

The Pin Mill at Bodnant Gardens by Steve Mills

I recently made a suitably socially-distanced visit to the National Trust's Bodnant Gardens in North Wales. As some of you will probably already know, there is an interesting connection between Bodnant and the Stroud woollen cloth industry. This takes the form of a building that was transferred from Frogmarsh Mill at Woodchester, and re-erected at Bodnant as a major garden feature. The building in question is referred to as the Pin Mill, although it was originally built around 1720-30 as a gazebo or summer house adjacent to the mill. It appears to have been built by the Shurmur family of clothiers who bought Frogmarsh Mill around 1700 – this was subsequently owned and operated as a cloth mill by several generations of the family.

After numerous changes of ownership, cloth manufacture finally ended at Frogmarsh by 1850, and this ushered in a new phase in the mill's history, as it became the manufacturing base for the noted pin-making firm comprising Albert Perkins, Henry Critchley and Joseph Marmont. Between 1851 and c1874, the business grew steadily and the site was enlarged via the addition of a number of new wings and buildings. However, the partnership eventually broke up with Perkins & Marmont continuing to manufacture a variety of pins at Frogmarsh until the business finally closed on 4th May 1934. By the mid 1930s, the mill had become the home of the Carr Tanning Company, who specialised in sheepskin leathers for the shoe and slipper trade, employing over 100 local workers.

By now, like parts of the main mill itself, the Pin Mill had suffered from the ravages of time and weather. It had been subsumed partially into the main mill, and was in a dilapidated condition. However, at this point, an unlikely saviour appeared in the shape of Lord Aberconway, who apparently spotted the building whilst driving in the area in 1938. A deal was struck and the Pin Mill was dismantled and transported to Bodnant Gardens where it was carefully re-erected and restored. During the process, the architect J. Murray Easton made some repairs and sensitive alterations. In 1952, it was designated a Grade II* listed building, as a fine example of an early Georgian garden building. In 2013, the National Trust undertook a further programme of restoration work, both inside and outside.

The building has long been referred as the 'Pin Mill' and even the NT talks about it having been used as a pin factory. However, there doesn't appear to be any documentary evidence to verify that pin manufacturing actually took place within building. This seems unlikely, as during its time as a pin manufactory, Frogmarsh Mill housed banks of steam-driven automatic pin-making machines, the norm for the time. Realistically, the Pin Mill could only have been used for perhaps, storage or packing, as its scale and configuration would appear to preclude actual manufacturing. However, it did find 'industrial' use when part of the Carr Tanning Company. Many years ago, I contacted the then Managing Director of the company and he confirmed that it had been relegated to the storage of tanning liquors and hides.

The Pin Mill was originally built to embellish the garden of the clothier's house, and you may wonder where this stood in relation to the Pin Mill – if you take a look at GSIA Journal for 1997 (pages 3-13: Cloth, pins and leather - *An Examination of Frogmarsh Mill, Woodchester* by Nigel Paterson and Stephen Mills) you will discover that remarkably, much of this survives. Over the centuries, the main mill expanded around it – it has been almost completely enveloped by later additions and is now barely visible.

Further information on pin manufacture in the Stroud area can be found in the GSIA Journal for 1995, Pages 37-42; *The Stroud Pin Makers* by Stephen Mills.



An aerial view from May 1933, showing the Pin Mill just to the left of the mill chimney. (Courtesy: Britain from Above)



The Pin Mill in the 1930s. Note the central Venetian window and the dressed stone quoins. Also, that the original openings in the wings have been blocked up and replaced with windows



The Pin Mill in Bodnant Gardens in September 2020. When rebuilt, the arches were opened up and returned to their original configuration



Detail of the tower's pediment, surmounted with what are thought to be the arms of the Shurmur family



One of the lead rainwater hoppers produced for the 1939 rebuilt at Bodnant. It carries the inscription 'C&H' – a reference to Henry, Lord Aberconway, and his wife Christobel. Note the Cotswold stone tiles, as opposed to Welsh slates