

THE STRUGGLE FOR WATER SUPPLY TO THE MILLS OF STOCKPORT, by Tony Bonson.

The First Silk Mill

In the early part of the 18th century silk yarn was being produced by hand in Stockport but this was a coarse yarn, known as tram, only suitable as the weft when weaving silk cloth. The much finer yarn called organzine, used for the warp, had to be imported from Northern Italy where it was produced on water-powered machinery. The design of this machinery was a closely guarded secret and any foreigner caught trying to steal the secrets of these machines was severely punished by the Italian authorities. However, in 1716 an Englishman, John Lombe, travelled to Italy and managed to smuggle out not only the secrets of the Italian silk throwing machines but also managed to bring with him some of the Italian workers skilled in the use of these machines. His brother, Thomas Lombe, then took out a patent for the machinery in 1718 and built the first water powered silk throwing mill in Britain on the River Derwent in Derby. This mill was five storeys high, 110 feet (33.5m) long and 39 feet (12m) wide and housed twelve of the Italian throwing machines, probably in two rows of six machines, in the two lower floors. The upper three storeys contained the winding machines. When the patent ended in 1732 Thomas Lombe tried to extend it but there was much opposition to this, including representations from the “manufacturers of mohair and yarn” in Stockport. As a result of the patent not being renewed, a partnership of six people took a lease on land at the Parks from the lord of the manor of Stockport, who at this time was Edward Warren. The lease allowed them to take water from the Mill Dam and build a tunnel from there to a waterwheel. The partnership recruited the services of John Guardivaglio, an Italian worker who came to England with John Lombe and who had worked in the Derby silk mill. The silk mill was built alongside the logwood mill (see Fig 3) and was only slightly bigger than the nearby corn mill. The size of the mill shown on the map would only have accommodated two of the Italian throwing machines which were about 20 feet (6.00m) in height and 13 feet (3.90m) in diameter. This size of mill was a far cry from the massive “factory” that the Lombe brothers had built at Derby and possibly reflected Guardivaglio’s experience with a more domestic use of these machines in his native Italy. At the time the silk mill was built, work was still taking place on the tunnels to bring the extra supply of water from New Bridge. In fact the whole project was not completed until 1743. Seven years later the owners of the silk mill purchased the logwood mill, which was derelict, and converted it into another silk mill. However its size at 23 feet square (7.50m by 7.50m) would probably only have housed winding and cleaning machines rather than the large throwing machines. In spite of its small size the silk mill at the Parks in Stockport was the second silk throwing factory to be built in England with other larger mills only being built in 1744 at Macclesfield and then at Congleton in 1752.

