

SIR HUGH MYDDELTON

Practical idealist

by Patricia Braun



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 twelfth 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 descendant, became the first Member of Parliament for Denbigh during the reign of Henry VIII. Richard Myddelton was also governor of Denbigh castle during the reigns of Edward VI, Mary and Elizabeth I. He died in 1575 leaving behind him sixteen 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 (William Pinks in the *History of Clerkenwell* (1865) and H Bourne in *English Merchants* (1866) give this date. John Aubrey in *Brief Lives* and the *Dictionary of National Biography* state about 1560). There were no parish registers at that time. On February 9 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. Three of his older brothers had claims to fame. William (born about 1545) was a sailor, author and a close friend of Sir Walter Raleigh; he was one of the first tobacco smokers seen in the streets of London and died in Highgate about 1603. Thomas (born around 1550) was an influential member of the Grocers' Company; he became a freeman of the Company in 1582, was MP for Merioneth in 1597 and represented the City of London in the 1624 Parliament. Thomas was made an alderman in May 1603 and knighted the following July, becoming Lord Mayor of London in 1613. In 1595, Thomas bought the lordship of Chirk castle (near Wrexham), which has remained the property of his descendants ever since.

Robert, the third famous brother, was a member of the Skinners' Company; he too served in Parliament, as MP for Weymouth and Melcombe Regis from 1604-11 and for London in 1614. Two other brothers maintained their father's Welsh interests: Charles, the fifth son, succeeded his father as governor of Denbigh castle; Foulk, the eighth son of Richard, became High Sheriff of Denbighshire.

In 1576, Hugh followed his older brothers to London and on April 2 of 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 for a second time in 1624. His goldsmiths' 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, 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 goldsmiths' 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 upon 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 Lee 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 from the northern heights, that is by conduit from 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 28 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 that they had obtained from Parliament. The Corporation agreed, stipulating on their part that work should begin within two months and 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 29 1613, water was permitted to flow into the large reservoir at what is now the New River Head, the very day that brother Thomas took office as Lord Mayor of London. The total cost of the project was £500,000.

But the years between were financially hard for Hugh. By May 1610, he had spent £3,000 of his own money, had got as far as Enfield and virtually bankrupted himself. His attempts to get additional financial assistance met with opposition from the City and Parliament. Work had no sooner begun than a host of opponents sprang up. Owners and occupiers of lands strongly objected and presented a petition to Parliament. Fortunately, Parliament adjourned in July 1610 and did not meet for four years, by which time the project was virtually completed. More time was granted to Hugh by the Common Council, but by 1612, opposition was so strong that Hugh sought help from King James himself, who agreed to bear half the expense for a half share of the profits. An agreement was signed under the Great Seal on May 2 1612. As work proceeded, the derisive voices quietened and by 1613, the King, Corporation and citizens vied with each other in honouring the 'brave and patriotic Hugh Myddelton'.

Galch Hill near Denbigh, birthplace of Hugh Myddelton



After completion of the New River, the capital was divided into 72 shares. Half of these shares went to the King, the other half to Hugh who disposed of 34 of them (mainly to other merchant adventurers, including seven members of his own immediate family), which brought him in something in the order of £10,000. Eventually, on June 21 1619, a charter of incorporation was granted under the title of 'The Governor and Company of the New River brought from Chadwell and Amwell to London'. Hugh was the first governor. After incorporation, a change was made to Hugh's own remuneration. As we have seen, he had himself been responsible from the beginning for all expenditure and since January 1612, he had drawn a personal allowance of £2 6s 8d per week. Henceforth, he was to receive a comprehensive fee of £800 a year from January 1 1622 onwards, in return for which he undertook to maintain existing works, but not to pay for any extensions.

Hugh proceeded to spend his £10,000 on the embankment of Brading Harbour in the Isle of Wight, an undertaking almost as important in engineering history as the construction of the New River. Then he 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, Hugh worked its mines for £400 a year and after some more costly engineering, he succeeded in working them to better advantage, sending so much gold to the Royal Mint, that he was made a baronet on October 19 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 and instructions were given that he was to be exempted from the customary charge of £1080. The grant of a baronetcy was accompanied by a citation of his three notable accomplishments: for bringing fresh water to the City of London; for reclamation work at Brading and for extracting silver from the Welsh mines.

On February 21 1625, King James, not always noted for his generosity, confirmed to Sir Hugh the lease of the Mines Royal as 'a recompense for his industry in bringing a new river to London' and exempted him from paying any royalty on whatever gold and silver he might discover.

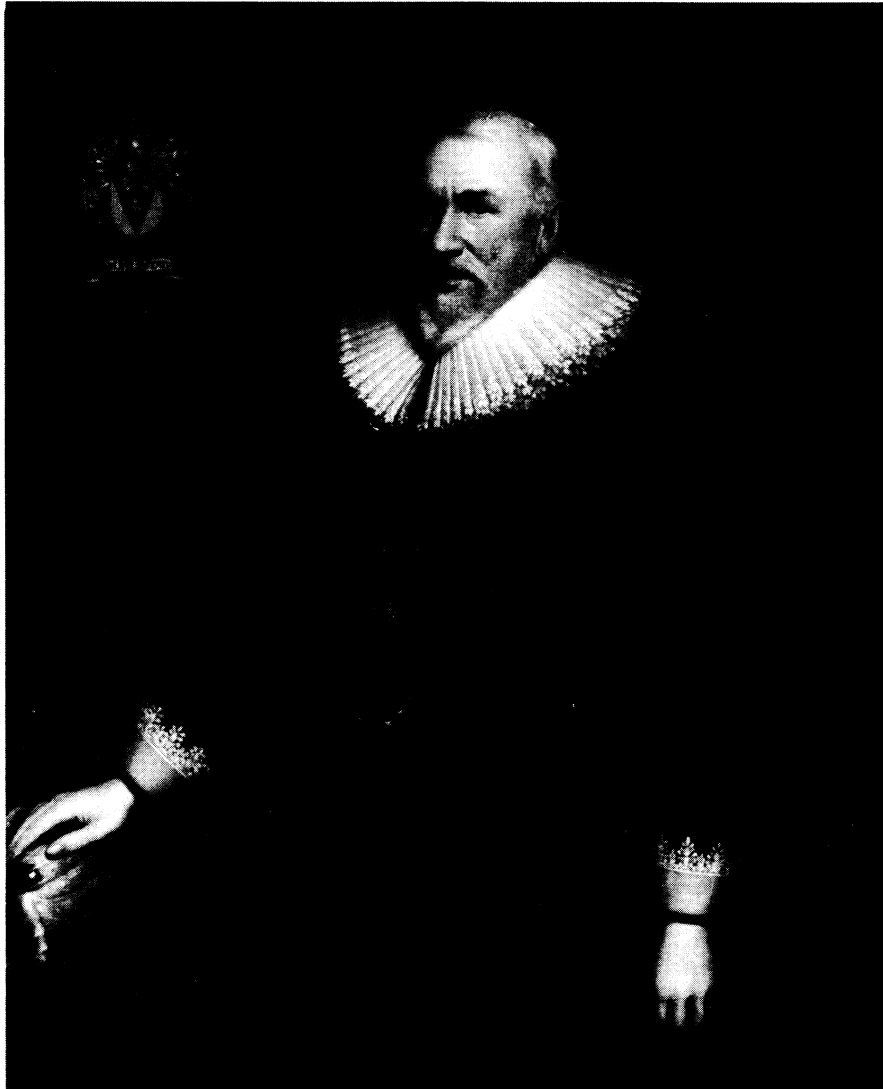
Hugh was twice married, once to Anne, daughter of Richard Collins of Lichfield Street, London; secondly to Elizabeth, daughter and heiress of John Olmstead of Ingatestone, Essex, by whom he had ten sons and six daughters. Apart from his house in Basinghall Street, he lived at Lodge, near to the Cardiganshire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



The silver cup presented by Sir Hugh Myddelton to the Corporation of Denbigh and now in the possession of the Goldsmiths' Company (by kind permission of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths)

The line of Sir Hugh's direct male descendants came to an end in 1828 and the last female direct descendant died in 1863. There are, however, a number of direct descendants of Sir Thomas Myddelton. At the time of writing (1980), Hugh Rickards who lives in Ludlow, is descended through his grandmother who was a Myddelton of Chirk. There are still Myddeltons in membership of the Goldsmiths' Company, again 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' Company charitable income, although it has lost its separate identity.



The Cornelius Janssen portrait of Sir Hugh Myddelton
(by kind permission of the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths)

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 in Islington Green. It was inaugurated by William Gladstone, then Chancellor of the Exchequer. There was another statue of Sir Hugh on a house in Holborn Viaduct by Henry Bursill but this was destroyed in 1940.

In 1633, Lady Myddelton sent a portrait of Sir Hugh to the Goldsmiths' Company requesting that it 'be hung in their parlour'. The portrait is attributed to Cornelius Janssen (anglicised as Johnson), the Amsterdam-born artist who came to England in 1618. This portrait may well be the one which still hangs in Goldsmiths' Hall. There is also a copy of it in the National Portrait Gallery (no 2192) which the Gallery acquired in 1928. The portrait shows Sir Hugh with a waterpot at his side. The chain and pendant round his neck were

given by the Court of Aldermen after a fire on the evening of November 13 1623, when Sir Hugh allowed the sluices to be opened, providing ample water to quench the flames. A pity he did not live to repeat the good deed in 1666. Incidentally, the portrait of Lady Myddelton, hanging by the side of Sir Hugh's portrait at Goldsmiths' Hall is not, as was previously thought, his wife. Recent research has established that the lady was actually the wife of his brother, Sir Thomas.

Sir Hugh presented a silver-gilt votive cup to the Corporation of Denbigh and another to the head of his family at Gwaenynog in 1616. The former cup was put up for sale in 1922 and was bought by the Goldsmiths' Company, at whose Hall it can still be seen.

Sir Hugh's coat of arms can be seen on the ceiling of the Oak Room of the Thames Water Authority's headquarters 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 Sadlers Wells and was depicted by William Hogarth in his etching *Evening* (the third of his *Four times of day* series) in the British Museum. There is a copy of this etching in the passage leading to the front of the stalls at Sadlers Wells Theatre. This is more evidence of Sir Hugh's fame in the eighteenth century.

John Aubrey in *Brief Lives* is 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 Hugh 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.

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 New River. William (1781 – 1863) inherited the surveyorship, 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, 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 about £16,000. It was consecrated on January 1 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 in 1824. George Cruikshank also lived in Myddelton Terrace for a short while, before marrying and settling in nearby Amwell Street. Another famous resident of Myddelton Square was Thomas Dibden, who lived at no 5 in 1827. He was a well-known song writer, 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.

We end this small tribute in the words of Samuel Smiles (*Lives of the Engineers*, 1862):

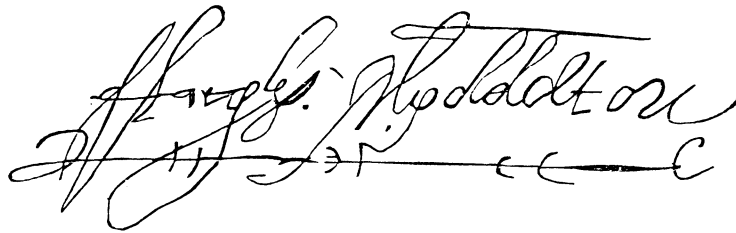
Sir Hugh Myddelton: a man full of enterprise and resources; an energetic and untiring worker; a great conqueror of obstacles and difficulties; an honest and truly noble man, and one of the most distinguished benefactors the City of London has ever known.



The Church of St Mark the Evangelist in Myddelton Square circa 1830

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The autograph of Sir Hugh Myddelton