

The Montgomery family of Brentford: timber merchants and benefactors

Beverley F Ronalds

Four entrepreneurial generations of the Montgomery family (Figure 1), operated a timberyard in Brentford for 120 years until the early 20th century. The sawmill, at one time the largest in Middlesex, stretched from the High Street towards the Thames at what also became the site of Brunel's Brentford Dock. A wealth of primary sources survives regarding the Montgomerys' activities, including a century of correspondence in archives on three continents as well as government, legal, business, church, charity and newspaper records in Britain. These enable the growth and later demise of the firm to be described – including its footprint, machinery, docks and transportation links – and show the influence of family characteristics and technological and economic change through its lifecycle. The business brought employment to the town and, through the leadership of the partners, significant infrastructure for education, health, worship and social amenity.

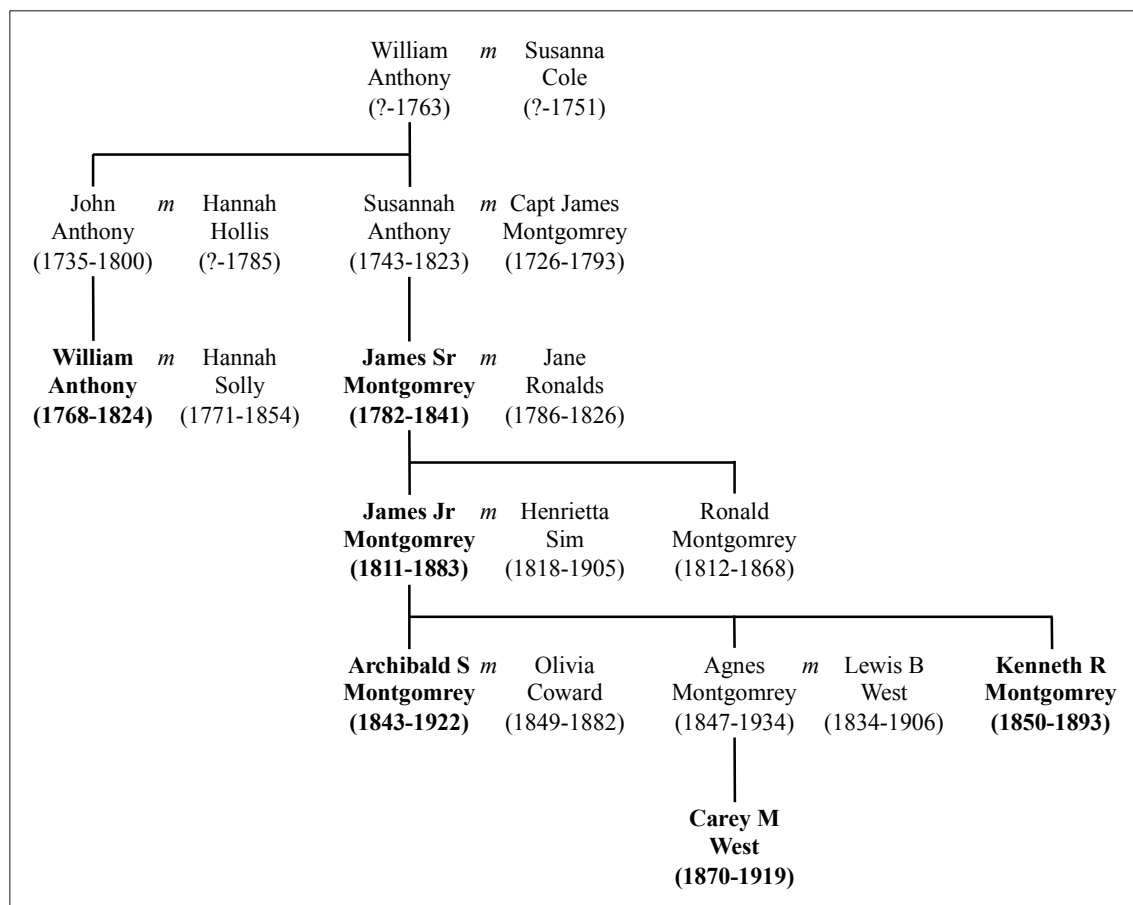


Figure 1. Montgomery family tree (abridged) with timber merchants highlighted



Figure 3. Local topography when James Sr and Anthony first leased the timberyard, including the new canal, double-lobed island, lock and weir (c.1806). The High Street lay to the north. LMA: ACC/1360/303

Landlord of the old Yard but did not agree to his terms which are now come down to £135 p annum. Mr A. will call again today'. They then agreed to lease 1.5 ha of Amber's former holding. James Sr also 'arranged affairs with Mr Anthony' to enter into partnership. The firm soon became known as Montgomrey and Co and the yard as Montgomrey's Wharf.⁴

The property was most apposite for their needs (Figure 3). To the north it fronted on to the Brentford High Street – the highway linking London with south west England. The main branch of the Brent River formed the site's south west boundary before entering the Thames nearby, which would have been the import route for foreign timber. A meander of the Brent had been bypassed by the new, straighter canal, creating a very suitable area for wharf facilities, an island to shelter them, as well as ready access to the inland waterways. There was also a lock and weir regulating the canal's water depth. The buildings included stables, a granary and a counting house, although repairs and improvements were needed on them.⁵

James Sr remodelled and extended the site in the years following. In 1813 he (without Anthony) purchased 1.1 ha of land on the far side of the Brent and the canal for £200 to ensure control of the island; it had now been split into two by a channel and weir to aid water flow and linked by a footbridge (Figure 4). The acquisition made the site 2.6 ha in area, with 120 m frontage along the High Street and an overall length more than three times greater. Docks totalling 0.5 ha were excavated along both banks of the river as seen in Figure 5. He and his family resided in a two-storey house with attics and garden facing

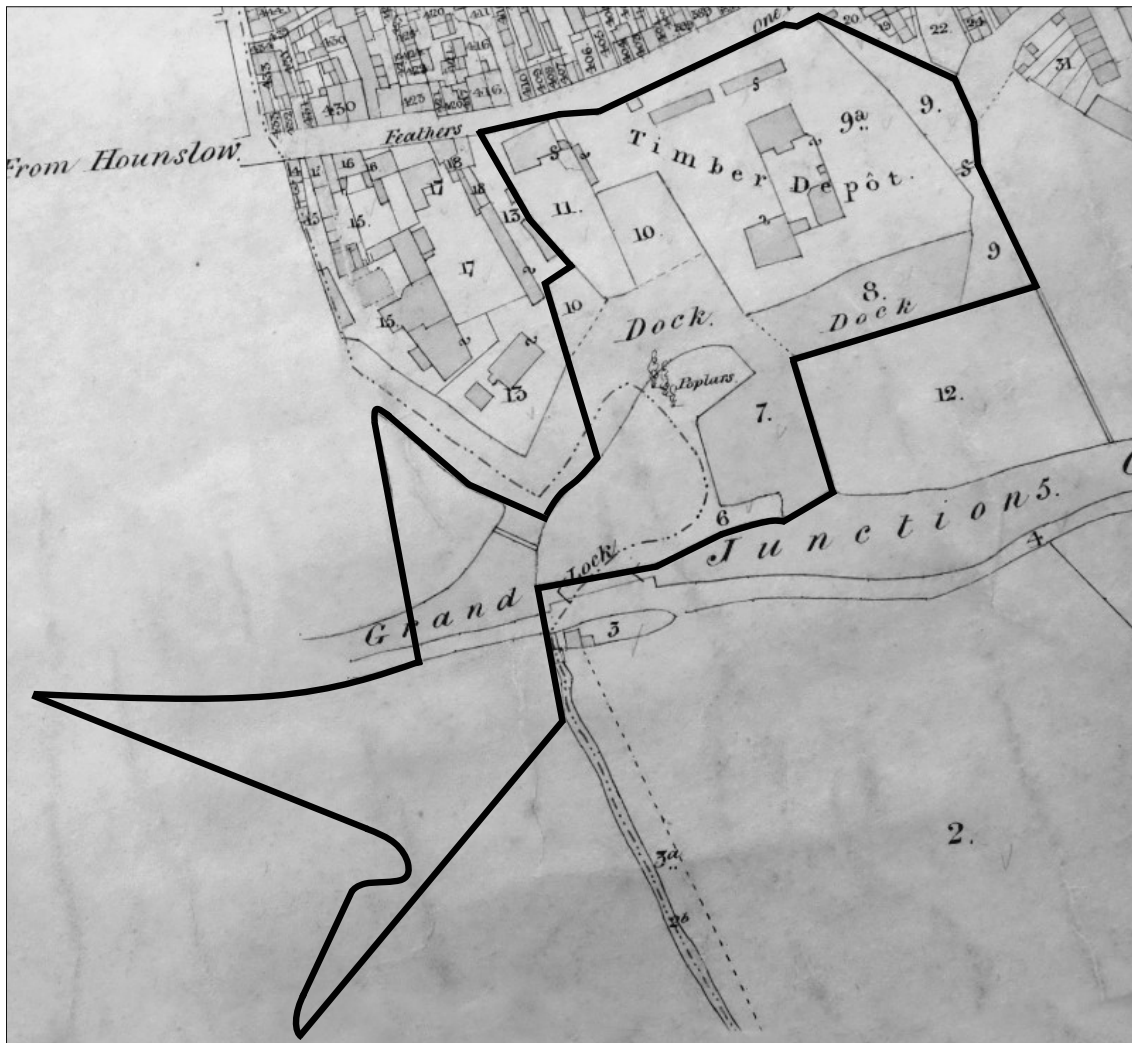
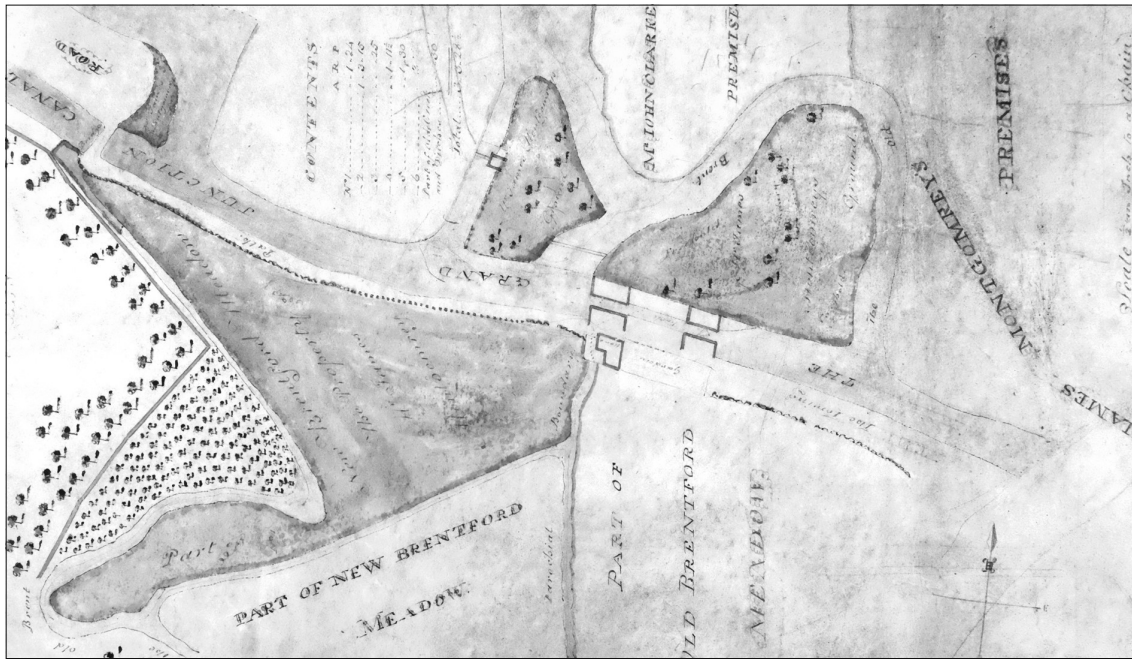


Figure 4. Shaded areas show land south of the Brent purchased by James Sr (1813). LMA: ACC/0638/051

Figure 5. Layout of the timberyard at James Sr's retirement (1839). The black line outlines the overall extent of his holdings. LMA: DL/TI/A/011/A

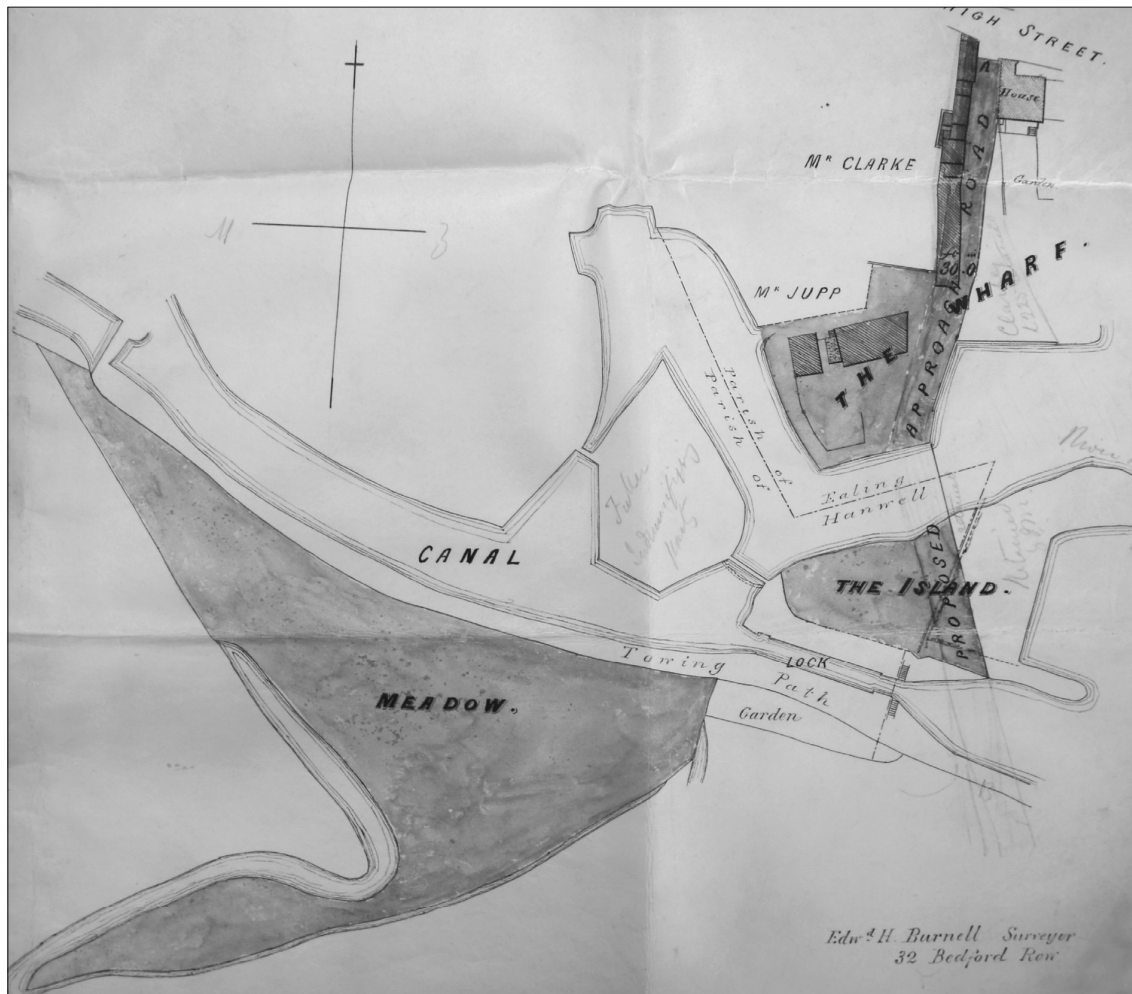


Figure 6. Shaded areas show James Jr's land purchased by railway company (1855). LMA: ACC/0638/076

the High Street and before long there was a sawpit, lath shop and crane.⁶ He also leased other houses in the area, presumably to accommodate staff. James Sr in addition perhaps owned transport barges, as both his father and his brother-in-law Edmund Ronalds (who ran a wholesale cheesemonger business) were experienced in boat ownership. He likely received assistance too from Edmund's brother (later Sir) Francis Ronalds, an inventor who developed a large and durable pulley block in this period as well as instruments for surveying and drawing plans that would have been useful for the civil engineering works.⁷

James Sr entered into partnership with his eldest son James Jr in 1836 when the latter was 24 years of age, while his second son Ronald became a respected surgeon in Devizes. James Jr did not coast into his new responsibilities. On James Sr's death in 1841, he needed to purchase the business at market value so that his siblings would also receive equal shares of their father's estate. Less than two weeks after his death, there was a sudden and severe flood of the Brent at Brentford caused by a breach upstream. Damage to the infrastructure would have been significant notwithstanding the levees they had built.⁸

The next year, 1842, James Jr borrowed significant money to purchase the freehold of the northern part of the yard for £4,200. He immediately installed new timber handling, cutting and dressing equipment driven by a steam engine and boiler, all in new buildings. He also acquired several cottages at the north east corner of the yard to house staff and their families – these became known as Montgomery's Cottages.⁹ By 1844, he was able to advertise as far afield as Oxford and Reading by utilising the emerging railways as well as the canal, the Thames and the traditional six-horse wagons:¹⁰

JAMES MONTGOMREY, TIMBER MERCHANT and PROPRIETOR of STEAM SAW MILLS, begs to inform the Consumers of Timber that his Machine for Planing and Working Boards to a width and thickness is now in operation ... and that orders for converted Timber and Deals can be expeditiously delivered by Land, Water, or Railway.¹¹

It was reported in 1845 that his facilities were 'by far the most extensive in the county'. 'Here is every kind of timber used in building, and mahogany, some specimens of which ... are of extraordinary magnitude'.¹² He was making good use at this time of the differential tariffs that had been introduced in the lead-up to the era of free trade, which encouraged imports of unworked timber from the Colonies.¹³

In 1853, James Jr made another shrewd investment. The Great Western Railway saw advantages in linking its mainline with the Thames to facilitate freight transfer between the river and rail networks. The company formed to build the branch line and dock facilities was incorporated in 1855 and work started the next year. Three years earlier, James Jr had borrowed money from his relatives using his premises as security, and purchased 0.3 ha of property along his west boundary for £1,500. This he sold to the new railway company, along with his little-used land on the west side of the downstream island and to the south of the canal, for £3,775. The southern plot became part of the new terminal while the recently purchased strip of land formed the route of the Dock Road built to reach it from the High Street (Figure 6). James Jr had earned more than 100% profit and obtained £2,000 worth of shares in the railway company, while gaining proximity to the railway network for his goods and suffering little disruption in his day-to-day business. From the perspective of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the designer of the terminal, the access road was 'exactly where we would wish'.¹⁴ Brentford Dock was opened in 1859 and enjoyed success for a century.

James Jr bought a further parcel of 0.5 ha on his south-eastern boundary for £325 in 1858.¹⁵ This made the consolidated yard 2.0 ha in area and facilitated an extension to his docks, controlled by a sluice (Figure 7).

With the timber mill now ideally positioned for the national transport system, the next years would have been the peak of the business. Both of James Jr's sons who survived childhood entered the firm – Archibald Sim (called Archie by the family) and Kenneth Ronald. By the time Archie was 31, he was largely running the enterprise, writing that his father 'takes no very active part in the business now'.¹⁶ James Jr was devoting much of his time to outside interests. The family was assisted by people like Stephen Walker, who moved up the ranks to become manager and later a partner and lived in what had been the family home on the site, and his son who was one of the travelling salesmen. There were also numerous clerks and, despite mechanisation, at least 50 other workmen.¹⁷ At James Jr's death in 1883, his personal wealth was valued at £49,000.

Archie and Kenneth having no children, their sister's eldest son Carey Montgomery West joined them in 1887 and was quickly 'giving great satisfaction'. Business was becoming harder though, with Britain in the midst of the Long Depression. Stephen Walker died in 1891 and Kenneth two years later of tuberculosis. Archie wrote in 1896: 'I really feel that I must take more holidays, it is false economy to exhaust one's health & energies ... but business is not so profitable as it used to be: & ways & means have to be more carefully considered'.¹⁸ A 1909–10 valuation indicated that several of the 14 buildings by then on the site were disused, although the rest were still in good repair. Ill-health forced Archie to retire at this time and the decision was made to sell – Carey too had no offspring and the dynasty was near its end.¹⁹ The premises were purchased by Water Softeners Ltd for £13,000 in 1911. Proceeds were shared with surviving family members and Archie's worth at death was £2,500. Walker's son obtained the mill equipment and established the 'successors to James Montgomery, Sons & Co' in Slough.²⁰

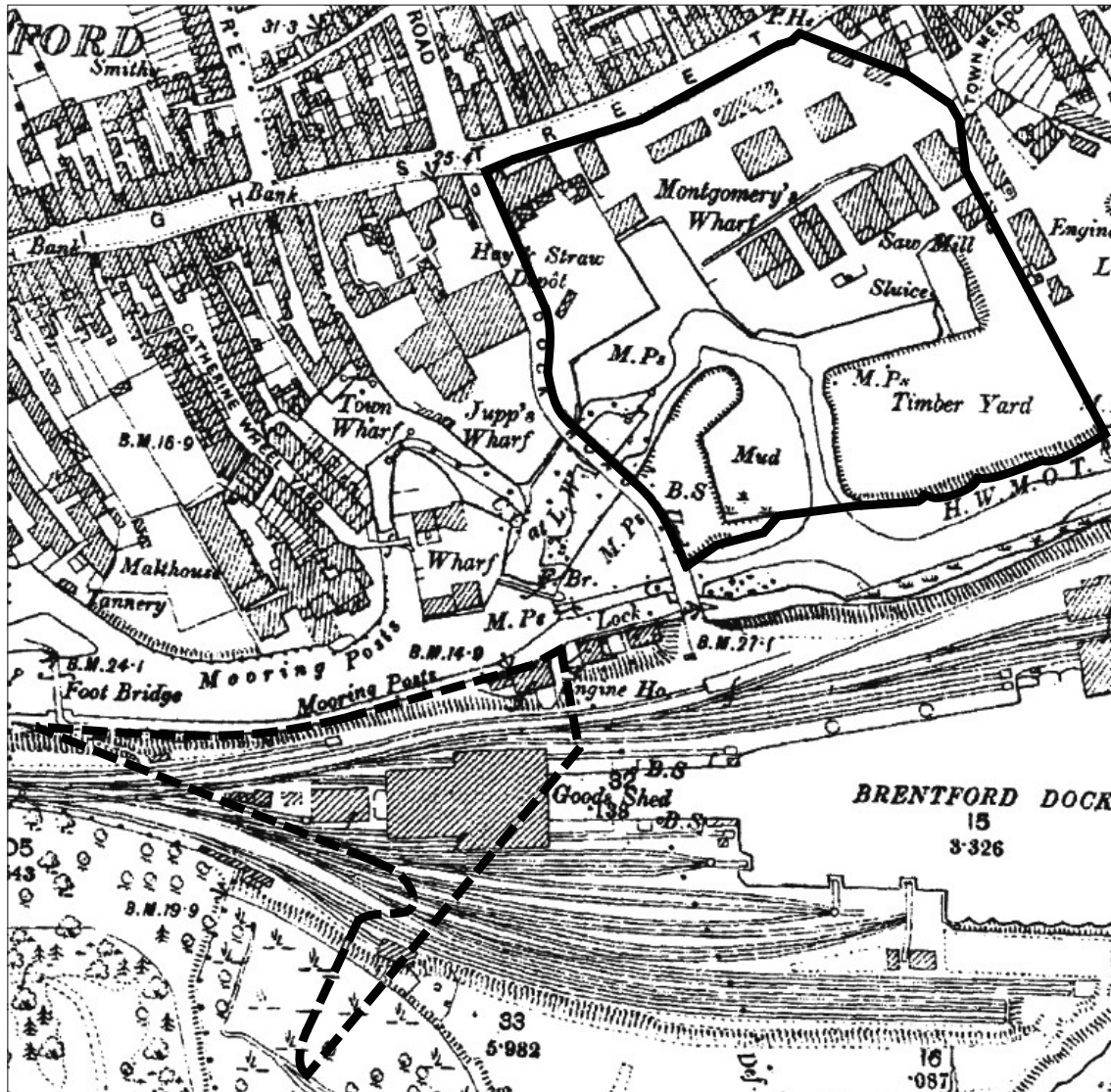


Figure 7. Montgomery's Wharf and Brentford Dock (1896). Thick solid line shows consolidated timberyard and dashed line overlays former holding on Dock facilities. Original copyright Ordnance Survey www.old-maps.co.uk

Family members

Surviving documents allow something of the family's personalities and lifestyle to be ascertained. According to James Sr's nephew and niece, his wife Jane née Ronalds was 'a very lovely woman' who wrote frequently to them and they enjoyed 'a ball ... with rather a large party' at the Montgomerys' home in Easter week 1824. James Sr wrote of himself as having 'so much more respect for the qualities of the soul than of the head', while his obituary advised that he was 'well known and highly respected during his years of health and vigour'.²¹

Unfortunately his wellbeing deteriorated when he was in his late forties. Jane became ill and died when the youngest of their nine children was two. Before long, their eldest daughter 'exhibited symptoms of a disordered intellect' and another daughter described the effect on their father: 'it is more than he can bear, and in his present state of health it is of the utmost importance that his mind should be kept calm'.²² Compounding this, his six younger children contracted tuberculosis and all were to die of the disease in early adulthood. James Sr could not cope and was determined to be 'of unsound mind' in 1837.²³



Figure 8 James Montgomery Jr (1811–1883). WU: RC1622

Figure 9 Archibald Sim Montgomery (1843–1922). WU: RC1632

After being surrounded by this suffering, James Jr (Figure 8) determined he would live life to the full; he also coached younger members of his extended family to make the most of opportunities they had received. As well as throwing himself into his timber business, he pursued numerous other commercial and community activities while also making time to enjoy himself and, according to his daughter, be a ‘dear loving Father’. A Ronalds cousin noted after his marriage to Henrietta Sim that ‘he is become so much quieter’. Nonetheless, a few years later other cousins recorded that ‘The Montys are as gay as possible’ and described a recent party at their home. James Jr also remained a keen horseman and race goer, as his father had been. On ‘the Grand day at Ascott’, he ‘dashed past driving his pair of horses and 2 Ladies in the Phaeton’.²⁴ A few months later: ‘I must indulge myself in describing his style of travelling, Mr Montgomery & his servant on the front of the Carriage or Box & Mr Ronald [his younger brother] inside, James driving a very handsome pair of horses. I ... hope that he will always have it in his power to do the same’. Unfortunately he had a ‘very severe fall’ from his horse at the age of 56 that had lingering effects on his health.²⁵

When work started on Brentford Dock, James Jr and Henrietta decided to live in ‘a country house’ rather than at the timberyard. They lived in various homes in the area. One, Hartlands in Cranford, was described by a distant cousin: ‘the taste displayed in the garden and whole house is wonderful ... My husband played lawn tennis’. At this time they had seven servants, including a butler and lady’s maid. When the children reached courting age, the family would move into London ‘for the season’.²⁶ They also spent considerable time on the Continent.

James Jr and Henrietta had risen to the upper circles of local society. After he was appointed Deputy Lieutenant of Middlesex at the age of 47, he was formally presented to the Queen by the Lord Lieutenant, the Marquis of Salisbury.²⁷ Their daughter married ‘the father of iron shipbuilding’, Charles Mark Palmer MP – later a baronet.²⁸ There is a memorial to Henrietta in St Mary’s Church Twickenham, while a procession of 26 carriages attended James Jr’s burial and ‘every house and shop in the town was partially closed out of respect’.²⁹ In his last years, however, James Jr had exhibited tendencies akin to his father’s, with Henrietta advising that he ‘suffers terribly from depression of spirits’.³⁰

Archie (Figure 9) wed Olivia Coward in 1870, who sadly soon became 'a constant invalid'. Through his 40 years as a widower, he remained 'an ardent supporter of many movements ... and in the social activities of Brentford he was one of the leading residents'. He continued to champion causes instigated by his father and grandfather while also spearheading projects of his own. Having no descendants to provide for, enhancing the town in which his family had enjoyed such commercial success became a higher priority than his business. The 'amiable qualities' he brought to these ventures included a self-deprecating sense of humour and he was less concerned with status than his father.³¹

He resided on the outskirts of Brentford for much of his working life, although less lavishly than his parents. As economic conditions tightened, however, he moved back 'into the old house'. His sister was disparaging – 'I cannot endure Brentford myself' – but as he explained: 'Brentford is, of course, now, not a place one would choose to live in but virtually all my interests lie there & the house is our own & a very comfortable one ... so one must put up with the noise'.³² There he kept his nephew Carey company.

In his later years, he was able to indulge his 'deep interest' in 'literary and scientific subjects'. Like his father, he was a member of Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce and he also joined the Royal Geographical Society, the Cotteswold Naturalists' Field Club, the Botanical Society and Exchange Club, and the British Numismatic Society (together with his sister). He was proud of his 'Botanical Library' and collected flowering plants as far afield as Canada (where he was trustee of a distant cousin's estate).³³ Much of his extensive herbarium survives at the Bristol Museum and the Natural History Museum as well as museums in Gloucester, Liverpool and Manchester. An ancient stone axe he unearthed in Ontario Canada is also in the Gloucester Museum.

Civic achievements

The family's community activities helped to create important infrastructure in Brentford as well as provide broad benefits for its residents. They were much more than figureheads and subscribers in these endeavours. They conceived projects, drove them to completion, oversaw their long-term operation and, where suitable, attracted support and funding by organising events that also entertained and fostered community spirit.

James Jr and Archie were magistrates for the County of Middlesex, with Archie becoming chairman of the Brentford bench. James Jr was also the inaugural chairman of the Brentford Local Board established in 1874 to oversee public health and other town matters – he had called for an enquiry into the town's sanitation the previous year during an outbreak of fever.³⁴ The board completed early sewerage works some years later. Archie was elected to the first Middlesex County Council in 1889 as regional governance continued to evolve.³⁵

In politics, the family were 'warm & ardent' Whigs cum Radicals.³⁶ John and William Anthony, Captain James and later James Sr befriended the radical political philosopher William Godwin in Beaconsfield, who is perhaps best remembered today for fathering the creator of *Frankenstein*.³⁷ James Sr and Jr were both founding members of the Reform Club in 1836 and Archie was elected in 1867.

James Jr formally proposed parliamentary candidates and chaired their campaign committees.³⁸ Elections could be stormy and in 1837 it was reported in *The Times* that James Jr received 'a violent blow' at the hustings.³⁹ Twelve years later:

THE protectionist meeting at Uxbridge was a model meeting of its kind ... Mr. MONTGOMERY ... attempted to offer a few observations, but was taken round the waist and tossed from the platform by the son of the chairman, while the chairman himself gave Mr. MONTGOMERY a broad hint that his name might be scratched from the list of magistrates for his presumption. By such gentle and gentlemanly means unanimity among the speakers was preserved.⁴⁰

Richard Cobden MP wrote to him a few days later:

You did quite right in the course you took at the meeting – The refusal to hear you, & the violence attempted to put down all discussion had the effect of damaging their cause far more than could have been done by a good Free trade speech⁴¹

The Montgomreys were appointed to directorships of fire and life assurance companies and James Jr was a director and trustee of the company that built the town hall in the High Street in 1850 with local architect Francis Byass.⁴² He chaired a public meeting at the town hall called to explain the Brentford Dock scheme in 1855, presumably setting aside his vested interest.⁴³ He had been on the committee of an earlier project to obtain a train station in the town, as his cousin described in 1845: ‘There has been a great excitement here lately about bringing a Rail way through Brentford ... James ... has been so very active about it, that he has knocked himself up and he is obliged to go to Brighton to recruit his health’.⁴⁴ Despite his efforts this line did not go ahead. Perversely it was not until 1878 that he took his first train trip himself, when he admitted: ‘it shook me considerably but I hope I am none the worse for it’.⁴⁵

Religion was an important part of family life. John and William Anthony, James Sr and Jane were Unitarians. James Sr became a trustee of the Boston Chapel in Brentford in 1810, was a life member of the Unitarian Association, and served on the Committee of Dissenting Deputies established to protect the civil rights of Nonconformists.⁴⁶ James Jr and Henrietta in contrast brought up their children as Anglicans. They were principal subscribers in the construction of St Paul’s Church in 1868 and its associated school, situated north of the sawmill: James Jr was chairman of the building committee, on which Archie ‘took a leading part’, and the latter served as churchwarden and ‘read the lessons there’.⁴⁷

Education was another priority. James Sr attended the Uxbridge Academy run by Thomas Beasley, James Jr went to John Bullar’s school in Southampton and Archie’s broad schooling included a year in Dresden.⁴⁸ The family were major funders of a school built in 1834 near the timberyard ‘to provide sound and unsectarian education for the children of the working classes’.⁴⁹ James Sr’s daughters were on the ladies’ committee and James Jr took over his father’s governance role when his health deteriorated. James Jr was treasurer and a principal subscriber when new buildings in the High Street were instigated in 1859 to house the increased student numbers and in 1865 he became president.⁵⁰ It was considered one of the best schools in London around this time. After Kenneth was appointed secretary in 1882, he ‘was a constant visitor, knowing almost every child’; one of his initiatives was a ‘fancy bazaar’ that raised an ‘excellent’ £260 for the school.⁵¹ Archie was still participating in the new century. He and then Carey were also managers of St Paul’s school.⁵²

James Sr helped found the Brentford Mechanics’ Institution in 1835, which had lecturing and library facilities. James Jr was before long serving as vice-president and Archie was later one of its trustees.⁵³ Archie was also ‘regarded as the founder of the Public Library’ in Brentford in 1890 having organised on the institute’s demise for its nearly 1,000 books to have a new home.⁵⁴

In 1904, Archie laid the first foundation stone for a Boatmen’s Institute alongside the river at Brentford Butts.⁵⁵ Providing a reading room for canal boatmen while their boat was in port, maternity facilities for their wives, and basic education for the children, it remained operational for nearly 75 years.

Another of his special causes was the Cottage Hospital and Nurses’ Home, of which he was long-term treasurer and also president when the committee purchased its building. His mother tells us at this time: ‘Archie is very much taken up just now, preparing some theatricals, which he hopes will bring in some money for his cottage hospital in Brentford. He is going to act himself & so many of his friends have kindly come forward to help him.’ He chose a melodrama, *Blow for Blow* by Henry Byron, and it was a ‘splendid success’ according to the *Middlesex Independent*.⁵⁶

Although the sawmill had its own manual fire cart, James Jr hosted the meeting that led to the formation of a volunteer fire brigade in 1868. Archie was the inaugural treasurer and Kenneth later served in several roles including superintendent. Archie was toasted at the opening of the purpose-built fire station in the High Street in 1898, where Carey provided a musical interlude.⁵⁷

Buildings associated with the Boatmen's Institute, Cottage Hospital, fire station, Brentford library, town hall, St Paul's church and school, and the sewerage pump house still exist; the first four have statutory listing, the remainder are listed locally and three retain their original purpose. The Montgomery name survives on plaques concerning the first two of these eight structures, as well as the 1859 school and a business now occupying part of Montgomery's Wharf. The road, river, canal and twin-island topography also continues. Subsequent redevelopment has resulted in little or nothing remaining of the timberyard's buildings, and Brentford Dock is now a marina and housing estate with its railway approach converted to a second access road.

Conclusion

This picture of the Montgomery family's commercial and community activities through the 19th century exemplifies how a small, middle class family can shape the ongoing development of an established town. Although Brentford has continued to change a great deal, substantial evidence of their leadership remains in buildings and other infrastructure.

Succession planning and mutual support were central in the Montgomreys' long-term achievements but it is apparent that the personal circumstances of each of the partners also had significant influence. External factors were important too, with the family both promoting and capitalising quickly on technological innovations and new economic policies in their timber business but, like others, suffering through recession and natural disasters. The final demise of the company was aligned with the demise of the family.

Acknowledgement

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