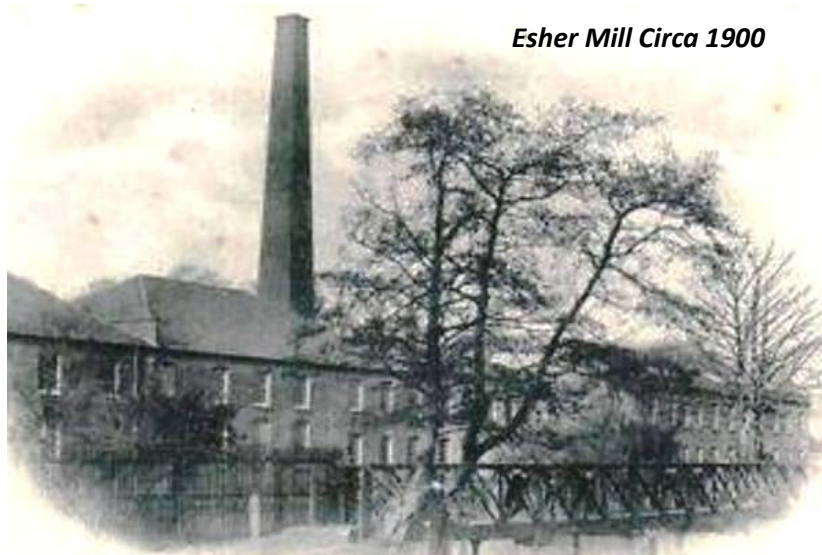


AN ACCOUNT OF ROYAL MILLS, ESHER

by G.B. Greenwood



Esher Mill Circa 1900

An extract from the Monograph

The recent complex of Mill buildings lay immediately north of the point where the London to Southampton railway line crosses the River Mole between Esher and Hersham stations. The buildings formed part of a former island of some 2 ½ acres formed by two branches of the river. The eastern branch, which originally worked the water wheels, has long since silted up. The late buildings appear to date from the mid 19th century with many later additions. They have now been cleared for industrial re-development. The Mill's present name dates from about 1852, possibly an allusion to Esher's royal associations. The Mills have a long history and were an important manufactory in the 17th and 18th centuries for brass wire and associated merchandise.

Mediaeval Background

The present Mill stands on the river Mole a few hundred yards downstream from what was once the Manor House of Esher. Its precursor was part of the manorial property. Domesday (1086) lists no Mill at Esher, but the Rotuli Curiae Regis records that in the first year of King John (1199/1200) the monks of Croix St. Leufrey, to whom the Manor of Esher had been given by William 1st, came into the King's Court and entered into a recognisance to pay for their Mill at Ashal (Esher) 12 broches of eels yearly to Henry de Bohun and Reginald Cruce, by the hands of Roger the Miller (F. Palgrave edition, Vol. II, p.118). Where this Mill was situated is not clear but the evidence of early 16th century field names (Millgrove, Millcroft) suggests that it was near its present situation.

In the 13th century the manor passed to the See of Winchester. The Mill was taken into the Manor park when it was enlarged in 1510/12. A rental of 1525 calls it 'Wrexford Mill' (Hardy and Page papers app.40 held at the Surrey Record Office). 'Wrexford' evidently refers to a place here called King's Ford in an Inquisition of 1595, the land adjoining being occupied by one Edmund Moore (Hardy and Page papers).

In 1539 the Manor was acquired by the Crown and incorporated into the Kings's Chase of Hampton Court. It seems likely that the Mill went out of use about this time to keep strangers out of the Chase, since a measured survey of the manorial lands made in or about 1606 (Public Record Office M.P.E.E. 213) makes no mention of a Mill.

In 1549 the Chase was disparked and in 1553 Queen Mary returned the Manor to the See of Winchester. In the 1580s the Crown resecured possession and granted the Manor to the Drake family. The Drakes appear to have used the property as profitably as they could. Although the survey of 1606 makes no mention of a Mill, it does show a tiny islet in the Mole where the later Mill was erected, and close by a 'warehouse' and house occupied by Edmund Moore. In 1593/4 Moore was taxed on 'goods' - as opposed to 'land' - which suggests that he was a merchant (Surrey Archaeological Society's Collections 18). His 'warehouse' was clearly some sort of commercial enterprise, and it features in the development of the Mill until well into the 18th century.

The First Brass Wire Factory

According to John Houghton, F.R.S., writing in 1697 ('Husbandry and Trade Improved') in about 1649 Jacob Momma and Daniel Demetrius began manufacturing brass wire here, using rose copper from Sweden. Exactly when they took over is not clear, for the 17th century Esher Manorial Court Rolls are missing. However, two 'Particulars of the Manor of Esher' dating from 1670 show that Momma had a lease of the Mill at £40 p.a., with 16 years to run, and that the Mill having cost £3,000, would be worth £100 p.a. when the lease had expired. There is an implication that the Mill was new built by Momma on the river bank. The property included 14 acres of land. Later evidence shows that the 'warehouse' was included.

In 1652 war broke out with Holland and the following year Momma was arrested, presumably as an enemy alien. He was questioned by an officer of the Council of State, who discharged him from restraint and returned his papers to him (State Papers Domestic).

It seems clear that Momma's Esher Mill still continued to grind corn as occasion required. William Lilly, writing from his house at Hersham nearby, to Elias Ashmole, on October 16th 1671 says 'Water so high we cannot get to the Mill with our corn or the Mill work'. He can only have been referring to the Esher Mill. ('Elias Ashmole' by C.H. Jostin, 5 Vols. Clarendon Press 1966).

Whatever trade difficulties Momma may have had, he did very well out of his brass wire and other milling activities. In 1664, he was taxed on a house of 20 hearths; another of five hearths and a third of twenty hearths for his workmen. He lived in the second largest house in Esher, exceeded only by the former Bishops' Palace with 34 hearths; was held in high esteem as a gentleman, and held all the better parish offices.

Momma's house would appear to have stood at the northern end of the former Bishops' 'Pond Garden'. Eighteenth and early nineteenth century estate plans show a large house here, which was demolished when the railway embankment was built in the early 1830s. The house and Mill can just be descried in Knyff and Kip's engraving of Esher Place done in 1709.

Jacob Momma died in February 1680 and was buried in Esher churchyard where his wife joined him in 1715. His lease of the Mill expired in 1687 and in that year his son James surrendered some adjoining copyholds - including the 'warehouse' - to Anthony Parker, citizen and Haberdasher of London (Kingston Borough Records 4/3/2).

The Dockwra Company

In 1691 the Esher Mill was leased by a new joint stock Company headed by William Dockwra. Dockwra, who finds a place in the Dictionary of National Biography, was an ingenious and adventurous entrepreneur. In 1691 Dockwra floated a joint stock company to exploit the benefits of a patent granted to Thomas Meale, for the sole making and vending of brass and brass wire by a particular process. £12,000 public stock was raised. The Company secured the Esher premises, erected proper buildings, hired foreign workmen and carried on the undertaking at great expense, but with so little profit that in a few years the greater part of their stock was exhausted. So says Josiah Brown in his 'Cases in Parliament' (1779).

The Company smelted English copper at Esher, which was an innovation, and initially at any rate, made about 80 tons of brass annually, which was about half the total English production. It produced vast quantities of brass wire and pins, and the pin-making part of the factory was organised on mass production lines. Top pin-makers claimed to be able to make 24,000 pins a day!

The Company evidently began with a flourish and high hopes of success, nor was it troubled by the Company of Mineral and Battery Works, whose powers had been curtailed by legislation. As the only factory of its kind in England experienced workers had to be brought in from abroad. Dutch brass workers and their families were invited to Esher and there is plenty of evidence of them in the Esher parish registers.

However, after a resounding start things began to go wrong for the Dockwra Company. By 1696 it was in such a bad way that the proprietors sought for somebody capable of managing it better and increasing its profitability. A certain George Ball was appointed agent, manager, director and overseer of the Mill at Esher for life at a salary of £78 p.a., with a house free of rent, rates and taxes, and was to be given annually free of charge five chaldrons of coal (about 6 tons) and ten barrels of small beer. In addition he was to receive a commission of 3s. 6d. for every hundredweight of brass wire made at Esher or elsewhere by the Company whether or not the Company was under his management, provided it was up to a standard set by an agreed sample.

These terms look over-generous but he seems to have been a good manager. One of his first acts in 1696 was to secure permission to import four pairs of 'grist-stones' - grind-stones - from St. Malo in France. England was then at war with France and the importation appears to have been arranged through returning prisoners of war. But matters soon turned sour. In 1698, Ball was dismissed by John Coggs the banker and Ball sued the Company for re-instatement or compensation. The law suits lasted for fifteen years!

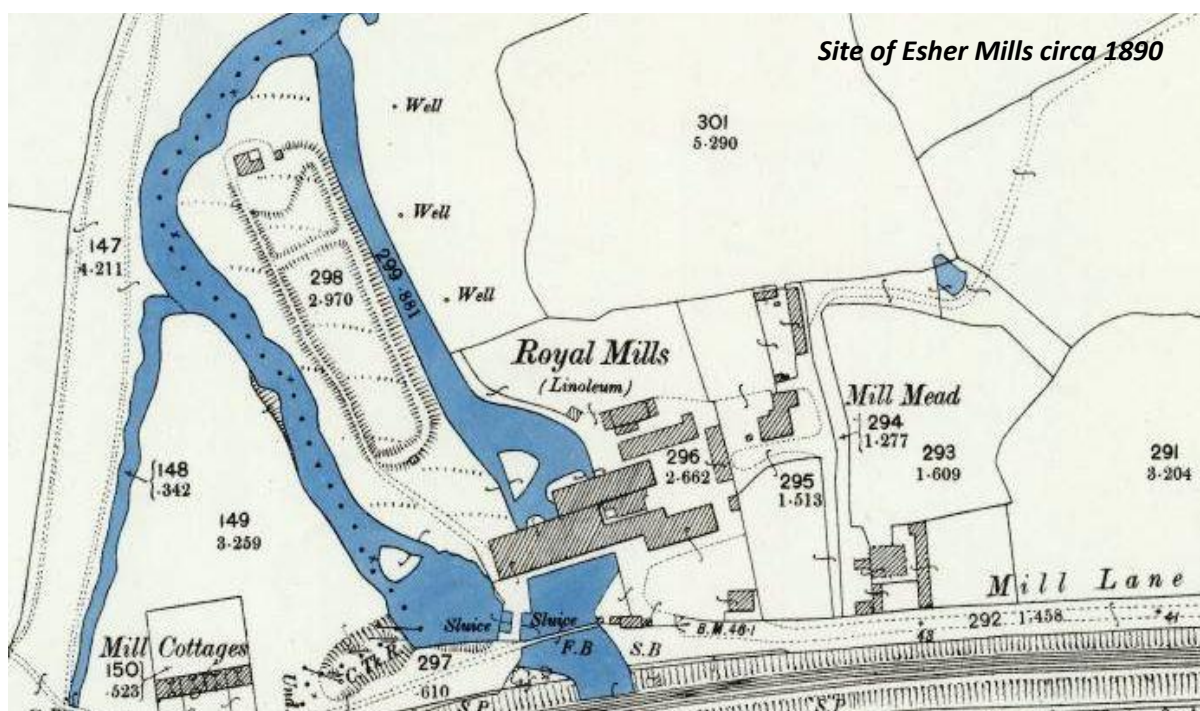
Ball versus Coggs and the Bristol Brass Company

In 1706 the House of Lords allowed Ball's various claims less his 3s. 6d commission on the brass wire produced after he left the company and he was awarded a total of £1,066 0s. 4d. In 1709 he appealed to the House of Lords for payment of his 3s. 6d. royalty on the brass being produced at Esher. The Lords eventually agreed that his claim was just and lawful and computed that up to January 12th 1712, he was entitled to £5,108.

Coggs was running into financial difficulties of his own and on 30th September 1709, a merger was concluded between the Esher and a Bristol enterprise, the new Company to be known as the Societies of Bristol and Esher for making Brass, Battery and Brass Wire. Coggs died in 1710 and in 1712 another Act was required to settle his affairs.

The Esher Mill evidently thrived under the new arrangement and the union with the Bristol Company lasted until the 1740s. A certain William Hughes mortgaged the Esher mill in 1743 and in 1750 leased it to a Joseph Biddle. Biddle was a substantial corn merchant and miller in Esher and also a Quaker. Thereafter until 1784 he and his partners used the Mill for corn-grinding. The Mill passed through several hands and Saville & Co. corn millers remained until the 1840's.

In or shortly before 1847 William McMurray, an enterprising Edinburgh business man, secured an interest in the property, cleared the site and erected a substantial paper mill. He installed thirteen pulp beating machines and machinery for tearing rags. He enlarged the water head by converting the former 'Pond Garden' into a reservoir. The enterprise became one of the largest paper mills in Surrey, employing some 200 men and women. But not for long. On December 23rd 1853 the premises were destroyed by fire to the loss of some £100,000. The present name, 'Royal Mills' dates from McMurray's time. McMurray salvaged what he could and about 1860 the premises were leased for the manufacture of linoleum. This was terminated by another fire. In 1872, the patent Cotton Gunpowder Company applied to the Esher magistrates for a licence to manufacture gun-cotton in the Mill. The local residents objected and the application was dropped. The premises were then taken by Messrs. Wells & La Motte of Camberwell for a new attempt to manufacture linoleum. This was more successful than the first venture. It survived a fire in 1877 but not another in the late 1890s.



James Burn & Co.

In 1902, the premises were bought for £5,000 by the bookbinding firm of James Burn. They comprised a factory, a row of eight workmen's cottages, a gate-keepers lodge, a manager's house and 12 acres of land. The factory was equipped with a steam engine, boiler and shafting as well as an undershot water wheel. The Company survived a fire in 1908 only to face severe industrial troubles in 1913. A strike broke out at the Company's London premises which was embittered by the transfer of work to the Esher Mill. It was only brought to an end by the outbreak of the war in 1914.

In 1940, after the bombing of the Vickers Aircraft factory at Brooklands, James Burn made over part of the factory for the manufacture of aircraft parts. This continued until 1946.

James Burn subsequently amalgamated with another firm, and the old Mill premises are now subject to re-development. The 'Pond Garden' reservoir was in-filled after the floods in 1968. It lay immediately south of the railway bridge over the river Mole.

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