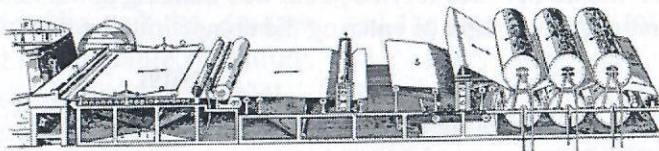


Sarratt Local History Society: November's talk in the Village School: Paper making in Hertfordshire, by Mike Stanyon, Archivist of the 'Apsley Paper Trail'

We now think of a 'paperless world' as a modern idea, linked to the rapid development of IT. But Mike Stanyon started his talk by reminding us that the world was indeed literally 'paperless for thousands and thousands of years. Indeed the West was without any paper for centuries after its method of manufacture had been discovered in China. Probably first made there in about 105AD, the secret of its manufacture seems to have been brought to the West by Muslims escaping from the East during the Battle of Samarkand, along the Silk Route.



A Fourdrinier Paper Machine

It was not until 1488 that paper was made in England and the first paper mill was Seely Mill in Hertford. This was short lived and no paper was made then for a very long time, while the invention of moveable type and the increasing rate of literacy was limited by the cost of animal skins for manuscripts. It was not until the middle of the 18th Century that papermaking became a flourishing industry and it was once more in Hertfordshire, with its many clear chalk streams, and its nearness to London that the majority of Paper Mills sprang up. A map of England marking paper mills between 1740 and 1800 shows a dramatically large cluster of these mills on the Chess, Gade, Wye and Colne rivers. Indeed the conversion from corn to paper would appear to have happened first at Sarratt Mill in 1740.

Hemp, Jute, Cotton and Linen (mostly as 'rags') were the initial raw materials used and then in 1860 'esparto grass' was also introduced.

The paper made on individual wire frames was limited in size and speed of manufacture. Then in 1803 a French system used at Frogmore, introduced an 'industrial' process for the first time. But it was John Dickinson, at Apsley and Nash Mills who transformed paper-making throughout the world with his 'seamless webb'. Dickinson seems to have been a blend of Dyson, the modern 'inventor' and Branson, the unconventional and highly successful entrepreneur. The surrounding mills did not stand a chance against his mix of creativity, business sense and sheer energy. He made use of the canals, railways, coal and a ready supply of local labour. This is why the names Croxley and Basildon Bond are recognised everywhere and also why the many local 'hand' mills gradually closed down, unable to compete. It is also why the area round Apsley is completely 'urbanised' while the little local valleys like the Chess have returned to their rural peace.

Angela Colman

The next meeting of the SLHSoc. *Is the AGM on 22 January 7.30pm for 8pm in Sarratt Village Hall. The talk that evening will be by Richard Lee, on 'A Stroll into History around the Green at Croxley'.*