

THE RISE AND FALL OF HENRY HICKS, CLOTHIER OF EASTINGTON

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Introduction

The Hicks family came to be connected intimately with Eastington, a village with a tradition of woollen cloth manufacture dating back many centuries. The parish of Eastington is widespread and apart from its main hub at Alkerton, essentially comprises a number of hamlets. The inhabitants were historically, employed largely in agriculture or working in the local cloth trade. The parish once played host to three cloth mills within its boundaries, although these were often worked in conjunction with two others in neighbouring Leonard Stanley (Beards Mill) and Stonehouse (Bonds Mill). The power for all of these came from harnessing the several branches of the River Frome that wend their way towards the Vale and their eventual outfall into the Severn. At its peak in the 19th century, Eastington itself became a thriving mini mill town, with virtually all of its social and industrial life inextricably bound up with the cloth trade. The present article examines how much of the development during the first half of the century occurred as a result of the influence of one family, the Hicks, and provides something of an insight into how, for more than a generation, they came to dominate so much of the life of the village.

The Arrival of the Hicks

The early background of the Hicks family remains something of a mystery, although they formed an offshoot of the notable Cotswold Hicks-Beach family, first appearing in Eastington c1785. The precise date of their arrival and their financial state is not clear, although they already clearly possessed considerable means. On the 11th September 1790, the Gloucester Journal reported:

A bank note £100. No. 4096. Lost between Alkerton and Millend, in the parish of Eastington, in the county of Gloucester, on Monday the 19th inst. Whoever has found the above and will bring it to Mr Henry Hicks, of Eastington, aforesaid, shall be handsomely rewarded. Bankers and Tradesmen are particularly requested to take notice and stop it, if such should be offered by any suspicious person. N B. Payment has been stopped at the bank.

Henry Hicks was clearly a man of means and even at this time, began rapidly to establish himself on the local industrial scene. Although Hicks was new to Eastington, various members of earlier generations had had many connections with both fulling mills and the cloth trade in general. For instance, during the mid 16th century, John Hicks was recorded in connection with Damery fulling and grist mills and in 1632, both William and Arthur Hicks are also mentioned. In the mid 17th century, Nathaniel Hicks was leasing the corn/fulling mill at Upper Cam and a few years later, John Hicks was involved with Nind fulling mill, near Kingswood. Other family members were similarly wealthy; for instance, in 1790, Purnell and partners, an important and well-connected concern based at Fromebridge Mills, mortgaged the site to John Hicks of Berkeley.

It is clear that the Hicks family had long been involved with the cloth trade in various parts of the county, although prior to Henry Hicks appearance, they had no known connections with Eastington. After his arrival, Hicks initially leased Millend Mill (in conjunction with Edward Sheppard of Uley) for 21 years and set about building up a substantial empire that would ultimately encompass property, lands and farms, as well as the two existing village cloth mills, Millend and Churchend (Figure 1). In 1799, he bought the latter from the trustees of

John James, whose father (Ellis) had owned the mill since its purchase during the 1770s from the Stephens family, various members of which had been Lords of the Manor for generations. A number of Stephens had been clothiers, Churchend Mill having been in the hands of the family from the late 16th century up to the time of its sale to Ellis James. Following Hicks' purchase of Churchend, he set about an extensive campaign of rebuilding and updating and by 1806, the modest fulling mill had been substantially rebuilt and enlarged. In the same year, Henry Stephens sold his estate to Hicks, the latter now assuming the role of Lord of the Manor, a position that was later to prove useful in a number of respects. The Stephen's estate also included land and farms at Westend and Nastend within the parish.

By 1820, Henry had been joined in the business by his two sons, James Phillimore and Henry Purnell Hicks, and "H. Hicks & Sons" were adding steam engines to their three Eastington mills. By now, they were also operating Bonds Mill, just over the boundary in Stonehouse parish. In 1822 they installed a 24 H.P. Boulton & Watt engine (of 5ft stroke) at "Churching (sic) dye mills" (Figure 2). Like many others, at times, the Eastington mills suffered from a lack of water and as a result, work sometimes could not start until the afternoon. In 1893, an aged inhabitant of Eastington recalled that as a boy "We boys at Churchend Mill were at play for water (there was no engine then)".

Thus, the workforce stood idle (and probably unpaid!) until sufficient water had been impounded to drive the water wheels and get production underway. This problem was likely to have been exacerbated by other mills further up the valley holding back water in their respective mill ponds. To overcome problems of water shortage, Hicks made attempts to improve matters at Churchend by constructing a new weir and making improvements to the mill race, in the form of an additional stream, long referred to locally as "The New River", although this did not overcome the basic drawback caused by the sometimes erratic nature of the water supply. It was not until the eventual arrival of steam power that this problem was finally overcome.

As his wealth increased, Hicks decided a new family residence was in order and c1815, built "The Leaze" (Figure 3), now Eastington Park, to which he added a large park, a short distance from his mill at Churchend. Along with this, he systematically bought up adjoining land until eventually, he owned much of this area of the parish. Despite the fact that much of his wealth was generated through the efforts of his workers and his mills, he apparently did not wish to be reminded of them from his new house and during the construction of a new stack at Churchend Mills, the height was reduced so that it would not be visible from The Leaze. Likewise, a tall screen of trees was planted along the southern edge of his park, effectively hiding Bonds Mill from his view.

Hicks and his Workforce

Although Hicks seems to have remained remote and aloof from his workforce, he nevertheless made some contributions towards what he considered to be their welfare. For instance, it was Hicks who paid for the clock for the tower of St Michael's church (although this may have been his way of ensuring that his workforce at Churchend Mills would not be late for work!). The gulf between Hicks and workers was by no means uncommon, and similar situations existed with many of the major clothiers in the region. Frequently, as one worker reported to the Assistant Commissioners examining the state of the industry during the

1830s, the masters were "Regarded, not merely with suspicion, but with open fear and hatred".

The tendency to remain aloof from the workforce was further accentuated by placing managers or other servants between themselves and the men. In the Hicks' case, this later took the form of his mill manager, Charles Hooper. The result was that no one knew each other personally. The Hicks family lived its life in splendid isolation, cosseted in its mansion, set in the midst of its landscaped park, and carefully screened from the ugly outside world. The general situation can best be summarised by the comments of a local weaver at the time "When a weaver goes before a master in Gloucestershire, it is as bad as if he were going before a judge". This seems to be how the majority of the workforce regarded Henry Hicks.

Although there was a gulf between Hicks and his workers, he does not appear to have been deliberately antagonistic as were some of the other masters. The Eastington workers were fortunate in having an employer who appeared at least to accept the fact that he was dealing with human beings as opposed to mere links in a chain of manufacture. He clearly acknowledged that at least a basic education was useful through his support for the village school. As has often been remarked, in this age, philanthropy and business tended to go hand in hand and Hicks certainly encouraged at least a rudimentary education for his workers. For instance, he encouraged children employed in his mills on a half-day basis, to attend such schools as were available in the village at the time. Typically, these "schools" were run as a sideline. For instance, William Hurd, one of Hicks' outdoor weavers of Millend, also ran a school on a part-time basis. In his modest cottage, pupils "learned their numbers" in a room that also held two handlooms. Lessons were carried out against the continual background clatter of the looms and the interruptions of Hurd's journeymen.

Local education prospects were boosted in 1818 when from his position as Lord of the Manor, Hicks donated land adjacent to the church for the construction of a new Charity School. In addition, his grant of £50 went some way towards paying for its actual construction. The construction of the new school took away the need for the teacher who had been employed for some time to instruct 30 pupils at one of the village cloth mills. His salary had been paid courtesy of an earlier endowment subscribed by eight Eastington inhabitants. The new school survived up to 1859, when it was finally replaced. As business and religion also tended to go hand in hand at the time, Hicks was also supportive of the church. Apart from his donation of the clock for the tower, there were other occasions where he donated cloth produced in his mills. At other times, presumably when he was feeling less magnanimous, he made sure that it was paid for. For instance, in 1832, the churchwardens accounts for St Michael's show considerable expenditure for crimson cloth supplied by Hicks.

As Lord of the Manor, Hicks was in a position to use his influence to the full and, as the numbers needed in his enlarged cloth mills increased, imported many new workers into the village. Numerous cottages sprang up to house the newcomers, the land (frequently roadside waste) being made available through Hicks' position. In later years, he was criticised for bringing in so many new workers, then only employing the best. The resultant unemployment put a great strain on the local poor relief system although Hicks was still able to influence events. An old inhabitant recalled "...several families who were thought needy, and Mr Hicks

gave them papers to go into the (Parish work) house and they lived there, and went to work and sent their children to the mills".

Useful Marriages

When wealthy families of the period intermarried, it was not uncommon for both family names to be adopted. In the case of the Hicks family, on the marriage of one of Hicks's sons, also Henry, he adopted his second name from family connections with the Purnells, a family of clothiers, industrialists and land owners stretching back many generations (the family had been resident in the area since 1465). Likewise, his other son, John, adopted his second name from the Phillimores, a wealthy clothier and land-owning family that had been settled in and around Cam and Dursley since at least the 16th century. In 1816, a lease of Cam Middle (fulling) Mill mentions the former occupants as being Henry Hicks and John Phillimore; either the social connections between the two families developed from their shared commercial activities or vice versa. Gradually, the Phillimore family dispersed or died, the last of the line to be resident in the area being John Phillimore of Symonds Hall, Uley, and the Knapp, Cam, and his sister, a Mrs Purnell. John died in 1825 and his sister in 1826, at which point the family estate was broken up. As a result, John Phillimore Hicks found himself the recipient of some £14,000 as well as the Cam Estate.

Expansion and New Ideas

At a time when much of the local cloth industry still remained firmly wedded to the use of water power to drive its mills, Hicks, along with a handful of other mill owners in the region, took the still bold move of investing in steam power. This process began in 1818 with the installation of an engine of modest power at Bonds Mill, at the time, leased to Hicks. He went on to install steam engines in four local mills (Figure 4) under his control at various times:

Location	Date of installation	Horse power	Engine type
Bonds Mill	1818	10	Independent
Millend Mill	1821	14	Independent
Churchend Mill	1822	24	Beam
Meadow Mill	1826	30	Beam

The period c1810-1830 was a period of great activity for Hicks, as he continued to build up his business and update and enlarge his manufacturing sites. Apart from a programme of expansion for his existing mills, c1810, he built a completely new mill in the meadows below the confluence of the two arms of the Frome than run through the parish. This was aptly named Meadow Mills (Figure 5) and was, as his other mills had been, initially water powered.

As with his adoption of steam power, Hicks seems to have been willing to try out new techniques and materials. For instance, from as early as 1800, the Bath Committee (of clothiers) investigated the use of Anglo-Merino wool, sourced from various flocks. Several manufacturers were employed to assess it, Hicks being one of them. In later years, he was to manufacture cloth produced exclusively from Australian wool, at a time (c1820) when the only other manufacturer to do likewise was Donald Maclean of Stanley Mill.

Troubled Times

Although the quality of the cloth produced in Hicks's mills was never in question, in March 1835, the business failed. The timing of the collapse was unusual in that this period is generally considered to be a peak of the Gloucestershire woollen industry. However, an indication that trouble was brewing had already come in 1834, when Hicks was "allowed off the next rate for the steam engine at Meadow Mill, £30".

In 1835, the Factory Commissioner's Returns indicated that over 8000 employees, working in 118 factories and mill, were active in the County. Business was good, many mills were working at full capacity, so why the Hicks's business failed remains something of a mystery. Hicks had supplemented his mill's water power with steam engines, so lack of water did not appear to play a part in his downfall. He had invested heavily in his mills, hence poor equipment would not seem to be the answer. Although there was a serious slump in the Gloucestershire woollen industry between 1836 and 1848, oddly, the Hicks were one of the first to fail.

The Hicks's business appears to have been in financial trouble for some time, as at least one of their mills had been mortgaged. In addition, short time working (of "only" 8 hours a day) had been in operation prior to the collapse. Whether the latter was due entirely to the prevailing economic climate seems doubtful, as judging by subsequent events, it appears that Hicks may have failed to devote enough of his time and energy to the state of his business. Perhaps "consorting with the gentry" (a criticism often levelled at some of the major clothiers aspiring to become part of the local gentry) simply took up too much of his time and money! On the other hand, it may simply have been that Henry Hicks had become disillusioned with the business, as in the years leading up to the collapse, his personal and family life had been marked with tragedy.

Overall, the decade was not to be a good one for the Hicks family, as apart from the failure of the business, a spate of deaths occurred. Charlotte Hicks, Henry's wife, had already died in May 1832, to be followed in June 1836 by Hicks himself. The Hicks had previously lost one son in 1824, when Winchcomb Henry Hicks died at the tender age of 21, and in the same year that his father died, the eldest son, John Phillimore, also passed away. Immediately following this troubled period, the estate was split up amongst the other members of the family. The surviving son, Henry Purnell Hicks, inherited the Millend estate, comprising Millend House and Mill and Alkerton and Muddleshole Farms, plus an area of land. On his death in 1862, this passed to his widow, Catherine, and she retained ownership until 1872, when Millend Mill was finally sold off. In the meantime, Catherine had remarried, becoming the wife of Auguste Rolland in 1864. The other part of the Hicks' estate passed to Eliza Hicks, John Phillimore's widow. This consisted of The Leaze and its park, plus Churchend and Meadow Mills. Eliza and her four daughters subsequently spent some time living in France before retiring to Clevedon. Her daughters (Emma, Fanny, Julia and Margaret) inherited the estate at Eliza's death in 1868. Within a year or so, The Leaze had been sold to Thomas Marling, a member of the local cloth-making family dynasty. Up to the early 1890s, Emma and Julia retained ownership of Churchend and Meadow Mills. Julia died in 1896 and when the last of the four (Miss Emma) died in 1901, ownership passed to a cousin, Cecil Hicks-Austin of London; the Hicks's long connection with Eastington effectively came to an end at this point.

Two years after Hicks's failure (1837) Henry Hicks's old business partner, Edward Sheppard, also went bankrupt. By now, the local slump was beginning to have severe repercussions on the trade. His huge mill complex in Uley shut down abruptly, along with his smaller fulling mill at Halmore (which he had occupied since c1820), throwing around 800 hands out of work. Although this was an undoubted disaster for Uley, Eastington was to fare somewhat better, almost entirely through the efforts on one man, Charles Hooper.

A Saviour Appears

Hooper had been employed as the Hicks's mill manager since 1833, and following the collapse of the company, leased Millend and Churchend Mills from them. The change in fortune for the new company was remarkable, as under Hooper's control, Eastington's cloth

making industry was rapidly restored. The situation with Meadow Mill, the newest of the three Eastington mills and built by Hicks, is less clear; it appears that initially, this was leased to Hooper although by 1839, Henry Fletcher (trading as H Fletcher & Son) was making cloth there. His business failed in 1841 and shortly after, Hooper was back in residence. At the time of the Tithe Survey, Meadow Mill and the surrounding land was owned by Eliza Hicks, widow of Henry's eldest son, John Phillimore Hicks. Perhaps ironically, the ownership of all three mills was to remain in the hands of the Hicks family throughout much of Hooper's lengthy reign.

Hooper clearly possessed a good deal of business acumen and trading under the name of "Charles Hooper & Co" soon established himself as a cloth manufacturer of repute. Despite this, the next few years were to become increasingly difficult for the cloth trade in and around Stroud, but in an era where mills were closing at an alarming rate, the Eastington mills continued working. Many workers, thrown out of work from elsewhere, applied to Hooper for work, but in most instances he was unable to employ them. He did however, take on a few workers from Uley, following the collapse of Sheppard's firm, as well as finishing up some of the cloth in various stages of completion at the mill. These were hard times and during the first quarter of 1841, over 300 applied for work but unfortunately, there was none to be had.

Unlike the Hicks, Charles Hooper seems to have been held in great respect by his workforce who perhaps realised that he had been responsible for the salvation of the local cloth trade, and hence, their livelihoods. Whereas the Hicks preferred to "consort with the gentry", presumably to the detriment of their business, Hooper appears to have been a competent businessman who concentrated on his affairs; indications are that he was a firm but fair employer. He was very popular with his workforce for a variety of reasons, one of which was undoubtedly that he had not reduced his rates of pay up to 1841, at a time when many other masters, in the face of increasing competition and falling profits, had done so. In his hands and subsequently, those of his son, the Eastington cloth trade would soldier on up to the early part of the 20th century, until like so many others, one by one, its cloth mills fell silent. However, that was not to be the end of the story, and Millend and Meadow Mills in particular, remained the focus of industrial and commercial activity. Indeed, Hicks' Meadow Mill site now houses a small but thriving industrial estate. His mill at Millend, its working life long over, is again under consideration for conversion into apartments. It is perhaps fitting that the infrastructure that Hicks was instrumental in putting into place within Eastington, remains an important feature of local life over a century and a half after his death.

References

The article relies heavily on an (unpublished) manuscript gradually being compiled by the author over the past 25 plus years, examining the social and industrial development of the village of Eastington. Information for this has come from a multitude of sources, including some oral history, kindly supplied from older inhabitants of the village and former employees of the local mills. Important specific sources of information include the following:

Steam engines installed by Hicks – a useful list of engines supplied to Gloucestershire is available in GSIA Journal, 1991, written by Nicholas Kingsley. Further specific data from order books, letter books and mills site evaluations was kindly provided by Birmingham Library Services, Boulton & Watt Collection, to whom the writer is indebted.

Further information on mills worked by the Hicks family is presented in articles by the writer in GSIA Journals for 1991 (Beards Mill), 1999 (Fromebridge Mills) and 2000 (Millend Mill).

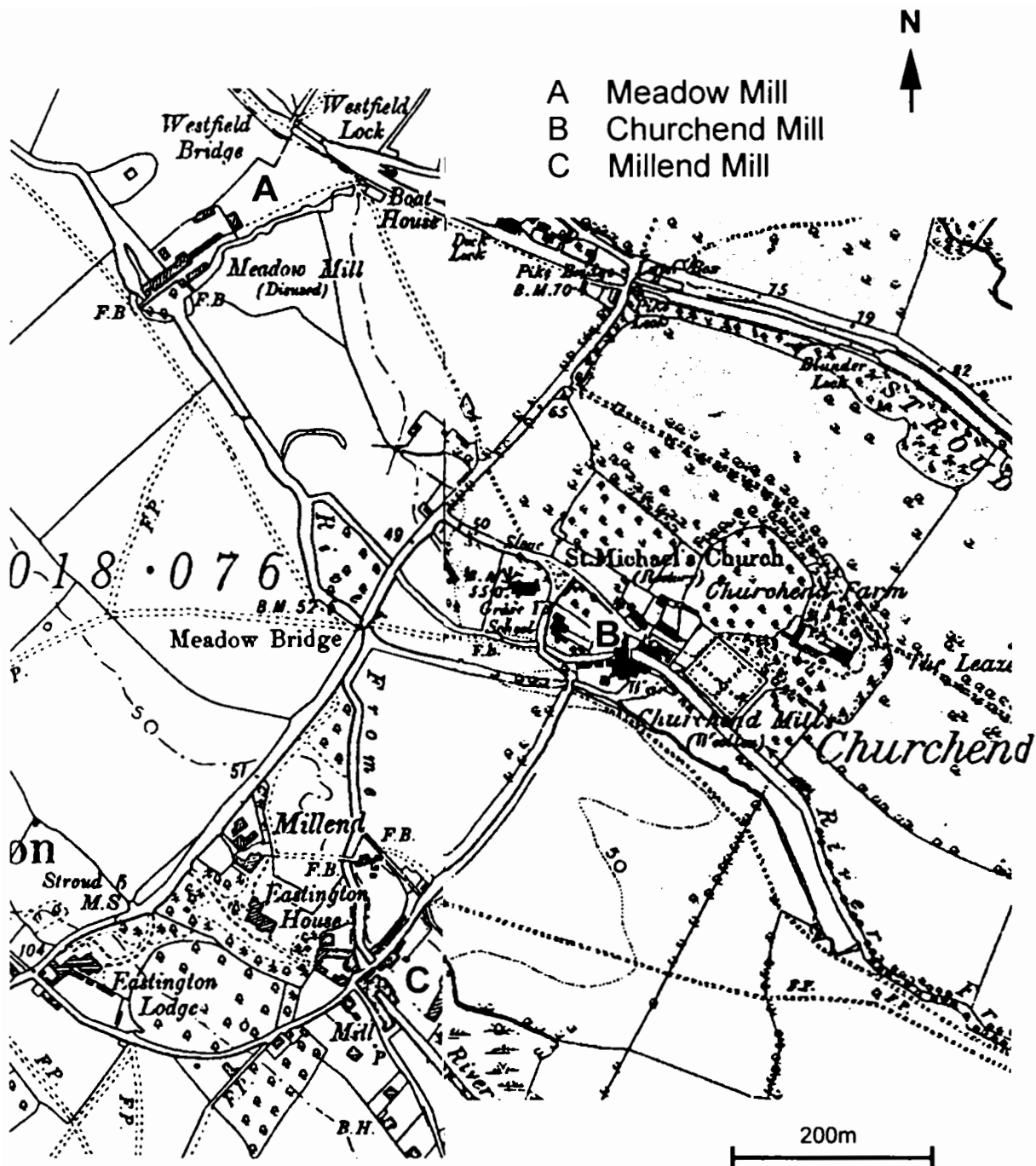
A rich source of information was unearthed in a bound set of the Eastington Magazine (in private hands), a publication produced by the local Temperance Society during the latter half of the 19th century. This included many articles referring to events dating back to the beginning of the 19th century and provided a fascinating insight into the working life of many of the villagers of the period.

Various Hicks family papers, kept in Gloucester County Library, Gloucestershire Collection.

Various Parliamentary Papers, in GCL, GRO and the Library of the University of Bristol, mainly in the form of:

- Reports of the Factory Inspectors. Especially: 1834, 1847-8, 1851, 1863.
- Report of the Assistant Commissioners for Hand Loom Weavers (HC 220) xxiv. Part 5. W A Miles.

Various trade directories for the county.



From Glos. County Series Ordnance Survey Maps 40SE (1901) & 41SW (1881)

Figure 1. Map showing location of the three Eastington cloth mills



Figure 2. The Churchend Mill site, c1880, packed with buildings. The engine house is on the right, attached to the 3-storey block.



Figure 3. The Leaze, now Eastington Park, the Hicks' family home, c1900. Later inhabitants included the Marling and De Lisle Bush families.

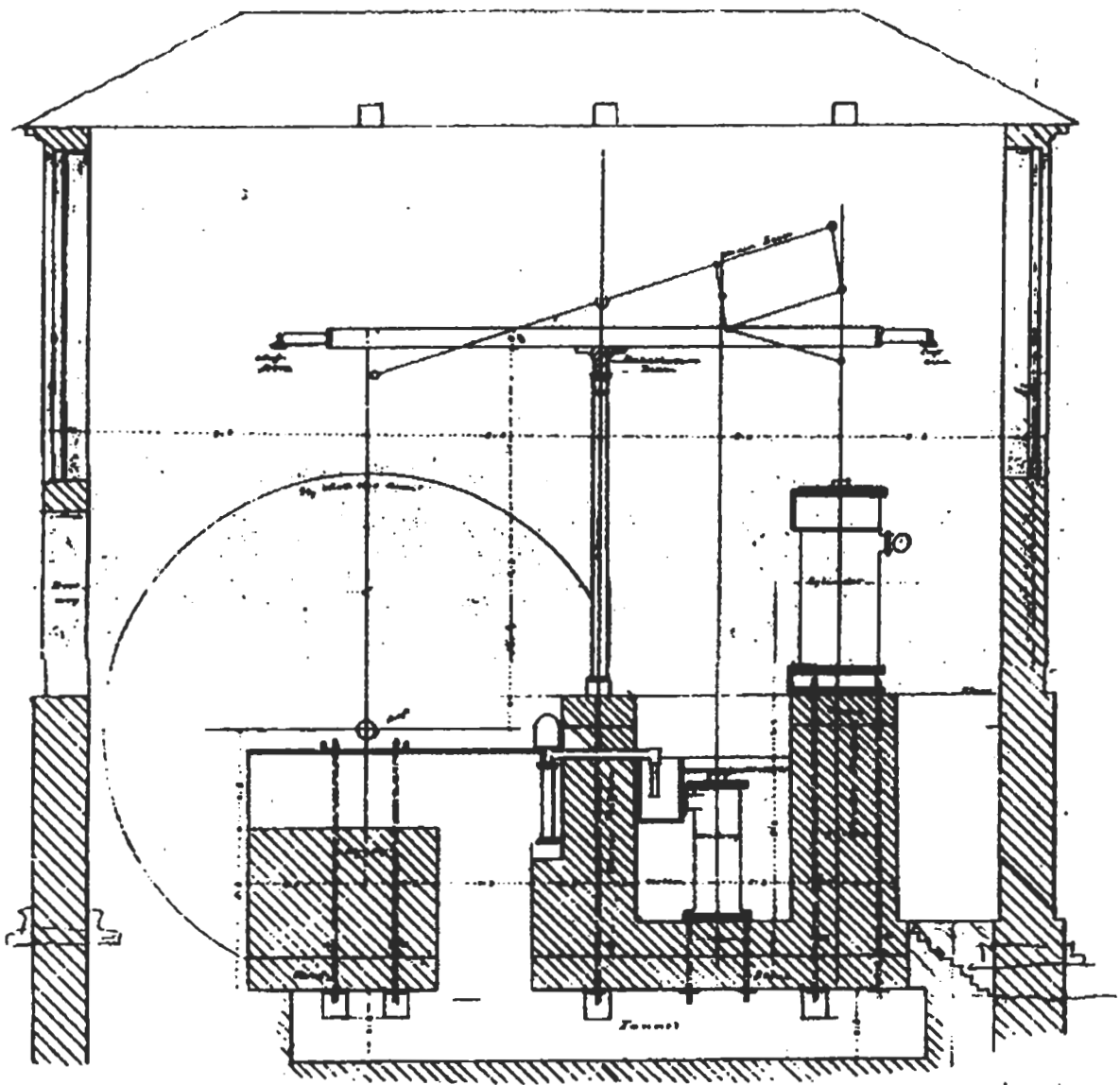


Figure 4. Plans for the Churchend Mill engine house, housing a 24 hp Boulton & Watt beam engine.



Figure 5. The final addition to the Hicks's empire, Meadow Mill, operational by 1811. Most of the buildings to the right were later additions, as was steam power.