

THE LOWER MILL PRESTBURY

AN INTRODUCTION

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Photo from 'Images of Cheltenham' Vol 2 by Elaine Heasman. Date? Before 1922.



The Lower Mill as it is today.

THE LOWER MILL

The earliest record of a watermill in Prestbury is in 1292 when ecclesiastical tax records show that the Bishop of Hereford had a water-mill at Prestbury. The Bishop of Hereford was the Lord of the Manor of Prestbury from early days. There is a later record showing that the Bishop held the mill in 1344. Records also show that the Prior of Llanthony was leasing a mill from the Bishop in 1389 and that in 1506 and 1536 the Bishop's mill was held by a lessee. In 1575 William Baghot was the lessee.

There are two mills in the village. The Upper Mill (sometimes known previously as Novertown Mill or White Mill) is further upstream and the Lower Mill nearer the church. Both are served by the same Mill Stream (Mill Brook in older manuscripts) which is fed by four springs on the Cotswold escarpment to the east of the village.

Which mill dates back to 1292? Or was there another which is now lost? In 'Mills and Milling in Gloucestershire' M Beacham records a third mill at the moated house of the Bishop of Hereford. He suggests dates of 11th century to 1698 (ie when the property fell into ruin). It seems very likely that he is taking the 1292 record to indicate a mill other than either the Upper or Lower Mill but there is no physical trace of it nor any further evidence. The evidence to support the Lower Mill as the site of the oldest mill is largely its position. It is near to the heart of the village, to Llanthony Priory's manor house, to the church, the Burgeage and on a ready route to the moated house which was the base of the Bishop of Hereford.. This is the conclusion reached in the Victoria County History.

The earliest reference found so far to the Lower Mill by name is in an Indenture dated June 1745.

OWNERS AND OCCUPANTS

The Lower Mill has had a variety of owners of which the earliest recorded is the then Bishop of Hereford in 1292. In the early days the Mill would have been part of the manor and served its needs. Eventually the Mill became independently owned and would have been leased to a miller for a rent. Until early in the 20th Century the owner was for many years the Capel family. The occupant was therefore a tenant who paid a rent to the owner and made a living from milling the grain of the local farmers and charging for this service.

The 1745 Indenture reads ‘Between Henry Smith of Cheltenham and Robert Bidington formerly of Blothington, Oxon, now of Prestbury, Miller, and John Cooper of Bishops Cleeve, Collarmaker.’ Bidington and Cooper sold to Smith for 5/- ‘all that water grist mill and houses and buildings known as Prestbury Lower Mill together with outhouses and stables, courts and yards, banksides, mill pounds, woods weirs millstream, mill shears, ponds, pound banks, floodgates, water courses, hedges itches, mounds, house woods…’.

On 8 August 1831 the property was for sale at The Plough, Cheltenham. In the Sale particulars the property is described as ‘All that Freehold Water Corn Grist Mill with dwelling house, stable, outbuildings and large garden called Prestbury Lower Mill now occupied by Mr John Cole at a rent of £50’. In 1832, probably as a result of that sale, a further legal document reads, ‘An agreement of the second year of William IV between James Bevan, gent, and John Capel, his wife Susan, Joseph Fisher and Sarah his wife of six messuages, six gardens, six orchards and two water corn grist mills in Prestbury.’ At this stage the Capels obviously owned both Upper and Lower Mills. They continued to own the Lower Mill well into the 20th century.

For at least 40 years the miller was John Cole. The 1831 sale details show him to be the occupant. The 1836-37 electoral roll shows the Mill occupied by the Cole family and owned by George Capel of 3 Dyers Court, Aldermanbury, London. In the 1851 census the occupants are shown as John Cole aged 59, miller and baker, with his wife Elizabeth and their 9 children aged from 7 to 26 (6 sons, 3 daughters) plus Thomas Wilkes a servant. (Three bedrooms!) In 1861 the Coles are still in residence, now with 7 children and Thomas Wilkes. John is described as ‘miller and baker’, 3 sons as millers and 2 as bakers. They are still there in 1871 still with 7 children (now aged 27 to 44) the youngest boy is now a clerk. A new resident is Jane Loveridge, grand daughter, aged 10.

(The Cole family moved from the Lower Mill to the Manor House before 1891. Perhaps on the death of John. They are shown as bakers, the head of house as William (62) with brothers Thomas, George and Alfred and two of their sisters Louisa and Mary.)

By 1901 William Wood (miller and baker) is shown as the occupier with Julia his wife and young children Willie and Fredrick, and George Wood, William's father - a miller. During the tenancy of the Wood family in 1903 the Mill was sold again. The Woods remained there until 1913/14.

When the Woods left or at about this time the Mill went through a change of use and became a laundry. The new tenants were the Kitchen family.

The late Elsie Yeo told Mr Roger Beacham that Major Christopher Capel moved his tenants, the Kitchen family who ran a laundry there, out of the mill so that he could convert it to a house for his widowed mother. Major Capel named it Greenland after a former house that once stood near the Grotto. Miss Yeo thought that Mrs Capel never lived there. She in fact died at a house in Evesham Road in 1923. The conversion must have happened in the early 1920s.

The property was still recorded as Greenland in 1950 when the Kelly's Directory shows the occupant to be Frank Daniels, and in 1955 when the occupant was George Hinton.

The sale particulars as they appeared in the Gazette contain useful information.

PRESTBURY, NEAR CHELTENHAM
John G Villar

Is instructed to SELL BY AUCTION, at The King's Arms Inn, Prestbury, on THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 5th. 1903, at 6 o'clock in the Evening precisely, subject to Conditions of Sale to be then produced,

PRESTBURY MILL,
SITUATE near the centre of the Village, and in the occupation of Mr, W, Wood, whose tenancy expires at Lady Day next.
The Property comprises a Water Corn Mill with large overshot Water Wheel, 3 pairs of French Mill Stone, auxiliary power by a Beam Engine with large Fly-Wheel, with steam pipe to an Eg-gended Boiler (out of repair). The Mill contains Corn Floor, Mill Floor, and Ground Floor, The Dwelling House adjoining contains 3 Bedrooms and Attic. Sitting Room, Kitchen and Pantry. There is a Bake-house and Oven, Wash-house, stable for 3 Horses, Cart Shed, Piggeries, &c; Kitchen Garden, and small Orchard. Also the Mill Pond, having a long frontage to the public road, with ancient rights of water supply and access.

To view apply to the Tenant, and for further particulars to Messrs. Bubb and Co., Solicitors, Cheltenham, or to the Auctioneer, 8, Clarence street, Cheltenham.

THE MILL POND AND THE MILL WHEEL



The position and extent of the mill pond is shown on the Tithe Map of 1841 and the Ordnance Survey map of 1883. The pond is extensive, reaching from the northbound footpath from the church right down to the mill. The 1903 advertisement refers to 'the Mill Pond, having a long frontage to the public road with ancient rights of water supply and access'. The whole pond is now filled in and some newer buildings on the east side are built very close to what would have been the edge of the pond. In the attractive Lower Mill gardens the area previously occupied by the pond is now a lawn which is almost on a level with the upstairs windows. The mill stream is re-channelled from the eastern edge of the property to join up with the sluice stream nearer the house.

There is no sign of the water course from the pond to the Mill and thus a query over the position of the mill wheel. The building itself shows no evidence of the old watercourse or the wheel. It is usually assumed that the rectangular space between Mill Street and the red brick Mill House was the space where the wheel turned. Looking closely at the old photograph, probably early 20th century, it is difficult to fit the wheel into the space between the railing and the red brick house as there are windows and doors at ground level in both the mill and the dwelling. The wheel is described in the 1903 sale particulars as 'a large overshot water wheel'.

A memory of Mary Martin who was born in Prestbury in 1906 and whose childhood home was in Mill Street reads 'The Old Mill had a huge mill wheel at the side. Mr & Mrs Seth Kitchen had a laundry there. At one small window some sweets were displayed and they were sold at the door'. The Kitchens are first recorded living at the Mill in 1914 according to the Cheltenham Annuaire. Regrettably later editions of the Annuaire contain no references at all to the Lower Mill so we do not know when the Kitchens left except that another personal memory was that Mrs Kitchen had to leave when the property was converted to a dwelling—probably 1922. So what is the date of Mary Martin's memory and what is the date of the old photograph shown on page 3? The memory and the photograph have to fit between 1906 and 1922 when the mill was converted. The evidence of the photo and the memory is that there was no wheel attached to the redbrick portion, nor was it on the road end of the mill. The conclusion must be therefore that the mill wheel was on the other end of the building.



Aerial view (1950s?) of the Lower Mill showing the east front of the house. The single story extension is now two story. It would seem likely that the buttress in line with the chimney was the base of the old chimney and that the north wall of the two story older building was the gable to which the wheel was attached. The millpond reached the fir tree and rockery—the photo conceals the drop of several feet at that point.

THE BOILER.

The 1903 sale particulars show that the mill has ‘auxiliary power by a Beam Engine with large Fly-Wheel, with steam pipe to an Eggended Boiler’.

It seems that a beam engine powered by steam from a coal-fired boiler was constructed to supplement the water power for the mill some time during the 19th century. Perhaps the end of the lease with John Cole, probably in the 1880s, was the occasion for the building of the boiler and engine in an attempt to make the mill profitable. The boiler explains the presence of the chimney shown in the old photograph. (‘Egg ended’ describes the shape of the boiler i.e. a cylinder with a hemispherical end cap.) The beam engine would have meant that three pairs of millstones could be operated simultaneously.



This is a single cylinder beam pumping engine built by Gimson & Co of Leicestershire in 1880, now in a museum. The beam engine in Lower Mill would have been much the same size. In the picture the fire and boiler are out of sight but on the left is the steam cylinder which would push and pull the red ‘beam’ thus making the wheel rotate. The rotation would drive the millwheels and hoists and other machinery.

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THE MILL STONES

Mill stones have always required special properties. British ones were produced mainly in the Peak District and in Wales. These were adequate for coarse grinding but the demand for finer grinding meant searching out French burr-stones. The French quarries produced the right stone but in small pieces. Large quantities of these pieces were imported and then fabricated, jigsaw fashion, and bound by iron hoops, to produce the required millstones. W Gardners of Gloucester were local fabricators.

Buying a millstone was a major expense. A single French stone often cost more than the mill's sales yielded, or the owner obtained from its lease, in a whole year. Few tenant millers could afford such expense, so leases normally obliged the owner, not the tenant, to replace a millstone when it was worn out.

Millstones were fitted in pairs, the upper 'runner' millstone moving against a lower fixed millstone. Stones were usually about 4 feet (1.25 metres) in diameter, weighed more than a ton and were geared to turn at about 125rpm.

Special patterns needed to be cut in the stones to grind the corn and the two stones had to match each others shape very precisely. Highly skilled stone dressers were needed to cut the stones correctly since wrongly set stones would produce flour that was too fine from one side and too coarse from the other. They had to be kept full of corn when running to keep the two stones apart – if the stone surfaces touched when running then they could wear out in a few minutes compared with weeks of normal use.



Typical French millstones. Each stone is made of several pieces of French burrstone which have been cut and pieced together then held by an iron band.

THE END OF MILLING.

During the Napoleonic Wars 1799-1815 Napoleon imposed an embargo on British imports from Europe - including grain . Inevitably grain prices rose. That all changed in 1815. British landowners feared the effect of cheap foreign grain so they passed the Corn Laws. This led to unrest in some parts of the country because the price of bread had been falling and was now suddenly increased. The Corn Laws stayed in place until 1846 when they were repealed. From that point the price of grain and flour began to fall and the amount imported increased dramatically. Britain's dependence on imported grain in the 1830s was 2%; in the 1860s it was 24%; in the 1880s it was 45%, for corn it was 65%. Therefore the amount of land under cultivation for grain decreased equally dramatically.

At the same time the techniques of milling were changing. Traditional corn grinding using mill stones produces meal which is good as long as everyone is happy with wholemeal bread. The introduction in other countries of reduction milling with cast iron rollers, and different strains of wheat, produced a fine white flour which quickly became very popular. Inevitably the profitability of the traditional mill fell. The introduction by many mill owners in the 19th century of the steam engine with more and better stones was an attempt to counter the changes in the market.

It is no surprise therefore that we see the Lower Mill becoming a bakery as well as a mill, and then being transformed into a laundry before it finally became a house. The process was repeated widely.

It is difficult now to re-construct the Mill as it was before the early 20th Century building work. The red brick part of the structure was the house which was occupied by the miller and his family. It is described in 1903 as containing 3 bedrooms and attic, sitting room, kitchen and pantry. (One miller and his wife had 9 children!). The Mill was the long stone structure which is now the larger part of the residence and has been converted to two floors.. According to the 1903 sale particulars it had three floors: a Corn floor, Mill floor and Ground floor. It would probably have been the normal mill layout; the grain was lifted in sacks onto the sack floor at the top of the mill on a hoist operated from the mill wheel. The sacks were then emptied into bins, and the grain fell down through a hopper to the millstones on the mill floor below. The milled grain (flour) is collected as it emerges through the grooves in the runner stone from the outer rim of the stones and is fed down a chute to be collected in sacks on the ground or meal floor.

The Lower Mill functioned for about 600 years before becoming a victim of the industrial revolution. Initially it was probably driven directly by the mill stream, perhaps first using a horizontal wheel and then an undershot vertical wheel. Eventually the conversion to the more powerful and efficient overshot wheel was undertaken which would have meant the construction of the mill pool and large scale modifications to the building.

In the 19th century the industrial revolution, the growing population and the demand for finer flour meant that in order to survive the mill had to change. The construction of the beam engine with more and better millstones meant greater production of higher grade flour.

Eventually by the turn of the century, milling, even with the help of steam and more millstones, became unsustainable for a small, local mill such as this. The laundry looked a good alternative because it could make use of some of the facilities but that too proved unsustainable. The conversion into a residence was therefore the best way to preserve the building so that it continues to have a place in the village and provide a very pleasant family home and garden.

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I am very grateful to the owner of the Lower Mill for opportunity to visit the house and garden.