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HOWARD & POWELL, WALLBRIDGE MILL, RODBOROUGH, STROUD

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Introduction

There was a bridge over the River Frome at Wallbridge on the main route south from Stroud by 1527 (1). However, there was probably a crossing here much earlier as a woollen cloth mill, Wallbridge Mill, is mentioned in a will of 1470 (2, 3). The mill lay just upstream of the river crossing and about a half a mile to the south-west of Stroud town centre. It was situated, at least in recent times, on the south side of the Frome and hence in Rodborough parish. The mill was very conveniently sited for later transport systems, such as the Stroudwater Canal, which opened in 1779 and the Midland Railway branch line from Dudbridge to Stroud which opened in 1886. The former had its terminus at Wallbridge Basin, and the latter its station at Cheapside and both were less than a quarter of a mile from the mill.

Wallbridge Mill was a significant obstacle to the building of the branch line and so the Midland Railway purchased the site in the early 1880s. They then skillfully constructed a brick built viaduct around the main mill building (Figure 1). Four of the arches of the viaduct were bricked in and provided with windows to create replacement workshops for the buildings that had been demolished during the construction of the line. The Midland Railway then sold most of the site back to the manufacturers in about 1886 and cloth production continued apparently without a break at Wallbridge Mill until 1958. Much of the site was demolished in 1964 including a part of the mill that dated back to the 17th century.

This article is mainly concerned with the history of the firm of Howard & Powell who manufactured cloth at Wallbridge Mill from 1886 until the end. Interestingly, Howard & Powell always spelt the name of their premises as 'Walbridge Mill' with a single 'l' (Figure 2) and this form of the name has been found in title deeds dating back to the 18th century.

The Early History of the Site

Wallbridge Mill existed by 1470 when Thomas Bigge, who had acquired it from John Bigge, died leaving it to his wife Alice during the minority of his son Richard (3). In the early 17th century there is a reference to William Trotman occupying "the mill below Ric. Arundel's Capel's mill" (4). This would appear to be Wallbridge Mill and in *Men and Armour for Gloucestershire in 1608* a William Trotman is listed under the entry for Rodborough as a clothier. He is shown as having six employees Thomas Iles, Nicholas Dangerfield, William Hicke, Edmond Budge, Mathewe Smith and John Harry (5). Thomas Iles is shown as a tucker which is an alternative name for a fuller and is the only one of the six whose occupation is given. One other clothier in Rodborough is listed as having six servants and one had two servants and the remaining two clothiers had none listed. Looking at the rest of Stroud district as a whole there are more than 20 clothiers listed but none with more than two servants. Therefore if the method of compiling the list was reasonably consistent between the different parishes in the district it would suggest that William Trotman was one of the biggest clothiers in the area.

The mill had passed by 1718 from Thomas Webb to his daughter, Anna, who was the wife of Samuel Sheppard of Minchinhampton (6). Samuel died in 1724 and the mill passed to a younger son of the Sheppards, Thomas, who died in 1757. He left it to his sisters (7), of whom the survivors Sarah Day, widow, and Mary Sheppard sold the property, comprising a

house, three fulling-mills, a gig-mill and land with cloth racks, in 1761 to the clothier Samuel Watts. The premises had formerly been occupied by Thomas Theyer, followed by Samuel Hawker and then William Hill (8).

Samuel died in 1773, leaving Wallbridge Mill to his nephew Richard Watts, who sold it in 1798 to another Richard Watts. Samuel also left his nephew, Nathaniel Watts, a dwelling house, dyeing furnace, brewing furnace and cloth rack (8). Nathaniel Watts, who first introduced the flying shuttle to the region in 1793, (9) may have occupied the whole or part of the mill, for his cloth-making machinery at Wallbridge was offered for sale on the premises in 1804. As well as the usual machinery, cloth, yarn and dyestuffs the advertisement referred to "various other articles amongst which is a good canoe"! (10).

Richard Watts, a dyer, sold the mill in 1820 to the brothers Peter, Richard, and Gustavus Adolphus Smith, (11) who used it for cloth-manufacturing and dyeing (12). Miles in his report on the 'condition of the hand loom weavers of Gloucestershire' noted that four power looms has been installed in the mill in December 1837. The firm was then listed as R. P. Smith & Co. (13). Richard and Peter Smith were given as the owner occupiers at the time of the tithe survey in 1839, (14) but by 1856 John Howard was making cloth there (15). The Smith family owned the mill until Peter's death in 1870 (16) and in 1871 it was put up for sale being described as:

'A convenient range of buildings of five floors divided into warerooms, cutting, scribbling, carding, picking and other rooms; engine house (in which there is an excellent 24 h.p. engine with boilers and gearing attached) storage, gig mill house and mills, counting houses and various convenient offices' (17).

However, the mill was not sold and as noted above it was bought by the Midland Railway in the early 1880s to provide a route for their line from Dudbridge to the centre of Stroud. Not all the site was sold back to the manufacturers in 1886 as some of it became subject to a 500 year lease granted in 1901 and could be repossessed by the railway authorities at any time for railway purposes! (18).

Howard & Powell Ltd. – The Early Years

The firm was founded in 1886 when George Edgar Powell and John Howard became partners. However a notice, five years later, in the London Gazette of 16 May 1891 announced that the partnership between J. Howard, F. A. Howard and G. E. Powell had been dissolved. In that same year it was also recorded that the mill was equipped with 22 power looms (19). Mr Powell continued to run the business until some time in the 1920s when his son George Woodman Powell became Chairman. However, it was not an entirely family firm as an advertisement in the Times newspaper of 3 February 1920 offering shares in the new firm of Marling & Evans revealed. The advertisement listed Gerald Arthur Evans of P.C. Evans of Brimscombe Mills as a former director of Howard & Powell. In addition, Mr Arthur B Cooke of Stroud was a director of the company from some time before 1930 until the company was sold to Mr Wilfred Asquith in 1961 (20).

Mr. G. W. Powell was very active in public life in the Stroud area and in the 1930s was Chairman of Stroud Rural District Council and was for many years a magistrate. He is shown in Figure 3 along with some of the 100 strong work force at the mill and two of his daughters celebrating the coronation of King George VI in 1937. The mill manager in the 1930s was a Mr Atkinson and he continued in this role right up until manufacturing ended in 1958. Mr

Atkinson lived at Wallbridge House, a fine ashlar faced house of three stories built for the millowner in about 1800 (2). This had previously had been the home of Mr. G. E. Powell and also before his marriage the home of Mr. G. W. Powell (20).

Mr. G. W. Powell's son Geoffrey (G. G.) Powell, joined the firm in 1939 but left in the following June when he began his war service. After the war he went to Leeds University where he obtained a B.Sc. degree in textiles and subsequently rejoined the family firm in about 1950. The author is extremely grateful to Mr Powell for much of the information given in the following sections regarding the company, the buildings and manufacturing at Wallbridge from the time of the Second World War until the mill closed in about 1958.

Howard & Powell Ltd. – 1939-1964

Howard & Powell were both woollen cloth manufacturers and merchants for their own and other manufacturers' cloth during this period. A wide range of high quality cloths was manufactured at Wallbridge. The main items were billiard cloths, cavalry twills and various cloths for military uniforms. In particular, 'Blue' cloth was made for naval uniforms, but cloth was also made for the Army and the Royal Air Force. 'Scarlet' cloths were produced but these were for hunting jackets and not generally for Guardman's uniforms.

Much of the cloth was sold direct to tailors by the firm's sales representatives in the form of 'suit lengths', typically 3½ yards (3.1m) long. The width of the cloth was about 58 inches (1.47m). Sales in the London area were mainly carried out through the firm of George Hunt & Co. (Woollens) Ltd. which was a subsidiary company of Howard & Powell. This left the rest of the United Kingdom sales, and when necessary the rest of the world, to the parent company. Howard & Powell also owned Millman, Hunt and Co. Ltd which at the end of the 19th century was a very large woollen cloth manufacturer operating at Nind Mills at Kingswood near Wotton-under-Edge. Millman, Hunt and Co stopped making cloth at the beginning of the 20th century and for some years they operated as a shoddy mill until 1919 when the business was acquired by Howard & Powell. Millman, Hunt and Co., which came to be based at Wallbridge, handled mainly the worsted side of the business. Howard & Powell also had a half share in a company called Eccles & Watson who were based in Huddersfield. They did much of the weaving and the processing of the worsted cloth for Millman, Hunt and Co who did not have their own manufacturing facilities.

Most Mondays, Mr. G. W. Powell, who was also the chairman of George Hunt and Co., travelled to London to ensure that all was well there. He also went to deal with the 'special' customers such as Bernard Weatherill Ltd of Savile Row who were, and still are, renowned for the manufacture of the finest quality riding breeches. The company was founded in 1912 by Bernard Weatherill, whose son of the same name was Speaker of the House of Commons in the 1990s. The firm has held the Royal Warrant for the supply of riding breeches to King George V and each subsequent monarch, and Howard & Powell was for many years their main supplier of cavalry twill for riding breeches. Billiard cloth was supplied to the major billiard table manufacturers such as E. J. Riley Ltd.

Howard & Powell's markets extended way beyond the United Kingdom and this sometimes required a departure from the processes traditionally used in this country. For example, billiard cloths destined for Scandinavia were dyed a lighter shade of green than those for the home market. A visit to the West Indies and Bermuda by Mr and Mrs G W Powell resulted in a massive order for a range of special light weight doeskins. These included colours not normally produced such as a vivid shade of yellow. The sales force was actually very small,

comprising normally of a couple of representatives and some assistance from the directors. In the closing years, Mr Jim Lines covered the whole of the southern area while Mr Rowe based in Cheltenham covered the northern area.

The woollen manufacturing side of the business came to an end in 1958. The Gloucester Citizen reported that the company was to become just a woollen cloth merchant. Mr G W Powell, the Chairman was reported as having said that:- "at the present time we can buy cloth cheaper than we can make it". The closure was not unexpected and it was reported that in anticipation the work force had been reduced from 100 employees to approximately 40. The firm was quoted as having succeeded in finding new jobs for all the people who are leaving. Those remaining were office and warehouse staff and sales representatives.

The business did not shut down overnight and manufacturing was run down over a six month period. Eventually, most of the premises and the weaving and finishing machinery was sold at auction on 4 January 1960 (21). In 1961 the businesses of Howard & Powell and associated companies were purchased by Mr Wilfred Asquith from Bradford in Yorkshire (21).

Description of the Site and Buildings

The main building at Wallbridge Mill in the 20th century was a four and five storey L-shaped block, built of Cotswold stone, the centre part of which was believed to date back to the 17th century (Figures 4 and 5). A very attractive letter heading used by the firm depicts an artist's impression of the mill with the caption "View of Mill at the close of the Seventeenth Century" (Figure 2). Unfortunately the date of the drawing is not known. The same letter heading also depicts a clothiers mark bearing the date 1646. This is clearly based on the combined datestone and clothiers mark rescued from the building during demolition in 1964 and given to Stroud Museum. However, the datestone is believed to be of a much later date, and is probably Victorian (22). It is possible that both the datestone and the artist's impression of the mill were created at the same time.

The centre part of the stone buildings is particularly intriguing. There is little doubt from the architectural evidence that it dates from the late 17th century but it is not obvious what such a large building would have been used for at that time. It was visited in 1964 immediately prior to demolition by Mr L. F. J. Walrond the then Curator of Stroud Museum. He recalls that there was an original loading doorway on the first floor although the loading doorways above it on the second and third floors were of a later date. The first floor also had two large ornate 'renaissance' fireplaces. The main staircase was located in the angle of the L-shaped block but there was also a small spiral staircase built into the external chimney stack that can be seen in Figure 5. The fireplace served by this chimney was directly opposite the loading doorway. There may have been another fireplace on the second floor but none on the top floor. The loading doorway together with the ornate fireplaces on the first floor suggests that it may have been a large warehouse combined with an office for the clothier or even some form of domestic accommodation. Workmen demolishing the mill told Mr Walrond that the date 1687 had been found scratched in the masonry high on an outside wall of the old building (22).

If the date of 1646 (or 1687) for this building is correct then it was built about a hundred years before the coming of the factory system in the area. It is therefore unlikely to have been used for carding, spinning and weaving as these would still have been carried out in the workers' own cottages at this time. There is no evidence of water power in the building and so the

fulling is likely to have been carried out at this time in an adjacent building that did have water power.

The old part of the mill was substantially extended to both the south and the west in the 19th century. The southern extension is clearly shown on the left hand side of a photograph of the mill taken from the east in 1956 (Figure 5). The 1646 datestone was set high up in the 19th century extension to the west rather than in the original building.

Figure 1 is based on the 1:2500 Ordnance Survey map for which the survey was carried out in 1901(23). However, a comparison with the earlier and later editions of the map (1881-2 and 1921) show the layout to be virtually unaltered from the situation in 1901 (after making allowance for the coming of the railway). The layout of the mill as shown on the Rodborough tithe map of 1845 is also very similar. It seems probable that there were no significant changes from this layout until much of the site was demolished in 1964. Only a relatively small number of minor buildings shown on the 1881 plan appear to have been demolished when the railway came through in 1883-1885. Four of the arches under the double track blue brick viaduct were used by the mill with intermediate floors being inserted into a least two arches.

Some of the uses that the different buildings were being put to when the mill closed are shown in Figure 4. The oldest part of the mill had carding on the lower two floors and spinning on the two floors above. The weaving shed was a large brick built single storey building to the south-west of the L-shaped stone block. The Gig mill was a single storey building in the south-east corner of the site running alongside the north side of the headrace. There were several sluices on this side of the headrace and Mr Powell recalled that there was at least one waterwheel in-situ in this building when he was a boy but it had not operated in his memory and was removed. The wheel pit acted as a bypass for water from the headrace.

Apart from the chimney little is known about the use of steam power at the mill. An oil engine was used to power the machinery in the earlier part of the 20th century and frantic activity at the start of the Second World War led to a second oil engine being installed. It is thought that this might have been supplied by a Gloucester firm, possibly Fielding. Mr Powell recalled that there was a turbine in the mill but this was not used very often.

The offices and warehouse were at the extreme southern edge of the site, and in 2005 the buildings were occupied by the Lansdown Veterinary Hospital. The main part of the range is a three story brick building but of greater interest is the small stone building at the western end (Figure 6). The stone building with its gabled roof and venetian window is clearly shown on a splendid large painting of Wallbridge in about 1785 as seen from the west. The painting is on display in the Museum in the Park at Stroud but a large reproduction of it has been published (24). The main mill buildings are partially obscured in the painting by houses but the gabled roofs of the mill with their many dormers can be seen. Thus the roofs depicted in the painting are quite different from those seen in 20th century photographs. However, it is understood that the roofs of the main mill building had been replaced at some time (22).

Also on the southern boundary of the site, but now in a ruinous state, is what is thought to be a former cloth drying stove. It is brick built and is an unusually long and narrow building of two storeys. Its approximate dimensions are 23.3m long, 2.7m wide and 5.1m high. It appears on a map of 1845 and was recorded in 1991 by the then Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England (25). They concluded that it appeared to have been built

for warm air and cold-air drying of long pieces of cloth hung vertically in the upper storey. Mr Powell remembers that the building was known as a former cloth drying stove but has no recollection of it ever being used. It is intended that this interesting building will be the subject of an article in a future Journal.

Wallbridge House a substantial millowner's house, dating from c. 1800, survives today as apartments. However, most of the fine stone buildings, the Gig mill, chimney and many ancillary buildings were demolished in 1964 and the large millpond to the east was in-filled (Figure 6). Since the chimney was located very close to the buildings that were to remain it had to be demolished brick by brick. These were dropped to the ground both inside and outside the chimney whose height reduced by about two to three yards a day (20).

Description of the Processes

The wool came from various sources but was primarily of the Merino type from Australia and New Zealand. Different wool factors were used including the local firm of T. M. Newman of Nailsworth. The wool arrived in the form of fleeces which had already been washed and also sorted into the different grades. They were stored under the railway viaduct arches until they were needed. At this stage they were spread out on the ground and oil was poured over them. The oiled fleeces were then passed through a willey which separated out the fibres for carding and to ensure an even covering of oil. The fibres were then passed through one of the five sets of carding engines to produce the slivers ready to be spun into yarn. The spinning was done using mules rather than ring spinning. A very high proportion of the employees were women, indeed it was the women who worked exclusively on the spinning, weaving and mending processes.

The winding of both the warping beams and the bobbins for the shuttles was another job that was carried out under the railway arches. Weaving was carried out on the 25 or so Dobcross looms manufactured by Hutchinson, Hollingsworth & Co. Ltd. The finishing processes carried out after weaving were of paramount importance to ensure consistent and high quality cloth. The cloth off the looms was perched (inspected) and mended and this was carried out on an upper floor of one of the workshops that had been created in one of the railway viaduct arches. From here it was taken to the fulling shed to be milled (fulled) with rotary milling machines and not fulling stocks. Drying was done on the steam tenterer which would also stretch the cloth back into shape after milling. Another process was called 'blowing' where the steam was blown through the fabric and further shrinkage avoided.

If the cloth was to be dyed 'in the piece' it would be carried out at this stage. No dyeing was carried out on site and the cloth was sent to Strachans at the nearby Lodgemore Mill. The gig mill used to raise the nap of the cloth with teasels put a 'face' on the cloth. The nap was then cut (also known as shearing or cropping) to produce a fine uniform finish. Brushing (literally with brushes) might be carried out both before and after raising the nap. Finally the cloth was pressed between steam heated metal plates interleaved with sheets of cardboard.

Howard & Powell Ltd. – After 1964

In 1961 Howard & Powell and the associated businesses of Millman Hunt and Co. Ltd. George Hunt (Woollens) Ltd and a half share in Eccles and Watson were purchased by Mr Wilfred Asquith from Bradford in Yorkshire. Mr Asquith was then the Managing Director of Listers Mill in Bradford (also known as Manningham Mills). Mr Asquith and his son Mr A. J. A. (Tony) Asquith and Mr G. G. Powell were directors of the firms. Mr Tony Asquith has very kindly provided information about this final phase.

The company retained the brick built warehouse and the attached stone building as their offices and warehouse. They had a staff of about eight at Wallbridge taking the orders and despatching them by post and rail to tailors all over the country. Mr Powell left the business in about 1969 and Howard and Powell vacated Wallbridge about a year later. Soon after this, the limited liability companies were wound up.

In about 1972 Mr Tony Asquith transferred four looms from the former Eccles and Watson premises in Huddersfield to Malham near Skipton in Yorkshire. The new enterprise was carried on in a building in Cove Road Malham which Mr Asquith renamed Wallbridge Mill. and this continued until about 1985. At some time the building also became known as the Cove Centre selling outdoor clothing and equipment, gifts and included a coffee shop. More recently the business has been taken over by the national firm of Edinburgh Woollen Mills. Initially, the name Wallbridge Mill was retained but sadly by May 2005 this had been dropped and no reminder of Wallbridge Mill now remains.

Concluding Remarks

Wallbridge has seen many changes from the late 18th century scene depicted in the painting in Stroud Museum. So much of interest like the canal basin, the old cottages and of course Wallbridge Mill has been swept away for commercial developments and an improved road system. Had the mill survived just another twenty five years into the late 1980s it would surely have escaped demolition although, admittedly, it is likely that it would have become residential accommodation. However, this would be a relatively small price to pay for the opportunity to investigate such an unusual and interesting building. Furthermore, we would have been able to pass on to future generations some tangible remains of a very important site where fine woollen cloth was manufactured for centuries.

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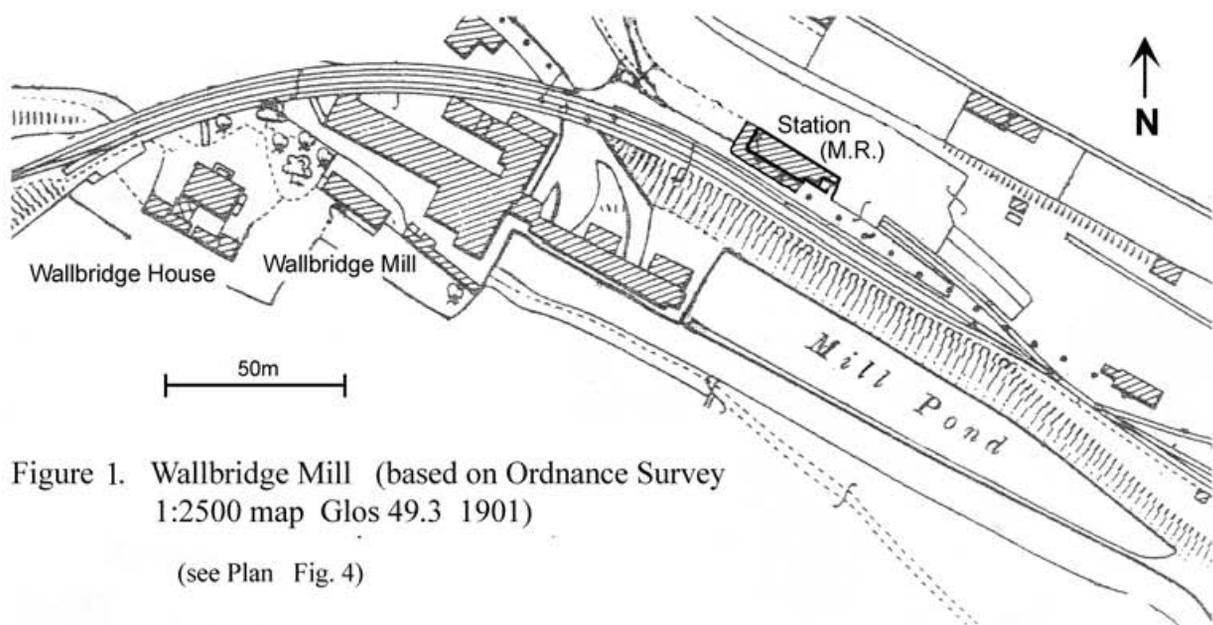
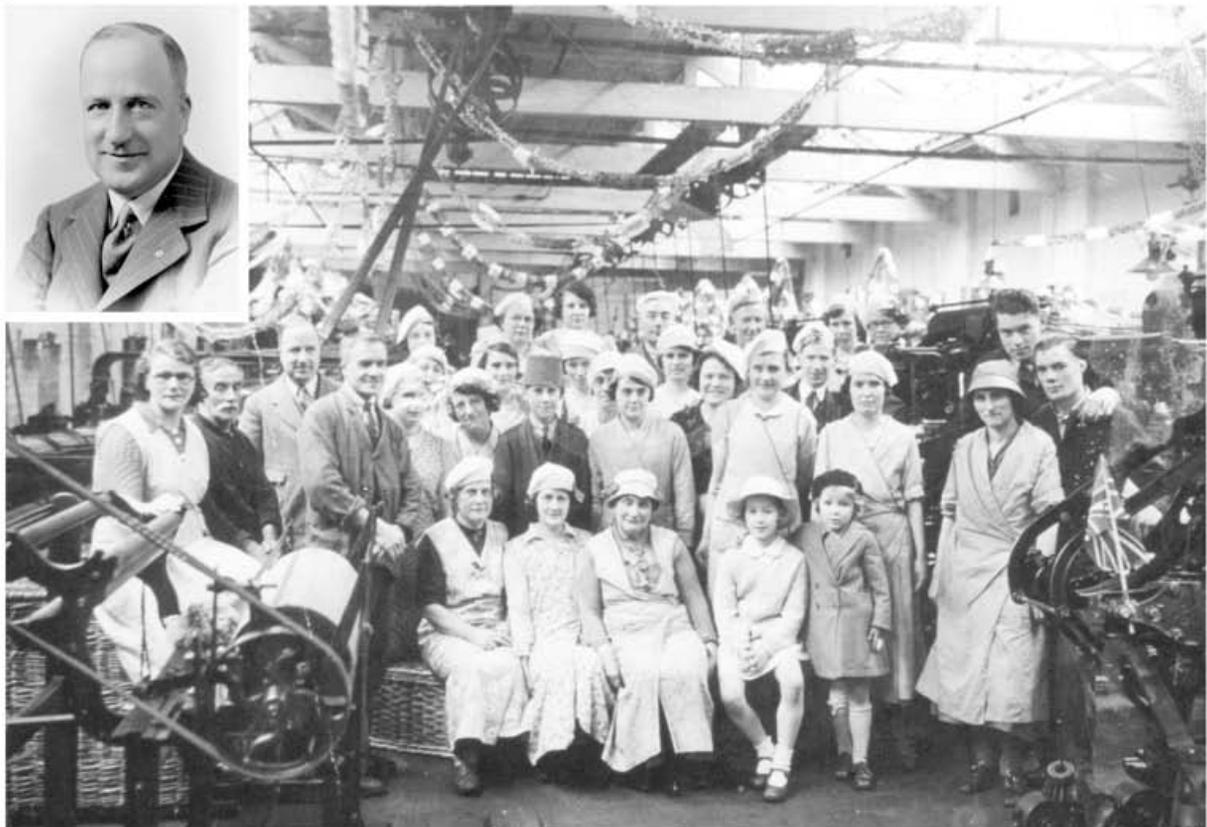


Figure 1. Wallbridge Mill (based on Ordnance Survey 1:2500 map Gos 49.3 1901)

(see Plan Fig. 4)



Figure 2. Howard & Powell letter heading showing cloth mark and artist's impression of the mill.
(Courtesy of Mrs Ruth Cook)



(Courtesy of Mrs Ruth Cook)

Figure 3. Coronation Celebrations at Wallbridge Mill, 1937. Mr G W Powell is third from the left and inset.

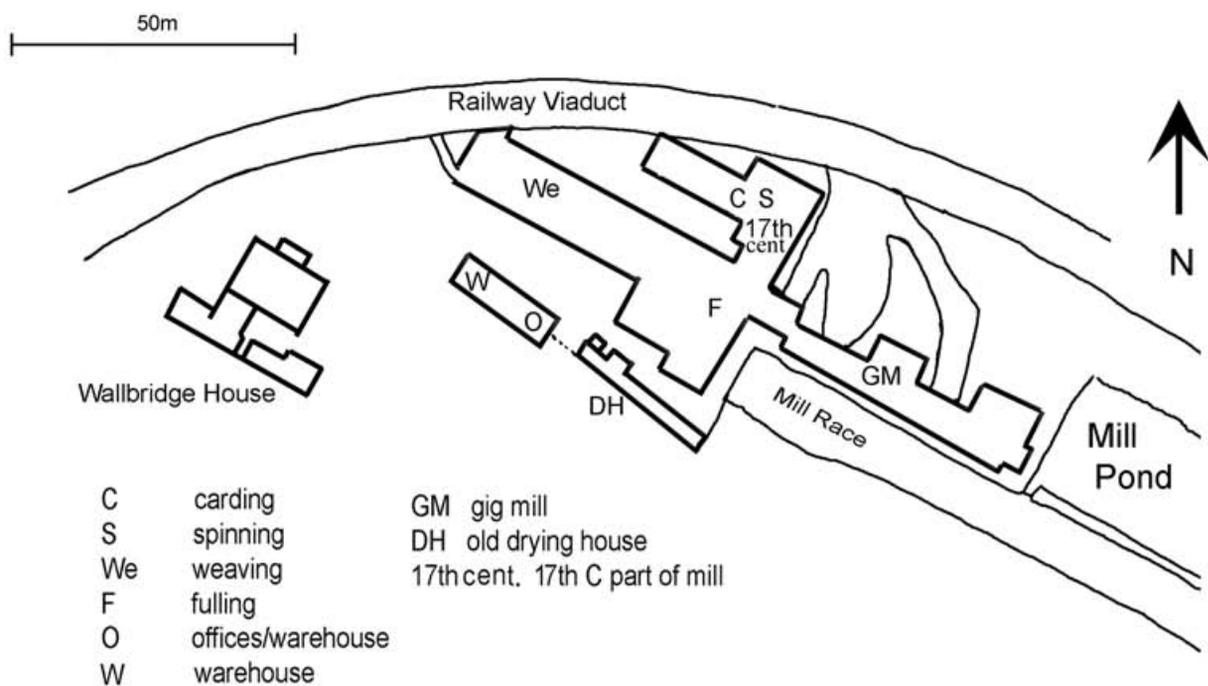


Figure 4. Some of the main features of the Mill



(Reproduced by permission of English Heritage)

Figure 5. Wallbridge Mill 1956 (Eric de Mare). View of main block from the South-east. The oldest part of the mill is the right hand block. The Gig Mill is in the right hand foreground



Figure 6. Former offices and warehouse (on right) at Wallbridge Mill seen from the east in 2005.



(N. L. Andrews)

Figure 7 Demolition of Wallbridge Mill 1964. The Old Mill is on the right and the weaving shed is on the left. The offices and warehouse are behind the weaving shed and Wallbridge House is behind them in the distance.