

# Useful ephemera!

Stephen Mills June 2022

Anyone with an interest in the past knows how useful old photographs can be. Especially in our area of interest, stumbling across a faded forgotten print of a mill or factory for example, can throw light on its size, how it was built, changes made to its fabric, and so on. Similarly, those scraps of paper that somehow managed to avoid the waste paper basket or the fireplace can also offer a wealth of information and provide a snapshot of the commercial and industrial activities taking place at the time.

Such was the case with the old invoice from December 1931 that I came across (Figure 1) – this single page helped paint a picture of a trio of large mills working together in South Gloucestershire and Bath. Its discovery also prompted a bit of online investigation to find out more about their organisation and background.

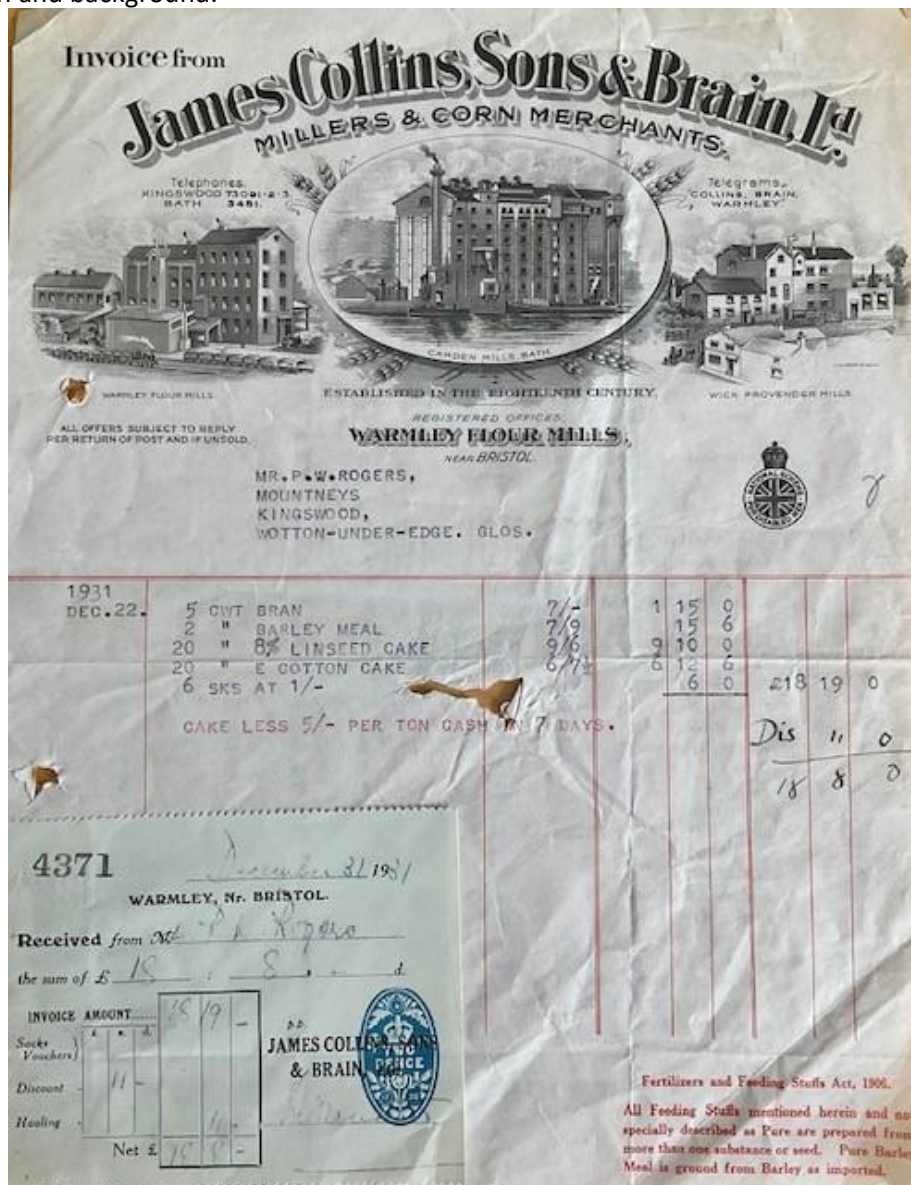


Figure 1 The 1931 invoice from James Collins, Sons & Brain Ltd

The three mills shown on the header of the invoice were Camden Mills in Bath, plus Warmley Flour Mills, and Wick Provender Mills, both in South Gloucestershire. At one time, all three were operated by the firm of James Collins, Sons & Brain Ltd. The latter name refers to the Brain family. Frederick

William Brain was born in 1885, the son of a corn mill owner of Wick, and various family members continued to follow in the trade well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Around 1907, they built a large new flour mill in Chapel Lane, Warmley (Figure 2) a village in South Gloucestershire situated between Bristol and Bath. For some reason, the mill was built in two halves. This new enterprise was ideally placed to take full advantage of the adjacent rail link, and was connected to the Mangotsfield and Bath branch of the Midlands Railway.



**Figure 2 Warmley Flour Mills. Now known as Chapel Mill and converted to apartments**

In December 1921, Walter Brain went into partnership with the Collins family, mill owners of Bath, the company then becoming known as James Collins, Sons and Brain Ltd. Like the Brains, the Collins had a long legacy as corn millers, operating various mills in the area for many years. But not all went well for the family. In March 1921, the Bath Weekly Chronicle and Herald reported that:

*Mr. Edwin Collins, one of the partners in the well-known firm of Messrs. James Collins and Sons, proprietors of the Camden Flour Mills, Lower Bristol Road, lost his life in a motor calamity on the Box Road, Bathford, late on Saturday afternoon.*

Despite the tragedy, the business carried on producing a range of products that included extra fine quality bread flour, as well as cattle, pig and poultry feed. However, around 1936, the company was taken over by Hosegood Industries who were in the process of building a large new flour mill in Avonmouth. This was completed in 1938-39, just in time for the outbreak of the Second World War, although shortly after, Hosegood went into liquidation and was taken over by Spillers.

During the war, the Warmley mill was one of those in the area taken over by Joseph Rank Ltd. after their mills in London and Southampton had been destroyed by bombing. The mill continued to operate until 1950, after which it was turned over to various other uses that included the manufacture of venetian blinds. In the 1990's it was converted to offices and in 2021, the process of its conversion to 20 apartments began.

### Camden Mills

The Collins' Camden Mill in Bath was a large steam powered affair located on the banks of the canalised River Avon/Kennet & Avon Canal (Figure 3). Built in 1879-80, it was designed by the Bristol architect Henry Williams. A sizable extension was added in 1892. Over successive decades, numerous changes and additions were made that included a malthouse and several large silos. Its use also changed, with part later converted to offices and apartments. The adjoining red brick section once housed a corset factory and engineering works. Further developments are continuing to take place in this part of Bath, and in the past few years, the entire structure was bought by a developer for £9.5 million!



**Figure 3 Camden Mills on the banks of the river Avon in Bath**

### Postscript

So what was on the original invoice and what can we glean from it? The order was for Mr P W Rogers of Mountneys, Kingswood, Wotton-under-edge, mainly for 5 Cwt (hundredweight) of bran, 2 of barley meal, 20 of linseed cake, and 20 of cotton cake. The most expensive item was the linseed cake at 9s/6d Cwt. The total bill came to £18-19-0, although he seems to have been given a bit of discount that brought it down to £18-8-0. Sacks were to be returned in good condition within two months of delivery or paid for at the cost of 2 shillings each. I think it's safe to assume that Mr Rogers was a farmer as the various products can be used to feed a variety of animals that include cattle, sheep, pigs, and poultry. There is still a Mountneys Farm listed in the area, so it is likely that this was where Mr Rogers farmed.

Just this single piece of paper provided useful information on a large milling operation, their customers, and provided direction towards discovering something of the history behind the individuals and families involved. It shows how useful even odd scraps can be when it comes to researching social and industrial history. Don't throw anything away!