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More than 1000 years ago – a look at Abbots Worthy Mill

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Abbots Worthy Mill is one of those few surviving buildings which can trace its antecedents to the Domesday Book, and even further in the past. In a Saxon charter of 961, when the Edgar ‘king of all England’ granted the bishop of Winchester ‘land at Easton’, there is a reference to *Mylan Weges*.¹ This was probably the existing Stoke Charity road, which led down to Mill Lane, Abbots Worthy, as the grant not only included Easton itself, but also much land immediately outside the city walls, between present-day Abbots Barton and Abbots Worthy and extending to Martyr Worthy. This is the interpretation of Grundy, whose monumental work on the Saxon land charters carried out in the 1920s, owed much to detail then being included by the Ordnance Survey on its maps.²

Domesday itself also included the mill, then valued at 20s, with 63 acres of meadow.³ It was held within the hundred of Micheldever by St Peter’s Abbey, which was the New Minster, Winchester, the last resting place of Alfred the Great. It was superseded in 1110, under orders from Henry I, when the monks with Alfred’s remains moved to the newly founded Hyde Abbey. St Peter’s also held 72 acres of meadow and pasture of 80 acres called ‘Moor’, which must have been part of Winnall Moors. These parameters were to rule the fate of Abbots

Worthy until the dissolution: it was a domain of Hyde Abbey within a Saxon 'regional council' that lumped it in with the manors of Micheldever and other villages to the north. ⁴

Domesday shows that there was also a mill at Martyr Worthy and three each at Headbourne Worthy and Kings Worthy, meaning three millstones and three wheels, probably housed in a single building. The actual detail of the mills could change, so that, for example, a grant of 1698 of Abbots Worthy Mill to Joseph Langford, refers to 'two Corn Mills or Grist Mills', ⁵ the word grist sometimes referring to malted corn. The ecclesiastical lords had, in effect, control of the most important technical facility of the times: the medieval mill was akin to the oil industry or the internet of today. Ownership was desirable not only because it allowed corn to be ground locally, but also because it brought income in the way of tithes. An example of this comes from a charter of 1294, when the refectory of Hyde Abbey was endowed with all the tithes of Kings Worthy and specifically the corn tithes of Barton [Stacey]. ⁶

The fall of Hyde Abbey

In 1538 Hyde Abbey fell victim to the dissolution and its prior and monks were pensioned off (though continued as local churchmen). Four years later Henry VIII granted the manor of Abbots Worthy and many other possessions to his physician, a Venetian called Augustine de Augustinis, and his wife Agnes, who three years later sold it on (the proper term is 'alienated') to Thomas Wriothesley. ⁷ In the transfer Abbots Worthy Mill is specifically mentioned. Wriothesley was a close servant of the king and rose to prominence under the ill-fated Thomas Cromwell, though survived his master's demise and rose ever upwards on the spoils of Hyde and other places in Hampshire. In 1544 he was created Baron Wriothesley of Titchfield and later the 1st Earl of Southampton, as directed in the king's will. ⁸ This man and his heirs were to own the mill until Rachel, a daughter of the 4th earl, married William Lord Russell in 1669, ⁹ after which it followed in the Russell family (which held the title of Duke of

Bedford) until 1770 when it and lands nearby became part of the Worthy Park Estate.¹⁰ The manor itself was kept until 1801, when the Bedford estate was sold to Sir Francis Baring.¹¹ The mill stayed with Worthy Park for 200 years until in 1966, in a ruinous state, it was bought by the writer, Raymond Hitchcock, and his wife Joyce, who turned it into a wonderful home and studio.¹² A few years after Raymond's death in 1992, the house was sold to the present owners, Geoff and Gonilla Tuite.

Millstones and water meadows

The mechanics of the mill have not been recorded and there is nothing to be seen in the existing building. Presumably it had an undershot wheel (or possibly a Poncelet version)¹³, as the more efficient overshot design would have required a substantial fall, which the existing topography precludes. The original mill was 'lately burned down' in 1770 and the present building was almost certainly built soon after by Sir Chaloner Ogle of Worthy Park, who had bought it in that year.¹⁰ The earlier mill building is depicted at the head of a largely diagrammatic 'Map of the Water Courses from King's Worthy Mill to Durngate Mill and ye City of Winchester' dated 1701.¹⁴ It also shows a crossing just below the mill, which must be the footbridge which still exists, leading into 'Lady [Rachel] Russell's Meadow'. A later but undated 18th-century plan,¹⁵ shows the same feature, leading to 'a watery lane', which can still be traced. The mill itself appears as a *longueur* with a large mill-pond alongside.

A third snapshot of May 29th 1741 may be earlier than the previous source, as it omits the crossing and the mill-pond. Entitled 'A Plan of Abbots Worthy Mill &c',¹⁶ it was drawn by the surveyor William Godson and gives details of the management of the waterways, which were no doubt manipulated from time to time to improve the flow of the water. On the plan the mill is called 'upper mill', presumably to distinguish it from Kings Worthy Mill, which was downstream. Godson calls it 'an Antient accustomed mill' and his notes refer to a point 'A', which is about 33 yards upstream of the mill, and point 'B', which is about 200 yards

further upstream. The same features exist today, though the sluice at 'A' now runs into a permanent channel.

So much for ownership and mechanics, but what was happening at the mill itself can only be glimpsed in the records that happen to have survived. Thus in 1597 Henry 3rd Earl of Southampton granted William Corham, son of Roger Corham of Hyde Barton a 99-year lease 'of [a] tenement or dwelling house; corn mills, grinding mills, and mill place and mill house set lying and being in Worthy Abbatis'.¹⁷ He was a Lincoln's Inn barrister who in about 1564 had married Mabel Chaundler, the widow of a friend, who held a large estate at the Abbots Barton and much else. The timing of the lease is rather odd. The Corhams were staunch Catholics at a time when those who refused to conform to the Anglican faith were subject to huge fines. Only a year after leasing the mill, 500 acres of land had to be leased by them to bring in much-needed revenue.¹⁸

Terrible deaths from a fungus

A century later, in the 1690s, snippets from Kings Worthy parish records reveal the plight of the Barnet family. Rebekah, widow of John, died in the mill in 1694 and in the same year Ann, wife of Thomas, described as a 'gent', 'being newly removed from ye Mill to ye Parsonage House [which was nearby, on the site of a house now called Lane End¹⁹] was taken ill in her legg ...[and in] great extremity at last had her legg cut off'. The poor woman, who died soon after, was probably suffering from ergotism. Her namesake daughter died in the following year also after being 'taken ill in her legg' and two years later Thomas himself died at the age of 80, having been 'bedrid severall months by reason of a sore legg'. It is now known that ergotism, or St Anthony's Fire, is caused by alkaloid poisoning from the fungus *Claviceps purpurea*, which grows on ears of rye and other cereals.

A Deptford sailor wins the day

The year after the death of Thomas Barnet, as mentioned above, the mill was granted by Lady Rachel Russell to Joseph Langford, a miller from Sutton Scotney.⁵ It was on a standard 99-year three-lives lease, naming his wife Patience and their two sons, Joseph and Robert. The Langfords probably never lived at Abbots Worthy and two years later the lease, citing ‘one wheat mill and one malt mill’, had been assigned to Thomas Dymock, who had land at Easton (where Dymoke House can still be found).⁵ Then by 1730 the mill was in the hands of a John Gringo from Fareham, whose family had links with the earls of Southampton. He was a Quaker, an entrepreneur and ironmaster with works at Titchfield, Bursledon and elsewhere,^{20,21} and probably had strong links to the dockyard at Portsmouth, which bought large amounts of grain for its ships. A contemporary source records that ‘everyone was afraid of old Mr Gringo’!²²

In the 1740s the Bedford estate wanted to get back the mill, probably to increase the annual rent from its level of £4. They believed they could prove that the Langfords were no longer in evidence and hence the lease had expired. A beautifully drafted summons was handed to Gringo in Fareham, requiring him to produce one of the Langfords at the Court Baron of Abbots Worthy.¹⁶ He told them that ‘there was one life living’, but he ‘must leave it to ye court to doo as they pleas’. They evidently did not believe him and turned to a Lincoln’s Inn lawyer, who advised an ‘Ejectment to be Bro[ugh]t ag[ain]st Mr Gringo... if [he] does not give some reasonable proof’ that one of the lives is still alive! The law was that if someone had not been heard of for seven years they could be assumed dead.

In fact, probably on legal advice, no action was taken for 6 years or more, when Gringo was again summoned to produce evidence. He replied that if the court had asked him a fortnight earlier he could have sent Robert Langford in person, as he was visiting relatives in Fareham! Indeed, he had visited Gringo, who explained: ‘He called to lett me know he had given up the sea and that he was settled at Deptford [East London] and lives in Kingstreet, and may be

directed to under ye description of sailmaker or marriner.’ To prove the point he got Robert Langford to write himself and his helpful, but clumsily penned letter, dated March 21st 1748/9, still survives in the Bedford archives:⁵

Reverend Sor I made bould to write to you as Consarning an afear of mine that Mister Gringo wrote to me as Conarning a small mater of an Estate Left by my father which I have Been Kept out of itt for many years Past & for to aquaint you of the afear [.] my name is Robert Langford son to Jhoseph Langford of Abatts Worthy Mills & if itt is Required I shall com my self [.] Pray Direct to me to King Street Debtford Near the Bear & grene [...] from yours to serve Robert Langford.

Whether Langford did attend or not, we do not know, but Gringo was certainly still the tenant in 1762,²³ still paying £4 rent a year, and the Bedford steward had to wait until the old sailor had spent out his last years before he could claim back the mill and rack up the rent. In fact, a better option came up in the form of naval captain Chaloner Ogle (later knighted), who was building up the Worthy Park Estate. As mentioned above, in 1770 the mill and properties on the east side of Mill Lane were sold to him.¹⁰

The Snows of Abbots Worthy

During the 19th century, as wills in the HRO show, the Snow family were prominent in the village, with tenancy of the mill going down the line. In 1818 ‘Richard Snow of Abbots Worthy, maltster’ left it to his son James, a shopkeeper, so that he should ‘take to and continue the trade I am in’. He obviously did so, for in a codicil of 1848 to a will of 1824 James states: ‘I have taken to the business of a miller’. His wife was Mary, the daughter of local man John Barter and they lived at the top of Mill Lane, in the Mill House, with the mill itself treated as an industrial site. Some houses in the vicinity, including No. 3 Mill Lane, still have the large brick ovens where no doubt local flour was turned into bread on a community

basis. The malt produced by the Snows at the mill, would certainly have had a good local market, for the Hyde district of Winchester and was home to several breweries.

In 1878 Richard Snow ‘maltster, miller, farmer and overseer’ was still at the helm, but as the century went on, times got hard for millers. Large roller mills, pioneered in Hungary in the 1860s, situated in the ports, as at Southampton, were more efficient and operated at much larger scales. Exactly when Abbots Worthy Mill ceased to function is not known. But after the First World War higher wages threatened many country estates like Worthy Park, and after the Second World War, the mansion house, which had been taken over by the REME, was sold to Currys Ltd, the electrical retailers.²⁴ The sale of the mill in 1966 was part of a piece-by-piece sale of all the many properties that had once been the pride and joy of the Ogles, the Walls, the Fryers and, lastly, the Butcherts.

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[BOX COPY]

Surveyor William Godson's notes on water management for Abbots Worthy Mill (the Upper Mill) and Kings Worthy Mill (the Lower Mill) at a time when there was apparently a plan to reactivate the fulling mill nearby.¹⁴ A 'tumble bay', usually termed a tumbling bay, is the outfall from a river, or the associated pool. The plan is annotated, in the hand of the Bedford steward: 'NB. The above calculation is for a Corn mill, but a fulling mill requires only 3.4^{ths} of the water.'

A: A sluice to draw off the water in case of a Flood.

B: A Tumble Bay at a place called the Point. This Tumble Bay is 18 Feet 5 Inches and $\frac{1}{2}$ in Length, and when the Water at [the] Mill head is at a sufficient hight (or standard) to drive one Wheel; then does the water run over the Tumble Bay 3 Inches and $\frac{1}{2}$ in Depth, and 18 Feet 5 Inches and $\frac{1}{2}$ in Length, w:^{ch} occasions somewhat more than $\frac{3}{5}$ of a Mills water (for one wheel) to be wasted: and if a whole Mills water (for one wheel) be required to run over the Tumble Bay, into the Fulling Mill Lake; then and in such a case, the Tumble Bay must be Sunk one Inch and $\frac{1}{2}$ lower, w:^{ch} will cause the upper Mill, as also the Lower Mill, to lose $\frac{1}{5}$ of a Mills water: nearly wh:^{ch} will render the upper Corne Mill (wh:^{ch} is an Antient accustomed Mill) as also the other Mill below it, almost Useless and by consequence of Little or no value.

NB: There is $\frac{1}{7}$ part of the River wasted by the Tumble Bay as it now is at the highth of one Wheels water, but if the Mill was to have the whole River (or two Wheels water) then ye Tumble Bay would cause $\frac{1}{4}$ part of ye River to Run wast, and if there must be water for a fulling Mill, there can be none for the Corne Mills.

[BOX COPY ENDS]