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III Forge Bank Mill, Halton by James Price

On the riverside at Halton are the remains of two former water powered mills. Both were recorded by Ashmore in 1969¹ - the Low Mill nearest the bridge, and further upstream the Forge Bank² Mill with its fine brick chimney. Water to power these mills was taken from the river at Forge Weir in the Lune gorge. The water travelled via a short head race to Forge Mill, while a second open race or leet ran along the river bank to fill a pond to the rear of Low Mill. After Low Mill the water was returned to the river above the lower weir at Halton (see Plan I). These mills have complex and lengthy histories commencing as separate units but ending up as parts of the same factory - that of James Helme and Co. manufacturers of oil cloth and linoleum. After the purchase of Helmes by Williamsons in 1932 the works was closed. Today the buildings are occupied by three main companies - Bambers and Luneside Engineering at Forge Bank, and the Great Lakes Chemical Corporation at Low Mill.

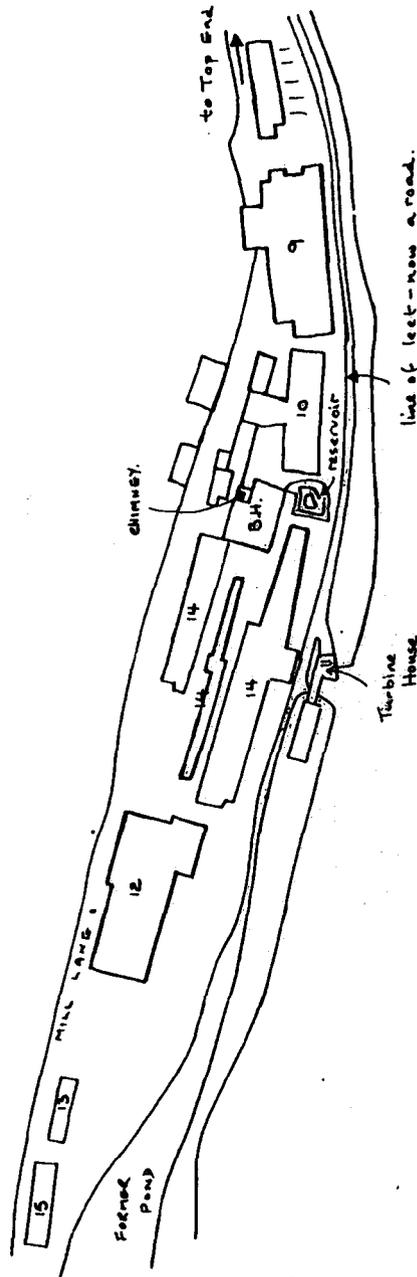
Unlike Caton where the mills were all separate, each with its own history, the Halton Mills provide Industrial Archaeology with many problems. Separating their histories and dating individual buildings is often very difficult.

This article attempts to provide a history of the Forge Bank Mill and to describe the main buildings to be found on this large and complex site.³

The History of Forge Bank Mill:

- 1744 William Bradshaw, Lord of the Manor, builds a mill at the north end of Halton. Probably for silk or flax
- 1821 Cotton spinning recorded at Forge Bank Mill
- 1826 Forse Bank and 12 cottages leased to Thomas and Edward Atkinson of Holme Mills. These 'newly erected buildings' were used for flax

PLAN III FORGE BANK MILL
(LOWER END)



KEY

 Buildings (numbered in text).
 Cottages.

SCALE: 1 mile = 50"

J.P. 80

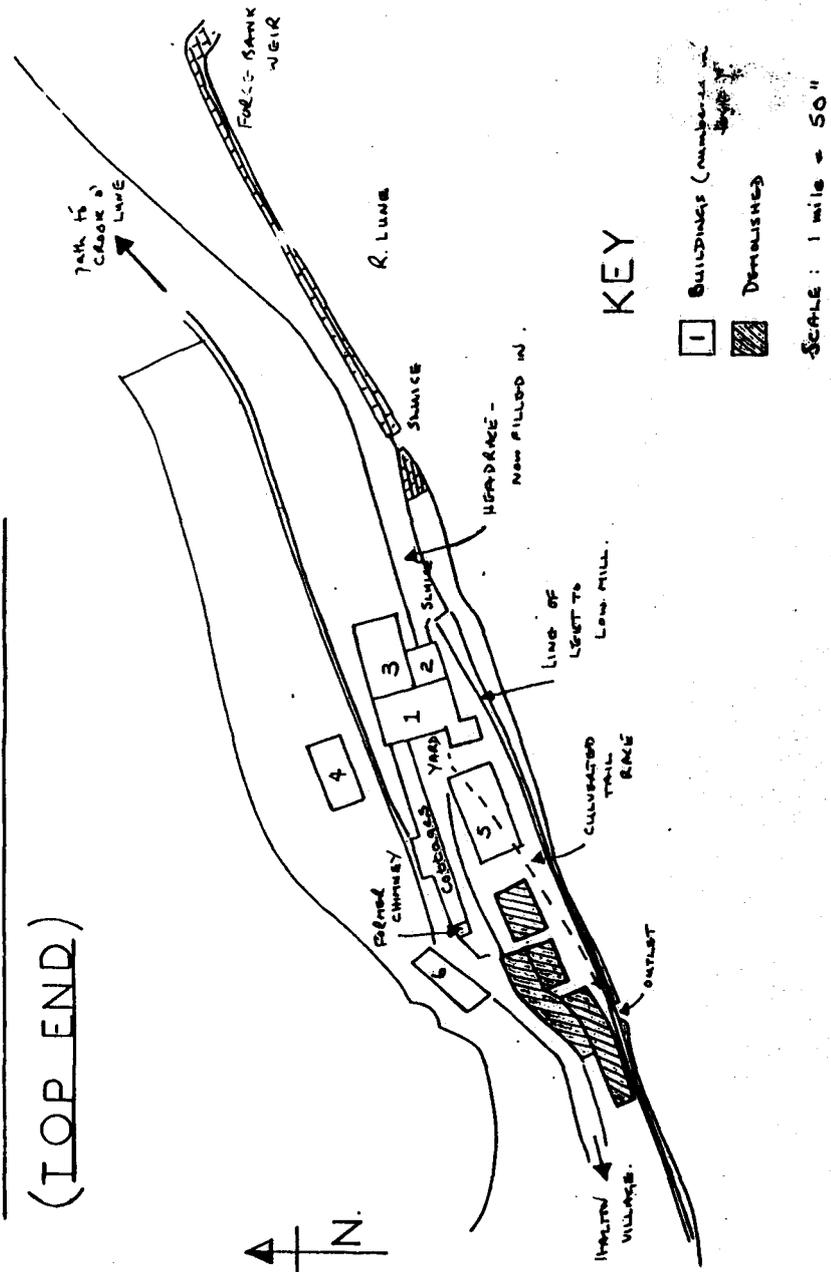
- and twine. (The lease of 1826 refers to the mill as being 'at the site of the Forge'. Two iron forges were erected at Halton after 1779, one in the vicinity of the Forge Weir. No physical remains exist today and other than the 1826 reference, the last record of the forge is a sale advertisement of 1824. There is a possibility that for a short time the forge was converted into a cotton mill).
- 1834 Purchase of the Bradshaw Estate (including Forge Bank Mill) by John Swainson a cotton manufacturer of Preston
- by
1841 Cotton spinning at Forge Bank with 54 workers (25 living at Forge Bank cottages).
- 1862 Closure of Forge Bank by Swainson during the Cotton famine.
- 1869 Stockdale and Wolfendale (of the Lancaster Oilcloth Company at Ridge Lane Mill) begin to make Table Baize or oilcloth at Forge Bank.
- c1874 Arrival of James Helme (as a partner?)
- 1881; Mannex Directory records 'an extensive manufactory of table baize and leather cloth of James Helme and Co.'
- 1932 Purchase by Williamsons. Oil cloth and linoleum manufacture transferred to St. Georges works 1936. Cotton weaving until 1941.
- 1941-
1946 Used by the Army.
- Post
War Purchase by Bambers (Millers) c.1950 and Luneside Engineering Co.

The Buildings:

The buildings of Forge Bank are a jumble of styles, materials and dates. In general terms the buildings become more recent as one goes south along the river and the building materials change from stone to brick.

The oldest part of the Mill lies at the top end of the site on the head race (now filled in) leading from

PLAN II. FORGE BANK MILL
(TOP END)



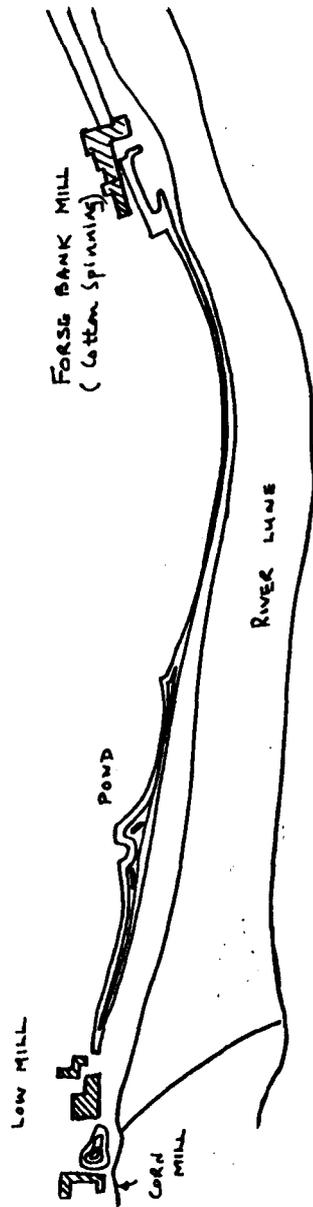
Forge Weir⁴. It is set at right angles to the river and is three storey with a cellar at the east and containing a 14' 8" wide wheelpit, the site of a former undershot wheel⁵. Built of stone with a slate roof it is 84' long by 45' wide. Much altered internally by Bambers, this building is probably the one mentioned as 'newly erected' in 1826. It is of non-fireproof construction with rows of metal columns supporting wooden floors. A number of the original windows still remain, but others have been covered or had their positions altered, while the whole building has been pebble dashed.

To the rear of this building (No. 1 on Plan 2) two additions were built sometime later. Neither is shown on the 1st Edition 6" map when the complex consisted of the mill and cottages. The two additions were erected by Swainson in the period 1845-62. To the east (No. 2 on Plan 2) a three storey stone building of random masonry with small paned windows was added over the mill-race. The race flows beneath it in a fine arched tunnel. It has a hipped roof and internally, wooden floors carried by metal columns. To the west (Building No. 3) is a single storey weaving shed built into the hillside with a typical ridge and furrow roof. It has a blank stepped wall on the north end.

Running at right angles to the original mill in a southerly direction and built into the valley side are a set of stone cottages. They are early nineteenth century in date and lie along the Mill Lane to Halton. Later converted to other uses by Helmes, 12 are recorded in 1826 and 8 by 1841. They provided a small industrial hamlet away from the village and adjacent to the Mill.

The Mill race from Forge Weir divided above the mill itself. One arm powered the wheel/turbines and then exited into the Lune via an overflow which still remains on the river bank. The rest of the water carried on along the river bank as an open leet. This leet is now infilled and is shown by the line of

THE HALTON MILLS IN 1845.



PLAN 1.

Source: 1st Edition 6" Map.

Scale: c. 9" = 1 mile.

the road on the river bank to Messrs Bambers premises.

At the upper end of the site are several buildings added by Helmes after 1874 - a single storey stone building (6) and a two storey building with a stone ground floor and brick upper floor (4). Stockdale and Wolfendale built some timber buildings on the hillside north of building 4 but only traces of their foundations remain. In front of building I is a single storey shed latterly used as a garage and built of Ingleton Bricks (5).

The majority of buildings erected by Helmes are situated further downstream. Facing the new infilled race are two larger four storey stone buildings (9 and 10 on Plan III). These were erected in the 1870s for the manufacture of table baize or oilcloth. Trowelling (where the mixture of linseed oil, resin and pigments was spread onto a backing of cotton cloth) was done on the upper floors; the lower floors being hanging rooms where it was left to dry. These buildings are of traditional construction with metal columns supporting wooden floors in Mill 9, and brick piers in Mill 10. Both have the typical windows of hanging rooms - and turn on a central pivot to allow ventilation/draught whatever the wind direction. Entrance to both buildings was from the rear via Mill Lane.

South of building 10 the buildings are smaller in scale and erected as the mill complex grew in size and extent, chiefly after 1891. Number (11) was formerly a turbine house from which power was sent to the lower parts of the mill by means of shafting. Adjacent to building 10 is the Boiler House which contained Lancashire Boilers (now removed) to provide steam to dry oil cloth. Also here is the reservoir pond for the boilers and the fine red brick chimney, which projects out of the valley itself.

The parallel series of single storey buildings now occupied by the Lunside Engineering Company (14) were built for finishing processes like printing and

varnishing. The most southerly buildings of Forge Mill are (12) - a two storey stone property used as hanging rooms and for printing which is now the offices of the Engineering Company; and Buildings (13) and (15) erected as cart house and stables.

This site is a very large one and extremely complex to unravel. This article provides an introduction to it. A later article will describe the use of the buildings on this site as they were in the early 1930s before ownership passed from Helmes to Williamsons.

Footnotes

1. Industrial Archaeology of Lancashire. David and Charles.
2. The older and alternative name is 'Forse Bank Mill'
3. I would like to acknowledge the help received from the following people in trying to untangle this complex site: George Niven, Bob Beeden, Mr John Stockdale, Mr. W. Hosfield.
4. Built into the bank of this race are 'mossers' - bowl shaped masses of slag from the forge.
5. It now contains the remains of two water turbines installed by Helmes.