

Bristol snuff

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Three overseas trades were Bristol staples in the 18th century: sugar, slaves and tobacco. Today none of the three is 'politically correct'.¹

Tobacco had been grown in Britain in the 17th century in places such as Winchcombe and Tewkesbury but had been outlawed by various acts, most effectively that of 1654.² Abraham Elton and his associates were fined £15,000 for cultivating nine plantations near Bristol in 1692.³ The leaf was being imported in bulk into Bristol by 1662: Customs duties of £12,000 were recorded and a number of ships were involved in the Virginia trade.⁴

By 1750 snuff was the main product of Bristol tobacconists, with one pound a week being consumed by families of the gentry. Cut tobacco and roll tobacco were also prepared. Demand was rising and the refitting of Bristol grist mills as snuff mills was heavily censured at a quarter sessions meeting in Bristol in 1756.⁵

The tobacco that was imported into Bristol came mainly from the Chesapeake, Virginia. (Chesapeake derives from the Indian '*k'tchisipik*', meaning 'great water'. The Chesapeake had a shoreline of 4,600 miles, allowing deep-water vessels to be moored at plantation landings⁶). The population of Virginia

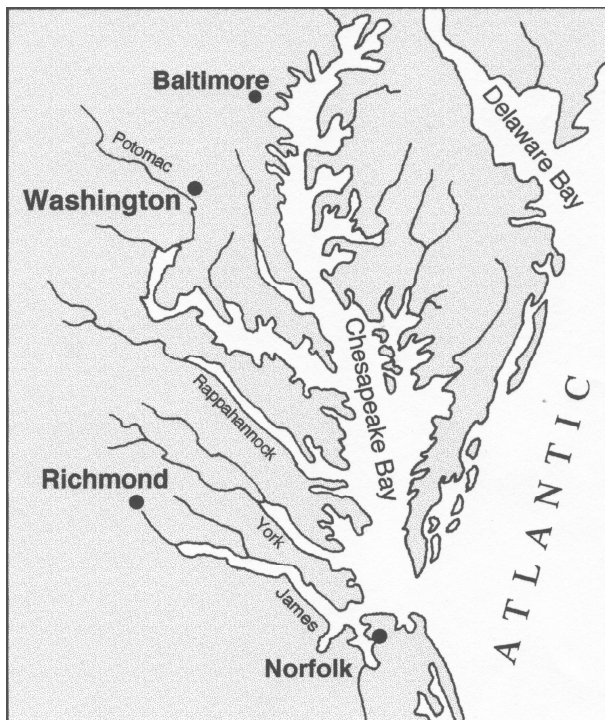


Fig. 1 The Chesapeake. Virginia and Maryland - the source of Bristol tobacco in the 18th century

had grown from 1300 in 1625 to nearly 63,000 by 1700, and tobacco cultivation was the mainstay of the state's economy. In the early 17th century it was reckoned that a man working for a year on a tobacco farm realised £50, whereas his labour in raising a corn crop was worth £10. By 1780 the Chesapeake colonies boasted a population of 786,000, 39% made up of black slave immigrants brought in to work tobacco farms that had grown into plantations.

Growing tobacco was a labour-intensive business and involved the following stages:

- Planting seeds in seedbeds: December-January.
- Transplanting to prepared hillocks followed by weeding; topping to eliminate production of flowers, and suckering, to eliminate secondary shoots. The plant consumes potash, nitrogen and calcium avidly and so - lacking fertilisers - the Virginians would use a system of long fallows before returning to the same ground.
- Cutting the tobacco plant. Often in September, although getting the timing right was always a difficult decision. The cutter had to decide which plants to cut and where to make the incisions.
- Curing. Drying stalks and leaves in barns was undertaken in the autumn months. If there was much moisture the tobacco would rot; if conditions were very dry, the product would turn to dust.
- Prizing. Packing the leaves into hogsheads. This involved getting as many layers of tobacco leaf as possible that could be stuffed into a wooden barrel or hogshead. Hogsheads could weigh from 950 to 1400 pounds. Freight rates were calculated on the number of hogsheads, not on weight. The type of tobacco grown on the Chesapeake was sweet-scented: it was found in the York basin and the Rappahannock. Oronoco was grown elsewhere in Virginia and in Maryland.⁷

A number of Bristol merchants were involved in the tobacco trade. One of these traders, for example, was the Quaker, Edward Harford II (1691-1779). His father died when he was 14 and in 1709 his grandfather died and he inherited the family soapworks in Bristol.⁸ He married in 1716 and moved from St Michael's Hill to Frenchay.

In 1720 Edward began importing hogsheads of tobacco from Virginia. His vessel, the *York*, no doubt named after the river on the Chesapeake, was

involved in the shipping⁹ and in most of the years between 1728 and 1768 he imported a total of 7,133 hogsheads of tobacco.¹⁰ One of the crew appears to have been impressed into the Royal Navy on 8 February 1758, when Thomas Saumarez of *HMS Antelope*, patrolling the Kingroad, off Avonmouth, recorded in his log: 'Impressed one man out of the York from Virginia.'¹¹

Edward's son, Edward Harford III (1720-1806) imported a further 3,768 hogsheads in the years 1754-60, 1763-67 and 1774-75. He dealt mostly with John Snelson, a Virginia tobacco grower. A number of other Bristol merchants were importing similar or larger quantities of tobacco until the American War of Independence curtailed these activities.¹²

Overproduction brought the price of tobacco leaf down from \$0.25 per pound in 1812 to \$0.04 by 1828; the soil was exhausted by 1845 and by the 1860s tobacco growing had disappeared from the tidewaters of the Chesapeake.¹³

While pipe tobacco was consumed, snuff was the major product for Bristol tobacconists in the 18th

century. Cigarettes were yet to come into vogue. Snuff was produced by grinding bunches of tobacco leaves in mortars, reducing them to a fine powder. This was done by heavyweight pestles driven by a water-wheel or a windmill. Snuff was exported, some even back to Virginia. Tobacco was also sold on by Bristol merchants - 117,000 lbs of it recorded at Minehead between Midsummer 1699 and Midsummer 1700.¹⁴

This Bristol port industry has vanished but hints of the mill sites remain from newspaper references and insurance policies of the time. The industry was already mature when Henry Overton Wills moved from Salisbury to Bristol in 1786 and became a partner in Wills, Watkins & Co, of 73 Castle Street, a favoured street for tobacconists.¹⁵

It may not now survive, but Sharrow Mill, Sheffield [see illustration] was until recently the oldest working snuff factory in the world. It featured a few years ago in *The Independent* and was a watermill built on the River Porter in 1763.¹⁶

The following is an attempt to catalogue Bristol snuff mills by parish. I cannot claim it is definitive.

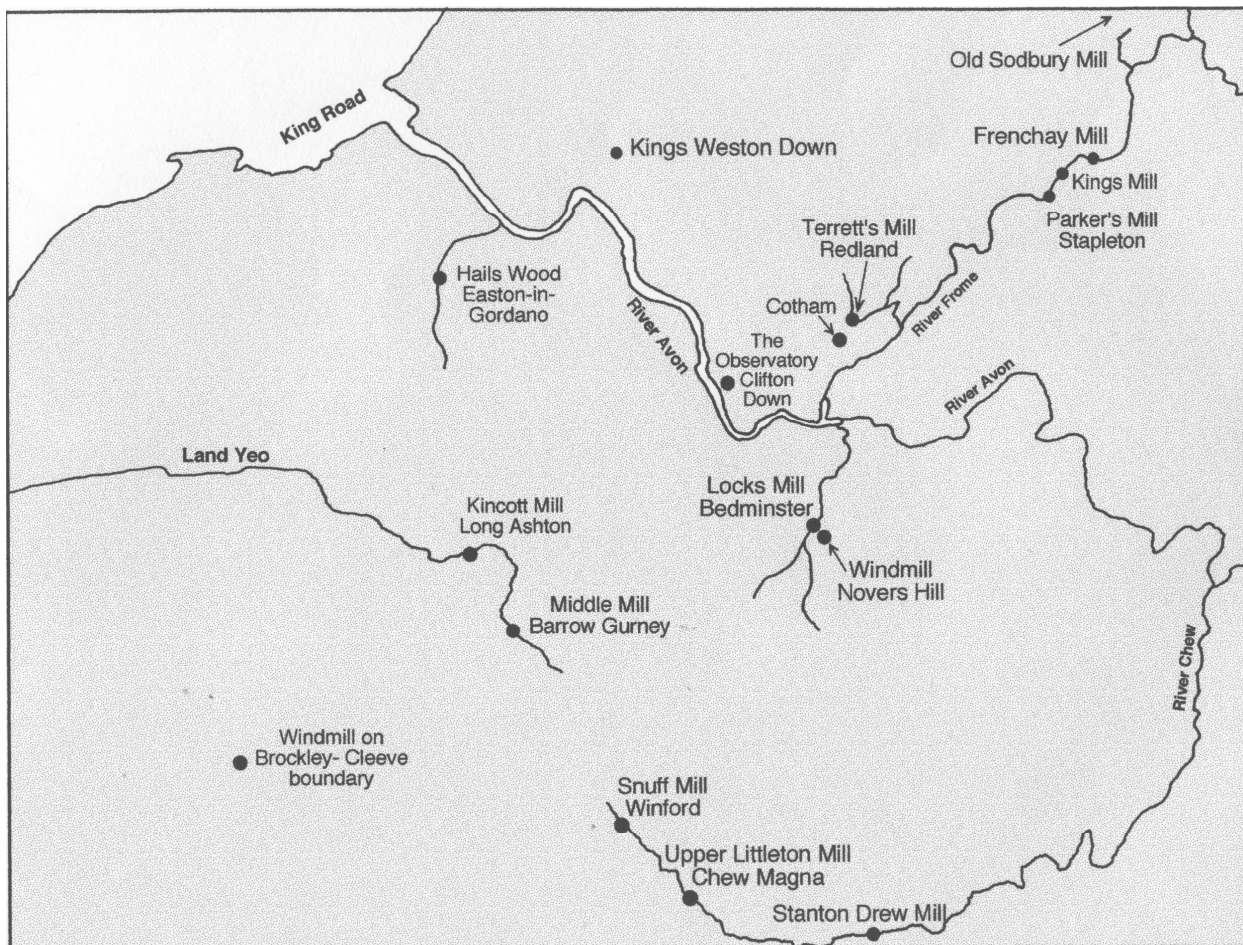


Fig. 2 Watermills and windmills involved with snuff manufacture in the Bristol region in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

Barrow Gurney**Middle Mill**

(ST526683)

1805. A lease of 1805 refers to mills at Barrow Gurney converted to snuff manufacture. Peter Lilly, a Bristol tobacconist, had an interest.¹⁷ Assignment of snuff mills called Barrow Mill in the period 1843-1867 could refer to this mill or Lower Mill.¹⁸ The site is now a private residence known as School Farm. The mill leat from the Land Yeo, has been filled in.

Windmills

(ST527688 & ST52365 approx.)

There were, it seems, two windmills at Barrow, as well as three watermills. Both had gone by c1839. Whether they were snuff mills, or more possibly medieval sites, is not known. But why would a small village like Barrow require two windmills and three watermills? Sites are at Windmill Close. Item 357 on tithe map, south west of Springhead Farm and Windmill Hill. Item 597, north of village and east of the Yeo.¹⁹

Bristol**Locks Mill and nearby windmill, Bedminster**

(ST583703)

1772. *'To be Sold in Fee by Private Contract. LOCKS MILL in the parish of Bedminster; consisting of 20 snuff-mills, two pair French Stones, two Bolting Mills, Screws, and all materials necessary for a Grist-Mill. A good .. Dwelling House for a Family and a convenient Apartment [sic] for a Miller. Also, a Wind-Mill, with 8 Snuff Mills, and 2 pair French Stones, for Grinding Grist; and a Stable for four Horses, and a Cart-House; with about 5 Acres .. apply to Mr William Weare.'*²⁰

1779. *'Thomas Gee of the City of Bristol, Tobacconist, Snuff-maker and Grocer. On his Utensils and stock in his warehouse adjoining Ratcliff Street, in the City aforesaid, stone and tiled £700. Utensils and stock in a house separate £300. Wind mill near stone and tiled £40. Utensils and stock therein £60. Utensils and stock in a water mill near stone and tiled £230'.*

While the location is not given, the combination of house, windmill and watermill fits this location: Gee was certainly here in 1782, by which time the windmill was not mentioned. Martin Watts notes the insurance value for this mill in 1779 was low.²¹

1782. Insurance Policy. *'Thomas Gee of the City of Bristol, Tobacconist, Snuff Maker and Grocer. On his Millhouse called Lock Mill in the parish of Bedminster in the County of Somerset £300. Two Water Mills therein £100. House adjoining and communicating in his own tenure £300'.*²²

The mill house was bombed in the Second World War and the site was levelled in 1952. The windmill, possibly uneconomic as a snuff mill by 1782, was probably sited on Novers Hill. The watermill was on the Malago Stream.

Windmill at Clifton Down

(ST565732)

*'The original windmill for grinding snuff burnt down in a strong gale in 1778, when the sails were driven round so fast the wooden pivots caught fire: barely two years after its original construction it was destroyed. The Merchants' Hall approved William West's plan in 1828 for rebuilding the ruined windmill as an observatory.'*²³

*'Clifton Down (now the observatory): permission to build granted by the Society of Merchant Venturers in December 1766, plus £200 towards a building cost of £300, so presumably built in 1767 to grind corn. Subsequently (no record of when) converted to snuff grinding and burnt down in a gale, usually said to be on 30 October 1777 and qualified almost precisely by a contemporary newspaper report.'*²⁴

Windmill at Cotham

The windmill was erected in 1725, *'presumably as a corn mill. In 1754 leased to William Hume, a Scotch-snuff maker of Maryleport Street, who became bankrupt in c. 1757, when the mill apparently contained 11 snuff mills [or mortars]'*²⁵

1772. *'In 1772 windmill and property around was in the occupation of Thomas Evans & Co., tobacconists.'*²⁶

1776. *'Cotham Windmill to be Lett, either as a Snuff or Grist Mill, with the adjacent Field and Tenement. Enquire of Mr Partridge, at Cotham Lodge.'*²⁷

The mill had apparently been converted to an observatory by 1807 and survived long enough to be photographed and later published by Reece Winstone: the tower was *'extremely tall'*²⁸

Frenchay Mill, Frenchay

(ST638773)

Amongst other eighteenth century sites Latimer listed a snuff mill at Frenchay. Owned by Mary Miles, Frenchay Mill on the River Frome was leased to Woodhouse and Co in 1781, when the drying room was destroyed:

'Late on Saturday last a terrible fire broke out in the dyeing [sic] house of a snuff mill near Frenchay belonging to Messrs Woodhouse & Co, tobacconists in this city. It was occasioned by a

coal fire falling into some snuff which was drying'. The miller was absent and the drying room burnt to the ground: *'The loss sustained by the fire is computed to be .. £2000'*.

In 1775 Woodhouse traded from premises at 47 Wine Street, Bristol. Frenchay Mill was last used as a flour mill in c1905 and finally demolished in c1958.²⁹

Windmill at Kingsweston Down

1883. *'Windy Hill and Windmill Hill recall the small mills set up for grinding snuff. The last of these snuff mills stood on Kingsweston Down and was still upright in the eighties minus its sails.'*³⁰

Latimer, writing in the late 19th century, referred to snuff mills at Terrett's, Locks, Clifton, Combe Dingle, Barrow, Frenchay and *'one or two others on the Froom'*. This could be the Combe Dingle reference, although there were also watermills on the stream running into the Avon at Sea Mills, which may have served tobacconists.³¹

Manufactory, Lewin's Mead

1860. Freehold premises used for the manufacture of snuff, with plant and machinery, were offered for sale by auction here in 1860. They had previously been occupied by Messrs J.H. Payne and Co and more recently by Mr Edward Hunt.³²

Manufactory, Redcliffe Street

John Gee, a tobacconist and snuff manufacturer, held premises at 141 Redcliffe Street and a steam engine with associated machinery was at work here by 1833. John Gee was succeeded by Richard Penny Gee and Thomas Gee, but the partnership was dissolved in February 1834.³³

Terrett's Mill, near Redland (ST591746)

c1750. Mill erected by Thomas Terrett pre 1727. In 1747 the mill was rebuilt by Thomas Vowles, a baker. A snuff mill here:

'was let to Messrs Maxwell and Co, at £40, but as a result of the advertisement which describes these premises in 1755, the mill was bought by an ironmonger, Jonathan Coram, of Bristol, and snuff milling ceased within a few years, certainly by 1764. I suspect that snuff miller Maxwell moved across to Snuffy Jacks with a new partner James McBraire .. the snuff mill lay idle for want of a tenant, being advertised in 1764, 1766 and again in 1774 ..'

However, a notice to lease the mill was published in 1781:

'To be Lett .. beyond Stokes-Croft Turnpike .. is a good substantial water SNUFF MILLS with all the materials ready for working, but having formerly been short of water in summer season, the Proprietor will engage a certain supply in future, so that the mills shall work Night and Day the year round, if required - He now grinds snuff by the Hundred or Ton as usual - For Particulars enquire of Mr Thomas Rennison ..'

The site was probably flattened c1874 when the Clifton extension railway was built.³⁴ Latimer located the mill *'near the upper end of Stokes' Croft'*.

King's Mill, above Stapleton (ST631767)

1771. In this year the mill was leased to tobacconists and snuff merchants by the owners of Oldbury Court. The partners included Francis Collins and John Thomas, who signed a 41-year lease. King's Mill was still referred to as a snuff mill in 1833, but it was unoccupied in 1839 when owned by Elizabeth Jones of Oldbury Court. Only a ruin survived in the late 20th century. It was also known as Clifford's or Glenfrome Mill.³⁵

Parker's Mill or 'Snuffy Jacks', Stapleton

(ST629765)

1777. *'.. Isaac Taylor shows a mill on the site in 1777 .. Messrs Maxwell and McBraire, tobacconists, (Maxwell left Terrett's Mill (qv) before 1764) certainly ran the mill at some time before 1790, and another firm of tobacconists, Wilson and Thomas, paid rent for the mill in that year. In 1792 it was leased (by W.S. Winstone) to Messrs Lilly and Wills for a period of 21 years, although H O Wills actually bought it outright in 1805, only 13 years later. They ground snuff there until 1843, when they sold it to W S Lawrence ..'*³⁶

Chew Magna

Upper Littleton Mill (ST556637)

1808. A fulling mill and leather mill prior to 1808. In that year it was owned by a consortium of local people - Joseph Yates, William Osborne, Mary and Walter Webb. It was leased to tobacconists Jacob Ricketts and Isaac Leonard and it would appear they remained until 1853 when William Day Wills and Henry Overton Wills, wholesale tobacconists, bought the premises. They sold in 1875 and the Winford Iron Ore & Redding Co processed colour here from 1881.³⁷

Cleeve Windmill

(ST473661)

Pre-nineteenth century *'A windmill was recorded on the manor in 1529, but the date of the stone*

*tower of which remains exist in Brockley Wood is unknown, for by 1829 it was in ruins. The north side of the tower stands to a height of 18'-20' but the south side has collapsed .. large diameter for the region 16'9" internally with a 2'6" thick wall and pronounced convex batter.*³⁸

Local folk memory has it that the mill ground snuff. Martin Watts, however, casts doubt, as documentary corroboration is lacking. He also notes that the windmill actually stands in Cleeve parish not Brockley as previously recorded.³⁹

As Cleeve was part of Yatton Parish at the beginning of the 19th century, the following has come to light: in 1806 Lord Poulette granted a lease to James Taylor of 'all that said decayed windmill formerly erected on the common hill with liberty to enclose two acres of waste ground adjacent'. Still no reference to snuff - and unless Taylor was a tobacconist, which is unlikely - any snuff ground here would have been milled in the 18th century.⁴⁰

Easton-in-Gordano

Possible mill site at Hails Wood (ST513751)

This is a mystery site, not shown on the 1839 tithe map, but it is extant on the 25" = 1 mile Ordnance Survey map of c1880. It lies 200 metres west of the Rudleigh Inn, to the south of the Easton-in-Gordano bypass. Ruinous buildings and walls clearly served a purpose and the compiler, talking with Rowley Ansell of Pill, one-time gamekeeper on the Robinson estate here, understood that it served as a snuff mill.⁴¹

Long Ashton

Kincott Mill (ST516698)

1778. Insurance policy. 'Thomas Gee and Christianus Load and Job Gee, Distillers and Tobacco Snuff and Blue manufacturers and grocers. On .. Distill House and warehouse in Redcliffe Street in the City of Bristol £1000. Utensils and .. in a water mill .. the mill stands at Long Ashton in the county of Somerset .. stone and tiled £200.'⁴²

In the following year Thomas Gee insured a warehouse at Redcliffe Street together with a house, windmill and watermill and these were probably the complex of buildings at Locks Mill, Bedminster [qv].

1827. 'On 21 December 1805 Richard Neale, John Ames, William Elton and Levi Ames leased the mill, a house, garden and strip and West Mill Paddock on lives, for a chief rent of £15 and £1 heriot. Neale surrendered the lease and when Edward Peters took it over on 8 October 1827, at

*an increased rental of £16 6s 8d, it was described as a snuff mill.*⁴³

Old Sodbury

Old Sodbury Mill (ST751808)

*'...stands in Mill lane where it crosses the Frome ...The 1828 OS map of Gloucestershire shows Old Sodbury Mill, and it ...reputedly ground snuff.'*⁴⁴

Stanton Drew

Stanton Drew Mill (ST595635)

Eighteenth century. In 1694 there was a mill house here, with two grist mills on the River Chew, owned by William Bull. There may have been two waterwheels abreast, each powering a single set of millstones. In 1811 - when there were representations over ownership - the property was described as 'heretofore grist snuff and logwood mills but now used as grist and logwood mills only'. Clearly snuff milling had taken place at sometime in the eighteenth century. The present mill building was erected later in the nineteenth century on the site of the old mill.⁴⁵

Winford

Snuff Mill (ST545649)

1769. Mill on the Winford Brook: leased for £200 a year in 1721.⁴⁶ In 1769 the mill was grinding snuff.⁴⁷ It was put up for sale in 1837 and converted to colour milling, grinding the local Winford red ochre, by 1839. The ruinous remains, smothered in ivy, stood in the grounds of Snuff Mill Cottage, in 1985.

Acknowledgements

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Plate 1
Lines of water-powered pestels and mortars at Sharrow snuff mill, Sheffield, c1990.

Mike Poloway