

Sir Hugh Myddelton



Sir Hugh Myddelton is chiefly remembered as the man who brought fresh water to London. This is how residents of Myddelton Square, in the London Borough of Islington, tend to think of him, and perhaps to associate him with the statue at Islington Green.

The Myddeltons were Welsh, descended from Rhirid Blaydd (sometimes spelled Flaidd) in Merionethshire, a famous warrior of the 12th century, who married the sister and heiress of Sir Alexander Myddelton of Myddelton in Cheshire and assumed his wife's name. Richard Myddelton, a direct descendent, became the first Member of Parliament for Denbigh during the reign of Henry VIII. Richard Myddelton was also governor of Denbigh castle during the reign of Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth 1. He died in 1575 leaving behind him 16 children of whom Hugh was the sixth son.

The greatest uncertainty surrounding Hugh's life is the actual date of his birth, which is thought to be around 1555, though there were no parish registers at that time. On February 9th, 1960, the *Daily Telegraph* published an article stating that Hugh Myddelton was born '400 years ago this month'. Although this has not been substantiated, Hugh himself believed that he was 68 in 1628. We do know that Hugh Myddelton was born at Galch Hill, now a small farm, half-way between Denbigh and Gwaenynog.

In 1576, Hugh followed his older brothers to London and on April 2 that year, he was apprenticed to Thomas Hartopp of the Goldsmiths' Company. Hugh's name first appears as a liveryman of the Goldsmiths' Company in 1592. In 1604 and again in 1605, he became a Warden of the Company. In 1610 he became Prime Warden and he held this office a second time in 1624. His goldsmith's shop was in Bassishaw (now Basinghall) Street and he lived over it. He also spent much of his time in Denbigh. In 1597, he was alderman of that town and was described in the local records as 'citizen and goldsmith of London and one of the merchant adventurers of England'.

Hugh and his brothers, Thomas, Robert and William, were all merchant adventurers; Thomas and Robert had shares in the East India Company. Hugh had nothing to do with East Indian commerce, but as an active member of the Society of Merchant Adventurers, he traded with European ports. Most of his wealth was, however, amassed in his goldsmith's shop. He supplied jewellery to Queen Elizabeth I and two entries in state papers show sums of £250 paid to Hugh Myddelton for jewels bestowed by King James I on his wife, Queen Anne.

Hugh maintained his interest in his home town and worked some mines in Wales, where he acquired the practical knowledge of levelling, draining and embanking which came in so useful later. In 1603 Hugh was returned as Member of Parliament for Denbigh and in January 1605 both he and Robert served on a House of Commons Committee to look into the possibility of bringing fresh water from the River Lea into central London. Hugh gradually became obsessed with the dream of improving London's water supply. The population of London at this time was about 300,000. Water came by conduit from the northern heights - the hills round Hampstead and Highgate. The villagers of Islington complained that there was not enough water. Some of it was drawn from wells and delivered by water carriers. Quite often it was contaminated. Hugh's idea was to find a way to bring water from the springs of Amwell and Chadwell in Hertfordshire, partly by means of an open channel and partly through underground pipes, to a reservoir near his own city house - a distance of 38 miles.

On March 28th, 1609, the Corporation of the City of London formally adopted Hugh's proposal to bring a supply of water from Amwell and Chadwell to Islington. Hugh's condition was that the Court of Common Council transfer to him the powers they had obtained from Parliament. The Corporation agreed, stipulating on their part that work should begin within two months and be finished, if possible, within four years. Hugh kept his side of the bargain to the letter, the first sod was turned early in May 1609 and on September 29th, 1613, water was permitted to flow into the large reservoir at what is now the New River Head, the very day that his brother Thomas took office as Lord Mayor of London. The total cost of the project was £500,000.

Hugh then returned to an old and formerly unsuccessful project of gold and silver mining in Wales. A company of Miners Royal in Cardiganshire had been established in 1604. In 1617, he worked its mines for £400 a year and, after some more costly engineering, succeeded in working them to better advantage, sending so much gold to the Royal Mint that he was made a baronet on October 19th, 1622 (the 193rd baronet created by King James after his accession) and the first engineer to be so honoured. Hugh's title was Sir Hugh Myddelton in the county of Denbigh.

Hugh was twice married, once to Anne, daughter of Richard Collins of Lichfield Street, London; secondly to Elizabeth, daughter and heiress of John Olmstead of Ingatestone, Essex, by whom he had ten sons and six daughters. Apart from his house in Basinghall Street, he lived at Lodge, near to the Cardiganshire mines and he also had a country estate at Bush Hill near Edmonton (convenient for superintending the New River works). He died on December 10th, 1631 and was buried in St Matthew Friday Street Church, where he had served as churchwarden from 1598-1600. The church was destroyed in the great fire and was rebuilt by Wren in 1685; there is no trace of his grave now. There are still Myddeltons in membership of the Goldsmiths' Company, descendants through Sir Thomas' line.

Sir Hugh left many charitable bequests and his shares in the New River Company (converted to Metropolitan Water Board stock in 1904) were bequeathed to the Goldsmiths' Company. Even today this bequest represents a part of the Goldsmiths' charitable income, although it has lost its separate identity.

His fame was commemorated by the erection of many memorials. In 1845 a statue of Sir Hugh by Samuel Joseph was placed in a niche on the north side of the newly rebuilt Royal Exchange. In 1862 a marble statue in Elizabethan costume by John Thomas, together with a drinking fountain – a joint gift of Sir Samuel Morton Peto, the New River Company and subscribers among local inhabitants – was erected on Islington Green. It was inaugurated by William Gladstone, then Chancellor of the Exchequer. A plaque marking the 350th anniversary of his death was placed on the wall behind St Mark's Church in Myddelton Square and unveiled by Lord (Peter) Broadbridge in January 1982.

Sir Hugh's coat of arms can be seen on the ceiling of the Oak Room at The New River Head Apartment building (formerly Thames Water Authority) in Rosebery Avenue. The coat of arms shows three wolves' heads, a reference to his ancestor – Blaydd means a wolf. Above his shield is a silver hand, a reference to the glove trade which flourished in Denbigh, the town of his birth.

The Sir Hugh Myddelton School stands on the site of the former Clerkenwell House of Detention (known as the Clerkenwell Bridewell), which closed in 1887. Several public houses commemorated Sir Hugh; the most famous was located at the side of Sadler's Wells and was depicted by William Hogarth in his etching *Evening* (the third of his *Four times of day* series) in the British Museum.

John Aubrey in *Brief Lives* was less than charitable towards Sir Hugh. According to Aubrey, William Inglebert was the first inventor of the scheme for bringing water to London. Inglebert was 'a poor man but Sir High financed the business and gained the profit and the credit'. This has never been substantiated. In 1606, a proposal by William Inglebert to the Corporation of the City of London to bring water was referred back and nothing further came of it. Inglebert is, at least, commemorated in Islington by a street leading into Myddelton Square.

By the spring at Great Amwell in Hertfordshire there is an urn commemorating Sir Hugh. This was designed by Robert Mylne and set up in 1800. Robert Mylne, best known for designing Blackfriars Bridge, was surveyor to the New River Company. He named his son William Chadwell Mylne, after the Chadwell spring which fed the River. William (1781-1863) inherited the surveyorship and designed St Mark's Church which stands in Myddelton Square, and laid out Myddelton Square itself, which was built in the period 1826-28. Myddelton Terrace had been built in 1821 and three other terraces were attached to the west terrace in 1827 to form the present square. The church of St Mark the Evangelist was erected in 1827 at a cost of some £16,000. It was consecrated on January 1st, 1828 by Dr Howley, Bishop of London. William Chadwell Mylne was also responsible for laying out Amwell Street and Lloyd Square.

Myddelton Square and the former Myddelton Terrace have attracted the famous. Carlyle stayed with the Reverend Edward Irving at no 4 Myddelton Terrace for a short while before marrying and settling in nearby Amwell Street. Thomas Dibden, who lived at no 5 in 1827 was another famous resident of Myddelton Square. He was a well-known songwriter, born in 1771, who died in 1841. Number 30 housed a famous Wesleyan, the Reverend Jabez Bunting, who died in 1858, aged 79. Stanley Lees Giffard, a barrister and journalist occupied no 39 Myddelton Square and, as a political writer, was compared favourably with Swift.

In the words of Samuel Smiles (*Lives of the Engineers*, 1862):

Sir Hugh Myddelton: a man full of enterprise and resources; an energetic and untiring worker; a great conqueror of obstacles and difficulties; an honest and truly noble man, one of the most distinguished benefactors the City of London has ever known.

A fuller version of this monograph was written and published by Patricia Braun, the first chairman of MSLA.

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