

These pages contain an extract from a collection of material compiled by John Morris Jones, former Headmaster of George Dixon Junior School, during the period 1960 - 1980. He wrote over 30 booklets in which he covered almost every district of the City of Birmingham. In many ways they were the first detailed local history studies aimed at the non-historian, and particularly focussed at children.

Sarehole Water Mill.

An indenture of 23 April 1542 is the first certain reference to the existence of a mill at or near the present site. In it John Bedell agreed with Daniel Benford 'to buylde and make a corne mylne before the feaste of St. Michuell th'archaungell nexte insueing....and agoyne the said Daniell Benford doth coveaunte and graunte upon his parte to dissever departe and tyne out from other groundes so moche parrcell of grounde as shall partayne and belongs unto the mylne fleame'. This is a grant of land for a mill and the necessary watercourses, to be completed by the end of September 1542. But was this the beginning at Sarehole ? There was already 'a pool lying within the ground', and a mill thereabouts was said to have made a small annual payment to Maxstoke Priory, owner of the land before the Dissolution; the lost reference was presumably in the Priory accounts.

The name of Sarehole is explicable only in part. The prefix may be either a personal name or a geographical term like 'hole' which is an abbreviation of 'holme' (meaning a meadow liable to flooding in winter). The site of Biddles Mill, as it was to be called during the long family tenure and afterwards, was actually beside the Cole, but was in fact on the Cole as Greet Mill was, or above flood level, and did it receive water from the river by a leat as the indenture wording suggests as well as from the Coldbath Brook? Was the mill on or near the present site or on the other side of Swanshurst Lane?

It is noteworthy that Titterford, Greet, Hay, Medley's, Stechford, Babbs, and Coleshill Mills are all situated just above fords, and it is arguable that the mill preceded the ford in at least some cases, travellers making use of the shallows created by the weir. Regardless of the actual mill-site, there are enough local examples of roads crossing valleys by way of milldams - Priory Road in Yardley Wood and Yardley Wood Road, not to mention Stratford Road by Greet Mill - to support a suggestion that the Tudor mill-pool was in Cotterells Meadow across the land.

Sarehole was in the manor of Yardley. The site of the first settlement was in the north near Stechford and the second on the central ridge (Stockfield, Acocks Green Field) both for geological reasons. There was an open field system, that of Greet sub-manor, overlying Spark Hill, but the settlements surrounding Sarehole - Greethurst, Bulley, Swanshurst, Billesley, Whateley, Clodeshal, Faucombe, Shaftmoor - were almost certainly individual assarts. The closeness of three mills by the end of the C15th if not earlier (Sarehole, Greethurst, and Greet) argues that there was plenty of corn to be ground, which means that the former woodland denoted by the 'hurst' and 'ley' names had been largely cleared. It is not unlikely that corn came to Sarehole from places as far apart as Highfield and Moseley.

Reverting to the question of water supply, it should be noted that Greet Mill was placed at a point where a natural break of slope could be increased by an earthen dam to provide a copious flow for an undershot wheel. A side-race was cut to take away flood-water, but damage and discomfort by flood were frequent. A site away from the bank involved the cutting of leats and the embanking of a pool, but made damage less likely and repairs easier. The valley at Sarehole is wider and raising the water level to provide a good fall and worthwhile reserve would require a long dam; the valley of the Coldbath Brook is narrower and steeper, more easily dammed - it had four pools in its 1.5 miles by the late C18th. On balance therefore, it seems most likely that the main source of water for Sarehole Mill was Coldbath Brook, but that there may have been a short leat from the Cole, and that the pool was approximately where it is now.

The first reference to the mill after 1542 provides another problem. In 1721 it was called 'High Wheel Mill'. Did this mean a large undershot wheel, or a wheel whose supply came in at a high level - an overshot wheel ? There are no records or traces to help answer this question, but the suggestion of a large wheel seems to be contradicted by the name, recorded in 1745 and later, of Little Mill(s). This is possibly a joke, based on the proximity of Greet Mill; in the local dialect this would be pronounced 'great', so that the neighbours could be called Great and Little Mills. Certainly an element of comparison is implied, but whether this referred to size of wheels or buildings remains unanswerable.

From 1721 there are frequent references, in rental rolls, leases, and Aris's Birmingham Gazette. Robert Eaves bought High Wheel Mill in that year; he was described as 'of Sarehole', but one never knows in this

and later entries whether Sarehole Mill or Sarehole Hall (Farm) is meant. The two properties may well have had common ownership or tenancy. In 1746 Richard Eaves succeeded to the ownership of the mill on the death of Robert (brother).

One tenant in 1752, was Judd Harding, who had rented the Moat Mill in Birmingham. He had been a sword-cutter there, and it may well be that he engaged in blade-grinding at Sarehole too - in addition to flour-milling, for little power was required for grinding; milling was not a full-time occupation, most millers being farmers as well. Increasingly during the C18th mills were converted to industrial purposes which were more profitable, and then as with Lady Mill a windmill might be built close by to continue corn-grinding for the neighbouring farms. As there is no local stone usable for grinding, the expensive imported ones were not thrown away when broken, but were cut and fitted to make iron-bound stones for rough grinding.

In 1754 Richard Eaves was bankrupt. It is said that John Baskerville, the famous printer, helped to restore the family fortunes. He made Richard's son (John) his heir, and when Richard died in 1764 Baskerville married the widow. It was John Eaves who with a relative, Edward Ruston, leased an estate on the desolate Handsworth side of Hockley Brook in 1757. An existing cottage was called Soho. Eaves and Ruston made a pool on the brook west of Hockley Great Pool, and built a water-mill. There they engaged in the manufacture of 'toys', small articles chiefly of metal and especially of brass; waterpower was required for rolling, slitting, stamping, grinding, boring, and polishing. Five years later the Soho mill and estate were acquired by Matthew Boulton.

Much time has been devoted to the task of establishing the facts about the Boulton family's connection with Sarehole; but certain vital records, the rental rolls and Constables' Accounts for the relevant years, are missing. A receipt of 1756 shows that Matthew Boulton secured the lease of Sarehole Mill the previous year - but which Matthew? The second of that name, a silver chain and trinket maker of Snow Hill, was the father of the great Matthew, James Watt's partner; he is known to have retired to Sarehole (Farm?) in 1759 and to have died there in that year. One Matthew was an Overseer of the Poor in the Swanshurst Quarter of Yardley in 1758; as one of the chief tenants of the part of the civil parish, he was required to undertake that office, but he was not necessarily resident in Yardley.

A newspaper item of 1756 refers to a crime near 'Mr. Boulton's flatting mill', apparently using a term for a rolling mill or stamping press. The great Matthew was 26 when the lease of the mill was taken up; it is quite likely that his father had chosen this rather inaccessible rural mill because waterpower was available for his business, but we may guess that it was the son who was the prime mover in the establishment of 'toy' manufacture there. The elder Matthew died in 1759, his widow being listed as tenant of Sarehole the following year. In 1761 Matthew III leased the Soho mill and estate, and has no further connection with Sarehole.

Why did he go to Handsworth when presumably the mechanical processes of his business were already installed at Sarehole? The assumed reasons (for Boulton's reasoning, if recorded, has not survived) are as follows :-

1. The water supply was inadequate. Six years later it was to be augmented, which may be taken as proof of insufficiency.
2. The site was far from ideal. Though it was two miles or so nearer London and the Avon Navigation, it was so much farther from Black Country coal and iron, and the brass that came by pack-horse from Bewdley on the Severn. The lanes between Birmingham and Sarehole were very bad, even the Stratford Turnpike being badly in need of improvement.
3. The skilled artisans of Birmingham may have been loath to leave the centre of industrial life for a remote country works where accommodation and amenities were lacking.
4. Sarehole Mill might be rebuilt and its water supply improved, but its location was unalterable. So Boulton turned to site rather nearer to Birmingham, to a turnpike, and to material supplies.

John Eaves died in 1763, and his brother Richard succeeded to the ownership of Sarehole Mill. Three years later he did what Boulton had doubtless considered, then paying for the first time the three guineas annual rent required by the lord of Yardley for the use of a half-mile leat from the Cole. It began as a natural basin in the Dingle, south of Little Sarehole Farm, called the Whyrl Hole, and was four yards wide; it ran past three farms, a flood-gate being provided at the Four Arches Bridge to prevent Little Sarehole from inundation, and maintained a nearly level line while the river descended.

At the mill it entered a 2-acre pool which was embanked on the north and east sides. Eaves and succeeding owners had to pay 20 shillings annual compensation to the tenant of Cotterells Meadow (between Sarehole

Mill and Swanshurst Lane) for loss of grazing due to flooding of the pasture by the leat. One John Jones, blade-grinder, was the tenant of High Wheel Mill in 1766, also farming 68 acres.

When exactly the mill building we see today was built is not known. It was in or before 1773, because in that year it was described as 'a water corn mill lately taken down and new built'. In 1775 Richard Eaves went bankrupt and his property was sold, including the mill then said to be 'well supplied with water'. It was then or later bought by John Taylor, lord of Yardley. As rebuilt the three-storey mill had a single-story forge at the south end, and a second wheel. This was a 12-foot diameter overshot wheel, 5 feet across, and was presumably used for edge-grinding and barrel-boring; while the main wheel, as 12-foot diameter breast wheel 6 feet across, was used for corn-grinding. The greater fall or head required by the overshot wheel was achieved by having a somewhat longer tail-race. The tail-races from both wheels are culverted beneath the mill-yard, the join in a long race which enters the Cole just to the south of Green Road ford.

John Allen was the mill tenant in 1783, the year when Titterford Mill was built. At the end of the C18th, when the Siviters were at the mill, wire-drawing may have been carried on, providing material for local nailers. The making of the Stratford Canal, open between Yardley Wood and Birmingham via the Worcester Canal about 1795, may have affected Sarehole Mill, as the nearest wharf was only 1.5 miles away, though along narrow holloways, and both materials and products could travel by water; by 1816 there was access to the estuary ports by canal and river.

Between the Siviters, early C19th, and 1841 no record of millers has survived. During this period Lady Mill went out of use and its pool was partially drained. By this time, and perhaps much earlier, 'Old Pool' had been made on Coldbath Brook in the dell between the two mills to provide a reserve for Sarehole; Swanshurst Pool, made before 1759, was then called Moseley New Pool, the implication being that there was an old one nearby. However both Coldbath and Lady Mill Pools were in existence by 1750, and so Swanshurst Pool could equally have been new compared with them.

There were changes at Sarehole about mid-C19th. The forge was adapted to a cottage, two-storied in part, and the tall round-headed gable window of the mill was partly blocked by a new roof. When Thomas Anderton, then Sarehole miller, went bankrupt in 1847, he was succeeded by Joseph Briscoe; he was related to the last miller of Greet, which had gone out of use in 1843. The barn at Sarehole was built in the year of Briscoe's arrival. There were expensive replacements of machinery in 1851, when Samuel Batsford was tenant, and in 1853 John Mander is recorded in the Rental Accounts as paying interest on the cost of a steam engine. A small engine house was built against the north end of the mill, alongside the main wheel, and a square-sectioned tapering chimney which survives.

John Andrews replaced Mander as tenant in 1858, and that year may have seen the end of Sarehole's industrial history. According to Mr. A. E. Mortiboys (B'ham Weekly Post 15.2.52) corn-grinding machinery from Titterford went to Sarehole when both mills changed function. Mr. George Andrews told me in 1958 that his grand-father had taken over from the Deykins of Hazelwell Mill a century before, and that Sarehole had been making edge-tools, gun-barrels, and ramrods. Neither Dr. Pelham nor I have been able to trace the tenancy of Deykin. At that time John Deakin was a sword-cutter at 70 Navigation Street. A descendant, Mrs. A. M. Richardson claimed in 1952 that her family had been connected with the mill; and Mr. Mortiboys stated that the 'Decon' family were 'proprietors' of Sarehole Mill for hundreds of years.

The Deakins (several spellings) are known to have been engaged in arms manufacture from 1759, and to have supplied arms to the East India Co. Several mills in Birmingham and elsewhere were making swords and gun barrels for W. Deakin & Co., and the most likely explanation of their undocumented connection with Sarehole is that the tenant millers were sub-contracted for them.

John Andrews was the last miller but one. His son succeeded him and continued grinding until 1919. His grinding Account Book in my possession shows that his income from the milling of grains and pulses in 1894 was only $\text{œ}54\ 16\text{s}\ 3.5\text{d}$, while his rent was $\text{œ}20$. Clearly another source of income was necessary; George Andrew Jnr., last of his family, who is the boy in the mill-yard photograph now on sale, told me that extensive repairs to the wheel (the larger one, the smaller one being out of use) was required in 1919, but his father chose to close the mill. There was little local corn to be ground, Birmingham Corporation planned large housing estates on the Taylor land, and a roller mill was being built at Shirley. Sarehole may well have been the last watermill within the boundaries of the city to have gone out of use.

The last of the manorial estates of Yardley were sold by A. J. Taylor in 1913. The catalogue describes Sarehole Mill as :-

Sarehole Corn Mill, a compact holding extending to 7 acres 2 rods 39 perches, and including a brick-built and tiled house containing three bedrooms, parlour, kitchen, scullery, and boxroom, and the Mill premises, comprising Breast Wheel, driving two pairs of 4 ft. stones, three mill floors, Bake House, Stable and Pigsties. The Mill and House are let to Mr. George Andrew Jnr. on a yearly tenancy.....rent £20. The land is let to Mr. G. E. Tipping on a yearly tenancy.....and the rent is £24.

The purchaser of the lot will have to enter into covenant to maintain and keep in repair the three bridges near Sarehole and Brook Farms and Sarehole Mill which span the feeder supplying the Mill Pool.

The mill and meadow were bought by Mr. A. H. Foster, solicitor, of The Chalet in Green Road, who left them to the City, to be kept in perpetuity as an open space, to be used as a botanical garden, park, or recreation ground for the benefit of the public. This would form part of the riverside walk, planned by the Yardley Wood Rural Council in 1909. Mr. Foster died in 1928, but his will stipulated that the bequest was not to be made until the death of Mr. Andrews. He was a bachelor and a noted local florist - large greenhouses had been built against the mill's west wall and the bakehouse - who died in 1959.

After this I heard indirectly that the pool was to be cleared and refilled, the meadow to become a recreational ground, and the mill to be a branch museum. Seeing that the greenhouses had been taken down and that other demolition seemed to be taking place - in a slow and very haphazard fashion - I assumed that the Parks Department was at work; but in July '60 I inspected the mill and discovered that vandals had destroyed every destructible thing in the building which were in an advanced state of dilapidation. Enquiries produced the information that the mill was to be demolished as it was beyond repair. Having brooded on this wrong for some time with increasing anger, I wrote the letter to the 'Post' which re-opened the campaign for the mill's preservation.

The story of the campaign and the magnificent restoration are left to be told by those who were engaged in it.

At present the watercourses supplying the mill:-

In 'The Dingles' a modern concrete weir at the Whirl-hole serves to keep up the river level; the 1766 race is not blocked at its start, but has been breached about 30 yards below, just beyond a small brick bridge which formerly took the path from Billesley Farm to Paradise. The channel, much silted and overgrown, still collects water in flood, but this returns to the river by way of the sluice beside the Four Arches Bridge. The flood-gate was stolen in 1917 and never replaced. The top of the bricked-up arch which took Brook Lane over the race can be seen. Beyond it there is a slight depression bordered by willows along the west side of Coleside Avenue (formerly Wake Green Road) which marks the line of the infilled leat. Beyond New Brook Lane the channel is lost beneath the prefabs and gardens on the east side of the re-aligned Wake Green Road; at the junction with Colebank Road can be seen the brick-lined culvert whence an overflow sluice returned floodwater to the river. The Swanshurst Brook which formerly entered the race beside Sarehole Farm now flows to the Cole in a conduit.

The Coldbath Brook is now culverted beneath the new housing estate that occupies the site of Lady Mill Pool and the raised and widened Yardley Wood Road; it then descends steeply through the still boggy bed of Old Pool, which was drained more or less c.1890. The brook cuts through the ruined brickwork of the sluice in the centre of the earthen dam, and is then culverted through the new housing estate that fills its valley down to Wake Green Road. Sarehole Millpool has been partly cleared and is patronised by mallards; there is sufficient water from Coldbath Brook, now the sole source, to turn the rebuilt main-wheel and some restored machinery for limited periods.

John Morris Jones - July 1969

Addendum:

The mill was indeed saved and is now owned and operated by Birmingham Museum & Art Galleries. It is regularly used by schools as an educational resource to support both the History and D&T programmes of study. Recent interest in J. R. R. Tolkien and the 'Lord of the Rings' has seen increases in visitors to the mill as, during his childhood, Tolkien lived there and it was Sarehole that provided the influence for the mill in Hobbiton.