

Middle Mill, Wandsworth

This mill was on the River Wandle at a site about 30 yards south of the present Armoury Way.

The earliest known reference to it was in 1504/5 when, as a corn mill, it was leased for 19 years by the Abbot of Westminster to Richard Bryght of Wandsworth [1]. On 13 July 1511 the mill was leased to William Gardyner, a London grocer, for 54 years [1], but, following the confiscation of the Abbey's properties at the Dissolution, William Gardyner surrendered the lease on 20 March 1546/7 and was granted a new 21-year lease by the Crown [2]. By 1569 it had been converted to a "brasalle mille" [3], that is, a brazil mill, used for rasping brazil wood to a coarse powder, which was then allowed to ferment to increase its colouring power, for use as a dye on textiles.

There are further references to the brazil mill in the Wandsworth churchwardens' accounts in the early 1570s [4], but the mill had reverted to corn milling by 1605, when Thomas Noate claimed possession by patent from queen Elizabeth I of "two grain watermills" called the "Brasell Mill", formerly held by Thomas Bradshawe since 1596 [1]. It continued to be referred to as the brazil mill for many years thereafter.

The lease was soon afterwards held by Richard Breame, described on a former brass memorial in Wandsworth parish church as "servant to Queen Elizabeth and King James" [5]. He died at the beginning of January 1609/10 and in his will proved on 25 January he referred to "my milles with the rightes thereunto belonging in Wandsworth ... formerly called or known by the name of the Brasell Mill", which he bequeathed to his son Thomas [6]. The mill at that period was sub-let to William Bucke [7].

Thomas Breame died in December 1611, and the lease of the mill then passed to his elder brother Richard Breame. He died in 1619, and by his will bequeathed it to his son Richard [8].

By 1661 the mill, "now or late occupied by Smythe", was owned by Francis Gaston who had inherited it from his grandfather, of the same name, who had purchased it from William and George Whitmore [9].

In 1691 the mill was occupied by Edmund Parsons, miller [1]. He died some time between April 1692 and April 1693, and was evidently succeeded by his son of the same name, for a Wandsworth Vestry minute of 17 August 1693 quoted from a lease dated 2 April 1700 which mentioned the "mill of Edmund Parsons heretofore called the Brazeel Mill" [10]. In a list of those liable to pay a sewer rate, dated 13 June 1704, "Mrs. Sarah Almond or her tenant Edmund Parsons" were rated for a mill in Wandsworth [11].

The next reference found to the mill was on 17 December 1717, when Thomas Smith, miller, insured his goods and merchandise contained in the mill, and a nearby dwelling house, with the Sun insurance company [12].

The function of the mill had been changed before 12 October 1724, when Benjamin Watson of Wandsworth, "Oyl Maker", took out insurance policies on his dwelling house and mill house and other buildings with the Hand in Hand insurance company [13]. A month later, on 11 November 1724, he insured his "two Oyl Mills" and his stock and goods therein, and his

dwelling house, with the Sun insurance company [14]. From the description given in the register record of the latter policy, it seems that the oil mills were on opposite sides of the river, with the dwelling house adjoining the one on the east bank. Benjamin Watson was also at this period oil making at the nearby Tower Mill.

Watson died in May 1728, and on 19 June 1728 the Hand in Hand policies were assigned to his brother-in-law Daniel Browne, who was also an oil maker. Browne renewed those policies on 14 October 1731 [15], and again on 21 October 1738 [16]. The register record of the latter was annotated as "Void 1740".

Browne was followed by Matthew Tealing, who is said to have been the leaseholder in 1740 [1], and the mill was then converted back to corn milling. Matthew Tealing died soon afterwards, on 11 July 1741, and administration of his estate was granted to his widow Mary on 26 August 1741 [17]. Her son Joseph apparently took over the working of the mill, and was probably responsible for the building of a windmill, an octagonal smock mill, alongside the water mills, in about 1750.

Joseph Tealing was named as liable to pay a sewer rate in a list drawn up on 25 March 1756 [18], and in a similar list dated 11 August 1763 [19], but apparently Mary Tealing had retained some control of the business. She died in March 1763, and by her will proved on 6 April 1763 she bequeathed two-thirds of her interest in her "leasehold mills and tenements" and the profits arising therefrom, to her daughters Elizabeth and Ann and her son John in equal amounts, and the other one-third to her son Joseph [20].

On 26 June 1770 the occupiers of the mill were named as "Mr. Tealing & Company", when it was noted in the Wandsworth Vestry minute book that the firm had paid their poor rates while their mill was "abuilding", obviously a reference to a recent reconstruction [21]. "Tealing & Co." were named as the tenants in the Wandsworth land tax registers from 1780 to 1786, and in May 1788 there was a reference in the Wandsworth Vestry minute book to "Mrs. Tealing's mill" [22]. This was no doubt Ann, the widow of Joseph Tealing, who had died on 16 May 1780, and by his will proved on 30 May 1780 had bequeathed to her all his estate [23].

By 1790 Richard Shepley was the miller there, and he was also working at the corn mill of the downstream Upper Mills, but he was declared bankrupt in January 1781 [24]. He may have continued working for a while, but on 2 January 1802 Henry Rowed, a Chelsea mealman, insured his utensils and stock contained in the Middle Mill with the Sun insurance company [25].

He was succeeded by William Holding, who was named as the miller there on 13 April 1803 [26]. About this time Richard Shepley's uncle, George Shepley, together with Jacob John Papineau, purchased the freehold of the mill, of which they had apparently held the lease for several years. George Shepley, a leatherdresser based in Southwark, had earlier bought the Upper Mills at Wandsworth and, much earlier, two mills near Hackbridge in Carshalton, which were under the management of Jacob John Papineau.

Soon after they acquired the Middle Mill, Shepley and Papineau engaged the engineer John Rennie to inspect its condition. His report, dated 5 March 1804, described a number of measures required "to put the mill in a proper state of repair and fit to manufacture wheat into flour".

Rennie made a further report on 25 July 1804, following another inspection, from which it appears that few of the measures he had recommended had been implemented. He mentioned that the two water wheels were in very bad condition, the machinery was "very old and of bad construction", and that the windmill had not been at work since the beginning of January 1802. William Holding, the miller, was accused of neglect [27]. Probably further works were carried out, and Holding was still named as the tenant in Holden's 1808 directory, but not in the 1809-11 edition, and the identity of the occupier for the next few years has not been ascertained.

George Shepley had died on 15 February 1807 and by his will proved on 16 March 1807 he bequeathed his properties at Wandsworth to his son Hugh [28]. Hugh Shepley died a few weeks after his father, and was buried on 20 March 1807. He died intestate and unmarried, but his elder brother Richard was granted administration of his estate [29], and conveyed most of the Wandsworth properties, including a moiety of the Middle Mill, to his brother Michael. Richard Shepley himself died soon afterwards, on 3 July 1808.

Michael Shepley sold most of these properties, and the half-share in the freehold of the Middle Mill was advertised to be offered for sale at an auction to be held on 29 March 1808. The mill was then described as "working six pairs of stones and now in full trade, with every requisite convenience for conducting the business with facility, together with two dwelling houses and eight cottages" [30]. The other half-share was retained for a time by Jacob John Papineau.

Apparently both moieties were subsequently acquired by Samuel Kingsford, who owned the whole property by June 1816 [31]. In July 1817 he complained to the West Brixton Justices of the Peace about his poor rate assessment [31].

Samuel and Edward Kingsford were named as millers at Wandsworth in Pigot's 1823-24 directory. They also worked at the Ember Mill near Thames Ditton, and when their partnership was dissolved on 1 July 1826, it was announced that in future the business would be carried on by Samuel Kingsford alone at the Ember Mill only [32]. It was probably soon afterwards that the Middle Mill was purchased by Daniel Watney, who by then had also bought the Upper Mills, and had taken his son James into partnership, and they took over the working of both mills. By this time the windmill was inoperative; a painting of c. 1825 shows it to be without sails, and it was probably demolished not long afterwards [33].



The mills in 1838
[130kb]

Daniel Watney retired on 27 June 1829, and James Watney then carried on the business at the Middle and Upper Mills alone [34]. Daniel died two years later, on 10 June 1831, and by his will proved on 29 June 1831 he bequeathed the Middle Mill, together with the Upper Mills and other property, to his son James [35].

James Watney was duly named as the owner and occupier of both those mills on the schedule to the Wandsworth Tithe Map of 1838. A few years later he also took over the working of the Lower Mill from his brother Daniel who had occupied it since 1826.

In about 1847 James Watney went into partnership with William Henry Wells. In 1850 Brayley wrote:

"Messrs. Watney and Wells, at the upper and middle mills, now work thirty-one pair of stones, which, at the average of 1000 quarters per pair, will produce 60,000 sacks a year, to the value of £150,000. Although the operations of grinding, boulting, &c. are performed partly by steam and partly by waterpower, the business employs 26 work-horses, and 10 or 12 nags, but with so much economy of labour not more than 50 men are required to prepare and distribute flour for 50,000 persons" [36].

The partnership of Watney and Wells was dissolved on 20 June 1861 [37], and they ceased working at all the mills. Soon afterwards the Middle Mill was taken over by the Aerated Bread Company, together with the Upper Mills, and they appointed George Pimm as works manager. On 19 May 1874 the Aerated Bread Company leased the mills to Pimm, and he carried on the business as George Pimm and Company, initially in partnership with Seth Taylor [38].

George Pimm was described as "among the leaders of the most advanced and enterprising millers of the country", and he introduced much modern machinery into the mills [39].

In 1883 Seth Taylor assigned his share to his brother-in-law William Bulstrode, who had married his sister Jane [40]. After George Pimm's death on 21 May 1885 at the age of 67, the business was carried on by William Bulstrode and Pimm's son, George Arthur Pimm, retaining the name George Pimm and Company.

The company was still operating at the Middle mill in 1892, but in 1898 the building was said to have been "pulled down" [41]. In 1911 Davis wrote that the mill was "now to be seen in ruins" [2]. The firm continued milling at the Upper Mill, under the name Bulstrode, Pimm & Company Limited, and managed by William Bulstrode's sons Ernest and Frank and George Arthur Pimm, until 1930.

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13. *Ibid.* MS 8674/29, p. 218.
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16. *Ibid.* MS 8674/56, p. 116.
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