

Dursley Clothiers and their Mills, 1450-1600

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Clothiers were the organisers of the cloth trade. They bought the wool and distributed it to the spinners, collected the yarn and passed it to the weavers. The loosely-woven cloth was taken to the mill where it was ‘fulled’: cleaned, shrunk and ‘finished’, the nap raised and sheared. The clothiers then marketed the cloth. A great deal of money was to be made in the cloth industry and men came to Dursley from the surrounding area to take advantage of the possibilities, which accounts for the number of mills established here by this early period. Many made considerable sums and their descendants established gentry families in the next two centuries, building large houses and laying out gardens: e.g. Purnell at Ferney and Kingshill, and Phelps at Townsend and Chestal.

Wool may have been bought locally or from the North Cotswolds, like Thomas Crew of Dursley did. In 1551, he was “*owed 22 shillings by one Holder, of Coln Rogers*” because his order of wool was 2 todts short (a todd is 28 lbs). In 1551 William Tratman noted that Dolman “*doth owe me 4 todts of woll to be paid at Midsomer next ensuing the date hereof*” and debts owed by Christopher Wolworth alias Webb in 1577 included £23-10s-0d (£4,806) to two woolmen, Richard Mumford and Hughe Benthe.

Spinning and weaving were carried out at home. There is no mention of spinning in the records, but there are 23 mentions of looms, usually a ‘brode lome’, in the wills of Dursley testators, between 1502 and 1586. Apprentices were given the loom they had learned on, together with a sum of money, as part of the completion of their training e.g. in the will of John Wolworth, 1558, “*To John Trewell, my prytise, when his prytishepe ys ende, for his wages which is 26s-8d (£311), a brodelowme with the harness perteyning to the same.*”

Some Dursley mills had dual purpose: to grind corn (grist mill) and to full cloth (fulling or tucking mill). Some mills contained two stocks and some three. ‘Stocks’ were wooden hammers which rose and fell alternately on the cloth in baths of liquid, by the turning of the water wheel. Fulling was very skilled work, for the fuller had to know when to remove the cloth to prevent it being torn. He then had to finish the cloth, combing the surface with teasels set in ‘handles’ to raise the nap. With the cloth laid over a shearing board, he then used ‘shearman shears’ to achieve a smooth surface. These were large, heavy, broad-ended shears, as long as a man’s arm and which required him to use both arms to manipulate them. They were expensive items and over 25 of them were left in Dursley wills in the period 1507-1582.

Dyeing was another process that needed to be carried out at the mill. There needed to be a good supply of wood for the furnace to heat the water. A furnace is mentioned in the will of Alice Abadam in 1507 and the ownership of woodland is mentioned in several Dursley wills. In 1492, Robert Rickards had goods valued at £121 (£81,050) in his Dursley warehouse: sixteen whole red cloths, three whole white cloths, madder and alum for dyeing, a weigh beam, pulleys and three packs of red cloth at London.¹ In 1551, the work of Thomas Stinchcombe, dyer, is detailed in debts to Thomas Crew. “*To Tomas Stynchcombe, for certayne dieing, which Y referre to his contyense (conscience) and bock (book). Also he had £22 of lyste (£6,044) which Y have not as yet, therefore Y refer that to my brother’s discretion and hys (his).*” In 1608,² there were 5 dyers in Dursley and Woodmancote, more than in most other parishes in the area. (Wotton had 2 dyers, Alderley 2, Bisley 1, Minchinhampton 1, Woodchester 3, and Stonehouse 3, (one of whom had 2 servants, who were termed dyers).

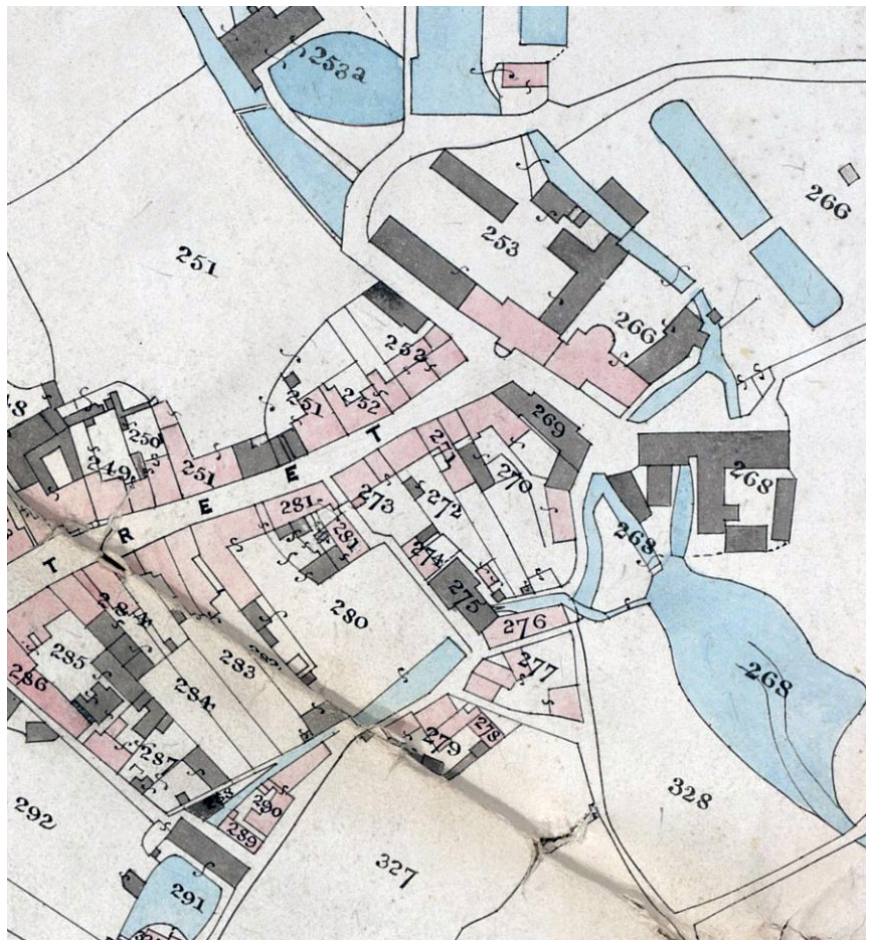
The cloth was stretched on racks in the open air. It was held horizontally, fixed by adjustable tenterhooks at top and bottom, so that it would not shrink unevenly. An area of land adjacent to the mill was, therefore, necessary for a rack ground. Four fields on the Dursley Tithe Map of 1841 are named Rack Close/Rack Ground (Numbers 43, 563, 564, 262 and 264).

The finished cloth was taken to London for sale. John Smyth recounts a story of a clothier, in the time of King Edward VI, (reigned 1547-1553) removing the wooden statue of St George from Cam church porch, carrying it in the wagon with his goods and leaving it at Colnbrook, Buckinghamshire, where it became the sign of a famous inn, The George.³ Thomas Bowser was the inn-keeper (will 1557) and as there were clothiers called Bowser in Dursley we might consider a family connexion.

Dursley clothiers had money invested with merchants in London. In 1522, Owyn ap Jenkyn left £20 (£10,400) in bills in the Steelyard for his granddaughter, Margaret Holder. The Steelyard was the home of the Hanseatic League, German merchants, situated on the Thames, a little above London Bridge. In 1534, John Davys, gentleman of Woodmancote, left £400 (£176,571) in the keeping of John Hardy, citizen and alderman of London. In 1579, Christopher Wolworth alias Webb left a debt of £60 (£12,273) to one Fisher of London and was owed money for five fine cloths⁴ at Mr Fisher's.

The means of getting the cloth to market was, therefore, important and some Dursley testators left money for the maintenance of the highways. Thomas Woodward left 6 shillings and 8d (£221) in 1508, for repair of the highway at Bowcott. In 1513, John Holder left 20 shillings (£663) for the same and 20 shillings to repair Drake Lane. In 1514, John Sherman, tucker, left 16 shillings and 8d (£553) for the repair of the bridge at the "townes yend", (Townsend, bottom of Long Street).

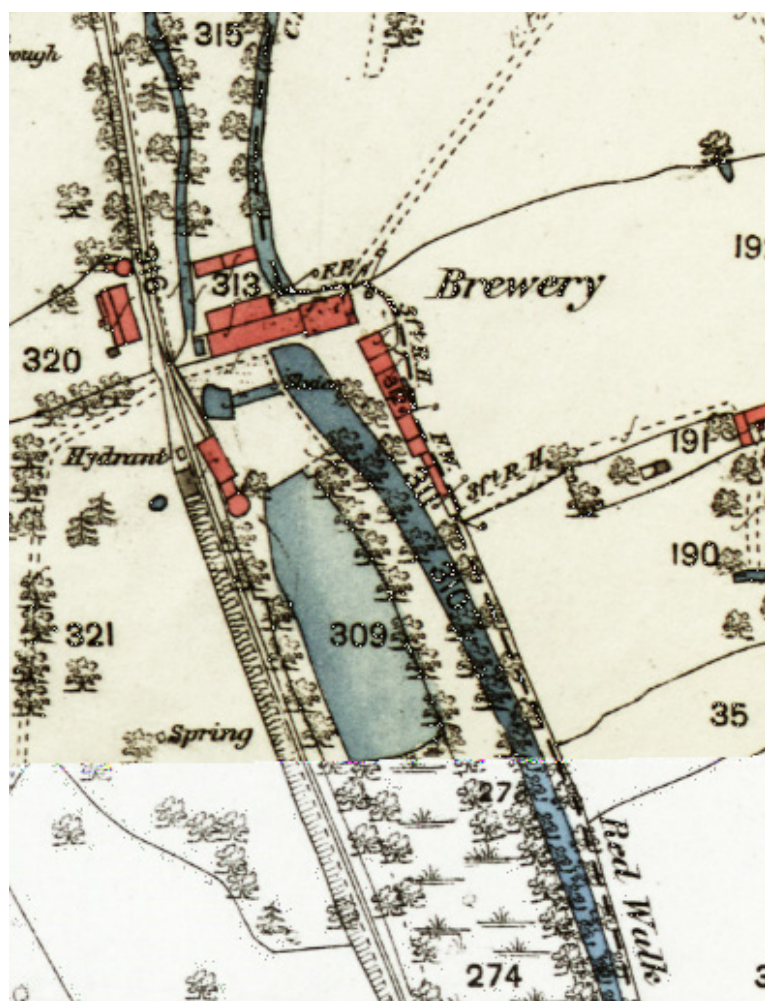
There are early records of mills in Dursley. The first mention of a fulling mill is in a document dated 1262-1287⁵ when 10 shillings (£365) rent was paid by William de Bernewood for the fulling mill in Dursley. In 1302, the mill was worked by Thomas de Bernewode. In 1274, there was a decayed water mill in Woodmancote and two mills there in 1325. In 1439, Richard Beauchamp, earl of Warwick, received an annual rent of 13 shillings and 4d (£429) from Alice Cooper, for the fulling mill in Dursley. There are several references to women having control of the business of the mills and the production of cloth, as we shall see later.



The industrial centre of late mediaeval Dursley
Long Street and Townsend

The Mills (in grey): 291 Howard's Upper Mill (**Over Myll?**), 275 Howard's Lower Mill (**Tann House Mill?**), 268 **Townsend Mill**, 253a Howard's Mill (**Tanner's Mill?**). 'The Priors' is the building in pink across the end of Long Street at 253. Townsend House, 266, in pink, next door, is the site of the Woolhouse and the Vawte. Lower Mill (**Bathmedys Mill?**) is above the map to the left and **New Mills** at Ferney is to the right of the map
Dursley Tithe Map 1841, Gloucestershire Archives

Almost all the mill sites have been built over and this article deals with those for which we have definite pre-1600 records: **Bathmedys Mill** (on the site of Littlecombe Business Park), **Tanners Mill** (at the bottom of Drake Lane), **Tann House Mill** (on the corner of Bymacks Lane and Victoria Close), **Townsend Mill** (Chestal Terrace) and **New Mills** (Ferney). Mills on these sites continued in use until the collapse of the cloth industry in Dursley in the 19th century.



Lower Mills Brewery (**Bathmedys Mill?**) showing the large mill pond and Red Walk, the road to the mill from the bottom of Long Street - Ordnance Survey 1881

On 11th May, 1495, Edmond Wykes leased a mill to John Sherman, tucker, who, in 1514, left his “*fulling myll called Bathemedys Myll with a mede, a pownde, and course of water to the same mill adjoining, for 80 years*” to William Samford of Dursley. John bequeathed his “*handills*” (hand-held sets of teasels for raising the nap) and “*eight pairs of Sherman sherys*”. In 1522, William Samford was the third richest clothier in Dursley with goods worth £52 (£27,015).⁶ Thomas Trolley was the richest, with goods worth £66-13s-4d (£29,418), whose name is recalled in “Trolley Moor”, between the Vale Hospital and Rednock School. The second richest was William Pacy with goods worth £60 (£31,201). William Sanford bequeathed the mill in 1534, to his son, William, for his life and then to his grandson, William Sanford. Another mill, “*Yawley’s Mill*”, was left to his daughter, Alice, which raises the possibility that there were two separate mill buildings at this site. In 1536, John Berye of Dursley, fuller, was granted Trolleys Moore, (rent 26s-8d per annum). This may imply that he was a fuller at Bathe

Medys Mill, next to Trolleys Moor. In his will dated 1562, John left to his daughter, Elizabeth Berye: “*6 paire of sheares with their appurtenances, a sheare boord and a folding boord and 2 trestles, all my ubbon earth, (fuller’s earth?) all my handles.*”

In 1536, Roger Redinge leased “*one fulling mill called Bathe Medys Mill, together with a meadowe and a staighe (mill pound?) and water course to the same mill adjoining within the lordship of Dursley, also a way lying by the streame (the Red Walk?) leading towards the mill for plowys and horses to carrye all things necessarye to the said mill as ofte as please them.*”

In 1584, John Essington of Coaley left his lease of Bathe Meads mill to his son, Robert and in 1595 Richard Bridges leased to John Plomer and Thomas Trotman: “*one grist mill and fulling mill with two stocks, a rack to dry cloths, and his other fulling mill with three stocks in the same place and one house near adjoining the said fulling mill called the Dyehouse.*” It was noted that the mill had been in the tenure of William Wolworth alias Webb, (died 1591), the younger son of Edmond Wolworth, whom we shall meet shortly.

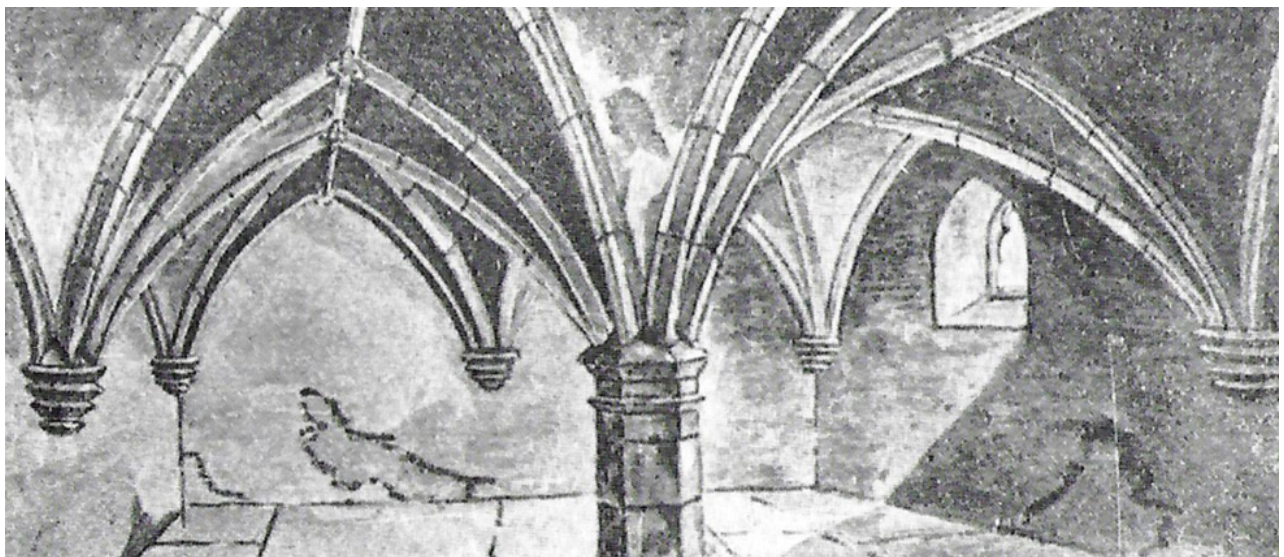
The next mill on the stream is **Tanners Mill**. This stood opposite Drake House, at the bottom of Drake Lane. Adjacent to it, to the north, were Tanner's Croft and Miles Moore, now the site of The Woodlands (The Towers) and The Hollies Care Home. A mill pound is mentioned in 1594. On 14th December 1610, a new lease was granted to Arthur Vizer, "*of the mills in his possession, Pilton's Paddockes, The Racks, Tanners Crofte and Mylesmore, at a rent of 20 shillings with a fine of £400 to be paid, part at Christmas 1610 and part at the following Candlemas.*"

Moving up the stream, we come to 'The Priory' (first so-called in 1874), at the bottom of Long Street, still an imposing building, with a flight of curved steps up to the front door in the two-storey porch. In the spandrels of the arch are, on the left, EW and a merchant's mark and, on the right, MC and two merchant's marks. J.H. Blunt⁷ notes that this house is said to have been built by Edmond Wolworth alias Webb (c.1509-1584) and gives a date on the exterior as 1520 (reading the right-hand side of the arch as MDXX) and on a beam inside, 'EW 1539'.

Edmond was a wealthy clothier, who bought the manor of Dursley in 1567, showing that the new men with their wealth from the cloth industry could replace the old Norman family, the Dursley Berkeleys and their descendants, the Wykeses, as important local landowners.



'The Priory' at the lower end of Long Street



The Vawte - This space was 'discovered' when Townsend House, the Phelps family home, which stood adjacent to The Priory on the east, was demolished in the 1840s - '*A New History of Dursley*' by Derek Archer (1982)

Between 'The Priory' and Townsend Mill were two tenements and a garden which William Austen alias Kerver granted to John Bowser of Tortworth, clothmaker, on 24th November 1532. Between these and 'The Priory' was a half-burgage called "*Le Vawte*". In 1573, one is called The Wool house, with a cellar under the same and The Vawte has a "*vawte, (vaulted room or cellar) other rooms and chamber over*". In 1594, it was noted that Edmond had used the building for a wool store and its chambers for his servants.⁸ The boundaries of these properties in the documents up to the 1580s indicate that the Ewelme ran to the south. Sometime later, before the end of the 18th century, the stream was re-routed to the north, behind 'The Priory'.

The business practices of Edmond and his father, Thomas (c.1470-1513) were believed by John Smyth, historian of the Berkeley family, to be the origin of the saying, *"He'll prove, I think, a man of Dursley,"* i.e. a man that will promise much, but perform nothing. *"This saying (now dispersed over England) took roote from one Webb, a great clothier dwellinge in Dursley in the dayes of Queen Mary, (reigned 1553-1558) as also was his father in the time of kinge Henry the viiiith; (reigned 1509-1547) using to buy very great quantities of wooll out of most counties of England; At the waighinge wherof both father and sonne (the better to drawe on their ends) would ever promise out of that parcel a gown-cloth, peticote-cloth, apron or the like to the good wife or her daughters, but never paid anything".*⁹

Edmond's great-grandfather, Robert Wolworth (c.1420-1467), was the first recorded member of the family in Dursley. He was churchwarden in 1462 with John Vale, whom we shall meet shortly. Robert's wife, Matilda, may have been a member of the Webb family, as her son, John, began using Wolworth alias Webb, as his surname. After Robert's death, Matilda married Robert Rickards I of Dursley (will 1492), a wealthy clothier,¹⁰ Robert Rickards II, (son of Robert Rickards I) moved to Cirencester and used his great wealth to benefit the parish church there. He left £10 (£5,200) in 1518 to buy a suit of vestments for priest, deacon and subdeacon for the parish church at Dursley.

Robert and Matilda's son, John Wolworth alias Webb (c.1440-after 1470) married Alice Vale, the daughter of John and Jone Vale. John Vale¹¹ had come to Dursley from Ireland, via Miserden and Tetbury, in the company of Thomas Pacy. In 1460, a group of Dursley clothworkers: John Vale and three other fullers, three weavers, a miller and a tailor were prosecuted by Thomas Wykes, the lord of the manor, for trespass and damage in Dursley. The value of Thomas' trees and hay was, for each, 100 shillings (£3,215). Possibly, these men, involved in the cloth industry, were stealing timber for construction, or for fuel for drying wool or the dyeing furnaces.

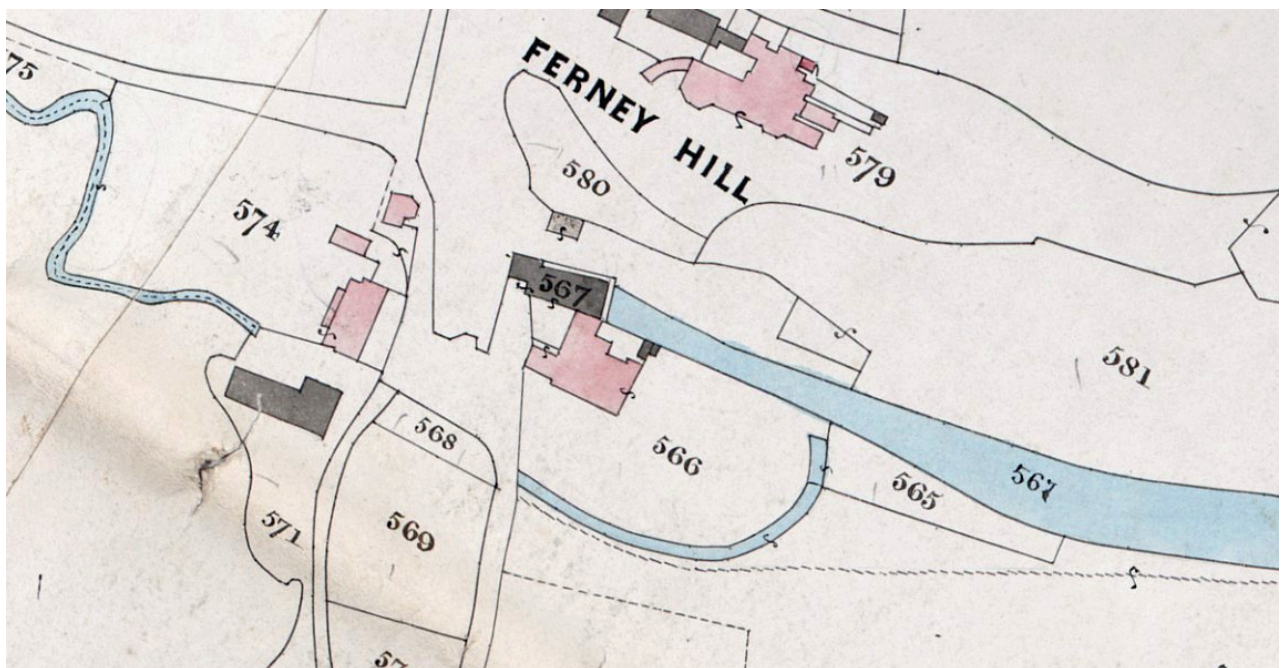
Edmond Wolworth's mother was Johan, the daughter of John Holder (will 1513), who left eight whole cloths in his will and money for his son, *"Sir Holder"*, to continue his studies at the university of Oxford. Edmond's father, Thomas Wolworth, left his wife the tenement by the Broadwell and an inn called The Bell. She could continue to occupy the house, the dye house and the mill for 12 years, paying to Edmond the annual rents of 6s-8d (£220) for the mill and 20 shillings (£662) for the rest. He also bequeathed eight whole cloths and a sack of wool. We see here, another woman left in charge of the family cloth business until her son came of age.

The next mill up the stream was **Townsend Mill**, where Chestal Terrace now stands. In 1532, William Hevinge, (Heaven) clothier, was in possession of this mill. We see something of his wealth and character in his will dated 1561. He owned land in Wick, Coaley and Dursley, a wood, five tenements in Dursley and one in Wotton, two silver-gilt goblets with covers, a salt with a cover and a dozen silver apostle spoons and ten with maidenheads at the ends, four cows and five horses. He obviously did not intend to leave his son, John, anything in his will, but was persuaded to do so by his friends. However, he had a cunning plan to appear to do this and yet leave John nothing. He left him £6-13s-4d, (£1,555) made up of all the debts which John and his wife owed him. *"He doe owe me for fee rent of the Devenishe lande, (near Mill Farm), the which I paied owte of my purse for 8 years of 20s so that I utterly denie the lesse (lease) which he hath of the said grounde, whiche he houldeth, for he never paied me rent and now the ground is in my owne hands."*

James Smallwood had taken a lease of Townsend Mill in 1567, the year in which he was bailiff (mayor) of Dursley. In 1596, it was leased to John Browning of Coaley and Richard Browning of Dursley, clothiers. It was then in the tenure of Richard Davis, fuller, who had been granted the lease after James Smallwood. Richard Davis made his will in January 1599. The debts of money due to him for dressing cloths from William Trattman, Hugh Fleminge and John Marten amounted to £12-15-0 (£1,069).

At this point, the water from the Broadwell, then called the Ewelme, joins the stream from Uley. Writing in about 1540, John Leland describes the water from the Broad Well as the main source of water driving the fulling mills. *“There is in the towne selfe a goodly springe, and is as the principall hedde of the broke serving the tukkyng (fulling) mills about the towne”*.¹²

Bustorpe’s Mill alias **Tann House Mill** stood on the Ewelme, at the present junction of Bymacks Lane and Victoria Close. Henry Bustrope held it in 1486 and left to his son, Robert, *“three tenements and a house containing two mills, a grist (corn grinding) mill and a towkyng (fulling) mill.”* He left his son, Maurice, a mill called the Over Mill. In 2006, when an archaeological excavation was commissioned by Crest Nicholson¹³ on the site of Victoria Works, several pits and tanks were excavated which were identified as part of a tannery. A raised mill race was also discovered, which, from the presence of Cistercian ware in the dump deposits and the absence of clay tobacco pipes, indicated very strongly that it was constructed before 1600. It is possible that **Over Mill** was on the site of the Pin Mill in Water Street, the ‘upper mill’ on the Ewelme stream.



New Mills site at Ferney. No 567. The spillway (sluice), with the waterfall and curving stream, around 566, is the most notable feature today. The mill pond has been filled in. There is no information in the Tithe Apportionment for 567 and 571 - *Dursley Tithe Map 1841, Gloucestershire Archives*.

In 1545, John Heskins left his mill called the Tann House, a house and rack lease to his son, William. His wife, Marryon, was asked to run the mill business until William came of age. If she would not, Thomas Smallwood, John Heskins’ uncle, was asked to do it. Marryon was a daughter of John Davys, gentleman, of Dursley and his second wife, Jane (will 1542) and was thus a half-sister of Thomas Smallwood’s wife, Elizabeth. We do not know if Marryon did run the business, but it is worth noting that her husband believed she could do so and so secure their son’s future. This mill is referred to as belonging to William Heskins in 1561.

New Mills at Ferney was probably the last mill to be established in our period. When it was granted by the lords of Woodmancote to Thomas Purnell, the second son of John Purnell of Woodmancote, clothier, on 26th May 1610, the lease notes that it had been previously held by John Smallwood, deceased. He was dead by May 1592, when his son, Thomas Smallwood, leased John’s house at Le Crosse, (Market Place), in Dursley to Matthew Crewe of Alderley, clothier, (will 1613). Matthew used this property as a bargaining point with his second wife, *“for that I promised at my marriage that she should enjoye all those goods and implements [in my house] in*

Dursley for her life." She was Jane Browning, who had married a clothier, Anthony Stokes of Colham Mill, Castle Combe, Wiltshire, (will 1593), was the sister of John Browning, clothier of Coaley and was coming back to live in her home area.

The Smallwood family's origin is obscure and there is no evidence that they were related to John Smallwood alias Winchcombe, (c.1489-1557), the extremely wealthy clothier, 'Jack of Newbury'. However, members of the Smallwood family were certainly inhabitants of Dursley by 1522.¹⁴

When Thomas Purnell took on the lease of New Mills, it was described as a "*fulling myll and all that other fulling myll, lately a grist myll with appurtenances... and one plot adjoining the said fullinge myll lately a grist myll, the greater part of which ground lyeth between the myll pond therof and the fludhatch streame and the lesser parte therof and the fludhatch of the little parcel of ground on the west side of the grist myll lying between the fludhatch water and the fleame water,*" This, presumably, was all established by John Smallwood during the latter half of the 16th century.

Further up the stream from this mill, there were two mills in Dursley parish and a further two just into Uley parish: **Rivers Mill** on the Caswell stream, which Anthony Holbrow left to his wife, Elizabeth in 1729, **Dursley Mill** (Mill Farm) which was granted to Nicholas Dangerfield, clothier of Dursley, in 1644, **Wresden** (Uley) which has a date stone over the porch IEE 1687 for John and Elizabeth Eyles, and **Rockstowes Mill** (Uley) which John Arundell stated in his will had been built by his father, John Arundell, who died in 1700. As yet, no documentation has been discovered to show that these four mills existed in the 16th century, but further research may alter this.

Acknowledgements

The two main sources used for this article are the leases of Dursley manor in 'Dursly Booke and Tenures' (*Gloucestershire Archives: D1571/E189*) together with 102 Dursley wills from the probate records of Canterbury (PCC), Worcester and Gloucester.

The National Archives 'Currency Converter: 1270-2017' has been used to estimate modern values, see www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter.

References and Notes

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2. Smith, John, *Men and Armour for Gloucestershire in 1608*, Alan Sutton, 1980, pp.166-168.
3. Smith, John, *A Description of the Hundred of Berkeley*, 1885, Vol III, pp.123-124.
4. Guy, John, *Gresham's Law The Life and World of Queen Elizabeth I's Banker*, Profile Books, 2020, p.xv.
"The standard broad-cloths each measured 26 - 28 yards by 1 ¾ yards and weighed at least 68 lbs. They were transported and sold in packs of ten."
5. Wells-Furby, Bridget (Editor), *A Catalogue of the Mediaeval Muniments at Berkeley Castle*, BGAS, 2004, Vol 1, p.25, A1/2/34.
6. Hoyle, R.W., *The Military Survey of Gloucestershire 1522*, BGAS, 1993, p.153.
7. Blunt, John H., *Dursley and its Neighbourhood*, London, 1877, p.10.
8. Gloucestershire Archives: D1571/T28
9. Smyth, John, *A Description of the Hundred of Berkeley*, 1885, Vol III, pp.26-7.
10. Robert Rickards I was a very wealthy clothier with goods worth £700 (£468,884) in 1492. He possessed a wool loft in Dursley with a beating hurdle and rods for removing impurities. See Lee, John S., *The Medieval Clothier*, Woodbridge, 2018, pp.125 and 199.
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