

As reported several times in the local press, the former flax mill at Ditherington is undergoing restoration, mainly because of its significance in the history of such buildings. Already, a volunteer-run visitor centre has opened, explaining all this and the local history of textile manufacture, and is well worth a visit.

During the late eighteenth century considerable progress was being made in the mechanisation of textile production, leading to the development of the 'factory system' as a replacement for 'domestic' production. The necessary power was initially supplied by water, hence the term 'mill' which was even applied to factories driven by steam engines, which could be sited almost anywhere with good transport links supplying coal.

Shrewbury already had a long tradition of textile trading, particularly woollen 'flannel' from Wales, so that local merchants were eager to seize the new opportunities which the factory system provided. The flax spinning mill was thereby built in partnership with a Leeds company on the new canal, just north of the town.

While all this was going on, in 1797, Arthur Aitkin, reporting in his tour of North Wales, remarked that 'the greatest undertaking he considered to be the mill erected by Cook and Mason at the Isle...where a tunnel conveyed water to a wheel which provided power for spinning and fulling.'

Clearly there is a local 'Bicton' story here which has tended to be overlooked, perhaps because so little is surviving at the site today.

The mill was obviously exploiting the difference in water levels across this narrow neck of land left by the two mile loop of the river around the Isle, (as already discussed in these pages Jan 2008). Historically the estates of Up Rossall (The Isle), Down Rossall and Rossall Heath all met here, as also already discussed (Oct 2008, Jun 2011).

The actual plot upon which the mill was to be erected first appears c.1777 as a single detached field of the Bicton Grove estate, then owned by Thomas Wright and called 'the Grove at Rossall Lane End', a term later continued by the Ordnance Survey (SA D3651/B/17/2/38).

At some stage, perhaps soon after this date, Richard Jenkins (Sen.) of Bicton Hall acquired this 6 acre field, which he called the 'Isle Yard', along with the neighbouring farm in Rossall. In 1792, he leased it to Shrewsbury Draper Samuel Cook, who at the same time reached agreement with the other landowners sharing the adjacent heath allowing a tunnel under that land to serve a mill to be built here (SA 2495/box 24). It surely cannot be a coincidence that one of them, Folliot Sandford, then employed miners to dig another tunnel in order to drain his pool at the Isle (SA 465/399-400). It was to remain dug for many years until his successor allowed it to partly fill up again (Feb 2011).

From now on the progress of the enterprise was recorded by various agreements involving new partners providing either technical or financial support, hence the appearance of Mason in Aitkin's report. Thomas Holt, a Liverpool merchant, also acquired an interest, which at his death in 1802 passed to his brother John, a glass manufacturer from Wordsley near Kingswinford, and his sons Edward and Thomas. Then in 1821, when both John Holt and Edward had died, the administration of the business passed to Thomas, who decided to close it down. Perhaps the economic climate after those boom years of the Napoleonic Wars was now less favourable.

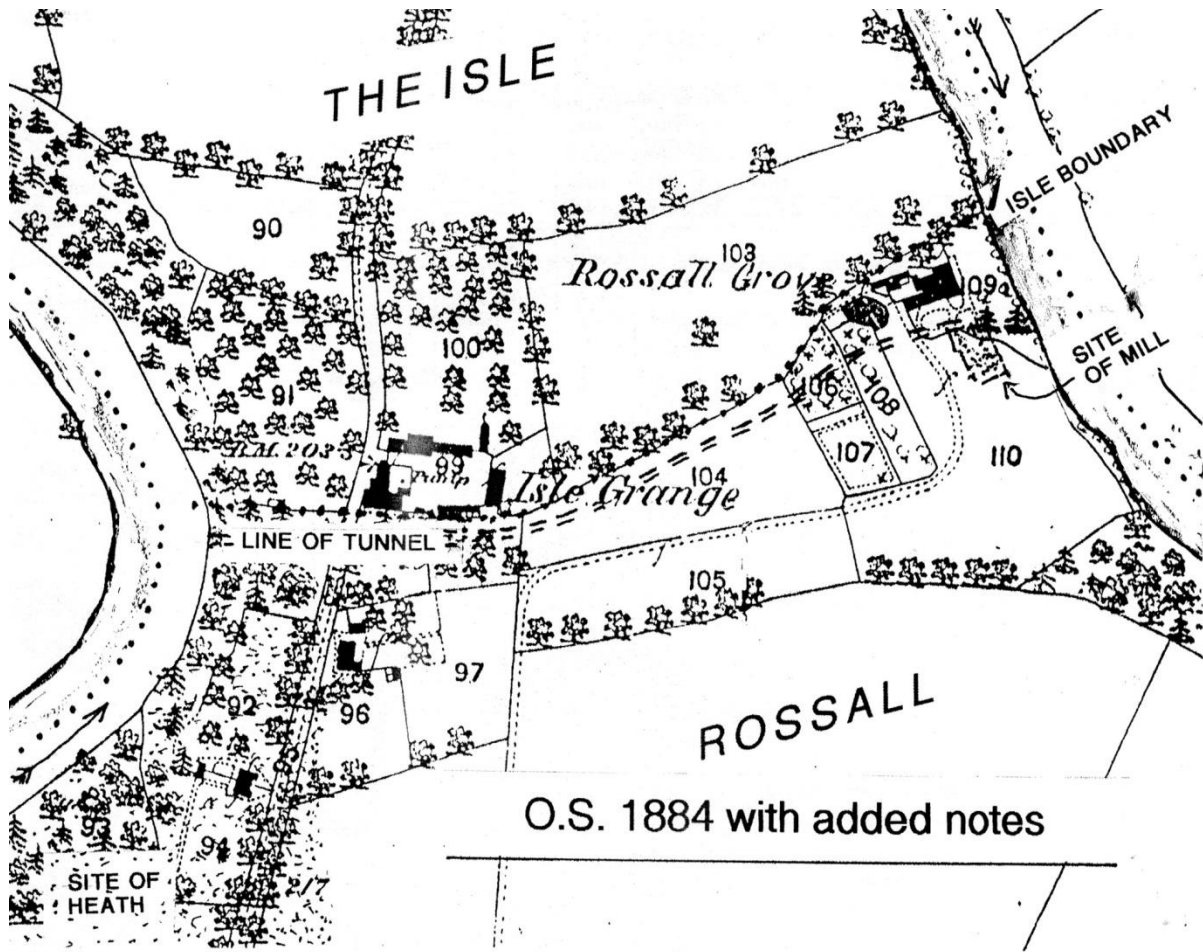
Jonathan Perry, auctioneer of Shrewsbury was thus engaged to dispose of it, first by selling its machinery and then seeking a buyer for the remainder of the lease of the premises including the remaining corn mill. The auction was duly carried out in 1824 with details listed in Eddow's Salopian Journal.

However, Jonathan failed to find anyone to take on the corn mill lease so he was obliged to take it himself, while continuing the search. Fortunately for him, Richard Jenkins returned from India in 1827 and now involved himself with the management of his estates, including taking back his father's lease and compensating Jonathan for any extra expenses. At the same time agreements were drawn up between the local landowners for the inclosure of Rossall Heath, in which Richard Jenkins was granted access to that part of the tunnel running under land allotted to the Sandford estate. Then, after the inclosure in 1830, further agreements rationalised the once irregular eastern side of the heath, giving the pattern of straight hedges and access road we see today.

In 1841, the census recorded John Davies 'malster' and family here. Then the Rossall Tithe Map of 1843 clearly shows the mill as part of the farm owned by Richard Jenkins and let to Richard Kilton, but there is no mention of an additional tenant actually working the mill.

Around 1850, a whole sequence of changes in land ownership took place leading to the disappearance of the mill altogether: 'Bagshaw's directory of 1851 provides the last reference to a mill and miller, Robert Williams, by which time Humphrey Sandford of the Isle had already taken over his part of the tunnel. At some stage, Richard Jenkins, now in London, sold his Rossall estate to Henry Wentworth Fielding, who already owned the rest of Rossall, and who could then sell the whole lot to John Harley of Shrewsbury (SA 3651/Temp bndl 5). A map prepared at this sale actually shows the line of the tunnel and the mill, but by 1884 the Ordnance Survey shows only the dwelling house remaining.

Meanwhile a row of six cottages down Isle Lane which had been originally built for the factory workers had been redeveloped into the Isle Cottages (Jun 2012).



O.S. 1884 with added notes

