

DUNKIRK MILLS NAILSWORTH: CHAPTER THREE.

Ray Wilson

The two previous Journals have given a brief account of the history of this fascinating textile mill complex and the progress being made in converting it into residential accommodation. This article brings the story up to date. In November 1989 there was a considerable re-organisation within the developers MMEC. The then managing director Mr Paul de Savary left the company as did the Project Manager and the chief architect. GSIA has maintained links with the new personnel and members have continued to research the history of the mills. However, we suffered a great loss with the untimely death of Neville Crawford who had been involved in our project since the beginning.

The biggest factor this year has been the continuation of the very depressed state of all sections of the housing market. This has meant that in keeping with a number of similar developments no flats were actually sold to individual buyers. However, in November, 1990 it was announced that the firm of Johnson Fry had acquired 20 of the apartments at Dunkirk with the intention of letting them in the private rental market. The 20 apartments are at the south end of the site in the 1818 and 1827 blocks. It is to be hoped that partial occupation of the building will provide a catalyst for the mills to become quickly occupied once there is an upturn in the market.

The building work this year has concentrated on the northern end of the buildings. The 1798 block (Enderley Mill in the Victorian novel, John Halifax Gentleman) has been re-roofed but the timbers which form the usual roof construction have been retained. The northern block with the wing that bears the datestone 1855 has had its flat roof replaced by a pitched roof. The original one was destroyed in a fire in 1923. The floors in this block have all been reinforced but not yet divided into flats.

The replacement red brick building between the 1855 block and the old railway is now complete externally. This also awaits being divided into flats.

Perhaps the major achievement in the last year is that the building is now at last weather tight.

The so-called Roadside Mill of 1829 which lies between the main road and the mill house known as the Gables has also had its pitched roof re-instated. This had been demolished about 1940 when it had become unsafe. This is contrary to some reports that say the roof was destroyed in one of the many fires that occurred on the site. Documentary evidence has come to light which shows that the building was used as a wool warehouse. This is borne out by a sale notice for the building which

refers to it as the Wool House in 1931. We hope that this name will be adopted by the developers for the building in preference to the present names of Roadside Mill or Georgian Factory.

There is also now documentary evidence that the single storey building opposite the 1855 block was the cloth warehouse. This was built near the end of the cloth manufacturing era on site as it bears the datestone 1870. The building was in a particularly bad state of decay and at present it has been partially demolished ready for rebuilding. This has made it possible to examine the massive sliding wooden shutters (like sash windows) which were fitted to each window. These security measures are consistent with the use of the building to store the very valuable finished cloth.

The building was divided into two unequal parts. The main room was 52 sq m and the smaller was 26 sq m. It is possible that the smaller room, which originally had the only external door was an office. The cloth was then accessible through an internal door from this office. The storage space may seem rather small, but it was not in the interests of the Playnes to retain the finished cloth on site for long. Thus the area provided would probably have sufficed.

Work has continued slowly with the restoration of the three overshot water wheels and the associated sluices and governor apparatus. Both of the 10 ft. wheels have now been operated by water. This magnificent sight is made all the more spectacular by the problem of water escaping between the sole boards of the wheel and the buckets. This is due to the fact that the oak boards tend to dry out with such infrequent use. The problem is to be tackled by injecting a suitable mastic compound which will provide a seal and at the same time permit limited movement.

Interviews with former employees of the different businesses at Dunkirk has continued during the year. We are sad to report the death at the age of 93 of Mrs May King who had worked at the stocking mill at Dunkirk before the first World War. Her father was William Harrison and he looked after the water wheel, steam engines and boiler at the stocking mill. We are pleased to have been given by his daughter a photograph of Billy Harrison as he was known. The story of the stocking mill is told in an article elsewhere in this issue.

One of the highlights of the historical research this year has the identification in the Birmingham Archives Office of the plans for the Boulton and Watt steam engine which was supplied to Dunkirk. (3) Three beam engines were supplied to W. & P. Playne of Minchinhampton between 1814 and 1823. These have been all ascribed to Longford's Mill by previous authors. However, until 1829 both Longford's and Dunkirk were operated by the William and Peter Playne partnership. The plans for the engines supplied in 1814 and 1823 can be closely matched to the present

building layout at Longford's. The plans for the 1820 engine can be matched to the stone boiler house and the building with the 1818 datestone at Dunkirk. This latter engine was a nominal 14 H.P. (10.4 kW) beam engine. It had a 15 ft (4.57 m) diameter flywheel and the length of the beam was apparently 9 ft. 4 in (2.85 m). The length of the piston stroke was 3 ft (0.91 m).

1990 has been a year that the building trade will wish to forget. It is expected that 1991 will see the occupation of part of the mill. That should signal that we can start thinking again about how the history of Dunkirk can be displayed.

Reference:

- 1 Wilson, R Dunkirk Mills, Nailsworth A New Chapter, GSIA Journal for 1988, p30-31.
- 2 Wilson, R Dunkirk Mills , Nailsworth A Progress Report, GSIA Journal for 1989, pp36-38.
- 3 Birmingham Central Library, Archives Division, Boulton and Watt Collection Portfolio 975.