

Wimbledon Mill

This mill was situated on the east bank of the Wandle at the end of Copper Mill Lane, Summerstown, Wimbledon. This road, now a cul-de-sac, was originally part of the road to Wimbledon, which was by-passed when the western part of Plough Lane was constructed in 1840.

The original mill on the site was a fulling mill, first mentioned in a record of the Wimbledon Manorial Court held on 14 January 1416 [1]. It was probably that of which John Kempe, Archbishop of Canterbury, granted a 21-year lease in 1452 to John Cromwell, who also held the lease of lands in Putney. All his properties were confiscated by John Kempe's successor, Thomas Bouchier, and it seems that Cromwell then ceased his business activities. In 1463 John Bell, who then worked the fulling mill, was accused of failing to keep in good repair the nearby road [2].

In about 1473, John Cromwell's son Walter regained possession of the fulling mill and the Putney holdings. In 1475 it was recorded in the manorial rolls that he had been fined for breaking the assize of ale, and he committed the same offence several times thereafter. He left the neighbourhood in about 1504 and died in 1516 [2].

By about 1634 the mill had been converted to iron working. In 1636 the burial of one of the workers there, "Tussen, a Frenchman from the Irone Myles", was recorded in the Wimbledon Parish Register. A Parliamentary survey of the manor in 1649 mentioned an iron plate mill [3].

About that time, or possibly a little later, the mill was in the occupation of Edward Barker. He was also the proprietor of works at Mount Pleasant, Wandsworth, where the iron plates produced at Wimbledon were forged into vessels such as frying pans and kettles. He was certainly at Wimbledon by 1660, when he entered into discussions with James Lloyd, the tenant of a gunpowder mill at Wandsworth about three quarters of a mile downstream from his mill. Lloyd wanted to build another mill, at a site about midway between the two mills, and went ahead and built it despite Barker's objections. In 1661 Barker commenced legal proceedings against Lloyd, claiming that the works at the new mill had resulted in the penning up of the water there, to the detriment of the working of his mill. He won his case, but nevertheless Lloyd's new gunpowder mill continued in operation [4].

Edward Barker died in February 1669/70 and bequeathed to his son James all his leasehold properties in Surrey and "all working tooles, bellowses, weights, beams and scales and all goeing geares whatsoever belonging to my Plate Mills, work Houses and Forges in the County of Surrey, the County of Somerset and in the County of Bristol" [5].

James Barker may have continued to work the mill for a period, but by 13 June 1704 James Robinson was named as the occupier in a list of those liable to pay a sewer rate, when he was also working at a copper mill at Wandsworth [6].

The iron mill was converted to copper working in 1712, "when £10,000 had been spent in equipping it and securing foreign skill. Moreover, it was said, a further sum of £20,000 was employed in granting credit to customers." As a result, by 1720 "the concern was greatly in

debt". The proprietors then were a number of partners, chief of whom were John Essington, James Bradley, and Case Billingsley [7].

In 1720 the partners came to an arrangement whereby the business was incorporated within a company called the Governor and Company of Copper Miners in England. This concern, usually known as the English Copper Company, had been established on 3 August 1691. The re-formed company then took over the working of the Wimbledon mill, and at the same time that of a copper works at Lower Redbrook, Gloucestershire. Thomas Chambers, the proprietor of those works, became the governor of the English Copper Company, and Essington, Bradley and Billington became major shareholders [7].

Within a few years the mill was occupied by Samuel Bellamy, a coppersmith of Whitechapel, as tenant and subcontractor of the English Copper Company. On 19 January 1721/2 he insured two copper mills and a dwelling house at Wimbledon with the Sun insurance company [8]. He died in 1723 and bequeathed his estate to his wife Elizabeth [9]. The insurance policies were assigned to Elizabeth Bellamy on 16 December 1723.

The mill was later in the ownership of Henry Robinson, son of the previously mentioned James Robinson, and who also held the lease of the copper mill at Wandsworth. Henry died in 1762 and by his will proved on 22 May 1762 he bequeathed "all my several freehold watermills and all and every my freehold messuages and lands tenements and hereditaments whatsoever situate lying and being in the parish of Wimbledon" to his nephew Henry Robinson. (He also left £10 to William Waters, "master workman at Wimbledon Mills".) [10]

A document giving particulars of the premises, undated but probably c. 1770, indicates that there were two mills, separately leased to the English Copper Company by Henry Robinson junior. A copper hammer mill with appurtenances was leased for 27 years from 25 March 1762, and a hoop rolling mill with ancillary buildings was on lease for 21 years from 25 March 1768 [11]. On 18 November 1771 Henry Robinson mortgaged the premises for £900 to John Webster, a London distiller [12].

At some time the English Copper Company purchased the freehold of the mills, possibly around 1771 when Henry Robinson relinquished the lease of the copper mill at Wandsworth. They remained the proprietors for many years thereafter, but only occasional brief references to occupiers have been found. On 18 June 1784 Hugh Percy junior, "of Wimbledon Copper Mills", insured some property at Smithfield [13]. In c. 1789 James Edwards noticed the "large copper mills, belonging to the English Copper Company ... under the management and direction of Mr. Smith, who lives in a neat dwelling house on the premises" [14].

Daniel Lysons in 1792 referred to Messrs. Henckell's copper mills at Wimbledon [15]. James Henckell the younger, a City merchant, was also at this period the proprietor of Henry Robinson's former copper mill at Wandsworth, which he had converted to iron working. Benjamin Paterson, a farmer who held the lease of the nearby Cowdray Farm, is said to have taken over the working of the Wimbledon copper mills in 1799, and he is listed in directories from 1802 to 1808, and was recorded by John Hassell in 1817 [16].



The copper mills in c. 1865 [69.5kb]

Benjamin Paterson was a shareholder in the Surrey Iron Railway Company, incorporated by an Act of Parliament on 21 May 1801, and empowered to build a horsedrawn goods railway from Wandsworth to Croydon, with a branch from Mitcham to Hack Bridge. There is no

evidence that Paterson made use of the railway, but its route crossed Plough Lane about 250 yards to the northeast of his mills and it would have been a simple matter to transfer coal and raw materials carried on the railway from Wandsworth, to road wagons.

Paterson died in 1831, and by 1832 John Cooke was directly employed by the English Copper Company as manager of the works, and was so described in the 1841 Wimbledon census returns. At about this time the company got into financial difficulties, and began selling some of its properties. In June 1844 it was announced that the company would receive offers for the freehold of the Wimbledon mills. The premises were thus described in the notice:

"The premises comprise a convenient small dwelling house for a manager, with a most excellent garden, a building about 98 feet by 70 feet, called the rolling mill, and a very capital iron water wheel, 18 feet diameter by 14 feet in width, a hammer mill about 70 feet long, with two other water wheels one 15 feet and the other 12 feet diameter, a new building called the refinery and foundry, about 85 feet by 42 feet, with three furnaces, stabling, sundry workshops and a counting house, an Artesian well 165 feet deep, with 5-inch copper pipes, 12 workmen's cottages, and sundry parcels of most desirable and valuable meadow land, containing altogether about 20 acres." [17]

Evidently no acceptable offers resulted from this invitation, and in April 1845 it was advertised that the property would be offered for sale at an auction to be held on 27 May 1845 [18]. Again the premises remained unsold, and further invitations to buy by private contract were published in July 1845 and in March 1846 [19].

The property was then purchased for £6,500 by Edmund and William Pontifex, who had been long established in Shoe Lane, London, as coppersmiths and engineers. The conveyance deed was dated 23 April 1846 [20]. John Cooke was retained as works manager, and in the 1851 Wimbledon census returns he was recorded as employing 36 men and 6 boys. He was still the manager in 1860, but by 1862 he had been succeeded by his son William Cooke. By 1866 he had been replaced by John Chambers, who was described in the 1871 census as employing 49 men and 6 boys. In 1881 he was employing 64 men.

Some information about the copper mill in its later years was given in an account related by Arthur Webster in 1973, based on earlier conversations with his late grandfather, Philip Webster, who worked there for 18 years, starting in 1871:

"The main work in the mill was smelting, casting and rolling copper. They had quite large furnaces and coal was carted there all day by horses and tip cart. They manufactured all types of copper work, but specialised in making copper vessels and utensils. Large brewing vessels for making beer were made there, the largest weighing four tons. They had at various times quantities of old copper coins to smelt down which were in circulation before 1860 ...

"Power to drive the mill was provided by the River Wandle. A large undershot water wheel stated to be the largest one of its type in England was working when the mill was opened ... The wheel's shaft was 11 inches square and 20 feet long and had 42 floats and a diameter of 16 feet ..."[21]

In 1889 the premises were taken over by Charles Chuter & Son Limited, and converted to chamois leather dressing. The water wheel was used to operate large hammers to pound

sheep skins which had been soaked in cod oil. The skins were then heated to oxidise the oil, then pummelled again. The oil was then drained off, the skins were washed, and put through a process using emery powder to raise the top surface. A more detailed account of these processes was given in an article by Wendy Scott published in 1960 [22].

Edward Chuter, the son, died in July 1900 at the age of 33. His father Charles Chuter died in March 1916 at the age of 72, but the firm continued in business as Chuter & Son Limited. The water wheel was removed in the early 1960s in connection with flood control measures. The works closed down in about 1968, and the mill buildings were later demolished.

References

- 1.** Extracts from the Court Rolls of the Manor of Wimbledon (1869), p. 27.
- 2.** D. R. Pollock, "The Cromwells and Putney", in *The Wandsworth Historian*, no. 14 (1976).
- 3.** *Surrey Archaeological Collections*, vol. 5 (1871), pp. 132-4.
- 4.** Dorian Gerhold, "Wandsworth's Gunpowder Mills, 1655-1713", in *Surrey Archaeological Collections*, vol. 69 (2002), pp. 175-7.
- 5.** National Archives, PROB 11/341 q16.
- 6.** London Metropolitan Archives, SKCS 42.
- 7.** Henry Hamilton, *The English Brass and Copper Industries to 1800*, 2nd. ed. (1967), p. 21.
- 8.** Guildhall Library, MS 11936/12 Nos. 20730-20733.
- 9.** National Archives, PROB 11/593 q184.
- 10.** *Ibid.* PROB 11/876 q217.
- 11.** Surrey History Centre, 72/8.
- 12.** *Ibid.* 72/9.
- 13.** Guildhall Library, MS 8674/127 p. 189.
- 14.** James Edwards, *Companion from London to Brighthelmston, Part II* (c. 1789), p. 14.
- 15.** Daniel Iysons, *The Environs of London*, vol. 1 (1792), p. 539
- 16.** John Hassell, *Picturesque Rides and Walks*, vol. 1 (1817), pp. 121-2.
- 17.** *The Times*, 8 June 1844.
- 18.** *Ibid.* 22 April 1845.
- 19.** *Ibid.* 8 July 1845, 10 March 1846.
- 20.** Surrey History Centre, 72/13.
- 21.** *Wimbledon Boro' News*, 19 January 1973.
- 22.** *Ibid.* 15 January 1960.