

Limpley Stoke Mill

Kate Werran

Introduction

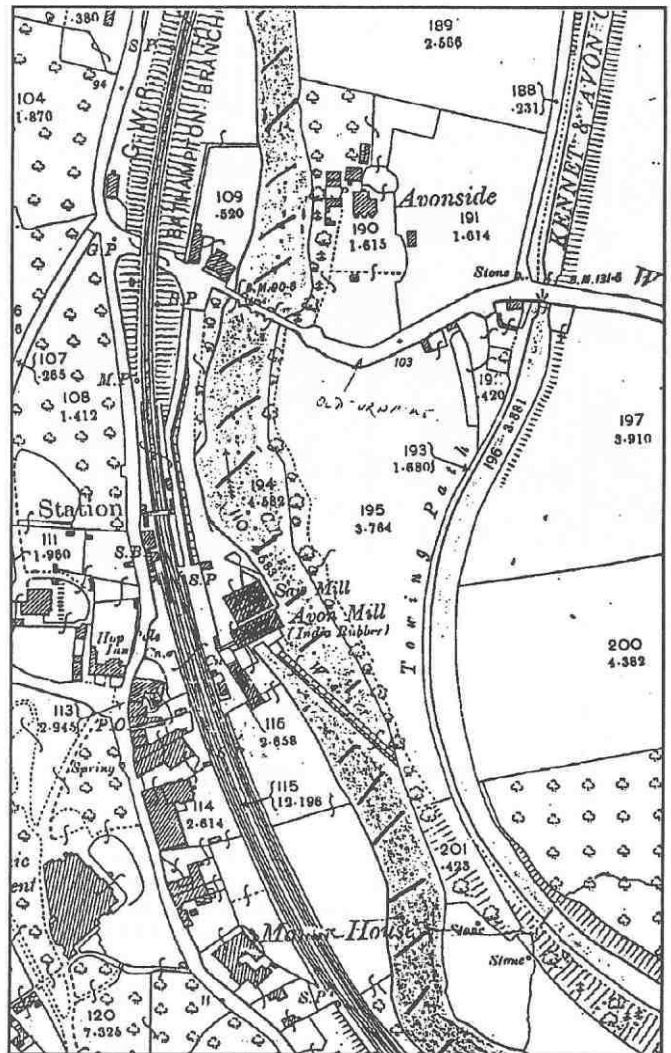
This article is the last chapter of a larger essay by Kate Werran 'The History of Limpley Stoke Mill'. In the earlier chapters the author explains how the mill came to be established as part of the Wiltshire woollen cloth industry in late-medieval England, when it was probably one of the 23 fulling mills estimated by Kenneth Rogers to be active in Wiltshire in 1590. However, the first certain record of the mill is in 1610, when it was known as 'Stoker's Mill', the term 'Stoke' being derived from a Saxon word 'stoc' meaning a stockaded place near a wood. When sold in 1796, the mill was described as 'consisting of four pairs of stocks in good repair'. It was bought by John Newton, a Bradford clothier, who developed the mill as a woollen factory and brought new activity to the village. Joseph Daniel acquired the mill in 1841. He was associated with the introduction of new machines invented by himself for processing the cloth and, in 1851, he won a prize at the Great Exhibition for 'patent double cloth'. The building was seriously damaged by a fire in 1853, and was disused for the following fifteen years. The opening of the Wilts, Somerset and Weymouth Railway about that time brought revived prosperity to Limpley Stoke and in 1866 the mill was rebuilt as 'Avon Mill'. It is with this stage in the life of the building that the following account is concerned.

Giles Holbrow

In the 1850s and 60s England had manufactured for a world that was still a generation behind her in industrial machinery. But, by 1870 America and Germany had risen as manufacturing powers able to rival our own. The greater natural resources of America and the scientific and technical education provided by far-sighted governments in Germany told more and more every year. Consequently, a greater concern with British interests overseas was generated as manifest in the imperialism of the 1890s. In terms of industry, therefore, the age of the steamship, the railway and the motor car was initiated and it was to this new era that Stoke Mill was introduced following its conversion after the Great Fire of 1853. A deed dated 31 December 1866 records the purchase of:

'all that piece of land with the buildings, thereon formerly a fulling mill and cloth factory called Stoke Mill, but which buildings were sometime since partly burned and are now being repaired... together with the yards, outbuildings, sheds and premises thereto adjoining and belonging, and also all and singular the weirs, water wheels and other wheels, flood gates, hatches, eel trap shafts and other fixtures and appurtenances thereon. ... belonging situate at Limpley Stoke...'

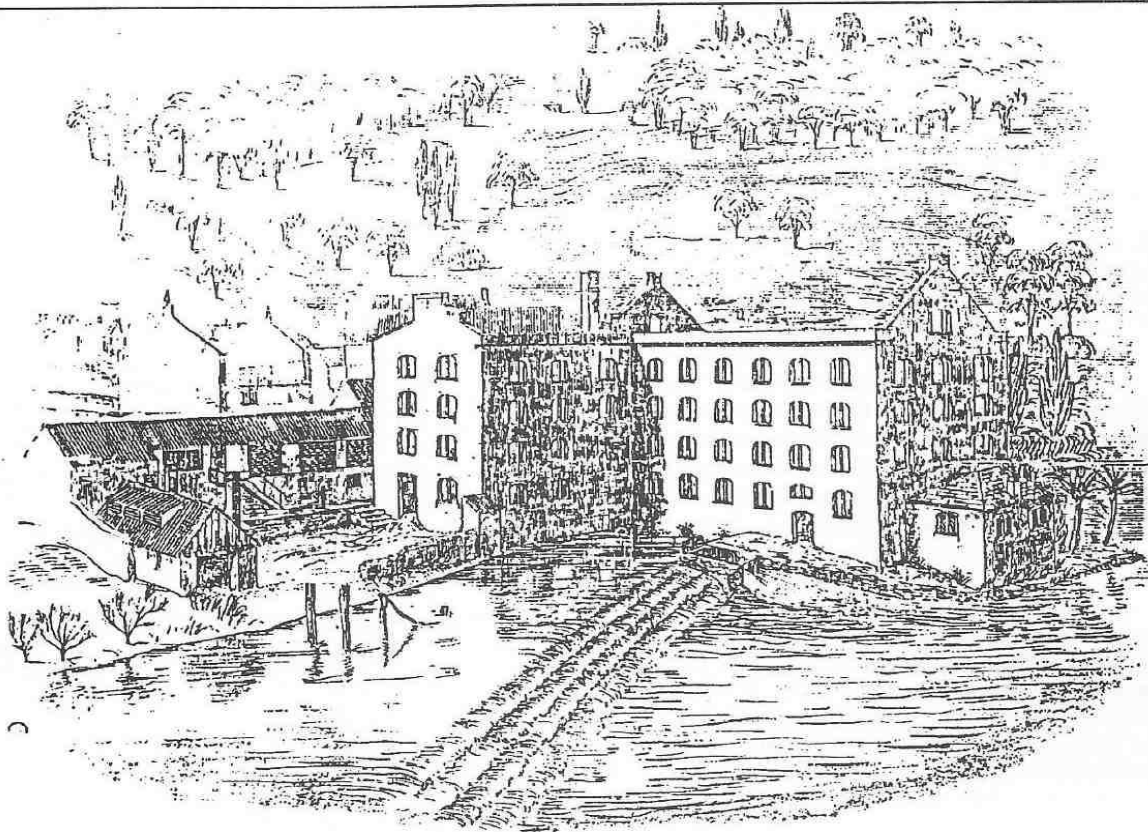
by Giles Holbrow of Wick, for £1,050. Holbrow had already acquired a large tract of land on the western slope of the valley, between the Warminster Road and the lower Station Road. Here, embossed in the woods, he built a family residence which he named Berkley House. Holbrow changed the mill's name from 'Stoke' to 'Avon Mills' and it remained a family concern for nearly one hundred years. His children Fanny Selina Hadley, Mary Jane John, Sarah Ann Lord, Emily Catherine



Limpley Stoke Mill from the 1901 OS 25in plan

Buswell, Henry Charles and William James inherited equal shares in the mill on Holbrow's death in 1892. By 1893, Charles Henry who had emigrated to Lee Wanamic, Luzerne in Pennsylvania (USA) and Fanny Selina were ready to sell their shares. Their sisters followed likewise and by 1906 William James was the sole owner. By 1934, it was held in conjunction with his son Gerard. Until 1939 it operated as 'the Holbrow Brothers Limited' until the firm was moved to Bradford. Despite various leases granted to different people during its history after 1866, the Avon Mills remained the sole property of the Holbrow brothers.

The Victorian period in which the mill was rebuilt witnessed the growing popularity of rail, steam and road as modes of transport and it is no real surprise that the uses which Holbrow set the mill to were associated with these. Once he had acquired the mill in 1866, a lengthy conversion of it into two factories producing timber and india-rubber took place.



TO MANUFACTURERS, MILLERS, AND OTHERS.

POWERFUL AND MOST ADVANTAGEOUSLY SITUATED WATER MILL,
Limpley Stoke, near Bath,

EASILY CONVERTIBLE into a Flour Mill, Silk Mill, or for ANY OTHER PURPOSE REQUIRING GREAT POWER, clear and pure water, an EXTENSIVE AND POPULOUS NEIGHBOURHOOD, with IMMEDIATE COMMUNICATION with Bristol, Bath, Bradford, Trowbridge, Warminster, Frome, Salisbury, and other Towns, by TURNPIKE ROAD, RAILWAY, and CANAL, PASSING CLOSE TO THE PREMISES.

TO BE SOLD BY AUCTION,
BY MR. FREDERICK MORRIS,
AT HIS ROOMS, No. 22, MILSON STREET, BATH,
ON
FRIDAY, the 5th day of MAY next, at 2 o'clock in the Afternoon,
SUBJECT TO CONDITIONS,

ALL THAT VERY POWERFUL
FREEHOLD WATER MILL
AND PREMISES,

CALLED

STOKE MILL,

Together with the Water Wheels therein, recently in the occupation of Messrs. KEMP and EDMONDS, situate at

The Saw Mills

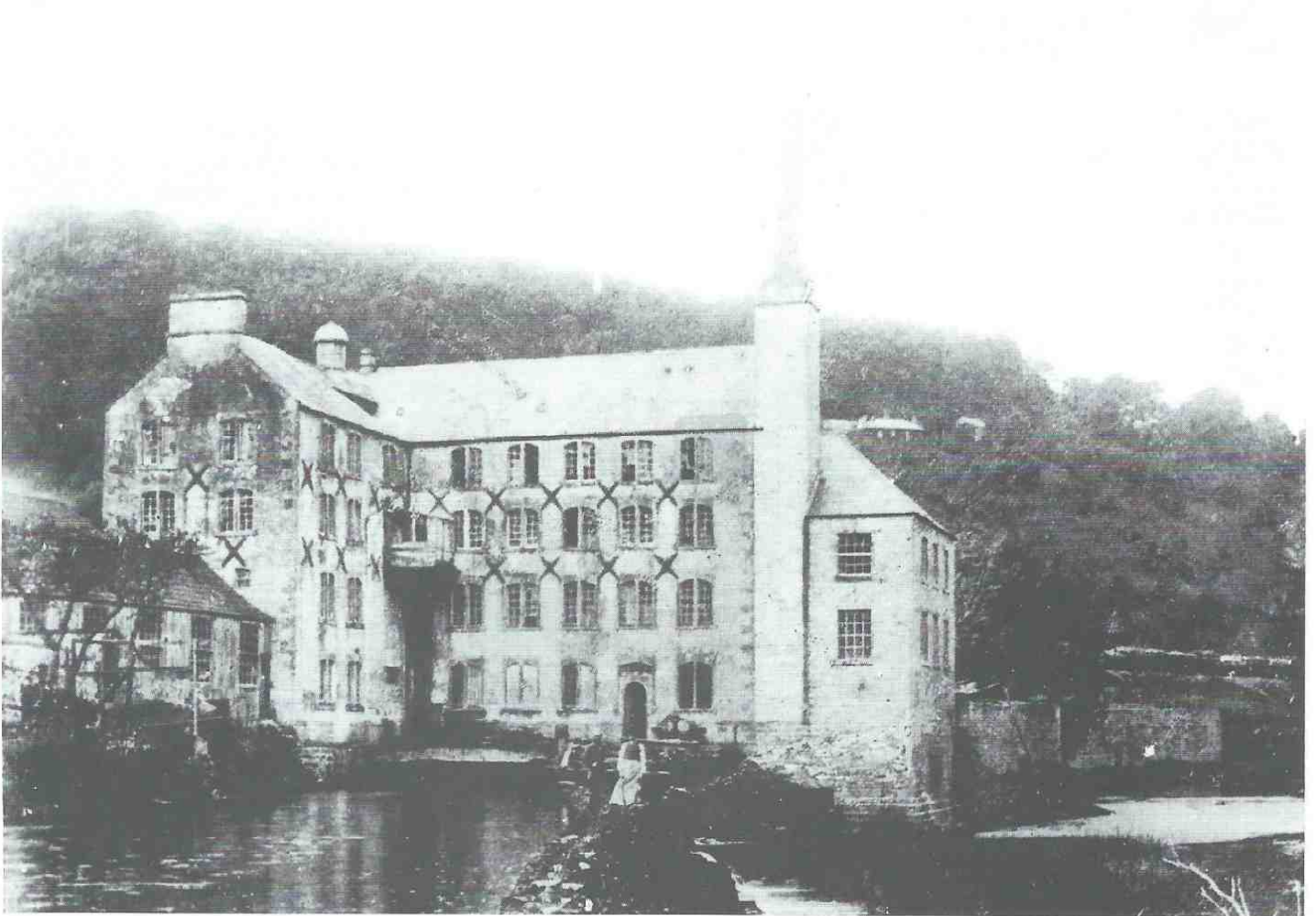
Giles Holbrow had decided to open saw mills in the valley and, to do this, he utilised the weir across the river just above the road bridge. The implementation of Holbrow's vision, however, was far from smooth. It was during this period that tragedy struck the saw mills. The hauliers had worked hard felling trees on a distant site that were now destined for the saw mills. They elected to sleep in the stables alongside the mills to be ready for an early-morning start with their wagons. During the night, however, the timbers of the roof suddenly collapsed with the loss of at least two men and several horses' lives.

Nevertheless, the Saxon meaning of the word 'stoke' and the census returns of 1841 prove that in the dark ages and relatively modern times the timber trade was no new industry to Limpley Stoke. In 1841, one George Elton was the resident wood dealer and a number of 'sawyers' are listed. The same picture is similarly reflected in the census returns of 1851 and 1861 (ie before Holbrow had even conceived the idea of the Avon Saw Mills). Once again, it seems as if the mill had regained its position as the principal employer in Limpley Stoke, as the profusion of occupations listed (including that of sawyers, timber merchant, box maker and wood carver) is testimony. By 1871, when both the saw mills and india-rubber factory were operational, the local population had dramatically increased by nearly 100 to constitute a total number of 452 residents.

Kelly's Directories reveal that the saw mills remained a Holbrow concern from its initial listing in 1867 to its closure in 1939. Originally cited under 'Saw Mills' and 'Timber Merchants', from 1911 onwards it was listed as a timber merchant only. The mill race served to supply power both for the saw mills and for a rubber mill which Holbrow founded later. Usually only one to three of the waterwheels, out of a possible four, were in use.

The Rubber Factory

It was the establishment of an india-rubber factory at Avon Mills which is the more interesting feature of the last phase in the mill's history since this was a new industry. As has been stated, the decline of the woollen trade meant that other uses were found for these factories. Kingston Mill in Bradford served to introduce the rubber industry to the district. In 1886 Gottlieb Daimler and Karl Benz used the internal combustion engine to power the first motor vehicles. This was to have a major effect on the development of both Avon and the world's rubber industry. The social effects of the newly founded rubber industry were phenomenal; the woollen industry had additionally employed as many (if not more) women than men, but the first rubber factory was predominantly worked by men - 21 as opposed to two women- and this too is borne out in the Limpley Stoke census returns.



Limpley Stoke Mill at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries

A deed of 1894 lists the equipment of the rubber factory as:

*'One 3 roll calender machine;
One 50 HP steam engine;
One large steam boiler;
One 10 by 3 vulcanizing press, '
One 80 foot heater in basement of the mill;
Two mixing machines;
Two 2 foot square vulcanizing presses, '
One washing rail machine;
One Donkey Durnt;
One tiller lathe and driving bell;
One hydraulic pump jack;
One wood turning lathe;
One upstairs bell for calenders;
Three making up tables;
One buffer making up table;
One hoist;
One grindstone and stand... '*

Although owned by the Holbrows, the rubber factory had a variety of occupants during this era. Albert Wallington - recorded in the land tax assessments of 1881 and listed in *Kelly's Directory* for 1898 was one such occupier. W P Hadley, husband of Fanny Selina Holbrow, was another. The most outstanding, however, were Messrs E.G. Browne and J.C. Margetson, who leased the mill in 1885. The new enterprise initially employed just 20 men and the earliest orders were obtained from the War Office, the India Office, railway companies, wagon works and collieries.

Margetson and Browne were responsible for erecting the factory's 130ft chimney in the late 1880s. The india-rubber factory soon proved so successful that additional space was needed. In 1889, the partners bought a derelict cloth mill and land at Melksham. In 1890, it was decided to move the existing business to Melksham and to form a limited company to be named the 'Avon India Rubber Company'. This world-renowned company, still thriving today, can thus trace its roots to Avon Mills, hence 'Avon' in the company's name.

After the departure of Margetson and Browne, Wallington and Weston took it over to produce rubber wheels and this business continued until well into the 1900s. When this firm moved on, the Holbrows resumed control of the rubber mill and ran it in conjunction with the saw mills. The goods produced by the Holbrows included rubber belts of varying widths, door stops and valves for steam ships. Wage books, ledgers and letters remain intact and illustrate the efficient administration and organisation of the Holbrow india-rubber firm.

Percy Wyatt was 12½ at the outbreak of the first world war. He recalls his childhood, a brief period of which offers an interesting, firsthand insight into the operation of the india-rubber factory:

' They reckoned the war was going to be over by Christmas. If that had been the case, I would have had to go back to school full time. The war dragged on. When I was 14 I left the farm and went to work at a rubber works in Limpley Stoke. A bloke named Burnett owned the rubber factory. He

had another place at Trowbridge and he went to Trowbridge afterwards. About 20 people worked in the factory at Limpley Stoke. I rode a bike to and from work. It was alright, but it was a bit bumpy. The roads were not like they are today, it was all humps and potholes. My wages were about 14 or 15 shillings a week. We did a six day week, eight hours per day. We worked so many weeks by day and so many weeks at night. To begin with, I was in the mixing room, that 's what they called it. They mixed up all these chemicals to make this rubber. Then I was one of the turner-up boys. They had a big core and they made and cut canvas strips. We had to wind this stuff round a casemaker to make a case. That was my job. I was there about twelve months until I was 15 that was about 1917'.

The timber and india-rubber mills made extensive use of the adjacent railway station. Their tin-plate boxes were loaded into railway wagons for despatch. They were carried from the mill to the railway siding on the heads of the workmen, six to eight boxes at a time. India-rubber goods were also manufactured to be used by the railway network itself, that is the Great Western Railway. During the heyday of the mill together with the demand from Monkton Combe School and the Girls Reformatory School (now Limpley Hotel) the station was regularly used and beautifully kept.

The Fire of 1939 - The End of Avon Mills

The prosperity and activity of Avon Mills was brought to an abrupt halt in September 1939. Gerald Holbrow, great grandson of the first of the Holbrows, recalls how his father was drawn to his bedroom window one night, attracted by the huge crackling and roaring noise which he took to be rain. Looking over at the mill, he saw it ablaze, its glow lighting up the entire valley. The devastation of the mill was complete. Built out on great platforms over the river bank, the sawmills were completely destroyed. The machinery fell into the stream as the supports twisted with the intense heat. Bradford and Trowbridge fire brigades were called, but the pipes laid in the river to suck the water out to quench the fire were too weak. Eventually, the pumps were laid beside the canal and the pipes brought to the mill over the river's bridge. So long and arduous was the work, that even the Bath fire brigade was summoned because it was feared that the railway station would be set alight in the



The mill after the fire of 1939

incredible heat. In one night, the exciting new rubber industry (with its profound social effects) and the traditional timber trade, both evoking the prosperity and changed trading ethos of the late Victorian and inter war period, were rudely cut short.

The fire heralded the death of the india-rubber industry. The mill was merely re-floored, re-roofed (minus one storey) and requisitioned by the Ministry of Works as a government store during the war. The timber merchants re-located to a new mill in Bradford. In retrospect, the contemporary fears that the mill had been the target of the German bombers reveal the genuine, if melodramatic, fears of people about to go to war. Moreover, the second world war was as much a watershed in Avon Mills' history as it was on a national basis. Never again would it function as a mill as it had done in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

Conclusion

The mill was leased to Peradin of Freshford in connection with the rubber industry in 1943. In 1950 its name was changed to the 'Avon Leather Dressing Company Limited'. However, despite a spirited effort by the ill-fated company, the planning authorities would not allow a continuation of the industry. In 1956, the name of the mill changed again to 'Limpley Mill Limited' with Mr Starosta's purchase and subsequent production of woven-wood fencing. This business came to an end in 1975, well after the chimney had been destroyed (1961) and the station closed for good (1966). In the 1980s the mill entered its latest phase by losing another storey and conversion into offices.

Throughout the centuries the mill has at once retained the local trading tradition of Limpley Stoke and epitomised the times in which it functioned. This has been its underlying fascination throughout this research. By consistently utilising Limpley's customary timber and cloth trade, the mill reflected the importance of the West of England cloth industry. Meanwhile, the innovations of the Industrial Revolution and the imperial era injected new methods and products which reflected the contemporary national trends. Its famous characters, such as J.C. Daniel and the Browne and Margetson partnership, further enriched this history. Furthermore, its role as employer and benefactor through the years made it a much cherished landmark. Its sympathetic conversion into offices in the 1980s has thus been kindly received by the local inhabitants.

The mill is part of local history, a record of man's development, life and achievements in the rich pattern of yesteryear. Although localised and parochial, it has consistently incorporated the latest technological innovations, thus highlighting the national trends of each historical epoch. Its recent acquisition by the computer software firm 'Microtec Management Systems' continues the tradition. By combining the latest technology with the current desire of businesses to relocate outside the cities to quieter areas more suitable for expansion,

the site is performing the same function that it always has. For future generations, its late-twentieth century role will be seen to evoke the zeitgeist of our times.

Select Bibliography and Sources

- Arlett, M. & Lockett, D., *Great Western Steam in the West Country* (Yeovil, 1990)
 Harper, D., *Wilts & Somerset. A Railway Landscape* (Bath, 1987)
 Longstaff, J., *Notes on Wiltshire Names Vol I: Place Names in Wiltshire*
 Mann, J. De L., *The Cloth Industry in the West of England from 1640 to 1880* (Oxford, 1971)
 Ponting, K.G., ed, *Industrial Archaeology of Wiltshire* (Trowbridge, no date)
 Ponting, K.G., *Wool and Water* (Bradford-on-Avon, 1975)
 Pugh, R.B., ed, *Victoria County History of Wiltshire Vol VII* (1953)
 Rogers, K H., *Warp and Weft* (Buckingham, 1986)
 Rogers, K.H., *Wiltshire and Somerset Woollen Mills* (Edington, 1976)
 Vincent, M., *Through Countryside and Coalfield* (Oxford, 1990)
 Whitlock, R., *Wiltshire* (1976)
 Wiltshire, K., *Wiltshire Folklore* (Salisbury, 1975)
Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine (1928-42)

- In the possession of G. Holbrow
 Sale Details (1854)
 Price Lists
 Ledgers
 Rubber Recipe Books
 Cash Books
 Letters
 Photographs

- Wiltshire Record Office
 OS Plan (1901)
 Tithe Map (1841)
 Canal Plan (1775)
 Holbrow Deeds (1866-1956)
 Seventeenth-century Deeds - 1610; 1626; 1639
 Poor Rates (1741-55)
 Parochial Rates (1816-19)
 Land Tax Assessments (1780-1871)
 Census Returns (1841-91)

- Public Record Office
 Statement of Receipts and Payments (1845-50)
 Schedule of Deeds, Documents and Other Papers Relating to Property Purchased by WSW and GWR (1853)
 Wiltshire, Somerset and Weymouth Railway Plan

- Directories
 Kelly's Directories (1848-1939)

- Newspapers
 Bath Chronicle
 Wiltshire Independent
 Trowbridge Cllronics
 Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette
 Wiltshire Gazette