

JOHN HAMERTON PAPERMAKER, NEWNHAM 1743

The inventory and statement of accounts of his widow, Elizabeth, show that John Hamerton was running a substantial paper mill in Newnham. Apart from the stock and tools of his trade he had gold and diamond rings, shoe buckles, silver spurs, a coffee mill, punch ladle, gun and good quality furniture including a bureau, an escritoire and looking glasses. This would indicate that he was running, or had run, a profitable business and led a comfortable life. Objects such as a child's chair, a coral (a piece of polished coral given to teething infants), and a pap spoon suggest that he was a family man.

A mill building stands at Hook Mill, on the Whitewater River. It was located in the extreme north-east of Newnham (Detached) until 1932, when it was absorbed by the parish of Hook. It was part of the great Tilney estate, which included freeholds in Newnham and the surrounding parishes.¹ It was evidently used for papermaking between 1739 and 1763 for, in those years a Mr. Hamerton and Gideon Ells paid church rates 'for the papermill'.² Map evidence shows a mill here until 1871. Although it does not lie on chalk, the Whitewater was fed by the chalkland providing clean water ideal for paper production.



Hook Mill, on the Whitewater River, located behind the Crooked Billet public house on the A30.

¹ HRO 10M57/P6 & 21M65/F7/168/1.

² HRO 67M80/PW1 (unpaginated) Newnham Churchwardens' rate and account book 1724-1797.

Hamerton's accounts and inventory state that he had a co-partner in the business, Robert Parker, who claimed half of the value of the tools in trade at the time of Hamerton's death. Parker had also arranged a delivery of rags from London prior to Hamerton's decease but as he had become bankrupt, Elizabeth the widow was reluctant to pay for them until ownership was proved.

It seems that specialist appraisers, John Bates and Bartholomew Revells were brought in to assess the tools of trade and describe the stock. Another appraiser was Gideon Elliott, presumably the Gideon Ells mentioned above. From the list of debtors it can be seen that Hamerton traded with customers in Basingstoke, Newbury, Winchester and Reading. Two of them were gentlemen who may have required good quality paper.

Paper at this time was made from rags – cotton or linen waste. Women and girls were employed to remove buttons, pins and non-cotton trim from fabrics. The cloth was cut into small squares and put into a large vat where it was boiled with an alkali solution to remove impurities. It was then washed in running water to remove any remaining thread or weave pattern, separate the fibres and remove all traces of dirt and alkali. The resulting cotton and water pulp, called half stuff, was put into a series of troughs fitted with hammers working against a bedplate of iron to beat the fibres and break down the cellulose. The first hammers were shod with nails to break the fibres; the second set had rounded nails to separate the fibres and the third set were of wood and designed to liquefy the cellulose into something resembling porridge. A sizing material such as alum or resin was added to the end stuff to make the finished paper less absorbent. This process could take up to 24 hours. For mills that had an irregular water flow, the stuff would be made during winter and spring floods and stored for later use.³

To make a sheet of paper a mould and deckle were dipped into the stuff. The mould consisted of a wooden frame with a fine wire mesh. These were of varying sizes according to the size of the required paper. The deckle was a wireless frame which matched the size of the mould. Parallel lengths of wire laced together with finer wire or thread created laid paper or a woven wire mesh resulted in woven paper. It was at this stage that a fine wire pattern could be woven into the mould to create a water mark.⁴

The vatman dipped the mould and deckle into the watery pulp and with a riddling movement would cause the water to drain and the fibres to spread evenly across the mould. This was a skilled job as the thickness of the pulp determined the weight and evenness of the paper. The deckle was removed and the mould passed down the line to the coucher (pronounced coocher from the French *coucher*, to lie down). The mould was quickly inverted on to a piece of thick felt. Another piece of felt was laid on top and the process continued until a stack or post developed being a pile of 50 sheets.⁵

³ *Traditional Crafts in Britain*, Readers' Digest, 1982, 152-3; *Paper Through Time*, T. Barrett, <http://paper.lib.uiowa.edu/contact.php>, updated 2012, accessed 12 Jan 2015.

⁴ http://www.ipst.gatech.edu/amp/collection/museum_prmaker.htm, updated 2006, accessed 12 Jan 2015; *Traditional Crafts in Britain*.

⁵ *Traditional Crafts in Britain*.

A heavy weight or screw press was used to expel any remaining water from the paper. The now manageable paper sheets were separated from the felts and either hung in the drying loft on ropes or laid on large squares of hessian stretched between posts. It took several days for the paper to dry out completely. The finished paper would have an uneven surface and ragged or deckled edge. Slightly absorbent paper was adequate for printing and wrapping but for handwriting a smooth, resistant finish was necessary. For this the paper was rolled between metal plates or rollers or manually burnished with a polishing stone. The sheets were cut to size and the edges guillotined.⁶

Hamerton's inventory lists white and blue rags, a copper, tubs, moulds, posts of felts, couch planks and boards. The varying sizes of moulds refer to:

Foolscap	13.5" x 17"
Double foolscap	17" x 27"
Double crown	20" x 30"
Demy	17.5" x 22.5"

Cartridge paper was a thick paper used for drawing or envelopes and was so called because it was originally used to make cartridge cases. It also lists 'lettice' which was a whitish grey fur, possibly also used in the paper making process.⁷

It is not known when Hook Mill ceased to work but the last remaining hand paper manufacturer in England at Hayle Mill near Maidstone in Kent ceased production in 1987. A video archive however does exist. Although some of the machinery is somewhat advanced from John Hamerton's mill the paper making process was basically the same.⁸

⁶ *Traditional Crafts in Britain*.

⁷ *Words from Wills*, S. A. Raymond, 2004, 63.

⁸ <http://www.kentarchaeology.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014-06-03-Hasted-Prize-news-release.pdf>, accessed 13 Jan 2015; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xs3PfwOlto>, Anglia TV, *Bygones*, 1987, accessed 13 Jan 2015.