

THE THREE MILLS

BROMLEY BY BOW



THE WIND AND WATERMILL SECTION
of
The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings

The objects of the Wind and Watermill Section are :

1. To stimulate the interest of the public in the preservation of wind and watermills.
2. To provide technical advice on questions relating to the repair of wind and watermills.
3. To make a detailed survey of wind and watermills as a permanent record with historical data of all mills in this country.
4. To encourage the craft of country milling.
5. To give financial help wherever possible.

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TIDE MILLS

PART THREE

by

E. M. GARDNER

With a Foreword by Godfrey Nicholson, M.P.

No. 4

S·P·A·B

2/6

THE HISTORY OF THE THREE MILLS

by

E. M. GARDNER

FOREWORD

All who take delight in the study of the past will be grateful to Miss Gardner for this interesting Paper. One of the tragedies of modern life lies in the fact that so many relics of minor historic significance are being swept away without any record being kept. Tide Mills must have played a great part in our economy, and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings has done well to study them at this eleventh hour. Of course, I am particularly grateful to Miss Gardner, because of the connection between my family and the Three Mills. They were bought by my grandfather in 1872, but as early as 1773 my collateral ancestor, William Bowman, as Miss Gardner records, entered into partnership with Daniel Bisson, who was the then proprietor. What would not one give to be transported for a few moments back into the past! I picture Three Mills in those days as a scene of great activity, teams of horses waiting to carry flour to London, and millers and labourers bustling round and attending to the waterwheels and millstones, whose busy hum dominated everything. An animated, but at the same time a peaceful, scene. Something of the same air of peace still broods over Three Mills to-day. Times change, and the past is only too easily forgotten. Let us be grateful to those who help us to remember the achievements and undertakings of our ancestors.

GODFREY NICHOLSON.

13th March, 1957.

For hundreds of years the River Lee—Stow's "pleasant and useful river"—flowed quietly from its source in Bedfordshire to join the Thames at Bow Creek, watering the osier hopes, providing on its green banks pasture for cattle and turning the wheels of a large number of watermills. From "time out of mind" it marked the boundary between Middlesex and Essex.

Near the Temple Mills on Hackney Marshes, the Lee divides into several branches, known (from east to west) as the Channelsea, Charles or Abbey Mill stream, the Waterworks river, City Mill river and Hart's or Pudding Mill river. South-east of these again is the "Navigation." Some of these streams united on the north side of the Stratford Causeway but two, known as the Three Mills Back river and the Three Mills Wall river, in addition to the main stream, flowed down to the Three Mills where they were joined by the Abbey Mill stream (Fig. 1). When work was undertaken under *the River Lee (Flood Relief, etc.) Act, 1930*, the water courses were much altered.

The Lee and all its branches were tidal almost as far as the Temple Mills.

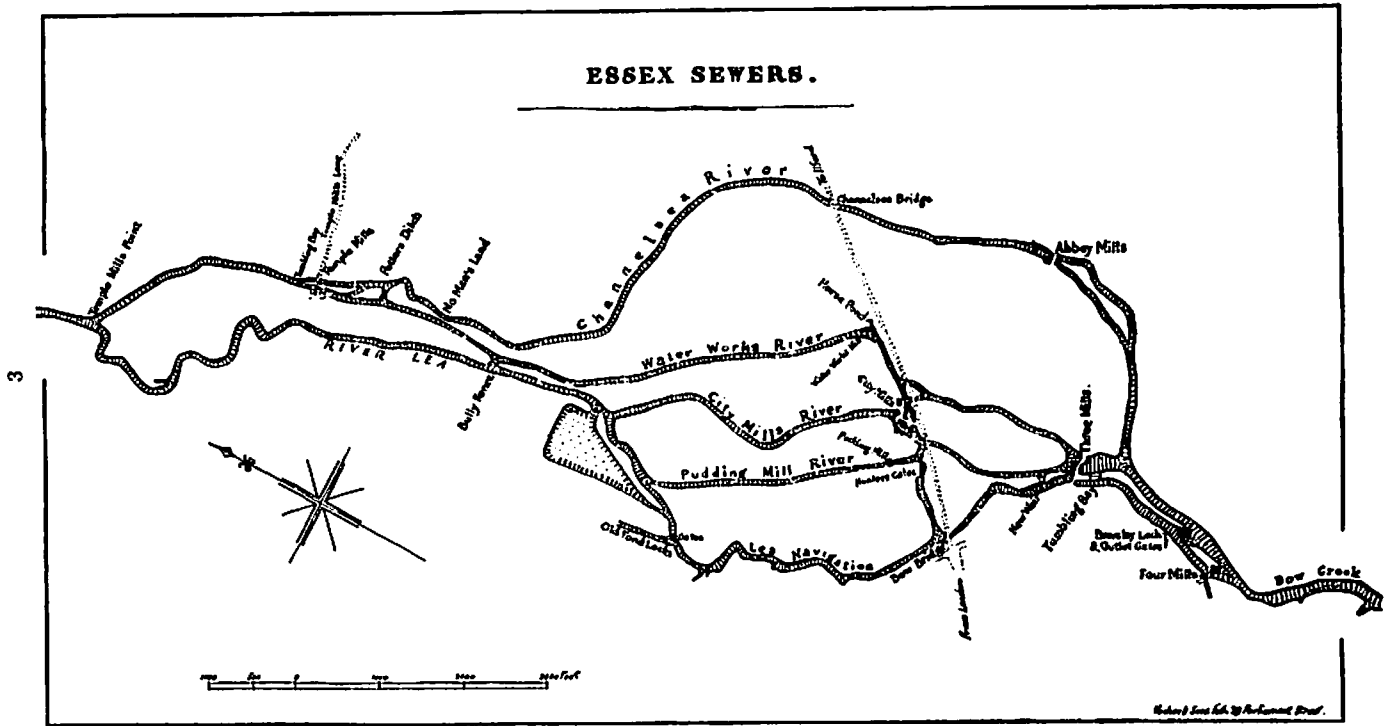
On these streams and in close proximity to one another stood six great tidal corn watermills, described in the Victoria County History for Essex (vol. 1) as "the most remarkable group of mills in Essex." Among the six, lowest but one on the river, stood and still stands the Three Mills.

The name "the Three Mills" gives rise to some speculation. There can be little doubt that at one time there were three separate buildings as the name implies, and that at some uncertain date in the sixteenth century they were reduced to two. When the mills were granted to Sir Peter Mewtys in 1538/39 the property included "Le Fyshe House situate next to two of the three mills aforesaid." A complaint against the occupier of the Three Mills in 1588 for penning up the water at his flood gates so that it overflowed and "drowned" the adjoining marshes states that:

"they take in the tides at seven gates (and) whereas in times past they had three mills to let it go again now they have but one corn mill and one powder mill which powder mill standeth still more than she goeth,"

By 1734 the position is quite clear: the Three Mills are "all those two buildings or grist mills containing six water wheels and granaries and a windmill on the bank next the buildings."

FIG. 1



THE RIVER LEE AND BRANCHES IN 1857

Records relating to the Mills before the sixteenth century are scanty. The Domesday Survey records that they were in the Manors of East and West Ham eight mills, formerly nine. It is reasonable to believe that the predecessor of the Three Mills was one of these.

In 1134/35 the Abbey of Stratford Langthorne was founded by William de Montfichet who endowed it with "two mills next the causeway of Stratford."¹ One of these mills (possibly both) was the Abbey or Wiggins Mill, which is described elsewhere, as "two mills under one roof" and is sometimes spoken of as two mills. The second may have been the Three Mills, although evidence from later documents suggests that these were purchased by the Abbot, probably in the thirteenth century. They were certainly in the possession of the Abbey when it was surrendered to the King in 1538/39.

The earliest named tenant of the Three Mills is Sir Henry Hopplesborne (Hobrothorn) Knight who was also the owner of one of the Four Mills below. His lease had begun before 1527/28 for in that year he paid 1/6 to the Sacristan of the Abbey for two of the Three Mills for the upkeep of the river banks. A new lease was granted to him in March 1538 for a term of 99 years at a rental of £8. 9s. 8d. a year but on the surrender of the Abbey his tenancy was terminated.

Much of the Abbey lands together with the Three Mills and the Abbey Mills were then granted to Sir Peter Mewtys "one of the gentlemen ushers of the Privy Chamber and to Joan his wife," for which they were to render the tenth part of a knight's fee and £8. 10s. 6d. rent.² In the grant the Mills are described as "all those our three watermills . . . situate in the parish of West Ham lying near the bridge called the Torne Bridge . . . with all ponds and water courses . . . and . . . houses stables and granaries . . . also a house call'd le Fyshe House . . ." Fishing rights were included and four osier hedges (willow groves).

On Peter's death the property passed to his son Henry and later to Henry's son Thomas, a minor when his father died. The Three Mills were then given as dower to his mother Anne.

In 1633 the mills and most of the land was bought by John (later Sir John) Nulls merchant of London for £7907.³ He is described in the Commissioners of Sewers' records as "one of the greatest landowners in the Level". Nulls was declared a bankrupt in 1653 and the property was administered for him until 1662 when it was bought for £7127 by William Curtis gentleman of Mile End⁴ who held it until his death in 1669.

With Curtis' death the second period of the known history of the Three Mills may be said to close; the first being the four centuries of ownership by the Abbey, the second dating from the Suppression to 1669. During the latter period the property was regarded as an investment to be sublet at a profit to suitable tenants.

During the time that the Mills were sublet a vast number of names appears in the records. Some of the tenants themselves sublet with considerable profit. For example, one John Freake a millwright, who leased the Mills in 1568 for £10. 17s. 4d. a year, sublet it twelve years later to John Fuller Esq. of London for £35. A complicated law suit followed, the first of many in which the owners and occupiers of the Three Mills were involved.

The names of the tenants and sub-tenants are not important. They are known chiefly from complaints made by and to the Commissioners of Sewers to whom the care of the river and its banks were committed. The most common of these complaints were (a) failure on the part of holders of land bordering on the Lee to keep the "walls" (banks) of the river in repair—a liability imposed on them as owners of land formerly held by the Abbey on whom the duty of upkeep had fallen, and (b) failure by the millers to keep the water at their mill head at the proper depth and to open their gates promptly to let flood water through. Another common complaint made by one miller against another was the diversion of the mill stream by unauthorised cuts.

The depth of water at the mill head had been fixed by "ancient assize" at $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet. Millers were tempted to exceed this height in order to obtain more power, with the result that the river often overflowed or broke its banks causing great damage to the low lying land on either side, impeding the navigation and other public works. Even if these ill results did not follow the water was so much penned up that the wheels of the mills above were blocked and unable to turn.

A few examples taken from the records of the Court of Sewers will illustrate this:

2.11.1605 (A) Presentment by the Marsh Jurors that the Great Mill of the Three Mills (has) the height of the gates from the mudsell five feet ten inches contrary to a former order and that the old gates between the Three Mills are always down and undrawn and no provision (made) sufficient to pull them up and that the mudsell thereof lieth at least one foot above low water. These Three Mills are now in the tenure of Sir William Stone.

11.4.1617 Because of the flooding of private land and the highway and the road to London at the Three Mills, all damnified by the heightening of the water at the Three Mills: an overshot to be made.

14.6.1617 Francis Mason, miller, makes complaint against Henry Brown of the Three Mills who had not observed the order that he should not pen up his water more than $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet and finding this, Francis Mason had sent a man to entreat the said Henry Brown to draw his gates, to which Henry Brown replied 'look,

as the water came in so let it go out' for he would draw no gates. Whereupon Francis Mason still finding his ground under water, went down himself with two neighbours and made the like request to him to have the gates drawn but he utterly refused to draw any gates; whereupon the water then being $6\frac{1}{2}$ feet Francis Mason went to draw the gates himself (*Note*: this procedure had been authorised by the Commissioners of Sewers) but Henry Brown made resistance and offered to beat him off the ground, violently reviling him with most opprobrious speech unfit for their 'Worships' ears.

8.6.1630 Mr. Henry Mewtys has still not repaired the breach on his land near the Three Mills which was getting worse and might not be reparable which would lead not only to the prejudice of the navigation . . . but also to the great hinderance of boats and barges.

No record has been found showing the output of the Three Mills during the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. That they were profitable may be assumed from the fact that they never lacked a buyer. The mills of West Ham were fortunate in their situation. Not only was there a rich agricultural hinterland—described by John Norden in 1594 as "the English Goschen"—but the river provided comparatively easy transport to the large and ever growing market of the Metropolis. For years the bakers of Stratford provided bread for the inhabitants of London and their supply of flour was close at hand.

With the death of William Curtis in 1669 the third phase in the history of the Three Mills may be said to begin, for from that year onwards the owners interested themselves actively in the business of milling.

Curtis bequeathed the Three Mills to his daughter Anne⁵ who became the first wife of Sir Peter Apsley. His sister married Sir Benjamin Bathurst, whose eldest son Alan was created Baron Bathurst in 1712 (N.D.B.). The milling business was carried on by the family. In July 1700 a letter from Sir Benjamin speaks of having "received a very lamentable letter from Rimmell, our miller at West Ham" regarding the setting up of a new weir near Hackney.⁶ Anne Apsley having died without issue, the Bathursts' claim to the Three Mills was disputed in 1714 by one John Edwards of Bristol whose wife Katherine was a great niece of William Curtis. The case was settled in 1716 by the payment of £300 by Lord Bathurst to Edwards who renounced his claim to the mill and lands.

Lord Bathurst sold the Three Mills to Peter Lefevre (Lefebure) in 1727 and that year may be taken as a turning point in their history for it marks the beginning of the change from flour milling to distilling.

Daniel Defoe in *The Complete English Tradesman* (4th ed. 1727) says of distilling:

"A new Trade in England is increased to a prodigious degree by an accident in our Commerce which was the Prohibition of Brandy from France."

In describing distilling as a "new Trade" Defoe was however hardly correct. The distilling of wine was common in Europe from an early date but it was not introduced into England until the 16th century. Its arrival was welcomed by the medical profession as a cure for all diseases. The author of *The Virtuouse Booke of Distyllacyon* (1525) writes:

"Aqua Vitae is commonly called the mistress of all medicine for it easeth the diseases coming from cold. It getteth also young courage in a person and causeth him to have a good memory and remembrance. It purifieth the five wits of melancholy and all uncleanness when it is drunk by reason and measure: i.e. to understand, five or six drops in the morning fasting with a spoonful of wine."⁷

The author of *A New Booke of Distyllacyon of Waters called The Treasure of Euonymous* (1559) is even more enthusiastic:

"It helpeth read (red) and duskish eies (eyes). It is good for them that hath the falling sickness if they drink it. It cureth palsy if they are onoynted therewith. It sharpeneth the wit and restoreth memore. It maketh man merry and preserveth youth. It putteth away fracins ringworms and all spots on the face, etc. It is merveyulous profitable for frantic men and such as be melancholy. It expelleth poyson. The smell thereof burnt killeth flies and cold creeping beasts."⁷

By the reign of Elizabeth I the habit of drinking spirits, especially French brandy had spread to all classes. The quality however was very poor. Anyone who wished to distill could do so without hinderance, and complaints were common that "hog's wash" sour wine dregs and other bad material were used. In order to obtain some control Charles I in 1638 granted a Charter to the Distillers within 21 miles of London with power to make rules for "the right making of strong waters and vinegar according to the Act." The first Master was Sir Theodore de Mayean, the King's physician. No monopoly was however given to the Company and abuses continued. Home distillers were encouraged by Acts designed to promote Agriculture especially by that of 1690 for "the encouragement of tillage by promoting the distilling of brandy and spirits from malted corn".

But England was at war, and as it continued the need for saving grain became urgent. A Bill was introduced to prohibit "the excessive distillation of spirits and low wine from corn" . . . and to prevent frauds in distilling. The importation of French brandy had already been prohibited.

While the Bill was before the House a "Humble Petition" was presented by:

"Two hundred Distillers in and about London who understand how to make spirits and brandy from malt, as well as those who now make the same who are about 20 persons"⁸

Their complaint was that since the introduction of the Bill the makers had raised their prices by £6 a tun more than before, yet they were being given the exclusive right to distill and would "impose extravagant and unreasonable prices which would be the ruin of your Petitioners".

The Petition was signed by 53 persons and is dated February 3rd 1698/9. Three days later the twenty Makers also petitioned to be heard stating that after the earlier Act to encourage distilling they had:

"at very great cost and charges built Distilling Houses and provided Stills, Backs and other Utensils for carrying on ye said Trade . . . to ye great Benefit of this Kingdome".⁸

It is clear therefore that already there was much activity in the distilling world and that the prohibition of spirits from abroad offered great opportunities to persons able and willing to take them.

Such a person was Peter Lefevre. He came of a Huguenot family which probably came to England in 1633, for in that year a Peter Lefevre and Melchior Goyvart from Holland, applied for and obtained a patent to erect and run watermills that would work on "any standing water lakes or ditches." In the petition they state that they "intend to come speedily into England."

By the 18th century the family was already well known in West Ham.

Lefevre soon took steps to increase the capital of the business and to make the necessary contacts with distillers. In 1734 he formed a partnership consisting of himself, described as a mealman (i.e. who traded in flour as well as made it), John Grace of St. Leonards mealman, John Debonnaire of West Ham distiller, Daniel Bisson of St. Leonards malt distiller, and Christopher Barton of West Ham, distiller.

The partners agreed to become:

"co-partners joint traders and dealers together in the several arts trades or mysteries of mealmen cornfactors millers and distillers in buying selling and grinding corn and grain and malt spirits."

£31000 was put into the business and the Three Mills with its windmill, together with St. Thomas' or Pudding Mill with its "newly erected windmill" recently leased by Lefevre, were rented by the partners for £602 a year.

Not long afterwards another Deed brought Thomas Bray of London into the business. He held the lease of a distillery and two

houses in Bromley which he held for 21 years at a rent of £37 a year and "a gallon of arrack or 10s. in lieu." There he was joined by Christopher Barton who lived in one of the two houses, paying 1d. rent.

Barton retired from the main partnership in 1745 and brought an action against Lefevre on the grounds that he had been denied his rightful share in the goodwill of the business and the dead stock. The details of the case are complicated and are of interest in showing that distilling as well as flour milling was well established by the middle of the century and that the business was flourishing and many sided. Mention is made of contracts for wheat malt peace (*sic*) flour meal and biscuits. There was hog contracts and contracts with the Victualling office for brandy and flesh. Lefevre had proposed what he considered to be a satisfactory settlement, and was not above a little blackmail for he suggested that he and his partners might keep litigation on foot for so many years that Barton would receive no benefit from the agreement. The litigation would cost some £200 a year but this would be "a small amount between them".

Lefevre when he died in 1761 left in his will "to the men who shall at the time of my death be yearly or weekly working at the Three Mills or at the Distill House at Stratford (St. Thomas' Mill) wherein I was lately connected, a guinea each".

His successor at the mills was his nephew John, already in the business with Daniel Bisson, father and son.

From Peter Lefevre's time onwards there were a series of law suits, all of interest but too long to be included here. They illustrate the continuous struggle between millers for water power.

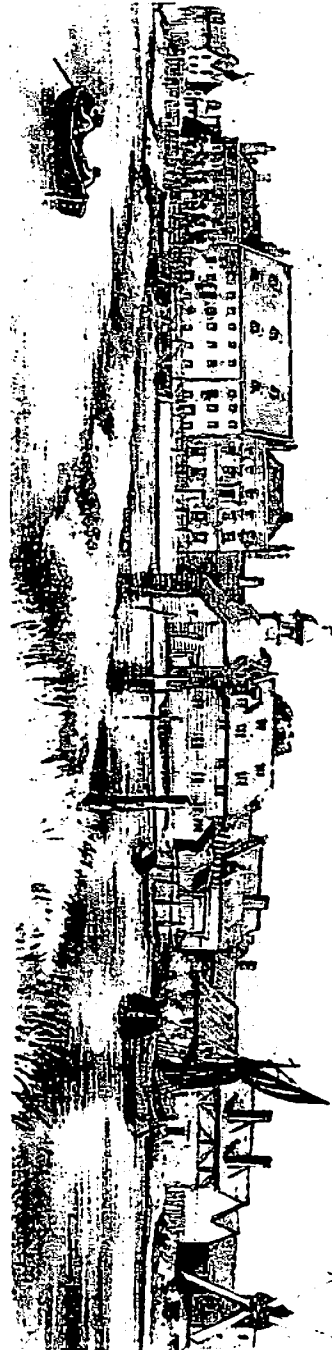
The main events in the history of the Three Mills after 1751 may be told briefly. Bisson succeeded John Lefevre in the business and ran it with his son Daniel Bisson Junior and two members of the Metcalfe family, Philip and Roger. On his death in 1766 the property passed to his widow but their son carried on until his own death in 1777. Sarah Bisson, with her husband's executors, then leased the Mills to Philip Metcalfe "malt distiller of West Ham". The lease was for 13½ years at a rent of £780 a year for the first 13 years and £560 for the remaining nine months. When the lease expired Metcalfe bought the mill for £25000.⁹

Fortunately for the owner of the Three Mills it was, at the end of the century, still in active production as a flour mill. In 1767 Bisson and Metcalfe had described themselves as "millers and malt distillers in a very large and extensive way." During the Napoleonic wars, with the possibility of invasion, great anxiety was felt about the food supplies for the nation. The troops had to be fed and millers were exhorted to increase their output to the limit of their capacity. On the other hand, to save grain distilling was forbidden by which means it was hoped to save 500000 quarters of barley.¹⁰

THE 'OLD' OR HOUSE MILL.

THE THREE MILLS IN 1800

THE 'NEW' MILL.



Metcalf on his death in 1819, was followed by his nephews James and Henry and later by Philip Mure in partnership with James Currie, distiller. £19990 was paid by Mure for the property.¹¹

From this date up to 1872 the business (now distilling only) seems to have declined. The Mills and land were heavily mortgaged.

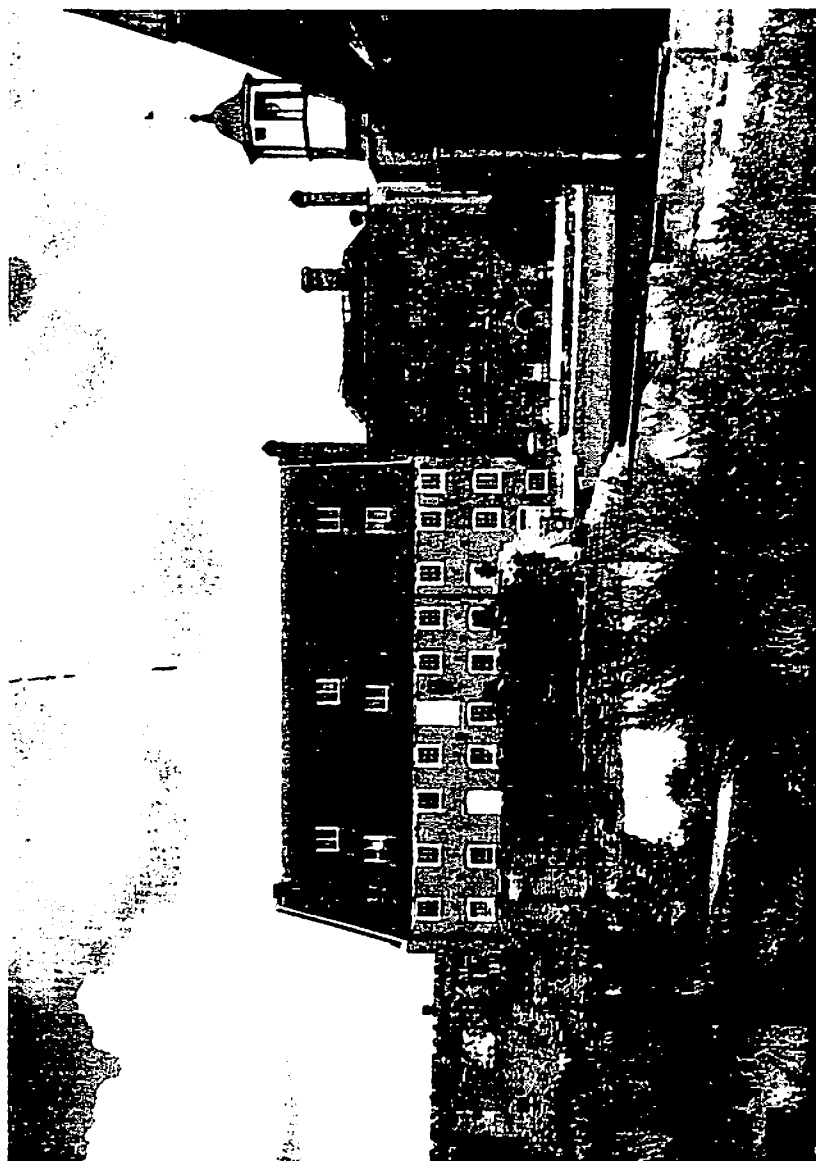
Philip Mure in 1833 married the daughter of Sir Thomas Strange, Kt., and in 1866 he entered into partnership with William Thomas Henry Strange who added the name of Mure to his own. In the Deed of Partnership it was stated that Philip Mure was in bad health and had incurred heavy debts to various persons including £16000 to William Nicholson. If no fresh capital was obtainable the business must be wound up although the creditors were anxious that it should be carried on.

In April 1872 W. T. H. Strange Mure filed his Petition in Bankruptcy.¹² His Trustees were authorised to accept £60700 from W. Nicholson for the Three Mills and the land, a sum which more than covered the debts owing. In March 1893 the property was transferred to J. & W. Nicholson.¹³

With this the history of the Three Mills may be said to end and modern life begin, for the Company still functions under this name at the Three Mills and in Clerkenwell.

A few notes only need be added. W. Nicholson (1824–1909) was, in 1872, already carrying on business as a distiller in Clerkenwell, where the present headquarters at 195 St. John Street had been built in 1805 by John Nicholson. He had succeeded to the business of his cousin John Bowman & Sons, a family long connected with the trade. One William Bowman had entered into partnership with Daniel Bisson in 1773.

Under the new ownership the business rapidly expanded. In a draft of a Petition (undated but probably about 1900) concerning an alteration in the powers of the Lee Conservancy Board, Richard Francis Nicholson, son of William, stated that since the purchase of the mills in 1872 his father had spent £250,000 in new buildings and improvements. The old established distillery owned by the Curries was bought out¹⁴ and closed down. Steps were taken to break two ancient links with the past. In 1905 Rent charge for Tithes amounting to £4. 0s. 6d. were still being paid to the Vicar of West Ham for land formerly agricultural. This was redeemed for £100. 12s. 6d. Three acres of land used by owners of the mills were held by copyhold and whenever a new tenant entered upon the property he was obliged (in theory) to appear before the Customary Court for admission to hold the land "at the will of the Lord according to the custom of the Manor by rent services and customs therefor due and give to the Lord for a Fine and (do) his fealty". Whereupon he was admitted. The Fine (not always stated) ranged from £30 in 1749 to £450 in 1872. The procedure had long become formalised as a



1855

RUINS OF DWELLING HOUSE AND WAREHOUSE

DAMAGED MANAGERS' HOUSE

matter between the solicitors on each side. In 1873 Nicholson bought his "enfranchisement" for £1550 and the property became freehold.

Many changes took place in the premises and machinery. These are dealt with in Part II.

Space is lacking in which to deal more fully with various aspects of the life of the Mills, and in particular with the great effect on it of the River Lee, with regard to fishing and navigation rights, flooding and the control of drainage.

It is perhaps fitting to end this section with a statement, as much of a "period piece" in its way as that by the author of the *New Booke of Distyllacyon*, taken from the *Sydney Daily Telegraph* of January 11th 1893:

"J. & W. Nicholson's unsweetened gin was considered THE Brand. Gentlemen of refined and educated palates would take no other, and no butler would dare to introduce any other brand at the Clubs, i.e. at the Swell Clubs in either England, Scotland or Ireland."

CHANGE AT THE MILLS

E. M. GARDNER

W. M. M. SHEPPERD

The illustrations following page 8 show the Mills as they were in 1800, in 1872, in 1938, and in 1955.

1800

The drawing of 1800 (Plate 1) shows the Mills as they were at the date of Philip Metcalfe's lease in 1778, viz.:

"All those Corn Mills called the New Mills and all those Corn Mills called the Old Mills lately rebuilt and all that Windmill on the Wall near to the said Corn Mills, and all that Messuage in the tenure of Sarah Bisson and also the Messuage in the occupation of Christopher Metcalfe Esq and also all those two Distill Houses with Malt House Stable Cooperage and Carpenter's Shop belonging and all those four wooden Messuages on the Wall called Stratford Wall and the Kiln Granary Coach House and Stable adjoining to the North end of the same and a stable adjoining the West end of the New Mills . . . also a Granary called Collet's Granary . . . and a Bacon House with Buildings adjoining . . ."

The lease provided that Sarah Bisson should continue to live in the house paying £30 a year for rent. Her husband had lived there before her and the other house, occupied by Christopher Metcalfe, had been in the tenancy of her son. A Deed of Partnership dated 1763 provided that he was to live on the premises. His father undertook to build "at his own proper costs and charges" within 18 months:

"a Fit Commodious and Convenient House where his own House now stands at the Three Mills which the said Daniel Bisson the Elder lately lived in for the Residence of the said Daniel Bisson the Younger and his Family, in order that the said Daniel Bisson the Younger may the better and more diligently attend and apply himself to the Management of the said Partnership's Business and Affairs, at a rent of £20 for which House when built and also a rent of £30 from this day for the Premises where Daniel Bisson the Elder now resides."

From this it is clear that both the dwelling houses were built before 1766, the date of Daniel Bisson Senior's death.

Metcalfe's lease contains a brief schedule:

In the Old Mill (i.e. the House Mill) eight pairs of French stones with spindles rings hoops hoppers and wires to each; four corn machines, one flour machine and four boulting mills.

In the New Mill two pairs of French stones and four pairs of old French stones with fittings as above and two boulding machines for dressing malt.

In 1734 there were six water wheels increased to seven when the House Mills was built. Seven wheels are still in position to-day. *The Windmill*. The first mention of the windmill is in 1734, but it is not then spoken of as "newly erected", a phrase in common use for new buildings. This windmill was apparently too near the water's edge and impeded the Navigation for in 1771 an entry in the Minute Book of the Lee Conservancy Board records that :

"John Lefevre Esq shall be allowed the following sums for removing and rebuilding his Windmill near the Cut at Bromley to a Place which shall be fixed on by him and Mr. Yeoman the Surveyor to the Trust : i.e. the sum of £27 for removing it as agreed by Mr. Lewis of Bow, Millwright and a sum of £28 for brickwork as agreed by Mr. Holland Contractor with this Trust and the expense of additional bond timber and raising the ground up to the said Windmill".

In Metcalfe's lease it is said to contain "one pair of French stones five feet high (*sic*) with spindles etc"

In 1820 the watermills were rated at £150 each and the windmill at £20. Dr. Pagenstecher in his *History of East and West Ham* (1908) says that the windmill was struck by lightning and wrecked in 1830 and gives a picture of it on the Stratford Marshes. It is however mentioned as existing in the Abbey Lands Rate Book for 1837.

1872

A full report was made on the Mills in 1872 and photographs taken (Plates 2). The description of the two mills and the dwelling houses is given in full in the Appendix with a summary of the other buildings and notes on later developments. The House Mill is unchanged but the Clock Mill has been rebuilt. This was done by Philip Metcalfe in 1817. Both the dwelling houses have been rebuilt and are architecturally inferior to their predecessors. The date of these and other alterations is unknown but possibly occurred after a fire in 1847 of which no details have yet been found. A large new granary (on the right of Plate 2b) with two circular kilns was built about 1857 and two more square brick kilns added near the Clock Tower. The latter has acquired a brick base and a new lantern. The main dwelling house still has a large garden and two greenhouses. The curious wooden structure is described in the report. There is stabling for 16 horses and piggeries, the latter recalling the day in 1773 when the owner of the Three Mills was ordered to appear before the Court of the Commissioners of Sewers :

"to show cause why a penalty of £50 should not be imposed upon them for allowing the soil of their hogs to run into the Mill Mead common sewer."

Particulars of the wheels and stones differ considerably from those recorded by Rex Wailes in 1938 (see Booklet 2 ; Tide Mills Part 1) changes having been made as repairs became necessary.

1938

An aerial photograph of the Mills taken in 1938 (Plate 3) shows buildings not dissimilar from those of 1872. The Spirit Receiver building disappeared in a disastrous fire in June 1908 and the granary was destroyed in another in 1920. All the wooden buildings have gone and the dwelling on the left of the House Mill was rebuilt in 1896. There is a very large Bonded Warehouse on the spit of land shown in the drawing of 1800. Cowles have been placed above the two square kilns and Collett's Granary has been replaced by a brick warehouse. The Three Mills Back River has been filled in ; the Three Mills Wall River has been widened and improved and a new channel known as Prescotts Channel takes off from this and sweeps round to the east side of the Distillery making it an island site.

1957

During the war the Three Mills suffered badly. The Bonded Warehouse was struck by a bomb and flaming spirits turned the Lee into a river of fire. The dwelling house on the left was destroyed and that on the right so badly damaged as to be unsafe (Plate 4). It has now been pulled down. Although the House Mill looks unchanged it was so much weakened by blast as to be unusable and its days are numbered ; a sad pity, as it is a fine example of a late 18th century mill, of good proportions and brickwork. Near the top loading door is a panel bearing the date 1776 and the arms of the Bissons. Below is a collection of insurance plaques ; the oldest dated 1777 being that of the Sun Insurance Company with which Bisson insured his new built mill "brick timber and tiled" for £4000 with an annual premium of £10. It is interesting to record a case where "history repeats itself." During the late war distilling ceased for the same reason that it stopped during the Napoleonic wars, i.e. to save grain. It was not prohibited as then, but supplies were so scarce that it was not worth while to continue.

In recent years the character of the business carried on at the Three Mills has altered. The buildings have been converted into a Bonded Warehouse where the bottling and storage of wines and spirits are carried on. No malt has been distilled since 1941. The wheels in the House Mill ceased to turn in 1941 and in the Clock Mill in 1951 or 1952. Apart from the water wheels there is little to suggest that here were once large important and flourishing flour mills. When the House Mill is pulled down almost the last link will be broken. But for the most part the buildings still stand on their old sites and still perform a useful function, unlike four of the other five great tidal watermills in the district that have gone beyond recall.

A Survey of the Three Mills Distillery in the Parish of West Ham

Re W. T. H. Strange Mure

Report by Messrs Fuller Hersey Sons & Co, Surveyors and Auctioneers

January 29th 1872

Freehold property comprising grain distillery and granary, two water tidal grain mills driving 18 pairs of stones; landing wharf on River Lee, malt stores, four drying kilns, back room with spirits stores and various accessory buildings. Principal dwelling house, manager's dwelling house, five dwelling houses for employees of the Firm. Several plots of arable and pasture land and a dwelling house next the Stratford road. The whole being 27 acres, 2 roods, 9 perch... *The Granary* . . . on the bank of the river . . . an enclosed locum has access to each floor; five sets of hoisting tackle . . . worked by steam power.

Brickbuilt Malt Store . . . with two pair of French burr millstones. *The substantial brick built tidal water grain mill* on the mill stream with slated roof strongly timbered supported on iron columns with loophole doors; two hoists next road and stream. The mill is fitted with 10 pairs of French burr stones; 6 pair being driven by three undershof water wheels, two iron: one 20 feet diameter, 3 feet 9 inches breast and one 20 feet diameter 2 feet 6 inches breast; one wooden wheel 16 feet diameter and 4 feet breast. The other pair are driven by steam power. Adjoining the mill and communicating therewith are two square brick built drying kilns 24 feet square. [The Clock Mill.]

A brick built tidal grain mill of 5 storeys, strongly timbered with loophole doors and a locum next the water side with hoist. The mill is fitted with 8 pair of French stones driven by four undershot wheels: one 16 feet diameter 3 feet breast and three 18 feet diameter 12 feet breast. There are smutting and dressing machines and malt crushing rollers in each mill. [The House Mill.]

The Distillery . . grain floor on upper storey and offices for clerks and principals on the first floor.

Steam Engine House . . with 2 low pressure condensing side lever steam engines by Ravenhill & Co of nominal power of 26 to 36 horses (*sic*) (These were replaced by two beam engines: one by Hall's of Dartford, a Woolf compound 100 H.P. taken from the Royal Mint, dated 1883; the other built by Joseph Foster of Preston 1901 at a cost of £2400—100 H.P. A third—a Marine Vertical engine by Hunter & English, compound 80 H.P. was removed from the Four Mills, Distillery and installed in 1892. This Distillery,

formerly Currie's, had Thomas Bray's for an ancestor. *supra* p. 7.) *Mash Tun Room* with 3 cast iron mash tuns (a fourth from the Four Mills was installed in 1892).

A Yeast Room; New Back Room, No 2 Duty Free Warehouse . . with 2 circular iron bound oak spirit receivers with capacity of 4321 gallons each.

Steam and manual fire engine houses. No 1 Duty Free Warehouse. No 2 Boiler House . . with 2 wrought iron double flue low pressure steam boilers. (now gone)

Excise Officer's room; millwrights' and carpenters' shop, in the grainyard 8 brick built spirit wash backs.

Stables for 16 horses (later there were 30 horses; the stable has now been pulled down), hay loft above, with turbine for chaff cutter and oat bruising machines.

Gas works . . retorts and purifying houses and brick chimney shaft and smith's shop adjoining. (Abolished when the Gas Company was formed.)

Other buildings in the stack yard are 3 ranges of piggeries, cart lodge, timber built stable, two coach houses, slaughter house, fowl houses, etc.

A brick built clock tower with a four dial clock and vane.

A brick warehouse known as the Bridge Warehouse.

A principal dwelling house, brick built of two storeys with two attics in the roof; 4 bedrooms and W.C. on first floor; dining room, drawing room, breakfast room, butler's pantry, entrance hall, passage and W.C. on ground floor and cellars in basement.

A two storeyed timber built building adjoining and communicating therewith containing on the upper floor 4 bedrooms, and bath and W.C.; on the ground floor kitchen scullery pantry and larder. Brick paved yard in rear with out offices. Large garden with two greenhouses.

Manager's dwelling house next the mill, brick built three storeys high containing on upper floor four bedrooms and bath; on first floor four bedrooms and store room; on ground floor two drawing rooms, dining room and housekeeper's room; kitchen and offices in the rear. (This is the house that has just been pulled down.)

A brick built dwelling house adjoining, two storeys high with 6 rooms (now the offices)

Four semi-detached timber built dwelling houses 3 storeys high each with 7 rooms, W.C.s offices and garden ground.

There is a *well* on the premises 7 feet diameter and 70 feet deep terminating in an artesian borehole from which a deep well pump drives a supply of pure water for distilling purposes. (During the years 1901-1904 the well was enlarged to 10 feet diameter and 240 feet deep. There was another well in the paddock to pump sub-soil

water used for cooling. Here in 1901 occurred the tragic death of Godfrey Nicholson, seventh son of William. In trying to rescue two workmen who had been overcome with marsh gas he lost his own life. A monument marks the spot—shown on Plate 3.

The tuns, gearing engines stalls and backs were all taken away in 1953. All gearing has been taken from the Clock Mill except the water wheels; only two of the six kilns remain and the cowl of one of those was destroyed by fire. The four water wheels are still in position in the House Mill together with the grinding stones.)

My thanks are due to the Chief Librarian and Borough Engineer of West Ham, to the Chief Librarians of Poplar and Stepney Central Libraries, to the Sun Insurance Company, to the Editor of the *Stratford Advertiser* and to many others. More especially to the County Archivist of Essex for the loan of transcripts and other assistance and to Messrs. J. & W. Nicholson & Co. Ltd. for permission to examine their records, and to reproduce the illustrations of the Mills in 1800, 1872, and 1938.

REFERENCES

Lack of space precludes references to the sources of all the material used in this monograph. They are limited therefore to the chief events in the History of the Mills and to information not found in public records. The writer will be pleased to supply other references if desired on receipt of a stamped addressed envelope.

- ¹ Harley Charter 53 E 15.
- ² Patent Roll 30 Henry VIII Pt 2 15 Feb. 1538/9.
- ³ Close Roll 2961 No 29.
- ⁴ *Ibid* 15 Chas. II Pt 29 No 4.
- ⁵ Prerog. Court of Canterbury, Penn. fol 15.
- ⁶ Letter from Sir Benjamin Bathurst, 18 July 1700, kindly quoted by Lord Bathurst's Secretary at his request.
- ⁷ Quoted in A. L. Simons' *History of the Wine Trade in England*, London 1909.
- ⁸ House of Lords Record Office No 1358.
- ⁹ Close Roll 31 George III Pt 12 No 1.
- ¹⁰ W. Cunningham *Growth of English Industry and Commerce*. C.U.P. 1903 3rd Ed. Pt II p 705.
- ¹¹ Particulars 11 to 13 were obtained from documents held by Messrs. J. & W. Nicholson & Co. Ltd.
- ¹² Records held by Glyn Mills & Co.

Booklets already published in this series :

1. *Water Mills—An Introduction*, by Paul N. Wilson, M.A., M.I.C.E., M.I.Mech.I.
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3. *Tide Mills, Part II*. } by Rex Wailes, F.S.A., M.I.Mech.E.

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