Edge runners in Walworth

by Brenda Innes

In 1979 Mr. Schimmer of Brome & Schimmer contacted me because his Company had some old equipment he thought might interest GLIAS. The equipment proved to be no less than eight pairs of edge runners that had been used in the processing of botanical materials. The GLIAS group that visited 8/9 Colworth Grove, off the Walworth Road, were not only impressed by these machines, but found the whole works far more romantic than the usual IA site because of its galaxy of aromas from the exotic herbs and spices stored, although no longer processed, there. Unfortunately, the readers of this report will have to make do with words and pictures!

Brome & Schimmer, still very much alive in new premises in Hampshire, is a contemporary representative of one of London's traditional industries: the preparation of medicines, food flavourings and spices; it is, however, a comparative newcomer dating back only to 1922. Their predecessors – John Wylde Ltd., Grinder to the Drug Trade – from whom Brome & Schimmer had bought the premises in 1971, had been at Colworth Grove for a century and had origins even further back. In the 1790s an apothecary in St. Paul's Churchyard marketed a very useful 'line': Thomas Keating's name was still a household word at the beginning of this century, albeit a word usually spoken in a low tone as his special product was a "flea powder"! In the 1870s John Wylde, who had been managing the firm for Keating's grand daughters, took a long lease of premises at Colworth Grove and installed plant to grind pyrethrum flowers, the main ingredient of Keating's indispensible powder. Pyrethrum flowers, originally imported from Persia, later came from Japan and Kenya.

The centre for food firms using imported botanical materials was Mincing Lane, where goods from the London docks were auctioned, but the actual processing was usually carried out in mills outside the City, probably because the steam engines that powered them were not welcome inside it. As early as 1815 a pharmacopoeia was stating: "most powders are now being prepared by firms using drug mills", but it went on to advise the

Plate 1. *Colworth Grove; Brome & Schimmer occupied the houses at the furthest end, and the building to the right (Photo R J M Carr, 1982)*

apothecary to avoid the risk of adulteration by continuing to grind his ingredients by hand with the ancient pestle and mortar. However, by mid-century the growing needs of hospitals, dispensaries, bakers, confectioners and food factories created enough demand to ensure the success of steam powered milling firms like John Wylde. Even if the exporters of the multifarious herbs and spices had been able to send them to London as powders, and most were from countries where industry was primitive, this would have been unsatisfactory as it increased the opportunity for adulteration at a time when chemical skills did not extend far in the analysis of powders. The 'Cambojans', for example, were reputed to mix the gamboge (used as a medicine as well as a pigment) they exported with rice flour and sand. In London a great deal of publicity was given to food and medicine adulteration in the 19th century, which ensured that laws governing their manufacture and sale were gradually tightened up.

Colworth Grove in the 1870s was not in an industrial area, although not far from the warehouse-lined south bank of the Thames; it seems likely that 8 & 9 Colworth Grove were a piece of failed suburban speculative building. Stanford's Library Map of London of the 1860s does not show the close, nor Browning Street which connected it to the Walworth Road, therefore it seems the houses were less than ten years old when John Wylde took the two fairly spacious houses to set up his drug grinding establishment. The use of houses as industrial premises was quite common, usually large houses in areas that had come down in the world, but at this period the expansion of railways in the whole London area had induced an over-production by speculative builders of 'desirable residences' in the new suburbs. It is probable that houses in this area, built on low-lying ground that had recently been market gardens, were too near the slums of Southwark to attract the middle-class families they were intended for, families which were by this time flocking out

Plate 2. *The bay window of the Victorian house through which a pair of edge runners may be seen (Photo R J M Carr, 1982)*

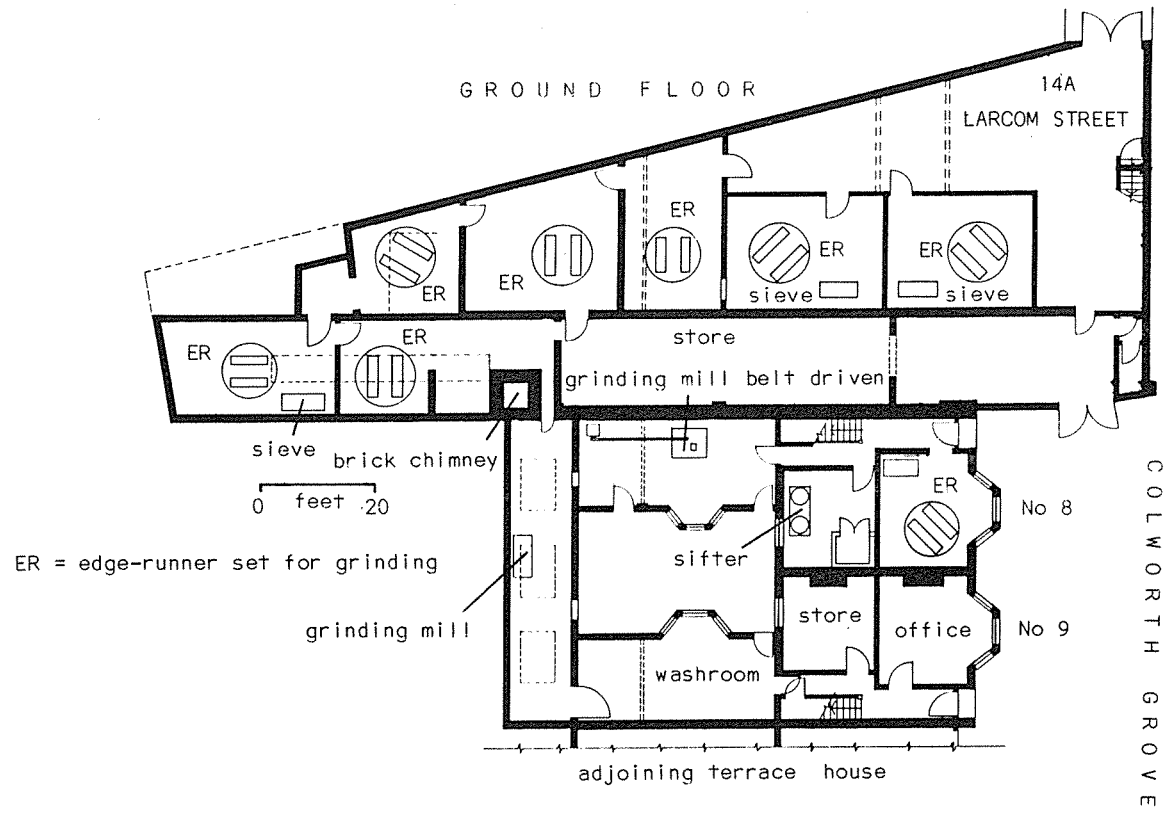

Fig. 1. *Plan of the ground floor of 8/9 Colworth Grove. Drawn by Rosalind Pilling*

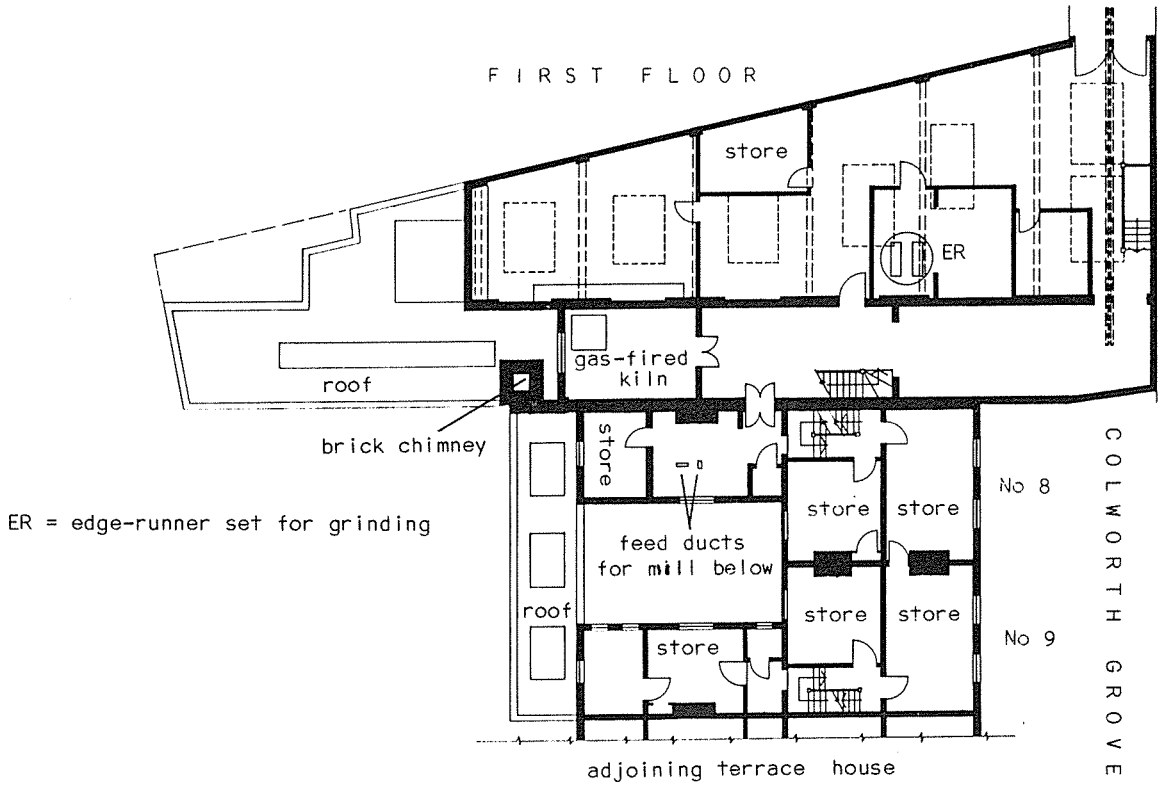

Fig. 2. *Plan of the first floor of 8/9 Colworth Grove. Drawn by Rosalind Pilling*

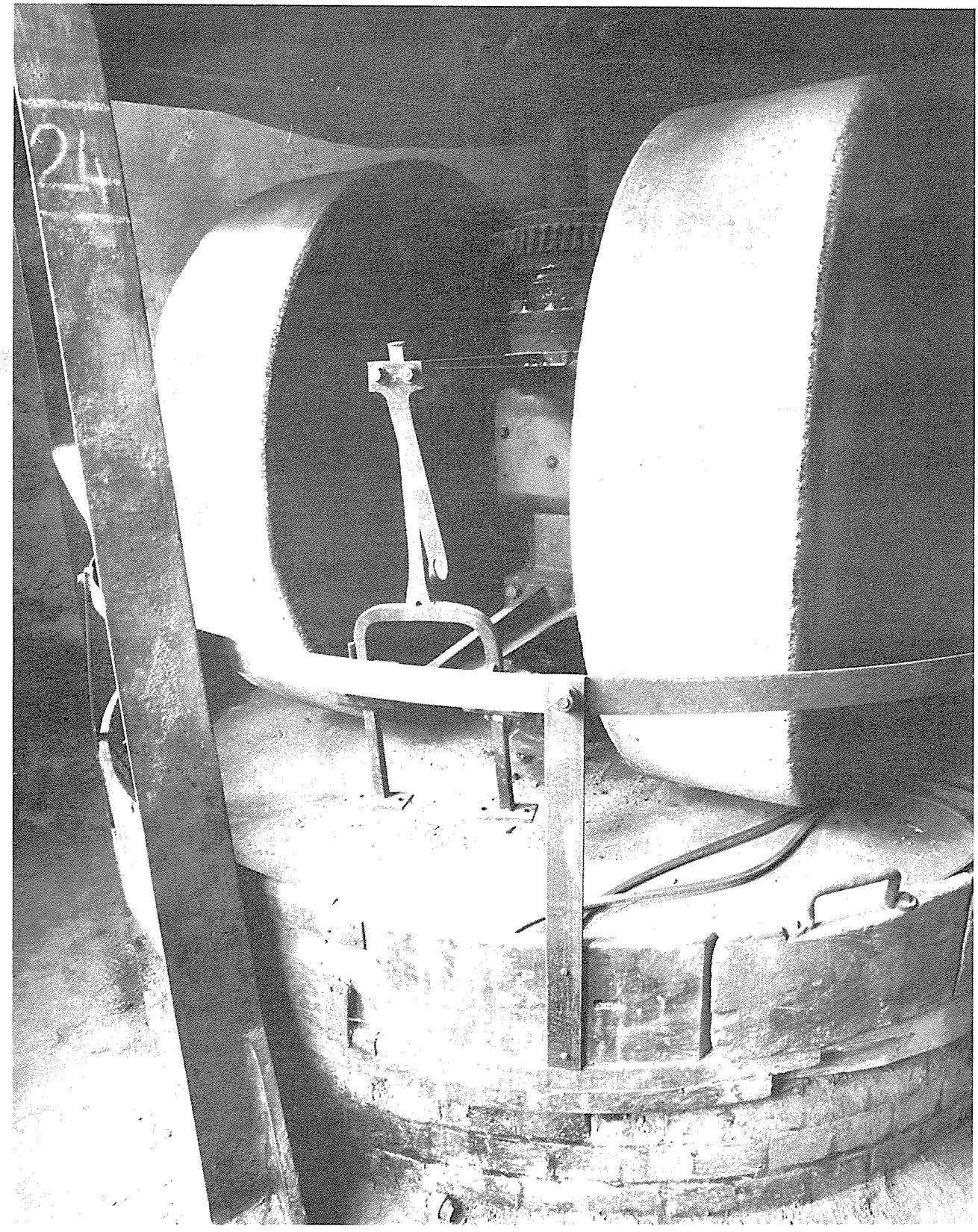

Plate 3. *A pair of grit-stone edge runners standing in the front room of the Victorian house (Photo R J M Carr, 1982)*

to the healthy heights of Norwood and beyond. There was nothing to stop John Wylde from buying houses to use as a factory: no laws, no zoning. A century later the area is still largely residential and, as the works has not been rebuilt, the original houses are still in use and are obvious on the plans (Figs. 1 & 2) and as one walks round; the small back gardens have been built over and the boiler house erected on adjacent land which was the site of a dairy stables (Plate 1). It is decidedly odd to find a pair of edge runners occupying a Victorian bay-windowed front room (Plates 2 & 3)

It goes without saying that the layout of the works does not have the significance of a purpose-built factory or warehouse, but nevertheless it is typical of much of London's industry in the 19th

century: small family businesses starting off in makeshift premises, to either expand and move as Brome & Schimmer did, or fade away as did John Wylde Ltd. (I hasten to add that the Wylde family has not in any sense faded away: the third generation, John Wylde's grandsons, have built up an engineering business in Sussex which a member of the fourth generation has recently joined.)

An interest in engineering could well have been developed watching the edge-runners at Colworth Grove, for although in a way primitive they are extremely effective pieces of machinery which, both Mr. Schimmer and Mr. Wylde affirm, are capable of reducing certain materials, mainly those with a high fibre content, to a finer powder than an electric disintegrater. Edge runners were originally used for all types of grinding: ingredients for cement after cintering, gunpowder (in water!), flint for pottery (also in water because of the health-hazardous dust), etc. They continued in use for materials where their peculiar twisting motion was especially valuable: for example fibrous materials such as rags being broken down for paper manufacture, cocoa, and the type of vegetable matter processed at Colworth Grove where, in particular, they were used to pulverise the bark of an American elm which is used for, of all unlikely thngs, baby and invalid food (called, if I remember correctly, 'Slippery Elm Food') (Plate 3); we were told that a disintegrater merely turns this into wool. Early edge-runner mills, such as Cheddleton Flint Mill, were water powered, but even in the 18th century steam power was being used to operate them in the Potteries and elsewhere. The square brick chimney stack at Colworth Grove probably served the original steam engine boiler; later, like many small businesses, Wylde's obtained its power from a gas engine. When Mr. Ronald Wylde went into the firm in 1935 the plant was driven by a 65HP Ruston & Hornsby engine, the gas being supplied from their own small gas-producer plant with Welsh anthracite as fuel. The drive to the main shaft was by eight cotton ropes, each about 1½'' in diameter, a form of drive he believes to have been derived from that used in the Lancashire textile industry. The drive continued in use when a gear-reduced 35 h.p. electric motor replaced the gas engine after World War II.

The massive edge-runner stones, usually about four feet in diameter and some ten or twelve inches thick, are not dressed on the face like ordinary millstones, but on the rim: a pair are set on edge to run round a bedstone, their considerable weight running continually over the material being pulverized. The bed stones on which the edge runners turn are surrounded by bed pans which are usually made of steel but where there is danger of metal contamination of the product, seasoned oak is used (Plate 4). Mr. Wylde describes the oak bed pans as "a nice piece of joinery work", so too must have been the sweepers – in-sweeper to continually feed material under the edge-runner, and out-sweeper used when withdrawing a charge – as these were cut on a curve out of a solid block of seasoned beach and were six to eight inches thick.

The actual stone used for edge runners varies: at Colworth grove some are millstone grit from Derbyshire (the stone used for the coarser sort of ordinary millstone for animal feeds, etc.), others are of Cornish granite and the three finest, which in nearly 40 years Ronald Wylde can only remember needing re-dressing once, are of near-indestructable Aberdeen granite. We have not been lucky enough to see these monsters in action because by the time GLIAS came onto the scene Brome &

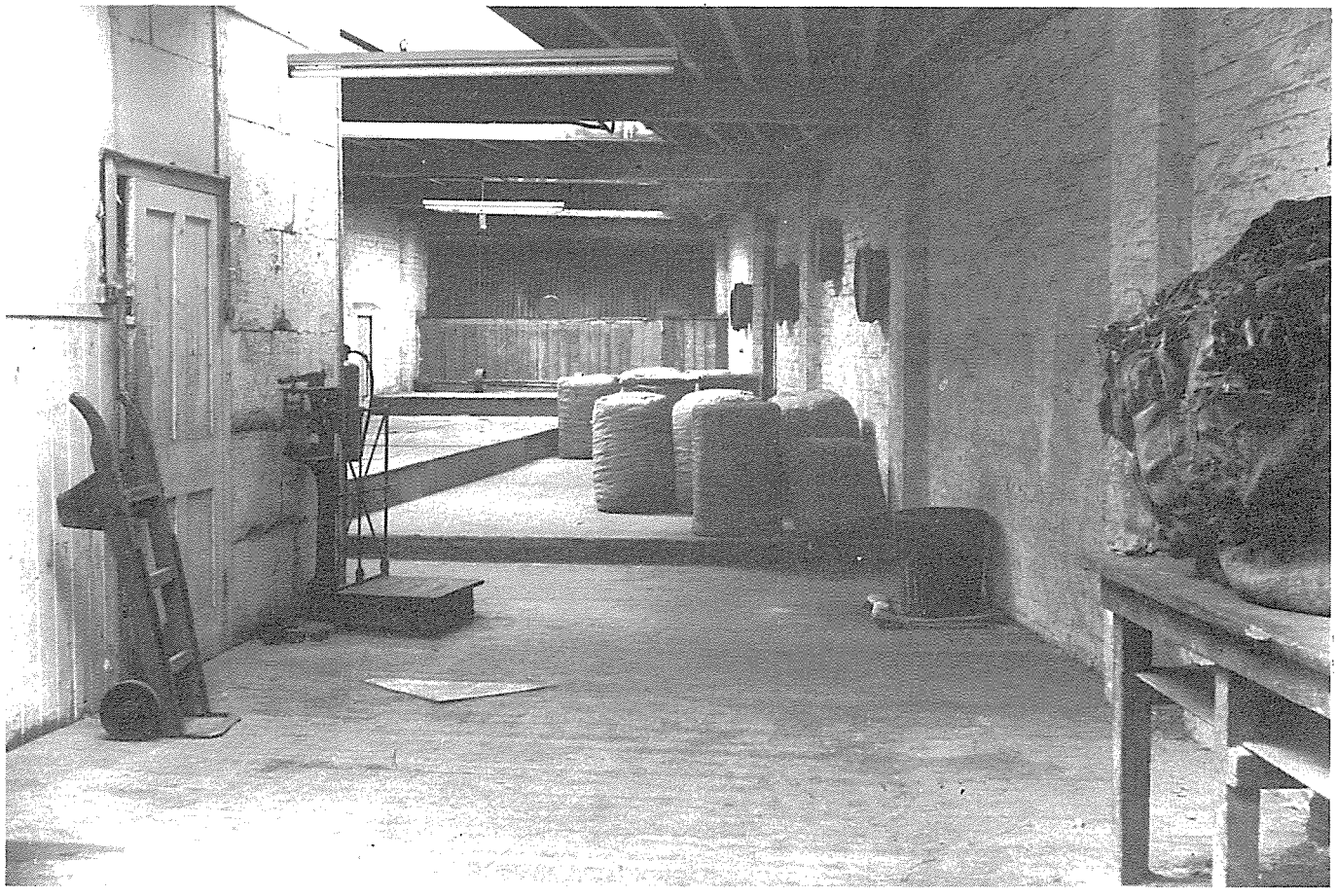

Plate 4. *Sacks of juniper berries and a stack of slippery elm bark (Photo R J M Carr, 1982)*

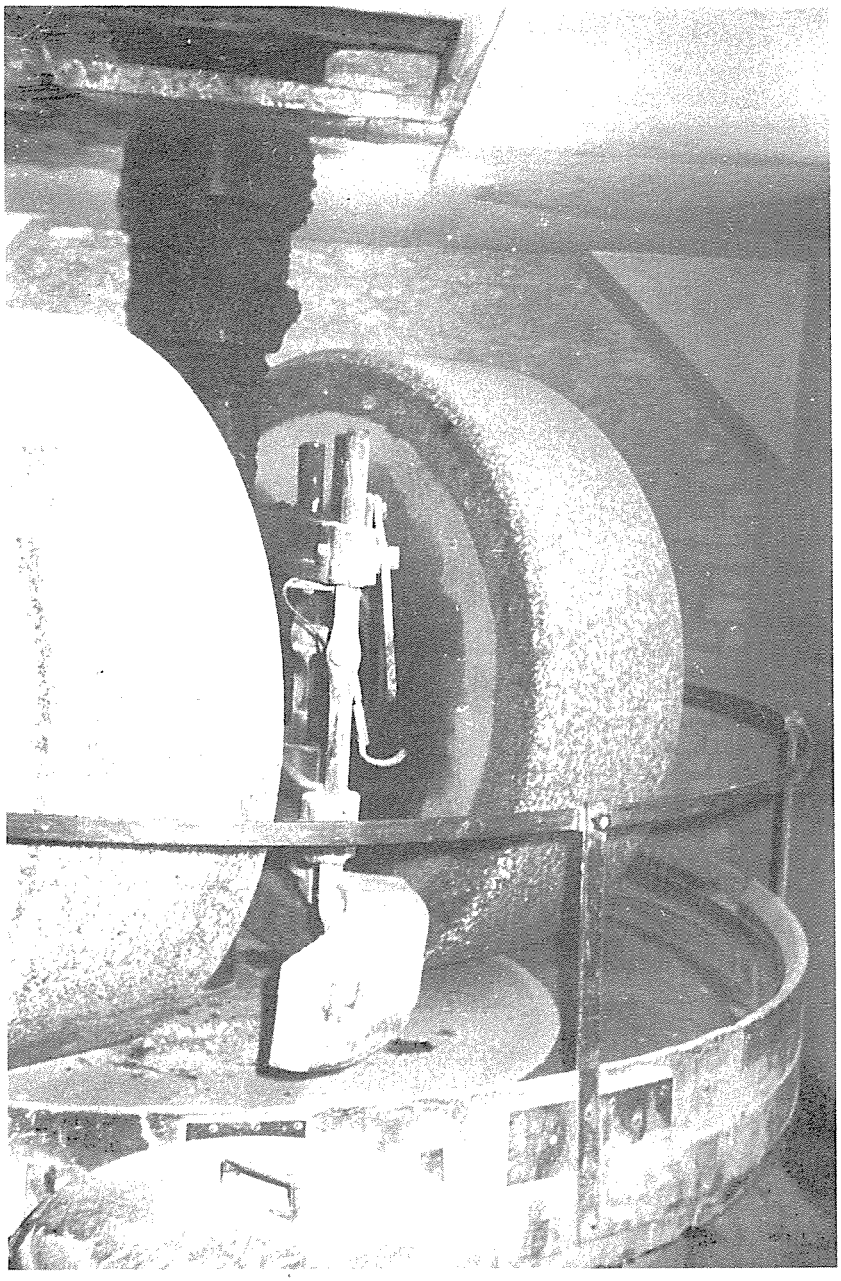

Plate 5. *A pair of granite edge runner in an oak bed pan. The beechwood sweep can be seen just above the bed stone between the two edge runners (Photo Malcolm Tucker, 1980)*

Schimmer had been forbidden to operate them as the premises did not come up to modern fire safety standards (the vegetable powders are capable of causing an explosion); however, those who have seen the flint mill at Cheddleton in operation can get an idea of the sights and sounds if not of the aromas that would have prevailed at Colworth Grove. (Local residents remember the smells from this particular works with affection.)

The final reason why the works at Colworth Grove fell out of use in 1978 was because it did not come up to safety standards with its potentially explosive dust and old, high fire risk building, but the overall reason why it was not worth bringing up to modern standards was the same as for many of London's small businesses, particularly in food manufacture and distribution: changes in patterns of demand and supply over a number of years. The major product of John Wylde Ltd., a botanically based insecticide, lost favour with the public on the introduction, after World War II, of the highly effective DDT, and some of their other products went out of use when old remedies were disregarded by the National Health Service. John Wylde Ltd. survived these setbacks and continued successfully as 'Grinders for the Drug Trade' until, with Mr. Wylde's retirement in 1971, there was no one to carry on the business. When Brome & Schimmer bought the business the numerous small pharmaceutical firms in Southwark for whom John Wylde Ltd. had processed ingredients were much reduced in number; however, as Brome & Schimmer were not only processors of botanical materials but also importers and exporters, they were able to survive several more radical changes in their business. However, the 1970s was a period of growth for other areas of the trade – health food shops flourished and popular interest in haute cuisine produced increasing demand for dried herbs – which enabled Brome & Schimmer to leave their London

premises for a new works in Hampshire. While Brome & Schimmer is by no means the survivor of a dying industry, as is so often the case with firms examined by I.A. groups, neither are the edge-runners themselves necessarily doomed to destruction: one pair has gone to a firm in Humberside for preservation and it is hoped that the others may also be found new homes.

Acknowledgements

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Sources

1. Kelly's Post Office Directories

2. Correspondence with Mr. Schimmer and Mr. Wylde

3. Made in Southwark: John Wylde Ltd 'Grinders for the drug trade', *The Borough: the quarterly journal of the Southwark Chamber of Commerce*, winter 1958-59, pp. 28-29.