

Beyond the Grain: revisiting the Belmont Mills Archive at MU Library

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Photograph of Belmont Mills courtesy of the National Built Heritage Service

Introduction

As part of routine work in our Special Collections and Archives Department last year, I revisited one of our lesser known collections at Maynooth University Library, the Belmont Mills Archive (IE/MU/PP17). Donated back in 2015, this fascinating collection relates to the lives and business interests of the Perry family at Belmont, Lisderg, County Offaly, their family, friends, and community, over the course of a century. Belmont Mills was built on the site of an earlier mill structure and is located in the village of Belmont. A handsome, two-storey, castellated country house, Belmont House was built around 1810 and is situated on a prominent site overlooking the mills. The house and mills formed part of the Belmont (or Bellmount) Estate, purchased by the Perry family in 1859 from Captain John Collins for the sum of £3275. The Perrys were a Quaker family originating in Shanderry near Mountmellick, County Laois, with strong connections in both business and transportation. Under the ownership of the family, Belmont Mills was to become one of the largest flour and oatmeal mills in the midlands.



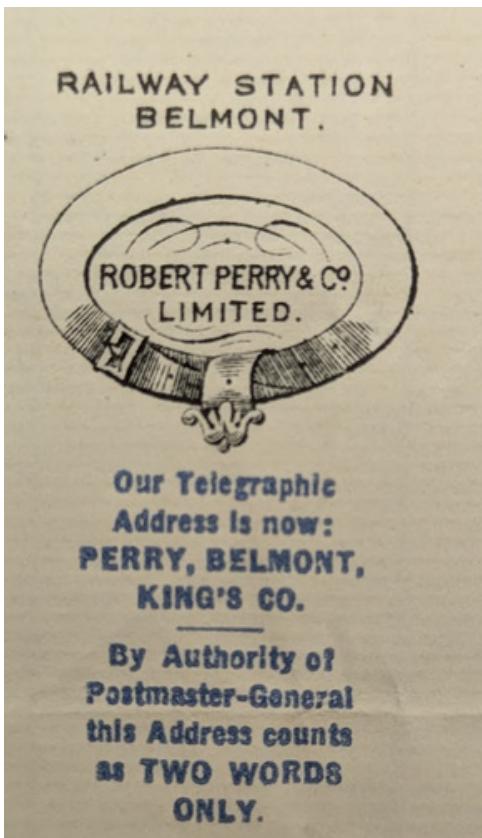
Photograph of Belmont House courtesy of the National Built Heritage Service

Evolution of the Family Business

The family's milling legacy began in Clara, County Offaly. A lease was taken on the Street Mill by Henry Robert Perry who formed the company Robert Perry & Co. in the mid-1800s, naming it after his father Robert. By 1865, the Clara mills were operated by Marcus Goodbody (a Quaker who married into the Perry family), and so the mills at Belmont became known as Belmont Mills or Perry's Mills. Thomas Perry, brother of Henry Robert, ran the mill in the 1860s, taking ownership of it completely in 1878. Many changes followed, including the use of roller mills, and the conversion of unused mill buildings into an oat mill and a granary. Business flourished during this period of transformation, helped by good transport links including the Grand Canal and the Clara-Banagher railway which facilitated distribution.

Belmont Mills experienced several fires in the years that followed, including the year 1879, resulting in a period of rebuilding and modernisation. The business was restructured in 1893 becoming Robert Perry & Co. Ltd. After the death of Thomas Perry, his son Ernest became the new owner of the mills in 1900.

Developments between 1906 and 1909 included a new maize mill for animal feed and a turbine to provide electricity to the mills and the village of Belmont itself. In 1924, Ernest's death led to his brother Wilfred Perry inheriting the mills. A year later the business suffered another fire, destroying the flour and maize mills. Another period of rebuilding took place, and the mills reopened in 1928 under another new name, Robert Perry & Co. (1927) Ltd. It produced wheatmeal, oatmeal, flaked oatmeal, and flaked maize. Wilfred's son Philip took over the business until his own death in 1967 when it passed to his wife, and then their son David (Perry) in 1980. Another fire engulfed Belmont Mills in 1982, but on this occasion, it was demolished apart from the granary. A hydro-power station was installed at the site to generate electricity for the national grid. The maize mill granary continued to produce animal feed until 1997 when the business was finally sold.



Detail from the Belmont Mills Archive

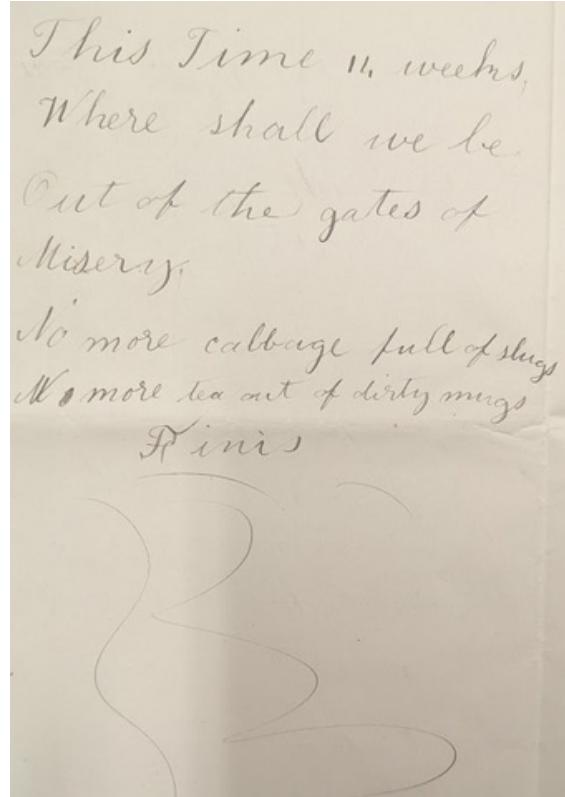
The Belmont Mills Archive

Education and Domestic Life:

The Belmont Mills Archive sheds light on individual family members, including Harriet St. Lawrence Perry (née Drevar) (1840-1924), her husband Thomas Henry Perry (d. 1900), and their children and grandchildren. Other branches of the family tree are also represented in the collection, including the Drevar and Edmonds families. The letters address a range of different subjects, including leisure; education; travel; household management; festive celebrations; farming; births and deaths; and operations at Belmont Mills. Education is a common theme in the correspondence.

A series of letters from Ernest Perry to his mother Harriet during his time at boarding school at Chesterfield, Parsonstown in Birr, County Offaly, capture the young boy's frustration at being separated from his family.

He refers to his 'unkind and cold hearted' family for not having visited him, and notes 'This time 14 weeks where we shall be out of the gates of misery, no more cabbage full of slugs, no more tea out of dusty mugs' (11 September 1881). Not all experiences of education are negative, however, with a letter from Ernest's sister May (Elizabeth Marion Perry) to their mother Harriet discussing her school in England, stating 'I know you and Father wish me to stay here so I will do my best and will look forward next summer to going home an accomplished young lady!!' (16 January 1883).



Extract from Ernest's letter about school, 11 September 1881

Domestic affairs at Belmont are richly documented in the archive. Mildred Perry's letter to her mother Harriet details cutting material for 'the little Duchess chair...there is a good big piece of the material over, enough to make two cushions' (9 December 1904). Wilfred Perry informs his mother of the death of a beloved pet, stating 'poor old Carlew was found dead in the paddock yesterday afternoon, he seemed to have died without a struggle of any sort' (20 April 1914). Ernest playfully recounts maintenance works at Belmont, noting 'it was a good job you were not at home when the plumbers were here...you would have been in a terrible state at seeing the place in such a mess' (30 November 1900). Christmas preparations are also addressed, with Mildred Perry describing making 'two wreaths of holly yesterday...Kathy was busy at them too...household arrangements go on all night' (23 December 1904), and the gifts she received, including 'a gold locket with a pearl device' from Ernest (29 December 1904).



Selection of items from the Belmont Mills Archives

Travel and Connections Overseas

Travel plans feature prominently in the family's letters with destinations including Dublin, Donegal, Cambridge, Manchester, Tenerife, Brussels, and South Africa. After Thomas Perry's death in 1900, his widow Harriet frequently visited their daughter May, her husband Walter Edmonds, and their children in Cape Colony, South Africa. The archive contains letters from May, Walter, and the children writing home to their beloved Harriet, with deep affection captured throughout the correspondence. A letter from Harriet's granddaughter, Mildred (Edmonds), refers to enclosing a pair of mittens, noting 'Jens and I each knitted one, I hope they will be nice and warm for you, it is such nice soft wool' (19 December 1915) and another letter from Mildred's sister Harriet refers to planting snowdrops originally from the garden at Belmont (11 February 1918). The Edmonds family lived on a 6000-acre farm at Komgha with livestock including cattle, sheep, and pigs. This section of the archive provides valuable insights into the daily lives of Irish immigrants in South Africa and their connections to family back home in Ireland. May's letters vividly describe her new life: hatching guinea fowl chicks, making marmalade, the births of her children, sheep thefts, hunting and fishing, health issues, her garden, and their Irish maid 'Kitty' from Sligo.

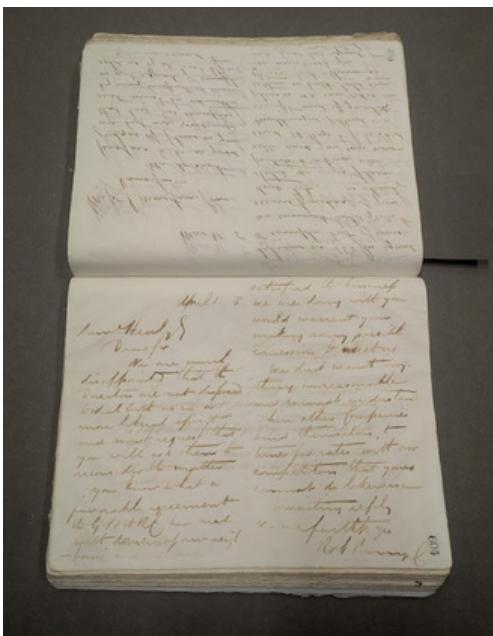
Of particular interest are the references to regional unrest in the documents. William Drevar's letter to Harriet Perry discusses the South African War (1899-1902) expressing relief that May and Walter were unaffected. William observes 'it is a most terrible war that is raging in Natal and the North of the Cape Colony; and as usual at the commencement of a war the English have made a mess of it; but the great number of troops England is pouring in now must soon bring it to an end' (15 January 1900).



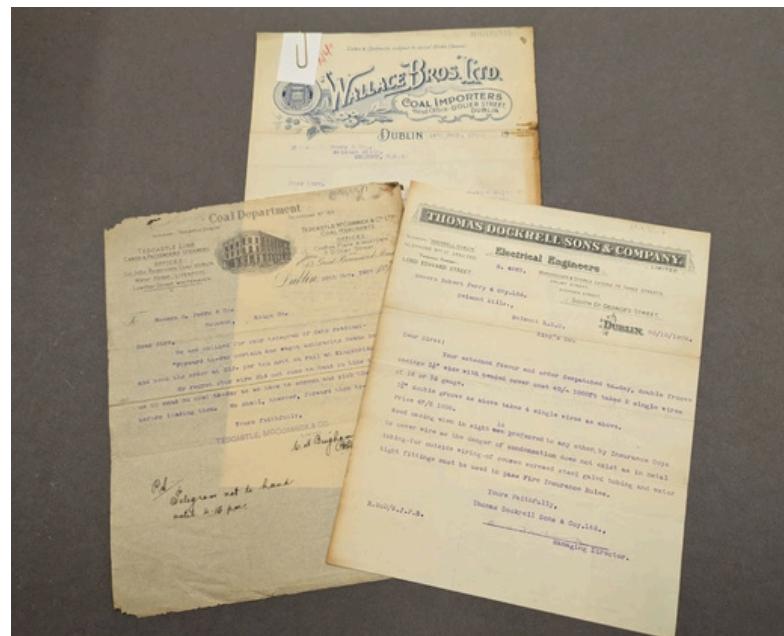
Stanford's New Map of the Orange Free State, the South African Republic, the Northern Frontier of Cape Colony, Natal etc. 1900 (courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Business at Belmont Mills

The archive also contains an extensive collection of documents relating to the administration and operations of Robert Perry & Sons Ltd, Belmont Mills. This includes letters, account books, order books, labourers' books, cash books, wage books, and employee records. Detailed letters from customers, suppliers, transport companies, government departments, banks, and solicitors record the daily business transactions taking place at the mills from the mid nineteenth century up until the doors finally closed in 1997.



Receipt book



Selection of Invoices

A series of letters from Merchants Warehouse Company, Burgh Quay Dublin, to Belmont Mills (1907-1911) detail grain storage contracts, delays in wheat shipments, and the weighing of grain. Correspondence from the Dublin and Provincial Corn Millers Association to Messrs Perry & Co., Belmont Mills (1907-1910), addresses the withdrawal of Belmont Mills from the Association, noting 'I showed your letter to several millers & it was felt that the withdrawal might lead to similar action by other members & might possibly bring about a total disruption' (5 April 1910). Other information can be gleaned from a series of letters from the Tedcastle Line Cargo & Passengers Steamers (1907-1909) regarding settling accounts, a contract for delivery of coal to Belmont Mills, the shipment of wheat to Liverpool, insurance of goods, and additional charges for 'the use of the Liverpool Dock Board Warehouse crane, which landed the grain alongside the ship' (29 April 1911).

The effects of war on the milling industry are also documented, in particular the increased cost of 'War Risk' insurance due to new risks of attacks on British shipments. One letter notes 'owing to the report last week of the depredations of the German Cruiser 'Karlsruhe' it has become exceedingly difficult to get underwriters to entertain fresh risks' (26 October 1914). New milling developments are explored in correspondence from various companies. These include a letter from Comet Chemical & Co. Ltd. in Manchester, discussing a new chemical product, noting 'Wheat Diastase...has a bleaching effect upon the flour when used in bread making' (10 May 1909). The electrification of Belmont Mills is mentioned in the archive, in a letter from Walsall Electrical Co. Ltd. which refers to a successful test conducted on the 'electric lighting installation' at Belmont Mills (1 March 1910). Transportation is also covered in the collection, with correspondence and certificates relating to the purchase, maintenance, and insurance of the vehicles used by the business from 1912 to 1937.

Legal and Employee Records

Legal records in the collection, dating from 1901 to 1979, include correspondence from various solicitors. A letter from Richard F. Barry LLB, Crown Solicitor, details a case of 'Belmont Mills v Cleary,' reporting that 'the defendant's mother...attended at the auction and eventually brought in the pony, cart and harness...to cover your debt and his expenses' (30 November 1909). Legal proceedings against Belmont Mills are also outlined in a letter from Patrick S. Golding, Solicitor, concerning an 'unlawful seizure...your Bailiffs walked into my clients shed and seized a cow [from] his property and took it away' (30 Nov 1901).

Employee records from 1907 to 1956 capture important information about the people who worked in the mills and their terms and conditions. Documents include job applications, employee compensation claims, and employee health insurance records. A poignant document in this part of the archive refers to a tragic death. The letter from Beatrice Le Strange, Killygally House, Belmont, King's Co, addressed to 'Maude', refers to the death of Margaret Davery, noting she 'was drowned when the ocean liner ship Titanic sank at sea on its voyage from Queenstown to New York.' She remarks how Miss Davery had intended to visit her brother and find employment in America (29 April 1912). The issue of workers' wages is addressed in the archive, with notices from the Labour Court: Provender Milling Joint Labour Committee, Dublin, referring to increases in wages for workers 'employed in the manufacture for sale of animal feeding stuffs by any process whatsoever, including the grinding, cutting or flaking of cereals of one substance with another substance', outlining also the specific hourly rates for male and female workers based on age and geographical area (1961-1971).

Conclusion

The Belmont Mills Archive is a fascinating and richly descriptive collection that reflects the lives of members of the Perry, Drevar, and Edmonds families and their domestic, social, and business activities over the course of a century. They shed light on important historical, industrial, and social developments in Ireland and overseas during a time of great change. Further collections of archival material relating to the Perry family and their milling business at Belmont Mills can also be found at Offaly County Archives Service (IE OCAS P68 Records of Robert Perry & Co. (Belmont Mills)), and the National Archives of Ireland (IE NAI BRS OFF/9 Business Records Survey of Perry's Mills).

For further information on the Belmont Mills Archive please feel free to contact us:
library.specialcollections@mu.ie

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Related Material:

IE OCAS P68 Records of Robert Perry & Co. (Belmont Mills), Offaly County Archives Service

IE BRS OFF/9 Business Records Survey, Perry's Mills, National Archives of Ireland