

History

Steeped in history The Old Mill site can be traced back to the Domesday survey of 1086. Known then as Kingsmill, it was held by William the Conqueror and valued at 20 shillings, along with the two fisheries at 5 shillings each.

In 1644 the second battle of Newbury saw Aldermaston and The Old Mill feature in one of the many skirmishes to take place at the time between the Cavaliers and Cromwells' Roundheads.

On one such anniversary was fully re-enacted by the Sealed Knott Society, camping overnight in the Mill grounds and continuing their 'ongoing' battle towards Basing.

Mounts Mill

Available records show that Aldermaston mill was owned by William Mount and was part of the Wasing Estate during the 18th and for much of the 19th centuries. There may well have been other mills on the river from Domesday onwards but it is certainly the present mill that was let to a Francis Webb for 14 years on 30th June 1797 at a rent of £80 per year to be paid in half yearly instalments. There is a document of 1694 concerning Henry Winscombe of Blucklebury and a rent of £15 per year for a mill at Aldermaston leased from Sir Humphrey Forster but its location is uncertain.

The mill was let to a succession of millers during the 19th century. A Mr Sherwood paid £200 per year during the years 1811-1820, a Mr King paid £300 a year from 1820-1822 and was pleased to have a reduction to £180 over the next two years until he surrendered the lease in 1824. During the next four years a Mr Waldren paid £200 rent. For the next 20 years it was occupied by a Mr Mathews, and later his partner William Champion Gilchrist, with a lease of £180 a year.

The 1851 census shows William Gilchrist, aged 34, as miller and malster employing 24 men and several boys operating as the firm of Mathews and Gilchrist (although the former has recently died).

Turnpike Cottage

There was at this time, and for some years previously, a turnpike keeper's cottage, with garden, on the mill side of the road between the end of the present Frouds Lane and the present private entrance to the Mill. The road to Basingstoke had been turnpiked improved and widened in 1772 and in 1851 the keeper was a William Bea. In 1961 it was the home of the mill's groom, Thomas Herridge and his wife Ellen, "*who keeps the gate*". Thomas was still living in the cottage in 1871 as groom/gardener but the days of the turnpike trusts were well past and there was no longer a gate to keep or tolls to collect-the railway having reached Aldermaston in December 1847.

Mount Sells, Gilchrist Buys

During the 1850's William Gilchrist and William Mount negotiated the proposed sale of the mill to the miller. It emerges from the correspondence and solicitors letters that Mount has at the time paid £268 1s 2d for repairs to the mill. Records show that he had spent money on the mill in years previous to this – in August 1847 £12 15s 0d to local brickmaker Wimball for 6,000 bricks and £25 7s 0d in 1851 for a similar number of tiles. The river bank required attention in 1842 and a Mr Keep was paid £3 in 1842 for chalk "*for filling up the river bank*". In more recent years, Mr Moss, Paices Hill, provided clay for a similar purpose. A number of Aldermaston craftsmen were involved in such work. Giles Soper (blacksmith) was responsible for iron work and provided nails (£10 3s 0d), James Joplin (plumber, painter and glazier) painted the woodwork for £7 2s 0d and Balding the barge master at the Wharf was responsible for the transportation of the heavier materials. Lord Falmouth (Woolhampton House) was experiencing similar problems at the Brimpton Mill – described by Richard Tull, squire of Crookham as "*much the worst mill on the Kennet or hereabouts*", and had spent £300 on new machinery. The Aldermaston mill was proving to be a drain on the Wasing estate and its sale would seem to have been a sensible option.

However, Mathews is reported to have claimed that he made £500 a year at the mill. There as an additional income from the canal company of £27 10s 0d per quarter to "*keep up a head of water for their boats*". In 1856 the timber standing in the mill's 13 acres was valued at £58 10s 0d. It was believed that it was a distinct advantage for the Aldermaston mill to have the availability of the Basingstoke market in addition to the outlets at Reading and Newbury.

The mill and detached house was surrounded by a considerable complex of outbuildings – fowl house, woodhouse, card houses and stables, cattle shed two pigpens, sack room, timber yard, carpenters house, rick house, chaff house, knife and coal house and boat house. The mill had four floors and documents mention pestling floor (probably and iron pestle housed here for gridding), bran floor and mill floor, two flour machines and two sets of sack tackle. Gilchrist alleged that of the 11 pairs of stones only 9 worked at any one time and more often *'seldom more than 8pairs'*.

The possible sale included the house, outbuildings and fixtures and the adjacent domestic brewhouse with *'leadern pump and sink'*. The inventory of the house included marble chimney piece, grates, cupboard with four shelves and two drawers. The dairy boasted five shelves, meat rack and fourteen iron hooks. There was a manservant's staircase with a range of pegs for candles, locks and keys *"for all doors and fastenings to windows"*.

Williams Mount was advised by his solicitor not to take less than £3700. The resident miller offered £3500 and in spring 1856 it would seem that the sale was agreed. Tragedy struck in the summer of the same year.

A Tragic Accident

The miller had a meeting with William Harvey, Woolhampton brewer, and Charles Beddings, landlord of the 'Angel' and immediate neighbour of the brewer, to discuss business matters in the comfortable ambience of the 'Angel' inn. Here the miller enjoyed three glasses of rum and water. He began the walk home accompanied as far as Woolhampton Bridge by Harvey and P.C. Tanner (the resident Aldermaston policeman at the time). He declined the offer of a lantern saying *"Have been on the road many times and know every inch of the way"*. He left the pair and continued his way towards the mill along the river bank. He was found next morning in the river some 50-70 yards on the Woolhampton side of Wickham Knights Bridge opposite Mr Hall's Farm (Hillfoot). In January 1857 Aldermaston mill 'previously the property of the late Mr Gilchrist' was placed for auction. Records of his negotiated sale with William Mount indicate that his brother had died in 1855 and it was his life insurance that enabled William to buy the mill.

In August 1858 an advertisement was placed in the Berkshire Chronicles by Charles Smith, architect, Reading requesting tenders for the re-building of the mill. This was commissioned by a Mr Richard Sisling of Goldalming who would appear to have acquired it in 1858 from a Mr Joseph Crockett who was the probable purchaser when the mill was placed for auction following the tragic drowning of William Gilchrist.

Restoration

The millers for much of the remaining years of the century were the Kersley family. Anthony Kersley was the miller in 1861 and in 1871 employed 6 men and a boy, a carter, several domestic servants and a governess, and he is described as both miller and malster. He died in 1885 and his ornate memorial stone in Aldermaston churchyard reads "Anthony James Kersley, Nevill House, Brimpton and Aldermaston Mill". He would seem to have been succeeded by his son Anthony. In 1895 Walter Parson and family were briefly in occupation and two of its members opened the batting for the village on occasions during these later Victorian years. ('Flicky' Higgs stood as umpire at some of these matches). In 1901 Charles Keyser shortly after his purchase in 1893, instigated *"thorough"* restoration at the mill *"which had been untenanted for upwards of three years"*. The news report stated that "new machinery was to be introduced and improvements made to the house in preparation for new tenant – Mr Iremonger. The new tenants had a cart with the sign *'Aldermaston Roller Mills'*. This suggests that the mill may now have been furnished with rollers as the preferred means of grinding the cereal. Some mills keep to traditional stones but used rollers to process the 'middling's' left after fine flour was extracted. Unfortunately, it was the increasing amount of imported 'hard' grain that was best suited to this more efficient process and milling was gradually confined to areas close to importing sea ports.

The Iremongers would seem to have traded with Strange's brewery, Huntly and Palmers and the village Co-operative where Billy Nash made bread in the bakehouse at the rear of the premises. The Brimpton mill at this time was the sawmill on Tom James and the Woolhampton mill produced a declining amount of animal foodstuffs with some sawing and the generation of electricity for miller George Frankum's house, *'Brookside'*, opposite the mill in Station road. The latter occasionally visited the Iremongers. It was his custom to sail up the river from his boathouse at Woolhampton proudly displaying his triangular red sail.

The Iremonger family would seem to have continued at the mill during these years of general decline until the late 1920s. What was to be done with an empty, rather dilapidated mill and neglected mill house?

“Teas by Running Water”

Charles Keyser had died in 1929, and his son Norman was living in Oxfordshire, thus decisions regarding the possible use of the mill devolved to his still resident widow or daughters Muriel and Sybil. It was the latter who persuaded Evelyn knowing “*she made lovely cakes*”, to run the mill on their behalf as tea rooms.

Major Edden had died in 1927 and Evelyn no longer had a situation at the Red House, and had declined an invitation to join Sir Robert Black’s staff at Midgham House. She was known personally to Lady Black, a family friend and tennis partner of the Eddens and Ben recalls being sent outside when Evelyn and she had a ‘chat’ in the kitchen during her visits to the Red House.

An advertisement appeared in the NWN around this time “*THOROUGHLY EXPERIENCED COOK HOUSEKEEPER wanted immediately between 35 and 45, wage £85. Lady Black, Midgham Park.*” Could this have been the offered position?

This did not mean that she was idle. She was busy making cakes and steak and kidney pies for Tony, complete with tray and bicycle, to sell around the village. This was when her son was available and not working for a few pence in the Rev. Newham’s secluded vicarage garden (now Old Well House), where there were a multitude of daffodil bulbs to be planted. He also went to Blacknest to assist Mrs Fosbury with her countless cats but resigned after three days on account of the smell.

Signs advertising “*Teas by Running Water*” were placed at the end of the mill drive and on the Bath road close to the present row of Broom Hill houses. A working routine developed whereby Tony, mother or both would collect milk, tea, sugar and bread from the Court kitchen and proceed to the mill with these basics plus Evelyn’s scones and cakes. When the last of the afternoon teas had been served mother and son were required to return the milk, tea, etc, to the Court kitchen (this latter procedure seemed somewhat petty – although perhaps needful as the Court kitchen would have had an available ‘fridge’).

The mill itself was derelict and the inside strewn with bits of unused machinery, old sacks and varying bric-a-brac. The house had an available kitchen with range and a suitable room downstairs for use as a tea room. The milling families had depended for their water on a well outside the kitchen window. In latter years the Keyser family had sunk a 110 ft artesian well (possibly 1901) which fed water by its own volition to a tank by the back door and could be pumped from here by hand to upstairs rooms.

There were an increasing number of touring casual motorists in the 1930s but not, as yet, sufficient to support a country team room. The setting was scenic but in Evelyn’s view the teas were too expensive.

‘A Step in the Dark’

Evelyn suggested “*it would make a nice guest house*” and the Misses Keyser asked Evelyn to run such a venture on their behalf. “*No*”, said Evelyn, “*it’s sink or swim, and would only do it for myself*”. Eventually she persuaded the sisters and their mother to allow her to rent the mill for one year from Lady Day (March 25). Thus with some trepidation, Evelyn, Ted and Tony left the familiar security of Hall Cottages to an uncertain future – “*a step in the dark*”. Ben, still working at Froyle Place now returned on his weekends-off to park his motorcycle at the mill from whence he had been sold somewhat grudgingly, one shilling worth of chicken feed some 12 years before.

Red Ochre, Chickens in the Bedroom and Afternoon Teas

Ben, still at Froyle Place, knew that the rest of the family were working night and day at the mill – ‘make or break’. One weekend he asked his mother “*Can I help*”? His offer was accepted on the condition that he sold his now unnecessary motorcycle. Ben began his 60 years residence at Aldermaston mill and years of hard work loomed ahead for himself, Ted, Evelyn, Tony and later, Effie and Betty.

The ground floor of the house was reasonable, with a usable kitchen, sitting room and tea room. The grounds, however, required much tidying if they were to give guests and customers a pleasurable and attractive aspect.

The interior walls of the home were covered in red ochre, accompanied by matched red spiders – (ochre ‘an earthy mineral’ oxide of iron mingled with varying amounts of sand or clay – available in three colours, yellow, brown or red’) The mill walls were certainly in the latter as Ben can testify as he and others spent hours tediously scraping it from the walls.

One of the bedrooms, now number 4, had previously housed chickens and there was obviously much unpleasant cleaning to be done before such a room could be considered for its proper use.

There is a blurred memory of much activity and hard work. Ted did a post round for Fred Clark at the post office, jobbing gardening for Draper Strange at Mill Lane, Padworth and worked in the gardens and vegetable patch at the mill (assisted by Ben). Tony continued at the vicarage, waited and served at table in the guest house. Evelyn cooked, kept the house and scoured the Newbury showrooms for secondhand furniture and other suitable articles. Drewett Neate in the Cattle Market was favourite place of call – Frank Neate being a friend of the family – a friendship that was to prove critical.

There was, in addition, wall papering to be done, brick and cobbled floors to be cleaned and other decoration to ensure that at least a tea room, a downstairs sitting room and bedrooms were available for potential customers. The family confined themselves to the rear of the house leaving the habitable remainder for guests and casual tea drinkers. The mill remained untouched as did the more remote part of the several acres of grounds, holding future promise but for the moment supporting beds of 3 foot high stinging nettles. The ground that would be the site of the future 'Woodbine' wooden bungalow was energetically cultivated to produce vegetables for domestic consumption and, hopefully, for paying guests.

A passing motorist in 1938 hoping for "*Teas by Running Water*" would have been served in the front right hand room of the present mill house or, in suitable weather, on the lawn. The tables were covered with yellow or other gingham style tablecloths and the visitors would have been attended by Tony or Evelyn. The set tea, for 1/3d, was homemade bread, four buttered scones, three cakes and a pot of tea. Luncheons were also served and the Henry family from 'the Gables', Colthrop were regular Sunday diners. This house has been demolished but the name remains in Gables Way leading to a recently built trading estate close to the site of the home.

John Henry had, as had the previous owners of Aldermaston mill, leased a mill from the Mount family. This was the Colthrop paper mill which he rented from the Wasing estate in 1861 until he purchased it four years later. It was most likely his son John Maclean Henry and family who enjoyed Evelyn's Sunday lunches.

Accommodation was available at three guineas a week (£3.3s.0d) and the first guest was a gentleman from an Indian tea plantation – remembered as recommended by Mrs Ford who also '*took in*' guests in the village. There was no water upstairs and this needed to be drawn from the copper in the scullery and taken upstairs to boarders in a large jug resting in a washbowl. (Some half dozen sets of these had been purchased at £5 a set). During the 1930s and through the war years very few boarding houses, seaside or otherwise, had running water in upstairs bedrooms and there was usually but a single bathroom. The cold water at the mill house was hand pumped to a tank in the roof and down again to provide water for the upstairs toilet.

Evelyn ensured that this precious water was carefully conserved by placing a brick in the cistern. This need for frugality meant that the sheets of toilet paper were counted and that the label on the top of the carton of 'Vim' was carefully replaced to expose but two holes.

The earlier lighting was generated from an American system – Kalor lighting. This had been obtained through Cyril Maynard (Maynards garage, Woolhampton), no doubt influenced by the advice of his father who was Count Gurowski's electrician at Woolhampton House. The dynamo was activated by pressing one of the light switches in the house and had a tendency to 'flicker' inconveniently. In the 1950's some two dozen accumulators were installed at the present Stable Room. This would have been similar to the system installed to operate at Ferris's Farm, Upper Woolhampton, and possibly in the absence of direct domestic supplies of gas or electricity at other large houses in the district (see Red House, Aldermaston).

There were helpful contacts. Parents spending a weekend visiting their son or attending a special day or other occasion at Douai School. Woolhampton were directed towards The Old Mill by Father Leonard. There were a similar arrangement with Downe House School, Cold Ash and Bradfield College.

Such income did not preclude the need to chop willows to burn on the kitchen range (not suitable for open sitting room fire because of the sparks), and other offcuts were collected from George Ford's saw mills, Park Farm, West Mortimer. Two huts were built near the river as changing rooms for would-be-swimmers at 6d a time and for 2/6d anglers could fish daily from 7 am – 8 pm – there were but 2 or 3 a week in the early years. There would be the need for future schemes that might raise sufficient income to allow the family to survive. Those pigs ...

Crisis – Purchase or Go

A number of guests stayed at the Mill while 'house hunting' in the district. One such family were the Huttons.

It's perhaps pertinent to record that Emma Keyser, the late squire's widow, died in May 1938 and much of the daily matters regarding the estate were, in the absence of Norman Keyser, very much the immediate concern of Muriel and Sybil Keyser. Mrs Keyser had always had a high regard for Evelyn. Shortly after the First World War, Evelyn Arlott asked to visit and speak with Mrs Keyser. She waited until she, as was the customer, summoned by housekeeper, Mrs Tracey. "*Mrs Keyser will see you now.*" Evelyn proposed that they ought to do something for the village children and suggested that perhaps a Christmas party would be suitable. "*Good idea. We will support you with butter and milk.*" Thus with the addition of bread from Aldermaston Co-op and perhaps some of Evelyn's cakes a tradition was established and Mrs Keyser regularly attended the parties and maintained her support. In the event Mr Bucknell, Forsters Farm provided the milk and the Keyser's butter and tea.

The Huttons, as did most of the guests had their meal in the sitting room and Tony served at table. Matters were far from normal on this occasion as the visitors halted their ongoing conversation whenever Tony appeared to clear or serve. On one occasion the remark was made "*Don't talk in front of that boy.*" That boy was concerned "*Mum, something fishy is going on.*" Later Mr and Mrs Hutton viewed the mill with its old machinery, walked along the river bank poking at the wooden weirs and seemed to be taking a particular interest in the property. Tony was certain as to its meaning, "*They want to buy this place!*"

"*Misses Keyser's would not do this to me*", exclaimed Mother.

Evelyn telephoned the Court and confirmed Tony's worst fears. She asked if she could make the first offer "*No, You can't get the money.*" The family were offered £200 to get out which was raised to £500 at a later date. The unanimous view of the family – "*This will ruin us.*"

The family had recently paid the rent on Lady Day and thus had 12 months grace before the tenancy expired and they would be forced to leave. Evelyn sought advice from Charles Smith (son of the late Harry) at 'Woodbine Farm' and he suggested that they spoke to family friend Frank Neate about the predicament "*Tell Evelyn not to worry*", he counselled.

Frank Neate arranged a meeting with the Misses Keyser's and discussed possibilities regarding the sale of the mill, house, the cottages and the land. He persuaded the sisters that he was not acting in his professional capacity as an estate agent but as a personal friend of the family. A price was mentioned - £3,500. There was an assumed belief that this would place it beyond the reach of Evelyn and Ted. (That amount would have bought half a dozen semi detached houses in Newbury at this time and the purchase of one such a house would have been the limit for most 'ordinary folk'). The negotiations were concluded at £3,000 when Frank was able to persuade the vendors that the family had at some cost improved the property considerably during the period of tenancy.

The Misses Keyser's would have been aware that the estate was to be sold in the very near future. This, plus the worsening international situation with the possibility of war in Europe, perhaps persuaded them to finally agree to a sale despite their reluctance to allow a tenant and former estate worker to make such an audacious purchase.

'*Kelly's Directory*', 1939, carried the following:

Old Mill Guest House, Mrs Evelyn Arlott, Tel Wool 65

In the NWN of the same year under 'Situations Vacant':

'*Daily maid required to help generally, no smoking, Mill Hotel, Aldermaston*'

(The ban on smoking put Evelyn years ahead of her time).

Ben was a smoker – permitted outside only – favouring "*De Rezke Minors – The 10 minute smoke for intelligent folk*", 1 shilling for 30.

Immediately below in the same column, same edition:

'*Lady Mount requires experienced Parlour Maid. Please apply Wasing, Place, Aldermaston*'.

There was now merely a need to maintain the regular payments to the Ramsbury building Society!

Tall Storeys

Evelyn and Ted had purchased a four floored mill. The roof frequently required attention. It was imperative that no loose slate fell on some unsuspecting visitor. The regular inspections and any necessary repairs were carried out by Bill Broadhurst, an employee of local builder George Blake. He put on his plimsolls, climbed the tall ladder and used others to assist his clamber across the roof. He checked the chicken wire guard that skirted the roof as a deterrent to any falling slates and inspected or renewed the roof where necessary. However, during the 1950's Health and Safety Regulations forbade such a dangerous practice and expensive scaffolding was now essential and mandatory for the most casual inspection and minimum maintenance. One day in 1957 "*Wish we could take it down*". "*Good idea*" said George.

The local authorities were consulted, as both mill and house were listed buildings of historical and architectural interest. Ben recalls the arrival of officials and a lady with a sketch pad who prepared a drawing to show the appearance of the site with the mill reduced to two floors. This appeared to enhance the setting for the much appreciated Queen Anne mill house. Permission was given to remove the top floors of the mill.

Geo. Blake used a number of the '*rescued*' bricks to build an office for himself and an old outbuilding at the mill provided the approved Welsh slates for the new lower roof.

A younger member of the family recalls that the workmen brewed up on a small fire each morning on the mill's stone floor. Ever helpful he brought them potatoes which they cooked on the open fire and enjoyed a warming lunch.

Later that snowy winter, wishing to maintain his carpenters by means of a suitable indoor job, the builder offered to put a wooden floor in the mill at a low price. Thus within a few months the mill had lost a roof and gained a floor. The latter, with regular weekly polishing, "*came up a treat*". It was also now possible to remove the wooden pillars that previously Supported machinery housed in the upper storeys. This gave more space and made the room more suitable for functions.