnership as calico printers at Merton Abbey. The "callico ground" included in the purchase was said in the conveyance deed to be in the occupation of William Walker although, as mentioned above, he had died the previous year [15].

Charles Greaves soon got into financial difficulties and in August a notice was published advertising the sale, by auction on 23 September 1800, of the freehold of about 80 acres of his land in Wimbledon [16]. This represented all the property he had bought from Sir Richard Hotham except Merton Place and its grounds. Greaves died soon afterwards, on 6 November 1800, and by his will he directed that his remaining properties be sold for the benefit of his children [17]. Accordingly, in 1801, Merton Place and its grounds was put up for auction, and were then bought by Lord Nelson on 18 September 1801. The ownership of the calico printing grounds and other lands, following their sale in 1800, is less easy to discover, and this matter will be considered later.

Meanwhile, Padmore and Bowness were probably succeeded as tenants by the firm of Francis Hudson, John Parris and Daniel Lloyd, of Mertonbridge, calico printers, from which John Parris retired on 30 June 1800 [18]. Hudson and Company were listed as calico-printers at Merton Bridge in Holden's directory for 1802-4, but the premises were occupied by Charles Thwaites, William Thwaites and Vere Monies from some time before 6 April 1805, when they dissolved their partnership. It was then announced that William Thwaites "will in future carry on the business on his own account" [19], but he later went into partnership with John Smith. They jointly insured a block printing shop and a wash house on the premises, with the machinery, stock and utensils therein, and Smith's nearby dwelling house, with the Sun insurance company on 7 June 1809 [20].

Soon afterwards, on 7 November 1809, they dissolved their partnership [21]. William Thwaites again carried on alone, but had evidently quit the business by December 1810, when it was advertised that the sale of all his utensils, materials and effects would be held by auction on the premises on 27 December 1810 [22].

William Thwaites was followed by William Bennett, calico printer, whose stay was brief, he being declared bankrupt on 29 June 1811 [23]. By order of his assignees, the leasehold of the premises, and his plant and utensils, "entirely new, and of the most excellent workmanship", were advertised to be offered for sale at an auction to be held on the premises on 8 August 1811 [24].

The auction probably did not result in a sale. Hassell, writing at about this time, noticed here "the calico works of Mr. Bennett, now at a stand from the stagnation of trade" [25]. In August 1815 the lease and the utensils and stock were advertised for sale by private contract [26].

The offer was then taken up by John Lewin Marshall and Oliver Pye Fox, calico printers, but they dissolved their partnership soon after, on 29 September 1815 [27]. They were followed at the works by William Smith and Peter Francis Papiion, described as dyers and calico printers at Merton Bridge when they were declared bankrupt on 16 March 1818 [28].

Apparently the lease was then taken by Benjamin Bailey, a calico printer who had previously worked at Willow Lane, Mitcham, who was named as the ratepayer in 1819 [29]. Then or later he went into partnership with Arthur Charles Goulet, but this union was dissolved on 6 February 1821 [30]. A week later, on 13 February, Benjamin Bailey was declared bankrupt [31].

In May 1821 it was announced that, by order of his assignees, Benjamin Bailey's plant, utensils and stock would be offered for sale at an auction to be held on the premises on 15 May 1821, and his household furniture on the following day [32]. Two months later, in July 1821, the owner, James Perry, advertised that the "Calico Printing Manufactory ... may be had by a respectable tenant on lease, for a term of years" [33]. The offer was repeated in November 1821 [34].

This reference to the ownership is the first made in this account since the property was offered for sale by Charles Greaves in September 1800, and it may be that James Perry purchased the freehold at that time. Perry, the proprietor and editor of the Morning Chronicle, had taken the lease of Merton Mill by 1796 [29], but had had a connection with Wimbledon since at least 22 June 1791, when he insured a dwelling house there [35]. In 1804 he acquired the freehold of Merton Mill.

The calico printing premises were probably still unoccupied when James Perry died on 5 December 1821. By his will, proved on 19 December 1821, he left all his property to trustees, to be sold for the benefit of his sons, William and Thomas Erskine Perry [36]. Accordingly, Perry's estate at Wimbledon was advertised to be for sale, in 32 lots, at an auction to be held on 24 July 1822, "by direction of the executors" [37]. Some of the lots were then purchased, but others, including the calico printing works, were not, and were again advertised to be on offer at an auction to be held on 10 June 1823 [38].

The calico printing works, together with some adjoining land, were then bought by Henry Floud of Lower Tooting who, on 19 December 1823 granted a 14-year lease of the premises,

at the rent of £75 per annum, to George Ansell and his brother Charles Augustus Ansell [39]. They were brothers-in-law of the previously mentioned Benjamin Bailey. George Ansell had worked as a calico printer at Carshalton from about 1798 until about 1822. Charles Augustus Ansell had been a paper maker for a few years until 1816, also at Carshalton.

Their undertaking at Wimbledon was not successful, and on 3 June 1826 George and Charles Augustus Ansell, "of the Bank Printing-Ground, in the Parish of Wimbledon, Calico Printers", were declared to be bankrupt [40]. Apparently they carried on working there for a while, but in October 1827 it was advertised, presumably at the instigation of Henry Floud, that their utensils and other effects would be offered for sale at an auction on 15 October, "under a distress for rent" [41]. It would seem that these effects were not then sold, for in May 1829 it was announced that the lease of the Bank calico printing grounds, "with the option of taking the Plant and Utensils at a fair valuation", would be offered at an auction to be held on 3 June 1829 [42].

Evidently no acceptable offers were made, for on 1 February 1831 the assignees appointed to deal with the bankrupts' affairs transferred the lease of the printing works to James Ansell, a brother of George and Charles Augustus [39]. In view of this arrangement, it seems odd that, a few days later, it was announced that by order of the assignees all the plant, utensils and fixtures at the works, would be offered for sale by auction on 14 February 1831 [43].

Whether or not James Ansell continued calico printing there has not been ascertained. He was at this period managing a flock mill at Wallington Bridge, until at least 1834. If he did carry on working at Wimbledon, he had left by September 1836, when a notice was published advertising the sale of an 11-year lease of the "Merton Bank Calico Grounds", at an auction on 26 September 1836. The premises were described in the advertisement as consisting of a "convenient residence, garden, and 12 acres of meadow land, with the following buildings - a copper house, printing shops, drying mount, drawing and cutting shops, stabling, and all requisite buildings" [44].

The premises were soon to be put to another use. In Pigot's directory for 1839, Fisher and Co. were named as leather dressers (japanned) who can be associated with the site, and Flower Fisher was recorded in the 1841 Wimbledon census returns as a japanner. The partnership of Flower Fisher and Thomas Davies, "Enamellers of Leather at Merton", was dissolved on 6 July 1843 [45].

On the schedule to the Wimbledon Tithe Map dated 4 February 1848, Henry Floud was named as the owner, and Christopher Robinson was the occupier of the premises. This situation was repeated on the schedule to a Deposited Plan, dated 28 November 1849, when the premises were described as Japan Leather Factory [46].

Two years later the occupier was James Paxton, who was described in the 1851 Wimbledon census returns as a patent leather dresser employing eight men and living at Wandle Bank. In 1853 Frederick Braithwaite visited Mr. Paxton's leather japanning works, "which are supplied with water from an Artesian fountain, rising about 8 ft. above the surface" [47].



The works in 1894
[112kb]

In the 1861 census returns James Paxton was recorded as employing 10 men and a boy, and in 1871 he was employing 11 men. He was still employing 11 men in 1881, two of these being his sons James and Henry. By 1884 Henry Paxton was in partnership with his father. They were working together in 1891, and probably until James Paxton's death at Wandle Bank on 17 December 1899 at the age of 78.

Henry Paxton probably continued working at the premises for a few years, but they were in the occupation of Connolly Brothers, leather dressers, by March 1905, when they wrote to the Croydon Rural District Council, referring to the disposal of sludge from the Merton sewage works, just across the river from their works [48].

Connolly Brothers took over the Merton corn mill in 1919, and converted it to leather dressing, but retained possession of the former calico printing site, and gradually extended those premises until eventually they occupied nearly all the land between the river, South Road, East Road, and North Road.

In 1994 Connolly Brothers (Curriers) Limited moved to a new factory in Kent. Subsequently, a housing estate was built on the site of the former calico printing grounds.

References

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- 6.** Ibid. MS 7252/7 No. 34894.
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