

The Mills of Guildford

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Beside the Wey at Guildford, near the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre (TQ 996 492), stands an imposing brick building (fig 5). This is the last of the Town Mills which have occupied the site for centuries, grinding corn, fulling cloth and supplying the town with water, and from the 17th century their history is well documented. However, they were by no means the only mills that have served the town.

The origin of the Guildford mills is obscure. The Domesday entry in 1086 makes no mention of any mill, but it is inconceivable that a large centre of population such as Guildford did not possess at least one: the town was substantial enough to warrant having its own mint from at least AD 978. Lloyd (1962, 398) notes that there are many similar omissions in the Surrey survey. About half the villages have no mill noted, including several (such as Chobham on the Bourne) where river conditions make it likely that mills did in fact exist. Mills are very tenacious of their sites, for there are usually few suitable ones on any stretch of river where the fall of water may be exploited effectively. It is just possible that one of the three mills noted in Shalford was close enough to Guildford to serve the town — the parish boundary runs only 250 yards south of the present Town Mills — but the three known mill sites in Shalford would have been inconveniently distant. Alternatively, the Artington mill mentioned below may have served the town. More probably there was at least one mill in Guildford from Saxon times and the Domesday survey simply ignored it, just as it made no reference to St Mary's church, whose tower is demonstrably pre-Conquest.

There was certainly a mill in Guildford by the early 13th century. It had two pairs of stones and stood on Westnye, a small river island by St Nicholas' church (this is called 'Benett's Island' in the *Ichnography* of 1739, and was joined to the west bank by filling in the channel by 1831). This mill belonged to the manor of Artington and it is conceivable that it was one of the three Godalming mills listed in Domesday, Artington being then part of Godalming (*Cal Chart Rolls* 1226–57, 366). On the death of Stephen de Turnham in 1214 his manor of Artington was divided between his four daughters: each received a quarter of the mill and the meadow adjoining (*Cal Inq Misc* 1219–1307, no 1163). This was the Mill Mead whose name is preserved as that of the road that runs along the west bank of the river.

By the mid 13th century there was a mill on the east bank also. This belonged to Richard Testard, a descendant of the Robert Testard to whom the Conqueror had given lands in Guildford. However, both his mill and the Artington mill were to suffer when Henry III built his own mills further downstream. In September 1251 he ordered three mills to be built in his park, one for hard corn, one for malt and one for fulling (*Cal Lib Rolls* 1245–51, 376). Fulling mills mechanised the process whereby woollen cloth was pummelled in vats of water to produce a nap on the surface: addition of 'fuller's earth' to the water would also de-grease the cloth in preparation for dyeing. This reference to a fulling mill in Guildford in 1251 is one of the earliest in England and is evidence of the flourishing wool trade in the locality at the time.

It is not certain where the king's mills stood. They are variously described as 'near the gate of the park called Mulgate' (*Cal Inq Misc* 1219–1307, no 1163), between Guildford and the king's

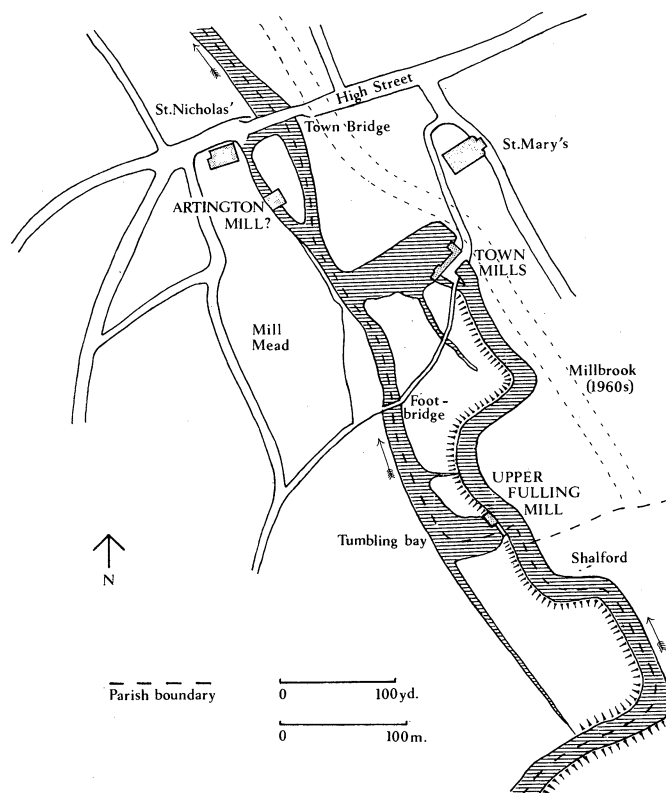


Fig 1. The Wey at Guildford with the sites of the mills. (Not all the features indicated existed at the same time.)

park (*Cal Chart Rolls* 1226–57, 456) and ‘on the north side of the bridge’ (*Cal Close Rolls* 1264–8, 433). Walter Balam, a Guildford clothier, was paid 100s for land to build the mills (*Cal Lib Rolls* 1245–51, 376), which suggests that they may have been just outside the park proper. If so they may have stood near the site of Bridge House (TQ 993 496). Alternatively they may have been further north, at the bridge and lodge that stood on the bend of the river about halfway down Walnut Tree Close (TQ 991 502).

The construction of the king’s mills, which would have required a weir to obtain a usable head of water, had the effect of penning back the river and raising the water-level further upstream. This not only stopped the wheels of the Artington mill and Testard’s mill, but resulted in the mills themselves being flooded and destroyed (*Cal Close Rolls* 1264–8, 433). In 1253 both the Abbess of Wherwell (*Cal Lib Rolls* 1251–60, 125), who held a quarter of Artington mill, and Geoffrey de Braboeuf (*Cal Eib Rolls* 1251–60, 145) who held another, were compensated for this damage, and Richard Testard’s claim for damages was assessed by Hervey de Mara and the Abbot of Pershore (*Cal Pat Rolls* 1247–58, 223). A payment of 20 marks was made to Testard in 1255 and another to Braboeuf, in partial recompense for their losses (*Cal Lib Rolls* 1251–60, 262). At some point before 1257 the king seems to have bought both Testard’s mill and Artington mill for 80 marks and demolished them (only Braboeuf is mentioned as owning Artington mill — possibly he acted on the other partners’ behalf) (*Cal Chart Rolls* 1226–57, 456; *Cal Close Rolls* 1264–8, 433). Then in January 1257 the king leased his own mills to Testard and Braboeuf — on the condition that they dismantled them and re-

erected them on the old sites south of the bridge. It is possible that the river current was more favourable on the old sites than on the new one downstream. Braboeuf and Testard pledged all their estates should they default on an annual rent of 20 marks, and the king for his part undertook not to set up any other mills in the town (*Cal Chart Rolls* 1226–57, 456). Over the next ten years, however, the mills, now back on the original sites, suffered further damage from flooding and eventually ceased to grind (there is no mention of fulling) on Palm Sunday 1267 (*Cal Inq Misc* 1219–1307, no 1163). The king was apparently responsible for repairing the mills, and Testard and Braboeuf accordingly refused to pay the rent. Thereupon the king attempted to distrain their estates under the terms of the lease but was dissuaded from doing so. In February 1268 he freed them from their lease and granted them the mills, with the proviso that they return to him any part of the original payment of 80 marks for the old mills they might actually have received. The building of the king's mills in the first place was acknowledged to be unjust, and the blame for the whole affair placed on the Abbot of Pershore, 'once guardian of our domains' (*Cal Close Rolls* 1264–8, 433). The *status quo ante* would thereby seem to have been restored, although in 1278 an enquiry was held which outlined the tangled story above (*Cal Inq Misc* 1219–1307, no 1163), as there had no doubt been some dispute over it. Perhaps further documentary research will throw more light on this complicated affair. It is not to be wondered at that Manning & Bray (1, 30) have slightly misinterpreted it: there is nothing to support their suggestion that the king had any mills in Guildford before 1251.

During the later 13th century the lands held by the Testard family were being acquired by the de la Poyles. By 1295 Walter de la Poyle held the mill as part of what was to be known as the manor of Poyle for the next six centuries. In that year he paid two shillings 'to have a watercourse at his mill' (*Pipe Roll* 1295, 27–9): it is unclear whether this was a 'one-off' payment or an annual one. This watercourse could well be an embanked leat or mill-stream to bring water at a higher level to the mill and so increase its power. It is interesting to note (fig 1) that the parish boundary between Shalford and St Mary's on the east, and St Nicholas' on the west runs along the embanked eastern arm of the river, rather than down the backwater that would be its natural course, then turns abruptly west down the weir — the Tumbling Bay — where once stood the Upper Fulling Mill. If the licence of 1295 was a unique one then it is possible that Testard's mill was on this site and that in 1295 Poyle continued the millstream to the present site of the Town Mills. Alternatively, Testard's mill may have been already on that site and the embanked stream merely improved its water supply. It is unwise to speculate too wildly upon a single enigmatic reference and a curious parish boundary, but it is interesting to note that Professor Crocker has observed the same phenomenon at Catteshall, where what is possibly a 13th century mill-stream, again on the east of the natural river course, acts as a tithing boundary (*pers comm*).

In 1439 Poyle's mill was described as 'two corn mills and two fulling mills under one roof' (VCH 3, 562) following the established practice of referring to each pair of stones as a separate mill. By 1394 the Artington mill also included a fulling mill: this was a period of great prosperity in the wool trade (GMR LM 1436). John atte Lee, the fuller, also had drying racks or tenter-frames nearby in Mill Mead for the fulled and dyed cloth. I have discovered no later reference to the Artington mill; a quarter of it had been given to the Abbey of Wherwell in Hampshire in the early 13th century, but it was not listed among the abbey's property on its surrender in 1539, although part of Mill Mead was (VCH 3, 4).

By this date, however, there was yet another fulling mill nearby. This was on the site of the Tumbling Bay and was known as the Upper Fulling Mill to distinguish it from those in the Poyle mills downstream. John Coke was fuller there in 1537 (Russell 1801, 306). It is shown on the Austen estate map of 1613 (GMR 111/2/3) but had disappeared by the mid 17th century, no doubt as a result of the decline of the wool trade in the town.

The Poyle estate, with its mills, passed through a number of hands until it was acquired in 1624 by Henry Smith, a noted Surrey philanthropist (Bray 1800, 28). Two years later he gave

the manor in trust, the income from it to be given to the paupers of Guildford. From this time onwards the Poyle mills are usually referred to as the Town Mills; but they were rapidly falling into disrepair. In 1647 they were leased to Abbot's Hospital as security for a loan of £400 towards rebuilding them (GMR 148/11). The new mills were completed by 1649 and consisted of 'four corn mills under one roof' powered by three wheels, with a separate fulling mill to the east with two wheels fed by a branch of the main mill-stream. In 1665 the corporation ordered that all local meal men must have their corn ground at the Town Mills, and all clothiers must have their cloth fulling there for the benefit of the poor (GMR BR/OC/1/2, 152-3). The degree to which the poor benefitted can be gauged from the annual rents which the mills brought in. The corn mills returned £71 yearly from 1697 to 1707, then £100 until 1711 when this was raised to £120 (GMR 22/3/1). The rents from the corn mills were regularly worth more than all the other properties belonging to the Poyle charity and in the later 18th century provided more than two-thirds the total income. The Wey Navigation, opened in 1653, was able to take Guildford flour to the London market, and the corn mills were clearly thriving (GMR LM 1276). However, the same was not true of the last of Guildford's fulling mills. No tenant could be found to take it at an economic rent in 1711, 'the Clothing Trade in Guldeford being very low' (GMR RB 987, 5). A small group of clothiers, headed by Angelo Burt who had been mayor in 1695, agreed that there was insufficient trade left in the town to support a fulling mill. In 1713 the abandoned and vandalized mill was converted to corn milling, with three pairs of stones. It is interesting to note that on other mill sites in the locality — for example Catteshall, Eashing and Stoke-next-Guildford — paper-making replaced fulling (Crocker & Crocker 1982). It cannot be ascertained why this was not so at Guildford: probably, however, the town's prominence as a corn market led the charity trustees to decide to expand the already very profitable corn milling facilities (GMR RB 987, 12).

An alternative use had been found already for part of the old fulling mill. This was a pumping station to provide a domestic water supply to the town installed by William Yarnold, a water engineer, in 1701 (GMR LM 355/11, 2). The pumps, powered by a wheel in the same channel as that of the fulling mill, forced water from the nearby St Mary's Well up hollowed elm-log pipes to a small reservoir at the foot of Pewley Hill, which supplied consumers in the town by gravity (Barrel 1951, 1).

It was in the early 18th century that the old practice of ducking or 'cucking' was discontinued. The post that acted as the pivot or fulcrum for the ducking-stool stood 'In a little garden on the border of the river, just in the deepest part where it enters the mill' (Russell 1801, 309). The last intended victim left town when she heard what was in store for her, 'she having long been a reputed scold'.

The lease of the corn mills to Roger Valler in 1707 gives a wealth of detail about the mills as they then were (GMR LM 355/11). Valler was a millwright and undertook to repair the foundations and the mill-race himself: it may have been for this purpose that a load of 'row' (wrought?) stone was quarried from Wormley Hill and delivered to the mills in 1710 (GMR LM 2000/23). There was a house attached to the mills with a hay loft and stable. A building for sifting or 'bolting' the flour had been built between the corn mills and the fulling mill, and fish were farmed in the mill-pool. The four pairs of stones are described in detail: two were 'Cullen' stones and the other two had Derbyshire 'Peak' stones running on bed-stones of French 'Burr', a blue granite from the Paris Basin. There were also specific picks or 'bills' to dress the three types of stone. Measures of a half-bushel, a peck, and a gallon were provided and it is probable that these were the ones found in the mills and now displayed in the Guildhall (GMR BR/CTM/WB, 2). A sketch of the mills in the mid 18th century by John Russell, the Guildford artist (fig 2; GM TG 442/1), shows a rambling row of timber buildings with at least three external undershot wheels. What is possibly Yarnold's water main can be seen protruding from the upper floor of the former fulling mill and this pipe is also prominent in Harrison's engraved prospect of the town in 1738.

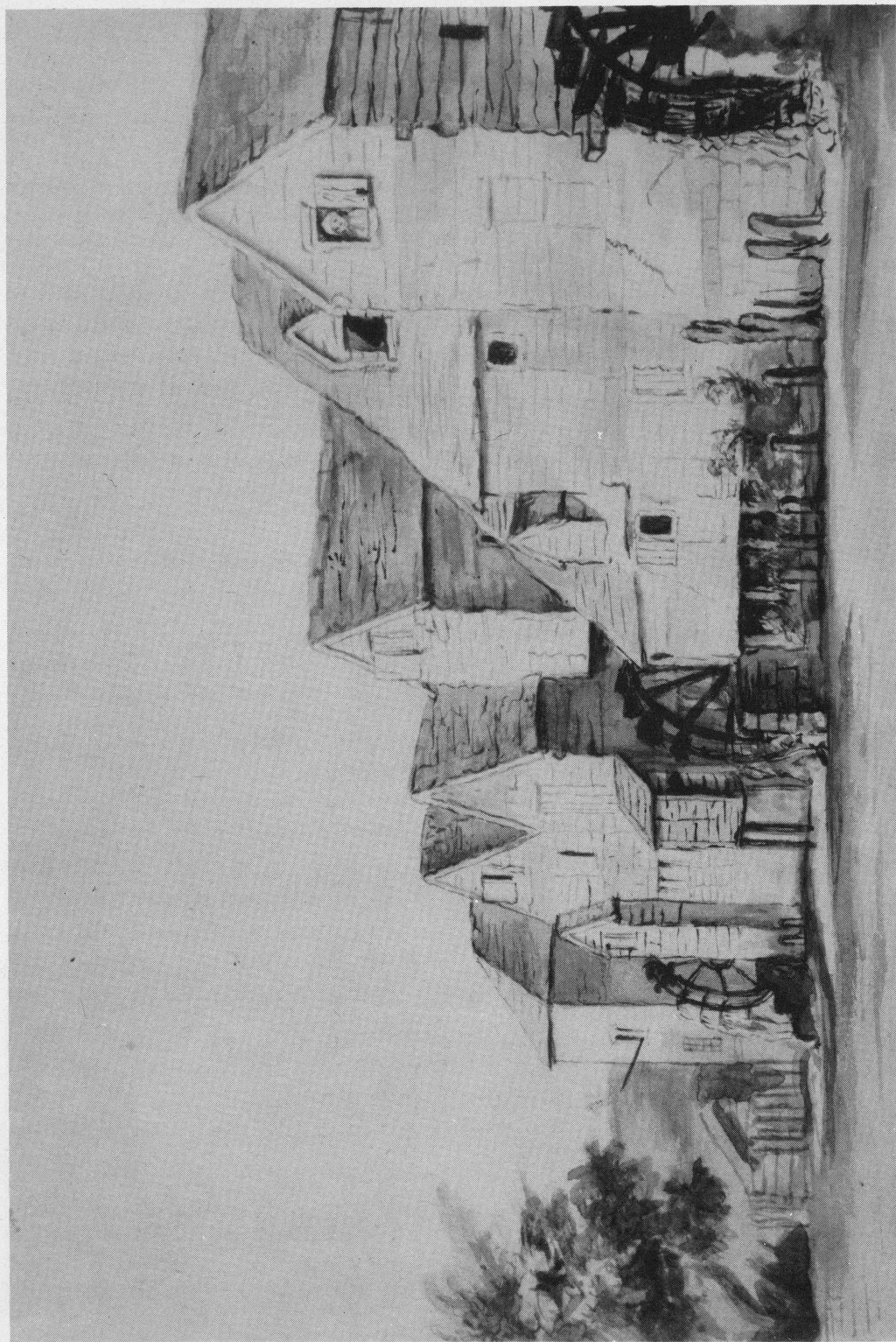


Fig 2. The Town Mills in the mid 18th century.

When the Wey Navigation was extended by the Godalming Navigation in 1760, the Act of Parliament it required allowed for compensation to be paid to the miller at Guildford for having to regulate the water level according to the needs of the new navigation (GBA&S 1759). Even when the corn mills were obliged to stop altogether, however, provision was made for the water-supply pumps to continue working.

By 1768 the Town Mills had become so dilapidated and flood-damaged that it was necessary to rebuild the greater part of them (GMR RB 987, 57–69). The charity trustees applied to the Court of Chancery to be allowed to borrow the necessary money, estimated at nearly £2000. This was permitted and a mortgage obtained on the Poyle estate. By March 1770 the eastern part of the mills had been handsomely rebuilt in brick by Messrs Upton & Mason of Guildford, with a large roof well-constructed of Baltic timber by William Balchin, carpenter. Four pairs of stones were installed, together with bolting machinery, by William Taylor, millwright of Stoke-next-Guildford (GMR RB 981). The opportunity was taken, it would seem, to replace the original undershot or 'current' wheels with the more efficient breastshot type. The Godalming Navigation had raised the water level on its completion in 1762 (GMR 142/1/4) thus providing an increased 'head'. The water works were housed in a single-storey building at the east end, with a wheel 3ft 2in (0.96m) wide and 14ft 2in (4.3m) in diameter. The western part of the mills was simply repaired and became known as the Old Mill or the Hogsmeat Mill, as it was used to grind animal feed with its two pairs of stones. A lithograph by Burton shows the mills in 1822 with the five-bay New Mill abutting the Old Mill with its external wheel (fig 3; GM TG 770).

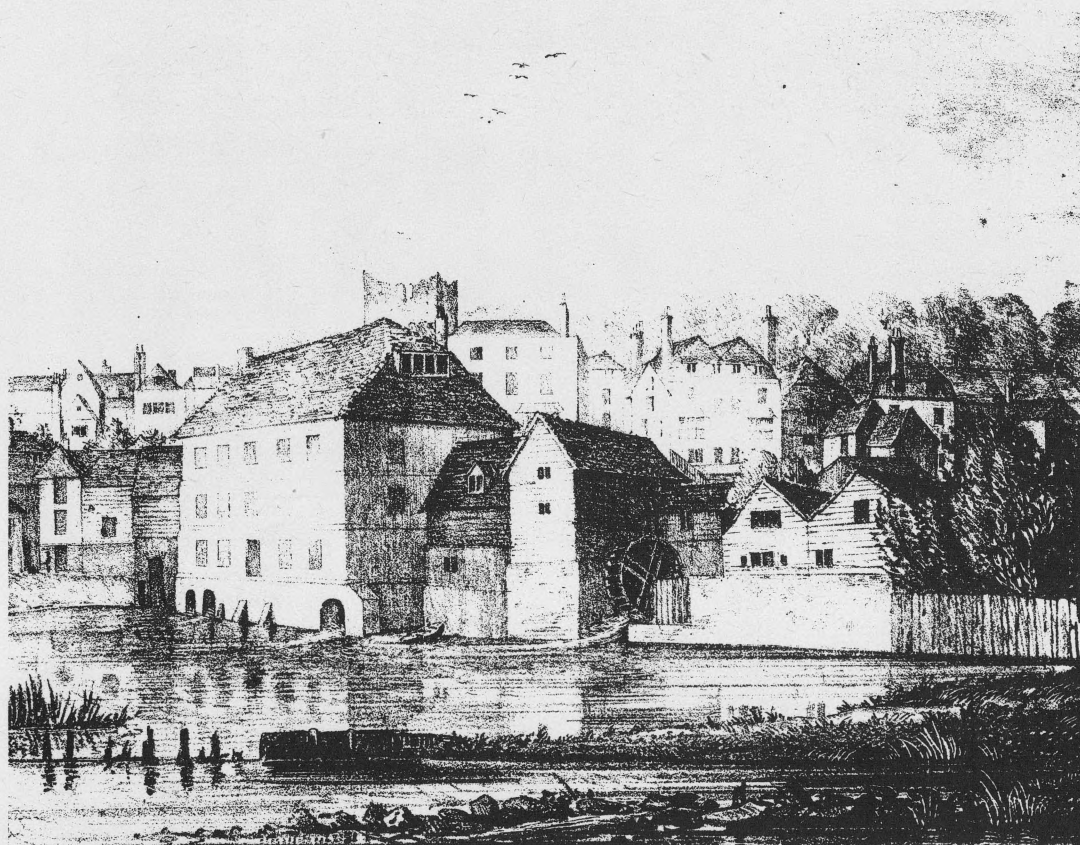


Fig 3. The Town Mills in 1822.



Fig 4. A barge at the Town Mills, c 1881 (note the steam rising above the waterworks engine-house in the background).

Rival mills, the navigations, and owners of land beside the river all had conflicting interests in respect of the height of the water. The backing-up or penning of the water when the mills were not turning could flood the meadows upstream and this was a cause of regular disputes. A particularly serious incident occurred in November 1772 when the tenants of the Town Mills raised the flood-gates without authority during a heavy flood, causing a breach in the bank which drained the Godalming Navigation and stopped the mills altogether (GMR 987, 74–7). Again, if the mills at Stoke further downstream penned the water the wheels at Guildford would become retarded or ‘tail-bound’ (GMR BR/USA/4/1).

The early 19th century saw several tragic deaths at the mills. A young man was crushed in the machinery in 1803 when his clothes, probably a smock, got caught in the gears (*Reading Mercury*, 28 February 1803). There were three reputed suicides in the mill in 1810–11 (Barrel 1951, 8) and Joseph Burt, miller, died while trying to clear ice from one of the wheels in the winter of 1813/14 (*Hampshire Telegraph*, 17 January 1814). Not surprisingly, the mill is said to be haunted.

In 1827 it was necessary to rebuild the north wall of the New Mill because of a failure in the foundations (GMR RB 987, 28.6.1827), and in about 1852 one of the tenant millers, Edward Chitty, demolished the Old Mill and rebuilt it as a two-bay extension to the New Mill. This followed the style of the 1770 building so closely it is hard to distinguish the join between the two parts: the whole building was reroofed at the same time.

The second quarter of the 19th century was a period of great prosperity for wheat millers. The urban population was growing rapidly and Guildford with its important corn market and

excellent river communication with London was in a position to supply the hungry mouths of the metropolis: barges called regularly at the Town Mills (fig 4). In 1858 a rival mill was built in Guildford on the site of the old Friary grounds in Commercial Road. This had a 16 horsepower beam-engine turning four pairs of French Burr stones, and was erected by Henry Chennell, a Guildford mealman and baker. It was not a success, however, and was sold in 1865 to be converted into the Friary Brewery (Sturley 1978, 1–2). However, the increase in imports of foreign wheat, followed by the introduction of steam-powered roller mills to grind it at the quayside, led to a decline in local milling during the second half of the century (Clark 1975, 2–3). In 1850 about a quarter of all wheat consumed in the country was imported; by 1870 it was a half, and by 1900 more than three-quarters. Roller-milled flour was considered finer than stone-ground and by the early 1890s the Poyle trustees had come to the conclusion that there was no future for the Town Mills.

Guildford Corporation had already acquired the water undertaking at the mills in 1866 (GMR BR/T/2538/1) and installed steam- and gas-engines as additional power for four sets of pumps. In 1894 they bought the rest of the mill from the Poyle charity for £6000, and the Town Mills ground for the last time (GMR RB 1196, 29.1.1894). The milling machinery was removed and new water-pumps installed, which required the demolition and reconstruction of the south wall of the 1852 extension (GMR BR/USA/1/1). This wall included a terracotta plaque with the date '1896', which has occasionally given rise to the impression that the whole building is of that date. The large external waterwheel of the 1852 mill was replaced by turbines in the autumn of 1897; the internal wheels were retained, however, until after the Second World War. There were many internal alterations and in 1904 the old hoist or 'lucum' was removed from the roof. The corporation transferred the waterworks to the Guildford, Godalming and District Water Board in 1952 (GMR BR/CTM/WB/6) and the last waterwheel was removed. In the early 1960s the construction of a new road, Millbrook, required the demolition of the low building which had housed the early water-pumps, but the traces of its



Fig 5. The Town Mills today.

walls and roofline can still be seen on the east wall of the present building. In 1966 the Water Board leased the mill to the newly-opened Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, having constructed new facilities just to the south. Ownership of the mill returned to Guildford Borough Council in 1971, when it was purchased from the West Surrey Water Board for £2500. It is currently in use as scenery workshops, but plans are in hand for converting it into a small 'studio' theatre. Whatever its future, the mill remains as one of the town's most impressive industrial monuments (fig 5).

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