

MARLOW MILLS

Water mills were introduced to England by the Romans, and have been in Marlow since Saxon times. The Domesday Book lists one, but during the next 150 years another was built in the town and one at the newly created manor of Harleyford. The two town mills had been given by one of the Earls of Gloucester to Matthew de Marlow. One of these would undoubtedly have ground the local corn, but in the mid 13th century disaster struck in a very strange way. The original hospital of the Priory of St. Mary Overie had burned down, and in rededicating the new building to St. Thomas a Beckett the Bishop of Winchester had promised a 20 day indulgence to all who gave alms to the hospital. This had inspired not only Matthew's descendant John de Marlow to give his two mills to the hospital, but Richard de Clare, Earl of Gloucester, to donate the third one; by far the largest grants to the hospital at that time. Richard's son Gilbert, sensing the flaw in all this, managed to swap the mills for other land, but in the case of the town mills this proved temporary and the hospital regained them. Faced with carrying all its grain to Harleyford, nebulous records suggest that Marlow built two windmills, one to the north east and the other on rising ground behind the Henley road.

The antiquarian book collector John Leland, visiting Marlow in the 1530s, during his pursuit of monastic texts, recorded seeing two mills. One was pressing linseed for oil, the other 'erected for the machinery of thimbils.' After the Dissolution the mills, in common with all monastic property, would have been passed to lay owners. In 1560 one was leased to a wool merchant, John Brinkhurst, perhaps as a fulling mill, but the Brinkhursts found Temple mills better suited to their purposes. By 1585 all three mills were in the possession of the Farmer family. The Farmers were recusants (Roman Catholics) and owed vast fines for non-attendance at church. These were paid by giving the proceeds of the mills, which the Farmers continued to own and run, to a third party; in this case Sir Richard Coningsby, a court favourite.

By 1723 a third mill had been built, and corn was once again ground in the town, which explains the disappearance without trace of the windmills. Another of the mills continued to press seed for oil, although by this time rapeseed was pressed for high grade lamp oil. Thimble-making had perhaps been an entrepreneurial last gasp of St. Thomas' hospital. It was certainly long lapsed when the Dutchman John Loftin re-introduced it to Marlow at the turn of the 18th century. At that time the mills had changed hands and belonged to John and Mary Ferrers. Their daughter-in-law Elizabeth sold the mill estate in 1753.

In 1798 the mills were sold by the estate of Thomas Ricketts and at the time the mills were occupied by the Wrights (*Oxford Journal* – 20 January 1798, page 3). There are also records which show that in 1798 Edward and Joseph Wright were papermakers taking an apprentice and land tax records which show the land was owned by Mr Ricketts and occupied by Mr Wright.

By 1823 the mills had been sold separately. At that time one belonged to Mr Wright, one to Mr Pepper and one to Mr Jacques. Wright and Pepper both described themselves as papermakers, while Jacques ground the corn as needed and made paper the rest of the time. In 1826 the Wright mill burned to the ground in a suspected arson attack, but, miraculously, the other two mills survived unscathed. The Wrights were successful Wycombe papermakers who had moved to Marlow, perhaps to take advantage of the greater power of the Thames current. The three elegant houses which the mill owners built for themselves on Thames Bank at this time still survive.

In the 1851 census William Jacques employed 3 men and ground corn. In the 1861 census Jacques employed 2 men and by the 1871 census Jacques, then 70 employed no men. At the same time

in 1851 William and Joseph Wright employed 20 men and 24 women and boys, in 1861 18 men 8 women and 2 boys. On 5 January 1866 a Parliamentary Commission looking into the best means to prevent pollution in rivers came to Marlow and took evidence from Joseph Wright. He provided detailed evidence regarding the scale of their business (see attached). By the 1871 census William was running the mills and employed 19 men and 9 women. By the 1881 census his son Sidney (then 34) was running the business and employing 18 men and 7 women.

Wright's papermill ran from at least 1798 until at least 1935. They appear in Directories including Piggot's Directory of 1830 and Kelly's Directory of 1915 and in the 1935 telephone directory includes 'William Wright and sons papermill'. On at least two occasions there were serious fires both of which were probably set deliberately. The first in 1826 (*Oxford University and City Herald* 22 April 1826 page 4) and the second in 1914 (*South Bucks Standard* 26 March 1914 page 18).

In December 1939 the land was re-zoned as residential and a request to use them as a sawmill denied (*Reading Mercury* – 9 December 1939, page 18). In the early 1960s they were eventually demolished and replaced with luxury apartments, although the remains of the double race still runs under them.

There are many photographs of the mill at: -

<https://swop.org.uk/>