

THE MYSTERY OF CLOTH MANUFACTURE AT FROMEBRIDGE MILL

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Readers will recall that in the GSIA Journal for 1998, some of the history and uses of Fromebridge Mill at Frampton-on-Severn were explored. As recounted, over a period of some 900+ years, the site has seen a succession of uses ranging from corn milling to wire manufacture. The latter activity ended *c* 1810 and it was not until the 1850s that clear evidence of industrial re-use comes to light with the appearance of Uriah Godsell, listed as "miller" at Fromebridge. Clearly, by this time, corn milling had resumed at the site after many years of alternative use, coupled with a period of inactivity. Godsell's milling activities appear to have been limited predominantly to the block at the southern end of the mill's main range. However, the function of the tall, central block of the mill remained something of a mystery.

Built of local brick and with a suggested date of construction some time in the first half of the 19th century, the purpose of the building has remained elusive. It had three floors, the outer walls being filled with sizeable windows at each level. Such a structure had no obvious function as part of a conventional corn mill, as being run by Godsell in the adjoining section. Rather, the layout and configuration of the central block suggested strongly an application that required a fair amount of floor space coupled with a lot of natural daylight. This pointed towards some form of textile manufacturing, a strong possibility in an area long steeped in the manufacture of woollen cloth.

Despite these suspicions, earlier research into the history of the site had not noted any mention of textiles at the mill in any of the usual 'industrial' sources such as Reports of the Factory Inspectors, Trade Directories and publications, etc. However, in 1999, research on another project discovered that throughout much of the 19th century, various textile workers were resident at, and working at Fromebridge, for much of this time alongside workers in Godsell's corn mill.

This interesting saga starts in 1836, with the recording in the Poor Rates of a weavers shop at Fromebridge. This, along with the farm, dwellings and mill were frustratingly recorded simply as belonging to the anonymous mortgagee. The various properties were described similarly in the following year. There is no evidence to suggest the scale of operations taking place or the nature of the products being manufactured, although the suggestion is that hand loom weaving was involved. This long-established practice had been taking place throughout the region's woollen districts for centuries although by this period, hand loom weavers were being increasingly gathered together in specially built weaving shops located at the major manufacturers' cloth mills. This arrangement removed the weavers from their respective cottages and workshops and put them under the direct supervision of the mill owners, allowing the latter to regulate the hours of work and monitor the quality of output. Although most weavers had worked in their own cottages, some had expanded through the construction of small weaving shops or sheds, usually housing a handful of looms worked by immediate members of the family, perhaps with one or two journeymen. The shop mentioned at Fromebridge may have been such an affair; whether it was linked with one of the cottages or accommodated within the existing mill buildings is not known.

By the time of the activities noted above, hand loom weavers in the surrounding parishes such as Frampton, Eastington and Stonehouse, were already being grouped together at local mill sites. For instance, in Eastington, Charles Hooper, the local cloth magnate, had 59 hand looms at work, split between his mills at Millend and Churchend within the parish. At the former, these were housed in a new, purpose-built 2-storey loom shop, added on to the existing mill. Similarly, the large Stanley Mill at Stonehouse had some 90 handlooms at work during the same period. Although universally disliked by the weavers, there were strong incentives for mill owners to follow this course of action as it allowed them full supervision and control of their weavers.

Against this background of entrepreneurism and the need to keep abreast of rapidly developing manufacturing techniques and production concepts, the existence of the little weavers shop at Fromebridge seems a little surprising. However, there is no doubt that textile working was being carried out both at this time and in the following years. Information gleaned from census records shows the following textile-related occupations at Fromebridge:

| Year | Occupations noted |
|-------------|---|
| 1841 | Woollen weaver Woollen cloth worker |
| 1851 | 2 handloom weavers 3 cloth workers 1 elastic spinner 1 spinner |
| 1861 | Handloom weavers Foreman of "cloth factory" Cloth worker 2 wool weavers Wool picker |
| 1871 | Wool and cloth weaver Wool thread winder 5 cloth factory workers Weaver Clothworker |
| 1881 | 8 cloth workers 2 cloth makers |

A number of interesting points arise from the above data. For instance, by implication, the scale of industrial activity taking place in 1841 appears small. However, a report published a year earlier suggests otherwise. In the years leading up to this date, such was the distress and hardship amongst many of the handloom weavers working in the local woollen cloth industry, that a wide-ranging report was produced by William Augustus Miles (*Reports from Assistant Commissioners. Handloom Weavers*. Pt V. Gloucestershire. 1839-40. HC220. BPP 1840. Vol xxiv) examining the state of the industry and the weavers' plight. In the section of the report examining *Combinations and Strikes*, a list of donations given to aid striking weavers was given; selected entries are given below:

| Donation from | Amount (£-s-d) |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Ebley Mill & Friends | 17-14-3 |
| Eastington mills | 14-9-6 |
| Lodgemore Mills | 9-8-11 |
| Pitchcombe & Smalls Mills | 6-16-3 |
| Alderley New Mill | 4-19-0 |
| Holcombe Mill | 1-1-3 |
| Fromebridge Mill | 6-6-10 |

What is surprising is the substantial amount donated by Fromebridge Mill, compared with the amounts donated by the workforces of what were some of the biggest mills in the region. As far as can be ascertained, at this time, there was little other industrial activity taking place at Fromebridge, as by now, wire making had long ceased at the mill and as yet, corn milling had not yet resumed. The monies collected clearly suggest a much larger workforce although there is no evidence to confirm that this was the case.

By the time of the 1851 census, further occupations are noted. Intriguingly, amongst these is the occupation of "elastic winder". This suggests a link with the major local woollen cloth manufacturer, Charles Hooper. As noted, his operations were based in nearby Eastington where he ran all three of the cloth mills within the parish, along with Beards Mill in Leonard Stanley and Bonds Mill in Stonehouse. Like many of the other major manufacturers in the region, his company concentrated on the production of high quality broadcloth. However, unlike many of his counterparts, Hooper was not adverse to trying out new ideas. One of these was the successful development of an elasticated material for which the company became well known. Initially, this was used primarily for the manufacture of gloves. So novel was this material that Hooper was awarded a prize medal in the **Woollen and Worsted** section of the Great Exhibition of 1851. At the time it was noted that:

"Yonly two novelties had been produced in the preceding decade, one of which was the newly-developed elastic gloving cloth developed by Charles Hooper".

As the material became more established, it became known widely as "Hooper's Lustres" and its use spread to the manufacture of trousers and great coats. This elasticated fabric continued to be produced for many years and was later exhibited at various major events such as the International Exhibition held in Paris in 1878. The presence of an elastic winder at Fromebridge may be an indication that at least one section of the mill formed a component of the Hooper empire and that it was being used in conjunction with the elasticated cloth manufacturing activity. If the mill was being used in this way, it could explain the total absence of any mention of independent industrial activity in the usual publications, such as trade directories, during the 19th century. It is inconceivable that it could have operated as a stand-alone cloth-making operation as by this time, virtually all cloth manufacture was taking place in a relatively small number of large, highly mechanised, steam/water-powered mills mainly around Stroud (eg, Ebley, Stanley, Lodgemore, Fromehall, Dudbridge, Lightpill, etc). Again, this suggests that the mill may have been operating as some form of out-department of Hooper's business. As Hooper's business was already spread between five other separate mills, this may well have been the case. For a time, each of Hooper's mills were specialised in different stages of cloth manufacture; Meadow and Bonds Mills were used primarily for

weaving, Millend Mill was used for fulling, drying and bleaching, Churchend Mill was used for spinning, and Beards Mills was used for dyeing and mending work.

As noted above, in the early 1840s, there is little evidence to locate the cloth-making activity taking place at Fromebridge. However, by 1861, there is mention of the "foreman of cloth factory", suggesting that by now, commercial operations were definitely taking place within the mill itself, almost certainly in the central block - there is no other building at Fromebridge that could have accommodated such an activity. It now appears that the mill was split between corn milling and textile manufacture, the milling being carried out in the southern part of the range (this still houses much of the machinery and equipment). Unfortunately, there are no records to establish precisely what was taking place with regard to cloth making. No records for this period have come to light for Fromebridge Mill and similarly, the company records for the Hoopers' business have been lost.

So, although there is little doubt that cloth manufacture took place in the mill's central block, we are faced with a lack of concrete evidence as to precisely what took place. However, the circumstantial evidence suggests that this part of the mill was being used by Charles Hooper of Eastington, probably on a leased basis, as all of his five other mills were. Although Uriah Godsell was operating his corn mill from the other part of the mill, it seems unlikely that he was directly involved with cloth making; this continued long after his death, apparently coming to an end in the 1880s. It was during this period that the Hoopers' business was in the stages of restructuring with several of their other mills being closed down. Eventually, the business became limited to Bonds Mill, in Stonehouse, alone. It was doubtless an economic necessity for the Hoopers to rationalise their business in this way, centralising all operations at a single site.

Summary

There is little doubt that cloth manufacture took place in the central block of the mill for many years and there seems a strong possibility that this was linked with Charles and later, Charles Henry Hooper's, business based largely in and around nearby Eastington. Again, there are suggestions that the activities taking place may have been linked with the manufacture of what came to be the Hoopers' speciality, elasticated woollen cloth. The configuration of the building comprising this section of the mill points strongly to textile manufacture in that the walls are packed with large windows, allowing the best use of natural daylight. In addition, alongside the mill race, there is a large iron drive shaft, originally driven by the water wheels, that carried power into the central block. There has never been a clear explanation for the shaft's existence; however, it is likely that this provided the power for textile applications, perhaps associated with the activity of elastic winding noted above.

As noted in the 1998 Journal, the mill has been converted to an inn and restaurant. The central block that is the subject of the present article now forms the main focus of the mill. It is therefore easily accessible and its fabric may be examined from both the inside and outside.

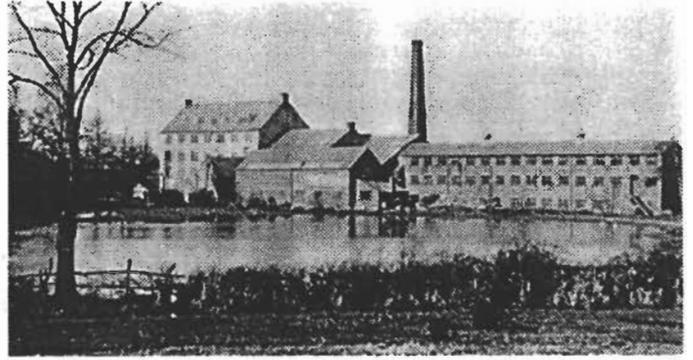
Similarly, the surviving water wheel and its power transmission system, the adjacent water turbine, and the external iron drive shaft are all visible from the rear of the mill.

Acknowledgments

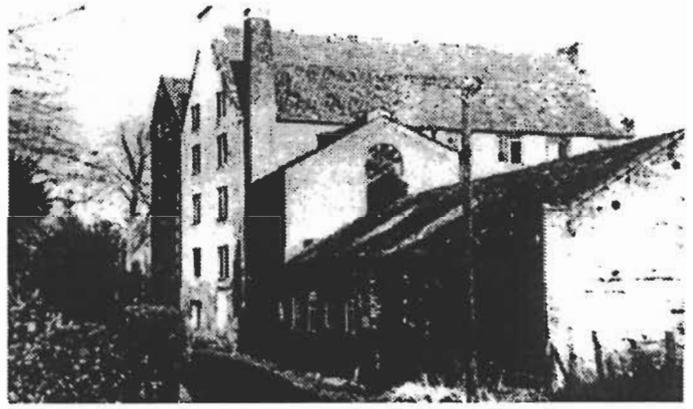
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- 1 Fromebridge Mill, Central Block. Note external drive shaft.
- 2 Meadow Mill, Eastington. c1900.
- 3 Millend Mill, Eastington. c1930.
- 4 The surviving water wheel at Fromebridge, showing the rim gear drive and power transmission system.

