

TUCKING MILL

John Broome

"Tucking" is another name for Pulling, a process used in the manufacture of woolen cloth. The sites of mills where the process was carried on often retain the name "Tucking Mill"; there are several places with this name in the West Country.

One of them lies about two miles south of the City of Bath, near the village of Midford. The name is attached to a hamlet that stands where the wooded valley of Horsecombe opens out into the Midford Valley. This particular Tucking Mill is famous for its association with the early Geologist - William Smith. Smith owned the land there from 1798 to 1814¹, and he occasionally lived in one of the houses.

In 1888 the Bath Natural History and Antiquarian Field Club decided to erect a marble tablet at Tucking Mill to mark where William Smith had lived². Evidently it was known at that date that he had lived at Tucking Mill, but not which house was his. The tablet was actually placed, not on a house but on a mill that stood there at the time. This mill was assumed to be the original tucking mill itself³, but in fact it had been built only in 1808-09 by James Sutton, a tenant of Smith's⁴. When the 1808-09 mill was

demolished in 1927 the tablet was moved to an adjoining cottage. Recent work by Joan Eyles⁵ has revealed that William Smith never occupied the cottage that now bears the tablet. His house was another one, a hundred yards or so away.

The remains of the original tucking mill have vanished. A map of 1741⁶ gives the name 'Tuckin Mill' to the area, but shows no trace of the mill itself; nor are any records known of the working mill. I have, however, been able to identify its site from William Smith's papers in the University Museum at Oxford. The papers contain two slight references to the mill, which is enough for identification.

The first is a Poem written by Smith, and headed "Vales of Bath, Tucking Mill. Doncaster 1825"

'As Wild as were the woods of Bath
When Bladud⁷ trod their thorny path
And bathed his Hogs
In steaming Bogs
Just o'er the hill was Tucking Mill
In scrambling through that thorny ground
Amidst the waste
The site I found
The old foundations traced'

This shows that the ruins of the mill existed in Smith's day, and he knew where they were.

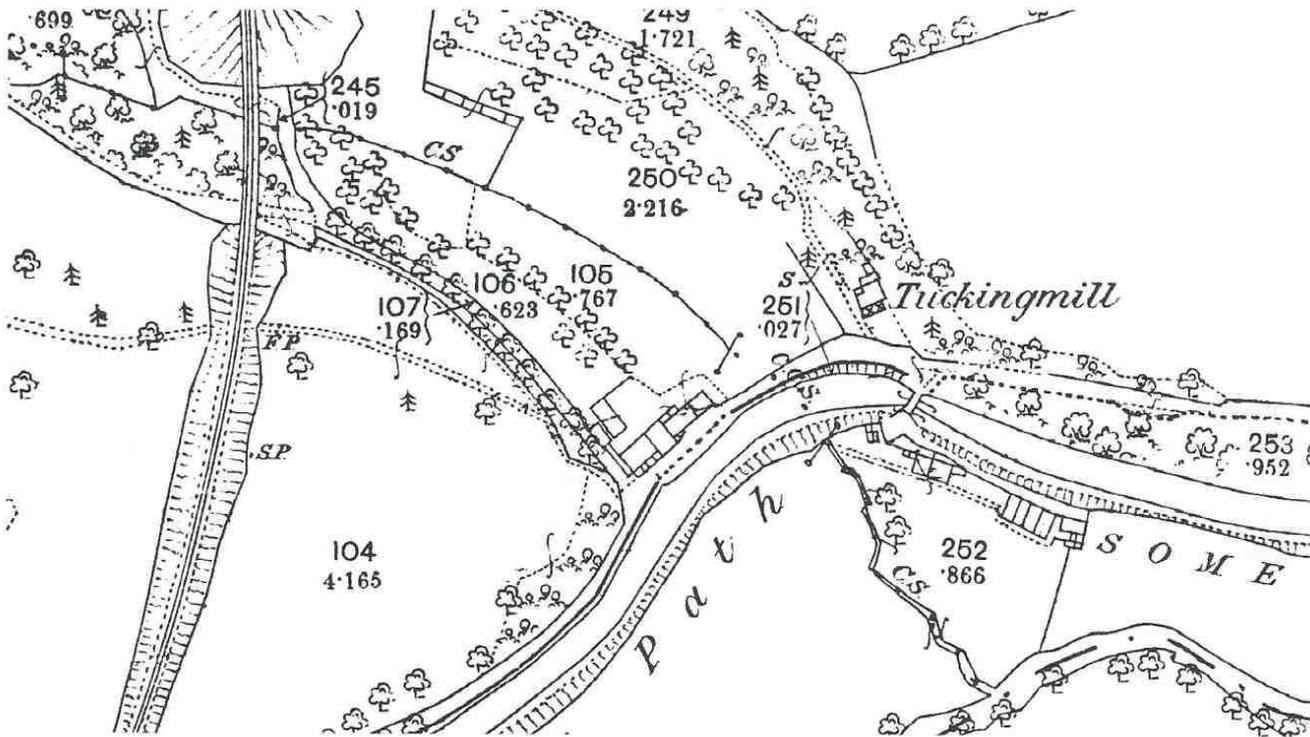
The second reference is in an Essay headed "London July 7, 1814". The essay eulogises Ralph Allen, the great benefactor of Bath. Allen, before Smith's time, owned the stone quarries on Combe Down, the hill above 'Tucking Mill.

Smith says:-

"Prior to Mr. Allen's completion of his large domain & the opening of his Freestone Quarries, Combe was a small clothing Town and the Wharf to which Mr. Conollys Stone is now

conveyed by a [illegible] railway was a Fulling Mill."

Charles Conolly was the owner of Midford Castle and at one time a business associate of Smith's. His stone quarry was at Kingham, on the side of Combe Down. A railway, constructed, by Smith himself in 1811⁸, ran down from there to a wharf on the Somersetshire Coal Canal. Smith's remark makes it clear that the canal wharf is the site of the tucking mill. Although the canal is now filled in, the wharf is clearly shown on old maps and photographs. Its outline may still be just traced on the ground.



Ordnance Survey Map, 1/2500 Scale, First Edition, Surveyed 1884.

References and Notes

1) **Joan M. Eyles** "William Smith's home near Bath: the real Tucking Mill" *Journal of the Society for the Bibliography of Natural History*. 7 (1974) Pages 29-34 ; gives 1818 as the date when Smith relinquished possession of the land. My date of 1814 is taken from an Abstract of Title owned by Laporte Industries Ltd. and from indications in William Smith's papers at the University Museum in Oxford.

2) **H.H. Winwood** "The new branch line of the GWR from Camerton to Limpley Stoke" *Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, Proceedings of the Bath and District Branch* (1908) Pages 195-197.

3) Ibid.

4) **William Smith's papers** at Oxford

5) Op. Cit.

6) **Map of the Estate of Ralph Allen, made by Thomas Thorpe**; in the Bath City Reference Library. The name is in the accompanying terrier.

7) **Bladud** was the mythical father of King Lear, and credited with the discovery of the curative powers of the Hot Springs of Bath from watching his pigs wallow in them.

8) **William Smith's diary for 1811**, in his papers at Oxford, see also **David Pollard** "Bath stone quarry railways 1795/1830" *BIAS Journal No.15* (1982).