

Mobberley Mill probably originated in the medieval period as a corn mill. The site was solely powered by water until the mid-19th century. By the 1870s gas was being produced on the site for lighting the mill and associated workers' housing (over twenty cottages were built in 1864 at what was named Hall Bank to house the incoming workers for the manufacture of silk thread)

Water-power to the site was provided by the Mobberley Brook. This was dammed by throwing an embankment across the valley floor to create an extensive reservoir. Mill Lane runs along the former mill dam, while the site of the reservoir is now a wooded area which extends south-eastwards from Mill Lane and is bounded on the north by the present course of the Mobberley Brook. When the water-powered mill was in use, the section of the brook immediately downstream of the reservoir served as a bye wash, i.e. a channel carrying away the excess of water not required for the mill. Its supply of water was provided by a headrace which must have passed through the reservoir dam and which continued on the other side of the mill as a tailrace which re-joined the Mobberley Brook.

The mill continued to be powered by water only until the mid-19th century when this was supplemented by steam. As a textile factory in the 19th century, the mill went through several phases of usage, involving cotton spinning and weaving, the manufacture of silk thread, and finally of crepe. It ceased production in the late 1880s and the building was demolished in 1891.

If the mill was of medieval origin, it may be the case that this was the mill site which was documented in 1228-40 as part of the moiety of the de-Mobberleys and which following the sale of the Talbots' property in the early 17th century came into the possession of the Leghs of Booths. By the late 18th century, through a process not recorded in the sources, it would then have passed into the hands of the Wrights of Offerton and Mottram St Andrew, whose successors are firmly attested as the landowners in the 19th century.

The 1672 list of freeholders mentions two properties as being close to Mobberley Mill: 'John Davenport, for Mosse's house by the mill: a small cottage' and 'Richard Strethull's cottage; formerly Hobson's house by the mill'

'The corn mill in the village was turned into a cotton mill by a gentleman named William Chapman in 1798 but he was compelled by agreement to keep the bottom floor for grinding corn. In 1802 Chapman advertised the newly rebuilt mill and its new machinery for sale or let. A manufacturer named Hughes became the lessee and enlarged the premises, and in addition to cotton spinning, commenced the weaving trade. Locals recall (and passed down) that this venture failed and the mill returned to Chapman.

By around 1820 corn milling on the site appears to have ceased. The Pigott's 1828-9 directory lists a corn miller at Mobberley, but this was John Burgess at New Mills.

Improvements to the Power System, c 1830s - 1855

Up to this period (about the middle of the 19th century) the power had been dependent upon water from the Pool, until John Hill Eckersley got possession, and he, too carried on the business of spinning only. Eckersley introduced an engine as an auxiliary to the water. Part of the building was then not in use, viz., that part once devoted to weaving. Eckersley sold the mill by auction, and it passed to Oliver, of Bollington, who built a new engine house and water wheel combined, at the bridge side, and started the spinning of fine counts for the Nottingham market, but it was not a success

John Hill Eckersley must have taken over the mill between 1834 and 1839 when he was listed in the Mobberley tithe award as occupant of the site, which is itself described in the award as a

cotton mill. He was still listed as a cotton spinner in Mobberley in 1850. The occupancy by Oliver of Bollington and his improvements to the power system should date to the first half of the 1850s, since a directory of 1860 noted of Mobberley that 'a short distance to the south of the church is a cotton factory, which has been unworked for the last five years'

SILK PRODUCTION, 1860s

It was next occupied by Messrs Kay and Robinson, under lease from Mr W. J. Harter, and this firm carried on the manufacture of Victoria and Albert crepe. But Kay and Robinson originally used the mill for a different purpose. In 1892 the Rev H Leigh Mallory wrote of the mill that 'about thirty years ago it was turned into a silk mill, and afterwards used for making the Albert crepe'. Helsby in 1882 also alludes to the use of the site for silk production, describing it as a 'silk mill and cotton mill, called "Mobberley Mills"... now in the occupation as a considerable crepe manufactory, of Messrs. Robert Henry Kay and Alfred Tho. Richardson - the former gentleman a merchant in Manchester'. The directory evidence shows that Kay and Richardson had taken over the mill by 1864 when they were listed as silk throwsters, i.e. manufactures of silkyam, at 'Mobberley silk factory'. Similarly, in 1869 they appear as silk throwsters as 'Mobberley Silk Mills'.

On a greater scale, the American Civil War restricted the supply of raw cotton between 1861 and 1865. The economics of cotton manufacture were also changing leading to much larger mills. This perhaps led to the switch to silk. Even here, Macclesfield had seen a contraction of the silk industry and emigration to America, in particular Paterson, New Jersey where two Macclesfield men set up new mills in 1846.

Nevertheless, Kay & Richardson must have had faith as they clearly recruited labour from far and wide and even built what is now Hall Bank for workers' cottages. At the 1871 Mobberley census 130 individuals were recorded as working in the silk industry. These included eight families from Norwich, seven from Macclesfield, one from London and two from Manchester. In addition, there were over twenty single young men and women boarding or lodging and already three Norwich-born wives of Mobberley men. In addition to the thirty households around Hall Bank and Tipping Brow thirteen Town Lane addresses included workers at the mill.

CREPE MANUFACTURE, 1870s AND 1880s

The use of the mill for silk manufacture appears to have come to an end by 1874 when Kay and Richardson were listed as crepe manufacturers at the site which had resumed its old name of 'Mobberley Mill'. Black Crepe had become fashionable as a result of Queen Victoria's extended mourning for the loss of her husband and the expectation that women would purchase and wear mourning clothes for specified periods. The firm are reported to have also attempted to produce the material in white, but were unable to find a satisfactory method of bleaching.

In Cheshire, at least, the use of the site for crepe production may have been unique, for a county directory of 1878 has one entry under the heading of crepe manufacturers, and that is for Kay and Richardson at Mobberley Mill.

The rarity of the trade is also implicit in the different accounts of the firm's demise. According to Hulme, 'Mobberley people always believed that the Germans sent workmen to copy their manufacture of this article - at all events the trade slipped away'. A later account recalled that 'In 1887 the trade had gone; the machinery was sent to Germany and two Mobberley men went with it to show the Germans how to work it'.

Joseph Cawley is buried in the graveyard at St Wilfrid's and the stone notes that he died in 1890 at Vohwinkel (near Wuppertal) in Germany. It appears that he was one of the two men.

The Rev H Leigh Mallory in 1892 reported of the end of the mill that 'three years ago is was vacated, and in 1891 was pulled down'. The mill pond was then infilled and planted with trees; the site being shown as such on 'Ordnance Survey' mapping of 1897.

The 1881 census for Mobberley shows that the numbers employed had reduced from one hundred and thirty to eighty-four. The occupational descriptions also reflected the change from silk to crepe that had happened between censuses. There had been 34 weavers in 1871 – now there were none, nor were there any twistors, throwers, warpers, tenters or piecers. By the 1891 census they'd all gone and the school log book for October 7th 1887 refers to the exodus of families from the village, including 'half-time' children who split their days between school and the mill. Some returned to Norwich, Pendleton or Macclesfield. A few changed their occupation and stayed in Mobberley. James Wright originally from Pendleton took on the Church Inn.

BUILDING DEVELOPMENT

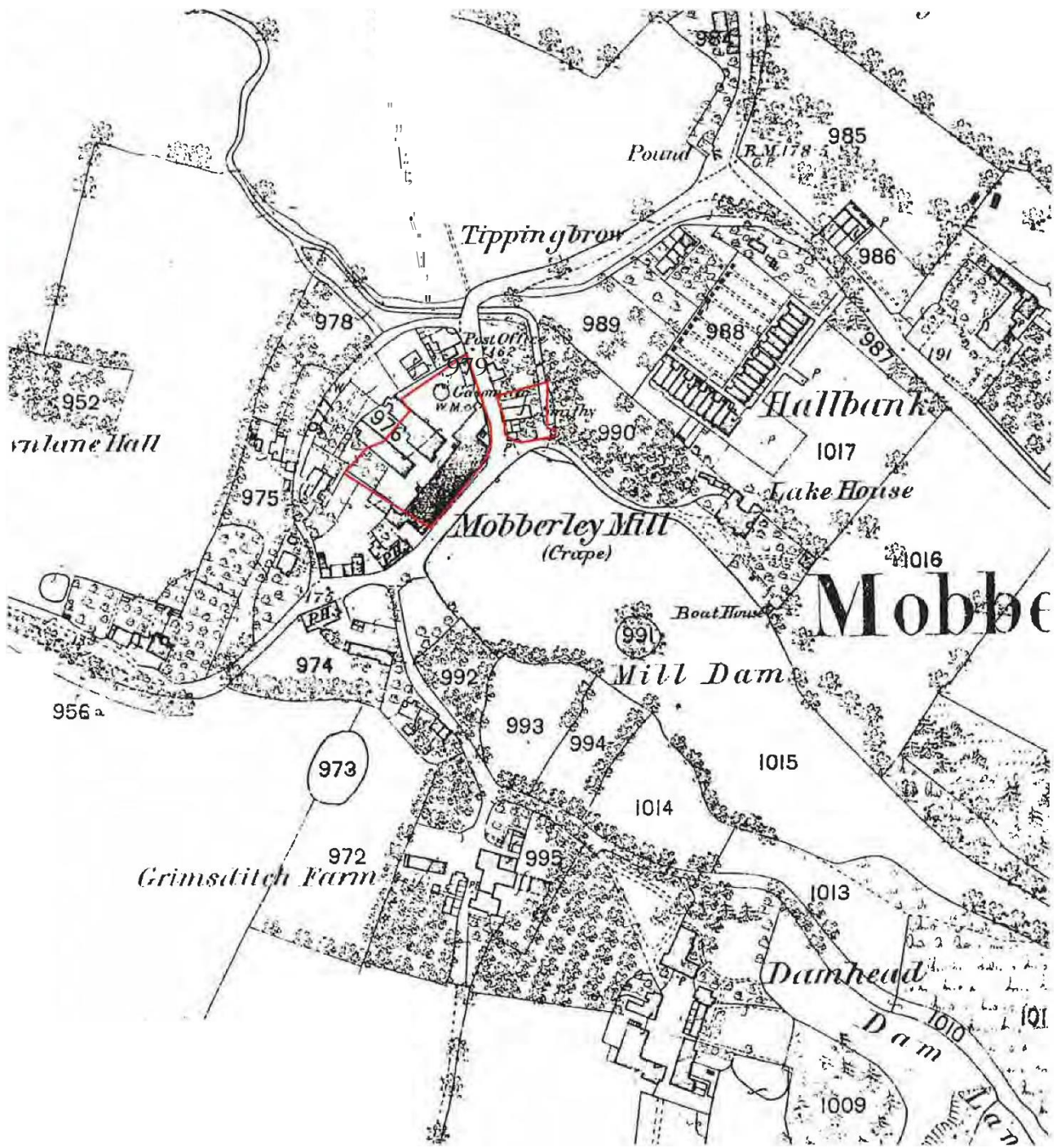
The available information on the mill structures is derived from the 1839 Mobberley tithe map, the 1876 OS map and photographs taken prior to demolition.

From this evidence the mill, as originally built as a cotton factory, was twelve bays long. Norris describes it as a four-storey building, but photographs suggest that there may have been a fifth, in addition to the use of the 'attic as a workspace or for storage.

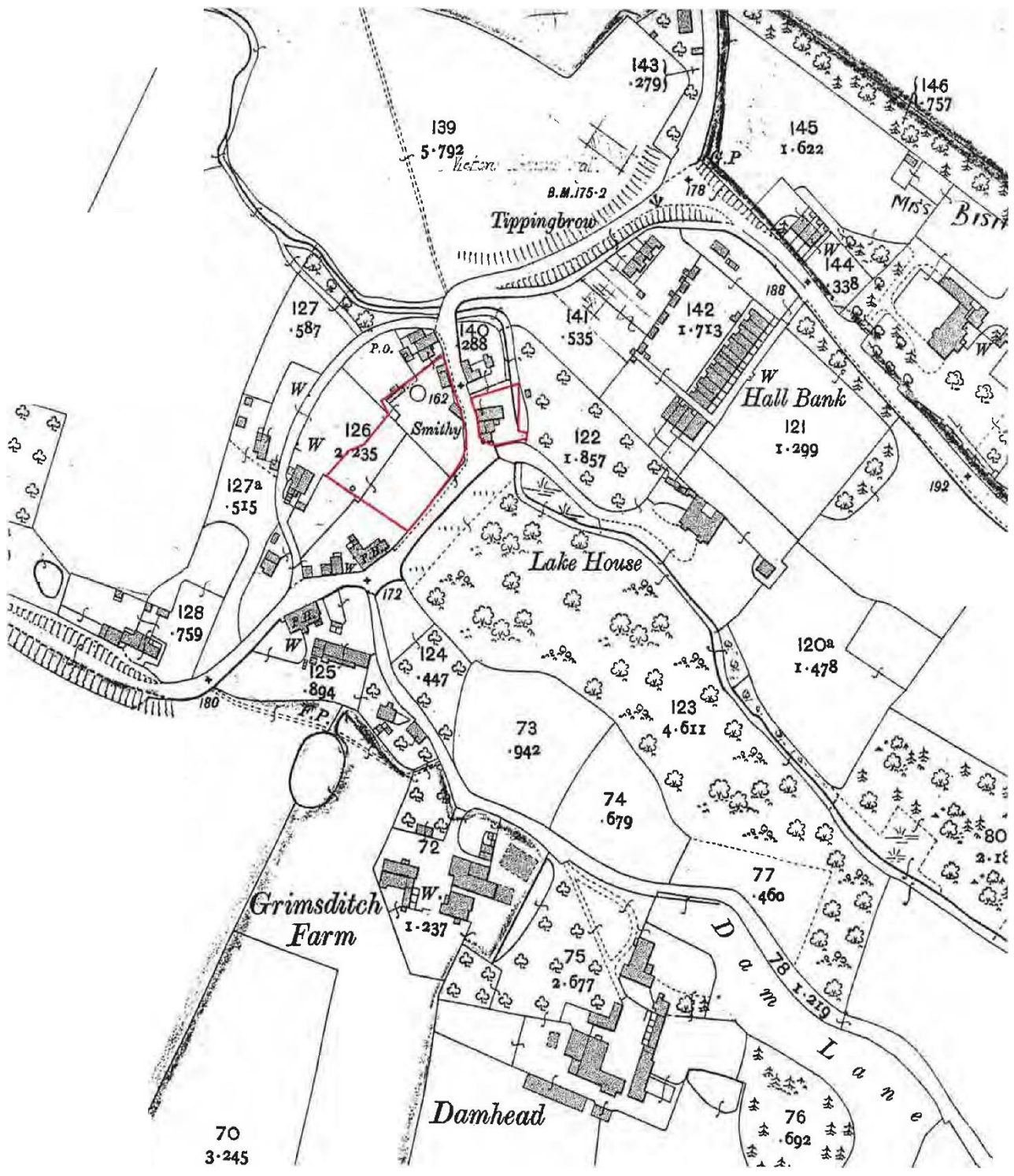
By 1876 the mill had been enlarged at its northern end. The photographs show that this included a three- or four-storey extension to the mill, and an engine house and chimney. It was at this end of the mill, i.e. 'at the bridge side' that in the 1850s Mr Oliver built 'a new engine house and water wheel combined'. The 1876 map also shows that two large detached buildings had been added at the rear of the mill. These also appear on the photographs which show them to have been of two or three storeys. The more easterly of the two either incorporated or was built on the site of the earlier building to the rear to the mill shown on the 1839 map. This more easterly building also lay over the site of the tailrace as shown on that map. It is possible that by this date this tailrace was either redundant or had become of secondary importance. To the north-west of the study area, immediately beyond Spout Lane, the alignment of the tailrace had been modified since 1839. If projected into the study area, that new alignment would have crossed the mill towards its north-east end, i.e. in the area of the 1850s wheelhouse and engine house. In other words, when that new wheelhouse was built a new headrace and tailrace may have built to the north-east of the earlier race.

In the northern angle of the mill site, the 1876 map shows a circular gasometer, with an unnamed rectangular structure to its north-east along Mill Lane. The latter may possibly have been a retort house in which the gas was produced. The primary function of this on-site gas manufacture was presumably to light the mill, but it was also used to light the row of mill worker's houses, called Hall Bank, built in 1864.

After the mill was demolished, the gasometer and possible retort house continued to be shown on maps into the 1950s, and by 1908 two new smaller buildings had been added to this part of the site. This area had been cleared by the late 1960s by which date the buildings known as Twibells Yard had been erected in the northern corner.



Detail of 1876 OS map. Scale 1:2500.



Detail of 1908 OS map 1:2500

