

## THE BURNING OF THE ALBION MILLS

The Albion Mills, the first great factory in London, formerly stood on the east side of Blackfriars Road, on the approach to Blackfriars Bridge. They were steam-powered mills, established in 1786 by Matthew Boulton & James Watt, featuring one of the first uses of Watt's steam engines to drive machinery, and were designed by pioneering engineer John Rennie (who later built nearby London Bridge). Grinding 10 bushels of wheat per hour, by 20 pairs of 150 horsepower millstones, the Mills were the 'Industrial wonder' of the time, quickly becoming a fashionable sight of the London scene... Erasmus Darwin called them "*the most powerful machines in the world.*"

But if the trendy middle and upper classes liked to drive to



Albion Mills, newly-built in the late 1780s.

Blackfriars in their coaches and gawp at the new industrial age being born, other, harder eyes saw Albion Mills in different light. They were widely resented, especially by local millers and millworkers...

At one time the Thames bank at Lambeth was littered with windmills - eventually they were all put out of business by steam power. When the Albion opened London millers feared ruin.

Steam was one of the major driving forces of industrialization and the growth of capitalism. The spectre of mechanization, of labour being herded together in larger and larger factories, was beginning to bite. Already artisan and skilled trades were starting to decline, agricultural workers were being forced into cities to find work, dispossessed from the countryside by enclosure and farm machinery... Many of those who had not yet felt the hand of factory production driving down wages, deskilling, alienating and shortening the lifespan, could read the writing on the wall.

Mills & millers were often the focus of popular anger. Not only were they widely believed to practice forms of adulteration, adding all sorts of rubbish to flour to increase profits (Significantly in many folk and fairy tales the miller is often a greedy cheating baddie), but at times of high wheat prices and thus, (since bread was the main diet of the poor) widespread hunger, bakers and millers would be the target of rioters, often accused along with farmers and landowners of hoarding to jack up prices. Bread riots could involve the whole community, though they were often led by women.

Rioters would often seize bread and force bakers to it at a price they thought fair, or a long-established



### A Bread Riot, Deptford

price; this was the strongest example of the so-called ‘moral economy’ (discussed by EP Thompson and other radical historians) a set of economic and social practices based in a popular view of how certain basic needs ought to be fairly and cheaply available.

The idea of a moral economy was one that crossed class boundaries, a reflection of the paternalist society, where all knew their place, but all classes had responsibilities and there were certain given rights to survival. But this moral economy, such as it was, was bound up with pre-capitalist society - which were being superseded by the growth of capitalism, of social relations based solely on profit and wage labour...

### “DARK SATANIC MILLS”

Cockney revolutionary visionary William Blake, an artisan himself, felt and expressed the powerful mistrust of the

growing changes. He lived in nearby Lambeth, and it's thought that Albion could have inspired his references to "dark Satanic mills". The name Albion may have set Blake off, as *Albion* as a symbolic name for an idealised England, played an important part in his radical spiritual mythology. Blake was in the 1790s a political radical, like many artisans, inspired by the French Revolution; he also strongly opposed the rational mechanical Industrial Revolution and set up a mystical creative spirituality against it.

Blake took the traditional mistrust of the symbolic figure of the Miller several steps further: in 'Milton' he described Satan as the "Miller of Eternity", whose mills represent the cold inhuman power of intellect, grinding down and destroying the imagination.

### **"ALL SORTS OF BASE MIXTURES"**

Dark rumors were spread locally about the Albion Works: "The millers, themselves best aware of what roguery might be practiced in their own trade, spread abroad reports that the flour was adulterated with all sorts of base mixtures." (Robert Southey)

Powerful watermill owners had attempted to prevent Albion being opened: they had managed to deter venture capitalists in the City from investing in the building, but Watt and Boulton had found the money themselves. In 1791, after a shaky start, the Mills looked like they were hitting profitability...

## “SUCCESS TO THE MILLS OF ALBION BUT NO ALBION MILLS.”

On 2 March 1791 Albion Mills burned down. The cause was never officially discovered, but it was widely believed to be arson by local millers or millworkers, feeling their livelihood was under threat . It was reported that “*the main cock of the*



**The Mills on Fire: Note the devil with a bellows fanning the flames!**

*water cistern was fastened, the hour of low tide was chosen” when the fire started...* (Although the could have been accidental: there had been some

concerns

about safety, and mills were prone to fire, with sparks and friction caused by grinding, and all that dust, chaff and flour about...)

*“The fire broke out during the night, a strong breeze was blowing from the east, and the parched corn fell in a black shower above a league distant: even fragments of wood still burning fell above Westminster Bridge.”*

The interior of the mills was totally destroyed in half an hour, the roof crashing in quickly. The fire could be seen for miles: burning grains and sparks blew all over the City and Westminster.

A huge crowd gathered and made no effort to save the Mills, but stood around watching in grim satisfaction! *“The mob, who on all such occasions bestir themselves to extinguish a fire with that ready and disinterested activity which characterizes the English, stood by now as willing spectators of the conflagration...”* (Southey)

Later in the day locals & mill workers danced around the flames & *“and before the engines had ceased to play upon the smoking ruins, ballads of rejoicing were printed and sung on the spot”*



(Southey). Millers waved placards which read *“Success to the mills of ALBION but no Albion Mills.”*

After a soldier and a constable got into a row, a fight broke

out, leading to a mini-riot; but firemen turned their hoses on crowd (early water cannon!)

*“...it was supposedly maliciously burnt, and it is certain the mob stood and enjoyed the conflagration... Palace Yard and part of St James Park were covered in half burnt grains..”* (Horace Walpole)  
A flood of speedily printed ballads, lampoons, prints and broadsheets celebrated the burning:

*“And now the folks begin to shout,  
Hear the rumours they did this and that.  
But very few did sorrow show  
That the Albion Mills were burnt so low.*

*Says one they had it in their power,  
For to reduce the price of flour,  
Instead of letting the bread raise,  
But now the Mills are all in a blaze,*

*In lighters there was saved wheat,  
But scorched and scarcely fit to eat.  
Some Hundred Hogs served different ways  
While Albion Mills were in a blaze.*

*Now God bless us one and all,  
And send the price of bread may fall.  
That the poor with plenty may abound,  
Tho’ the Albion Mills burnt to the ground.”*

(Extract from a popular song, published March 10th 1791,

## “...MALICIOUSLY BURNT...?”

Was it arson? The Mills stood in Blackfriars, an area together with neighbouring Southwark long notorious for its rebellious poor and for artisan and early working class political organization. Just as the Luddites, stockings of the North & Midlands were soon to smash machinery that threatened their livelihoods, did workers displaced or fearing displacement by the Mills take matters into their own hands? 18th Century London workers undercut by the new industrial processes did destroy the machines taking their



jobs... In Limehouse in 1768, Dingley’s Steam-powered Sawmill was burnt down by 500 sawyers put out of work. Sawyers had many privileges and scams they could pull, to use

wood (especially for shipbuilding) which allowed them to gather valuable offcuts, & good wages; the steam mill threatened to do away with all these perks, which often made the difference between bare subsistence and a living wage. The arson was effective: a generation passed before another such attempt to replace sawyers' labour was made in London.\* Around the same time Spitalfields silkweavers were also fighting a heavy fight against mechanisation and wage cuts, smashing machinery and intimidating masters and workers undercutting the agreed rate.

It's also possible that disgruntled small millowners were behind the burning. Although Albion had not entirely replaced local water-powered mills, it had caused disruptions in the price of wheat, which may have hit small mills' profits.

Albion Mills remained a derelict burned out shell until 1809, when it was pulled down. Most of the Steam-powered flour mills subsequently built in London were much smaller. Whether or not it was arson, whether it was the millers or millworkers who burned it, the fire was long remembered and celebrated locally. Rightly or wrongly, in popular tradition, and maybe in the rhymes of Blake, the Mill stands as a symbol of the disruption and disaffection caused by

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\* Interestingly, Sawmill owner Dingley had been populist demagogue John Wilkes' unpopular opponent in the notorious Middlesex by-election: he couldn't even get near the hustings some days for huge 'Wilkes and Liberty' crowds, and was beaten up by Wilkes' lawyer. He is said to have died of shame at being so vilified. Aaaah.

industrialisation, but also of the powerful if ultimately defeated (thus far) resistance to the march of capitalism.

*GB, October 2006*

## **SOME SOURCES/USEFUL READING**

William Blake, *Milton, A Poem in Two Books* (1804)

Broadsheet with a popular song celebrating the Burning of the Mills,  
Published March 1791, by C. Sheppard

Robert Southey, *Excursion To Greenwich*, in his *Letters from England*, 1802-3.

[www.icons.org.uk/theicons/collection/jerusalem](http://www.icons.org.uk/theicons/collection/jerusalem)

[www.lostindustry.org.uk/walkblackfriars.htm#Albion](http://www.lostindustry.org.uk/walkblackfriars.htm#Albion)

[www.history.rochester.edu/steam/lord](http://www.history.rochester.edu/steam/lord)

George Rude, *Wilkes and Liberty*. (Useful on Dingley's Sawmill.)

E.P. Thompson: *Customs in Common*, especially Chapter 4, *The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the 18th Century*.