

**GLASS MILL, ASHLEY VALE, 1528-1898 : notes on its history and its contribution to local industry -and several outstanding questions**

**By Owen Ward**

**A long-lived institution**

The existence of Glass Mill is still recorded on the street plan of Bristol by a 'mill pond' at the northern, dead, end of Mina Road. Alongside it is now a pumping station which continues to supply water to the city from the brooks which have fed both mill and the town for hundreds of years. The mill was situated at the spot where the streamlet which rises behind the gasholders in Horfield is joined by the Boiling Well Brook, filled from a spring to the north-east of the railway embankment under which it is culverted.

In his article in the *Regional Historian*, no.8 (Winter 2002), published by the Regional History Centre of the University of the West of England, Harry McPhillimy tells us about the history of Narrowways Hill, St. Werburghs. In it he mentions a reference (pp.11-12) to the enclosure in 1813 of a piece of waste ground in the lane leading from Baptist Mills to the Glass Mill, which he identifies as Mina Road. Then in the subsequent, Summer 2002, issue (no.9, p.12, Correspondence), Barbara Tuttiett, who has been studying a survey of the Barton of Bristol of 1553, tells us of a reference to land at Glass Mill (described as Glaste Mill) in 1528, when one Harry Curtys and his wife held two acres of land there (not the mill itself). This gives an early date for the mill, which did not finally cease operations until around 1898, while part of the premises were occupied until the 1960's.

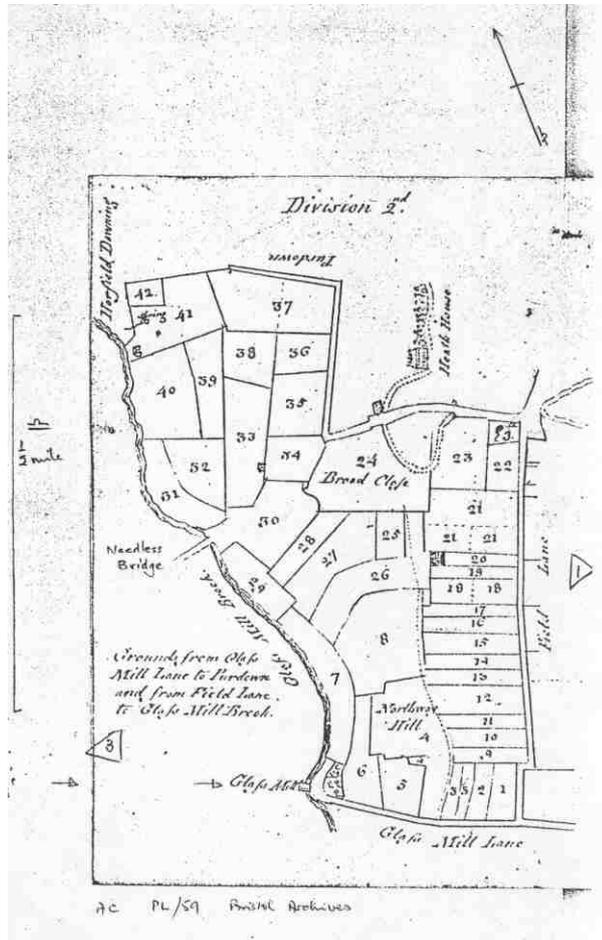
In spite of such a lengthy pedigree the history of Glass Mill is virtually untouched since my own brief note in *BIAS Journal* (vol.11, 1978) on 'The mills of the Bristol Frome'. There I chose to call it by its most recent name, Pickering's Mill, perhaps wrongly so, since Glass Mill has been more widely used and recognised in historical documents over such a long period that it can be regarded as the traditional name. Whether we prefer 'Glass Mill' or not, and all the more so if we do, we ought to explain the name -and we can't. The earlier version which we now have, 'Glaste Mill', is itself probably a corruption, and 'Glass' is certainly in turn a corruption of 'Glaste'. Enlightenment would be welcome.

The possible sequence of events in the mill's history as recorded, very sparingly, in the documents is complicated because several different names have been given to the mill. In addition the names seem to overlap in date; we have Glass Mill in documents running from 1528 to the 1890's, but during that time it has been referred to as Ashley Vale Mill, Ashley Court Mill and Green's Mill.

**The mill shows its true colours**

The most interesting interlude in this long history, indeed the only one in which we have any usable data, is that which is played out around the years 1813 to 1819. The Smyth family were by 1767 the owners of the mill and many of the surrounding fields. The short period in the mill's history we are looking at now begins with the letter, referred to by

McPhillimy, written on 18th July 1813 by Jane Smyth to the owner of a neighbouring piece of land, a Mr Master of Knowle, to tell him that:



1890 Bristol Floods Prevention Act  
Bristol R.O 07711(36)a-b, Sheet 6

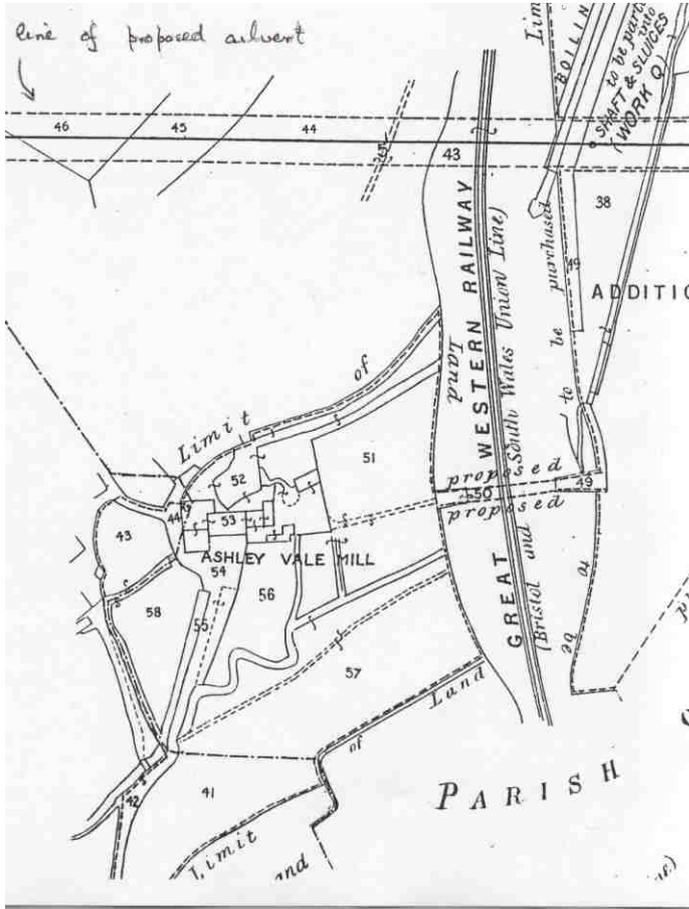
Reproduced courtesy of Bristol  
Record Office

I beg leave to inform you a person of the name of Thomas Woolford, a butcher in Bristol, has enclosed a piece of waste ground in the lane leading from Baptist Mills to the Glass Mill which has much contracted a driving way from a field of mine called Netherway hill inasmuch as to prevent a loaded wagon with corn or hay to be taken through'.

McPhillimy goes on to tell us that the butcher 'backed down'. Unfortunately there is no indication here of the use to which the mill was put: but would the Smyth estates have been content to operate a mere corn mill when more lucrative trades beckoned?

A clue to an entrepreneurial development lies in a newspaper report in the *Bristol Mercury* for Monday, 13th March 1815: 'Early Wednesday morning a fire broke out in the Logwood Mill near the Boiling well, Stapleton, which consumed the same, with considerable property'. David Pollard, who culled this reference (in 1982) also found virtually identical accounts in the *Bristol Gazette* on 9th March, and in Felix Farley's *Bristol Journal* and the *Bristol Mirror* on the 11th.

We know that the Boiling Well was just above the mill - it is named on the 6 inch OSO map of 1921 while the map accompanying the Bristol Flood Prevention Act of 1890 (Sheet 6) labels the brook leading to the mill as Boiling Well Brook (although the mill is by then called Ashley Vale Mill). There is no evidence at all of another mill in the vicinity, indeed there is neither the space nor the water for one, and convincing evidence that the Logwood Mill was Glass Mill appears in the press a few years later.



c.1795 Smyth estates;  
 Division 2nd Bristol  
 R.O., AC PU59  
 (Reproduced courtesy of  
 Bristol Record Office)

A brief report was spotted in the *Sherborne and Yeovil Mercury* for 20th September 1819 by Martin Bodman, who also found it in the *Sherborne Mercury* on 22nd September, and sent it to me (in 1993). It reads as follows: 'To be sold by private contract, and entered upon at Michaelmas' [29th September, only nine days away; but the advert had been sent in on the 8th!] 'the LEASE of a valuable WATER MILL,' [The Smyth family retained actual ownership of the mill until the date of the Tithe Map (1842) at least: there should be other references to it in the estate papers] 'about a mile from Bristol, of which lease twenty five years are unexpired; the machinery and buildings erected thereon being almost entirely new.' [This would tie in with the destruction and subsequent reconstruction of the 'logwood mill' four years earlier. Was the mill rebuilt with the help of insurance money? Possibly the insurance registers, especially those of the Sun Insurance Company, in the Guildhall Library in London, would help. But they are not easy to consult: see M. W. Beresford's

essay on scanning for insurance documents<sup>1</sup> before starting out.] 'All those MILLS,' [The later text makes it clear that the plural is a manner of speaking, and that we are here simply reading the detailed subtext of the main heading -the 'valuable water mill'. There would in any case be more than one piece of milling equipment in a logwood mill, and it was not unusual to speak of 'mills' when there was more than one machine under the one roof. ] 'WAREHOUSES and ERECTIONS, called GLASS MILLS, in the parish of STAPLETON, being the first on the stream, and abundantly supplied with water. The water-wheel is 18 feet diameter' [Inspection in 1968 found a grill in the retaining wall of the millpond over 8 feet above ground level, suggesting a wheel of the size quoted; it could have been up to 4 feet in width] 'has the shaft and arms of iron; the other [cog-]wheels are also of iron, with wood cogs in part, consequently are liable to very little repair. ..' [Then follows a list of outhouses and grounds] 'These mills and large warehouses have been used for the manufacture of ivory black and for chemical operations; they are suitable for the same purposes, or for grinding colours, and drugs, or any other purposes requiring water power and room, and, with a small addition to the machinery, may be used as a corn mill.'

Prospective buyers were asked to apply at the offices of the Bristol Journal. The latter therefore also presumably published this advertisement, which leads the history of Glass Mill through the period from 1813 to 1819. But its business does seem to need some further explanation.

### **The Glass Mill at the eye of Bristol industry, 1813 to 1819**

To begin with, the term 'ivory black' appears to be a contradiction in terms; ivory was especially prized for its whiteness. What exactly ivory black was, and what purpose it served, is explained in several nearly-contemporary publications. One of the more useful ones is Charles Tomlinson's *Cyclopaedia of Useful Arts and Manufactures* published in London soon after the Great Exhibition of 1851 and including an account of it by way of introduction. In the body of the work he has a heading for 'ivory-black', which refers us to 'carbon', where we learn that ivory-black was made from bone in much the way that charcoal was made from wood, but we are now referred to the article on 'bone'. There we are told how the bones are treated to extract, for example, the fat used in soap-making which was a major, though gently declining, business in Bristol. The residual bony material was now called ivory black, bone black or animal charcoal, and once it had been reduced to powder, was 'largely used' in the refining of sugar, another major trade in contemporary Bristol. But if it was made from bone, why call it 'ivory-black'? Here a modern dictionary reassures us that ivory-black 'is a black powder made from burnt ivory, but now from bone' -and this still in 1993, according to Chambers.

Another term for ivory-black we saw in Tomlinson was animal charcoal. Robin Stiles, in his article on 'The Old Market Sugar Refinery', says that 'At the turn of the century conditions began to change rapidly. ..and the restless enquiry of the period brought forth a flood of new ideas and patents, such as the use of wood charcoal for decolourising the syrup, followed shortly after by the more efficient animal charcoal'.<sup>2</sup>

Now, as far as Glass Mill is concerned, we have a chicken-and-egg question: did refineries try out the local ivory-black and find it efficient, or did Glass Mill turn to ivory-black

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<sup>1</sup> *Urban History Year Book*, 1976, p.7

<sup>2</sup> Robin Stiles, 'The Old Market Sugar Refinery', *BIAS Journal* vol.2, p 12.

because of the demand from the local sugar refineries? Was it indeed taken over by a sugar boiler for the purpose of producing animal charcoal?

One more name, and another use for ivory-black, is to be found in Edward Blakely's 'Handy dictionary of commercial information' published by him in 1878. He wrote that it was 'otherwise called velvet black', and was 'burnt ivory or bones, which, . . . being reduced to thin plates, are ground in water, afterwards to be used as a watercolour pigment'.

One purpose of the mill, then, was to reduce the ivory-black, and the other chemicals or drugs which were un-named in the advertisement, to a usable powder. Such chemicals would have had many uses in Bristol's numerous and widely differing industries in the early 19th century. The mill was also advertised as 'grinding colours', clearly a separate matter from the ivory-black business. This trade would have given the mill its name of 'Logwood' mill, although we should properly speak of dyewoods. a more general term to include the generic logwood. The process is described in Buchanan & Cossons' *Industrial Archaeology of the Bristol Region* and in Joan Day's article 'The last of the dyewood mills'.<sup>3</sup>

In brief it involves the reduction of the dyewood, usually imported from South America, to 'small chips [or] raspings that the colouring matter may be more readily extracted by the dyer'. This summary, which omits to mention that the raspings were subsequently ground to powder, is from Rees's *Manufacturing industry' of 1819/20* <sup>4</sup> Rees goes on to tell us that the product went to the wool and cotton textile industries and the leather trade. All of these were represented in the Bristol region in the early 19th century, but, as Joan Day's article says, it was the cloth industry of the Stroud valley which was particularly interested in the dyestuffs available in the district around this date.

Finally, it is worth considering the passing suggestion that 'with a small addition to the machinery, [the mill] may be used as a corn mill'. It is true that one normally expects to find edge-runners doing the job of reducing the raspings to powder in a dyewood mill, but it could equally well be done with a pair of horizontal corn millstones -especially if that is what happens to be in situ. And since the advertiser speaks of only a 'small addition' to enable the mill to grind corn he cannot be referring to rejigging the whole train of machinery and going to the expense of buying a pair of grist stones, which notoriously cost as much as the rest of the machinery in the mill put together.

But, aside from any need to adapt the machinery, and any concern with the comparative profitability of the trade, might a dedicated corn miller really want to enter Glass Mill for grist milling in 1819? Indeed he might have been tempted. By this time three of the mills which had once ground flour on the nearby Bristol Frome had been converted to the more lucrative snuff trade - Witherly's, King's and Frenchay -while Cleeve Mill had been incorporated in Frenchay Iron Company. Other mills on the same river were still working as corn mills, and the need for little local mills still existed so long as the development of the great steam-powered dockside mills was another generation away. Remember that Jane

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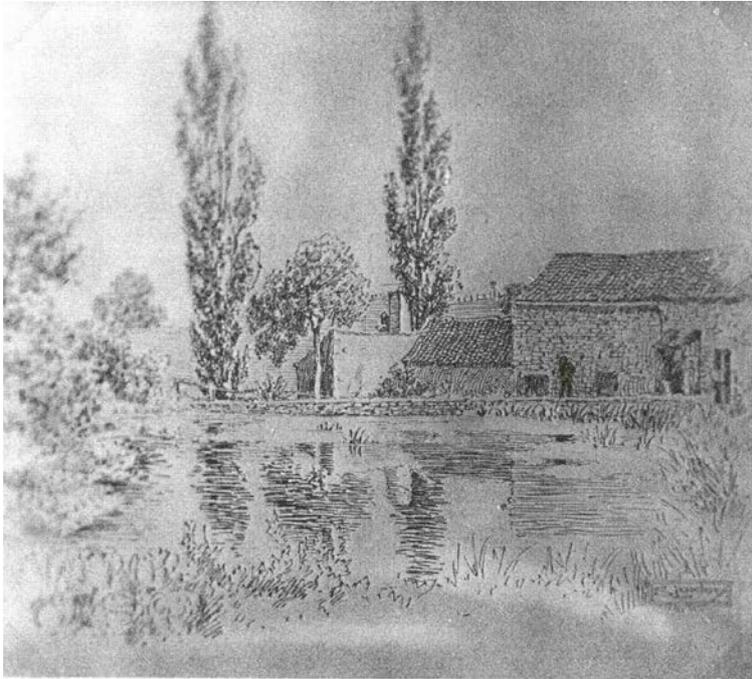
<sup>3</sup> Buchanan & Cossons, *Industrial Archaeology of the Bristol Region*, Newton Abbot, 1969, pp.69-71; Joan Day, 'The last of the dyewood mills', *Industrial Archaeology*, vol.3 no.2, May 1966.

<sup>4</sup> Rees' *Manufacturing industry' of 1819/20* , Cosines edition, vol.3, p.305.

Smyth, for one, grew corn which she was having to carry away from Netherway hill along 'the lane leading to Baptist Mills' when she might have had it ground on the spot.

### **Later history -and the lack of it**

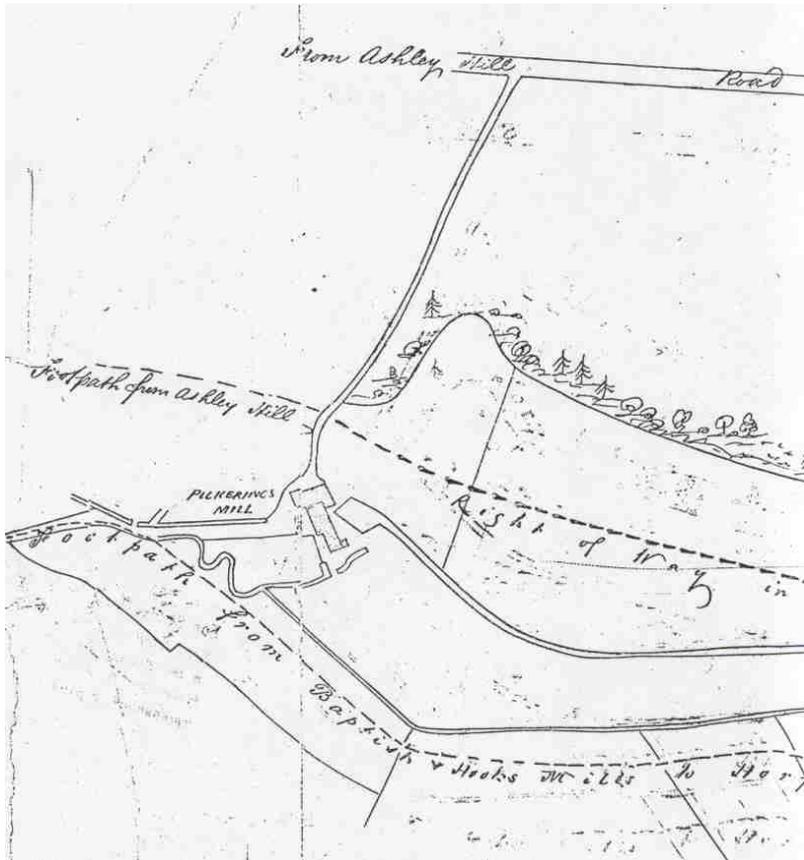
At all events, most subsequent references to the mill site provide us with little or no evidence as to what was being done there for the remainder of its life.



Loxton's picture of about 1820 simply shows a tranquil millpond; the *OSO* map of 1830 calls it Ashley Court Mill, by association with Ashley Court which then stood some 300 yards to the west, but does not say what sort of mill it was; The Tithe map of 1842 has Mary Pickering as the occupant, but with no suggestion that she operated the mill machinery, such as a miller's widow might well have been doing.

**1820s Loxton's drawing: Ashley Vale Mill**

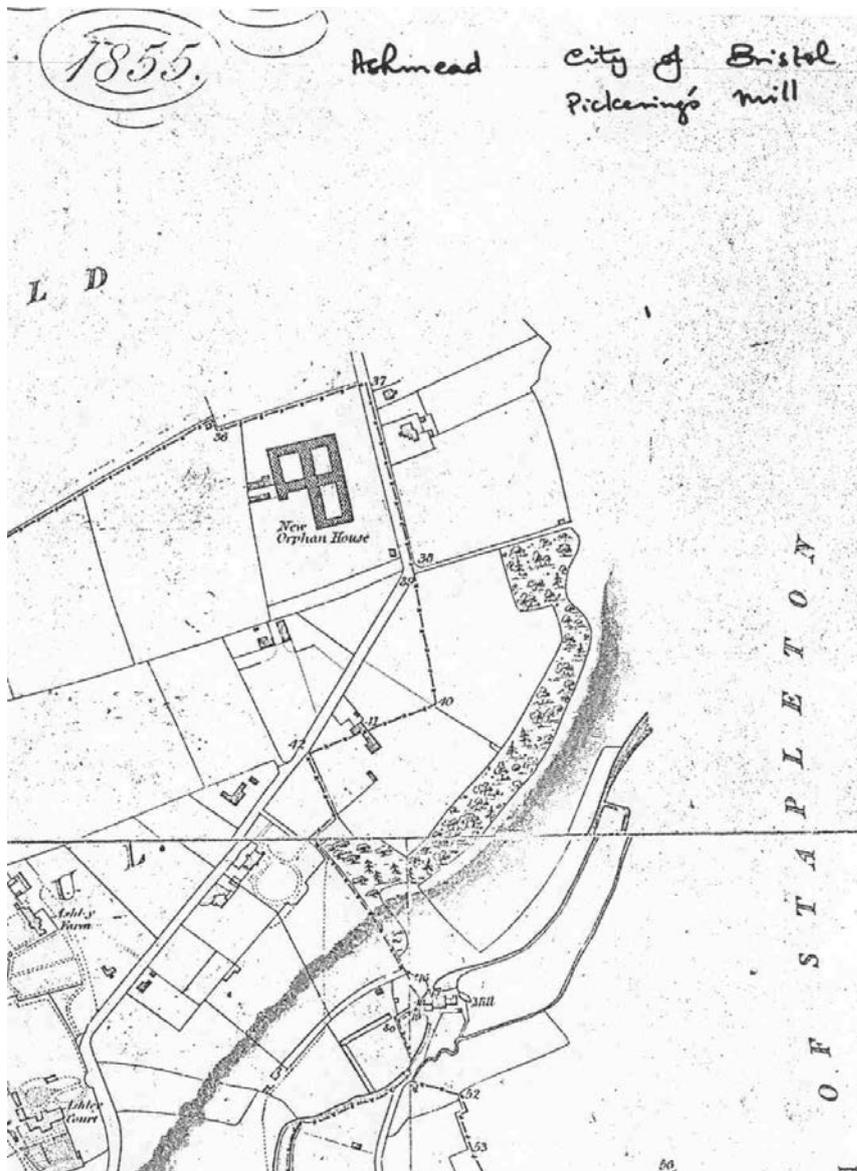
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1840s? Pickerings Mill & footpaths

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Ashmead's map of 1855 labels it just 'mill'; and although the 1890 Bristol Flood Prevention Act plan has 'Ashley Vale Corn Mill', it was clearly already in the ownership of Bristol Waterworks Co., who would have been interested only in taking the water for their own uses, even though it had two tenants; on the other hand local historian and cartographer Harry Lane has said that by 1898 the mill 'had closed' so that it may have been serving some useful purpose until that date.



1855 Ashmead's, City of Bristol

Maybe the railway records would tell us a little more about the mill whose watercourse they had to conserve; maybe the Bristol Waterworks records secrete some hint of the mill's importance; perhaps the census returns include some useful information. In any case there is still much to learn of the significance of this modest enterprise in Bristol's economic fabric; at least I am now sure that my suggestion in BIAS Journal of 1978 that Glass Mill was always a grist mill is quite wrong; we live and, I hope, learn.