

Mills near Phipps Bridge, Mitcham

The first mill built in the vicinity of Phipps Bridge was probably situated on the east bank of the Wandle a short distance downstream from the bridge. Much later, a calico printing works was established, the location of which is also uncertain, but it was most likely again just downstream from the bridge, but on the west bank. The last establishment, also a calico printing works, was located on the east bank of a new channel formed to the east of the original course of the river, and about 200 yards upstream from Phipps Bridge.

The earliest reference found to a mill near Phipps Bridge was in an inquisition post mortem conducted in 1263, confirming Eustace, prior of Merton, as a tenant of the late Baldwin de Insula, of "Pippesmoln" [1]. In 1275 or 1276 the mill was purchased by the incumbent prior of Merton [2]. This purchase was probably of a moiety, and in 1301 the prior "paid homage to Sir Ralph de Marton on behalf of the king, for the mill of Pippes" [3]. Nothing further has been recorded, and apparently the mill had fallen into disuse and been demolished before 1500 [4].

The first reference found to the bridge was to "Pypesbrige" in 1535 [5]. Thus it may well have been built long after the mill, which would support the likelihood of the mill being on the east bank and easily accessible from Merton Priory, a short distance to the north.

The first calico printing works located near the bridge were established by Francis Nixon and George Amyand in about 1756. Francis Nixon, a calico printer, had previously worked at Drumcondra, near Dublin, from about 1752, in partnership with Theophilus Thompson. There they printed linens from copper plates, by a process which they were said to have invented in about 1753. This claim was upheld by another Irish linen printer, Samuel Dixon, in a petition he presented to the Irish House of Commons in 1763. He also stated that "the proprietors were prevailed upon, by large sums, to transfer the Manufacture to another Kingdom" [6].

Phipps Bridge was the place the business was transferred to, at the instigation of George Amyand, and Nixon moved with his family, although apparently Thompson stayed in Ireland. George Amyand was a merchant and financier, and had no direct involvement in calico printing. He became M.P. for Barnstable in 1754, in 1760 he was appointed as a director of the East India Company, and he was awarded a baronetcy in 1764.

On 27 July 1759 Francis Nixon & Co. of Merton, calico printers, insured Nixon's dwelling house, and other buildings including a printing shop, mill house, copper house, and pencilling house, and the stock and utensils therein, with the Royal Exchange insurance company [7].

As remarked above, there is some uncertainty about the precise location of these works. Eric Montague concluded that they must have been on the west bank of the river, in Merton, on the basis that neither Nixon nor Amyand were recorded as being liable to pay a Poor Rate in Mitcham at this period. The Poor Rates books for Merton have not been preserved [8], but confirmation is provided by the above insurance policy record, and by a list of those liable to pay a sewer rate, dated 11 August 1763, wherein Francis Nixon was rated on land and a mill in Merton [9]. Because of the irregularity of the Mitcham-Merton parish boundary line here, the works must have been situated on the west side of the 200-yard stretch of river below Phipps Bridge, and probably close to the bridge.

In Mortimer's Universal Director for 1763, Nixon and Amyand were listed as calico printers at "Martin". Soon afterwards they were joined by John Anthony Rucker, who had also been in partnership with George Amyand as Hamburg and Russia merchants at Lawrence Pountney Hill in London since before 1755. Amyand was then living in Carshalton House which he had purchased in 1754. In 1764 Rucker was also recorded as living in Carshalton.

Francis Nixon died on 17 February 1765 at the age of 60, and on his tombstone in Merton churchyard the claim also was made that he was "the first that perfected copperplate calico printing". By his will he bequeathed £1,000, part of his capital stock in the hands of Sir George Amyand, to his wife Hester in trust for the daughters of his daughter Susannah [10]. Sir George Amyand died on 16 August 1766 at the age of 46. His son John later went into partnership with Rucker as merchants, but does not seem to have become involved in calico printing.

John Anthony Rucker, after the deaths of his partners, proceeded to carry out extensive works in connection with the calico printing business. On 9 June 1769 he was granted by Richard Garth, Lord of the Manor of Morden, a 61-year lease of some land on the east side of the Wandle above Phipps Bridge [11]. Across this he constructed an additional channel for the river, about 600 yards long, from a point in the present Morden Hall Park, to the bridge. This was nearing completion by 19 November 1769, when the Mitcham Vestry agreed that Rucker "may carry on the Tail from his new Cutt" through a small piece of parish waste land, for which privilege he was to pay one guinea a year. He was also required to build a bridge across his cut and to keep it and Phipps Bridge in good repair at his own cost, for the term of his lease [12].

Eric Montague assumed that Rucker constructed his new cut in order to supply water to Grove Field, situated a little to the east of the bridge, which was used by Nixon and Company as a bleaching ground [13]. This ground had been previously supplied from a backwater of the Wandle which was partly obliterated by the new cut. A supply was indeed provided from the new cut, but this could easily have been obtained from the main river. It seems improbable that the forming of this long, wide channel was primarily for this purpose, and it is more likely that Rucker intended to build a mill beside it, and that this was constructed soon after 1769. Montague suggested 1788 as the date for the erection of the new works, on the basis of the Mitcham land tax records [14]. At whatever date the new premises were erected, presumably the original works were then abandoned.

Some support for the contention that the new works were well established before 1788 is provided by an advertisement published in June 1789. This announced that an auction would be held on 16 July following, of the lease of the "Capital and most Compact Set of Copper-Plate Callico Printing Works in the Kingdom, advantageously situate at Phippsbridge ... now in full Work under the Firm of Messrs. Francis Nixon and Co." (Evidently Rucker had retained the original name for commercial reasons.) There was also a dwelling house and three lots of land, one partly laid out as bleaching grounds, and another containing a messuage and three tenements [15].

The dwelling house mentioned was probably that to the east of the works, later known as Wandle Villa. The date of its erection is usually ascribed as c. 1790, but it was probably built by Rucker some years before the auction.

Evidently no acceptable bids were made at the auction, for on 28 February 1790 the Mitcham Vestry discussed what action should be taken against John Anthony Rucker for his refusal to pay his Poor Rate [12]. His reluctance to pay was probably due to the works being then empty. He retired from business at about this time, and went to live at West Hill House, Wandsworth, where he died in May 1804 at the age of 85.

The calico printing premises were eventually taken by the firm of George Gould, Richard Howard and Robert Reynolds, calico printers, possibly on a sub-lease from Rucker. They were in occupation before 18 August 1793, when the Mitcham Vestry met "to consider of the proper methods for the recovery of the poors rate due from Messrs. Gould, Reynolds & Co. to this parish for Land and Premises late in the occupation of John Anthony Rucker Esq." [16]



Extract from the O. S. map of c. 1865. The former calico printing works had recently been converted into the "Bleach Works".
[124.5kb]

A month later, on 21 September 1793, Robert Reynolds resigned [17], and then or later went into partnership with Thomas Chesson at Beddington Corner. On 23 November 1793 George Gould left [18], and later went to calico printing works at Isleworth. Some two weeks later, on 6 December, Richard Howard went into partnership with John Rivers and Isaac Hellier, when they announced that they had "taken the Premises at Phippard's Bridge ... lately occupied by George Gould and Co. whereon they intend to carry on the Callico-Printing Business in Copartnership under the Firm of Rivers, Howard and Company" [18]. Rivers and Hellier had previously worked together as calico printers at Crayford.

The matter of the poor rates in respect of the property was again discussed by the Mitcham Vestry on 16 March 1794, when they gave consideration to an offer made by the new partnership to pay £100 instead of the £160 demanded. They decided on 20 March to reject the offer and stand firm on the original assessment [16].

On 24 December 1795, Rivers, Howard and Hellier insured the premises with the Royal Exchange insurance company. These included block printing shops, copper house, machine room for printing, china blue house, madder house, mill house, calender mill house, colour house, drawing and cutting shops, workshops and warehouses, and dwelling houses occupied by Isaac Hellier and Richard Howard [19]. On 5 December 1796, John Rivers junior insured the furniture in his dwelling house "near Phippards Bridge" [20], so he was evidently involved in the business by that date, and when his father died in May 1797, he took his place in the partnership.

Isaac Hellier, John Rivers junior, Richard Howard, and his sons James and Richard, were all shareholders in the Surrey Iron Railway Company, incorporated by Act of Parliament on 21 May 1801 (41 Geo. III cap. 33) and empowered to build a horsedrawn goods railway from Wandsworth to Croydon, with a branch from Mitcham to Hack Bridge. By an amendment made on 7 May 1801 by the Lords Committee then considering the Bill, a clause was inserted forbidding any branch that might be made to "the Manufactory of Richard Howard near Phipp's Bridge" from being carried further than that manufactory (Clause LXXXV). The reason for this prohibition is not known. In fact, no branch was made to the works, although the firm did make use of the Surrey Iron Railway in due course.

Perhaps the reason why the branch railway was not built was that there was some uncertainty as to the firm's future. During July and August 1801 an advertisement was published, announcing that the lease of "the very extensive, valuable and desirable premises of Messrs. Howard, Hellier and Co. callico printers and bleachers, dissolving partnership", would be offered for sale at an auction to be held on 14 September next. The notice gave a comprehensive description of the premises:

"Two very convenient and well-finished Brick Dwelling-houses, one of which has been recently erected, and both in perfect repair, with suitable offices, excellent gardens, pleasure grounds, and every other requisite family accommodation, together with very spacious and substantial brick-built erections, judiciously arranged, well connected and forming together as complete a set of works as most in the Kingdom; fitted up in a very superior stile, in complete repair, and possessing every convenience for carrying on Trade to almost any extent. They contain a printing shop 107 feet by 20, 2 others 60 by 28, pencilling shops of very large dimensions, cylinder room, copper-plate shop that holds 8 presses, plate rooms, stove room, stamping loft, town loft, store houses, madder-house, print room, very capital copper house 85 feet by 26, that holds 10 coppers, blue house 62 feet by 26, colour houses, callender shop, light drawing and engraving shops, drying mount 56 feet by 26, mill-room, large water and wash wheels, horse works and gear, very large water reservoir, and pipes to supply various parts of the premises, carpenter's and turner's shops, counting-house, very roomy store cellars, stabling, waggon and cart lodge, and other out-buildings, spacious yard, &c, A Bleaching Ground of near 16 acres, another of 7 acres, and about 12 acres of rich meadow land, also a neat messuage, and sundry cottages for workmen, right of fishery, &c. The very valuable Plant, Fixtures, Copper Plates, Blocks, and Utensils in Trade of every description will be included in the purchase." [21]

However, it was announced on 26 August that the premises "are disposed of" [22]. In fact, they were retained by Howard, Hellier and Co., but only for three more days under that name. On 29 August 1801, the partnership was dissolved, but only "so far as regards the said Isaac Hellier" [23]. By this date Richard Howard's son Richard had joined the partnership.

The company continued to operate, under the name Howard, Rivers and Howard, for a further nine years, with the addition at some time of Richard Howard's other son James as a partner. Then, on 29 June 1811, they were jointly declared to be bankrupt [24]. In August 1811 it was announced that the lease of the calico printing works and the bleaching grounds, and, as a separate lot, that of the dwelling house occupied by John Rivers (probably Wandle Villa) would be offered for sale at an auction to be held on 19 August, "by order of the assignees" [25]. A subsequent notice advertised the sale by auction on the premises of some of the effects of the bankrupts, to be held on 5 and 6 September 1811 [26]. These included three railway wagons, indicating that the firm had made regular use of the Surrey Iron Railway, which passed along the route of the present Church Road to the east of the printing works.

Evidently no acceptable bids were received at the first of these auctions, for it was later advertised that the lease of the premises and land would be on offer by auction on 8 October 1811 [27]. The sale was subsequently deferred until 15 October and following days, when the plant, 900 copper plates, 6,000 printing blocks, implements, utensils, and numerous other effects, including an 8-horsepower steam engine, would also be offered for sale [28].

The lease of the properties was then purchased by James Moore and his brother Henry, who were named as the "occupiers" in the Mitcham land tax records for 1812 [29]. James Moore, who had bought the Lordship of the Manor of Biggin and Tamworth in 1804, was in partnership with James Potter as a firm of "physic gardeners". He was described by James Malcolm in 1805 as "pre-eminently distinguished" in the cultivation and distillation of medicinal herbs. He had no connection with calico printing, and evidently acquired the works as a commercial speculation.

James Moore sub-leased the works to William Blake, a calico printer, who was brought before the West Brixton Justices of the Peace on 31 October 1812, for having failed to pay excise duty. He repeated the offence the following year, when on 20 March 1813 the magistrates found him guilty of "having printed &c. 2076 yards of linen ... between the 22nd. of Novr. & the 12th. of Decr. last at Phipps Bridge in Surrey amtg. to £30-5-6 which said duties he has not paid" [30]. Blake must have quit soon afterwards, and the Mitcham land tax records show the premises to be unoccupied in 1815 [29].

Henry Byne of Carshalton, the owner of the site, died on 20 June 1816, and by his will proved on 25 June 1816 he bequeathed all his real estate to executors in trust to sell the properties for the benefit of his children [31]. There was some delay in carrying out Byne's directions and it was not until three years later that his lands and properties in Mitcham and Carshalton were advertised to be offered for sale, at an auction to be held on 22 October 1819 [32].

James Moore then purchased the premises at Phipps Bridge which he had held on lease, and they were conveyed to him on 8 and 9 June 1821 [33]. At that date the works were occupied by Peter Wood, a silk printer, who had held the tenure for probably a few years previously. A witness in a case heard by the West Brixton Justices of the Peace on 25 April 1820 stated, "I have for some time worked at Mr. Wood's silk manufactory in the parish of Mitcham." [34]

In January 1822, Shears and Son., the proprietors of the copper mill downstream on the Merton Abbey estate, brought an action against Peter Wood, which was heard in the Court of Common Pleas. The substance of their complaint was that Wood had diverted the water of the river to serve his mill, thereby causing an irregularity in the supply of the water to their mill, which was "particularly injurious to a copper mill". Apparently what Wood had done was to raise a dam in the old river at the point where Rucker's "new cut" began, thus increasing the amount of water in the cut. Judgement was given in favour of the plaintiffs so presumably Wood lowered the dam and restored the status quo [35].

On 2 December 1823 James Moore granted to John Tyrrell a 99-year lease of a piece of vacant ground adjoining the silk mill premises on the north side [36]. Upon this Tyrrell erected a large building, for the use of the London Patent Steam Washing Company, of which he was the director. At the end of June 1824, it was said to have been lately erected but not yet finished [37]. It was, as the name of the company indicates, a laundry. It was opened for business in the autumn of 1824, and by November 1825 the premises had been extended and dyeing facilities added. However, there were operational difficulties which apparently were never overcome, and in 1826 the business closed down. On 14 August 1826 John Tyrrell was declared bankrupt [38].

During March, April and May 1827, an advertisement was published announcing that the lease of the washing premises would be offered for sale at a forthcoming auction [39]. Later

it was announced that the auction would be held on 14 August 1827 [40]. The premises were described in these notices as "comprising a newly erected building, about 214 feet long and 61 feet wide", together with a dyehouse and 15 acres of meadow land. The premises were said to be "easily applicable to the calico printing and many other descriptions of manufacture."

Apparently a bid was made at this auction which Tyrrell's assignees thought to be acceptable, but at a meeting held with them on 22 September 1827, his creditors disagreed. The assignees then either found a new purchaser, or negotiated different terms with the former, and the creditors were invited to meet the assignees again on 6 May 1828, "to sanction and confirm an agreement for the sale of the leasehold premises, machinery and effects, known as the Patent Steam Washing Works" [41].

The creditors must have given their agreement, for on 7 May 1828 the lease was assigned to Matthew Smith, described as a merchant [42]. A few days later, on 16 May, Smith mortgaged the property for £5,000 to Christopher Kymer [43]. Kymer sub-leased the premises to James Nicholls, a silk manufacturer, who converted the building, or part of it, to his purposes, but on 12 August 1829 he declared himself insolvent [44], and on 27 August he was adjudged to be bankrupt [45].

In February 1830 it was announced that the lease of the premises was on offer for sale by private contract [46], and the following month a notice was published announcing the sale by auction on 2 April 1830 of the "newly erected plant and machinery" in the premises [47]. The offer of the lease was repeated in May 1830 [48] and in August 1831 [49].

James Nicholls's sub-lease had been surrendered to Christopher Kymer on 26 April 1830 [50], and on 13 January 1831 Kymer had assigned the head lease to Maximilian Richard Kymer, presumably a relation [51]. The latter continued to try to find a tenant, and in July 1834 a notice was published advertising that the lease was to be offered for sale at an auction to be held on 12 August 1834 [52]. The date of the auction was later deferred until 19 August [53]. Again no sale was effected, and in November 1834 the buildings were said to be "empty" [54].

Eventually the old steam washing works were taken on a sub-lease, granted on 19 March 1839 to Jasper Wightman and Charles Collins, who were apparently already in occupation [55]. They were listed in Pigot's directories for 1839 and 1840 as silk and woollen printers at the "Royal Factory" at Phipps Bridge. However, on 13 October 1840 an auction was held of their "five capital handkerchief printing presses", copper plates, and other articles, "under a distress for rent" [56]. A further portion of their plant and utensils was advertised to be sold by auction to be held on 8 and 9 December 1840 [57].

Wightman and Collins left the premises at about this time, and it seems that the lease was then taken by Baron Reynolds, a silk printer [33]. (Baron was his first name, not his title!) Not long afterwards, on 30 November 1843, he was declared bankrupt [58]. In January 1844 it was advertised that his plant, machinery and utensils would be offered for sale at an auction to be held on 23 and 24 January 1844 [59].

Maximilian Richard Kymer, the head lessee, was declared bankrupt on 29 June 1841 [60], and in 1844 his assignees arranged for his lease to be transferred to his mortgagees, William Deacon & Company, bankers.

Baron Reynolds was probably succeeded in the tenancy by Benjamin Helps Starey and William Palmer, who were listed on the schedule to the Mitcham Tithe Map, dated 24 February 1846, as the occupiers of a "Block Printing Factory, Counting House and Yard". Starey was a cousin of Samuel and Thomas Starey, bleachers and calico printers at the Old Archbishop's Palace at Croydon, and he purchased the Palace when it was put up for sale in 1833.

In 1847 the premises were in the occupation of Thomas Taylor, a hot presser. He was still the tenant, and William Deacon & Company were still the head lessees, when the main building was destroyed by fire in April 1848.

Meanwhile, back at the earlier site, where Peter Wood was silk printing in the early 1820s. He had been followed by Thomas Watkins Wood and Edmund Peck, silk throwsters, at some time before 7 September 1830, when Peck left the partnership [61]. Wood then carried on alone, but in May 1832 he was an insolvent debtor [62]. In November 1834 the premises were said to be "empty" [54].

It would seem that the next occupier was Baron Reynolds, at the same period that he was working at the former Steam Washing Factory, that is, from about 1840 until 1843.

In the Post Office directory of the Home Counties for 1845, Welch and Margetson were named as silk printers at Phipps Bridge. These men were Joseph James Welch and John Stewart Margetson, who were to remain there for some 17 years. They exhibited some of their products in the Great Exhibition of 1851, of which it was said that, "as specimens of printing in their class (bandannas, cambric, &c.) they are excellent. Of course, being pocket-handkerchiefs, we have the range of stock subjects, from bull-dogs to Indian pines." [63]

At this time Edward Asprey was manager of the works, and lived in a cottage on the site, as recorded in the Mitcham Census returns for 1851. He died the following year. His father, William Asprey, had, in 1781, founded the firm of Asprey & Company, which later moved to Bond Street, London, where they still sell luxury silver and other wares.

The landowner, James Moore, died on 16 February 1851. By his will proved on 11 April 1851, he bequeathed most of his properties in Mitcham to executors, in trust to sell them for the benefit of his children. His will had been drawn up some ten years earlier, on 11 February 1841, and in it he referred to, among other properties, "the Silk Factory buildings and premises as the same were in the occupation of Peter Wood and now of ---- Reynolds ... and also all that my freehold land at Phipps Bridge with the erections and buildings thereon formerly used as a Steam Washing Factory ... as the same are now in the occupation of Charles Collins and Jasper Wightman" [64].

Moore's estates were duly put up for sale at an auction held on 29, 30 and 31 August 1853 [65]. At the sale, the freehold of Lot 14, that containing the silk mill, was then purchased by Welch and Margetson for £2,100. The conveyance to them was made on 3 February 1854 [66]. At the same sale, William Deacon & Company purchased Lot 15, the site of the former Steam Washing Factory, on which they intended to erect houses.

Frederick Braithwaite visited the silk printing works early in 1853, and gave the following account:

"At these works considerable quantities of water are used, in rinsing and washing the goods; in short, the whole of the eastern division of the river is required. The mill head has a regulating sluice, and another waste on the eastern side, which, after passing through some ornamental grounds, enters the stream called the Pickle ... The small water wheel required for these works is of 8 H.P. Messrs. Welch and Margetson used weekly, about 3 carboys or 6 cwt., of sulphuric acid, 1/2 ton of alum, three carboys of muriate of tin, besides small quantities of other chemicals. For the supply of water to the vats, a pump is constantly at work which raises about 6000 gallons daily, all of which is contaminated and which is discharged into the eastern waste water. Besides this, there is an absolute necessity for a large supply of water in the washing process, for without it, the excess of dye washed out of the printed part of the fabric, would spoil the plain part." [61]

Welch and Margetson had ceased working at the mill by 31 December 1862, when they granted a 21-year lease to the partnership of John Robert Breach, Charles Samuel Henry Hartog and Edward Baines Pye-Smith, bleachers and dyers, in association with John Wade, a wool merchant [68]. Hartog, named as Carl Samuel Heinrich Hartog, was declared bankrupt on 23 November 1864 [69]. Edward Baines Pye-Smith retired from the firm of "Breach and Company, Patent Wool and Silk Manufacturers" on 13 October 1865, and Breach then carried on alone.

Hartog's financial affairs were still being sorted out by his assignees, and on 14 March 1866 Breach undertook to discharge Hartog's debts, provided he was assured possession of the premises [71]. The following day, Welch and Margetson conveyed the freehold of the property to John Wade [72]. On 8 April 1867 Wade mortgaged the premises for £2,200 to two Leeds merchants [73], and took out a further mortgage of £1,100 on 12 April 1867 [74]. Breach had retained his lease, as stipulated, but on 24 December 1867 he conveyed this to Gilliat Hatfeild, the proprietor of snuff mills in the present Morden Hall Park [75], and vacated the premises.

Apparently John Wade failed to make repayments to his mortgagees so they arranged for the mill premises to be offered for sale. An auction was accordingly held on 17 May 1870. The particulars of sale contain the last description of the "Phipps Bridge Bleaching and Carding Works"

"The business portion of the Premises comprises an extensive brick and tiled factory of three stories ... a lean-to, brick, timber and tiled, used as a Pulping and Drying Room, a large brick and tiled Two-storied Building used as a Carding House, Store Room, &c., a one-storied building adjoining used as a Weighing Room, Store Room and Engine House.

"A timber and tiled Boiler House, a brick and tiled Forge House with Turning Shop over.

"A large brick, timber and tiled Bleaching House, situate on the edge of the River Wandle ..."

There was also Wandle Villa and its grounds, and some other buildings [76].

An inspection carried out before the sale found that the mill was "much out of repair" with "men at work repairing the roof of the factory". These observations were contained in a letter dated 31 March 1870 sent to the solicitors of Gilliat Hatfeild, who had evidently expressed an interest in acquiring the property [77]. Since he was the tenant, the information must have

come as no great surprise to him, and at the auction he purchased the property for £3,000 [78]. At about the same time, he bought the empty site of the old Steam Washing Factory from William Deacon & Company.

Gilliat Hatfeild then lived in Wandle Villa, briefly, until he purchased the Morden Hall estate in 1872. It seems that no attempt was made to put the mill to work, and it fell into ruin and was demolished.

After Gilliat Hatfeild's death on 10 February 1906, his estate was inherited by his son Gilliat Edward Hatfeild. He died on 9 February 1941 and bequeathed the land and buildings comprising Morden Hall Park, together with Wandle Villa and the adjoining land, to the National Trust, the present owners. At some time, probably during the Second World War, the land adjoining Wandle Villa, including the site of the mill, was formed into allotment gardens. Prentis mentioned a recollection of an elderly local resident, of an allotment gardener who "dug on to some brick foundations and old woodwork in the ground there" [79]. The allotment gardens, disused and overgrown, remain, together with Wandle Villa at No. 98 Phipps Bridge Road.

References

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