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THE ‘MAUSOLEUM’ OF JOHN LOMBE AT DERBY

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When I first joined Derby Museum in 1974, all the curatorial staff were expected to work a full Saturday in rotation at one or other of the City's Museums. The famous Derby Silk Mill had just opened as the Industrial Museum (now completely re-imagined as the Museum of Making and due to open this spring) and there was a smart new office on the ground floor for the curator which connected to the enquiry desk, where we did our penance. I can remember looking out of the window, where there was a miniscule island about ten yards away which consisted of some emaciated looking trees rising from scruffy boscaje

and a few old tumbled bricks, visible by the waterline. This water-girt oddity later disappeared forever when a storm in the Peak brought the River Derwent down in spate and carried most of it away in the late 1980s. About one tree survived at an insouciant angle, and that was eventually removed by the Environment Agency. What I had been gazing so blankly at on Saturdays for five years were the last shattered vestiges of the Little Byflatt, an island upon which local legend had it that the mill's founder, John Lombe had been interred.

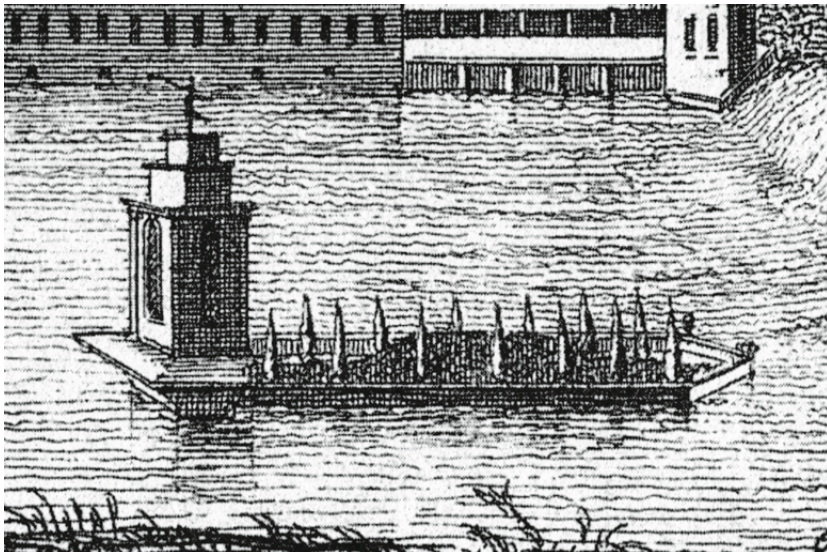


Fig. 1. The Little Byflatt, detail from S & N Buck, East Prospect of Derby 1728. (M. Craven)

The late Roy Christian was a meticulous historian who spent much of his post-war life lecturing on history, local and otherwise, to students at Derby and elsewhere.¹ He was forever researching to strengthen his material and to test the veracity of the secondary sources upon which much of the City's history was then retailed. He was especially good at teasing out information handed down by word of mouth, and would consume much time in an effort to test the veracity of what he heard, for he knew his often reluctant charges responded better when their history was embellished by quirky (or indeed slightly *risqué*) details. One such tale, told him in the 1940s, concerned John Lombe (1693–1722), the founder (with his half brother Sir Thomas and cousin William) of the Derby Silk Mill. This building is believed to have been the first true factory in Britain, in that all the processes of production were housed under one roof and driven by a common power source. The story was that John Lombe had been buried on an island in the Derwent opposite the mill itself. A mausoleum was clearly implicit in this asserveration. That there *was* a building, in a formal setting on an island there, is inescapable, for the East Prospect engravings of Samuel and Nathaniel Buck (1728) (Fig. 1) and Thomas Cox (1730) both illustrate it. It also appears on an anonymous East Prospect painting of similar date acquired by Derby Museums in 1999. Not only that, it appears to have been a building of some pretension.

The present writer used to send copies of Derby's Civic Society's *Newsletters* to the late Howard Colvin (at his request, one might add), and one of these included a short piece about this island with its strange structure, in which Roy Christian's story was repeated. This prompted Colvin to write back in his memorably miniscule, black, hand:

'...you mention a mausoleum on the Little Byflatt (Pan island) in the Derwent built in or soon after 1722. This would render it one of the very earliest mausolea in England to be created on what are

presumably unconsecrated grounds and certainly not a churchyard. The one at Castle Howard was not built until 1729 ... the site apparently on an island is remarkable: it was not until the 1770s ... that Jean-Jacques Rousseau was famously buried on an island in a lake in France: to think that he had been anticipated by 50 years by a silk manufacturer in Derby!'²

I consulted my original informant as to whether he had been able subsequently to find any supporting evidence for the assertion, expressed, apparently, as 'John Lombe was buried on the island in the Derwent.' His informant, in turn, had been a local solicitor whose ancestors had been practicing law in the town since the mid eighteenth century, but beyond that, he confessed that he had made no headway and indeed had put the matter firmly on the back burner.

The Lombe family were well-connected Norwich merchants, Henry Lombe (1659–1695) having been a worsted trader and mercer. He had married twice, his eldest son being (Sir) Thomas (1685–1739) and his second a King's Lynn merchant, Henry Lombe (1686–1723). John, born in June 1692, was the eldest son of the second marriage.³ He was apprenticed in about 1706 to Thomas Cotchett, a local barrister who had founded a silk mill on the edge of the Derwent in 1704, engineered by the enigmatic hydraulicist George Sorocold using water power from the Derwent and employing 'Dutch' throwing machines. Unfortunately, his system was neither producing well thrown silk nor making any money. However, John, who became Cotchett's assistant probably around 1710, seems to have become enthused by the possibility of producing good quality thread, and in the end, after the failure of Cotchett's venture for lack of consistent quality in 1713, he determined to travel to Piedmont, then part of the Duchy of Savoy, where the finest organzine was produced, and discover the true process. His progress in 1716–1717 and the subsequent history of the founding his mill (1718–1721) is known to us through the account of the historian William Hutton FSA (Scot), who was put to

work at the mill aged seven in 1731.⁴ Much cynicism has been exercised over his account of Lombe's successful efforts at industrial espionage, but much of the detail was confirmed by the research of Professor Claudio Zanier of the University of Pisa.⁵ George Sorocold was again the engineer; the architect is unknown but was perhaps his associate Thomas Steers.⁶ The cost was borne in thirds by John, his half brother Thomas (later Sir Thomas), and a second cousin, William, an exact contemporary of John and also a wealthy Norwich cloth merchant.⁷

John is said to have brought with him a number of Italians to work with him at the mill, and one of these apparently poisoned him, according to Hutton, out of vengeance for his having stolen their national secrets (as it were). As a consequence, he died on 16 or 20 November 1722 and was buried, according to the register of the church of All Saints' (now Derby Cathedral) on 20 or 28 November 1722.⁸

There is no record of a monument to Lombe in All Saints' and there never has been, despite Hutton telling us that the funeral 'was the most superb ever seen in Derby' with a procession extending back almost a mile.⁹ Indeed, John and Thomas Lombe had subscribed £26 5s to the fund for the rebuilding of the church in 1723.¹⁰ The old church was taken down and rebuilt in 1723–5 to the designs of James Gibbs, and was overseen by Francis Smith of Warwick.¹¹ There cannot therefore have been time to erect a monument, especially since, thanks to having subscribed, the family knew very well that the church was imminently to be replaced. Furthermore, monuments to be transferred to the new building were smashed or damaged in being removed from the old All Saints too, some of them incomplete and incongruously re-assembled.¹² Yet there is no mention of a monument to John after the church was rebuilt, though it would seem impossible to believe that there would not have been one, given the esteem in which Lombe was apparently held in the town. None of the surveys of the post-1725 monuments in All Saints mention one. It is most likely, of

course, that a monument *was* intended, but was not proceeded with – but why not?

It is possible that, instead of waiting for two years, it was decided to bury Lombe in his newly laid-out garden: an island in the Derwent called the Little Byflatt. After all, did such sepulchral embellishment in a garden not 'please the eye and evoke an appropriate sentiment'?¹³ But what evidence do we have for this island and its garden? In the wake of the death of John, his half-brother Henry arrived to take over the management of the mill on 7 December 1722. At the beginning of January 1723, Henry, ensconced in John's Mill House at the north end of the site, was able to visit and describe the island; his MS letter to Benjamin Willis is still in the Norfolk Archives at Norwich, although damaged and unreadable in parts.¹⁴

'[?on] a small long island my Bro[the]r ... had built the finest [?summer] house at one end of the island I ever saw with a fine long gravel walk from [?end to] end with the finest tall greens on each side in [?such a] butifull manner with fine grass walks on each side of the greens [?and] on each outer side a fine hedge cut out of greens and at that end opposite to the Summer [house] a fine place for a fountain, when all that's designed be finished it will be a most noble work'

Clearly, this little island paradise was not quite finished when John died: the surviving views reveal no fountain, suggesting that work must have stopped with his death despite Henry's good intentions. Indeed, the lease of the site (and the island), although agreed in principle for some time, was only finally signed the following year. It mentions the island 'and also by the flatt or little island in the middle of the Derwent over against the Goose Green and all buildings thereupon erected with free liberty for him the said Thomas Lombe his executors administrators and assigns to alter the said buildings ...'¹⁵ We have some visual evidence to couple with Henry Lombe's description. Foremost, there is an engraved 'East Prospect of Derby' of 1728, made by Samuel and Nathaniel Buck. In this, though, the

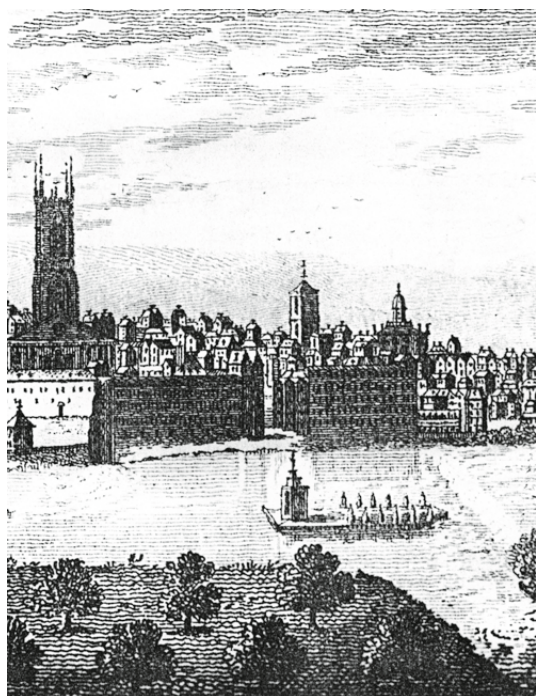


Fig. 2. The Little Byflatt as engraved for Thomas Cox's *Magna Britannia* (1730). (*M. Craven*)

island is without doubt drawn smaller than it actually was, and nearer the east bank (where was situated, according to the 1724 lease, Goose Green) for, had it been drawn to life, it would have obscured much of the northern ('Italian works') range of the Silk Mill itself. What we can determine, however, is that the island was kerbed around, with a cutwater at the north (up-stream) end, embellished with urns at the angles. The ground in the centre appears to have been made a little higher and it was edged with fourteen yews, arranged in pairs east-west and clipped as obelisks.

The 'summer house' at the downstream end, was an imposing square-planned structure of three stages, the lower one being relatively lofty, with pilasters at the angles supporting an entablature

and cornice, the east, south and (presumably) west faces each boasting a near full height round headed window with stone surround and embellished by a key-block, closely resembling in style, size and proportion those installed a year or so later in the nave of nearby All Saints.¹⁶ We must assume that the side facing north contained only a door and probably no window, to obviate the threat of inclement weather from that direction. The second and third stages seem to be quite plain, save for a little corning, the top one appearing as half the size of the second. On top, an enigmatic piece of (presumably) iron decoration – possibly a wind vane – which one would love to associate with the ironsmith Robert Bakewell, then living in Derby.¹⁷

The other contemporary engraving, that of Thomas Cox, published in 1730 (Fig. 2), is probably derived from the Bucks, and although the building appears roughly the same, including the ironwork (if such it was), there are only twelve yews arranged in pairs and an open area in front of the building with what looks like a circular parterre (the 'place for a fountain?') penetrated by a path.¹⁸ The third piece of visual evidence is a panorama, painted in oils, of the town from the east, purchased in 1999 by Derby Museum from Sotheby's. The date appears to be around 1730 again (Fig. 3). It depicts the island nearer its true size and position, whilst diminishing the height of the summer house. Other differences are also apparent: the fenestration appears rectangular with four rows of three panes each. The yews, less lofty, but still obelisk-like, are fourteen in number again, but there is no parterre and, as in Henry Lombe's letter, they are hedged around at the water's edge. Behind the island in this view can be seen Lombe's house by the weir, attached to the north end of the 'Old Shop', Cochet's timber framed mill of 1702–4, which appears almost white and was perhaps at this period rendered or painted. Mill House was hexagonal at its east end and looked out onto the island, as Henry Lombe made clear, for his letter was written in his brother's dining room,

an apartment built 'in 6 squares [hexagonal] with handsom sashed windows'.¹⁹

Of all three views, that by the Bucks may be judged the most reliable overall, even allowing for the diminution of the Byflatt to make the Silk Mill more visible.²⁰ From it, one can reasonably say that the Baroque summerhouse ranks as a building of uncommon interest. One might, indeed, wonder who designed this elegant oddity on its island; it looks at first glance almost Gibbsian, the lower stage calling to mind the second stages of some of his unrealized steeples.²¹ Of course, Gibbs may well have been on hand, assuming he actually came to Derby prior to designing All Saints, but then, so was Francis Smith, busy in the locality. Furthermore, Derby had one or two moderately competent architects of its own at this period, but although there were plenty of garden buildings in early Georgian Derby, especially the summer houses or boat houses that then lined the Derwent, neither their architects nor their builders are known. For instance, in the garden of Alderman Franceys' grand Baroque house in the Market Place (of 1694) there was a fish pond surrounded by a gilded wrought iron railing, a

'good-sized' summer house beyond, with a frescoed ceiling, all destroyed in the 1850s by encroachment and infill.²² There were also no fewer than eleven small brick riparian pavilions of various sizes at the end of the town house gardens depicted in the 1730 oil painting (and by the Bucks) that lined the west bank of the Derwent; mostly single-storeyed, with pyramidal sprocketed roofs, they demonstrate that the art of building attractive garden retreats flourished amongst the builders of Derby in the post-Restoration period and beyond.

Is there any evidence, then, that John Lombe was interred in his island summer house? The two years of upheaval at All Saints might suggest that some measure other than interment in the church could have been intended. Henry Lombe's letter of 1723 omitted any mention of his half-brother having been buried on the island, but it was written only six weeks after his death, and it is possible that he may have been embalmed and temporarily interred elsewhere. Henry, sent from Norwich as John's successor to run the Mill, suddenly shot himself at his Derby home less than six months after writing his relatively cheerful letter describing the garden.²³



Fig. 3. The Little Byflatt, from Derby Museums' anonymous oil painting of the east prospect of Derby, with the hexagonal angle of Mill House to the right at the end of the weir. (*Derby Museums Trust*)

No suggestion has yet emerged as to why this should be, except *post facto* we are told in his obituary that he was 'of a melancholy disposition'. Perhaps, if he had caused John to be interred on the island, this had caused a falling out with the authorities at All Saints; after all, it was part of All Saints' parish and only a stone's throw from the church. Perhaps it was a hint as to difficulties in that, although Henry lived in John's house in All Saints' parish, he was buried at St Michael's, the next nearest church to the north.

As Howard Colvin pointed out, no compromise with the practicalities of eighteenth century life was required in designing a mausoleum, and simple classical forms could be allowed full rein. He added that the earliest garden mausolea were 'simple rectangular structures, often of minimal architectural interest,'²⁴ though few if any had tall fenestration.

The last we hear about this enigmatic island is in 1732, from the local newspaper. An advertisement appeared, offering a reward of twenty shillings to anyone who might discover 'him or them who robbed the said gardens'. The details of this crime – 'gardens robbed of all wall Fruits, the trees much abused, and other damages done' – suggests that they were those directly attached to the silk mills, which appear, if sketchily, in the Bucks' engraving and as a green strip in the 1730 oil painting.²⁵ But the use of the plural could imply the Little Byflatt garden was affected too.

Had this miniature Elysium survived, we might know more, but at some stage before 1774, the date of a painting by Moses Griffith, the building had vanished entirely.²⁶ (Fig. 4) In the picture, the trees have grown up uncontrolledly, yet apparently still



Fig. 4. The Little Byflatt, denuded of buildings but retaining its cutwater and trees, as painted by Moses Griffith, 1774. Note the Old Shop (right of centre) and Mill House below the tower of All Saints. (*Derby Museums Trust*)

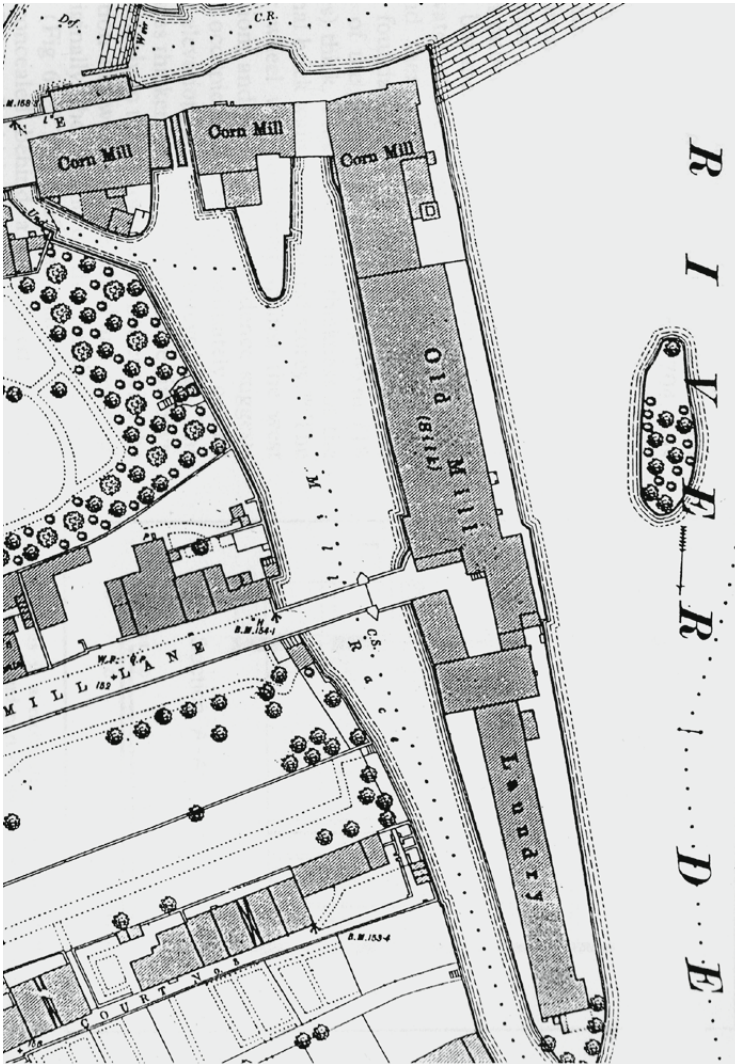


Fig. 5. 10ft. 1mile Map of the area showing the Little Byflatt (right) in 1883. (*Derby Local Studies Library*)



Fig. 6. The diminishing Little Byflatt: 25in. to 1 mile map of the area, 1901. (*M. Craven*)

in regimented rows, although the cutwater and associated kerbing was still in place on the north end. The destruction of the building can surely have been caused only by the Derwent in flood. The only likely event between 1723 and 1774 was the flood of December 1740, caused by the Derwent, being in full spate, backing up a sizable tributary that ran through the streets.

'On Tuesday last, we had the greatest inundation of water here that ever was known, occasioned by the falling of a great quantity of snow and rain, which began on Sunday, and continued (almost without intermission) till Tuesday morning, at which time several streets, and all the rooms upon the ground floor were laid a great depth under water. Great damage was done to the houses and furniture; several walls were thrown down; bridges and great quantities of wood carried away, and numbers of cattle swept from pastures perished.'²⁷

The Derwent was prone to flooding the town in this manner; a subsequent one of All Fools' Day 1841 had made an indelible impression on the philosopher Herbert Spencer, so much so, that he devised a

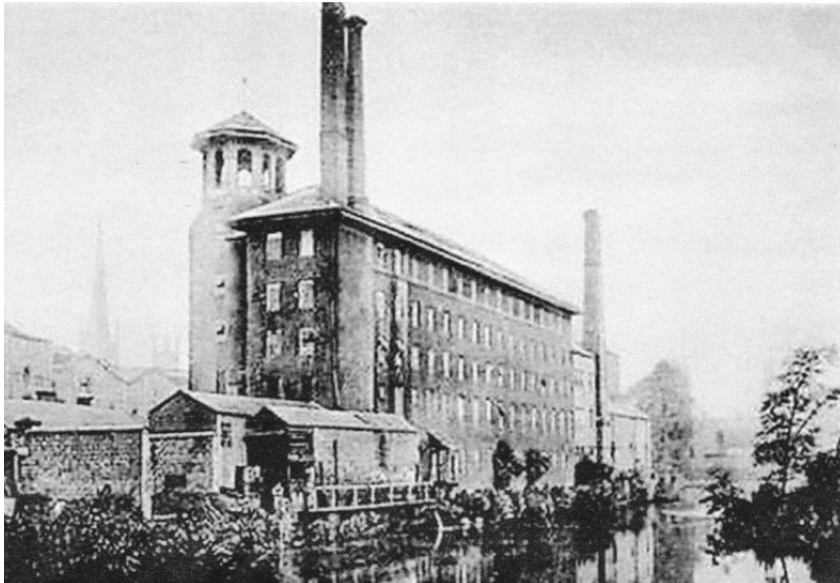


Fig. 7. Derby Silk Mill as it was before 1910, from a rather poor quality postcard, with the battered remains of the Little Byflatt visible on the extreme right. (*M. Craven*)

Fig. 8. A view of the Silk Mill, the old shop adjacent to the right and a very overgrown Little Byflatt, from the north, engraved by Thomas Swanwick 1819. (*Derby Local Studies Library*)



scheme to prevent a recurrence which, in the event, the City fathers turned down, only to be obliged to proceed with it posthumously in 1931, after the next catastrophic such event.²⁸ From there on, it was all downhill for the Little Byflatt, which appears as an increasingly amorphous blob on various maps of Derby, until its complete demise, during my time working at Derby Museum.²⁹ (Figs. 5 & 6) If it was indeed true that John Lombe was buried in his island summer house, his mortal remains, like those of Alaric, king of the Visigoths in the bed of the Busento, lie for eternity in an unknown, watery grave.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Roy Cloberry Christian MBE (1914–2006).
- 2 Letter dated 18/11/2006, over a decade after he had made these points in *Architecture and the Afterlife* (New Haven and London, 1991) pp. 328–329. Colvin was of course referring to the park at Ermenonville, where the philosopher was (initially) buried in the parkland of the Marquis de Girardin in 1778; the Princess of Wales' interment on an island at Althorp is but the latest manifestation of this conceit.
- 3 Parish registers, summarized in J. Hunter, *Familiae Minorum Gentium*, vol. III (1896) p. 1134; see now Oxford DNB entry on the Lombes, contributed by the author.
- 4 W. Hutton, *History of Derby* (1791), pp. 196–209. The mill's inaugural date is assumed to have been 1721, but an account by a member of the Lombe family from only a few decades later would suggest 1718: Norfolk Record Office, MC257/59/22.

- 5 A. Calladine 'Lombe's Mill: An Exercise in Reconstruction', *Industrial Archaeology Review* 16/1 (1993), p. 87 & n. 25.
- 6 Daniel Defoe, *A Journey Throughout the Whole Island of Great Britain* (London 1727), vol. III. p. 38.
- 7 W. Cunningham, *The Growth of English Industry & Commerce* (Cambridge 1907), Vol 2, Pt 1., p. 350; cf. John's will, proved 24 July 1724, PRO PROB 11/598.
- 8 The dates in [brackets] refer to those given in the endorsement of his will, which I am rather inclined to prefer.
- 9 Funeral: S. & D. Lysons, *Magna Britannia*, vol. V: *Derbyshire* (London 1817) p. 105 & (quoting Hutton) n. l.
- 10 They probably subscribed some time before John died; the list's date is that of its completion: J.C. Cox & W.H. St. John Hope, *The Chronicles of the Collegiate Church of All Saints, Derby* (London & Derby 1881), p. 77.
- 11 See, most recently, M. Craven, 'James Gibbs's Derby Connection', *Georgian Group Journal* 27 (2019), pp. 113–118.
- 12 As that to Mrs. Allestrey 1638: M. Craven, 'Beautifull Dust', *Derbyshire Archaeological Society Newsletter* Dec. 2020, pp. 26–29. Note Hutton (1791) p. 151: '...a few of the ancient monuments were preserved or replaced'. Post 1725 monumental inscriptions, in R. Simpson, *History and Antiquities of Derby*, vol. 2 (Derby 1826), pp. 340–353; S. Glover S., *History of Derbyshire* 2nd edn. (1831/1833), vol. 2. pp. 490ff.
- 13 Colvin, *Architecture and the Afterlife*, p. 329
- 14 Norfolk RO, MC257/59/20, dated 4 January 1723.
- 15 Derby Local Studies Library DB/32/44: lease for 79 years dated 20 August 1724 between the Mayor and Burgesses of Derby and (Sir) Thomas Lombe: rent £7 10s 0d *per annum*.
- 16 We have to take on trust my assumption that these windows were present on the west side, too.
- 17 Bakewell certainly made the impressive double gates with ornamental overthrow for Thomas Lombe. They bear Sir Thomas's monogram topped by his heraldic crest and, in being restored early in 2020, the smith's initials RB were found on a bar upright, his usual method of signing his work: E.J. Saunders, *A Biographical Dictionary of English Wrought Iron Smiths of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Walpole Society, vol. 67, 2005), pp. 252–6.
- 18 Thomas Cox, *Magna Britannia et Hibernia, Antiqua et Nova* (London 1720–1731), vol. 5 frontispiece.
- 19 Norfolk RO *loc.cit.*
- 20 R. Hyde, *A Prospect of Britain* (London 1994) pp. 29–32.
- 21 For example, plates XI & XXX in James Gibbs' *Book of Architecture* (London 1728).
- 22 E. Bradbury & R. Keene, *All About Derbyshire* (Derby 1884) pp. 34–35.
- 23 Obituary. *Nottingham Mercury* 20/6/1723
- 24 Colvin, *Architecture and the Afterlife*, p. 333.
- 25 *Derby Mercury* 31 August 1732.
- 26 In the collections of Derby Museums.
- 27 *Derby Mercury* 19–23 December 1740.
- 28 'On the Derby flood of April 1841', *Civil Engineer and Architect's Journal*, 6 (October 1843) The flood of 1931 took place on 21–22 May: *Derby Daily Telegraph* 23 May 1931, *passim*.
- 29 In spring 2021 the rebuilt Silk Mill is scheduled to re-open as the Museum of Making following a National Lottery Heritage Fund grant of upwards of £13,000,000.