

Four Generations of Water Flour Millers in N.W. Kent

From humble beginnings in a small country water mill, working three pairs of stones, to one of the most prosperous flour milling enterprises in N.W. Kent.

In 1806, Stephen Cannon and his younger brother George moved from Thong, near Shorne, and took over South Darenth watermill, which they worked in partnership as flour millers. They were the sons of Stephen Cannon (1733/34 to 1818), a tenant farmer, who moved from Hartley very soon after the baptism of his elder son Stephen on 14 February, 1773. He became the tenant of William Hammond at Cheney's Farm of 100 acres, together with 5 acres of hops, where George was born on 19 March, 1784. Before their move, Stephen junior kept an inn "The Yorkshire Gray (sic) Horse" and George helped on the farm. The Mill at South Darenth had only recently been built by Thomas Edmeads of Darenth and it is likely that the brothers were the first tenants, their home being Hill Cottage, Sutton-at-Hone, also the property of Thomas Edmeads. At some later date, it was bought by the family and remained their home until it was sold in 1888 on the death of Harriott, one of the daughters of Stephen junior.

Stephen and George held their own until they were badly hit by the great depression following the end of the Napoleonic Wars and were declared bankrupt in May 1816, when the partnership was dissolved. Bankruptcy was an occupational hazard amongst watermillers but their debts were ultimately discharged and Stephen returned to milling at South Darenth, while George, who was said to suffer much ill health, became a mealman, only to be declared bankrupt for the second time in 1823, whereupon he disappears from the scene.

Stephen continued to mill profitably at South Darenth until his death at Hill Cottage on 27 February 1856. He was taken back to Shorne for burial, where his grave and that of his wife Mary, who predeceased him by 19 years, are to be found halfway along the path to the church door on the left-hand side facing the porch. Watermilling had entered his family's blood and his three sons, William (1798-1876), George (1807-1868) and Stephen (1812-1872) all followed in their father's footsteps, whilst two of his six daughters married into milling families.

William spent some years helping his father at South Darenth Mill, where he learnt the trade but in 1831 he was admitted a Freeman of Canterbury by purchase (at an enhanced fee), entering into a partnership with Josiah Woodhams at Chartham Mill. He did not move to the city until after 1833, when he took a 14-year lease of the run down Abbott's Mill from the Mayor and Commonality at a rental of £225 per year. Although William had removed to Canterbury by 1835, he kept close touch with NW Kent, taking four shares of £25 each in the still-born Dartford-Crayford Ship Canal in 1835 and the Hall Place Mill, Bexley, was under his control from 1838 to 1842. Sometime between 1842 and 1845 he took Old Dover Road Mill, Northfleet but this had been given up by 1844 when William disappears from the scene in N.W. Kent, although he continued to own property at South Darenth and Northfleet until his death.

George also helped his Father at South Darenth but branched out on his own at Westminster Mill in nearby Horton-Kirby early in the 1830's. He, too, was said to suffer ill-health and in 1842 he was declared bankrupt as a common brewer, an occupation he combined with watermilling. One hopes that the full penalty of the statute enacted in the first year of the reign of King James I whereby corporal punishment could be inflicted upon bankrupts in special cases was not invoked. George continued to mill at Horton- Kirby but his health forced retirement in 1852 and he died at Sutton-at-Hone on 1 April 1868.

Stephen, the youngest brother, was born at Sutton- at-Hone on the 26 May, 1812 and laid the foundations for one of the most successful and well- known milling enterprises within easy reach of the Metropolis. He had a very modest start to his career in 1832, for his capital was but £8, the savings of his youth together with a present from his father of five quarters of tailings wheat. The latter he had ground at his brother's mill and the resulting flour, about five sacks, and the offals, were sold to start in business as a corn-factor, sending the grain to be milled by George at Horton Kirby. He made useful connections and bought the four-pair Old Mill at Bexley in 1839, subsequently purchasing Westminster Mill, Horton Kirby when George retired in 1852.

In 1835 he married Emma, second daughter of John Cooper, a substantial farmer of Pennis, Fawkham, from whom he bought wheat and there is little doubt that Stephen and Emma met when he visited

Pennis to purchase grain. The two mills became very profitable despite another recession in home milling after 1860 and it was said of Stephen Cannon that "he was possibly one of the most practical millers in the County of Kent; he has decided predilection for the system of slow grinding and his flour found a ready sale throughout the County." He, too suffered intermittent ill-health and in 1850 his eldest son, yet another Stephen (even today the head of the Bexley line is a Stephen Cannon) virtually took over most of the work at the Old Mill when he was but 14 years of age.

The business expanded steadily under the control of father and son, the former becoming one of the most respected millers in N.W.Kent. Unfortunately he died at Mill House, Bexley, on 9 October 1872, at the comparatively early age of 60, when his Will was proved at just under £630,000. Stephen had come a long way since he started out in life with £8 and a present, a typical example of Victorian success through hard work, initiative and determination to succeed in a world full of progress in every sphere of industry and commerce. He was succeeded by his eldest son, with his invaluable experience gained at an early and receptive age and, to use a modern expression, the business "really took off".

Stephen junior was born at Sutton-at-Hone on 15 January 1836 and was educated at the village school in Bexley. He used to walk two miles to school carrying his dinner in a knapsack, for at that time knowledge of the "3 R's" was considered sufficient for a commercial life such as milling. Tradition says that he was considered very apt and a great favourite in the neighbourhood. He worked with unremitting energy in helping his father, and when he took over full control of the three mills, started to build up an even larger business, soon becoming a man of substance and importance in the Bexley district.

One of the first steps on taking the helm in 1872 was to sell off South Darenth Mill (which had remained in the family) and Westminster Mill, Horton- Kirby, concentrating flour production at the Old Mill, Bexley, to which he added four more pairs of stones and introduced auxiliary steam power. This soon proved inadequate to the trade flowing in, so, in 1878, he bought Erith Water Mill of five pairs of stones, bringing the milling power up to 13 pairs, subsequently increased by enlarging Erith to eight pairs. Two years later the volume of work was so great that Stephen formed a partnership with Mr Gaze, also a miller by inheritance, coming as he did from a family

long established in the trade in Norfolk the name of the business becoming Cannon and Gaze.

It might be thought that, in those days, the care of two large mills would be sufficient for any man but Stephen had stomach for yet more mills. In 1882 he took over five- pair Hall Place Mill at Bexley and four years later the Royal Victoria Mill, Dartford, with four pairs of stones, came into his hands. At one time he was working as many as 25 pairs in different mills, all within Kent, and became very well known at Dartford Market, where it was said of him in 1877, "he is pretty often present he is a large buyer of corn of the best standing probably as shrewd a purchaser as the market can produce."

In 1892 he made the inspired and momentous decision to erect great steam roller mill in a good position on the banks of the Thames in order to take advantage of the rapidly increasing flow of grain across the Atlantic and, at the same time, to close down the country mills except the Old Mill, concentrating business of flour manufacture at Erith. The old Erith Mill was incorporated into the new buildings and the whole so welded together that there was no breach of continuity. Ten 250-ton barges could lay along side without difficulty, their contents being hoisted directly into the mill, which was lit by electricity. The Old Mill at Bexley, Stephen's "Home Mill", remained in operation for many years and provender milling did not cease until after the Great War. It was finally sold in 1946 by Stephen's grandsons and granddaughters.

Following the virtual concentration of milling operations at Erith, a joint stock company was formed under the title Cannon and Gaze Ltd., all the shares being held by members of the two families with Stephen taking the controlling interest. His earlier appetite for expansion had not been satisfied by the construction of Erith Mill with a vast volume of business on the most modern lines, for he later acquired the Maidstone Mills, soon to be incorporated as the Medway Milling Company, with Stephen as Managing Director. Cannon and Gaze continued to prosper and in 1913 Erith Mill was remodelled on the latest cyclo pneumatic plansifter system, increasing the capacity from 20 to 35 sacks an hour. Stephens's readiness to take advantage of modern methods was also seen in the installation of a sprinkler system of fire prevention, whilst in 1900 he introduced the first of the firm's motor wagons, a 3- ton Thorneycroft with a 3- ton trailer. In 1902 a Mann's steam wagon was added, to be followed three years later by

a five- ton Foden with a 3- ton trailer, a type giving such satisfaction that a further six were purchased between 1906 and 1910. By 1913 Cannon and Gaze probably employed the largest fleet of motor wagons of any firm in the milling industry, doing all their work with nine such wagons, whereas formerly they required as many as 50 horses. At the seventh Annual Commercial Vehicle Association Parade at the Grosvenor Embankment on Whit Monday 1913, the firm took the Silver Challenge Cup. Stephen's last acquisition, River Daly Mill, Lewisham (also known as London Bridge Mill), came into his hands in 1914 as part of payment for a bad debt. The mill remained in the family's hands until after the Great War, during which it came under government control for the production of macaroni, being sold to Mr Garfield Weston around 1925-6, together with the old Cannon trade name "Sunblest", still seen today in bakers' shops and supermarkets.

On 28 September 1859, Stephen married Amelia, second daughter of Josiah Bath, a farmer of North Cray, whose family had been established at Eynsford and Farningham since at least 1642. They had six sons and four daughters, one of the former becoming a flour miller in South Africa. Sadly their eldest son, another Stephen, died on 24 July 1881 and in due course the second son, Thomas Neville Cannon, succeeded to the Cannon and Gaze family company. Resident at Bexley from 1840, Stephen was a typical merchant of the old school, keen, hard-headed, even mean, and of splendid business qualifications. He took a considerable interest in the public life and progress of the town despite the many calls on his time, being for some years Chairman of the Urban District Council, and Captain of the Bexley Fire Brigade.

In addition to his many business and civil commitments, he founded the Kent Millers' Association, being elected the first President and was President of the National Association of British and Irish Millers for 1903. As if milling was not sufficient, Stephen took up farming in 1902, leasing Horton Lodge Farm, Horton Kirby, from the Queen's College Oxford. This 500-acre farm had been devoted mainly to tillage but the new tenant, still energetic and full of enthusiasm, planted a large area with fruit trees, causing a revolution in the appearance of his farm. Nevertheless, he continued as active as ever in business until a few months before his death at "Heathercroft", Bexley, on 10 June 1917 and his genial presence was much missed at Mark Lane, where he

was so highly respected as such a typical "Grand Old Man of the old milling school".

Thomas Nevill Cannon, the eldest surviving son, succeeded his father as chairman of Cannon and Gaze, with his younger brother Herbert in charge of the milling department until his sudden death at the early age of 52, following a heart attack on 13 July 1918, during a friendly game of cricket whilst playing for the Erith Detachment of the Kent Motor Transport Corps, A.S.C., which he commanded as a lieutenant. All the flour milling interests of the Cannons now came under the direct control of Thomas, who preferred to be called Nevill Cannon, and it fell to him to keep the mill active and profitable during the recession of the 1920's.

Nevill was born at Bexley on 6 February 1864 and his education was mainly under the direction of the Rev E.E. Crake, of Clifton House, Eastbourne. This was followed by a short period learning farming and he was then sent to gain experience of the flour milling industry at the well-known flour mills of Mr Burton at Hellingly, Sussex, before joining his father at Bexley, where he worked in all departments of the business. He was appointed a director of the Medway Milling Company when his father acquired Maidstone Mills but until that time he had received no more than a clerk's wage for his work, a typical arrangement in a Victorian family business.

Nevill married Clara Amy, daughter of William Littlejohn Lucas of Bexley in July 1896 and had two sons, Stephen born in 1900, and Richard Nevill (who entered the milling industry), and three daughters, Victoria, Evangeline, and Dorothea. Like his father, Nevill became a prominent figure in the flour milling industry, being elected Chairman of the London Flour Millers Association for 1913 and 1931, and serving on the Council of the Flour Milling Employers' Federation for many years. He, too, had many interests outside the sphere of industry; his service to the social and public life in Bexley, Erith and elsewhere in N.W. Kent covering a wide range of activities. The list of his interests and activities include Bexley Hospital, Victoria Homes, the Anglo-Belgium Union (he provided a house rent free for Belgian refugees in the Great War), Bexley United Charities and Bexley Boys and Girls Hall. It was said that he was the treasurer for 20 years at St. Mary's, Bexley, not the least of his contributions to the life of the village. In 1922 his voluntary service entered a wider sphere when he was elected to the Kent County Council as representative for Bexley

and Crayford, serving on the Education Committee and that of the Alexandra Hospital for Children.

The family firm was not neglected but times were changing and it was evident to Nevill that the future of the flour milling industry laid outside the family business, no matter how large and how long-established. This was particularly relevant to the Metropolis and an amalgamation of many individual companies had become inevitable. He was active in forming the Associated London Flour Mills Company established in 1926 but was able to ensure that Cannon and Gaze retained its own identity. Nevill became a director of the new company and his long experience of the industry, beginning in the days of the stones system of the milling before steam auxiliary power became universal, was invaluable in the successful establishment of the Associated Company.

Nearly fifty years of toil in the industry and on behalf of the people of Bexley and Erith must have taken its toll on Nevill's strength and he died at Mounteagle, Cold Blow, Bexleyheath on 4 August 1932, after a long illness. Although he was the last Master Miller of the Cannon family it was not until November 1946 that the Home Mill at Bexley was sold by his children to the Mill Garage, High Street, bringing to a close the family's close and intimate association with the commercial and civic life of N.W. Kent extending over one hundred and forty years. On 20 May 1966, the Old Mill, one of the most beautiful buildings in N.W. Kent, was completely destroyed by a fire. After reconstruction it became a restaurant and today has been converted into flats.

Complied with acknowledgement to Dr Felix Hull and the Kent Archives Office; Mrs C.E.B. French; the Flour Milling & Baking Research Association; Mr Alex Freeman, Local History Librarian, Dartford; Mrs Susan Illott, formerly Local History Librarian, Bexley; Mr Derek Stoyel of Brussels; Mrs Beryl Waters of Winchelsea; Mr Stephen Cannon; and many others too numerous to mention.

Note on Peter Harrison's account of Stephen Cannon's acquisition of Erith Flour Mill

Harrison says that Cannon 'bought Erith Water Mill' in 1878, and in 1892 decided to "erect a great steam roller mill" on the site. These statements do not tally with certain contemporary records held at Hall Place.

There is no other known reference to a water mill at Erith. There were windmills in the vicinity, on Northumberland Heath and Bexleyheath, but no watermills. The site where the Erith mill was built has a long and well-attested history and it is clear there was never a watermill there. The first mention of a mill is in a 99 year lease of the site dated 24 July 1871 to George Fletcher senior, George Fletcher junior, James Fletcher and Jonathan Thompson Glaze, who undertook to build a steam flour mill costing £2500 (with a safety valve on the boiler and a smoke consuming device on the chimney). The partnership was short-lived, for it was dissolved in 1875; George Fletcher junior and James Fletcher carried on by themselves, buying the freehold with the aid of a mortgage for £5000. The mortgage documents include an interesting description of the machinery and fittings of the steam mill.

They soon got into difficulties, and in 1876 went into liquidation. At this point Stephen Cannon comes on the scene. In July 1876, he bought the mill and some adjacent properties from the Fletchers' mortgagees for £5900, at the same time mortgaging it and his Bexley mill and some other properties for £6000. He paid off this mortgage in 1887.

Jonathan Gaze seems to have operated alone after the break-up of the original partnership in 1875. In a transaction of 1877 he is described as a corn dealer. It is not clear from the title deeds when he went into partnership with Stephen Cannon, but the local rate books show that he occupied a wharf and yard not far from the flour mill from 1877, that he joined Cannon sometime between 1879 and May 1881, when the entry in the rate book becomes 'Cannon and Gaze' for the first time, and that the two partners from that date also used his wharf and yard.

This date for the formation of the partnership between Cannon and Gaze agrees with Peter Harrison's account. However where the author implies that steam power was not introduced until 1892, he is evidently mistaken. What happened at that time was the addition to the existing mill premises of plant using rollers instead of stones to grind the flour. This enlargement is reflected in the rate books, which show that the rateable value of the mill rose from £507 in May 1893 to £1036 in the November following.