

Upper Mill, Wandsworth

This was situated on the River Wandle approximately 190 yards upstream from Wandsworth Bridge on the High Street. The site is now covered by the Wandsworth shopping centre.

There are some early 16th century references which may apply to this mill, but the earliest specific one so far found was in 1521 when, described as two mills under one roof, it was leased by the Abbot of Westminster to William Sharparowe for the term of 50 years. In 1526 the remaining term of the lease was transferred to Jacob Astable [1]. By about 1550 the mill formerly in the tenure of Astable was held by Henry Blakden [2]. By this date, following the dissolution of the monasteries in c. 1540, the mill had become Crown property.

By 1575 the head lease was held by Thomas Smythe of Mitcham, who by his will dated 29 January of that year bequeathed most of his properties to his wife Eleanor, but the lease of the Wandsworth mill was to go to his son Edward [3]. In fact, the interest in that mill too must have been transferred to Eleanor. In 1577 she was married to Bartholomew Clerke, and her properties passed to him, but reverted to Eleanor after his death in 1589 [4]. Eleanor Clerke died a few years later, in July 1594, and bequeathed the mill to Thomas Smythe, the son of her son George. George Smythe was to enjoy the benefits thereof until Thomas came of age [5].

On 14 May 1595 George Smythe, as trustee for Thomas, granted a 21-year sub-lease of the mill, "now or late in the possession of Henry Bucke", to Thomas Broadborne and Edward Thornton [6].

In 1605 it was recorded that the mill, held by George Smythe under a lease of 1536, was then occupied by Thomas Hamond [7]. Two water mills called the Upper Mylles at Wandsworth were included in a list of King James I's properties drawn up in 1608 [8]. In 1610 the miller there was named as William Crensham [9].

Thomas Smythe had entered into his inheritance by 1618, and in an indenture dated 1 September of that year, confirming the settlement agreed to by his father on his marriage to Sarah Handford, it was stated that the "two Water Corne Mills under one roof" at Wandsworth were "now or late in the tenure of Richard Crosse" [10]. Richard Crosse had in fact died in 1613, and the business may have been carried on by his son John. The premises were apparently unoccupied when, on 19 June 1640, Thomas Smythe entered into an agreement with John Lered, a millwright of Bexley, for the carrying out of extensive rebuilding work at the mill, for the sum of £1,000 [11].

Thomas Smythe died in about 1677 and by his will proved in October 1678 he bequeathed his estate to his son George [12]. The next reference to the tenancy was on 13 June 1704, when Thomas Dring and ---- (blank) Hatch, the leaseholders, and their tenant John Shapp, complained to the Commissioners of the Surrey and Kent Sewers that a tumbling bay formed by James Robinson at Adkins Mill further up the river, was "very much to their detriment" [13].

By this date the mill had been converted to copper working. Thomas Dring, "Citizen and Armourer", by his will proved on 4 January 1713/14, bequeathed his share of the lease of "all those Copper Mills and of and in all the buildings, houses, utensils, appurtenances thereunto

belonging situate at or near Wandsworth Bridge", to his nephew William Carpenter. In a codicil he referred to a lease, evidently a renewal, "agreed or intended to be granted to me by Susan Smith of Mitcham spinster and George Smith of the same place Esquire of one half part of the Mills at Wandsworth" for 32 years to commence in 1717 [14]. Presumably the other half of the lease was still held by Mr. Hatch, about whom nothing more has been discovered.

The ownership arrangements in the period following are not clear. George Smith by his will proved in October 1714 bequeathed all his real estate to his "kinsman" William Myers [15], and Susan (or Susanna) Smythe, who was probably his aunt, by her will proved in July 1725, did likewise [16]. William Myers certainly inherited their property in Mitcham, but no record of his ownership of the Upper Mill has been found.

William Carpenter did not continue to work the copper mill, or not for long. By 7 December 1721 it had been converted to leather dressing, when John Hughes, a London leatherseller, insured the premises with the Sun insurance company. By this time there were two separate buildings, described as "great Mill" and "little Mill", which were in the occupation of Jacob Papineau [17].

On 9 November 1725 Jacob Papineau insured his goods contained in the mills [18], and he renewed this policy on 6 October 1726 [19]. On 26 December 1727 the goods in the mills were insured jointly by Jacob and his brother Michael Papineau, with whom he was in partnership as oil leather dressers, together with their goods in their warehouse at Southwark [20]. They insured the mill buildings on 29 December 1727 [21].

They re-insured the mills, and the goods and stock therein, on 25 December 1732 [22]. The mills were then described as "Great Leather Oyle Mill" and "Little Mill", and it is clear that the larger mill was on the east bank of the river and the smaller on the west bank. The following year the mill on the west bank was converted back to copper milling, and on 17 September 1733 it was insured by John Applebee and Company with the Hand in Hand insurance company [23].

John Applebee, "citizen, armourer and brazier", renewed this policy on 16 December 1740 [24]. He died in 1746, and the name of his successor and the use to which the mill was put, are not known, but it would seem to have remained as a copper mill for some years.

Jacob Papineau was working a leather mill above Hack Bridge in Carshalton-Beddington from about 1739, and apparently Michael Papineau carried on alone at the Upper Mill. He was rated for a mill in Wandsworth in a list of those liable to pay a sewer rate, drawn up on 3 May 1739 [25]. He was named again on a similar list dated 25 March 1756, as tenant, the proprietor being William Mears, who was then also named as the proprietor of a mill occupied by George Pengree [26]. Thus it would seem that George Pengree was then the tenant of the former copper mill, which may have been converted to corn milling by this time. A later list of sewer ratepayers, dated 11 August 1763, also included George Pengree, but Hugh Mears was then named in place of Michael Papineau [26], who had died in 1760. Hugh Mears had been in partnership with Michael Papineau and John Papineau (who had also died in 1760), and had married Michael's elder daughter Susanna.

On 12 May 1763, the late Michael Papineau's younger daughter Mary was married to George Shepley, described as haberdasher on his application for a marriage licence. In about 1765

George Shepley went into partnership with Hugh Mears in the leather dressing business. Soon afterwards they acquired the freehold of the Upper Mills. These were in the occupation of George Shepley's elder brother Richard, a corn miller, by 25 October 1768, when he insured both mills with the Sun insurance company. They were described in the policy register as a corn mill, and "another water mill ... late leather mill", which had presumably been converted to corn milling also [27].

Earlier in 1768, Hugh Mears and George Shepley had engaged the eminent engineer John Smeaton to advise on improvement works to the mills. On 20 February 1768 he prepared a report on experiments he had carried out regarding "the power of the head of water at Mr. Shepley's mill at Wandsworth", and during the following 20 years he prepared schemes for a number of improvement measures [28].

The first of these must have been carried out soon after Smeaton's initial report, and comprised a substantial rebuilding, for when Richard Shepley renewed his insurance policy on 7 February 1769 the original corn mill was valued at £2,500 as against £1,500 in the previous policy [29]. On 26 June 1770 the Wandsworth Vestry agreed to make an order of distress on the goods of George Shepley because he had refused to pay his poor rates "while his mill was abuilding" [30]. The outcome was not recorded, but Shepley probably paid up.

On 29 December 1769 Richard Shepley had re-insured the two mills and the utensils and stock in the smaller mill, together with the household goods in his nearby dwelling house [31]. He renewed this policy, with the addition of cover for the utensils and stock in the larger mill, on 7 August 1771 [32]. On 24 October 1776 the mills and machinery were insured by George Shepley, and on the same day Richard Shepley re-insured his goods and utensils therein [33].

On 21 November 1780 Richard Shepley renewed the insurance on the contents of the mills and the house [34]. In the register entry of this policy the name "Richard" is crossed through and "George" substituted. The policy was renewed by George Shepley on 6 February 1782 [35] and again on 23 May 1782 [36]. Possibly Richard Shepley had retired due to ill-health, for he died the following year, and was buried at Wandsworth on 5 October 1783.

The record of the last-mentioned policy contains a significant change in the description of the property. Instead of two separate mills, there was now "water corn mills in one building", which had apparently been built within the preceding three months. This evidently spanned the river, as shown on later maps.

George Shepley renewed the policy on 8 January 1787 [37]. On 9 June 1787 the contents of the mill and the dwelling house were re-insured by another Richard Shepley [38]. He was George Shepley's nephew, son of the late Richard Shepley. On the same day George Shepley insured the mill building and the dwelling house [39].

In 1789 John Smeaton was commissioned to design a new and separate mill for the production of oil. This was constructed during 1790 as a building spanning a bypass channel of the river, a little to the south-west of the corn mill. This must have been one of his last commissions; he died in October 1792. On 19 January 1791 George and Richard Shepley insured the new oil mill with the Hand in Hand insurance company [40]. This Richard Shepley, the third man of that name to be associated with the site, was George Shepley's eldest son, who by this date was in partnership with his father. (Hugh Mears had retired in

about 1777, and then or later moved to Wales, where he died in 1792.) On 8 March 1791, "George Shepley & Co." insured the machinery, utensils and goods in the oil mill with the Sun insurance company [41].

The second Richard Shepley, George Shepley's nephew, was declared bankrupt in January 1791 [42]. He may have continued working at the corn mill for a time, but on 16 November 1793 John Watney, a mealman of Wimbledon, insured his utensils and stock in the mill [43], and probably he had taken a short-term lease of the premises.

On 16 January 1798 the Hand in Hand policy on the oil mill building was renewed by George and Richard Shepley, together with George's son Michael [44]. It was renewed again on 21 January 1805 by George Shepley and his three sons Richard, Michael and Hugh, who by this date were all in partnership together [45].

George Shepley was a founder-member of the Surrey Iron Railway Company, incorporated by Act of Parliament on 21 May 1801 (41 Geo. III cap. 33), and empowered to construct and manage a horsedrawn goods railway from Wandsworth to Croydon, with a branch from Mitcham to Hack Bridge in Carshalton. The route in the vicinity of the Upper Mills ran close to the west side of the Wandle, and Shepley had a private branch (or siding in modern parlance) laid to his oil mill. He also had a branch built to some warehouses he owned near the railway terminus at Wandsworth, and another branch from near Hack Bridge to his oil mill a short distance upstream.

This latter mill, together with a nearby leather mill, had been built in about 1784, to replace three earlier mills which had been destroyed by fire. One of the these mills, a leather mill, was that which Jacob Papineau had worked from about 1739, as mentioned previously. After his death in 1760, it had been worked by his son Jacob John Papineau. George Shepley had purchased these mills in 1788, having previously held them on lease.

It is not known for how long Jacob John Papineau remained at the mill near Hack Bridge, but by about 1801 he had taken over the management of the corn mill at Wandsworth. Holden's directory for 1802-4 lists him as a miller there. By 1808 he had also taken over the working of the oil mill, according to Holden's directory for that year, which named him as oil and corn miller at Wandsworth. James Malcolm in 1805 had referred to the Upper Mills as "Messrs. Shipley and Poppineau's [sic] flour and oil mills" [46].

George Shepley died on 15 February 1807 at the age of 69. By his will, proved on 16 March 1807, he bequeathed his properties at Wandsworth to his son Hugh [47], but Hugh died a few weeks after his father and was buried on 20 March. He died intestate and unmarried, but his brother Richard was granted letters of administration of his estate [48], and he conveyed most of the Wandsworth properties, including the Upper Mills, to his remaining brother Michael. Richard Shepley died soon afterwards, on 3 July 1808.

In 1809 Michael Shepley sold the Upper Mills and other properties to George Augustus Ferguson [49]. By 6 November 1810 Francis Atkinson, "oil and flour manufacturer", was the tenant of both mills, when he insured the oil mill, and his utensils and stock in the corn mill, with the Royal Exchange insurance company [50]. He was still there in 1815, but on 19 November 1817 it was recorded that Daniel Watney, miller, was in occupation of both mills [51]. On 19 December 1818 it was stated that the corn mill was under repair, when the West Brixton Justices of the Peace adjudged that Watney should pay only half his poor rate on it

"until the repairs were completed" [52]. According to Cecil Davis, this mill was rebuilt in 1818 to the design of the engineer John Rennie [8], but Rennie's connection with the site has not been corroborated.

At some time in the early 1820s Daniel Watney purchased the freehold of the Upper Mills from George Augustus Ferguson, and also took his son James into partnership. It was probably at this period that the oil mill was converted to corn milling. The partnership was dissolved on 27 June 1829, when Daniel Watney retired, and James carried on the business at Wandsworth alone [53]. Daniel Watney died on 10 June 1831 at the age of 59, and by his will proved on 29 June he bequeathed the freehold of the Upper Mills to his son James, and also that of the Middle Mill at Wandsworth, which he had purchased in about 1826 [54].

In the mid-1840s, James Watney went into partnership with William Henry Wells, who may have previously worked at the mills; he was living in Wandsworth at the time of his marriage in September 1841.



The mills in 1838
[99.5kb]

In 1850 Brayley reported that

"Messrs. Watney and Wells, at the upper and middle mills, now work thirty-one pairs of stones, which, at an average of 1000 quarters per pair, will produce 60,000 sacks a year, to the value of £150,000.

Although the operations of grinding, boulting, &c. are performed partly by steam and partly by waterpower, the business employs 26 work-horses, and 10 or 12 nags, but with such economy of labour not more than 50 men are required to prepare and distribute flour for 50,000 persons" [55].

In 1853 Frederick Braithwaite noted at the Upper Mills two water wheels equal to 47 horsepower and a steam engine of 20 horsepower [56]. The steam engine mentioned in these two references had actually been installed some time before 1834.

By this period, it seems that the mills were managed mainly by Wells, while Watney devoted himself to the management of the Stag Brewery at Pimlico, which he had taken on in 1842. In the 1861 census returns for Wandsworth, Wells was said to be a miller employing 40 men. However, later in 1861, on 20 June, the partnership of Watney and Wells was dissolved [57]. Shortly afterwards, the Upper Mills, together with the Middle Mill, were taken over by the Aerated Bread Company.

In 1862 George Pimm, who had previously managed the Race Mills, Surrey Docks, was engaged by the Aerated Bread Company to be the manager at their Wandsworth mills. Later, the Aerated Bread Company evidently decided to relinquish direct involvement in the milling process. On 19 May 1874 they leased both mills to George Pimm [58], and he carried on the business as George Pimm and Company, initially in partnership with Seth Taylor.

George Pimm was said to be "among the leaders of the most advanced and enterprising millers of the country", and he introduced much modern machinery into his mills, including the first silk centrifugal flour dressing mill in England [59]. A sad accident occurred at the Upper Mills on 25 March 1881, when the foreman, Frederick Wood, died as the result of falling into a hopper full of flour [60].

In 1883 Seth Taylor assigned his share in the business to his brother-in-law William Bulstrode, who had married his sister Jane [61]. George Pimm died on 21 May 1885 at the age of 67, and the business was then carried on by William Bulstrode and Pimm's son, George Arthur Pimm, retaining the name George Pimm and Company.

Bulstrode evidently followed George Pimm's policy of using the latest equipment. In October 1893 it was advertised that "in consequence of extensive alterations in plant" at the Upper Mills, some of the old machinery and effects were for sale. These included a 12-horsepower steam engine, purifiers, dust collectors, and seven pairs of French burr stones [62].

The firm was still also working the Middle Mill in 1892, but that building was demolished a few years later, and by 1898 they were making some use of the Lower Mill, according to Cecil Davis:

"The Upper Mills of Messrs. Pim [sic] do not rely on the Wandle for motive power; but water-gas is made on the premises; this drives two powerful engines ... The wheat after being cleaned in the Lower Mill is brought to this mill ..."

He went on to describe the grinding process using metal rollers, and how the wheat germ was separated. This was then specially prepared and mixed with the flour, to go to the making of loaves marketed as "Wando" bread [63].

William Bulstrode died on 7 October 1910 at the age of 79, and was succeeded by his sons Ernest and Frank Bulstrode. Davis wrote about the mills again in 1911, following a recent visit when he was shown around by Ernest Bulstrode. By this date, and probably for many years past, the milling was mostly carried out in the northernmost building, and he wrote that "The machinery and plant installed therein is one of the finest and most complete in the whole country ... Powerful electric motors supply the motive power for most of the modern machinery, and these are supplemented by gas engines, which drive the machinery in certain parts of the mills." [8]

On 21 October 1911, the firm was reconstituted as Bulstrode, Pimm and Company Limited, with a capital of £50,000 in £1 shares, and with Ernest and Frank Bulstrode and George Arthur Pimm as directors [64].

Despite the references by Davis in 1898 and 1911 to the use of electric motors and gas engines for the power supply, it seems that water power was also being utilised in 1919, when a report about the river mentioned a 20-horsepower turbine and a small water wheel in use on the premises [65].

In the early morning of 29 November 1928, a fire broke out in the main mill building, which was completely gutted, and its machinery and a large quantity of grain were destroyed [66]. It would seem that the company carried on milling in the southernmost building, which had escaped the fire, but on 12 March 1930, the shareholders attended a meeting to formally agree to the voluntary winding-up of the company [67].

Even before that meeting, at the beginning of March, it was advertised that premises at Wandsworth, "formerly a flour mill", were available for letting [68]. The winding-up procedure was completed on 11 January 1931 [69].

Soon afterwards the building was taken over by the Cheaper Garage company, who were still there in 1939. Its further history has not been ascertained. It is said that the building, by then derelict, was demolished in 1962.

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