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ROBIN ATTHILL

The gunpowder mills of north Somerset

MUCH HISTORY lies buried beneath the waters of the Chew Valley lake in north Somerset. The 250-year-old Stratford mill was dismantled in the 1950s and carefully re-erected at Blaise Castle Folk Museum near Bristol, but the scattered hamlet of Moreton—all that remained of a mediaeval village—was completely demolished and obliterated.

At Moreton too there was an eighteenth-century mill which was worked as a cornmill in conjunction with Stratford by several generations of the Hassell family. Previously, however, it had been a gunpowder mill. The Compton Martin parish registers record the burial on 15 December 1799 of Thomas Urch of Moreton 'who died in consequence of having been burnt in a most dreadful manner at the powder mills', and also of Joseph Gaskell 'who was unfortunately blown to pieces by standing too near the fire with gunpowder in his pocket'.

Moreton Mill is marked as a powder mill on the first edition of the one-inch ordnance survey (1817) which also marks another powder mill at Littleton, near Winford, a few miles to the north. This had already featured fifty years earlier in Donn's 1769 map of the Bristol district. A dozen miles away, at Woolley, immediately to the north of Bath, there was yet another powder mill, while lower down the same valley gunpowder was also made at the Dead Mills, Swainswick. (The

name has no ominous reference to the dangerous trade, but derives from John Dedemull who in 1369 occupied what was then a fulling mill.) The Swainswick registers for 7 January 1724 record the burial of Edward Roberts and Daniel Workman 'boath kild at the Powder Mills'. The Poor Rate accounts show that four shillings a week was paid to the widow, Elizabeth Workman, while the 'gentleman at the Powder Mills' gave £7 10s towards apprenticing the children.

In the course of time both Moreton and Littleton mills came into the hands of Curtis's and Harvey. This firm (now incorporated in I.C.I.) was established at Hounslow in 1820 and eventually owned 175 gunpowder factories in many parts of the country. The Somerset mills, however, all seem to have been closed down in the first half of the nineteenth century: Littleton, for instance, though still owned by Curtis's and Harvey, was 'unoccupied' in 1839 according to the tithe schedule; yet in 1889 the firm still owned a magazine at Shirehampton on the Avon below Bristol.

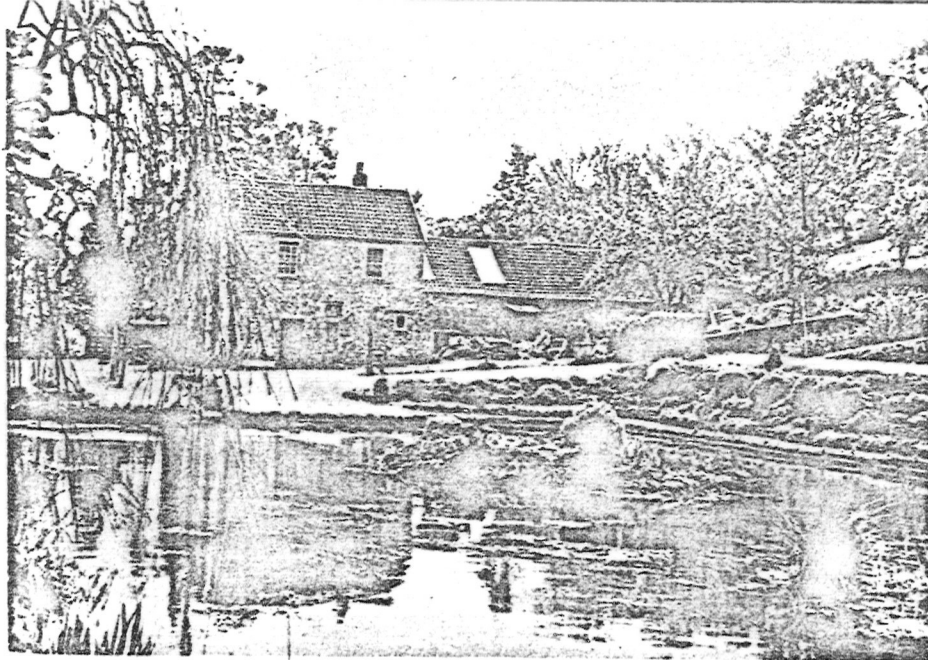
The location of these mills, dotted apparently haphazardly among the green hills of north Somerset, was due to several factors. First and foremost, water-power was necessary to drive the mills in which the three ingredients of gunpowder—saltpetre, sulphur and charcoal—were incorporated. (The best charcoal, incidentally, was made from alder buckthorn, and a field close to the Woolley mill is significantly named Alder-moor on the tithe map of 1839.) Isolation was also necessary against the recurring danger of explosion. Moreton and Littleton were remote hamlets, and Collinson's *History of Somerset* (1791) describes the Woolley mills as 'situated in a deep picturesque spot, and almost environed with wood'—another useful precaution.

On the other hand the Somerset mills were within easy reach of the port of Bristol through which the sulphur and

saltpetre could be imported, and the finished product exported. A gunpowder repository was built by Bristol Corporation at a cost of £143 18s 5d at Tower Harratz in 1722. This tower, dating from about 1250, formed part of the city wall to the east of Temple Gate on Temple Back, 'a greate towre caullyd Tower harrays at the very end of the waulle in ipsa ripa Avonae' as Leland observed 300 years later. Although the magazine was within the city boundary, it was some distance from any other building, and an Act of 1772, which set out to control the carriage and storage of gunpowder, specifically allowed the magazine to remain in use, and privateers and merchant-vessels continued to draw supplies there. But by the end of the century the houses had crept closer, and the magazine was closed. By now the Powder House had been built below the city, at the downstream end of the famous Horseshoe Bend on the Avon. Here ships were required to off-load their supplies of explosives, and this is presumably the magazine listed as belonging to Curtis's and Harvey in 1889.

Something of the history of the Littleton and Woolley mills, which were amalgamated in 1782, can be gleaned from a bundle of Strachey MSS. in the Somerset Record Office. The papers start in 1733 when Hodges Strachey married Ann Parkin, the daughter of John Parkin, one of a group of partners from the Bristol district who together owned the Woolley mills. The Parkin estate at Woolley eventually came to the Worgans whom Collinson noted as owning the mills in 1791, but a series of annual statements record the dividend (one-sixth) paid to the Strachey's throughout the second half of the 18th century, varying from £11 4s 10½d in 1753 to £381 11s 8d in 1758, with a general average of between £200 and £300.

A memorandum dated 1747-1749 gives details of production: twelve men were employed, and there were four mills,



Eighteenth-century powder mill at Woolley; the pond has been landscaped and incorporated into the garden

producing 2000-4000 barrels a year, each containing 100 lb of gunpowder, the best powder being made of 64 lb saltpetre to 18 lb each of charcoal and brimstone. In 1761-2, for instance, about 3500 barrels were produced. There were various outlets for production: merchantmen were supplied, and Guinea powder was exported to Africa on the first leg of the regular voyages which transported slaves across the south Atlantic and brought back rum, sugar and tobacco to Bristol from the American colonies. Powder was also supplied to the mines in Cornwall and South Wales (and presumably to the Somerset and Bristol collieries), and stocks were stored at Tower Harratz for their town customers.

In 1761 the firm was in serious trouble. 'The Spanish War is almost a Prohibition for our Ships are afraid to go to Africa

or at least our Merchants don't care to venture their Fortunes abroad at this juncture.' They were desperately striving to make powder for the government service: samples were produced and sent up to London 'by Machine', that is stage coach or stage wagon. The powder had 'gone through all the regular Process of manufacturing; it has been dried in the Stove its proper Time, it has been ground the full Number of hours, and has its full Quantity of Petre, and if this does not succeed to be fit for his Majesty's Service, we can make it no better'. But all in vain. The trouble was apparently the weight of their runners which were not heavier than from 50 cwt to 3 tons, against the London powder-makers' runners of 5 to 6 tons weight. These 'edge-runners' were heavy stones on horizontal axles which ground the powder on a circular stone bed.

More troubles followed, for when the prohibition on export was lifted in 1762, export licences were granted only from the port of Liverpool. When the firm applied for licence to ship their powder 'Coastways to Liverpool', they were informed that licences were confined to those manufacturers who had already supplied the government, although 'the Board of Ordnance are not ignorant how heartily zealous we have been in our endeavour to make powder for their service'. Their magazine in Bristol was overstocked, 'and should any accident happen to blow up such a large quantity, it would be the ruin of the Company'.

Their fears, however, proved unfounded, and it was not until 1796 that people in the neighbourhood claimed that the magazine was a nuisance, and it was closed down. The site of Tower Hartz beside the Floating Harbour has long since been developed, but the Powder House at Shirehampton survives, with its little quay jutting out into the Avon and an old-fashioned hand-crane which must have served to unload

explosives for storage in the larger building behind the quay.

At Woolley there is still a good deal to be seen, though it is difficult to decipher the precise layout. There are signs of the leat which brought water along the hillside from Langridge to supply the upper millpond, with a group of yew trees at least four hundred years old, now beautifully landscaped with lawns in a private garden. There are a number of buildings of varying age, including what was clearly the magazine built into the steep hillside and vaulted with what may well be Tudor bricks. The present owner has even found a powder tin still carrying its Curtis's and Harvey label.

Littleton, however, is far the most spectacular site. Powder Mill Farm is a large ungainly building just off the road from Chew Magna to Winford (B 3130). The original magazine survives inside one of the farm buildings; its four-foot thick walls made it the obvious site for the headquarters of the local defence unit during the last war. The ruins of the mills themselves are buried in woodland: the mill-pond, now a marshy swamp, was 300 yds long and fed from the brook which winds past the crumbling walls of numerous buildings. Three separate mill-houses can be identified, and there is a curious square edifice which might be mistaken for a Georgian folly but which tradition maintains to have been a shot tower, built of local grey stone, about 8 ft square and 20 ft high.

At Littleton too was found a most human relic. Some years ago while making a hedge near the mills a farm labourer came across an old boot: instead of the usual hob-nails in the sole it had copper studs—an obvious precaution against the sort of hazard which had brought Thomas Urch and Daniel Workman to their early graves. For all too often these little factories in their remote and beautiful settings must with reason have been reckoned to be the dark satanic mills of north Somerset.