

ART. XV. – *Mill Management at Wigton*. By J. HUGHES, F.S.A.

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DOCUMENTARY evidence concerning the management of Cumbrian watermills is scarce and at best is limited to the recording of ownership or lord and tenant disputes. Seldom do we learn of the day to day running of a mill or of the engineering skills of local millwrights. This is not a little surprising for a county rich in mills powered from an abundance of fast-flowing streams. Mills, of course, were commonplace, perhaps so much so that they and their builders were taken for granted. However, a remarkable exception to this state of affairs is to be found among Lord Egremont's records at Cockermouth Castle.¹ The relevant documents cover a period ranging from the 16th to the 19th centuries and provide a valuable insight into the operational problems and economic difficulties of running a pair of Wigton corn mills.

The earliest reference to these mills is to be found in the Percy Survey² of 1578 when it was recorded:

Robert Sands holdeth a mill there called the Stone Mill of old rent £6 and renteth now by the year at the feasts before written [St. Michael the Archangel and the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary equally]. Mabel Briscoe holdeth another mill there called the "little mill" (in lease at this survey and therefore not improved) rent by the year 20s. od.

Throughout its history Little Mill appears to have retained its name. Although now demolished it stood on the site of the present Public Baths east of the town, drawing its power by a leat from Speet Gill. It is known that in former times a windmill stood nearby,³ the same miller probably operating both mills. The Stone Mill, also now demolished, was located some five hundred metres downstream with access from Market Hill. It was known variously as Lords Mill, Low Mill or Wigton Great Mill. (Fig. 1). The term "Stone" in the Percy Survey may well indicate an original distinction between the two mills, one being of stone and the other of timber. According to manorial custom the tenant of Great Mill was compelled to keep a stallion, while the occupier of Little Mill maintained a boar for the benefit of the community in general.⁴

In the early part of the 17th century both mills were held by Robert Briscoe. His lease was determined at Michaelmas 1627 and on the 13 October Michael Studholme, the millwright, together with four appraisers prepared a dilapidation report on the premises. The mills presented a sorry state. The roof of the Stone Mill required re-thatching, the troughs together with eight pairs of "struddletrees" (presumably supporting timbers) were in decay, the mill-stones were not an inch thick and both the in-wheel and the out-wheel were in need of renewal. Repairs would require an expenditure of £14. Briscoe's milling activities must clearly have been limited, for the report on Little Mill showed it to be even more ruinous:

The milne Called the litle mill hardlie goeaboute Soe that she must be builded Clear a newe and for the Stones the one of them is in three pieces and the other is not an inch thick for we thinke the deceies (decays) ther to be the value of xx^{li}.

Unfortunately the terms of Briscoe's lease are not known. Either he, his landlord, or both of them were called upon to dig deep into their pockets to set the mill up in decent order. Presumably the necessary work was satisfactorily carried out for we learn of no further major expenditure for another hundred and fifty years. During this time Little Mill was successively worked by Richard Studholme, Thomas Walker and Thomas Bewley, amongst others. Rents at the beginning of the 18th century were £16 a year but by 1755 they had increased to £20.

One hundred and fifty years of milling finally took their toll and in 1775 dilapidations were again such as to necessitate rebuilding both mills. It was made known that

“Lord Egremont's Mills are intended to be rebuilt in the Spring and the following Articles will be wanted viz:

Two water wheels overshot	Two upright shafts
Four pairs of stones	Two sack Tackles
One Barley Mill	One machine

Two Dressing Mills

Please to consider and propose at what rate or rates you will perform the Iron Work per pound necessary to be made use of at these Mills.”

John Wilson agreed to do the work at the following rates, Hoops, Gudgings and Cramps at 3½d. per lb. and all other articles at 5d. per lb. delivered and fixed.

Work proceeded apace under the supervision of Miles Ashburner, the millwright. By September 1775 handbills had been circulated in the district to advertise that the mills would be let by auction “at the house of Robert Johnson, the King's Arms, Wigton, at Four o'clock in the Afternoon”. A detailed description of both mills was given. Low Mill was fitted with a pair of grey stones, one for shelling oats, the other for grinding barley and oats. It also had a horizontal mill for shelling barley, a dressing machine and a commodious drying kiln. Little Mill accommodated a pair of French Burrs, a pair of blue stones and a pair of grey stones. Both mills had granaries above and were fitted with suitable sack hoists. Altogether a sum of £671. 10s. od. was expended. Prospective tenants were called upon to give satisfactory security for their performance of covenants and the payment of rent. They were also required to keep the mills in good repair during the term of lease. Henry Wood, the successful lessee, offered a rent of £40 per annum, a return of approximately 6 per cent on expenditure.

Twenty-five years later the mills were let to separate tenants, Joseph Hind being the miller at Low Mill whilst Thomas Turner was at Little Mill. In 1782 Hind's business failed and he was “sold up” for arrears of rent.⁵ The estate resumed the mill and for at least two years ventured directly into business by installing a miller as a paid servant. Detailed financial accounts were kept for each year and from them we learn much about the day to day running of an 18th-century mill.

The miller was paid a weekly wage of 9s. od. whilst his assistant, the mill boy, received a shilling. Occasional labour such as “4 men casting Dam” cost 6s. 4d., a shilling of which was expended on ale. On another occasion John Graham and Hugh Batty were paid 1s. 6d. a day for three days' work carting rubbish to bank up the dam head. From time to

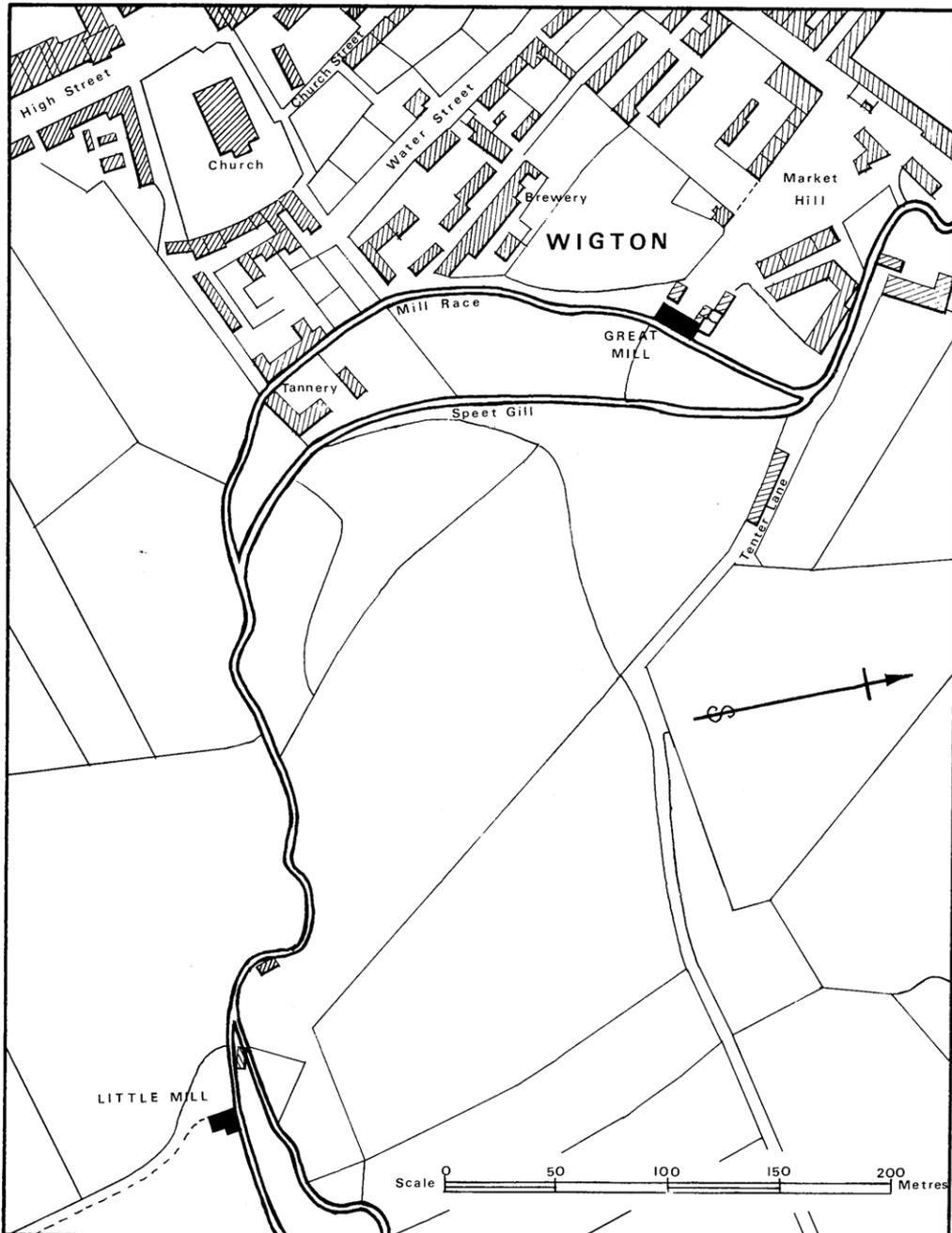


FIG. 1. - Wigton in the late 18th century. Based upon a contemporary map.

time the services of John Hewson, the millwright, were required. Once, "the water wheel gudgeon being broak", he charged for four days at a rate of 2s. 8d. per day. A few weeks later he received 15s. od. for "cogging the fly wheel". It would appear that the miller dressed his own stones, but the sharpening of the mill pick was a matter for John Little, the blacksmith, whose usual charge was 3s. 8d. Another entry records that 15s. od. was paid to William Barker for stones and that Benjamin Trimbel received 4s. od. for carting them to the mill. Unfortunately there is no indication either of their precise character or their number.⁶

Entries for candles and mill grease frequently occur. The former were bought at 6d. per lb. and the latter cost 4d. per lb. In two years a total of 17½ lbs. of grease was purchased. The accounts reveal that the cost of drying oats amounted to about 5½d. per week. The miller used both peat and cinders to fire the kiln. Typical entries read:

To 2 [cart] load of Cinders for drying Oats	2s. 4d.
To a cart load of Peats for drying oats with	1s. 8d.
To coals for cinders for - do -	2s. 6d.
To firewood and leading for drying oats with	7s. 6d.

From the quantities purchased it would seem that fuel was used at a cinder/peat ratio of 2:1. Sundry annual taxes were levied on the mill such as:

To Land Tax	6s. od.	To Highway Sess	14s. od.
To Poor Sess	18s. 9d.	To County Stock	2s. 8d.

Total expenditure from the beginning of January 1782 to the end of December 1783 amounted to £54. 2s. 8d. Set against this was income largely derived from "multer"⁷ which amounted to £54. 17s. 10½d. The harsh facts of mill economics were sharply brought home to the owner, who had fared little better after two years than the unfortunate Joseph Hind. Included in income was £2. 9s. 6d. for a short-term letting of Little Mill and a sum of £8. 3s. 8d. received for the sale of Hind's goods. Even so, with only a mere 15s. 2½d. to show as profit, it is hardly surprising that Hind had failed to pay his rent.

Clearly times were bad for the milling trade. By 1783 Little Mill had closed down completely and a change of use was mooted. R. Clark of Sebergham, writing to Joseph Barwick, the local agent for the estate, declared, "As the little mill at Wigton is now unemployed Mr. Benson⁸ would perhaps have no objections to let her for the use of Bleaching". No doubt with the intention of fostering his own ends he gloomily added, "I should suppose by this time you may all be satisfied she will never answer any good purpose for grinding corn". Before and for some considerable time after the advent of the steam engine, water wheels were a major source of power for a variety of industries. It was therefore not unusual for corn mills to be adapted for other uses as occasion demanded.⁹ It is not known if Clark's proposal was immediately put into effect but a note dated 28 June 1810 records an agreement between the Earl of Egremont and Joseph Irving of Wigton, calico printer (on behalf of himself and co-partners carrying on business under the name of Ferguson, Irving & Co.), to lease Little Mill at a rent of £26 per annum. About this period and for some time previously Wigton was a thriving textile town and no doubt manufacturing accommodation was then at a premium.

However, ten years later corn milling appears to have been prospering, sufficiently so for William Stanwix not only to offer £20 rent for Little Mill, but in addition to propose

spending £200 on improvements. Stanwix at the time was also milling at Great Mill and clearly wished to expand his business. Nor was he the only miller with eyes on Little Mill. Alice Huthart of Bolton Mill went one better by offering £25 rent and in addition agreed "to convert, renew and put same into perfect condition as a corn mill". All this, however, was premature, for the mill despite the attractive offers, continued for a time to serve the needs of textiles. A draft lease dated 1826 records:

... All that the said Earls Mill now or lately used as a Carding Mill commonly known by the name of Little Mill late in the occupation of Richard Dugdale . . . [is] to be converted by the said Wm. Blair Pattinson [the proposed lessee] into a Dyehouse.

The annual rent was to be £21. The following year Pattinson gave notice to quit the mill and in 1829, after possibly forty years in textiles, it reverted to its original use as a corn mill. William Baxter, a Wigton grocer, took it on a 31-year lease at £15 a year. It would appear that, for the moment, the textile boom was over. Little Mill remained a corn mill for the rest of the century.

Meanwhile the fortunes of Great Mill are not without interest. Between 1783 and 1791 it was let to a number of tenants, all of whom appeared to find difficulty in meeting the rent charges – generally they paid in arrears. They were however spared the cost of renewing the stones. This was a landlord's responsibility and in 1790 John Lewthwaite, millwright of Barrgill, ordered on behalf of Lord Egremont a new barley stone 3½ ft. in diameter and 7 ins. thick from Alexander Coultart & Co. at a cost of 10sh. In the same year William Parkin, a Wigton tanner, took Great Mill at a rent of £31. From the lease we learn that

... the said William Parkin being possessed of a Bark Mill lately erected on the said mill race [of Great Mill] . . . doth acknowledge that he hath no right to take or use water flowing or to flow along the said Mill race for the benefit of the said Bark Mill.

It was also stated that the corn mill was "lately re-built" and that in addition to the old drying kiln on Market Hill there was now a new one adjoining the mill.

In 1825 William Sanderson became the tenant but within twelve months the mill was in need of repair. Hugh Wilson, the author of the report, noted that

... the water wheel is nearly all to pieces and will not hold the water so he gets verrey little ground and ther wants new troughs as they are nearly decayed A Way.

Wilson added that in his opinion the troughs (leat) should be replaced in stone. The proposal appears to have thoroughly alarmed the Earl of Egremont's cost-conscious agent, Nathaniel Nicholson, who declared:

I consented to nothing being done at the Wigton Corn Mill but to the making a new wheel (which was absolutely necessary) and that was to be done in the cheapest but in a substantial way and as I understand was to be made of wood and cast metal as is now usually done. Nothing further is meant to be done at present and I do not know that the Landlord will have to do anything more.

The new wheel allowed Sanderson to continue milling until 1834 when he ceased business. There was, however, no lack of prospective tenants and each was carefully screened. A note in the estate papers reads:

Henry Frizell is a respectable young man at present a servant with a miller, but I understand his connections are highly respectable and that he can find amongst them good security for the Rent. Robert Taylor is a very respectable and I believe solvent man – his brother who has an extensive business as a miller will be Security for the Rent.

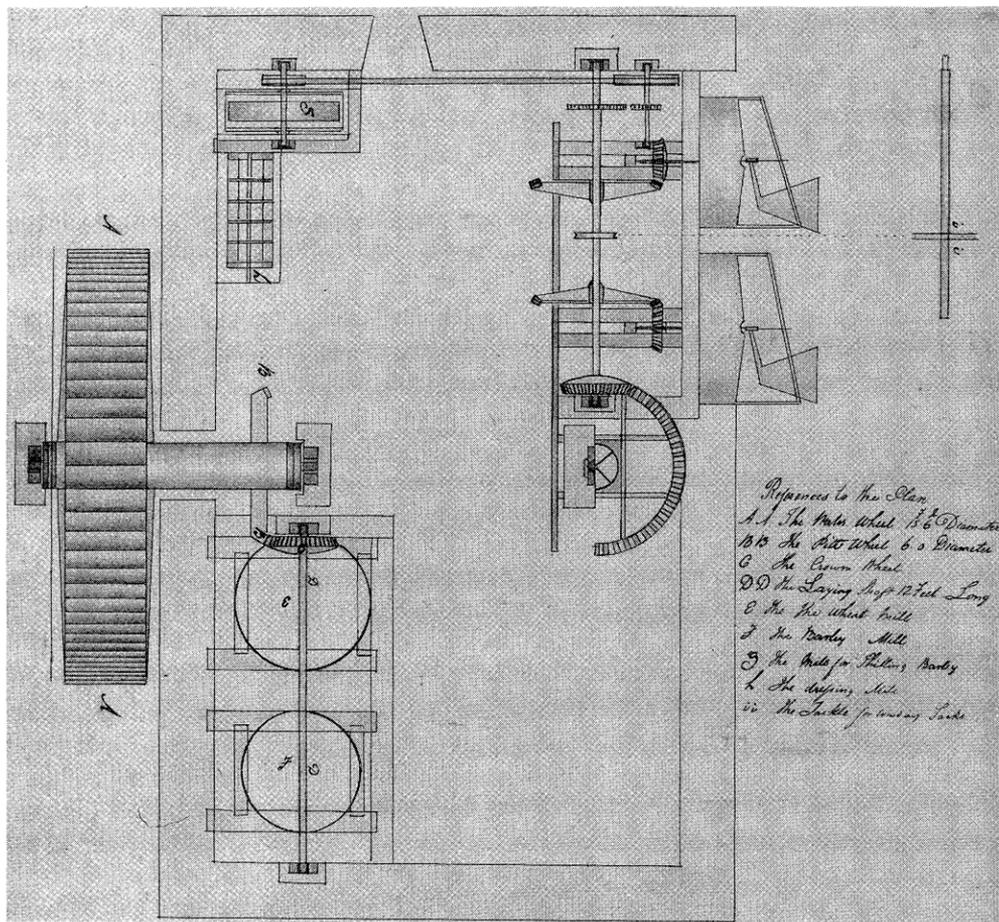


PLATE I. — Wigton Great Mill. — undated plan.

Neither was accepted, but clearly the precaution of obtaining security for rent was prompted by the memory of the unfortunate affair of Joseph Hind.

Management problems were not restricted to matters of repairs, rents and tenancies. In February 1834 the Rt. Hon. George O'Brien, Earl of Egremont, received through his steward a petition signed by 31 inhabitants of Wigton. In it they complained that the tenants of the Earl's mill (Joseph Robinson and Robert Johnson), "have lately inclosed a piece of land on Market Hill adjoining the Millers Dwelling House and erected thereon several Pigsties and Dunghills to the grievous and common nuisance of the Public . . .". The petitioners threatened legal action if effective steps were not taken to eradicate the nuisance. The building of pigsties is readily understandable. Most millers kept pigs as a profitable side line to their businesses, the animals being fed on sweepings and coarse stuff from the mill. Presumably the residents of Market Hill were suitably appeased, for we hear no more about the matter. Of the tenants, Robinson was probably the miller and Johnson his security though the lease was made in both their names. It would seem that there was little profit in the business as in 1836 Johnson, then of Denton Mill, Carlisle, wrote to the Earl's agent pointing out that Robinson had been compelled to expend

£54. 11s. 9d. on repairs to Great Mill adding, "Hope this will be taken into consideration re. Rent due". A year later Robinson quit the mill saying he was quite unable to pay £6. os. od. arrears of rent.

His successor was Wilson Todd who failed in less than two years and once again action was taken to recover the rent. Handbills were circulated to inform the public that all Todd's household goods and furniture would be sold at his dwelling house on the 8 May 1838. Included in the sale were "a good Work Horse, Cart and Cart Gear, a quantity of Manure, Nine Swine and a quantity of Mill Gear, and other Utensils". The Sale Book makes sad reading. Headed "sold for ready money", it records everything which came under the auctioneer's hammer. The following extracts are of interest:

Dripping pan	10d.	Bedstead	3s. 6d.
Tea pot	1s. 0d.	Quilt	1s. 8d.
Jug	7d.	Sheet	2s. 2d.
Kettle	1s. 9d.	Blanket	2s. 0d.
Lantern	8d.	Pillows	8d.
Dolly & Tub	2s. 10d.	Horse	£10. 5s. 0d.
Chair	7d.	Cart	£3. 8s. 0d.
	9 Pigs	£11. 19s. 0d.	

A statement of accounts reveals the following particulars:

	£	s.	d.
Dr. Rent due Lady Day 1838	120	0	0
Cost of Distress		6	0
	£126	0	6
Cr. By Cash	30	0	0
By-do- at Sale	22	16	5
Balance due Lady Day 1838	73	4	1
	£126	0	6

Hard times indeed for both tenant and landlord. Tenants were obviously not making a living and the landlord was hardly in a position to carry out much needed repairs. However, despite the difficulties the mill continued to operate.

By 1848 the water wheel again required new buckets and 88 feet of timber troughing was in need of repair at a total cost of £20. About this time William Miller eked out a living from the mill and at the same time somehow managed to pay his rent. Writing to his landlord in 1854 he, no doubt correctly, summed up with the comment:

As in old mills they are very expensive
 To keep in repair witch she as cost me
 A great deal this last 15 Ear Witch mills
 Ar so very thick the naberhood of Wigton
 One as a deal to dow to get lively hood
 So please to let hus know what
 Is to be done.

Miller was probably right about there being fierce competition from other mills. At one time, in addition to the two water mills, there were four windmills in Wigton.¹⁰ Still it would be wrong to assume that the story of milling at Wigton was simply a succession of

hard times. Certainly there were periods of trade depression but equally, being in the midst of good corn country, there were times of prosperity. However, the latter seldom elicits comment. Then, as now, bad times make news.

Acknowledgements

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Notes and References

- ¹ Record Office, Carlisle, D/Lec. box 323.
- ² Survey and valuation of the estates of Henry, Earl of Northumberland, Record Office, Carlisle, D/Lec. 301.
- ³ Stoneybank – see CW2, lxxii, 128.
- ⁴ T. W. Carrick, *History of Wigton* (Carlisle, 1949), 241.
- ⁵ His rent was £30 per annum.
- ⁶ Probably a pair of local stones for oats. A pair of French Burrs for a Carlisle Mill in 1793 cost £19. 5s. 6d. (Record Office, Carlisle – CA Vouchers).
- ⁷ Originally manorial toll taken in kind for grinding tenants' corn, but by the 18th century a sum of money.
- ⁸ Steward to Lord Egremont.
- ⁹ J. Somervell in *Water-Power Mills of South Westmorland* (Kendal, 1930) 61, records a Kendal mill used for corn milling, malting, textile manufacturing, leather dressing and the grinding of snuff.
- ¹⁰ CW2, lxxii, 128.