

Merton Mills and Wandlebank House

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The former Merton flour mills, designed by John Rennie and erected at a cost of some £20,000 in 1798 for James Perry, proprietor of the Morning Chronicle, were regarded as one of the most complete of their kind. Milling ceased around 1910, and from 1919 until 1991 the building was owned and occupied by Connolly Leather Ltd, manufacturers of high quality upholstery leathers. Wandlebank House, the villa Perry built for himself in 1805, survived until demolished by Wimbledon Corporation in 1962. This article examines the long history of an important industrial site, which hitherto has been largely unrecognised, and of the houses associated with it.

Introduction

The building which at one time housed the Merton flour mills can be found today, converted into a block of housing association flats, to the north of the A24 between Merton bus garage and Colliers Wood underground station. A map of the district in the early 20th century is shown in figure 1. The mill head, dug by an unidentified industrialist probably in the late 17th century, now carries the main stream of the Wandle below Merton Bridge and defines the western boundary of Wandle Park. Few people today can remember the large triangular mill pond, which was located behind the Royal Six Bells and occupied nearly one-fifth of the park. It had been excavated in the 18th century in what was then meadowland to provide a reserve of water to power the mills about 200m downstream. The pond had become redundant by 1910 but it remained a picturesque feature, and was presented to the National Trust by local benefactors shortly after the adjoining grounds of Wandlebank House had been acquired by Wimbledon Corporation as a public park.¹ Unfortunately by 1951 the pond had come to be regarded as a nuisance by the local authorities, and was filled in and the site returned to grass.

The mill building itself, at first glance little altered externally since its erection at the close of the 18th century, occupies the site of an earlier mill built soon after the Restoration. Sadly, despite its considerable historic interest, the present building was considered by English Heritage in 1994 to have suffered too much structural alteration to merit statutory listing, and it became an integral part of Kendall Court, a Wandle Housing Association redevelopment scheme funded by the Housing Corporation. This account is the outcome of the author's research carried out initially to provide information to accompany the application for listing submitted by the London Borough of Merton.

Since 1991 the park has been within the Merton (Wandle Valley) Conservation Area and is maintained by the Leisure Services Department of the London Borough of Merton, but until the reorganization of London government in 1965 it was in the care of Wimbledon Corporation. A century earlier and, indeed, until the expansion of suburbia in the late 19th century led to the creation of daughter parishes, the ten acres had been divided between the ancient ecclesiastical parishes of Wimbledon and Mitcham. Across what had been known as Miller's Mead their common boundary followed a serpentine course defined by a former channel of the river Wandle, part of which now survives as a small stream, meandering through the centre of the park. The Wandle probably also served as a Saxon land boundary, as it had upstream from Merton bridge, where, in a 10th century charter, it was referred to as the *Michamingemerke* and marked the limits of the land occupied by the people of Mitcham.²

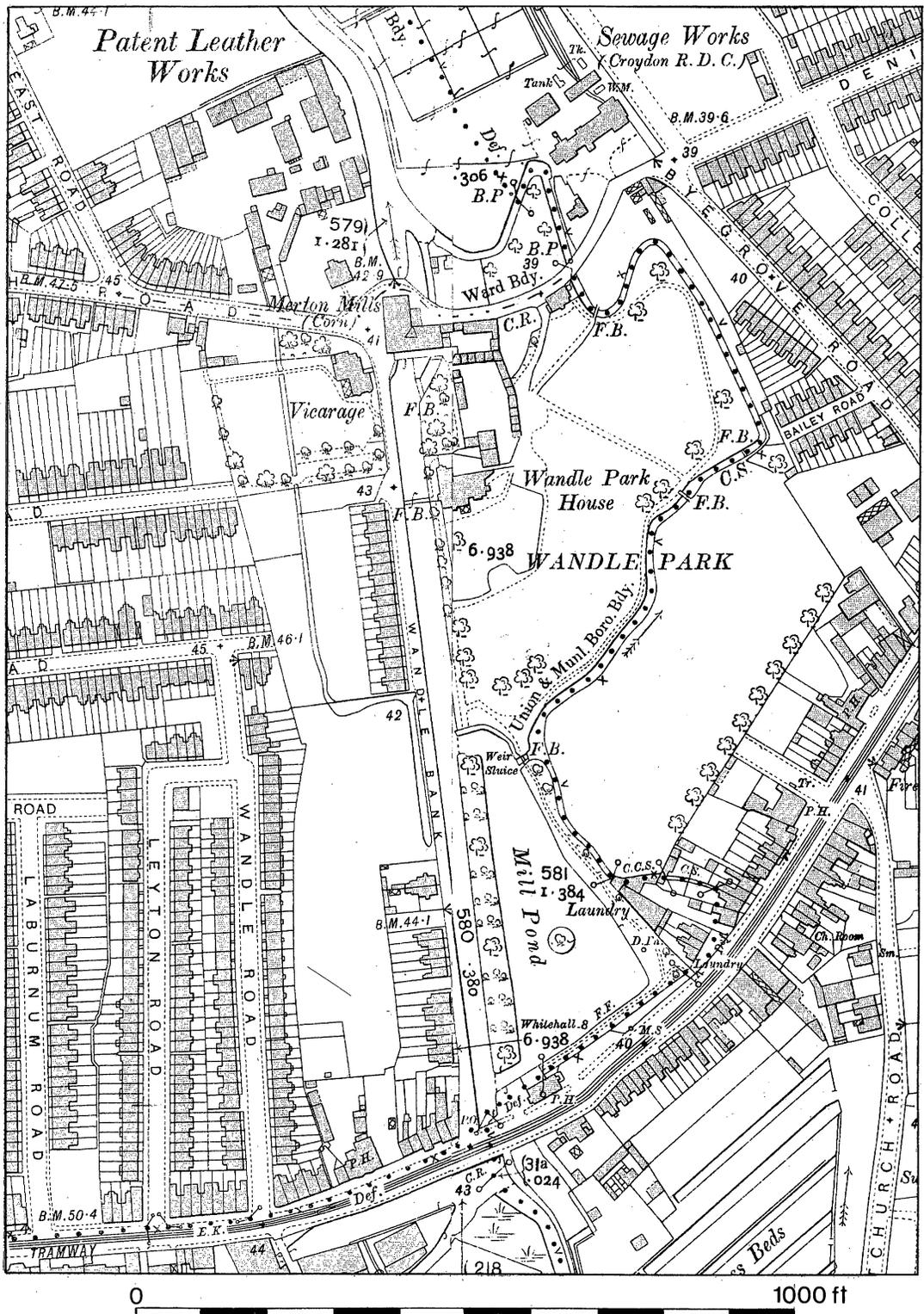


Fig 1 Location of Merton Mills and Wandle Park [Wandlebank] House, from the OS 25 inch map, 2nd edn 1913, Surrey sheet VII.15-16. Courtesy of Surrey Archaeological Society

The early mills

The power of the Wandle has been exploited since time immemorial, and it has been suggested that one of the two mills recorded during the Domesday survey as being part of the archbishop of Canterbury's manor of Mortlake was situated on the river in the vicinity of the modern park.³ Even at this early period, the mill, which would have been used primarily for the grinding of corn produced by tenants on the archbishop's Wimbledon estate, may have been served by a specially constructed leat or channel diverting water from the main stream of the river. Not unexpectedly, such a mill would have been in constant use, and was often in need of repair. Thus in 1273 both the wheels and cogs required attention, and there is a record of six oaks being brought from Croydon in 1390 to be used in repairs which cost over £11. It is understood that by the 13th century the mill was in the tenure of the important de la Mare family, whose manor of Ravensbury included property nearby, and its subsequent ownership can be traced through the later Middle Ages until after the Reformation. During the reign of Elizabeth I the mill was in the possession of the Lingard family of Wimbledon who, in addition to farming, had an interest in no less than three mills on the Wandle, of which two were used for the fulling of cloth.

In the absence of any supporting archaeological or documentary evidence, the location of a Domesday mill actually on the site of what, by the end of the 18th century, had become known as the Merton corn mill, has to remain speculative. Moreover, the diversion of the river as early as the 11th century has yet to be proved. However, the view has been expressed that a survey of the manor of Wimbledon in 1617 almost certainly places one of the Lingard mills on the site.⁴

By the late 17th century the present mill head was very definitely in being, and can be seen on the plan produced by Walter Henshaw showing the colour mills belonging to William Knight, a manufacturer of white ware in the parish of St Botolph Aldgate (fig 2).⁵ Knight, who was a potter, had purchased the land and premises, formerly used as a fulling mill and a dyewood or 'Brasill' mill, in 1690, when it was described as 'now and of late used for a Colour Mill for Grinding Colours for the Glazeing of White Ware'. Henshaw's plan, which has been dated to shortly after 1690, shows the mill building astride what had become the main course of the river, and a garden adjoining it on the east bank. A tumbling bay or weir can also be seen, taking surplus water from the mill head and discharging into the stream which marked the eastern limit of Knight's land as well as the boundary of the parish of Wimbledon. The vendors of the premises were Mary Crisp, widow of Ellis Crisp, and her son Samuel Crisp of the Inner Temple.⁶ The mill is obviously that marked as a 'Brasile' mill in John Sellar's map of Surrey dated c1690. In 1693 it was shown again, this time in a plan attached to an indenture recording the completion of Knight's purchase from Samuel Crisp of a further 35 acres of arable and pasture, also mainly in Wimbledon (fig 3).⁷ This land adjoined the property he had purchased three years previously, and abutted the river immediately downstream from the mill.

Ellis Crisp, Samuel's father, was a grandson of Roland Wilson, from whom he inherited the old Amery Mills, once owned by Merton Priory, as well as much of the Priory's grange estate at Merton.⁸ To a large extent a self-made man, Ellis Crisp had served as sheriff of Surrey from 1671-72, and was regarded by his contemporaries as 'a fanatic industrialist'.⁹ Whether or not it was he who adapted the former fulling mill to the grinding of dyewoods we cannot say. At this time dyes were being extracted from newly discovered woods imported from the Americas, and were used in a variety of applications, not the least of which was the dyeing and printing of textiles, an industry firmly established in the Wandle valley by the end of the 17th century. The new gaily coloured fabrics were highly fashionable, and although they were increasingly subjected to punitive taxation, profits could undoubtedly be made supplying the factories with colours. If, as seems likely, the mill head shown so clearly in the plans of 1690 and 1693 had been enlarged, if not actually constructed, a few years previously, the enterprise could well have been one with which Ellis Crisp was associated. A considerable outlay of

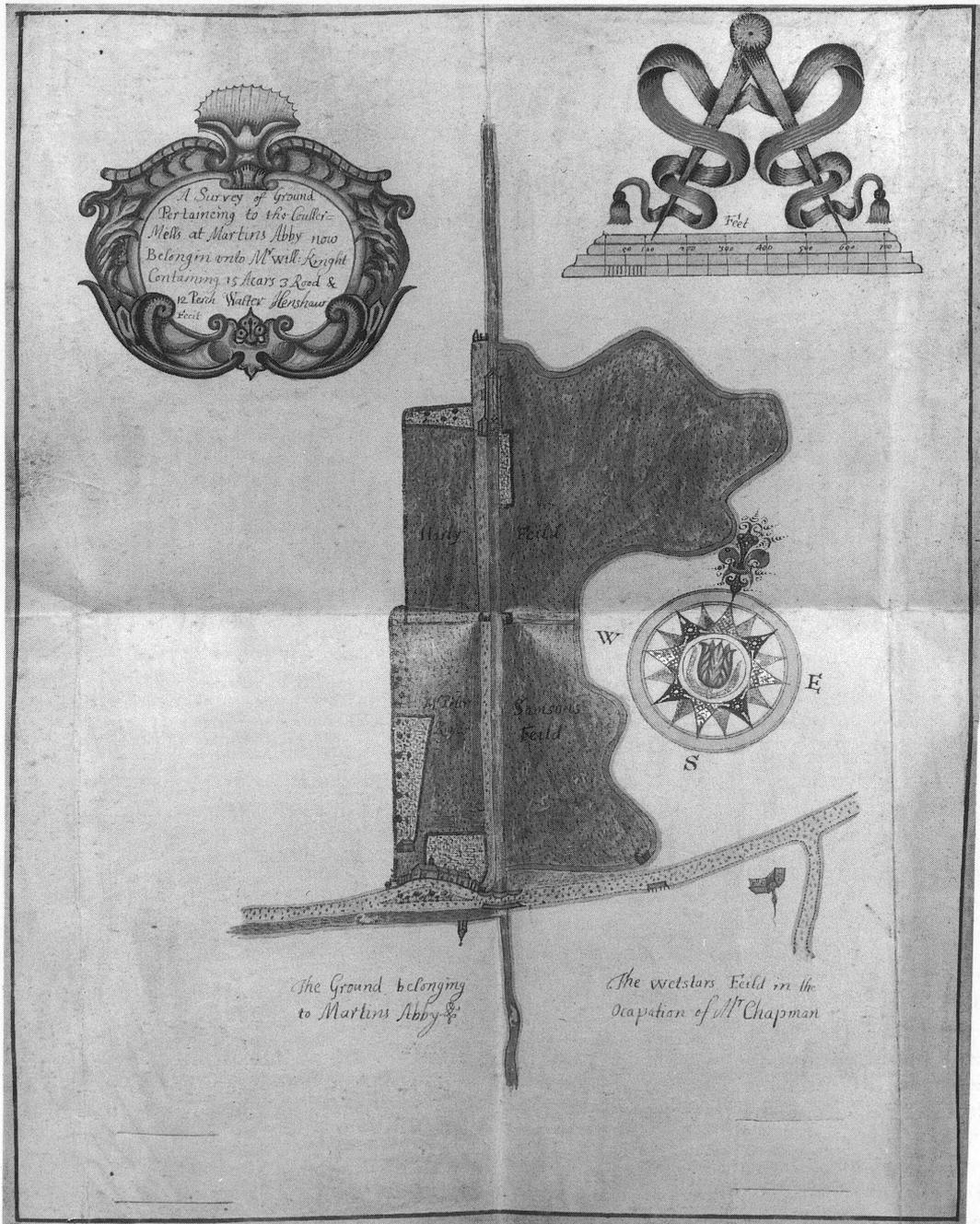


Fig 2 'A Survey of Ground Pertaining to the Couller Mills at Martins Abby now Belongin unto Mr Will: Knight ...', by Walter Henshaw, c.1690. Courtesy of the Surrey Record Office (SRO: 4079/1)

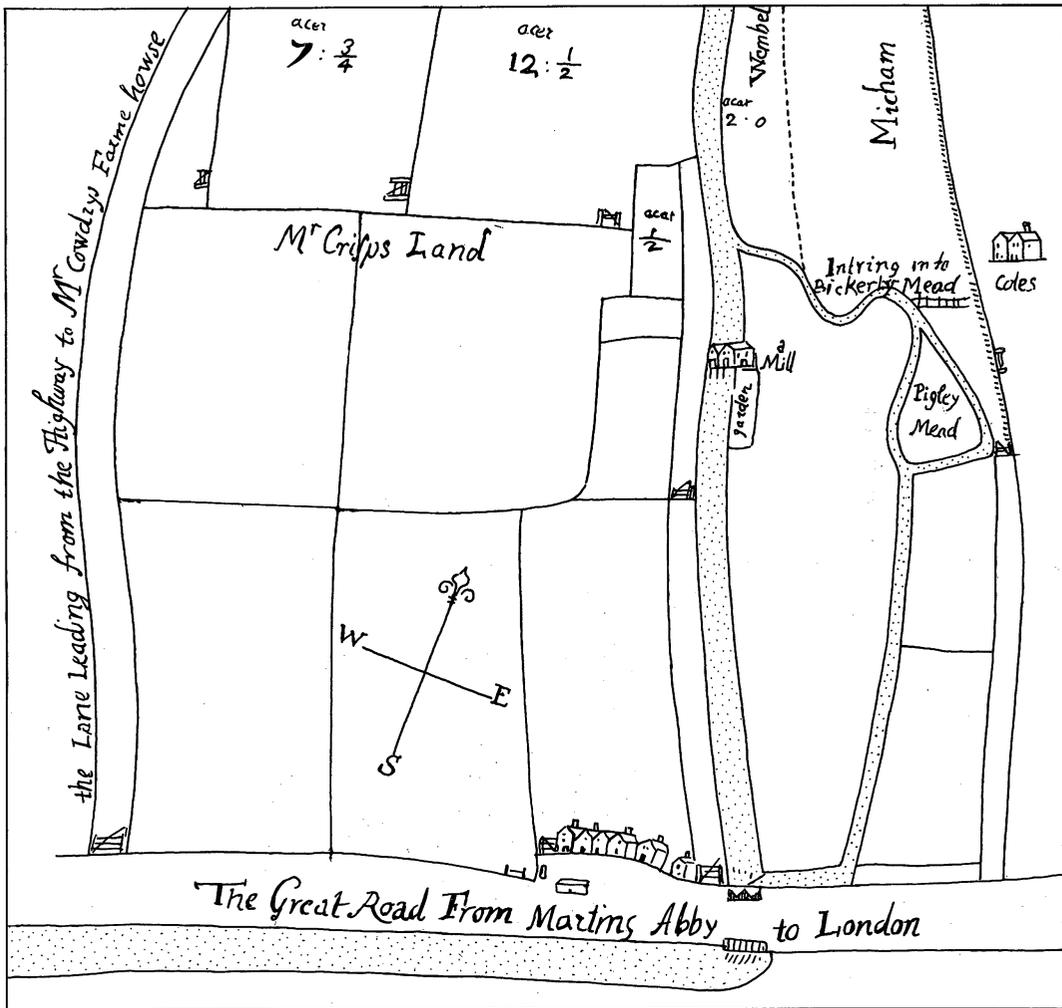


Fig 3 The site of Merton Mills, redrawn from a plan accompanying the Indenture of Release between Samuel Crisp and William Knight, 1693. Courtesy of the London Borough of Lambeth Minet Library (5844)

capital was involved, but unfortunately the records appear silent on the source of finance, and one can only speculate as to the entrepreneur responsible.

The unrestricted activity of landowners and industrialists seeking to exploit the power of the Wandle for their own ends was bound to cause friction, and an interesting case is recorded involving the owner of the former priory mills, lying immediately upstream from Merton bridge, and the lessees of the colour mill.¹⁰ It appears that towards the close of the 17th century three mills at Merton, then in the ownership of Ellis Crisp, had been let to Jonathan Welch. Subsequently, when the reversionary interest had been conveyed by Crisp to Thomas Pepys, the latter had induced Welch to surrender his old lease and to take out a new one for 51 years at a yearly rental of £50. Possession afterwards passed to Sir Edward Smith, bart; he was accused by Welch's sons, Jonathan and Joseph, to whom tenure of the colour mill had descended following their father's death, of making preparations, under pretence of erecting a small eel-gin, for building a fulling or other mill which would obstruct the stream to the Welches' prejudice. The brothers accordingly initiated action in the court of Exchequer against Smith, and in May 1692 secured an order for the issue of damage to be

heard at the Surrey assizes. The following January the Welches gave evidence that in consequence of the new mill they could not grind so much by at least 7cwt (360kg) of logwood a week, at 5s the cwt, as they did before. The court found in their favour, and the brothers were granted £40 damages against Smith, who was ordered to pull down the new mill. Sir Edward Smith appealed against the order, but it was upheld by the House of Lords on 3 March 1692/3.

Precisely how long the Welch brothers retained their lease is not known, but a possible change in tenure is indicated in the early 18th century, for in August 1720 Sun Fire Office policies were issued to David Blanker 'at Martin Mills Near Martin Abbey in the County of Surrey, Miller' for his dwelling house, 'for his Brazil Mill near his said dwelling' and for his corn mill which was also situated near the house.¹¹ Sometime between 1720 and 1740 the brazil mill would appear to have ceased being used for colour grinding, for Rocque marks the premises merely as a corn mill on his map surveyed in 1741-5.¹²

We next find William Walker of Wimbledon, a calico printer, taking out an insurance policy with the Royal Exchange Assurance in February 1758, cover being for a corn mill and a stock mill to the value of £360. The mills were described as timber built and tiled (a phrase which conveys the picture of a typical 18th century Surrey weatherboarded structure under a pantiled roof) and situated 'near Martin Bridge at Wimbledon'. There were three tenements adjoining, also timber built, and a dwelling house with stabling and outbuildings.¹³

The land tax records for Wimbledon, commencing in 1780, list a Mr Nettleton in occupation of premises in the vicinity of Merton bridge assessed at £36 per annum.¹⁴ No description is given, but from subsequent tenure of the premises there is no reason to doubt that they included the corn mill shown on Rocque's map and in the tenure of William Walker by 1758. Like Walker, Nettleton was a calico printer. He was probably also the former's son-in-law, for the parish register records William Walker acting as a witness to the marriage of Ann Walker to Robert Nettleton at St Mary's, Wimbledon, in 1780.¹⁵ Walker and Nettleton were obviously in partnership in the 1780s, when they occupied land owned by Sir Richard Hotham downstream from the mill on the Wimbledon side of the river.¹⁶ By 1781 Nettleton was evidently in possession of the mill (possibly it had passed to him on his marriage to Ann) for in April that year he insured his water corn mill at 'Martin Bridge' in the parish of Wimbledon with the Sun Fire Office.¹⁷ The company's record of a policy taken out in January 1782 describes Nettleton as a miller, and covered his dwelling house nearby, as well as the mill, machinery, stock, two stables, outhouses etc.¹⁸ The mill would appear to have been sub-leased a few years later, for in February 1785 John Peacock, a flour factor of Montague Close, Southwark, insured his utensils and stock in the 'timber and tiled watercorn mill at Merton' with Sun Fire for £500.¹⁹

Hillier in 1951 speculated that an 'old timber building' (at the back of Wandlebank House, then still standing in Wandle Park) 'might easily be a remnant of the mill that in 1779 was described as one of the most complete in England'.²⁰ He gave no source for this date, but presumably had in mind the account given of the mill's successor by James Malcolm in 1805, to which reference will be made below. The actual position seems to have been that until about 1798 the mill remained quite a modest affair, and that the present structure, and the machinery which so impressed Malcolm, can be dated to a complete rebuilding which occurred around 1798-9.

The tax assessment for Nettleton's premises in 1782 shows a jump to £70, but this fell back to £67 the following year. The value placed on the property for the purposes of the parish poor rate also rose from £68 in 1780 to £112 in 1786. The possibility of a general revaluation having taken place can be discounted, since the tax liability of a nearby copper mill, for instance, remained unchanged over the same period. There may have been structural changes to the mill at this time, but the sharp fluctuation in the assessments for the property on which Robert Nettleton paid rates and tax can probably best be explained by his investment in land and buildings, such as the house insured in January 1782, and the two brick and tile houses 'not quite finished' which, with another timber and tiled house nearby,

he insured five months later.²¹ If, as suggested above, concurrently the mill was sub-leased to Peacock, some disparity in the tax and rate assessments would have been inevitable. Unfortunately the evidence is insufficient to indicate precisely what happened and one can only make assumptions.

An archaeological evaluation of the site of Nettleton's mill was conducted by Museum of London staff in 1993, when application for town planning consent for conversion of the late 18th century building vacated by Connolly Leather Ltd in 1991, and redevelopment of the rest of the site, were under consideration by Merton Borough Council. The excavators sought to determine the nature and extent of any evidence surviving of early occupation, and the way in which the river had been used, but were restricted to the area likely to be disturbed by the proposed building works. Nothing preceding the 18th century was identified, but the mill race serving an early undershot wheel was observed beneath the existing building, and what was taken to be the leat leading from the Wandle to a second wheel of which no other trace was exposed. Knowing that a former mill had been replaced with the present structure, the archaeologists concluded that this mill race also belonged to the older building.²² Lack of demolition material encouraged the belief that this was of weatherboard on a timber framing – a conclusion which is now supported by the evidence of the insurance policies.

From 1786 onwards the tax records become a little more explicit, and show that whilst Nettleton was the occupier (or probably more correctly the principal lease-holder) of property we can identify with confidence as the corn mill and land adjoining, the proprietor, or actual landowner, was Welch. This was William Knight Welch, presumably related in some way to Jonathan and Joseph Welch and William Knight the potter, to whom reference has already been made.

Edwards, compiling his *Companion from London to Brighthelmston* in about 1788, noted that on crossing Merton bridge the Wandle could be seen flowing in 'a fine canal, or straight piece of transparent water, which extends in a lineal course as far as Merton cornmill, which lies about a quarter of a mile distant. On its west bank is a road at the farthest end of which is a square white house in possession of Mr. Padmore; who, in partnership with Mr. White, has a calico-manufactory here. – These premises are now on sale'.²³

Tenure of the mill remained unchanged until about 1795, when a Wimbledon poor rate book confirms Robert Nettleton to be the occupier and discloses that for rating purposes the valuation of his premises was £112 per annum. The following year Messrs Perry & Co appear in the land tax records in place of Nettleton. For the next four years assessments for tax fluctuate between £60 and £67, landownership remaining with Welch. Then, from 1798 to 1799, the assessments show a massive increase to £162, and for the first time the tax books confirm that the premises comprised 'Mills etc.' These changes in assessment are more or less paralleled by the entries in the parish poor rate books, which also show a substantial rise in the valuation of the property, from £108 in 1797 to £162 in 1798-9.²⁴ The figures clearly indicate a major event in the history of the site taking place around 1798, and provide the evidence for the erection of a new mill, to which we shall return later. The column for the proprietor's name is left blank in the tax book for 1799, which may indicate uncertainty as to actual ownership on the part of the official responsible. However, James Perry Esq is listed as the occupier, and for the first time we have mention of six small dwellings nearby, owned by Perry and, one might speculate, probably erected by him for workers at the mill or on his estate.

Nothing occurs in the official records to indicate the use to which the old mill was being applied whilst in Nettleton's occupation although the insurance records describe it as a water corn mill and, as we have seen, Edwards did refer specifically to Merton corn mill. Lysons' *Environs of London* published in 1791, and the 1793 edition of *Ambulator*, both contain a reference to 'Messrs. Walls' manufactory of Japan ware' in this general locality, but surprisingly make no mention whatever of corn milling.²⁵ This suggests that yet another, and recent, change of use had taken place, and that perhaps the corn mill was idle. The Japan ware manufactory calls for an explanation, but this presents a little difficulty in the absence

of any other contemporary reference to this activity. The Walls were, one might assume, engaged in producing black varnished wares, such as articles of furniture or perhaps leather. Whatever the process, they seem unlikely to have been heavily dependent on water power although, if leather was actually being worked on the premises, a supply of water would have been necessary. In the supplement to his *Environs*, dated 1811, Lysons sought to clarify the precise location of the Walls's factory by commenting that it had become a flour-mill belonging to Mr James Perry.²⁶ Although he failed to quote his source, Bartlett, writing in 1865, was most likely relying on Lysons when he asserted that 'on the site of the premises now used as a flour mill by Mr. Child, and originally by Mr. Perry, was formerly Messrs Walls' manufactory of Japan ware'.²⁷ As we have seen, the Wimbledon parish rate book for 1786 certainly lists 'Robert Nettleton or occupier' as the ratepayer, and the likely explanation is that for brief periods in the early 1790s Nettleton sub-leased or let the mill either in part or in its entirety to a variety of tenants, including the Walls.

Padmore's 'square white house', to which Edwards also referred, seems to have been to the north-west of the corn mill and a short distance downstream where a small rectangular building shown on the OS 25 inch map of 1894-6 can be identified with a villa demolished in 1960 by Connolly Leather Ltd. In 1994 the site was covered by part of the firm's leather drying sheds.

Deeds survive concerning the leasing and sale of calico grounds on the west bank of the Wandle by William Knight Welch of Middlesex to Sir Richard Hotham in 1779 and 1784,²⁸ but these make no mention of the corn mill or a house. Padmore & White's calico-manufactory which, as far as we know, succeeded that of Nettleton & Walker, was obviously still in being in the late 1780s although, as Edwards remarked, the premises were then for sale. The calico factory was mentioned again in 1822, when the late James Perry's estate was auctioned, and was described as being bounded by the mill-tail, ie downstream from the mill itself.²⁹

From c1804 until 1811 one of the Bennett family, probably John, who also had connections with the calico printing works at Merton Abbey, was involved in the works by the mill, but these were difficult times for the industry, and in 1812 Perry was paying the rates. In 1819 Benjamin Bailey, another calico printer and a partner of the Ansells at Carshalton, was the rated occupier, and by 1823 the works were actually in the hands of George and Charles Ancell (or Ansell), who had acquired a major interest in the Merton Abbey print works. At this time the calico printing industry in the Wandle valley was in general decline, and changes in ownership and even bankruptcies were commonplace. The lease of the printing works below Perry's mill would seem to have expired or been surrendered by 1828, for the land tax book for that year shows the premises in the hands of a person referred to briefly as Wright – presumably the land-owner. By 1833 the works had gone over to japanning leather and the tax payer was listed as 'Flower Fisher'.³⁰

James Perry and Merton corn mill

James Perry was undoubtedly in possession of Merton corn mill by 1796, but, as we have seen, the identity of the proprietor remained vague in the land tax records until 1803, when a Mr Lucas was listed under that heading. Lucas held a number of leases at this time, including those of the King's Head in Merton High Street and land to the rear.³¹ In practice, the matter was probably largely academic since Perry, as the *de facto* occupier, would have been held responsible for paying the tax and local rates. Bartlett was informed that when Mr Perry first took the mills, it was for the purpose of making felt cloth,³² but here again we have no corroborative evidence, and Bartlett does not venture a date. The *Dictionary of National Biography*, whilst having nothing to say about Perry's alleged venture into felt manufacture, actually adds to the confusion by observing that 'on the banks of the Wandle, near this house [ie that rented by Perry], some machinery for multiplying pictures, designated the "polygraphic art", was set up by Perry. It resulted in failure, and after some years the premises

were converted into a corn-mill. In his hands this undertaking was not a success, but it was afterwards let at a good profit'.³³

James Perry was editor and proprietor of the *Morning Chronicle*, the paper on which Charles Dickens was to begin his career as a reporter. Born at Aberdeen in 1756, the son of a builder, Perry had entered Aberdeen University with a view to qualifying for the Scottish bar, but the failure of his father's business had obliged him to earn his living as best he could. After a short career as an actor – terminated, it is said, because his brogue made him unfitted for the stage – he made his way to London. Here he gained recognition as an essayist and journalist, and became editor of the *Gazetteer*, which under his direction evolved as the vehicle for reporting the views of Charles James Fox. Purchase of the *Gazetteer* by a group of Tories brought about a change in its political orientation, and Perry left. Journalism had now become his driving passion, and in 1789, with his friend and fellow Scot James Gray, Perry purchased the *Morning Chronicle*, a journal founded in 1770 and reputedly the first to report proceedings in Parliament. In their hands the paper was soon to become the leading organ of the Whig party. Perry's support for the radicals and his mockery of the establishment repeatedly placed him in conflict with the authorities, and in 1798 he served a month's imprisonment in Newgate for poking fun at the House of Lords. The partnership with Gray ended with the latter's death, but under Perry's energetic management the *Chronicle* gained steadily in reputation, reaching a circulation of over 7,000 copies a day by 1810. Production did not cease until over 40 years after his death.³⁴

Perry's town house was in Tavistock Square, but for some 15 years he made Merton his country seat. It is believed he may have been living in the vicinity of the mill as early as 1796,³⁵ renting a house on the banks of the Wandle.³⁶ Around 1805 this was replaced with a stylish new villa, a development which, as might be expected, is reflected in the Wimbledon poor rate books. Some idea of the appearance of the new house can be gathered from an undated watercolour by John Hassell, entitled 'Wandle Villa, Wimbledon. The Seat of Mr. James Perry'.³⁷ The rebuilding may well have been occasioned by a serious fire, in which Perry's brother-in-law, a professor of Greek by the name of Porson, is said to have lost his notes on Aristophanes and much of the transcript of the lexicon of Photius, on which he was working. Precisely when Perry purchased the property has not been established, but it was certainly his freehold in 1821 when, following his death, it was offered for sale by auction.

The Perry household in the early years of the 19th century seems to have included not only James's own children (he and his wife Anne had eight) but also his sister's family by her first husband. At Wandle Villa, it is said, he was always ready to extend to visitors an invitation to fish in the waters which surrounded the property.³⁸ Lord Nelson, himself a keen angler, maintained a hearty and intimate friendship with the Perrys during the whole of his short residence at nearby Merton Place³⁹ and stood godfather to their daughter.

Perry's Mill

The tax records imply that by 1806 Perry had acquired freehold ownership of the land on which the mill stood, for Lucas is no longer mentioned. The land tax assessment now stood at £125, and the new mill was clearly impressive. Malcolm, in his *Compendium of Modern Husbandry* written in 1805, remarked upon 'those very spacious flour mills belonging to Mr. Perry of Merton', and had obviously taken a special interest in them, observing:

The mills work seven pair of stones, and the whole interior of the works, machinery etc., are said to be the most complete of their kind in England; and in order that a constant supply of water may be had at all seasons to assist the river in carrying on such an extensive concern, the proprietor has dug out the soil from an adjoining field and formed it into a large basin of some acres in extent, which, being full of springs, contributes greatly to the supply ... This gentleman grinds for hire only, according to my information.⁴⁰

THE MERTON ESTATE.

Particulars and Conditions of Sale
OF A VALUABLE
FREEHOLD AND COPYHOLD ESTATE,

INCLUDING A SMALL PART LEASEHOLD,
HELD OF EMANUEL COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE;

THE PROPERTY CONSISTS OF

The Gentlemanly Residence,

WITH

Gardens and Grounds, formerly in the Occupation

OF

JAMES PERRY, ESQ.

*With a fine Sheet of Water, and about Twelve Acres of Rich Meadow Land,
And Right of Fishing.*

THE CORN MILL

WAS ERECTED BY MR. RENNIE,

It is considered equal to any in the Kingdom: the present Rental is only £680.

A CAPITAL HOUSE AND OFFICES

ON THE HIGH ROAD, NOT FAR DISTANT FROM THE

TURNPIKE AT MERTON,

*With about Thirteen Acres of Land, in the Occupation of Mr. Windham, whose Lease
expires in Three Years.*

Sundry Houses and Gardens in front of the High Road,

ALSO

Sundry very Rich Inclosures of Old Meadow Land,

THE CALICO FACTORY,

Being First Rate Premises, also a House and Offices, at Phipps's Bridge, &c.

THE ESTATE ALTOGETHER IS

One Hundred and Sixty Acres,

A GREAT PORTION IS IN HAND.

Which will be Sold by Auction,

By Messrs. ROBINS,

At the Auction Mart, opposite the Bank of England,

On Wednesday, 24th of July, 1822,

AT TWELVE O'CLOCK.

IN THIRTY-TWO LOTS.

When in July 1822, following Perry's death, his Merton estate was offered for sale (fig 4), George Robins, the auctioneer, made a point of informing prospective purchasers that the mill had 'been for many years past considered as one of the best in the Kingdom', and was 'erected by Mr. Rennie, at an expense of little short of 20,000 Pounds'.⁴¹ The head of water was nearly 5ft (1.5m) and subject to little variation, which enabled a pair of 16ft diameter wheels to be in constant operation. These were positioned either side of the mill stream, and together produced the equivalent of 40hp.⁴² One wheel, 8ft wide, drove three pairs of 4ft diameter French stones, plus flour machines, bolting mills and other machinery, whilst the second, 9ft wide, worked four pairs of stones and ancilliary machinery. Grain storage in the two parts of the three-storeyed building amounted to a total of 1,800 quarters (22.5 tonnes), and together the mills were capable of grinding 'upwards of 60 loads per week'.

Perry's Merton flour mill was undoubtedly in the forefront of industrial progress, for Mr Rennie was none other than the great John Rennie (1761-1821), the Scottish civil engineer who is best known for building the old Waterloo, Southwark and London bridges. Whilst at Edinburgh University from 1780 to 1783 Rennie had worked as a millwright during his vacations and, following a short engagement to gain practical experience with James Watt at the latter's Soho works, he became engineer in charge of the Albion flour mills at Southwark in 1784. All the machinery at the Albion mills was designed by Rennie, and in 1791 he started as a mechanical engineer on his own account at Blackfriars.⁴³ Merton mill was perhaps one of his smaller commissions, completed when he was in his mid-thirties, but it would have embodied the latest refinements of milling technology. Nor was the enterprise for long hampered by primitive transportation, for Perry was an enthusiastic supporter of the Surrey Iron Railway, which was probably already available for use before its formal opening in July 1803.⁴⁴ The mill was served by its own branch from the main trackway near the junction of Byegrove Road with Mead Path, and thus had direct and easy access by horse-drawn wagons to the wharves at Wandsworth. What was not conveyed by rail could be carried on the turnpike, which passed through Merton and linked London with the farmlands of Surrey and Sussex.

Half a century before Perry's new Merton mill was in operation, Rocque had indicated an elongated channel parallel to the main cut,⁴⁵ which had obviously been designed to augment the supply of water held in the mill head. This channel was still there as late as 1894, when surveys were conducted for the second edition of the 25 inch OS map. Malcolm, however, makes it clear that it was Perry who was responsible for constructing the large mill pond⁴⁶ which, as we have observed earlier, survived into the 20th century as an attractive feature of Wandle Park. The remains of a penstock valve in the river bank can be found today to the rear of the Royal Six Bells, but this must be a relatively recent installation, for at the beginning of the 20th century water flowed in and out of the mill pond through inlets some 6m wide, with the surplus spilling into the brook in the park via a tumbling bay and then finding its way back to the Wandle below the mill. Deeds dating from the latter part of the 18th century show that the mill head and the brook were known respectively as the New and the Old River.⁴⁷ As late as 1883, when Wandlebank House was being offered for sale, the brook was still regarded as the river Wandle, and is shown as such in the plan produced to accompany the sale particulars (fig 5).⁴⁸

By 1807 Perry's property at Merton included thirteen small tenements, some fronting the high road, but a terrace of four – Bank Buildings – and probably one or two others, were ranged along Millbank and had first appeared in the land tax books eight years previously. Today this road is known as Wandle Bank, and still contains several early 19th century cottages. A semi-detached pair, undated but stylistically early 19th century and numbered 16 and 17 Wandle Bank, were categorized Grade II and added to the statutory list by the Department of National Heritage in June 1994.

In February 1808 James Perry obtained insurance cover from the Royal Exchange Assurance on goods to the value of £2,000 'in trust' at what the policy described as his 'large and Small Water Corn Millhouses adjoining ... brick, stone and tiled built or Slated' at Merton. The register noted it was 'warranted that there be no Steam Engine or Kiln' in

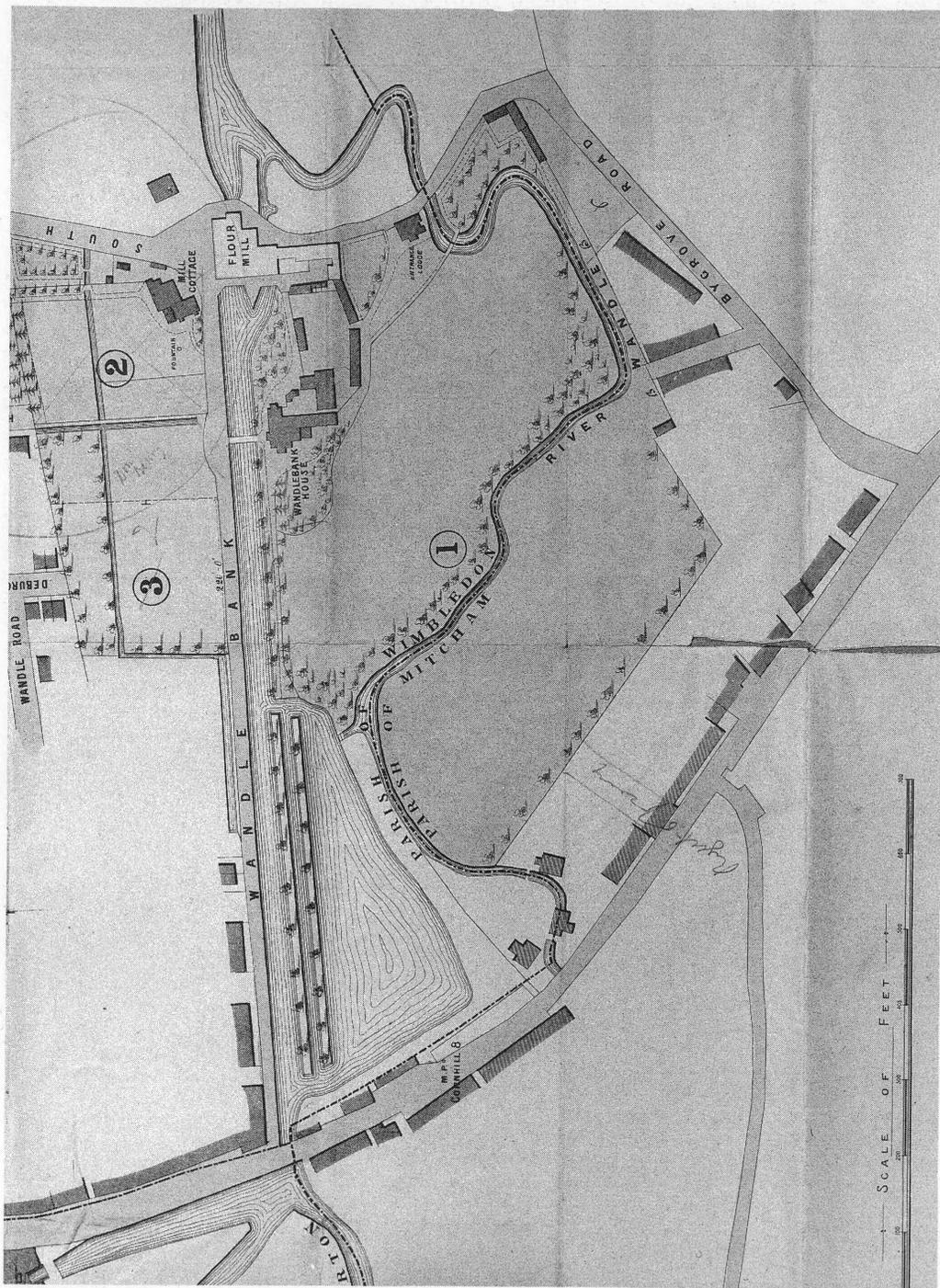


Fig 5 Detail from a plan accompanying the Wandlebank sale particulars of 1883. Courtesy of the Surrey Record Office (SRO: Acc 767)

either.⁴⁹ His address at the time was given as the Strand and, according to Milward, Perry left Merton for good by 1811, having granted leases of both Wandle Villa and the mill. ('Cook Esq' was assessed for poor rate on the mill in 1810). One of the cottages is shown in the land tax returns of 1814 as being occupied by a Robert Macard, and four years later the mill itself was held on a lease by Messrs Atherton and Macard. Messrs 'Mackard' are referred to in 1820, Mr Hayes in 1821 and Ward in 1822.

James Perry's health began to decline in 1817, and an 'internal disease' obliged him to undergo several painful operations. On the advice of his doctors, he retired to his house at Brighton, where he died in December 1821, aged 85.⁵⁰ Perry was buried at St Mary's, Wimbledon, where a monument to his memory was erected on the east side of the south aisle by members of the Fox Club.⁵¹

Under the direction of Perry's trustees, his freehold and leasehold estate at Merton, totalling some 160 acres and including numerous houses and cottages as well as Wandle Villa and the mill, was offered for sale by auction the following year.⁵² As might be expected, his death is reflected in the land tax records of 1822, when the proprietors of the mill are given as the executors of the late James Perry. This remained the position until 1831, the last year for which the tax books survive. As usual, full details of the various properties comprising the estate are given in the sale particulars, and show that since Michaelmas 1821 both the mill and mill cottage had been held by Joseph Ward on a 21 year lease at a rental of £680 per annum. Wimbledon rate books confirm that Ward continued as the occupier of the mill, a reservoir and a house and land from 1822 until 1832, when the cottage was recorded as empty. Whether or not Ward exercised his right under the lease to relinquish tenure of the mill after fourteen years is not known, but when the cottage and mill were again offered for sale in 1837, Ward had gone, and the premises were described as 'in hand'.⁵³

Although Ward had been in occupation for ten years or so, as late as 1833 the mill was still known by local people as Perry's mill⁵⁴ and, more formally, in a book of reference compiled in 1834 when James Erskine Perry was recorded as the owner, and Charles Baker the lessee and occupier.⁵⁵

The Victorian era

Thomas Erskine Perry, son of James Perry's son and his daughter-in-law Ann, was born in July 1806 and baptised the following October at St Mary's, Wimbledon, the sponsors including the Rt Hon Thomas Lord Erskine, Lord High Chancellor of England.⁵⁶ Thomas was, as one might expect, one of James Perry senior's beneficiaries, and a document survives, dated May 1838 and signed by William Perry and Thomas Erskine Perry, confirming the agreement to sell to Henry Pollard Ashby for £1,500 the freehold premises then in his occupation, including the dwelling described as Bank House.⁵⁷ This must have been the 'gentlemanly villa residence', built 'in the Cottage Style' and surrounded by 11 acres of pleasure grounds and meadowland on the banks of the Wandle, which had been offered for sale with the mill in July 1837. Ashby had married Harriet Gibson in 1835 and, it would appear, had taken up residence at Bank House shortly afterwards. Known subsequently as Wandlebank House, or Wandle Park House, this was the villa built by Perry in 1805 which, together with later additions, was demolished by Wimbledon Corporation in 1962.⁵⁸ A detail from a plan of the property in 1883 is shown in figure 5. A description of the house by Cooke in 1927 as 'a square edifice of three bays and two stories with a square bay window protruding from the centre of the South front',⁵⁹ tallies well enough with the villa depicted in the watercolour painted by Hassell. By Cooke's time, as can be seen in an Edwardian postcard (fig 6) and an early photograph of the house, it had been altered and extended considerably, but Perry's Wandle Villa can still be identified as the older part of the building.

A few years before James Perry's death, Hassell described the river valley below the Merton flour mills. His account is worth repeating for the image it creates of the scene which was so well known to Perry and his contemporaries:

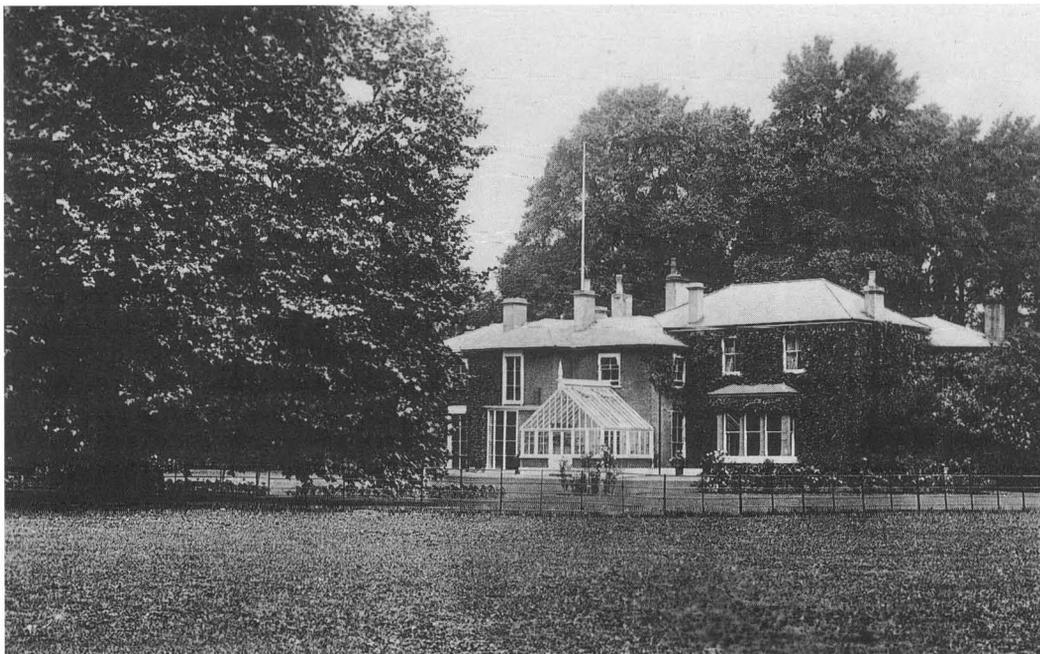


Fig 6 Wandle Bank Park, from an Edwardian postcard. Reproduced by permission of Merton Library and Heritage Service

From hence the river winds its devious way through the valley, until it reaches Mr. Patterson's copper mills; at which place, the scenery begins to assume a very picturesque effect. Lord Spencer's park forms a bold angle of jutting knolls and woods, in the background; – passing in a double direction, southwards, to the hills of Kingston, sweeping the brow of Wimbledon, it combines itself with an innumerable number of coppices and woods, and becomes one mass of forest scenery.⁶⁰

'Harry' Ashby was born in 1809, and on the monument erected to his memory in Wandle Park in 1911 is described as an artist and a fellow worker with John Constable RA. He was also a member of Wimbledon Local Board from 1869 until 1881, and is credited with being one of the first advocates of the preservation of open spaces in the town for public recreation. In 1881, having lived at Wandlebank all his married life, Ashby, who was then in his early 70s, suggested to members of the trust established at the time of his marriage that the house should be sold. Some delay ensued whilst legalities were settled and then, having advertised the property the following year with what seems to have been a less than satisfactory response, the Ashby trustees decided to offer the house and estate for sale by auction.⁶¹

One cannot help wondering if the lack of interest shown by purchasers might be attributable to the now deteriorating locality in which Wandlebank was situated. There had been a marked decline in the area over the forty-odd years since the Ashbys first made it their home, especially with the increasingly rapid expansion of London's suburbs since the early 1870s. The Wandlebank estate itself may have remained substantially intact, but to the west former calico grounds and farmland were disappearing under the streets of terraced houses of South Wimbledon, a development stimulated by the opening of Haydons Road railway station in 1868. Change was also in the offing to the east where, styled by the vending land company the 'Lower Tooting Estate', the grounds of Colliers Wood House had been sold for redevelopment in 1877, and the building of new villas was proceeding apace.

If all this was not deterrent enough to the purchaser who might otherwise have taken delight in an attractive and secluded riverside property, in 1877 the watermeadows to the north of Wandlebank were chosen by the Croydon rural sanitary authority's civil engineer Baldwin Latham as the site for the Wandle Valley sewage works. Effluent from the embryo sewerage system serving the expanding urban areas as far afield as Beddington and Wallington, and the intervening Mitcham, Merton and Morden, was to be treated at the new works. Smell would have been inevitable, and in 1882 a sludge pressing plant was added in an effort to keep pace with the growing volume of waste entering the expanding sewer network, presaging the progressive enlargement of the works which was a feature of the closing years of the 19th century.

Understandably, these less attractive aspects of the immediate neighbourhood were tactfully ignored by the vending agents, and the detailed sale particulars (fig 5), dated May 1883, describe the property as including a family residence known as Wandlebank House, together with Mill Cottage (standing at the corner of South Road and Wandle Bank), a lawn, tennis lawn, flower and kitchen gardens, and 12 acres of land. Through the grounds wound the stream correctly identified by the surveyor preparing the sale plan as the river Wandle, in which the landowners had exclusive fishing rights. There was also a small ornamental entrance lodge, and a 'farmery', complete with stabling for four horses, a cowshed, fowl houses and piggeries to serve the needs of the household. These attractions notwithstanding, the reality of the surroundings could not be ignored completely, and Norton, Trist, Watney & Co, the auctioneers, drew attention to the fact, albeit discreetly, that the Wandlebank estate was also admirably adapted for building purposes.⁶²

The Merton flour mill and the mill pond constructed by Perry were not included in the sale of Wandlebank House in the 1880s. The industrial premises seem, in fact, to have gone their separate way after the sale in 1837. On 24 January 1837 notice was published of a fiat in bankruptcy against Charles Baker, described as a miller, of Merton Mills Wimbledon, and Suffolk,⁶³ and by 1838 the ratepayer was John Child. This was the situation confirmed in the Wimbledon tithe commutation survey conducted in 1851, the records of which show Child as the occupier and owner (he was more likely the lessee) of the watermills, the pond and mill head, a stableyard and paddock, and also of a house and plantations.⁶⁴ Between 1846 and 1860 Pigot's directory listed John and Edward Child at Merton Mills, but Edward disappears from subsequent editions, and the relationship has not been established. When in the 1870s the directories commenced drawing a distinction between commercial and private residents John Child was listed under both headings, with addresses at Merton Flour Mills and also Mill Cottage.

From the description given of the mill by W W Simpson, the auctioneer, in 1837, it would appear not to have altered under Ward's occupation. The flow in the Wandle had yet to be affected by the increasing extraction of water for commercial and residential use, and potential buyers could still be assured that output was sustainable throughout the year – 'short water even in the driest seasons being unknown on this stream'. As in Perry's time, stabling was maintained for nine horses and the mill's branch tramway to the Surrey Iron Railway was still an asset worth emphasis in 1837. The railway was closed down in 1846, by which time alternative facilities for the transport of heavy goods were provided by the London & South Western Railway Company, whose yards had become available to the public with the opening of the station at Wimbledon in 1838. John Child's name continued to appear in the directories for Wimbledon until the 1880s, but by 1887 the Merton flour mills on Wandle Bank were listed as being in the tenure of James Bristoe.⁶⁵

Precisely what transpired at the sale of Wandlebank House is not made clear by the Ashby papers now at Surrey Record Office. The formalities seem to have been concluded and final accounts settled by 1885, but the family did not leave the neighbourhood, and 'Harry' Ashby moved to Mill Cottage, where he was still living at the time of his death in June 1892.⁶⁶ It had been described in 1883 as a well-appointed detached freehold residence situated in two acres of ground, and sounds as if it were something more pretentious than the four-bedroomed

cottage 'suitable for the residence of a Miller' which had featured in the sale in 1837. Ashby willed his personal effects (including the contents of his ample wine cellar) to his wife Harriet, who survived him, and left his affairs in the hands of his son-in-law, Robert Bloomfield Fenwick, whom he appointed sole executor. Mill Cottage subsequently became All Saints Vicarage, and can be glimpsed in a postcard of 1912. In part, at least, it was a two-storeyed brick and tile house, and its general style and the two boxed-sash windows in the south wall suggest it may have dated to the 18th century. The probability is that it was the brick and tiled dwelling house once occupied by Robert Nettleton, which he insured in the early 1780s.

Robert Fenwick, who received one-third of the proceeds of the sale of the Wandlebank estate, was born in 1831 at Monart Rectory in County Wexford.⁶⁷ He had been living at Wandlebank House since 1867, and there survives an agreement dated June 1893, between Henry Rogers and Henry M Walsh, who were then the owners of Wandlebank, to continue letting the house with its lawn, meadow, stabling and coachhouses, plus 11 acres of land, to Fenwick at a yearly rental of £120 until September 1894.⁶⁸ Fenwick was an alderman of Surrey County Council from 1889 until 1895 and a justice of the peace, and it was through his influence and generosity that All Saints parish was founded and its church erected. He was also remembered for his work in building and endowing the Hubert Road Institute, in what later became All Saints Road.⁶⁹

Connolly Leather Ltd

The history of Connolly Leather Ltd commences in 1878, when a shoe repair shop was established in the Euston Road by John Joseph and Samuel Frederick Connolly. From shoe repairing the company expanded rapidly through belt and harness repair, and then started to buy in hides which it had finished by James Paxton & Son, a firm of leather dressers and japanners at Wandle Bank. By this time Paxtons was in the hands of Philip Paxton, but on the evidence of local directories the business was already at Merton in the early 1870s where, presumably, it had been established by his father. It was through this regular contact with Merton that Samuel Connolly became aware of the old flour mill building (fig 7) which he acquired in 1919.⁷⁰ Purchase of Paxton's premises is understood to have been negotiated at about the same time, although the Connollys would seem to have had an interest in the Wandle Bank works at least as early as 1904, when they complained to Croydon Rural District Council about smell from sewage sludge at the adjacent treatment plant.⁷¹

Whereas in 1912 the Victoria County History stated that the Merton flour mills were still owned and occupied by Bristow & Sons, and the firm continued to be mentioned in local directories until 1915, actual milling of corn may have ceased around 1910, when the redundant mill pond was purchased by Mrs Richardson Evans and presented to the National Trust.⁷² Gradually as Connolly's premises expanded, picturesque old mill buildings were demolished but a few outbuildings survived, and as late as the 1930s one could still glimpse mellowed pantiled roofs and red brick walls amongst the trees and foliage at the back of Wandlebank House.

Mill Cottage survived until 1950/51, when it was demolished and the site utilised for the erection of a warehouse and the construction of a car park. In 1994 Connolly Leather Ltd moved its headquarters from the Euston Road to Wimbledon, where new offices had been built in what was once part of the vicarage gardens. From its simple origin in a chain of shoe repair shops the firm has developed into a major supplier of quality upholstery leathers to the automobile industry. Since 1904 Connollys have been the exclusive suppliers of leather for Rolls Royce cars, and the firm has included many of the foremost European car manufacturers amongst its clients. The company, which in the 1990s is run by the grandsons and great-grandsons of the founders, has also supplied leather for such prestigious assignments as the seating in the Houses of Parliament and the new British Library, the ocean liner Queen Elizabeth II and British Airways' Concorde.⁷³

Wandle Park 1907 – 1990

In 1902 Richardson Evans, a leader writer for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, was successful in his second attempt to stimulate interest in the preservation of the more picturesque amenities of the area amongst his fellow residents of Wimbledon. The John Evelyn Club (later The Wimbledon Society) was formed early the following year, and in 1904 another body with which Richardson Evans was to be actively involved, The River Wandle Open Spaces Committee, came into being.⁷⁴ Interest in the conservation of open spaces for public enjoyment had been growing steadily since the middle of the 19th century, but in areas which were still largely rural, or enjoyed large tracts of unenclosed common land, the need was not immediately apparent or appreciated. By the turn of the century, however, the speed with which Wimbledon and Merton were becoming urbanised and recreational land was being lost was very obvious, and it was largely through the efforts of Richardson Evans and other like-minded spirits that the municipality of Wimbledon was moved to act.

Having been purchased by the Corporation for the sum of £6,000, the nine and a half acres which included Wandlebank House itself and its garden, as well as the grounds bordering the river, were formally opened to the public as Wandle Park on 11 July 1907. The ceremony was graced by the presence of Her Royal Highness the Princess Louise, Duchess of Argyll, and attended by many local dignitaries, who joined the royal party at tea in the house as guests of the Mayoress.⁷⁵

A white limestone monument, in the form of a drinking fountain which has long since ceased to function, is to be found near the gate leading from Wandle Park into High Street, Colliers Wood. It stands in the part of the park owned by the National Trust, and was erected



Fig 7 The former Merton Flour Mill in 1975. At this time the building was in the occupation of Connolly Bros (Curriers) Limited. *Photograph by Merton Borough News*

in memory of her brother, John Feeney, by Mrs Richardson Evans, through whose generosity the Trust came into possession of the disused mill pond and the adjacent gardens. The opening of the Mill Pond Garden, as it was called, and the granting of the honorary freedom of the Borough of Wimbledon to Mr and Mrs Richardson Evans, took place at Wandle Park in a ceremony on Friday 15 July 1910 following formal vesting of the property in the National Trust.⁷⁶ John Feeney, who died in 1905, was the proprietor of the *Birmingham Daily Post*, and chairman of the Press Association. In politics a Liberal, he was a supporter of the Arts and Crafts Movement and a generous benefactor of Birmingham's Art Gallery, where special arrangements were made to house the collection he gave to the city. The inscription on the fountain reads 'This garden is given for the enjoyment of the people of Wimbledon and Merton in memory of John Feeney of Birmingham and Berkswell, one who loved nature and his fellow men'.

Henry Pollard Ashby and Robert Bloomfield Fenwick were not forgotten, and both were commemorated in a second monument, still to be seen near the site of Wandlebank House, where it was formally unveiled with due ceremony on the 14 January 1911. In 1995 both monuments are suffering from erosion and their inscriptions are barely legible.

In the years before the outbreak of war in 1914, Wandle Park was still very much as the Ashbys and Fenwicks had known it, and retained a wealth of mature trees and ornamental shrubberies into the 1920s. In its early years in municipal ownership it had proved popular amongst the local community, but after the war interest seems to have declined. Part of the mill pond gardens was filled in by Wimbledon Corporation in 1930, and what remained was levelled and grassed over in 1951. Wandlebank House, which some had hoped would become a branch library and art gallery, was for a time used as a maternity and child welfare clinic, but in 1962, having been reported beyond repair by the borough surveyor, it was demolished. A final memento of Perry's house, a pleasant little wrought iron gate which gave access to the park from Wandle Bank, was removed and scrapped by the Parks Department of the London Borough of Merton in the late 1980s.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 The National Trust's Wandle properties total 139 acres and include a substantial length of the precinct wall of Merton Priory to the south of Wandle Park, as well as Morden Hall Park and the Watermeads at Mitcham. By agreement with the Trust and Mitcham Corporation (only a small portion of Wandle Park lay within the Borough of Mitcham), Wimbledon undertook to maintain the park.
- 2 Jowett 1951, 17
- 3 Milward 1969, 30-31; 1989, 90-91
- 4 Richard Milward, pers comm
- 5 Robinson 1993, 309-10; SRO: 4079/1
- 6 *VCH Sy*, 2, 367
- 7 LBLML: 5844. The land, mainly in the parish of Wimbledon and lying downstream from the mill, had formerly belonged to Rowland Wilson, the vendor's great-grandfather. The map is redrawn as figure 2 in Saxby (1993), with the mill marked as a 'corn mill'. This description was not used on the original plan.
- 8 Jowett 1951, 81, 93
- 9 Burns 1992, 26-7
- 10 *VCH Sy*, 2, 367
- 11 GL: 11936/12/19411-3
- 12 Rocque 1744-6
- 13 GL: 7253/7/34894
- 14 SRO: QS 6/7
- 15 Richard Milward, pers comm
- 16 John Wallace, pers comm
- 17 GL: 11936/291/442703
- 18 GL: 11936/299/454960
- 19 GL: 11936/326/501375
- 20 Hillier 1951, 180. Hillier's speculation is unfortunately followed by the *Wandle guide* (Wandle Group 1974, 35) and by Harris (1992, 6)

- 21 GL: 11936/302/460795
 22 Saxby 1993, 25
 23 Edwards 1789, 24
 24 SRO: Wimbledon poor rate books; QS 6/7 (land tax)
 25 Lysons, 1791; *Ambulator* 1793, 284
 26 Lysons 1811, 96
 27 Bartlett 1865, 188
 28 LBLML: 5849, 5850
 29 GMR: 85/2/1/147
 30 SRO: QS 6/7.
 31 John Wallace, pers comm
 32 Bartlett 1865, 188
 33 *DNB*
 34 *ibid*
 35 Milward (1989, 92) gives the date as 1791, but I am informed this is a misprint, and that 1796 is the correct date.
 36 *DNB*
 37 Held by London Borough of Merton, Wimbledon Library. Cf Hassell catalogue (Batley & Moss 1984, 48)
 38 Oman 1950, 423
 39 According to Bartlett (1971, 171) Nelson gave Perry a 'double shaft roller, which cost 100 guineas', but he does not explain what it was for. Presumably it was for rolling the lawns.
 40 Malcolm 1805, 1, 7
 41 GMR 85/2/1/147
 42 Braithwaite 1861, 203
 43 *DNB*
 44 Bayliss 1985, 41
 45 Rocque 1744-6
 46 Malcolm 1805, 1, 7
 47 Bass, unpublished essay
 48 SRO Acc 767
 49 GL 7253/48/236405
 50 *DNB*
 51 Bartlett 1865, 83. In the family vault at the east end of Wimbledon churchyard lie the remains of John Perry, son of James Perry, who died August 1806 aged 22 months. Also commemorated is James Perry, Perry senior's eldest son, who died of wounds received in India 1806, aged 29.
 52 GMR 85/2/1/147
 53 SRO Acc 767
 54 LBMWL: MS by Edwin Chart, 1833
 55 SRO QS 6/8/164
 56 Bartlett 1865, 115
 57 SRO Acc 767
 58 LBMWL: WBC Minutes 2172 (1959/60), 1040 (1962/3). See also Browning 1955 on the history of Wandle Bank House, occasioned by the debate on the future of the house.
 59 Cooke 1927, 37-8
 60 Hassell 1817-18, 1, 121
 61 SRO Acc 767
 62 *ibid*
 63 *London Gazette*, 24 January 1837
 64 SRO 3185/5/3
 65 SML: Simmons Collection, Surrey watermills: notes on Merton flour mills contain a reference to Bristoe at Merton Flour Mill, Wandle Bank, as early as 1887. Kelly's Directories have James Bristow & Sons listed from 1892-1915, but from 1909/10 through to 1918 the occupier of the mill is listed as Trim.
 66 Wandle Park, Ashby monument. Notice of Harry Pollard Ashby's death in *The Miller*, 4 July 1892 indicates that he had retained an interest in the mill and milling throughout his life.
 67 Wandle Park, monument
 68 SRO Acc 767
 69 Wandle Park, monument
 70 Patrick Tully of Connolly Leather Ltd, pers comm
 71 Croydon RDC Minutes, 13 April 1904, 892
 72 WSM: Mill Pond Gardens, official opening 1910
 73 Patrick Tully of Connolly Leather Ltd, pers comm
 74 WSM: River Wandle Open Spaces Commission, *Report*, 1914
 75 WSM: Wandle Park, official opening 1907; see also *Wimbledon Borough News*, 21 Jan 1907, 5
 76 WSM: Mill Pond Gardens, official opening 1910; Warburton 1992

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 5850: deeds, 1784
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 3185/5/3: Wimbledon tithe commutation register and map
 4079/1: Plan of Colour mills at Merton c1690
 Wandle Park, inscriptions on monuments
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