

TROUBLE AT MILL - PAPER & PRINT

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Last week we looked at the history of Byfleet Mill in the 18th century when it was working iron, brass and copper, but this week I want to go back a quarter of a century to when it was known as the 'Kings Mill' and producing paper

The origins of paper making in this country probably go back to the late 15th century, but it is not until the early 17th century that paper making in Surrey began, probably at Stoke Mill (where the publishers of the Woking Advertiser have their offices). Other mills were then established at Eshing near Godalming and then Byfleet, with eventually something like forty mills being established at one time or another within the county.

The diarist John Evelyn visited the area on the 24th August 1673 and noted, "I went to see my Lord St Alban's House at Byfleet – thence to the paper-mills, where I found them making a coarse white paper."

He went into great detail of how the paper was made, noting that 'they cull the rags which are linen for white paper, woollen for brown; they then stamp them in troughs to a pap with pestles or hammers like the powder-mills, then put it into a vessel of water, in which they dip a

frame closely wired with wire as small as a hair and as close as a weaver's reed; on this they take up the pap, the superfluous water draining through the wire; this they dexterously turn, shake out like a pancake on a smooth board between two pieces of flannel, then press it between a great press, the flannel sucking out the moisture; then taking it out, they ply and dry it on strings, as they dry linen in the laundry; then dip it in alum water, lastly polish, and make it up in quires. They put some gum in the water in which they macerate the rags. The mark we find in the sheets is formed in the wire.'

The process seems very slow and laborious and the 'alum water' and 'gum' must have made the whole a very messy process. I doubt there was much care taken in cleaning the water before returning it to the river, so the environmental impact on the area must have been quite severe.

Although Evelyn talks about 'white paper', it was apparently not the bleached white paper that we are used to today – more like a 'whitened brown' paper.

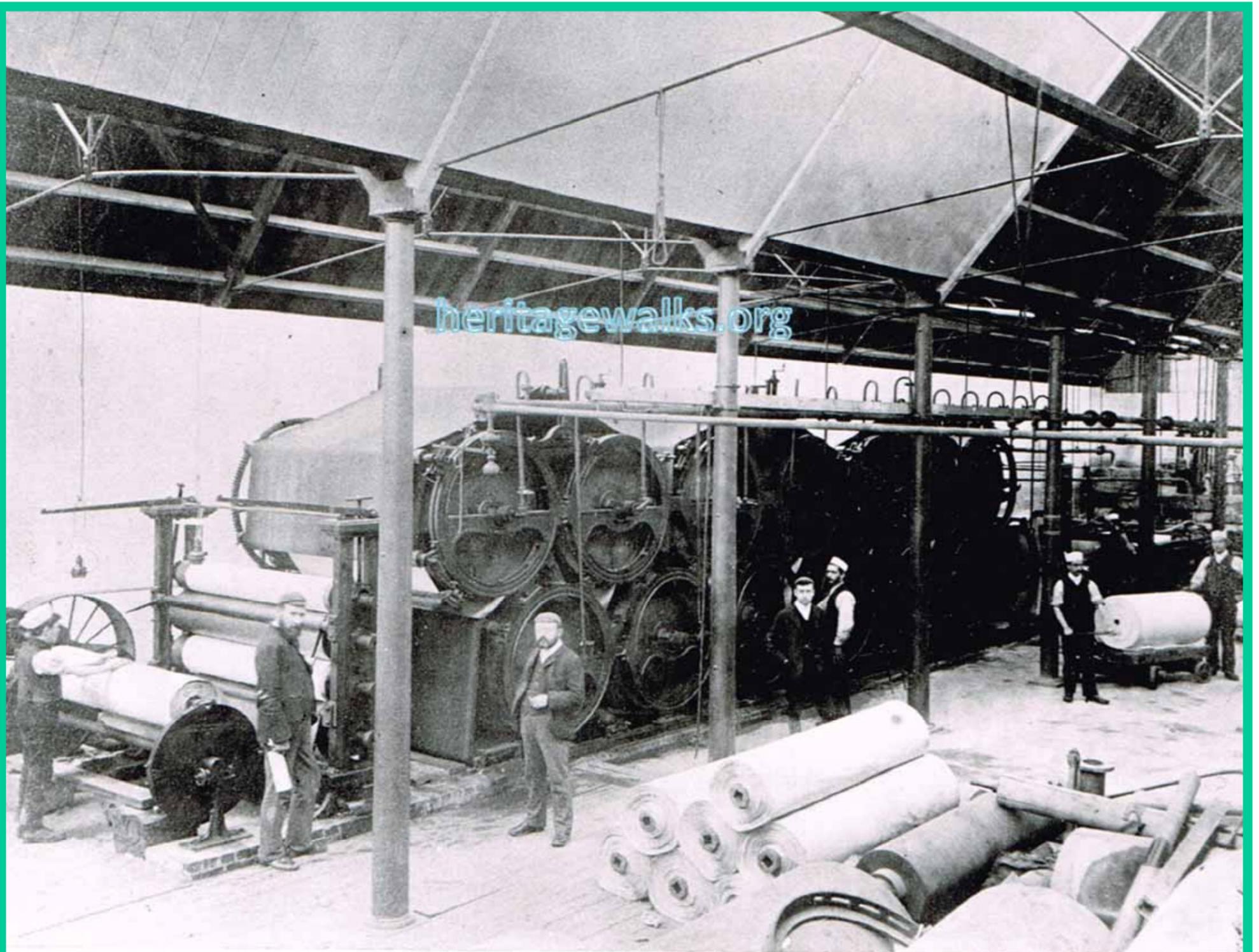
According to Leonard Stevens – 'in 1682, one George Hager had discovered a new way of making white paper, and had obtained a patent

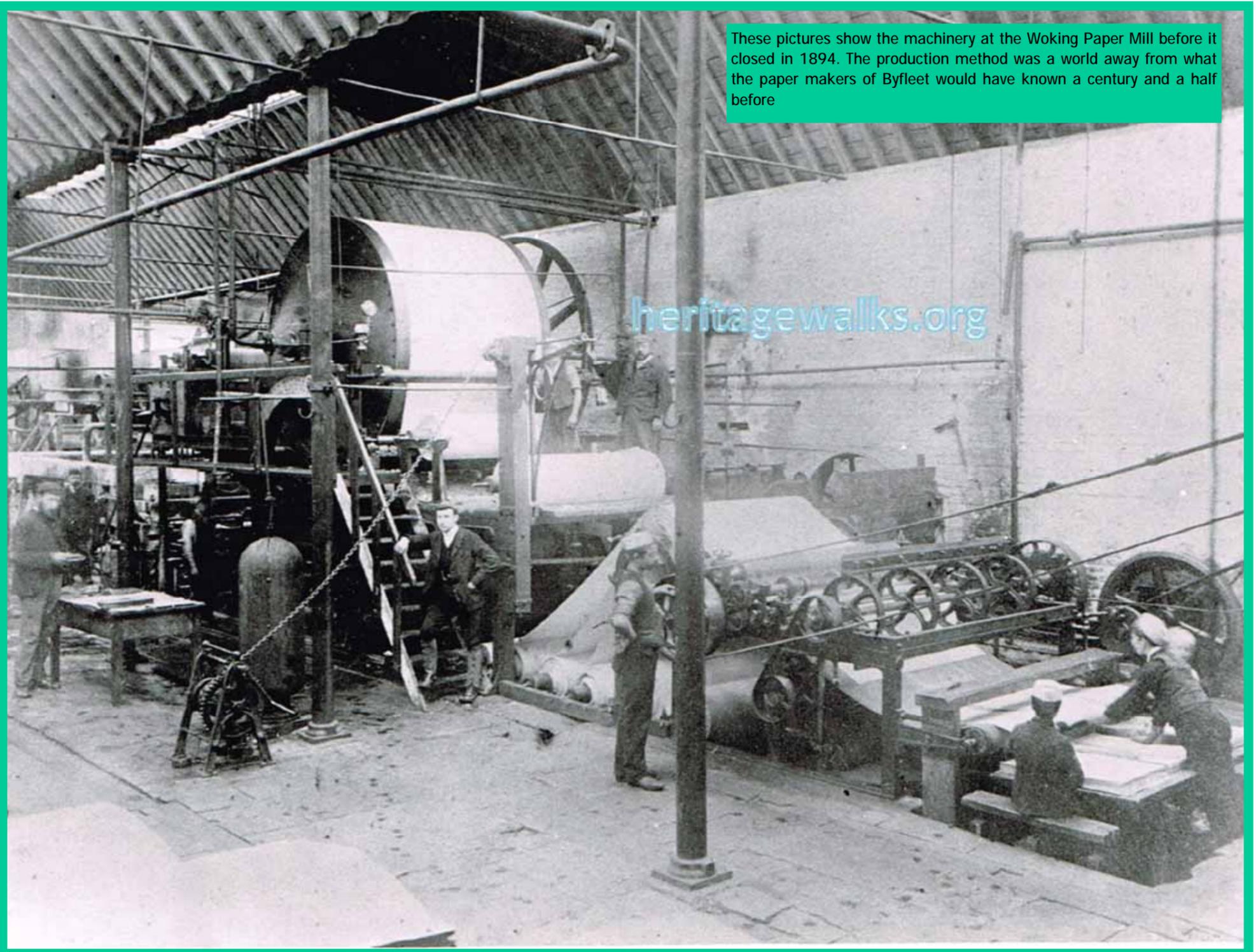
giving him the sole right for making white paper for fourteen years. However, he very soon went bankrupt, and in 1687, William Sutton had Hager's patent assigned to him.'

Whether Sutton was the rightful owner of the patent I don't know, as soon after a group of businessmen partitioned parliament to set up the Company of White Paper Makers, and Sutton was forced to reach a deal with them whereby he would be admitted to the company and have four of the four-hundred shares allocated to him provided he didn't oppose their Bill.

Part of the agreement was that Sutton would lease his mills at Byfleet from midsummer 1690 for twenty-one years to a John Dunstan and Peter Delaney, but as we have seen from the report on the iron mills last week, it seems likely that nothing came of it as by then John Seller was already showing the 'iron mills' on his map at Byfleet.

It would be almost another 150 years before papermaking returned to the Woking area with the conversion in 1835 by Alderman Venables of Guildford of a 'leather mill' at Woking that in 1796 had been 'in the occupation of Richard Baker'.





These pictures show the machinery at the Woking Paper Mill before it closed in 1894. The production method was a world away from what the paper makers of Byfleet would have known a century and a half before

Venables soon sold his paper mill to Henry Virtue and Company, who obviously expanded the works quite considerably. No longer was paper being made by hand like at Byfleet in the 1670's, now vast machines were turning out huge rolls with fifty-four paper-makers

apparently being recorded in Woking during the census of 1851.

By 1870 they were employing 136 people (several of them women), but by then the mill was in financial difficulties and was sold the

following year to a new venture called the Woking Paper Company who just about managed to struggle on to 1894 when production ceased and the site was put up for sale.



After the paper mill at Woking closed in 1894 it was taken over by Unwin Brothers, printers, who remained at the site for over hundred years before selling to developers who demolished all but a small part of the late Victorian façade.

BENJAMIN BENSLEY'S PRINTING WORKS

Almost at the same time that Alderman Venables was setting up his paper making business at Woking, Benjamin Bensley was establishing his printing works in the town. According to the 1841 census he lived with his wife Sarah and children at 'High House' – the house next to the church in Old

Woking, now known as Weylea. He is certainly shown as occupying the house on the Tithe Map as well as a 'building and yard' where the houses of The Cloisters are now off Church Street, and several houses (presumably occupied by employees) on the site later occupied by the village school (now the Church

Centre). Some have speculated that Weylea and possibly Church Cottage next door were where his printing works were, but the 'building and yard' across the street would seem to me to be the more logical location, but I guess we will never know for certain.



JOSEPH BILLINGS PRINTING WORKS

According to the 1851 census Joseph Billing, a 'printer and stereotyper' who is recorded as employing thirty-six people, owned this building in the High Street, Old Woking. ! It is hard to see how they all could have worked in this small building, which was specially designed with its large expanse of glass on the north-facing first floor to allow in the maximum of light for the typesetters to work by.

It is often assumed that as Benjamin Bensley was no longer recorded in the area by this time that Joseph Billing must have taken over his business, in which case some of the thirty-six employees may well have continued to be employed in the workshops in Church Street. Whatever is the case by 1856 Billing had closed his Woking operation and moved to larger premises in Guildford.



In the 1960's the building was home to a company called Venture Furnishing and later was an antique shop known as The Venture, before being used by Woking Hospice as a furniture store.