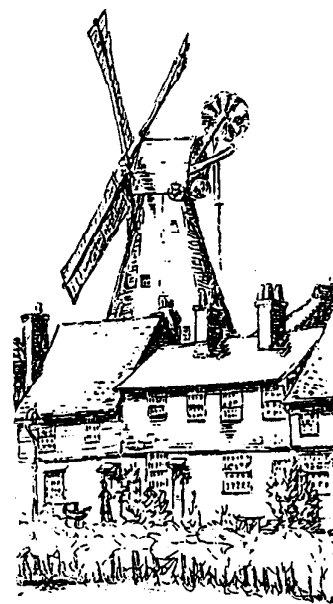


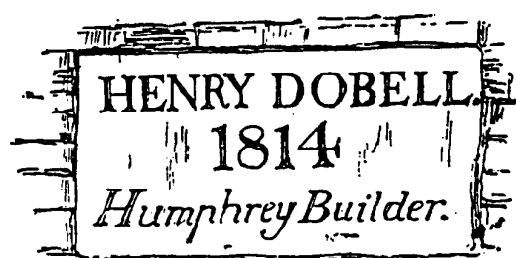
High Hopes Dashed

Tony Singleton

During the eighteenth century, there were great improvements in agriculture, spurred on by the industrial revolution and the demand for more food from the growing industrial towns. In the Weald, much of the land was woodland or pasture but more was brought under the plough for growing corn during the century and consequently more mills were needed for grinding the corn into flour. There were several water-mills within the parish boundaries although the streams were mostly small, but the outbreak of war with Napoleon in 1793 meant an increased demand for supplies for our army and navy. Thus the next 20 years were a prosperous time for farmers and millers. The 1801 Ordnance survey map shows only one windmill on Cranbrook Common (near Camden Lodge), but another was built further north in 1802 (north of Verralls garage). Perhaps their success inspired two more windmills to be built in 1814, one near to Three Chimneys and the other on the Hill, at the east end of the town.



William Dobell was a tallow chandler, living on the Hill in Cranbrook in the late 18th century. He married his second wife, Mary Couchman in Benenden on 25th October 1788⁽¹⁾ but died relatively young and was buried on 7th April 1799⁽²⁾. Mary must have been moderately well off as William had left her a tenanted farm on the Golford Road (now called "Paddocks") and houses and land on the Hill in Cranbrook, which included the house near the windmill now called "Greycoats"⁽³⁾. They had four children, of whom Henry, born in 1791, was the second and Stephen was the third⁽⁴⁾. Mary continued the tallow-chandlers business, going into partnership with her son Stephen⁽⁵⁾ and built the windmill for Henry⁽⁶⁾, who, presumably, had been apprenticed with a miller in the neighbourhood. The mill was first rated in her name with a rateable value of £15 in April 1815 but Henry took over as ratepayer in May 1816⁽⁷⁾. Henry must have felt that his future was assured and he married Susannah Boulden on 17th June 1816 in St. Dunstan's church, Cranbrook. In November 1818 the rateable value was increased to £20 but there is no rate assessment for the Dobell



property in May 1819 and by the Autumn bankruptcy had been declared. The rate books give "Henry Dobell or occupier" in November but the rate was probably never paid. The slump which followed the end of the Napoleonic Wars hit agriculture badly and there was a nation-wide depression which lasted for at least a decade with reduced wages, much unemployment and great hardship in the countryside, resulting in the Swing Riots of 1832.

The Centre for Kentish Studies in Maidstone holds a deed⁽⁶⁾ dated 11th Oct 1819 which is a copy of the conveyance and assignment of real and personal estates in trust from Mary Dobell to three Cranbrook creditors, James Russell, gent, James Skinner, gent and Thomas Oyler, carpenter. James Skinner was the minister, from 1785 until his death in 1827, of the Chapel-on-the-Hill which the Dobells attended and in whose registers the births of William and Mary's four children were recorded in the 1790s. The Dobell properties are listed in this conveyance and they include the windmill described as follows: "a wind cornmill ... lately now erected and built by and at the costs and charges of the said Mary Dobell ... at a place called the Hill in Cranbrook now occupied by Mary Dobell". In addition to the land and buildings, Mary Dobell was obliged to sell "all stock in trade, stock alive and dead, farm implements and effects whatsoever and wheresoever ... And all the Household Furniture, Plate, Linen and China Goods, Wares, Merchandizes, Book and other Debts, Bills, Notes, and Securities" and all her goods and chattels "except her wearing apparel". So all she was left with was her clothes. The deed cites three outstanding mortgages of £1000, £600, and £600 with interest, having first call on the proceeds from the sale of the property; no names of the

mortgagees are given but presumably they were the three creditors mentioned above since they had the most to lose and it seems likely that the money was borrowed from them to pay for the construction of the windmill and a cottage nearby (see later).

The three trustees inserted notices in the Maidstone Journal shortly after ⁽⁵⁾, requesting claims from any creditors of Mary Dobell. There was also a notice announcing the dissolving of the partnership of Mrs Mary Dobell and Stephen Dobell, tallow chandlers, presumably to protect Stephen's personal estate from claims when settling Mary's debts. It is interesting to note that one of the witnesses to this declaration is James Humphreys, the millwright who built the windmill for Mary. Then came the advertisements for the auction of Mary's real estate, the farm, and the cottages on the Hill, although it did not include the windmill (first two lots only included).

TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION

By Mr. JEREMIAH PETHURST

Under a Deed of Assignment for the Benefit of Creditors on MONDAY, NOV 29th inst at two o'clock in the afternoon. at the GEORGE INN, CRANBROOK.

The following very Valuable and most Desirable FREEHOLD ESTATE late the property of MRS MARY DOBELL, Tallow Chandler, &c. Cranbrook

LOT 1.

Consists of a DWELLING HOUSE, SHOP, Outbuildings, Yard, Garden, Stable, &c. and THREE newly-erected COTTAGES, situate on the HILL, adjoining the town, on the road to Tenterden.

This lot is well worth the attention of Tallow Chandlers wishing to obtain an established business, the neighbourhood being very populous, consequently capable of very great extension of trade.

LOT 2.

TWO DWELLING HOUSES, adjoining lot 1, in the several occupations of Mr Henry Dobell, Slopseller, &c. and Samuel Relf.

Henry's reduced circumstances had obliged him to find other less desirable employment. There is no separate advertisement for the sale of the windmill although it is possible that it was advertised with no location details; there were several advertisements for windmills in the Maidstone Journal in the ensuing year (eg two on 20th April 1820 in Kingsdown and Snodland). It seems more likely that the trustees decided that they would not obtain a worthwhile price in the economic climate and did not advertise the mill for sale but decided to recoup their money by approaching local people to operate the mill, which was little more than five years old.

THE UNION MILL COMPANY

The windmill was not rated again until December 1820 to "Buss & others or occupier" at a rateable value of £20. Pigot's 1824 trade directory describes William Buss as a corn factor (and in 1829 as a hop factor). He was also a partner in the Cranbrook Bank and therefore a suitable person for the creditors to appoint as a trustee to oversee the management of the mill and generate some income. Certainly, the name "Union Mill" had been adopted by 1822 but the following entries in the rate books suggest that the Trustees for the Creditors changed fairly often (or perhaps just the chairman):

	occupiers	description	
Dec 1822 -Apr 1824	Saml Reader & others	Union Mill & Land	RV £23
Jul 1825-Jan 1829	Isaac Titford & Co	Union Mill & Land	RV £23

Pigot's directories tell us that Samuel Reader was a printer, bookseller and librarian, while Isaac Titford was a druggist ie chemist, and they were presumably the chairmen of a group of parishioners who constituted the trustees of the Union Mill Company and oversaw the management of the mill's affairs. No record has so far come to light to tell us who was actually working in the mill, making flour from grain during this period,

although Stephen Dunk, another Cranbrook corn factor, is described as "manager for the Union Mill Company" in Pigot's directory published for 1828-9, so he probably organised the deliveries of grain to the mill and flour to the customers, along with all the contingent paperwork, and reported progress to the trustees on a regular basis.

The land tax assessment for June 1831 ⁽⁸⁾ has the following entry:

owner	occupier	property		
Buss & Co.	Union Mill Co.	Mill, land		
		2 Cottages	Rent (damaged)	Rate £2 8s
	Selves	House (Bank)	Rent £6 10s	Rate £1 6s

Since there is no mention of the windmill in the assessment for the previous year, it seems likely that it was still in the hands of the trustees and qualified for exemption from this tax. William Buss clearly decided that by this date the mill was a worthwhile investment and purchased it from the trustees although he died about a year later and in his will ⁽⁹⁾ made in November 1831, he instructed his executors, John Wilmshurst and George Tye, to sell the Union Mill along with his other freehold property. As soon as probate had been granted in March 1832, the executors set about the task and a notice of the sale appeared in the Maidstone Journal on 17th April:

**IN THE WEALD OF KENT
FREEHOLD PROPERTY
On WEDNESDAY, the 16th of May, 1832, at 4 o'clock
in the afternoon,
WILL BE SOLD BY AUCTION
BY S. DOBELL**

At the *George Inn, Cranbrook*, by order of the devisees IN TRUST, under the will of the late Mr. WM. BUSS, deceased.

Lot 3 - A substantial modern-built WINDMILL, advantageously situated near the town of *Cranbrook*, with a Cottage, in two dwellings, and about an Acre of Ground adjoining. The Mill contains 7 floors, 3 pairs of stones, (1 pair 4 ft. 6 in. French, 1 pair 4 feet 4 inches ditto, and 1 pair 4 feet 6 inches peak.) Flour Machine, Bolter, Jogging Screen and Gear complete. The ground floor, with the first and second stories, are enclosed with solid brick-work, and form capacious store-rooms; with a convenient counting house.

The jogging screen was used to clean the grain before milling by sieving out any stalks, chaff, and foreign matter. French burr stones are used in mills when white flour is required, as the bran, the outer "skin" of the grain, is not ground so finely as by peak stones. Consequently, when the wholemeal flour produced by the millstones is passed through the bolter or the flour machine to produce white flour, its removal is much easier.

The Union Mill Company was still recorded as the ratepayer in June 1832 but by the following October, the sale had been concluded and John & George Russell, from Waldron and Chiddingly in Sussex, were the new owners and paid the rates.

Mary Dobell lived for a few years after her bankruptcy, watching these men trying to make a profit from her investment but she was buried on 9th June 1825, aged 66. Henry, however, survived to see the mill's fortunes revived and the Russells take over, while he struggled to make ends meet. After his short rise to fame as the miller at the newest and grandest windmill in Cranbrook, the rapid change in economic climate sadly reduced him to more menial occupations and he soon disappeared from the public records. He is not listed in the 1841 census for Cranbrook so it appears that he was obliged to seek elsewhere for work but he must have fallen on hard times when the 1851 census was taken, because he was then resident in Cranbrook

Union workhouse at Hartley. By this date he was 60 years old and probably still reasonably able-bodied and would have been obliged to do some work to help pay for his keep. In the census he is described as "labourer nurse", suggesting that he may have been assisting in the infirmary. The entry in St.Dunstan's burial register does not say whether he died in the workhouse but reads:

21st March 1860 bur. Henry Dobell, aged 69

After starting his working life with such high hopes, Henry must have died a greatly disappointed man.

Illustrations by Peggy Fryer

References (CKS = The Centre for Kentish Studies):

- 1) Benenden parish registers & Canterbury marriage licences
- 2) Cranbrook parish registers
- 3) Cranbrook Parish Map CKS U78 P30 and P31
- 4) Registers of the Chapel-on-the-Hill, Cranbrook RG4/?? (microfilm copies in CKS)
- 5) Maidstone Journal 19th October, 1819 (microfilm copies in Maidstone Library)
- 6) Articles of bankruptcy state that the windmill was built "at her own costs and charges", CKS U78 T108
- 7) Cranbrook's Overseers of the Poor Rate Books CKS P100/11/ 10 & 11, P100/12/1 & 2
- 8) CKS Q/RP1/90: Cranbrook Borough
- 9) Will of William Buss, gent, PRO B11/1796/305

Footnote:

Residents of Cranbrook will be aware that at present the windmill is undergoing substantial repairs, thanks to significant funds being obtained from the National Lottery Heritage Fund and Kent Council Council and if progress continues at its present rate, the mill will be restored to its former glory in the autumn of 2003 with new sweeps, a rebuilt cap and fantail, repairs to the timber frame, and completely new weatherboarding. As a separate project, new floodlighting will also be installed while the scaffolding is around the mill. It is perhaps fitting that this should coincide with the 21st anniversary of the formation of the Cranbrook Windmill Association, the voluntary organisation set up to open the mill to the public. A new history of the windmill is in preparation, and this article is the result of research carried out to fill certain gaps in our knowledge and to correct some previously published inaccuracies about its history.

Cecil Pile, in his booklet, "The Watermills and Windmills of Cranbrook", states that it was Henry's widow, Mary, who was bankrupted, assuming that it was Henry who had built the windmill. There is also a copy of a deed in our museum which relates to the sale in 1811 by Mary Dobell, widow, of an acre of land behind the windmill. Unfortunately, some Dobell family researchers have combined these two pieces of information and published on a family website that Henry's widow sold the land in 1811, ie four years before Henry started working at the Windmill! The moral is clear for the historian: never state your assumptions as if they are facts.

In view of all that has been written by Cecil Pile and others in the pages of this Journal and elsewhere about Cranbrook's history, it is even more surprising to read in the latest edition of Borough News (Tunbridge Wells BC) which has just dropped through my door, there is a statement that the windmill was built to provide flour for the French prisoners at Sissinghurst Castle, which is obviously inaccurate to anyone who has done a little homework. The author of the article has clearly confused two wars with France. Sissinghurst Castle was used for prisoners of war during the Seven Years War (1756-1763) but by the end of the century, Sissinghurst Castle Farm was leased to the parish and was operated as a working farm to employ the poor of the parish and thus help reduce the rates.