

YORKSHIRE CURIOSITIES



The Egyptian Mill

BEFORE the importation of cotton into this country, household items such as sheets and towels were made of linen. Its manufacture from flax was pioneered by a young and diligent Leeds draper called John Marshall. In 1782 at the age of 22 he bought a mill where he perfected his technique, going on to build his own mill in the Holbeck area of Leeds in 1791. He chose a site at the head of the Leeds-Liverpool canal for easy transport.

Business boomed and his son John joined in 1816 building a second mill with steam-powered machinery. Finally another son, James, took over and in 1840 built the curious Temple Mill in Marshall Street off Water Lane. It is quite different to its gloomy, multi-storey predecessors, those "dark, satanic mills" with their small windows and stifling noise and heat.

Instead we find a spacious, single-storey building with a cast-iron frame, large windows and a flat roof. Glass skylights lit the entire workspace and

ventilators maintained an even temperature inside. Finally, the roof was damp-proofed with tar and lime and insulated with a layer of earth. To consolidate it grass was sown and a flock of sheep was employed to keep it trimmed! The story of a spinner meeting an untimely end when a sheep plunged through one of the skylights may or may not be apocryphal.

Paradoxically, the exterior of this futuristic mill was adorned with the most ancient of artistic decoration. Its designer, Joseph Bonomi, had spent time in Egypt studying the architecture of the Pharaohs and adorned the building with Egyptian columns and motifs. The office block is a copy of the Temple of Horus at Edfu on the Nile and the now demolished chimney resembled Cleopatra's Needle.

This article has been adapted from the book "South and West Yorkshire Curiosities", by Duncan and Trevor Smith.