

COTTON MILL ROW, CANTERBURY

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Over the past 2-3 years I have been collecting material on the watermill sites in Canterbury, for future publication when research is completed.

To define the area of study, sites looked at begin at the S.E. side of the city (within the city wall), extending north to outside the city wall as far as the mill known as Barton Mill in the parish of St. Mary Northgate, Canterbury. (Two other important mill sites also exist approximately 2.4 km east of Canterbury in the parish of Sturry, but these are sufficient to form the basis of a separate study).

To date, the number of mills included in the study is five: namely Kings Mill, Abbots Mill, Shaffords Mill, Westgate Mill and Barton Mill. These may have been in existence by the 15th century and certainly were by 1703; four of these mills are known to be on Domesday sites. The only mill still standing is Barton Mill (although much of this was burnt down early this century) and the present building serves as a modern mill producing animal feed and fertilizer by electrically-driven plant. At least seven other mills are known to have existed in and around Canterbury, three of which had disappeared by the 12th century. I have yet to research the others in detail.

It is to be noted that almost certainly all these mills were corn grinding, and were served by either the main River Stour or its branches. The Kent Stour rises at Lenham near Ashford and flows via Ashford and Canterbury to the sea at Sandwich.

It is not my intention to present here a detailed history of the above-mentioned mill sites. Much material has been, and is still being, collected and will be put together in due course. There is however one watermill not already mentioned which did not grind corn, and which currently the subject of my enquiry.

The discovery in the 1931 Canterbury Street Directory of a "COTTON MILL ROW" led me to undertake some field work in the area concerned. The first clue as to any mill's existence was a small weir across the northern branch of the River Stour, (off Broad Oak Road) which matched with the area cited in the 1931 street directory.

I then spoke with some older residents in the area and they confirmed that Cotton Mill Row was a row of terraced cottages which existed within their memory - it appears that they were only demolished around the late 1950's - early 1960's.

They did not, however, remember the mill in any form, and its date of demolition has yet to be established.

My next aim was to find some written reference to a mill in this area, which I found in Hasted's History of Kent, Vol.XI, in his chapter on the Walloon refugees and their manufacture of silk and cotton. It appears that one John Callaway, a master of the weavers company in Canterbury, erected this mill in 1791 to produce a cotton twist used in the production of Canterbury Muslins. It was his part in attempting to revive the failing silk industry

during this period in Canterbury, which is attributed to the importing of silks and calicoes from Persia and India. This mill is understood to have been built on Arkwright's principle, and have employed 50 women and children, at a cost of £3000. Furthermore, the site is fairly well defined: "he erected a cotton mill, on the river, at Shoal-oak, near this city...." (The main road past this site is today known as Broad Oak Road). We learn later that this mill was rented by a Hugh Stirrop "who applied the machinery to the purposes of an improved manufactory of woollen yarn for Canterbury Worsted".

From a Sun Fire Insurance Policy dated 18 Aug 1791, we learn that the mill was insured for £400; "...on his fulling mill, Water Wheel and Cotton Mill all adjoining and communicating.... Utensils and stock therein £500....All brick, timber and tiled or slated, in his own tenure and situate at Shawl Oak in the Parish of Hackington in Kent".

The extensive use and mention of brick here might be questioned. However, just across the road from the mill site there existed a brickworks, and it could be quite safe to assume that the brickworks was in existence at the time of the construction of the mill.

However, the revival of the cotton trade - in particular 'Canterbury Muslins' - does not appear to have lasted long, for in 1812 the mill was up for auction.

Kentish Gazette, September 18, 1812: ".....To be sold.....A Leasehold estate comprising a substantial Worsted Mill, with machinery, going gear, apparatus etc., situate in the parish of St. Stephens, Canterbury, on a branch of the River Stour from which it derives a constant supply of water".

Finally, although map evidence has not yet been thoroughly investigated, a slide of a section of a map of Canterbury has come into my possession. Unfortunately it is not dated, but it depicts a mill on the same northerly branch of the Stour which corresponds with the site under discussion. Although this illustration is not easily visible, it includes a waterwheel symbol.

This information is thus constructed from the following sources:- Topographical, Oral, Newspapers, Insurance Policies and Map evidence. I pose the following questions/enquiries:-

- 1) Does any other comparable mill or site exist in the U.K?
- 2) Can anyone suggest what type of waterwheel? The present flow does not suggest an overshot wheel.
- 3) What might the mill have looked like?
- 4) John Callaway, we are told, "travelled north and west of England, at great expense" to consolidate his ideas and so create the Canterbury Muslins. These Muslins not only kept Canterbury weavers busy, but spread as far as London, Manchester and Scotland. I also have reason to believe that John Callaway may have had connections with cotton growers in America. Does anyone know anything more about this?

Discussion.

- A A BRYAN What were the millstones for? They look like a pair, so they could be edge runners from, say, an oil seed mill or something like that.
- JARVIS The small size of the hole in the middle suggests they could very well be edge runners. There may be other holes around the centre, where a bearing was clamped in, etc. They need to be looked at closely. Are they parallel on both sides, or is one side domed? Are we looking at the top or the bottom?
- McKEAN I couldn't approach them closely enough to see that. It says that of the two stones, one came from the City Moat, which was destroyed when the ring road was built.
- JONES I have two comments on the textile aspects. First; this was not a fulling mill. Fulling was a finishing process for woollen fabrics. It was not part of a cotton mill. The main process was spinning. Second; several declining textile towns attempted to mechanise in a rather half-hearted fashion. None succeeded for any length of time. An example of a surviving building of such a cotton-spinning mill in a former textile town is in Norwich. It is now used as Jarrold's print works. It was built in 1839. Pictures of it can be found readily enough; for example, in Richards, J M; The Functional Tradition in Early Industrial Buildings; 1958.
- McKEAN What sort of size was it?
- JONES I can't say exactly; perhaps 60 m long, and originally three stories high. I was interested that the Canterbury mill was soon listed as a worsted mill. Obviously the cotton trade didn't prosper. Away from the main textile areas, there are other isolated mills like this one. Others I can think of - though they are not cotton mills - were St Albans....
- BUCKLAND There was also a cotton mill at Lewisham.
- JONES Was there? but I was referring to surviving examples.
- McKEAN There are bits of it at Lewisham.
- TURNER The Silk Mill at St Albans has gone.
- JONES I hadn't heard that. I knew it well, but I hadn't seen it for some years. It had found some other use, and I didn't think it was threatened. Another example is at Whitchurch.
- PLUNKETT Whitchurch is an example of a mill that did the whole process from start to finish. It now has an undershot wheel with governor control, driving machines through line shafts.
- JONES It is now purely a weaving mill, using silk, but that is a conversion. It was built as a woollen mill. Then there are the Essex silk mills, some of which still survive. All of these are timber-framed, weatherboarded structures. I believe they were offshoots of the

London silk trade rather than the last efforts of a local one.

McKEAN At Canterbury, I have heard that it was slate and brick.

PLUNKETT Do we know anything about its owners?

McKEAN Hasted says, "It was later rented by Hugh Stirrop who applied it to woollen yarn for Canterbury worsted". Would that explain why it was called a fulling mill later on?

JONES It might well. Fulling was one of the last processes after weaving, but it could have been added to the mill as part of the same business.

McKEAN It goes on to say, "into which article it converts 1000 lb of wool weekly, but this manufacture is not yet completed". Obviously it was converted for wool processing after it was built.

JONES Worsted is a yarn made from wool, but with an extra process called combing added before spinning. It was a skilled manual process at that date, and it was not successfully mechanised until the mid-19th century. So this would have been a spinning mill. Arkwright's machines were tried for worsted several times, but they were not well suited to it, and never really succeeded with anything except cotton. If you gather any more facts on these aspects of the business, you will need to consult a textile specialist. Was it originally built for fine cottons?

McKEAN It was a mixture of cotton and silk, which formed the unique Canterbury muslins they produced. It enjoyed a boom for a time, when silk was difficult to import. He goes on to say that there were weavers in London, Manchester and Scotland weaving that particular twist into Canterbury muslin.

JONES So it was a luxury item.

McKEAN It would appear so.

JONES Did that not mean spinning very fine yarns? In 1791, that would have meant spinning on a mule.

McKEAN It says here, "He found the means of mixing Sir Richard Arkwright's level cotton twist to his looms of silk warps, by which contrivance he introduced to the public a new manufacture".

JONES I am not quite clear what that means, but it is at least certain that he was spinning on Arkwright frames.

McKEAN This mill was supposed to have given employment to 50 women and children. That mill on the map hardly seems large enough.

PLUNKETT Some of them could have been in sheds away from the main building.

The discussion continued, but the Editor regrets that the record of the later part was lost, due to a tape fault.