

## OVERTON SILK MILL

The first water-powered mill producing silk thread in England was built at Derby by Thomas Lombe in 1721.<sup>1</sup> It stood five stories high and housed 26 Italian winding engines that spun the raw silk on each of the upper three floors.<sup>2</sup> When the patents lapsed in 1732, others were quick to follow at Stockport (1732), Macclesfield (1744) and Congleton (1753).<sup>3</sup> Although the machinery was driven by water power, the work required large numbers of relatively unskilled people and could be done by child apprentices.

The mill at Overton was built in 1769 and was almost certainly the first large scale silk mill in the south of England. It was built on the site of a former fulling mill and corn mill.<sup>4</sup> Thomas Streatwells, John Bridges and Edward Atkins bought the lease from Joseph Portal,<sup>5</sup> the son of Henry Portal, who was making paper at Bere Mill and Laverstoke Mill further downstream. Thomas Streatwells was well known to the Portal family since his father had been an executor of Henry Portal's will in 1748.<sup>6</sup>



The caption reads, 'Mr Troughton's Silk Mill near Overton employing about 200 men, women and children. 247 windows',

This may explain why this site was chosen, the other probable reasons being that Overton could provide a sizeable workforce and was reasonably near Spitalfields in London which was England's major silk-weaving centre.

This is the only known illustration<sup>7</sup> dated August 1826 when Mr Bryan Troughton had acquired the lease.<sup>8</sup>

This sketch cannot be taken as an accurate drawing but it was certainly an imposing

structure. The main building was 103 ft high and 160 ft long on five floors.<sup>9</sup> The artist shows no chimneys and a fire insurance document of 1805 confirms that, '*there is no stove or steam engine in the building.*'<sup>10</sup> It must have been a cold place to work in during the winter.

<sup>1</sup> Prosser, R. B. and Christian, S., *Lombe, Sir Thomas (1685–1739)*, in ODNB, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Defoe, D., *A tour thro' the whole island of Great Britain*, (London, 1724–7), 3, 67.

<sup>3</sup> Warner, F., *The Silk Industry of the United Kingdom, its origins and development*, (London, 1862), 127, 133, 147.

<sup>4</sup> HRO 11M59/E2/OVE/153985.

<sup>5</sup> Indenture of Lease, 2 October 1769, HRO 11M59/E2/OVE/153985.

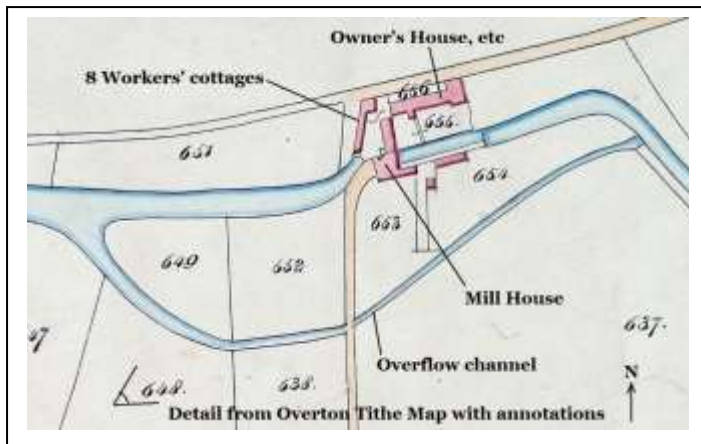
<sup>6</sup> HRO 5M52/F34.

<sup>7</sup> HRO TOP24445/2/4.

<sup>8</sup> HRO 11M59/D1/7 page 219.

<sup>9</sup> HRO 10M57/SP555.

<sup>10</sup> Royal Exchange Fire Insurance Policy, No 213995.



The general plan of the site is shown on the Overton Tithe Map of 1843.<sup>11</sup> The river shown to the right in the illustration must be the overflow channel. The main river driving the water wheel was beneath the building and cannot be seen.

The buildings may not have been drawn to scale but the general layout is clear. The main mill building straddles the river. The overflow channel with a bridge across it runs to the south.

The water wheel was geared to drive a vertical shaft right up to the top floor with further gearing to provide horizontal rotating shafts to each work room. Altogether, there were 11 reel mills with 2,160 swifts, nine train engines, 32 winding engines, and seven spinning mills.<sup>12</sup> It is not known who designed and built the mill or what the venture cost.

### Three visitors

Child labour was nothing new in an age when few children went to school. They were expected to contribute to the family enterprise usually at eight or nine years old. What was entirely new in the silk factories was the use of such young children as 'apprentices' for the full working day and for a small weekly wage. Three people who visited the mill before 1800 had sharply contrasting views about it.

Richard Sullivan, who came in 1785, saw 140 children at work from the age of six '*so advantageously for themselves and their families*' and a group of 30 younger children who '*are fed and clothed until they are capable of work.*' He saw that the children looked healthy and described the enterprise as a '*highly praiseworthy and sensible exertion of charity.*'<sup>13</sup>

He was followed in 1786 by the Revd James Fordyce. He saw 190 girls employed and praised Mrs Streatwell for the way she instructed the '*happy children.... in knowledge, virtue and piety.*'<sup>14</sup> There is nothing in the records to show that the Streatwells had any children but Mary Streatwells evidently cared for all these children as her own. They could not possibly have been recruited from Overton parish alone. Many of them must have been parish apprentices from elsewhere.

John Thelwall, who visited 11 years later in 1797, took the entirely opposite view. He was a radical reformer who took to travelling the countryside to record the condition of the poor. He described Overton as a '*wretched looking place*' and contrasted the factory with the owner's house, '*in one of which the multitude produce, in the other a single family enjoys what we call the wealth and*

<sup>11</sup> HRO 21M65/F7/181/2.

<sup>12</sup> HRO 10M57/SP555.

<sup>13</sup> Sullivan, R.J., *A Tour though Parts of England, Scotland and Wales, in a series of Letters*, 1, (1785), reprinted in Mavor, W. *The British Tourist's Travelling Companion*, London, 1798, 58.

<sup>14</sup> Fordyce, J., *An Epistle to Mrs Streatwell*, in *Poems by James Fordyce, D.D.*, (London, 1786), 99.

*prosperity of the nation.*’ He regarded the factory as ‘*a common prison house*’ in which ‘*a hapless multitude are sentenced to hard labour.*’<sup>15</sup>

He recorded their wages as 9s. to 10s. 6d. a week for a few men and 4s. to 4s. 6d. for the women. Children from five to 14 or 15 years of age received 1s. a week for the first year they were employed and an additional 3d. per week for every year they continued. The hours were from 6 o’clock in the morning to 7 or 8 o’clock at night, six days a week.

The first of the Factories Acts came in 1802.<sup>16</sup> It banned night work and limited the working day to 12 hours in cotton mills. However, the owners of silk mills successfully argued that they were much less dusty and not injurious to health. Silk mills were exempted, even though children started work much younger at five or six.<sup>17</sup> The Act was ineffective because there was no means of enforcement. Nevertheless, it showed how opinion about the employment of children was changing. What was deemed acceptable and even desirable in 1769 when Thomas Streatwells opened his mill in Overton was much less acceptable by 1800, at least to the small band of reformers who thought about it. The poor had no voice of their own.

### **A change of management**

In 1790, when Thomas Streatwells was 56, he assigned the lease of the Silk Mill to Bryan Troughton.<sup>18</sup> The Troughtons were a prominent family in Coventry where Bryan’s father was a silkman.<sup>19</sup> ‘Streatwells, Bridges and Troughton, silkmen’ were working as a partnership at 108 Bishopsgate in London in 1783.<sup>20</sup> Sometime before 1795, Bryan moved his wife and six young children from Bishopsgate in London to Overton so that he could manage the business.<sup>21</sup>

### **An argument over water**

It must have become apparent that the silk mill was under-powered soon after it was built. Mr Streatwells tried to rectify this by building up the weir of his overflow channel to raise the level of water in the mill pond and the head of water driving the mill wheel. This led to arguments with Mr Small who worked Town Mill 600 m. upstream. He claimed that the water had backed up so much that it was slowing down the wheel at his mill.<sup>22</sup>

The argument continued for years. Eventually, Mr Small put the matter into the hands of his lawyers. In 1790, Bryan Troughton was in charge of the silk mills. He must have been in contact with John Rennie as he did his survey for a canal passing through Southington to join the Basingstoke and Andover canals.<sup>23</sup> Rennie was engaged as Troughton’s expert witness for the trial. He carefully

---

<sup>15</sup> Thellwall, J., *Monthly Magazine*, 8 (1799), 784.

<sup>16</sup> The Health and Morals of Apprentices Act, 42 Geo III c.73, (1802).

<sup>17</sup> Parliamentary Papers, 20, (1834), Second Report of the Central Board of his Majesty’s Commissioners, Supplementary Report, Factories Commission, Children’s Employment, B1, 125.

<sup>18</sup> HRO 11M59/D1/7 page 219.

<sup>19</sup> Will of Bryan Troughton, sen., NA PROB 11/977/28.

<sup>20</sup> Anon., *The New Compleat Guide to All Persons Who Have Any Trade or Concern with the City of London and Parts Adjacent*. 16, (1783), 302.

<sup>21</sup> Nathaniel Troughton was baptised at Overton church in 1795. Hampshire Archives 82M72/PO4.

<sup>22</sup> *Hampshire Advertiser*, 14 November 1791.

<sup>23</sup> Rennie, J., *The Report of John Rennie concerning the practicability and expense of making a Navigable Canal from the Basingstoke Canal to join the Andover Canal*, 1790. HRO COPY/582/1.

surveyed the levels at the weirs of both mills and did experiments by adjusting them.<sup>24</sup> Rennie concluded that Mr Small's mill was 'very ill constructed', arguing that this was where the problem lay. Eventually it came to court but, despite the evidence of the foremost canal expert in the world, Mr Small won his case.<sup>25</sup> Mr Troughton just had to accept the situation. Lack of power may have been a factor in the eventual economic failure of the mill.

### Keeping the mill running

The period of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815) were good times for the English silk weavers because import tariffs on raw silk were cut and imports of finished products from France were banned, though this did not prevent smuggling. However, being almost wholly dependent on home demand, silk manufacture was liable to serious fluctuations with every change of fashion.<sup>26</sup> In 1810, the output from the Overton Mill was '*not to the extent formerly, of which the mill and machinery are capable, but which is expected to be resumed at the termination of the war.*'<sup>27</sup>

In 1821 there were debates in Parliament about reducing the import duty on raw silk and removing the ban on foreign imports.<sup>28</sup> Bryan Troughton was so concerned about it that he wrote to his M P, fearing that the trade of silk throwsters would be annihilated.<sup>29</sup> Nothing happened until an Act of Parliament in 1824 which changed the whole system with a view to '*lessening the fluctuation in demand and to meet the altered state of commerce attending the return of peace.*' The high duty on raw silk was abandoned, that on thrown silk reduced by half and the admission of foreign manufactured goods was made legal after 5 July 1826.<sup>30</sup> During debates on the bill, the minister, church wardens and inhabitants of Overton petitioned Parliament<sup>31</sup> but, despite similar petitions from all over the country, the Act came into effect.

In 1834, the lease of the Overton silk mill came up for sale by auction '*by order of the mortgagees by a power of sale.*'<sup>32</sup> Around 1830, Bryan Troughton had transferred the lease to his son Charles<sup>33</sup> and maybe he had raised money by mortgaging the property and was unable to repay it. Charles himself was declared insolvent in 1834.<sup>34</sup> The highest bidder was probably John Corrie, since he was the proprietor of the lease in 1847.<sup>35</sup> Bryan Troughton died just after the sale at the age of 83 and was buried in Overton churchyard.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Rennie, J. *Troughton's Silk Mill*, Institute of Civil Engineers, REN/RB/01/136.

<sup>25</sup> *Hampshire Advertiser*, 14 November 1791.

<sup>26</sup> Lardner, D., *Treatise on the Origin, Progressive Improvement and Present State of Silk Manufacture*. (London, 1833), Part 1, 76.

<sup>27</sup> Vancouver, C., *General View of the Agriculture of Hampshire, including the Isle of Wight*, (London, 1810), 403.

<sup>28</sup> *The Times*, 9 June 1821.

<sup>29</sup> HRO 44M69/F10/56/15.

<sup>30</sup> Lardner, D., *Treatise on the Origin, Progressive improvement and Present State of Silk Manufacture*. (London, 1833), Part 1, 76.

<sup>31</sup> J. HOC, 81, (1826), 115.

<sup>32</sup> HRO 10M57/SP555.

<sup>33</sup> HRO 11M59/D1/14, Page 59.

<sup>34</sup> London Gazette, 30 May 1834, 1, 992.

<sup>35</sup> HRO 10M57/T161.

<sup>36</sup> HRO 81M72/PR12.

John Corrie lived at Southington House just south of the silk mill. He was a widower who married Bryan Troughton's daughter Martha in 1836.<sup>37</sup> Charles Troughton remained the mill manager and he was at the mill on census night in 1841.

The census reveals that the eight tenements at the mill were occupied by families and not by child workers. Only four silk throwsters actually lived at the mill. There were at least 25 others, all women, who lived in the village, the youngest being 15.<sup>38</sup> The 1841 census did not record whether children were in school or in work but it appears that the practice of accommodating very young children until they were capable of work had gone. However, there was one child, Jane Nash, who was 11 at the time of the census, who started work there at the age of six, perched on a little stool to enable her to reach her task.<sup>39</sup>

### Closure and demolition

John Corrie closed the silk mill on 2 January 1848<sup>40</sup> and let it be known that the buildings would be demolished. Charles Troughton was evidently liable for debts at the mill as all his possessions were sold at an auction held in the house on 24 February. The furniture, china, glass, sheets, tablecloths and even the beer in his cellar were sold and he was left with nothing.<sup>41</sup> Two days later, he wrote a formal letter to his brother in law.<sup>42</sup> It is clear that he was a year behind in paying the rent. He acknowledged that the business was in difficulties but still thought he could turn it round. He claimed that his relatives would always look after him financially and based his appeal on behalf of the workforce.

Two weeks later, John Corrie received another appeal from the minister of Overton Congregational Church, John Moreton, saying that, '*My decided conviction is that the down-taking of that building must be the most calamitous event that could befall the poor of this place and neighbourhood.*'<sup>43</sup> The mill workers would find themselves in the workhouse and become a further burden on the ratepayers. He also wrote that closing the mill had been advocated on moral grounds, without saying what these were, but the parish christening records reveal that the 'silk girls' had always had a tendency for producing 'baseborn' (illegitimate) babies. Twenty of them had done so in the previous seven years.<sup>44</sup>

It seems there was quite a head of steam behind these protests. Mr Corrie was warned by his legal adviser to '*abstain from any act of demolition at the Mill*' until he had the bishop's 'Licence to Demolish' in his hands in case those who disagreed might persuade the bishop to withhold it.<sup>45</sup>

If Charles Troughton was mismanaging the business and John Corrie had lost patience with him, why could he not have sold it to a new investor at auction as had happened 12 years before? The answer is that in 1846 the duties on foreign silk products were reduced from 30 per cent to 15 per cent, making the fine and abundant French silks only marginally more expensive than their inferior English counterparts. The decreased demand and a simultaneous increase in weavers' wages crippled

---

<sup>37</sup> *Oxford Journal*, 18 June 1836.

<sup>38</sup> *Census*, 1841.

<sup>39</sup> Obituary, *Hants & Berks Gazette* 21 October 1916.

<sup>40</sup> John Hobbs Chronology, HRO COPY/483.

<sup>41</sup> *Hampshire Chronicle*, 21 February 1848.

<sup>42</sup> HRO 34M87/23.

<sup>43</sup> HRO 34M87/24/1.

<sup>44</sup> HRO 81M72/PR7.

<sup>45</sup> HRO 10M57/T161.

manufacturers, and many were driven to bankruptcy.<sup>46</sup> The banking crisis of 1847 meant that credit was unobtainable.<sup>47</sup>

John Corrie could not hope to find a buyer. The assets of the machinery and the building had to be



sold to pay creditors. He took advice on what the sale might raise and 29 April 1848 he received the opinion of a Mr John Money. It was not optimistic. He estimated the quantity of building bricks at 720,000 with 40,000 plain tiles and upwards of 70 loads of timber. He thought that, '*the machinery is worth but a trifle and will not answer to remove to a distance.*'<sup>48</sup>

The auction was held on 26 May.<sup>49</sup> On 7 June workmen started to demolish the building to allow the successful bidders to cart away their purchases.<sup>50</sup> Much of the machinery remained unsold and good winding engines went for a few shillings. The mill wheel raised just £4. The total proceeds amounted to £193 6s. 6d.<sup>51</sup> Nothing was left except the eight tenements.

At the 1851 census, after the mill had closed, there were 39 young women living in Overton working as silk winders and throwsters, including Jane Nash, now 21.<sup>52</sup> They were presumably working at the Whitchurch silk mill with a three mile walk each way added to their working day.

Did the silk mill workers have to go to the workhouse as Charles Troughton and the minister predicted? There were 29 people at the workhouse on census night in 1841. By 1849, the Overton workhouse had closed and Overton paupers were sent to the new workhouse at Whitchurch. On census night in 1851 there were 59 people there of whom only 19 were born in Overton. Closing the



silk mill was not the 'great calamity' that had been feared.

What became of Charles Troughton? At the 1851 census he was living by himself in a boarding house in Winchester. His family had not supported him as he had hoped.

The eight tenements became known as 'Silk Mill Cottages'<sup>53</sup> and were still occupied in 1957 but they were demolished soon afterwards because they were considered unsanitary.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>46</sup> Baird, A., *Silk in England*. [www.smith.edu/hsc/silk/papers/baird.html](http://www.smith.edu/hsc/silk/papers/baird.html). Accessed 15 November 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Ward-Perkins, C. N., *The Commercial Crisis of 1847*, Oxford Economic Papers New Series, 2, (1950), 75-94.

<sup>48</sup> HRO 34M87/24/4.

<sup>49</sup> HRO 34M87/26.

<sup>50</sup> John Hobbs Chronology, HRO COPY/483.

<sup>51</sup> HRO 34M87/26.

<sup>52</sup> *Census*, 1851.

<sup>53</sup> Silk Mill Cottages. [www.overtonpictures.com](http://www.overtonpictures.com). Accessed 15 November 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Oram, R., '*The Changing Face of Overton*,' (1998), 27.

The only remains in 2017 are the weir and the bridge over the river.

VCH Overton Group

