

MOLESEY MILLS

A HISTORY OF THE MILLS AND MILLING

This paper is based on the background notes that were used in a presentation given by Brian Smith at the Molesey Local History Society AGM in April 2009.

There were three mills in Molesey; two on the Mole, the Upper Mill (near Molesey Park Road) and the Lower (or Sterte) Mill near to Hampton Court station. The third, Ember Mill on the River Ember at the end of Orchard Lane, was shared between the parishes of St. Lawrence in Molesey (now St. Mary's) and St. Nicholas in Thames Ditton.

For more than 2,000 years water mills were the main source of industrial power in Europe but in most cases only the weirs and waterways are left and this is largely true of our mills in Molesey.

The main industrial processes were:

Millstone - grinding of flour, animal feed and, additionally in the Mole mills, for gunpowder production.

Tilt Hammers – used in paper making, fulling cloth, breaking rocks and in Molesey for “metal bashing” of lead, brass and iron.

Other applications included draining mines, operating bellows in metal production and, at the Sterte Mill in Molesey, sawmilling and slate tile production.

During a long lifetime many mills were often converted to carry out different activities depending on the economic necessities of the time. This also is true of the Molesey Mills.

Modern applications include hydro electric power generation and their use in tidal barrages. It has even been suggested that a turbine, as they are now called, should be included in any future development of Molesey Weir.

Domesday Book

From the historical aspect, the Domesday Book is the obvious starting point as it was the first comprehensive record of land ownership and activity in England. There were of course earlier water mills, and a Roman tidal mill has been identified on the River Lea in East London.

The Domesday Book records that there were 30 mills in a 10 mile stretch of the River Wylie in Wiltshire and locally, in our part of Surrey, there are a number of locations. The Pip Brook near Dorking had 7 mills in a 3 mile stretch; there are possible Domesday Mills in Cobham, and at least 3 on the Hogsmill River in Kingston as well as other possibilities in Long Ditton.

There appear to have been no mills in Molesey at the time of the Domesday Survey. However within a hundred years there were two mills on the River Mole.

These were the Sterte Mill (or Lower Mill) in the manor of Molesey Prior and the Upper Mill in the manor of Molesey Matham. A “sterte” is an old term for a narrow tongue of land between two rivers, e.g. as between the Mole and the Ember at the confluence with the Thames. In medieval times each manor had the right to have a mill which gave them a monopoly of flour milling and fulling. Peasants and tenants had to get their corn ground and their cloth fulled at the manorial mill and these monopolies were jealously guarded. Sterte Mill was the property

of Merton Priory which was a particularly powerful religious establishment as it was on the main route for the Court when it left London for Winchester or Portsmouth.

[A particularly unpleasant incident occurred on the manor belonging to the Abbot of St Albans in the early 13th Century. The Abbot's tenants were grinding their own corn on hand quorns, thus bypassing the Abbot's monopoly. The Abbot ordered his men to go and seize the quorns and to rub salt in the wounds he then paved his courtyard with them!]

Millers were paid for grinding corn – this was known as “Miller’s Soke” and was usually a sixteenth of the flour produced from each tenant. There were of course many arguments as to just how large a sixteenth was and Millers tended to have a poor reputation for honesty.

One exception, apparently, was a miller in Essex – a man called Strange. On his tombstone in an Essex Churchyard there is an epitaph:

“Here lies an Honest Miller, and that was Strange”

Returning to Molesey there was a dispute between the Upper and Sterte mills in 1214. Merton Priory, who owned the Sterte Mill, accused the upper miller of diverting the mill water and sent some of their men upriver “to sort the Upper Mill out”. However in the fight that ensued “Sampson de Molesey” (Upper Mill) beat them back and they were unsuccessful. Merton Priory appealed to King John to hear the case and, in the manner of all governments, he referred matters to a “jury” who attempted to resolve the issue. Sampson had made a counter claim. The year was 1215 and King John probably had more important matters on his mind, upstream at Runnymede. The final settlement was complex and not possible to relate to the current topography.

The next important date for the mills on the Mole was the dissolution of the monasteries. This lead to the final demise of monopoly rights – although they had been under attack for many years – and mills became commercial entities.

Early in the 1560s the mill became implicated in a major scandal involving Queen Elizabeth herself. In 1562 it was widely reported that Elizabeth had given birth to a son and some 25 years later a young man called Arthur Southern turned up at the Spanish Court and claimed that he was that son. Phillip II was clearly impressed, or taken in, because he awarded the young man a pension.

The young man claimed that he had been brought up by a man called Southern who was a servant to a Mrs Catherine Ashley, a confidant of Queen Elizabeth. Southern said that he had been told to go to Hampton Court because one of the ladies of the Queen’s court had given birth to a son and she did not want Elizabeth to know. Southern relates that when he went to the Palace, he was handed the baby, whose name was Arthur, in a corridor leading directly to the Queen’s private chamber. He took the baby to the wife of the miller at Molesey to be suckled. The baby was later transferred to Evesham where he was brought up as Southern’s son. Thus Molesey Sterte Mill may have been involved in a major Royal scandal.

The Gunpowder Era

In 1561 the English Crown paid £300 to a Gerard Honrick for his process to make saltpetre. Saltpetre is an essential element in the manufacture of gunpowder and though it could be imported there were no natural sources in England and most supplies came from farmyard manure – pigeon lofts, byres, pig styes etc. In 1649 a man named John Samyne took over both the mills on the Mole to make gunpowder for which there was a great demand from the war with Holland in the 1650s and in Scotland.

Samyne was not originally a miller but a “Peterman”, a man who collected the farmyard manure to turn into Saltpetre which was then ground up with Sulphur and Charcoal and milled to a fine powder at the two Molesey mills or as “corning” which allowed guns to have a much quicker firing time. At one time Samyne was the second largest supplier of gunpowder in the Kingdom. Obtaining the necessary manure etc was not popular and Parliament passed laws so that farmers and others could not floor their byres with brick or stop the Petermen from coming to take the manure which they, the farmers, wanted to fertilise their own plots of land.

Although a good gunpowder manufacturer Samyne was not a particularly successful business man and after his death a private Act of Parliament had to be passed to sort out the mortgages and ownership of his various enterprises.

Gunpowder milling was not popular - not just because of the risk of explosions but also because of the smell associated with the manufacture of the saltpetre. The straw etc had to be soaked and then boiled off to leave the saltpetre behind.

There was a petition to stop gunpowder milling at Mole mills in 1666 and the process was stopped at Sterte Mill at around that time though it is not clear if the petition had any effect – possible damage to Hampton Court Palace may have been a more important consideration.

The Upper Mill continued making gunpowder until 1780. There was a fire in 1669 and several explosions, some fatal. Lord Hotham took over the property in 1780, dismantled the mill and built a grand country house – the waterways were converted into a garden (the Wilderness).

The Sterte Mill reverted to flour milling plus some lead milling (around 1700). In 1692 the mill was taken over by the Martin family and prospered during the 18th Century. Four generations of the family were millers and they were important local dignitaries and acquired much land in Molesey and the surrounding areas.

They gave up the lease in 1816 and the Crown tenants – Lord Hotham and Sir George Berkely decided to construct a new brick built mill. This was taken over by another successful local family, the Andrews. The 1820 rebuilding showed clearly that it was still profitable to operate a flour mill, and Thomas Andrews added a saw mill in 1846 and a slate cutting mill alongside the flour mill. Flour milling stopped in the 1890s and the saw mill finally shut down in 1907. It is likely that many of the houses built in Molesey after the coming of the railway in 1849 used wood sawn at the Molesey Mill.

The Mill site was taken over for other industrial uses during the 20th Century – notably the Zenith Motor Cycle Company and then by Neilsons for their marquee and other work. The Zenith works only really started in March 1914. In the early period of the Great War Zenith advertised their motorcycles and sidecars as a replacement for the horses which were requisitioned for military use. During WW2 jigs etc for aircraft were made there and the site was finally sold off for residential development in the 1980s.

The Ember Mill

Molesey's third mill was constructed on the River Ember at the end of what is now Orchard Lane. The first records of the mill appear in the early 1600s and it started life as a flour mill but was always a commercial mill and was converted to “metal bashing” in the middle of the 17th Century. Lead was milled for water pipes and tanks, and for roofing. In 1638 brass processing was started to make “battery” which was the name for brass wire from which nails etc could be made. Finally around the end of the 18th Century iron was forged here to make hoops for barrels etc. Iron processing requires a good water flow to drive the hammers and the bellows needed to get the temperature of the iron high enough. Although rebuilt early in

the 19th Century the mill fell out of use and was closed and dismantled in 1837. Only the leats or water channels remain.

As stated earlier the mill straddled two parishes and in the 1780s the allocation of Poor Law rates arising from the mill was decided by "six creditable men, three from each parish". The Poor Law rate set in 1783 was £351. 10 shillings split equally, after an appeal, between the two parishes. This was quite a tidy sum in those days and illustrates the profitability of the mill at that time.

In 1785 the miller, a certain Mr. Papps died and was buried in St Nicholas churchyard but within a few hours two men were discovered carrying away his body for dissection. They were found guilty and fined 6 shillings and 8 pence (just over 33 pence in modern money). They were both churchwardens – one was a farmer and the other was the landlord of the Harrow Inn in Thames Ditton. Less fortunate was John Watson of East Molesey who was found guilty of stealing 8 iron bars from the mill for which he was imprisoned for 4 months and then was sentenced to be "publicly whipped around Kingston Market place until his back is bloody" (One law for the rich etc etc - it would seem).

The Mills today.

For Ember Mill only the water channels from the old Ember River remain and can be seen from the footbridge at the end of Orchard Lane. They are becoming rather overgrown at the present time (2011) but it is possible to see where the mill stood between the two water races. There is a sketch of the mill dating from the 1820s in Mercer's book (The History of Thames Ditton).

The weir and channels of the Upper Mill can still be seen from the bridge over the Mole leading to the children's playground on Neilson's field. The location of the mill itself is not known but the main mill channel can be seen flowing away into the housing on the Wilderness site. The "drop" in water levels over the weir is quite impressive and would have been quite a powerful flow when the mill was in use.

The Sterte Mill building can still be seen, in part, from the BP garage on Hampton Court Way to the right of the M & S franchised store. It can still be seen from inside the estate. The channels have largely disappeared following the flood prevention works of the 1980s.

References: this review is based on the notes produced for a presentation. Inevitably the amount of detail therefore had to be restricted. For further information the following would be of value.

East Molesey Mill – Rowland Baker 1980 – www.moleseyhistory.co.uk

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