

LOWFIELD HEATH MILL in the 1840s.

During 1997 Mrs Liz Butler of north London visited us. Her ancestor, John Robinson, a farmer at Lowfield Heath, had leased the mill. His wife was Sarah, and his children Henry, Joseph, Martin, Hannah & Jane. Henry (the great-grandfather of Liz Butler) did a milling apprenticeship at Carshalton, and afterwards went to America where he ran a mill from 1844 to 1851. The following are extracts of letters written to Henry by his family during that time. It was intended that Henry should run the mill, but his brother Joseph ran it in his absence. A miller was also employed.

July 1844, from Joseph. The first letter tells of the miller, Phillip Mobsby, developing "rapid Consumption" & dying "I have engaged another hand, Isaac Leeny. We have agreed to give him 17s a week at present ... he will live in the cottage. We have no fault to find so far. .. Land sells at £25 to £30 an acre."

Aug 1844, from Sarah. "We have got the sails up at last but have had no wind since. We have been obliged to get flour from others' mills. I suppose that Joseph has told thee all about the Mill and of the death of poor Mobsby. His widow is gone down to see her relations, Mary has got a place (in service) and little Philip has gone with his mother. I do not know what she will do." (3 days later) The wind has been a blowing all day and the new sails go very well. Father is just come from the Mill and he says that she grinds away very fast and will soon do a good many of the grist if the wind holds, Joseph has been troubled to get enough for his customers."

Nov 1844, from Sarah. "We have done sowing wheat, we could not finish before because it has been so very dry. Constable's engine has been of use to him this summer. (Constable ran Horley watermill). Our ponds and ditches have been all dry so that we have been troubled for water for our cattle but our well has not been dry, we have had plenty of water in that. We have not had much wind for a long time. Joseph said today the wind blows and I wish it would blow for days and nights for we have the mill full of grist. We have a great number of acorns and that will help poor men's hogs. We have killed one today, a very small one, it only weighed seven stones and five pounds, to save us going to the butchers. Joseph bought four and gave 18/- each for them. We have a great stock of hogs, we must sell some of them. Father & Joseph went to Ewell fair and bought thirty ewes and gave 16/- each for them and Martin bought 80 lambs at Croydon fair and gave 16/- for them. We killed 100 geese at Michaelmas and sent most of them to London."

Dec 1844. from Martin. "The patent sails seem to answer well in heavy weather but I question whether in light winds the extra weight and addition of friction does not rather retard the useful properties, on the whole they are decidedly an advantage. Tommy put up a capital pair and they look well. I think the miller they have got to take the place of poor Philip suits pretty well. He seems to have some gumption about him, is obliging and I think industrious and I hope honest. He has unfortunately fallen into the common

error of getting a wife before he had a prospect of maintaining one and is well acting to the command 'increase & multiply'. I think he has 4 children the eldest about 5 years old."

May 1845, from Joseph. "I dare say thee would like to know a little about our mill business. I suppose thee knows we have got up a pair of Patents (sails) that were so long talked about. We like them very much, we find them a great improvement in rough winds. I think I can safely say that we grind twice as much in heavy uneven winds, they are a great saving of labour to the Miller. Flour is now selling at 35/- per sack though we are obliged to take less for most that we take into Crawley. The profits have been better this year than last owing to the superior quality of the wheat. We give our horses coarse mids instead of oats with cut hay and straw, it is cheaper than buying oats. I often wish that I could have a little more practice in dressing stones. If I was as perfect as thou art I think I should come and see how you are getting on for I am nearly sick of the Old Mill, there is such competition in the trade, we can't equal the Horsham millers in quality without losing all the profit."

Nov 1845, from Martin, "Joe's time is pretty much occupied with the mill business. They now have Mobsby's son William for miller, he is a single man. It has lately been a sad slack time for wind and old Durrant (Ifield watermill) has been much on the quiet. I dare say thee have some accounts of the sad failure of the potato crops throughout Europe and the astonishing effect it has had on the corn market."

Nov 1845, from Sarah, "It has been of late very foggy and no wind, so much so that Joe has had to take his things to Ifield Mill."

Jan 1846, from Jane, "The weather has been very fine and open, we have had no snow & very little frost. Wind has been plentiful & Joe has had pretty full employment. It is not in my power to tell thee more about the milling business as I know nothing. Joe does not let us know much about what he is doing.

March 1846, from Joseph. "Windmills, Harry, were made to worry & torment a man out of his senses, they are one of the miseries of human nature, at any rate we find our's so. We keep the old trap a going night and day except Sundays and the wind has been provoking enough to blow a good breeze. We ground last year about 80 loads of wheat, beside grist work pollard and all."

Oct 1846. from Joseph, "The weather is dreadfully wet so we are prevented from wheat sowing. We have been at a standstill at the Old Mill being obliged to have the tail wheel new geared it is now finished and she runs off as quiet & pleasant as need be. Tommy did the work. These Old Windmills Harry are capital things to test one's temper."

March 1847, from Martin. "A quarter loaf of seconds flour is now selling 10d. Thee see we are realising high prices but I had much rather have lower prices & less distress. Dick told me that their wheat is brought by the railway, The other day, they had sixty five sacks of wheat brought to their mill on one wagon at one time with five horses, what would your Yankee teamsters have thought about doing such a job!

MORE of the HISTORY and the PEOPLE associated with the MILL.

We are most grateful to Mrs Butler for sending us this most excellent record of the mill during those years. In fact she sent us more than this and we hope to make the whole of the extracts that she sent available at a later date to those who wish for more detail. I enjoyed the farming details too. Mrs Butler added that in 1851 Joseph took a small watermill in Lewisham and invited Henry back into partnership. This business was subsequently built up into J & H Robinson of Debtford, with one of the largest flour mills in the country, but the brothers continued to hold the lease of Lowfield Heath Mill. Mrs Butler also writes that in a copy of 'Flour of London', 1932, (SyRO 340/4/1) there is a pencil note, "the old mill was brought to Lowfield from Horsham about 1713," and initialed 'J.C.R.' (Joseph Colgate Robinson, Henry's son). It is possible that they dismantled it and used the good parts, as in 1987 we found that some parts of the frame seemed older than others.

I found myself wanting to know more about the people involved.

The Mobsby family were in the 1841 census of Charlwood. At that time Philip was 50, his wife Jane 40 & children Jane 20, William 15 & young Philip 7 years. (Adult ages are not accurate in the 1841 census). I could not find a miller in the 1851 census,

The Robinsons I found in a transcript of local Quaker registers & in the 1851 census of Crawley. John was born in 1781 at Hunts Green, Lowfield Heath, Charlwood, roughly where the large buildings north of the Radford Road roundabout on the A23 now stand. John married Sarah Pennifold in 1811, both were of Charlwood. They appear to have had 10 children between 1812 & 1829. John is described as a farmer of Charlwood until 1826 when he was a farmer of Crawley. In 1844 Martin would have been 31 years, Joseph 25 and Henry 22. The census shows them living at Manor Farm, where the industrial estate now is. Sarah Robinson's name is well known in Crawley for she was the driving force behind the original Church School in the Ifield Road and the Council School in what became Robinson Road. Also one of the houses of Ifield Community College still carries her name.

If you want to contact us try -

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I had a phone call a few days ago saying only, 'Are you open today?' As it was a weekend, I knew to answer, 'Do you want to know if the mill is open?'

I wonder if they thought that I lived in the mill.