

BEARDS MILL AND THE MENDER'S SHOP (LEONARD STANLEY)

Stephen Mills

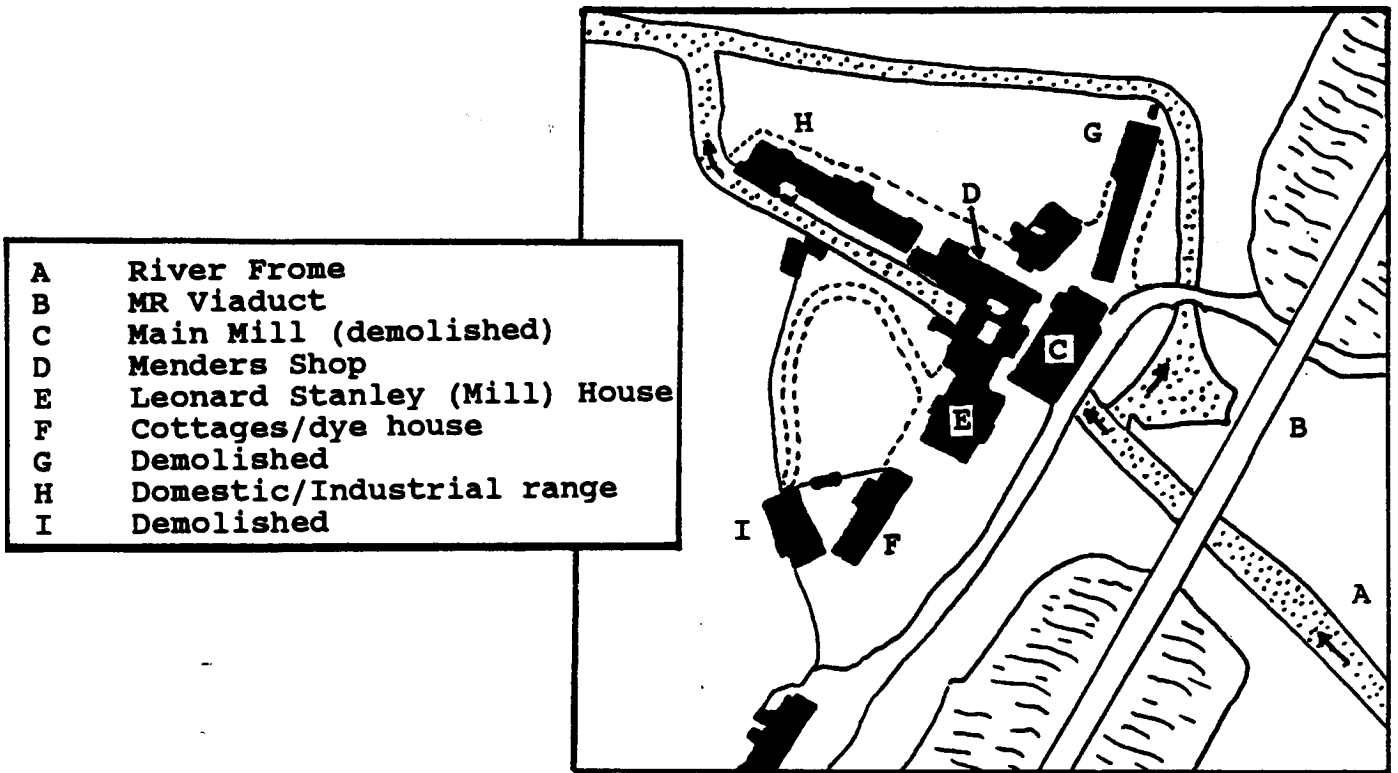
Background.

During the summer of 1991, part of the surviving complex of buildings that originally formed Beards Mill at Leonard Stanley, near Stonehouse, was sold for conversion to a dwelling. The building, which had been on the market for some considerable time had been variously described over the years, although its current title would seem to be appropriate; it is most likely that its original use would have been for the repair of minor flaws in the woollen cloth produced at the mill (and possibly others - see later).

During the 19th century Beards Mill ceased cloth manufacture and became the specialist dyeing centre for a number of the local mills. It had developed out of a 17th century fulling mill, built of local stone with a stone tiled roof, and up to this time, had been a typical self-contained cloth mill. Some of the earliest references to the site come around the 1660s, for in 1667 Thomas Beard is recorded (1) and in 1668, there are further mentions of Merritts (or Merretts) Mill, worked by Thomas Beard. He was followed by his son John, who died in 1732. It was not until after nearly a century of running the mill that the Beard family finally became the owners, (2) presumably around the time of Nathaniel Beard, who was recorded as working the mill in 1751. He was followed in turn by his son John. By the close of the century he had been replaced by yet another Thomas, and it was during this period that some form of partnership agreement must have been entered into, for Davies, Beard & Davies are recorded at the mill. (3) In 1821, they installed a 14hp beam engine of 3 ft stroke, supplied by Boulton & Watt. (4)

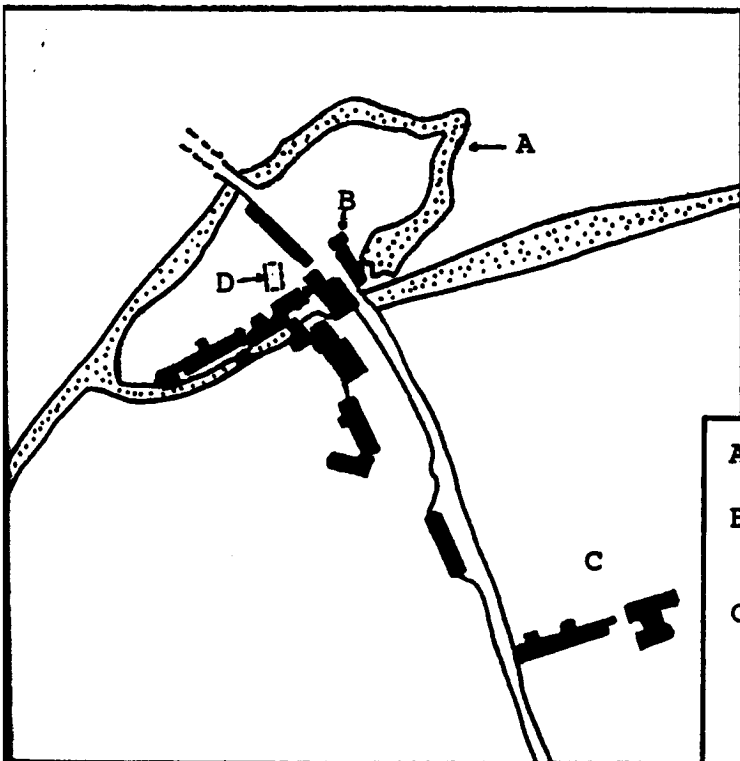
The coming of the Bristol & Gloucester Railway in 1844 brought some changes to the site, for Brunel's wooden viaduct eventually towered over the mill (this was later replaced, around 1884, by a new Midland Railway structure). This large viaduct carried the line to Bristol and its construction resulted in the adjacent loop of the river being cut off and diverted. This was re-directed over a new weir in front of the main mill. A range of buildings of unknown function was also obliterated by the new viaduct. It seems likely that this occurred during the time when the original embankments were built during the 1840s as these were only slightly extended during the 1880s rebuild. (5) The tail-end of the old river loop survives as part of the pool below the weir. A few hundred yards along the track to Stanley Downton, another building and gardens owned by John Beard were also destroyed by the embankment. The area is still referred to locally as "French Gardens", although no-one can recall why!

From 1884 OS Map



- | | |
|---|------------------------------|
| A | River Frome |
| B | MR Viaduct |
| C | Main Mill (demolished) |
| D | Menders Shop |
| E | Leonard Stanley (Mill) House |
| F | Cottages/dye house |
| G | Demolished |
| H | Domestic/Industrial range |
| I | Demolished |

From 1830 Inclosure Map of Leonard Stanley



- | | |
|---|--|
| A | Old river loop. |
| B | Buildings destroyed by building of B & G viaduct. |
| C | "Yards, gardens and buildings belonging to Thomas Beard." The right hand building was destroyed by the viaduct. The area is still known as "French Gardens". |
| D | Additional industrial building - post 1830. |

In all, the mill was owned or worked by the clothier family from the latter part of the 17th up to the middle of the 19th century. (6)

Confusingly, another mill nearby was also called by the same name at different times. This was the mill owned by the clothier Paul Beard early in the 19th century, which stood north west of Kings Stanley. Originally water-powered, by 1826 it also boasted two steam engines. A succession of owners followed Beard but around 1908, the mill was demolished. (7)

In line with most other cloth mills in the vicinity, various enlargements and additions were made to the buildings of Beards Mill at different times. For instance, there are references to building work being carried out on the site during the first part of the 19th century, a period of intense mill building/enlarging in the Stroud valleys. At this time, the mill owner's house which stands near the centre of the site was altered by Joshua Parsons (a mason, formerly of Portsmouth) and his assistant, James Warren, who were both living at Cress Green, Eastington. Parsons was responsible for adding the grandiose front part to the existing house belonging to Mr T Beard, Esq; (8) he may also have been responsible for the construction of the menders shop as certain structural details would seem to indicate that it may date from this period. If Parsons was not the builder, the other likely candidate is a Mr Blackwell of Brimscombe, who was active in the area at the time. He organized the rebuilding of Millend Mill at Eastington, transforming it from a small fulling mill into a substantial factory mill, around 1818. 9 He also carried out work at Churchend Mill, adding a new weir for the wealthy Hicks family, who owned both of these mills.

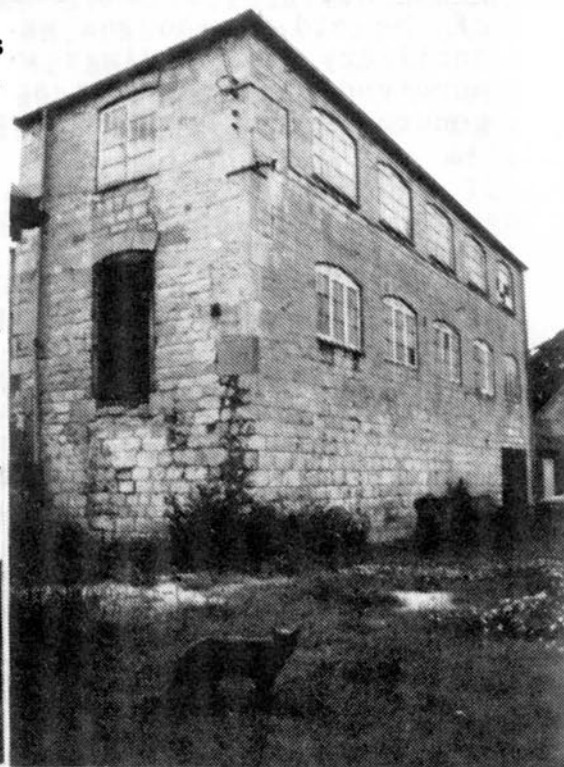
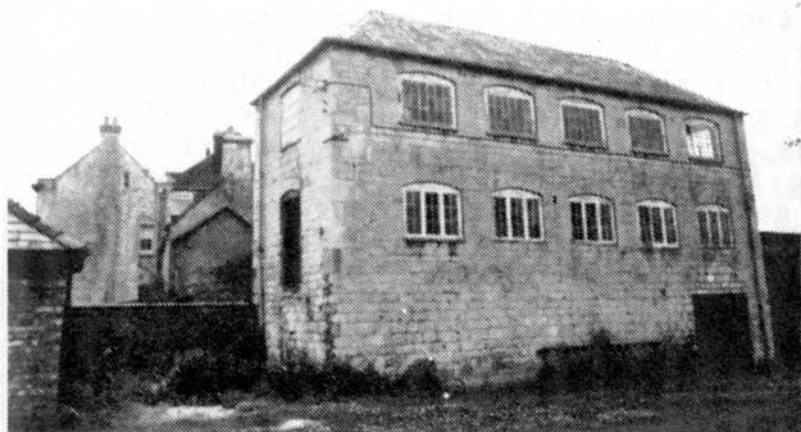
From the 1830s, another John was recorded as working Beards Mill, however it appears that cloth manufacture ceased shortly afterwards. During this period, there were many casualties, for by 1837, all of the Dursley and Uley mills and many of those along the Little Avon had closed. Doubtless attempts were made to find a buyer for Beards Mill, however the decline of the local cloth trade had already set in. The days of the small, independent mills were numbered, for it was becoming the era of the large, highly organized and mechanised cloth mills, or in a few cases, the specialization of a number of mills being worked together. It was as a result of the latter that Beards Mill was eventually brought back to life for during the 1870s, it was occupied by Charles Henry Hooper, (whose father had taken over the running of the Hicks' mills) as part of an attempt to compete with the larger cloth mills higher up the valley. He operated no less than five local mills in unison. Under his control, Millend, Churchend and Meadow Mills in Eastington, Bonds Mill near Stonehouse, and Beards Mill became specialized in specific stages of cloth manufacture. Millend became the fulling, bleaching and drying centre, Churchend was used for spinning, Meadow and Bonds for weaving, and Beards Mill for

The mill house, weir and inlet to the water wheel. The main mill stood to the right of the house.



The Menders Shop with its preponderance of windows.

The Menders Shop, with the mill house to its left; the front section was a later addition.



The interior of the upper floor

"picking and dyeing". Cloth produced in Eastington was carried along footpaths, built up with boiler ash, through the Frome-side meadows to Beards Mill for dyeing and probably mending. (10) This carried on up to circa 1906, when Hooper closed the mill down. The inevitable decline in the cloth trade caused Hooper to initially desert Millend and Churchend Mills, and eventually to shut down Meadow Mills, concentrating his efforts entirely on Bonds Mill.

Beards Mill does not appear to have attracted another commercial use, possibly because of its relative isolation, and after standing empty for several years, the main mill was demolished around 1908. (11) In the ensuing years, the mill house and some of the cottages remained in occupation, and part of the old dye-houses were converted to dwellings. A number of ancillary outbuildings were also demolished. The menders shop survived, although it appears that it was only ever used for general/agricultural storage.

The Menders Shop, as surveyed in 1991 (prior to conversion).

The building is constructed from a combination of brick and stone; the most visible portions are of the latter. It is of three storeys, the upper two being well lit by windows in the front and end walls. There are no windows in the brick-built back wall. This overlooks the mill house and its garden which might explain why there is a taking-in door in the side wall of the first floor which was originally reached by an external wooden stairway, now lying in nearby undergrowth. The external stonework is generally of good quality with well-dressed quoins and arches of dressed blocks over the door and windows.

The ground floor is at present inaccessible, except via a modern garage door which must have replaced the original. There are two brick arches (around 5 ft in height) set into the rear wall, although these are not easily accessible and their function is unknown. They do not appear to be connected with the tail race from the main mill, which runs behind the building.

The upper floors consist of single long, rectangular rooms, one on each floor. Internally, all floor joists, boards, skirtings, timbers, etc. appear to be of elm, some of it in very poor condition. The window recesses are lined with wood and each show the remains of small wooden brackets - possibly these held shelves or something similar connected with mending operations. There are no indications that machinery of any sort was ever operated in the building, nor any external signs of a source of mechanical power.

There are domestic sized fireplaces set centrally in the back wall on the upper floors, although the one on the top floor has been bricked up. The eastern wall of the building has a bricked

up doorway at first floor level which formerly gave access to a two-storey brick-built range that joined the menders shop; the former survives as single storey garages. The wall is constructed from an odd combination of stone and bricks, the transition following the line of the demolished upper storey of the garage block. A substantial tie-bar at first floor ceiling height strengthens the wall at this point. An additional window was added to the eastern wall at some time, having been inserted directly under the eaves. It does not match the other windows in either size or style. The result is that the upper floor is lit by no less than seven sizable windows - clearly light was at a premium.

Overall, considering how long it has stood virtually unused, the building is in reasonable condition, the external stonework being fairly good. Internally, some of the plaster facing has fallen away, exposing a jumble of rough hewn stone, bricks and mortar in some areas. Clearly the outside had to look impressive, although this was not uncommon during the mill building boom during the first quarter of the 19th century. The roof of Welsh slate appears to be in sound condition, although doubtless some of the roof timbers and much of the internal woodwork will need to be replaced during its conversion.

Recent years have seen the adjoining domestic/industrial range converted and renovated to dwellings, and this has not detracted from the area. It will be interesting to see what effect the conversion of the menders shop will have, although indications are that this is probably the best use that could currently be made of this interesting building.

References

- 1 Tann, J., 1967, Gloucestershire Woollen Mills, p 145.
- 2 Kinsley, N., 1990, Boulton and Watt Engines supplied to Gloucestershire, GSIA Journal, p 51.
- 3 Gell and Bradshaw, 1820, Directory.
- 4 Ortzen, A., 1980, The Village of Leonard Stanley.
- 5 Smith, P., 1985, An Historical Survey of the Midland on Gloucestershire, Oxford.
- 6 Victoria County History, Gloucestershire, vol x.
- 7 Leech, 1981, Historic towns in Gloucestershire, Committee for Rescue Archaeology in Avon, Gloucestershire and Somerset.
- 8 Eastington Magazine, July 1894.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Unpublished note by Mr F.J. Ireland of Eastington.
- 11 Victoria County History, Gloucestershire, vol x.

Maps

- (i) Inclosure Award map of Leonard Stanley - 1830.
- (ii) Ordnance Survey map of Gloucestershire (Eastern Division), 1884, surveyed 1882.