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HORTON KIRBY PAPER MILLS

Although we are covering only the past 100 years of the parish's history, it is interesting to note that Horton Kirby Paper Mills can be traced back to the 1820s. An engraving owned by James Salmon claims that the mill was founded in 1790, but we have found no evidence of this. The first known manager of the Paper Mill was Henry Hall, who was brother to J & E Hall, the founders of the engineering firm in Dartford. John Hall and Brian Donkin had made the first continuous paper making machine (c 1801). There is a long history of paper making in Dartford, starting with Sir John Spielman in the 16th Century, and during the 19th Century there were several mills on the Darent between Eynsford and Dartford.

When Henry Hall went into liquidation in 1872 the Mill was taken over by the firm of Spalding & Cudlip. They later became Spalding & Hodge, who were also wholesale stationers in London and had other mills in various parts of the country. By 1894, Spalding & Hodge employed about 400 people from the surrounding district. Some are known to have walked from as far away as Horns Cross. These must have been prosperous times for the mill because the railway had arrived in 1860, making the delivery of coal and materials much easier, reducing the previous four mile trip by horse and cart to Dartford to half a mile from the nearby railway sidings. In addition the Mill was well-positioned being built over the River Darent with full use being made of the artesian wells.

The taller of the two mill chimneys was constructed in 1881 indicating a major expansion at that time. It was extended by 70' to 225' in 1918, after Spalding and Hodge had sold to A E Reed. Mr Spalding lived nearby in Avenue House and complained of the emissions, hence the extension! In c 1964 the second chimney was demolished. Steel bands were added to the taller chimney for safety but, sadly for some, the chimney had to be reduced in height in the 1980s. It can however still be seen for a considerable distance and remains a prominent landmark.

After Albert E Reed & Co, Reed International as we know it today, had purchased the Mill, a paper coating plant was built to produce the paper for the "big 7" amongst which were *The Sphere*, *Tatler*, *Bystander* and *Illustrated London News*. In 1922 it was sold to a syndicate owning several of the prominent London illustrated weeklies for the express purpose of making paper for these journals. This venture was not successful and in 1927 they decided to close the Mill and transfer production to their Scottish mills. It was at this time that a new company was formed by James Salmon, who had been manager since 1908, and Mr H Lynch-Watson. Following the takeover, Mr Salmon became Chairman of the company and his son, David, became assistant manager. It was a tradition that was to continue with James Salmon (grandson) joining the business in 1947 and becoming Chairman in the early 1960s. Mr Salmon still resides in Horton Kirby in Kirby Hall.

Originally the raw material used in the manufacture of paper was rags and many women and children were employed at the Mill in sorting and preparation. When esparto grass, from Spain and North Africa,



*Two views of the Mill site showing its development from the turn of the century to the late 1920s
Top photograph courtesy of Jim Woolley
Lower photograph courtesy of James Salmon*



began to take the place of rags, Horton Kirby Paper Mills was one of the first to use it. In an article from one of the trade papers dated September 1924 it stated that “For the first time since papermaking has been demonstrated at the British Empire Exhibition, esparto grass is this week being used as the raw material. The Horton Kirby Paper Co Ltd are responsible for the innovation. A beautiful laid paper is being made, a blue tint being introduced by Mr J Salmon, the expert manager of the Mill.” The article went on to say “In the production of blue coloured papers, Horton Kirby has a high reputation, and large quantities are exported. Mr Salmon delights in recalling the origin of blue papers, due to the accidental dropping of a housewife’s blue bag into a vat of pulp. The old papermaker, much annoyed at the spoiling of his paper which came with a decided tint, told his agent to get rid of it “at any price”. Misunderstanding the instructions, the agent asked a higher price than usual for the paper. Not only was the price readily paid,



*The coated paper salle c 1930. Mr Barton, foreman, is on the right
Photograph courtesy of James Salmon*



*Engineering staff in 1900.
Photograph courtesy of James Salmon*

but orders flowed in for more. Thanks, therefore, to a minor accident, blue paper jumped into favour and has been the vogue ever since.”

Purity of colour was a characteristic of the papers made at the Mill and the clear spring water sourced from two artesian wells - one 300', the other 400' deep - ensured this excellence. The paper produced was of a very high quality and was exported to many countries. One reel of paper produced for the *Graphic* for the Adelaide Exhibition was nine and a half miles long!





Paper Mill outing c 1960

Photograph courtesy of Kentish Times Newspapers

During the War years the Mill was faced with a new task. It was found that information was leaking out through the internment camps. To prevent this, the Government decided to supply the internees with special paper for their letter writing. The paper had to be made so that ordinary writing ink could not be washed off, that any writing with a ball-point pen lightly done in colourless solution such as water or saliva could be easily detected, and writing with a metal point would be clearly visible. This paper was made successfully at Horton Kirby and many tons were sent to the Censor's Department.

The 1950s saw the Mills at their peak with 80 tons of finished paper from the coating mill as well as 150 tons per week from the paper mill being produced. At this time 450 people were regularly employed and the factory ran a three shift system over 24 hours. Workers were called at each shift change by a steam hooter. The

Mill closed once a year for two weeks so that the machinery and equipment could be overhauled. By 1965 the number of employees was 400 and they only manufactured for the home market.

In 1972 William Nash Ltd of Orpington became the new owners of the Mill and still are in 1994. Of the three papermaking machines only one remains. No. 1 machine closed in the late 1960s and No. 3 machine was dismantled so that the Mill could be reorganised. In 1978 the Mill was converted to produce woodchip wallpaper which is popular on the Continent. 80% of the paper produced is exported; 60% of that to Germany. The paper is a high grade woodchip and is made up of three different layers. The process of its manufacture from the pulping room on the upper floor where the waste paper and water are mixed then agitated to remove the larger lumps, through to the sucking, wringing and heat drying process on the floor below is all the more fascinating when you realise that this



Jack Stimpson and James Salmon by the boilers (newly converted from coal to oil) in 1961

DAILY MAIL, Saturday, October 1, 1966

Panties up a 250ft chimney cost £40

By NICHOLAS LLOYD

THREE steeplejacks celebrated finishing two months' work renovating a 250ft. chimney by hanging a pair of red lacy panties on the lightning conductor at the top.

The joke cost them £40 in wages, one shirt and two half-days' extra work. It all began at 12.30 p.m. on Thursday.

The job finished, the men dismantled their ladders and put them on a trolley ready for the journey home to Eastbourne from the Horton Kirby Paper Mills, near Dartford, Kent.

Then, Mr. Dennis Shanahan, the steeplejack boss, went to get invoices signed for payment. But the management said: "No money, until they come down."

Sparks

Mr. Shanahan said that the acid, fumes and sparks from the chimney would soon burn the panties down. The management was adamant.

At 2.30, the steeplejacks emerged from a public house council of war, suited their ladders and began to re-erect them on the chimney.

One, Mr. Peter McMeekin, said yesterday: "At this point, the joke began to lose a little of its amusement."

At 5.30, 180ft. of ladders were up, reaching steel rungs let into the chimney and going to the top.

At 5.45, the steeplejacks were at the top. But the rungs took them to the opposite side of the chimney from the panties.

They desperately tried to reach across the 12ft gap belching fumes and sparks. But it was impossible. A pole did not reach.

Then Mr. McMeekin took off his shirt, lit it, put it on the pole and tried to burn the panties down.

Forget it

He ended up without a living penny.

The steeplejacks retired to the pub.

The operation continued at 7.45 a.m. yesterday.

At 10 the ladders were right to the top of the chimney and on the correct side.

At 10.10 the panties were captured and down to earth.

At 12.30 all the ladders were packed up again and the steeplejacks were on their way to the pub.

Mr. James Salmon, the paper mill's joint managing director, announced: "It was an amusing incident, which is now closed. They can have their cheque."

Mr. Shanahan said: "It's cost me £40 in wages alone. We should have started a job near Eastbourne this morning."

Mr. McMeekin, still shirtless, said: "Anyway it seemed a good idea at the time."

*Damage caused by cylinder explosion 1983
Photograph courtesy of Marjorie Seal*



whole process is 100% recyclable. The company has attained a very high standard - and has been awarded the "Blue Angel", a coveted European environmental award.

In 1983 the huge MG cylinder, used at the end of the paper making process, exploded. Malcolm Strudwick living in Paddock Close at the time remembered waking in the early hours of the morning as the windows of his flat felt the force of this terrific explosion. It took place during a shift change so, fortunately, no-one was in that

part of the Mill at the time and only one man received a minor injury. The large building housing the production area was completely demolished and looked as though a bomb had hit it. The Mill manager was telephoned at the time by the shift foreman and requested to attend as they had a "slight" problem! The front wall of the building and the roof section above the cylinder were demolished, 700 square yards of the building being condemned as unsafe and a further 700 square yards of the machine house needing extensive roofing repairs. It took less than eight weeks to bring the Mill back to full production.

Today there are only 60 people employed, 90% of whom are long-service employees as has always been the case, with many of the employees following in the footsteps of their fathers. The longest ever serving employee at the Mill was Albert French, a millwright who completed a staggering 70 years before retiring in 1949!

Although the workforce today is greatly reduced, the Mill still produces 150 tonnes of paper per week.



*Presentation to Albert French (holding clock) after 70 years service
Photograph courtesy of James Salmon*

As the Paper Mill business no longer uses the whole site, small business units have been set up. These presently include PJM Coachworks, BHF Offset, Ceroform and Phoenix Pine. Some are housed in the old buildings whilst others are in newer ones. Re-development is planned with buildings which are modern but still in keeping with the historic nature of the site.

WESTMINSTER MILL

Westminster Mill is situated on the corner of The Street and the entrance to Westminster Fields. Originally a small flour mill was on the site which by 1894 was run by Thomas Millhouse, a church warden of St Mary's who lived in the Mill House. Cannon & Gaze, cornmillers, bought the Mill in 1902 renting it to Vavasour Earle, of Franks Hall who established the Niblet Solid Electric Storage Co in 1903. On 4th July 1908 the Mill was severely damaged by lightning.

It remained in this state until Walter Millen arrived in September 1914. He transferred the business he had established in 1912 with Mr Rowland Flewitt, of pairing, banding and packing shoelaces, from Eynsford and took over the Mill, renting it and Mill House. Wally Millen, Walter's son, although only 5 at the time, had vivid first impressions of the Mill. He remembered sitting on the saddle of his father's bicycle with his father alongside him watching men remove the grindstone and machinery.

They were given a demonstration of the water turbine which had been transferred from Franks Hall by Vavasour Earle. A handwheel opened an underwater valve and a drive and shaft pulley transmitted the power. As mains electricity supply was not connected to the village until much later, the turbine was used to light the Mill and Mill House and power the insole press which was to be installed later.

In March 1918 Mr Millen purchased the Mill, the Mead, the bridge and the weir. The first structural work undertaken was a new ground floor with temporary roof which joined Mill House to the Mill, and then 1926 saw the start of the major expansion at the Mill. The first and second floors were built and a permanent roof was added, then another wing was built on to the northern end of the old Mill in 1929. This work was carried out at the same time as Dartford Council were replacing the old wooden footbridge over the river with a wider concrete bridge.

In 1930 two further extensions were added - an easterly wing which extended to The Street, and a large ground floor extension to the south with glass roofing allowing daylight to enter. A final addition in 1936, similar in style to the southern extension, was built right up to and covered the front of Mill House.

From 1914 until the Government requisitioned the Mill in November 1940, the business grew considerably, by not simply pairing and banding laces, but also producing them. Cords were bought from a firm in Scotland, cut to the correct length, tagged with tin tags and run through an old grinding machine to flatten them.



*Westminster Flour Mill at the turn of the century
Photograph courtesy of Pyefinch and Swaine*

*View of "The Lace Mill" from the
meadow c 1920
Photograph courtesy of Wally Millen*



*Lightning damage to Westminster Mill 1908
Postcard courtesy of Wally Millen*



The office was manned by Wally, young Mr Flewitt, Mr Rose the book keeper and Mr Bean who was responsible for the new venture into the production of cork insoles. Fifty German braiding machines were bought, twelve machines were obtained from a firm in Lancashire and Wally was sent to assess machines produced in Switzerland, where a further 12 were purchased.

Demand from the Mill's main customer, Woolworth's, was rapidly increasing and the braiders were soon working two shifts. The Company required approximately 250 more braiding machines. With War approaching, machines from Germany were not possible and English ones were very expensive. As Wally's expertise lay in engineering and machine design, it was decided that he would make the machines!



Amy Lambert at her braiding machine in the 1930s
 Photograph courtesy of Wally Millen

Walter Millen Senior was well known for his kindness and generosity in business and social activities. Eileen “Nippy” Filmer began work at the Mill when she was 14 putting tin tags on the bootlaces and was paid ³/₄d gross. One of the many works’ outings she remembered as follows: “In 1938 a day trip was organised by Mr Millen for the workers. We put one shilling a week aside for 20 weeks. It was a train ride (with breakfast on the train) to Southampton. An ocean liner was in dock at the time and we were fortunate enough to be shown round. This was followed by a coach trip through the New Forest. On the return journey home high tea was served. The highlight of the day was Mr Millen giving back to each of us the money we had saved over the weeks for the trip, plus a present of a cut-glass sugar bowl”. She still has her sugar bowl. Jim Austin also recalled vividly these outings and how the men received ash trays, but as he was still a young man at the time he received a sugar bowl along with the ladies!

There was also an outing to Windermere, travelling up on the train and spending the day on and around the lake.

Jim Austin spoke warmly of Mr Millen. “He was a wonderful man, the best employer in the world. Whenever a member of staff got married he would give them a canteen of cutlery as a wedding present and for the first child born he gave £10 in National Savings”.

Mrs Dolly Austin, who lives in Horton Kirby, worked at the Mill for a total of 19 years. She lived in Sutton-at-Hone during the war years and cycled to and from the factory. Mr Millen had a shelter built and if an air raid commenced during the 2-10 shift all had to stay in the shelter, with cocoa provided by Mr Millen, until the all clear had sounded when everyone would cycle home together.



Amy Lambert and Vera Norton in Keswick
 Photograph courtesy of Jean Barnett

On 4th November 1940 Mr Millen received a notice from the Ministry to vacate the Mill which was to be taken over by Vickers-Armstrong Ltd to produce lighting, nuts and bolts for the war effort. It could be that the Germans believed it was to be used as an armaments factory as, according to Wally, that same day a bomb dropped in the braiding room.

Some of the machinery and stock was transferred to Lancaster on 27th January 1941, some was stored at Holmesdale where Mr and Mrs Millen Senior now lived and some was stored by James Salmon at the Paper Mill. All was safely returned to Westminster Mill on 12th April 1946 and production began again only 19 days later.

Of the 39 women who had moved to Lancashire with the firm, eight returned to work at the Mill. Some of the other women who had remained in the area also returned, and numbers soon swelled as the men were demobbed.

THE MILL OUTING
 HAS BEEN ARRANGED BY
Messrs. Flewitt & Millen, Ltd.,
 HORTON KIRBY
 TO
KESWICK and
WINDERMERE
FRIDAY & SATURDAY,
JULY 20th & 21st, 1934.

ITINERARY.

FRIDAY, JULY 20th

P.M.
 10.30 LEAVE WESTMINSTER MILL BY COACHES TO EUSTON
 11.30 ARRIVE EUSTON
 11.45 TO BED ON TRAIN

SATURDAY, JULY 21st

A.M.
 7.0 BREAKFAST ON TRAIN
 8.0 ARRIVE KESWICK
 8.45 LEAVE KESWICK BY COACHES TO GRASMERE
 9.30 LEAVE GRASMERE
 10.30 ARRIVE AWBLESIDE
 11.0 LEAVE AWBLESIDE BY STRAMER
 11.25 ARRIVE BOWNESS, WALKS, FISHING, BOATING,
 TRIPS ON LAKE, ETC., ETC.

P.M.
 5.0 LEAVE WINDERMERE STATION.
 Bowness to Windermere (distance about 14 miles) frequent
 Bus Service.

7.0 DINNER ON TRAIN.
 11.15 ARRIVE EUSTON.
 11.20 LEAVE EUSTON BY COACHES TO HORTON KIRBY.
 11.57 ARRIVE HORTON KIRBY.

NOTE. Brush and Comb essential. Night attire optional.

Unfortunately, demand never returned to that of the pre-war years and on 8th January 1952 the company ceased trading. Walter Millen died in January 1961 aged 86. A wooden seat with a commemorative plaque to his memory was placed in Westminster Field not far from the Mill.

In 1952 the Mill was sold to the J Day Group which continued to make shoe laces until 1968. J Day then entered the electrical industry and manufactured cable and harnessing for their main customer,



*Fire at Westminster Mill
Photograph courtesy of Kentish Times Newspapers*

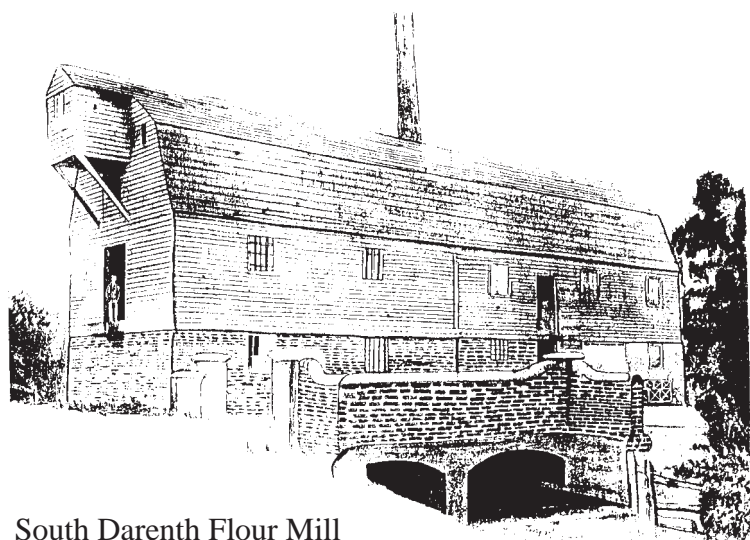
the Post Office, which at that time incorporated telecommunications. Part of the factory was sublet, one company being Barker and Tytheridge who manufactured lampshades during the 1960s. At the end of the 70s a new company was formed, Daflex Ltd, which made some telephone cable harnesses, different types of audio and electronic cable harnesses and terminations.

In 1975 a former employee set fire to the wing by the bridge - resulting in a complete rebuild. The fire destroyed £50,000 of hospital equipment ready for export by the company, Jacob White Ltd, who were leasing part of the factory. The loss proved too great and they closed down. The J Day Group continued production at the Mill until 1991. The building is unoccupied in early 1994, but there has been much speculation about the redevelopment of this prime riverside site.

SOUTH DARENTH FLOUR MILL

The building at Mallys Place bridge, South Darent, stands on the site of an old timber-clad flour mill which was constructed in about 1800. It was owned by Stephen and George Cannon and then William Muggeridge and Thomas Millhouse and then by Thomas Millhouse alone by 1894. It had been a water mill which in the 1870s had acquired auxiliary steam power in order to increase efficiency and competitiveness.

Disaster struck on 1st December 1879 when the Mill was destroyed by fire but it was soon re-built by Thomas Millhouse as a three-storey brick building with slate roof. It is thought that rollers replaced the millstones in 1894. Mr Millhouse died in 1899 and the Mill was put up for sale. Its use as a flour mill ceased in the early part of this Century along with the majority of mills in this country. The building was used for furniture storage but also stood empty for long periods until 1960 when Repetition Woodworks took it over. The last owners of Repetition were Tony and Olive Lee who made garden furniture and made-to-order fitted wooden furniture. Unfortunately substantial damage caused in the 1987 storm brought this use to an end. In 1993 the mill building was modified and restored for residential use in keeping with its character. It was suggested that this and other houses built on adjoining land in 1994 were given the name Thomas Millhouse Close.



South Darent Flour Mill