

## **Pawson's Warehouse- Skeldergate**

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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 (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 passed 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 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 discovered to be 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<sup>th</sup> C –early 18<sup>th</sup> C. The inclusion of wasters amongst the pot sherds have given the conclusion that these were probably locally made (Brooks 1983,4). A follow up excavation 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 17<sup>th</sup> C 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).



*Skeldergate mould and jar fragments (YAT)*

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, (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 and that is the Trippet site in Hull, 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. Though 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. However that 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 it's brown muscovado syrup form before being transformed into useable crystals was developed by the

Arab world, these methods 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 of 12thC or early 13<sup>th</sup> C. and the first written reference to the manufacture of sugar loaves comes 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 for 17<sup>th</sup> C onwards. The sugar cane was cultivated and harvested then crushed using a roller device to extract the juice, which would make its way to be clarified with 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. The moulds had a hole at the bottom, normally plugged for 48 hours allowing the sugar to set into a combination of crystals and molasses, the moulds were then placed on jars and then 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.

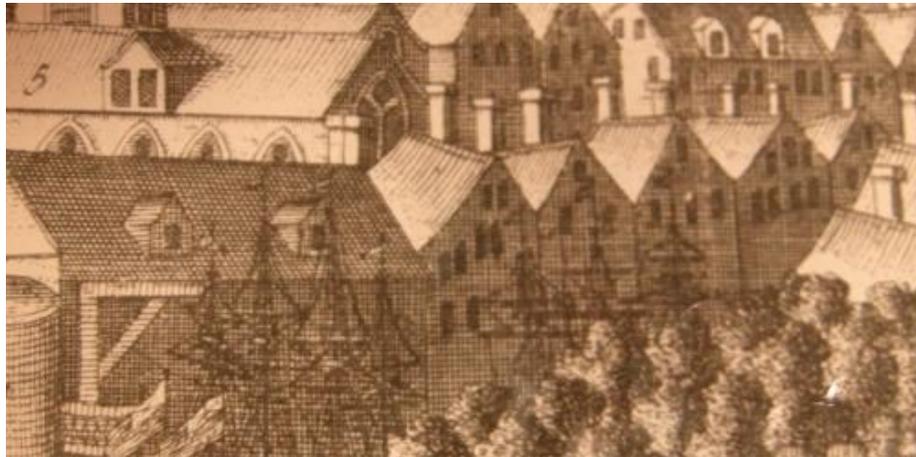


*Drawing of complete mould and jar (Mawer after Brooks – YAT)*

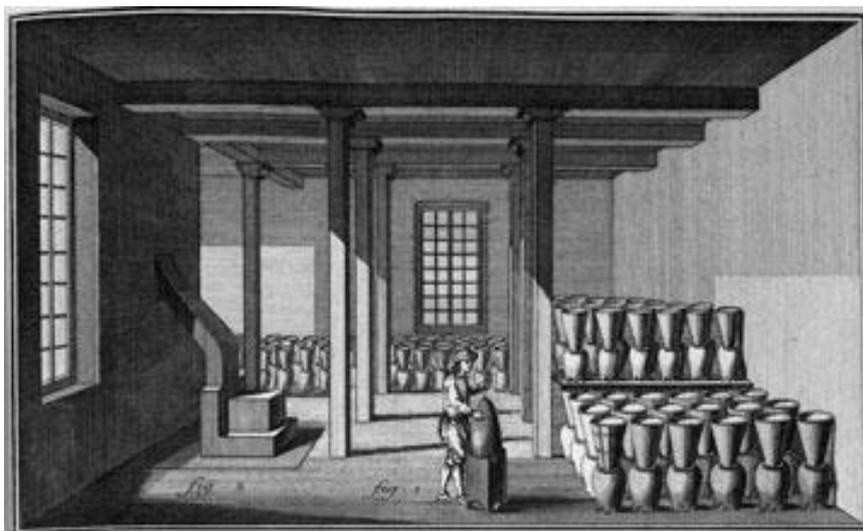
In 1685 an Act of Parliament put an end to sugar refining in the colonies as the duty on importing refined sugar into England was 4 times greater than importing brown sugar, this meant it was more economical to do the bulk of the refining back in England.

'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. Mawar speculates that 'just 11m would have been enough for a small sugarhouse including dwelling space' (Mawar –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 remodeled, both inside and out.



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



*Engraving of interior of boiling house with sugar pots. From Diderot's Encyclopédie, 1762, Reference [affinerie\\_des\\_sucres](#), as shown on [www.slaveryimages.org](http://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.*



*Photo showing the last remaining Dutch gabled vault of the Pawson warehouse –possibly 1950's – shows difference in style when compared to Robinsons etching (YAT)*

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

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 Mawar 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.

Not a native of York, (his Father in mentioned as living in Huntingdonshire –Taylor 1710,21), John Taylor was converted by Quaker founder George Fox in 1656, when he was around 18, and set out initially to preach in the West of England but soon decided to travel abroad as a missionary. Travelling 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. Though 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, except a comment stating some of his preaching's 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 treated similarly, 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 in 1663 that they married. Following a few more years of travels to America and the West Indies in 1676 Taylor made the decision to set himself up in business in York as a sugar refiner.

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. He asked York Quaker Edward Nightingale to find a suitable location and as shown by Pawson's deeds Nightingale acquired the Skeldergate property from William Ramsden, with Taylor fully taking it over in 1681. This was an ideal location not only on the waterfront but situated next to the Crane tower, which was 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 when Pawson acquired the property in 1719. Taylor's eldest son appears to have predeceased him leaving his second son Isaac to inherit (John Taylor's will, Borthwick Institute –accessed by Mawer), Isaac though is listed as a Merchant Taylor in the Freeman of York registry which suggests that he hadn't followed in his father's footsteps. Isaac himself must have died prior to 1719 as it is his niece, (John Taylors granddaughter) Frances (married to Samuel Falconer), who sold the property on to Pawson thereby bringing to an end sugar refining at Skeldergate.



*Sugar mould and Jar along with finished cone of refined sugar (Liverpool Museum)*

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### **Website**

Independent historian Bryan Mawer's extensive "Sugar Refiners and Sugar Bakers Database." (Accessed 13/04/16)  
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