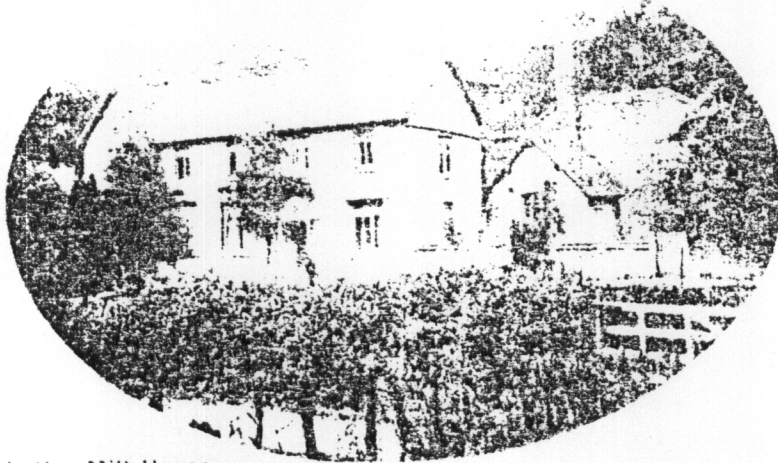


No source given.

From Halesowen
Library,



Lutley Mill House.

—as it was in the early years of this century.

Photograph loaned by Mr. F. Billingham, Halesowen.

TWO OLD CRADLEY MILLS

PETER BARNSELY

PROBABLY very few of the hundreds of people daily travelling the A458 from Stourbridge to Birmingham, along its Drows Holloway - Stourbridge Road stretch, realise that as they have descended the former and are accelerating to ascend the latter, they are passing over a narrow stream carried under the road by culvert. Doubtless even fewer are aware of the former economic significance of this stream—known locally as Pudding Brook—whose flow was once manipulated to turn water-wheels in the service of small mills, first for the grinding of corn and later (supplemented by steam engine) for the forging of metal as well.

If you stand at the foot of Drows Holloway and look southwards towards Clent, you can discern the tops of a ring of tall trees less than a quarter of a mile away along the stream. These trees fringe the shallow circular depression where Lutley Mill and its dwellinghouse still stand. Turning northwards, and following the stream along Belle Vale in the direction of its flow, you would come—again in no more than a quarter of a mile—to the site of Shilton Mill which stood almost alongside the present Shelton Inn. Here, the stream flows along the base of a few crumbling feet of brickwork—the only standing evidence that a mill once flourished here. The one and

a half acres of ground which was formerly covered by the millpool is now entirely overgrown by rank grass, nettles and trees.

LONG HISTORY

These two old mills have a long history and it is possible to obtain vivid but fragmentary glimpses of this history from surviving deeds, letters and other documents. There is record of there having been a 'Cradley Mill' as far back as the twelfth century and it is possible that this stood on the site of the present Lutley Mill. Lutley and Cradley are contiguous and the latter has always been the bigger and more important of the two. A mill in Lutley could well be described as 'Cradley Mill,' just as nowadays Cradley is, officially, in Halesowen. The twelfth century mill might even have been Shilton Mill, but this is less likely. Lutley Mill is the first mill along the length of the stream; its site suggests that it is the older mill.

In the reign of Queen Elizabeth, a survey of Sir John Lyttelton's land mentioned 'Birch's Millpond.' This is almost certainly Lutley Mill, which is still referred to by some old people as Birch's Mill. The lane leading to it was known as Birch's Lane until building development largely obliterated it in the nineteen-fifties.

The more recent history of these mills can be traced with certainty from the eighteenth century. On the 11th August, 1777, the Shilton Water Corn Mill was leased to Daniel Winwood by one Thomas Brettell who, it was recorded, had lately purchased the mill from the Right Honourable Lord Lyttelton—who therefore had once owned both these old mills. Winwood,

whose lease was to be for eighty-four years, was a chapemaker—a chape could be either the hook of a scabbard, the metal cap of a scabbard-point or the plate on the back of a buckle by which it was attached to a belt. The lease stated, with that conscientious precision so cherished by the law, that the mill was conveyed "together with all wheels, troughs, dams, stanks, weirs and aqueducts to the same belonging. (A 'stank' is presumably a pond, from the French 'étang'.)

Within less than a year, on 7th July, 1778, Winwood mortgaged his property to John Taylor, Sampson Lloyd, Nehemiah Lloyd and Charles Lloyd, for the sum of £1,000 and interest on that sum. Winwood could not pay his creditors although he sold off other property of his (including a 'Blade Mill' at Halesowen) in his efforts to do so. By 1787 (the exact year is uncertain) Winwood was bankrupt and at a public auction his lease on Shilton Mill was bought by Richard Eaton—the miller at Lutley Mill.

RICHARD EATON

On the 2nd October, 1786, Richard Eaton had taken a forty year renewal of his lease of Lutley Mill; the lessor was Bate Richards, a Stourbridge maltster and the mill was still described as a Water Corn Mill though it must, by this time, have become a forge as well. In any case Eaton, who was to pay £29 a year rent for Lutley Mill, must have been confident of the future, having within a year renewed the lease of one mill and obtained the lease of another.

On the 22nd March, 1791, Eaton made his will, in which he bequeathed to his son, Richard

Augustus Eaton—when he should attain the age of twenty-one years —“ . . . all my two water corn mills called Lutley Mill and Shilton Mill for all the remainder of my term of years therein respectively.” He charged his copyhold estate (various fields near to the mill) with an annuity of £10 to his wife and with a lump sum of £200 to each of his three daughters—these sums to be paid within one year after his son’s majority. Oddly, Richard Augustus was not Eaton’s eldest son; his heir-at-law was William Eaton who, under an agreement of 1798, was to have Shilton Mill until his younger brother was twenty-one.

RICHARD AUGUSTUS EATON

When the father died is not known, but he was certainly dead by 1807, which was probably the year when Richard Augustus attained his majority, for in that year the young miller surrendered his copyhold land to the Lady of the Manor of the Deanery of Wolverhampton. The reason for this surrender was to secure money owing to Francis Rufford and Thomas Biggs, two Stourbridge bankers. He had borrowed the money to pay the legacies to his sisters as well as to help him in his trade. His leasehold interests were also mortgaged, for a total sum of £697 0s. 8d.

The subsequent history of Eaton’s tenure of the mills is one of continual financial struggle. The problems he faced were not entirely if indeed at all—of his own making. His father had left him the duty of finding the money for his sisters’ legacies, but this was not the worst of his problems. Lutley Mill still ground corn, but like all such mills, had to forge

metal as well if it was to remain a going concern. Lutley Mill made gun-barrels, and when Richard Augustus Eaton assumed control of the mill, he could not have foreseen the depression in the gun trade which was soon to come.

Guns were made in other places locally—in Birmingham and Wednesbury in particular. With the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the trade fell into decline; many gun-barrel makers in Wednesbury took up tube manufacture instead. The sporting-gun trade, neglected during the wars, remained sunk in depression. In 1830, Birmingham gunmakers had a large order from the French government, but trade generally was depressed until 1839 when the government replaced the flint-lock service gun with a type fired by percussion caps; this brought fresh orders and fresh prosperity, as did the approaching Crimean War. But all this was too late for Richard Augustus Eaton.

He again mortgaged his property in 1822 to a Miss Mary Richards, a daughter, perhaps, of Bate Richards. It is possible that the money raised by this mortgage was used for rebuilding, or at least altering, the mill building. Two plaques in the mill structure—one at the front and one at the back—mark the Shropshire-Worcestershire boundary and bear the date 1823 (Halesowen was in Shropshire at that time). The patterns of brickwork in the mill walls certainly bear witness to alterations, and they could well have been carried out in that year.

In July, 1824, the mortgage to Miss Richards was transferred to Messrs. Rufford and Biggs, who paid off Miss Richards with the £1,600 due to her and took an

additional mortgage on other land belonging to Eaton. An ominous paragraph in this document reveals how Eaton was falling deeper and deeper into debt; Rufford and Biggs had been advancing him credit over a considerable period of time and Eaton now owed them £2,300.

Rufford and Biggs, who seem at this distance like the villains in some Victorian melodrama, snaring the hero in a deadly financial trap, insisted that Eaton should insure his buildings and his steam engine against fire for a sum of not less than £350. Eaton was to pay £5 per cent. per annum interest on a total of £3,900. Further, he was to pay a yearly rent of £195 for all his property, payable half-yearly, so that Rufford and Biggs would be entitled as landlords to all the powers and remedies, whether by

distress or otherwise, for the recovery of rent.

LAST CHAPTER

Things obviously went from bad to worse and in 1832, on 26th October, came the beginning of the end.

Eaton sold to Francis Rufford—Biggs having probably died meanwhile—all the freehold, copyhold and leasehold interests that he possessed, with a right of repurchase at any time within fourteen years from the 25th December, 1832. Meanwhile, Eaton was to pay rents fixed by two surveyors, John Davies and John Burr, whose survey and valuation of Eaton's property reveals that he owned in all just over thirty-five acres of land, besides his mills and machinery; the whole was valued at

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£6,179 10s. 0d.; the annual value was £312 13s. 0d.

There were steam engines at both mills, and another schedule surviving from this year records that Shilton Mill had two water wheels, one seventeen feet in diameter and the other fifteen feet, besides describing the Shilton Mill machinery in considerable detail; but it is significant that in the document prepared by the two surveyors, there is a footnote saying that it would take an estimated £50 to put the Shilton premises in working order.

The type of machinery indicates that the mill was being used at this period for the manufacture of edged tools—probably scythes and spades—and even in this branch of his trade, Eaton was obviously not prospering.

By 1837, Eaton was having trouble in paying his rent and on the 5th November of that year distress was taken on his goods and effects for the sum of £248 13s. 0d. Among a long list of household articles, including two beds, mattresses, sheets and blankets, there appears: 'Two hay ricks, oat rick, five fat pigs, kneading trough, bread racks.'

Eaton was clearly farming and baking in a small way—and probably these were more successful than his main activities.

A second distress was taken on 6th January, 1838, for the sum of £174 6s. 0d., being a half-year's rent due on Christmas Day. The list of goods taken this time includes a pistol and a blunderbuss from the office and '124 gun barrels, lot of boring implements' from the mill.

But by the time of this second distress warrant, things had taken

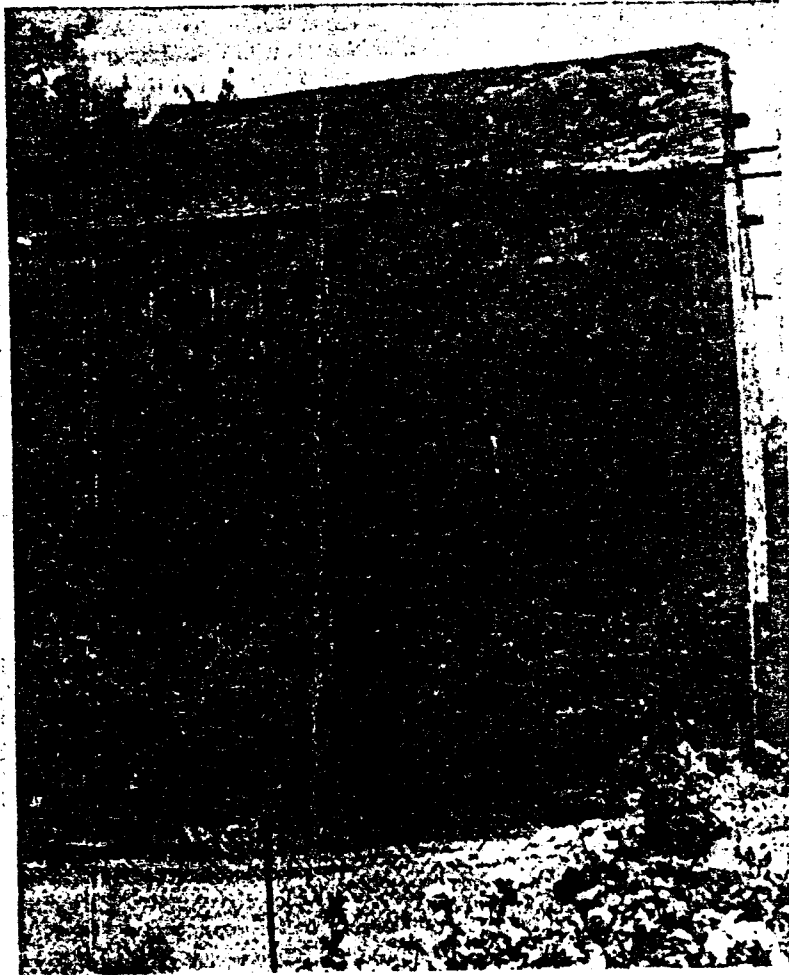
a more serious turn. On the 22nd November, 1837, Eaton wrote a letter, in firm, bold handwriting, to James Foster of Stourbridge. The letter was written in Worcester jail:

"I am sorry to have to address you from this place but here I am very much against my consent at the suit of Miss Biggs (probably a relative of Thomas Biggs) for £150 with interest and which I cannot pay." He went on to say that he did not want to become a bankrupt—"my landlord will take all I have—otherwise I think he will be friendly." Then, with a reference to his "motherless family" (probably partly in genuine concern and partly to arouse sympathy) he stated his intention of offering a "small composition" to his creditors.

The next day he wrote in almost identical terms to William Hunt, Jnr., a Stourbridge solicitor who was to handle his affairs. But he soon changed his mind about bankruptcy. His petition was presented on 12th December and on the 14th Eaton wrote to Hunt thanking him for a "letter of comfort" and announcing that he was preparing himself to "take the benefit of the Insolvent Act."

On 18th December, Hunt wrote to his client to inform him that he had been declared a bankrupt and that his property would be sold on the following Saturday "to prevent there being more than one year's rent in arrears" as it was only possible to claim one year's rent in bankruptcy proceedings.

The last surviving letter from Eaton is dated 19th December. He hoped that the sale could be postponed until after Christmas, which would be a more favourable time



LUTLEY MILL TODAY

and announced his intention of paying Rufford all he owed. In a postscript he pondered with rather bitter bewilderment on the action of Miss Biggs and protested against the fact that he had not yet received his discharge. He wanted Hunt to help hasten this, in which event he would be particularly obliged 'on account of my poor children.'

On 29th December, Eaton was

still in jail; a letter from Hunt on that date is addressed there and contains no mention of his discharge. Hunt told him that the property taken on the 5th November would not be enough to pay the rent due at Midsummer, informed him that Rufford would not act as Assignee (the equivalent of the modern Trustee in Bankruptcy) and asked for particulars of Eaton's creditors and how much he owed them.

No trace of Richard Eaton after that date has yet come to light. Miss Nellie Eaton, a lady now almost eighty years old, was born in the Rumbow, Halesowen, and has vivid memories of her paternal grandparents, who kept a sweet shop near Halesowen Church before the turn of the century. Her grandfather might well have been one of Richard Eaton's motherless children (her own uncle was named Richard Eaton), but her only recollection of Lutley Mill is that in her early childhood, Tom Moseley lived there and that in earlier days he or his family might have worked it. Her father married a Miss Moseley so it is possible that one of the unlucky miller's descendants married back into the mill connection.

FINAL STAGES

The fate of Eaton's property was decided on 8th January, 1838, when a meeting at the Talbot Hotel, Stourbridge, selected Thomas Fawell as the sole assignee of his estate and effects; he was enrolled and registered as such in the Court of Chancery on the 17th January.

Both Eaton's mills were bought by Rufford at a public action in the Lyttelton Arms Inn, Halesowen, on 23rd April, 1838. Rufford was the highest bidder at £500 for all Eaton's property.

On August 9th, 1839, Rufford leased Shilton Mill to James Griffin and James Avery Griffin of Withymore in the parish of Dudley, "scythesmiths and co-partners," for a term of $2\frac{1}{4}$ years. The mill was described as a 'plating forge and mill, formerly a water corn mill' and the rent was to be £120, payable half-yearly. The Griffins were still in occupation in 1855

when they were in dispute with Mr. Rufford's son (Rufford having died ten years earlier) over the maintenance of a road which crossed part of the mill property.

The mill continued, under one owner or another until some time in the 1890's. Mr. General Mole of Cradley, now over 90 years old, remembers it as an anchor forge. He skated—or rather slid—on the millpond in the winter of 1894—**"It started snowing on New Year's Eve and it dey stop till March."** As a young blacksmith in Colley Gate, Mr. Mole shod the horse owned by Mr. Griffiths, the last man to work the Shilton Mill. He remembers such earlier owners as Nathan Smith, who also owned the Shelton Inn, and Samuel Taylor and Sons of Brettell Lane, Stourbridge, who subsequently amalgamated with Hingleys. The millpool was not drained until about the time of the First World War, when it yielded a rich harvest of fish and eels. None of the mill buildings remain though two small brick huts, now garages, may have belonged to the mill and were used for nailmaking after 1900.

The later history of Lutley Mill is more elusive though it certainly did not reach the 1890's. In 1841, six corn mills were listed in Halesowen, including Lutley Mill; the miller was J. Morris. The 1842 Tithe map names Francis Rufford as owner of the mill and James Morris as his tenant. There is then a gap until 1851 when the census returns for Lutley list William Hulstone, 76, as farmer and miller. In the same census, two brothers named Cox of Two Gates, Cradley, are listed as gun-barrel forgers and another man in Lutley is listed as a gun-borer. These men could well have worked in Lutley Mill.

It has not been possible to ascertain when the mill closed. The 1904 six-inch Ordnance Survey Map describes the mill as 'disused,' and Mr. Mole is certain that the mill was not worked in the 1890's. The 1904 map was prepared from a Survey originally made in 1882; the revisions for the 1904 edition would only cover major changes and a change in the status of a mill would hardly be worth notice. It seems a reasonable deduction that the mill was already disused at the time of the 1882 survey. It is possible that the Crimean War brought a temporary recovery in the mid 1850's—an era which is regarded as the zenith of the Birmingham gun trade—but it must have soon become uneconomic. Competition from the Birmingham gunmakers would have been too great; and, for whatever reason, no-one seems to have thought fit to use Lutley Mill for tube or edged tool manufacture.

The mill has in fact probably stood unused for nearly a century—perhaps even more than a century. Yet the tall, gaunt building has survived when such neighbours as Shilton Mill and Drews Forge (midway between Eaton's two mills) which lasted much longer, have vanished almost without trace. Lutley Mill has survived because of two accidents of history. First, it stands next to farmland and was owned by people

who were, in a small way, farmers; when it lost its use as a mill it became useful as a hay loft and was used for this and similar purposes until after the Second World War. Second, it stands on the West bank of the stream. Had it stood on the East bank, it would certainly have been demolished in the course of the land development of the late 1940's which brought the Hasbury Estate almost to the water's edge.

Even as it is, the local council had granted permission for private development on the site when the present owner snatched the mill almost from under the noses of the builders with hopes of restoring it to something of its former appearance by repairs and the re-installation of a wheel.

It would be fitting reward for the scarred and battered structure if its patient vigil in this still-quiet spot should bring eventual renovation. It has long been as much an anachronism as the two old boundary plaques on its walls but it would have been a great pity if this old building, which is unique in Halesowen, had been thoughtlessly swept aside. No motor road runs by the mill, whose quiet situation encourages the reflective pedestrian to resurrect the old millers in his mind's eye and see the spot alive with industry. And not, as now, sombrely brooding on its better days.

(With special acknowledgments to the staff of the County Record Office, Fish Street, Worcester, the Birmingham Gun Barrel Proof House, the Department of Science and Industry of Birmingham Museum. Mr. Rex Walker of the Industrial Monuments Survey, Mr. Michael Hubbard, the present owner of Lutley Mill, Mr. General Mole—a senior citizen of Cradley—and Mr. John Pritchard of Halesowen College of Further Education.)

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