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Pawsons Warehouse, Skeldergate, York

An Insight Report

By Kate Fletcher

In 1970 demolition took place to remove the final part of a riverside warehouse on Skeldergate, which had occupied that site since 1719. Described by Drake (Drake 1736, 266) as 'noble vaults built in [Skeldergate] by the late Mr Pawson wine merchant; whose father and grandfather were of the same business'. The property past out of the Pawson family in 1760, changing hands several more times until one vault was demolished to be replaced by flour mills in the first half of 19th Century, the next two vaults came down in 1920 and as mentioned the final one in 1970.

A proposed major development in the area led to an archaeological investigation being carried out in 1972 by York Archaeological Trust (YAT) with pottery found at the site showing that there had been some industrial activity in this area. In 1982 this pottery was studied and revealed the history of the location pre-Pawsons. The pottery was identified as moulds and collecting jars associated with sugar refining. Around 132 red earthen ware sugar loaf moulds varying from 17-44cm in diameter at the rim, with a smooth interior, either with or without a white slipped finish and about 65 syrup collecting jars in several sizes. Again red earthenware, with heavy rolled rims and ring footed bases, internally covered with a lead glaze, yellow, green or brown in colour. These pots have been dated from late 17^h century to the early 18th century. The inclusion of wasters amongst the pot sherds has lead to the conclusion that these were probably locally made (Brooks 1983, 4). A follow up excavation by YAT in 1983 uncovered a furnace and rooms containing lime and white clay; both known ingredients of the sugar refining process.

While never a great manufacturing centre York has been home of some specialised industries, although the early ones were relatively small scale. In the late 17th century a sugar refinery was briefly in business near the waterfront on Skeldergate, where partially processed imported sugar could be offloaded. The archaeological evidence for the industry is the distinctively shaped remains of pottery moulds for sugar loaves and jars for collecting syrup. (Hall 1996, 94)



Figure 1: Skeldergate mould and jar fragments
(©York Archaeological Trust)

The first English sugar refinery had been established in London in 1544 by Cornelius Bussine, from Antwerp. Initially English sugar refineries suffered due to pressure and competition from the Netherlands, until Henry VIII's government established a monopoly. By 1650, 50 other refineries had come in to existence with the majority in London and by 1750 the number had risen to 120. 'With the development of the English colonies in the West Indies in the mid 17th century, and the exporting of raw sugars, the British refining industry went through a period of considerable expansion. London merchants could not restrain provincial merchants from participating in the new enterprises' (Brooks 1983,11).

In his research independent historian Bryan Mawer, who has written extensively on Sugar houses, has so far only uncovered one other sugar refinery close to York operating around the time of the York refinery. The Trippet site in Hull is believed to be in operation from 1658-1673 but as yet there is virtually nothing known about this business other than it existed.

Sugar cane itself originated around New Guinea and spread through India, to Persia and the Arab world, with sugar in England first being mentioned when in 735 the Anglo-Saxon monk and scholar the Venerable Bede bequeathed the contents of his spice cabinet containing a small amount of sugar to his monastery in Northumberland. It would take the returning crusaders in 1099 to bring the 'discovery' of sugar to the majority of western Europeans, when they returned to their native countries with tales of the new spices including sugar which they had experienced. Originally sugar was seen as a spice and medicinal ingredient, rather than a sweetener, and was an expensive luxury for only the aristocracy. That, however, was to soon change.

Having developed from a rarity to a luxury, events took place that would further change its status from a luxury to a necessity. The European consumption of sugar skyrocketed over the next few centuries, especially in England... between 1660 and 1775, English consumption of sugar increased 20 times. The expansion of sugar use in the Western world coincided with that of bitter, heated tropical beverages. The spread of tea, coffee, chocolate, and other sugared ingestible since the 17th century was one of the most important economic and cultural phenomena of the early modern world. (Meide 2003,1)

When it comes to refining sugar, the method of taking the raw sugar cane to its brown muscovado syrup form before being transformed into useable crystals was developed by the Arab world and then filtered to Europe 'through the trade routes via Venice and through Arab possessions in Spain' (Stiles 1969,1).

The earliest archaeological source for sugar pottery is an Iranian refinery dating from the end 12th century or early 13th century and the first written reference to the

manufacture of sugar loaves is from Ibn-el- Awam, who wrote in Spain in the mid-12th century but drew heavily on earlier works. He refers to boiled sugar being put into 'receptacles, forms, or vases made of clay of a peculiar shape, or conical' (Brooks 1983, 8).

At the time of the York refinery England's chief supply came from the West Indies, with British interest beginning with the development of plantations in the Caribbean from the 17th century onwards. The sugar cane was cultivated and harvested, then crushed using a roller device to extract the juice which would then be clarified by the addition of substances such as lime, egg white and vinegar before moving to the boiling pans,

each smaller and hotter than the last, with constant skimming and evaporation, (the juice) would turn into a dark brown, thick, ropey mass. One gallon of juice typically boiled down into one pound of muscovado sugar. At the point of crystallization ...the boiler....dampened the fire and ladled the taffy-like substance into a cooling cistern. (Meide 2003,13)

After cooling, the sugar was packed into moulds and allowed to drain. Moulds had a hole at the bottom, normally plugged for 48 hours to allow the sugar to set into a combination of crystals and molasses; the moulds were then placed on jars and unplugged allowing the molasses to drip out. The molasses was further refined or used in the alcohol industry in distilling. The archeological finds from Skeldergate are examples of these moulds and jars.



Figure 2: Drawing of complete mould and jar (Mawer after Brooks)

In 1685 an Act of Parliament put an end to sugar refining in the colonies as the duty on importing refined sugar into England was four times greater than importing brown sugar, this meant it was more economical to do the bulk of the refining back in England.

The sugar arriving in Britain varied in quality, depending on the degree of primary processing. Once unpacked and sorted, it was refined again to produce the qualities of sugar required by the customers. Water was added, and the process of boiling was repeated... Conical moulds of different sizes and syrup-collecting jars were used to produce loaves, as before... To whiten and

purify the sugar fine white clay and water was poured onto the sugar loaves in their moulds and the water slowly carried away more of the molasses, often repeated several times then dried the sugar loaves were removed from the moulds and dried out. The loaves were placed on shelves in a dome-shaped room which was heated by burning charcoal. (Brooks 1983,9)

An ideal factory for sugar refining was a lofty building with small windows and several storeys. Largely constructed in iron, stone and brick due to the flammable nature of sugar. Mawer speculates that 'just 11m would have been enough for a small sugarhouse including dwelling space' (Mawer, online) and surmises that as the later wine vaults and the earlier sugar refinery had different requirements that if the sugar refinery wasn't fully demolished to make way for the 'noble vaults' then it was totally remodelled, both inside and out.



Figure 3: 1718 – Etching by Tancred Robinson believed to show the Skeldergate sugar refinery (5 pointed warehouses, with several storeys and small windows).

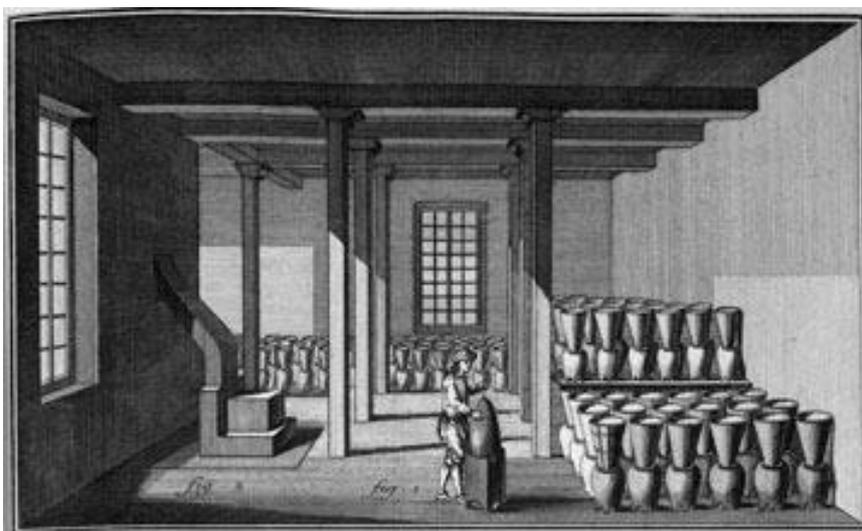


Figure 4: Engraving of interior of boiling house with sugar pots. From Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, 1762, Reference *affinerie_des_sucres*, as shown on www.slaveryimages.org, sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library. Courtesy of authors Jerome S Handler and Michael L Tuite Jr.



Figure 5: Photo showing the last remaining Dutch gabled vault of the Pawson warehouse – possibly 1950's – shows difference in style when compared to Robinsons etching (©York Archaeological Trust)

The registry of Freeman of the City of York lists only one sugar baker (refiner), John Taylor. Braithwaite (1955, 570) tells us that 'John Taylor of Barbados, a man of energy, settled in York as a sugar refiner in 1676'. Indeed John Taylor himself tells in his memoirs how he 'travelled on for York...I did intend to come to the city and set up the trade for refining of sugar'. (Taylor 1710, 39)

Conclusive evidence that it was Taylor who set up the Skeldergate refinery is seen in the 'Abstract of Title Deeds relating to the Estates of Mr William Pawson situated in the City of York...' uncovered by Mawer at York City Archives. This document refers to the Skeldergate property 'as to a house and premes near the Crane' and notes the 1680 acquisition of the premises by Edward Nightingale, followed by Taylor taking ownership in 1681.

John Taylor was not a native of York and his father is mentioned as living in Huntingdonshire (Taylor 1710,21). In 1656, at around 18 years old, Taylor was converted by Quaker founder George Fox and set out to preach, initially in the west of England but soon he decided to travel abroad as a missionary; first to New England, then on to other parts of America and finally Barbados. His memoir documents his numerous travels, including shipwrecks, imprisonment and pirates. Unfortunately other than the previous quote regarding his intention to set up as a sugar refiner in York and the statement that in 1680 'I came down to York with my wife and Family, and set up the Trade of refining Sugar as aforesaid' (Taylor 1710, 39) there is no more on the subject, excepting a comment stating some of his preachings were in the great sugar mill houses in Barbados.

In 1661 whilst back in London Taylor was caught up in the puritan Fifth Monarchy men disturbances. As non-conformists Quakers and the Fifth Monarchy men were initially similarly treated, with new king Charles II outlawing meetings. Taylor, along with 300 other Quakers was briefly imprisoned in Newgate and it was here he met his future wife Frances Rither. Frances' parents lived in York, which explains why Taylor finally settled here, and

it was in York that they married in 1663. In 1676, after a few more years of travels to America and the West Indies, Taylor made the decision to set himself up in business in York as a sugar refiner.

John Taylor's travels to Barbados would have made him aware of the sugar industry. It is unclear though whether he was aware of other sugar refineries in England. In York he asked fellow Quaker Edward Nightingale to find a suitable location and, as shown by Pawson's deeds, Nightingale acquired the Skeldergate property from William Ramsden, which Taylor took over fully in 1681. This was an ideal location not only on the waterfront but situated next to the Crane tower used to unload ships.

Initially Taylor refused to take the oath to become a Freeman of the city, a necessary requirement for anyone wanting to trade in the city, and in 1681 he was fined £140 'for the privilege of trading in the city' 'in regard he refuse to swear' (Scott 1991,24). This sum was soon reduced to £100 and he was given operating rights on one of the cranes on the Kings Staithes. 'John Taylor became the first, and only, cane sugar refiner in the history of York' (Mawer online).

Taylor became hugely involved in the Quaker movement in York as well as still preaching all over England. Mawer has uncovered a reference to 'William Simpson of the City of Yorke sugar baker and his wife Grace' and wonders if he could have run the business during Taylors many absences due to his preaching.

Taylor's wife Frances died in 1696 and in 1698 Taylor married Elizabeth Goddard, of Houndsditch, London (sister in law to prominent Quaker George Whitehead.) Taylor himself died in 1709 and it is unclear if the sugar refinery continued between his death and Mr. Pawson acquiring the property in 1719. Taylor's eldest son appears to have died before him as his will (Borthwick Institute, accessed by Mawer) has his second son Isaac as the beneficiary). Isaac Taylor is listed as a Merchant Taylor in the Freeman of York registry and may not have followed in his father's footsteps. Isaac must have died prior to 1719 as it is his niece, (and John Taylor's granddaughter) Frances (married to Samuel Falconer), who sold the property to Pawson thereby bringing to an end sugar refining at Skeldergate.



Figure 6: Sugar mould and Jar along with finished cone of refined sugar (Liverpool Museum)

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