Tuckmill at Watchfield

Historically known as ***'Little Mill.'***

By Neil B. Maw

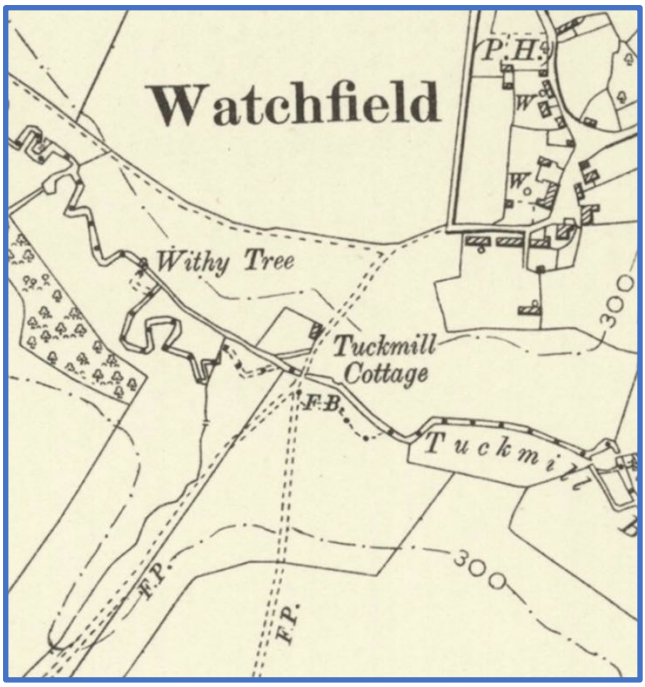
In the early part of the 17th century several families moved from the Lambourne area of Berkshire. Three of them were the Fairthornes, Blagraves and Cheyneys. The latter headed overseas to the USA and played a major part in the settlement of Pennsylvania. The other two moved to north Berkshire to the area of Shrivenham and Watchfield. They would all become the landed gentry of the 18th and 19th centuries. It's not certain what caused the move, random opportunity, economical necessity, desperation or perhaps just coincidence. Shrivenham Parish Records informed that Edward Fayrethorne (sic) was running a farm and mill and that his son William was baptised in

Watchfield in 1606. He had clearly done well as when he died in 1636, he left in his Will, *'All his leases in Eastcott and Westcott within the Parish of Swindon, lately purchased from John Padnell.'* He also left £80 to each of his daughters. But the problem with rural records arose, giving no confirmation as to where in the parish the farm and mill were located. About a mile to the West lies the farm and mill called West Mill, and to confuse matters further, Fairthorne's were at both.

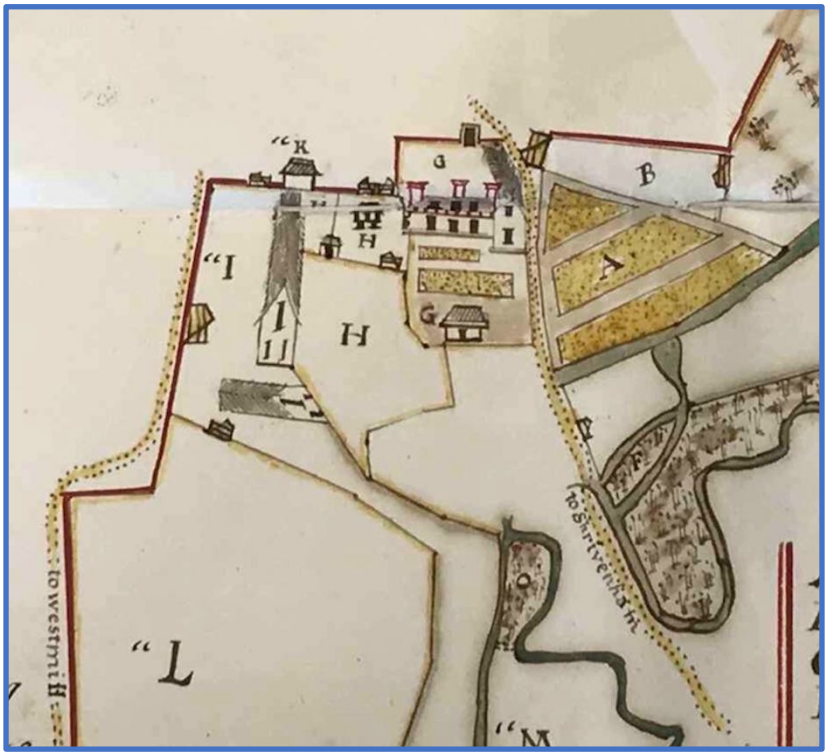
Fortunately, legal problems that occurred in the 18th century provided the answer as to which mill was occupied by which Fairthorne. And, equally fortunate, the documents concerning the legal proceedings have survived and were safely stored in the Royal Berkshire Archives (RBA) at Reading and the National Archives (NA) at Kew - document references D/EPB/T46 and C11/159/12 respectively, contained all the documentation required by the High Court of Justice in 1744.

The location of the farm and mill can be seen on the map below (OS 6inch series circa 1900). Tuckmill Cottage is all that is shown within the garden but the building that housed the mill mechanism is not shown. This is most likely because there had not been a mill there for perhaps a century as will be explained later. The oblique line below the rectangular cottage is the tail race channel, the water exit after it left the wheel. The map also shows clearly the original meanders of the course of the brook. It's possible that the water course straightened itself naturally to form an Oxbow but

it's also possible that it was done manually. But to what advantage for such a large amount of work is rather enigmatic. Also, we have no documentary evidence for such an excavation.



The mill formed part of a farm, and it was particularly pleasing to find in the documents at the RBA a sketch made by the person working for the lawyers. (Below. RBA D/EPB/T46).



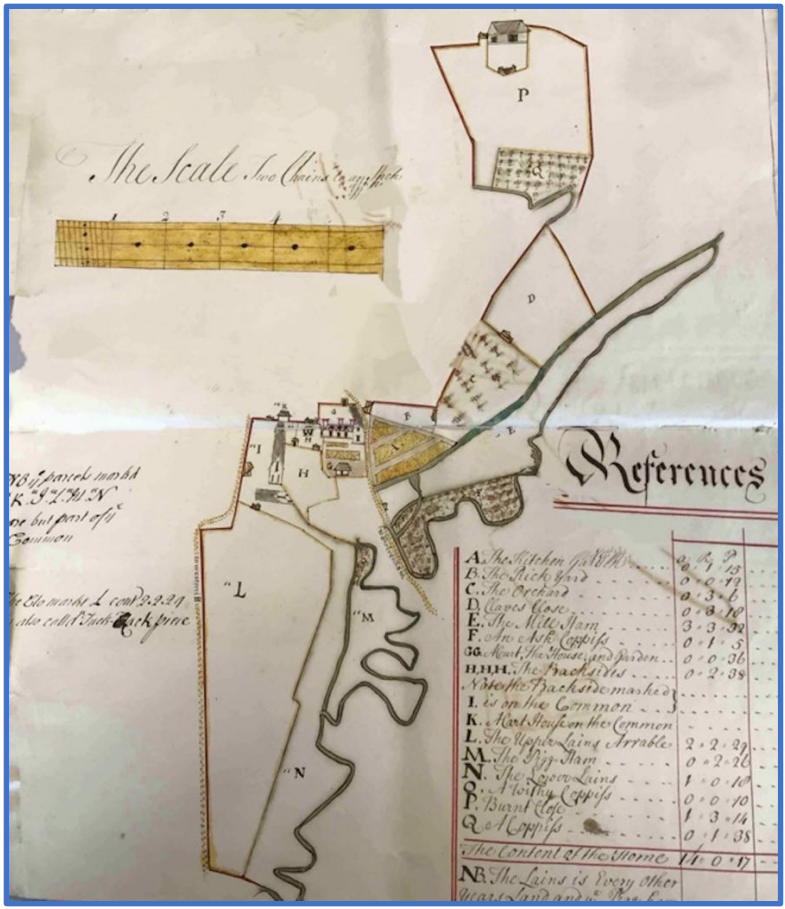
Unfortunately, the surveyor did not include the mill on the drawing probably because at that time it wasn't considered part of the Fairthorne farm. This was common with mills that are located close to farms. They were often leased out separately and almost considered independent.

From the drawing above it's clear that it was a considerable farm. The house with the three chimney stacks and what looks like

three garrets was likely a substantial building. A further description of it comes from an Indenture dated 22nd January 1672, which is a formal agreement between William and Mary Fairthorne to hand over to their son Edward the farm and mill at Watchfield. Of the property it is described as '*Messuages and Tenements with their Appurtenances in Watchfield and also all those six Yard Lands to the same belonging and also all that Water Corne Mill in Watchfield.*' And interestingly the agreement described the details of the property, '*the Hall and Kitchen at all times and also all the Boultinge House in the messuage and also the Little Cellar and also the Parlour Chamber and Hall Chamber and the Chamber called the Apple Loft and the Workloft over the Hall Chamber and Parlour Chamber and also one part of the Barn belonging to the messuage and the use of the Midsty to thresh the corne in at all times and also the use of the Stable to keep a horse beast in at all times and the Upper Cart house and also all that Water Corne Mill.*'(RBA. D/EPB/T46).

The full map drawn by the surveyor circa 1744 gives more details of the various parts of the farm. (Below 1) It has everything that might be expected of a farm of the period, stables, barns, gardens etc. Even though the mill buildings are not shown, we do have documentation that does include it from a later date of 1808. (Below 2. RBA. D/EPB/T4). The assumption has been made that Tuckmill Cottage was an integral part of the mill premises in that the Miller would have lived there. The cottage survived until the early 1972 so its location is recorded. With the amount of physical

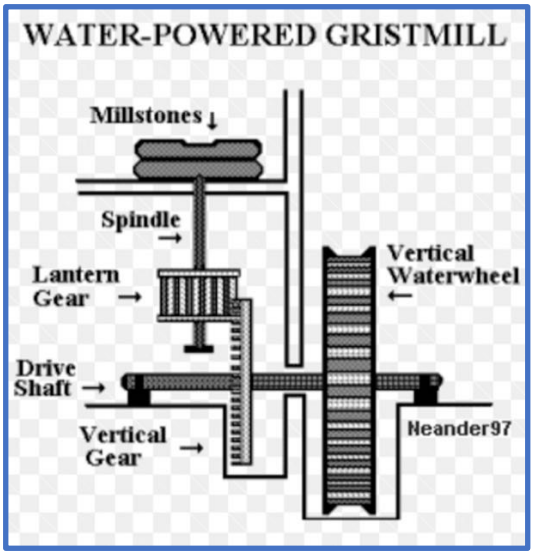
space left between the cottage and the brook being small, it must be deduced that the mill building was also small.



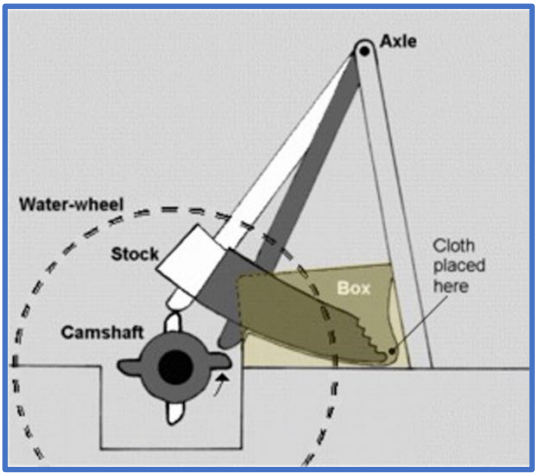
The name Tuckmill is misleading in terms of historical fact. There are numerous documents from the early 17th century up to the mid 18th century that describe it as a Corn Grist Mill. But the Enclosure Award of 1789 (RBA. D/P112/26A) described an exchange whereby Lord Barrington gave to the Earl of Radnor, *'All the piece or parcel of old inclosed land whereon a Mill House and a Tucking or Fulling Mill formerly stood.'* Tucking or Fulling is one and the

same process. When raw wool is knitted together to create a fabric, it still contains natural oils and is bloated. It was discovered that if it was pounded and the oils removed it created a very versatile and durable fabric. Anciently, the method of pounding the material was carried out by human feet in tubs of water but as always, man's ingenuity invented a mechanical process whereby a wheel driven by the force of water could pound the material more evenly. Fullers Earth or stale urine were used during the pounding to neutralise the oils. The exchange mentioned above provided the evidence that Little Mill was used as a Corn Grist Mill from the early 17th century (and possibly earlier) until at least 1746. Sometime within the period of 1746 to 1789 it was used as a Tucking Mill, and furthermore the wording, *'formerly stood'* suggests that at that moment in time it was either no longer '*Tucking*' or perhaps more likely, no longer a working mill. Therefore, it could only have been Tucking for a very short period in its history, but the name just stuck.

An example of each type of mill is below



Tucking or Fulling Hammer

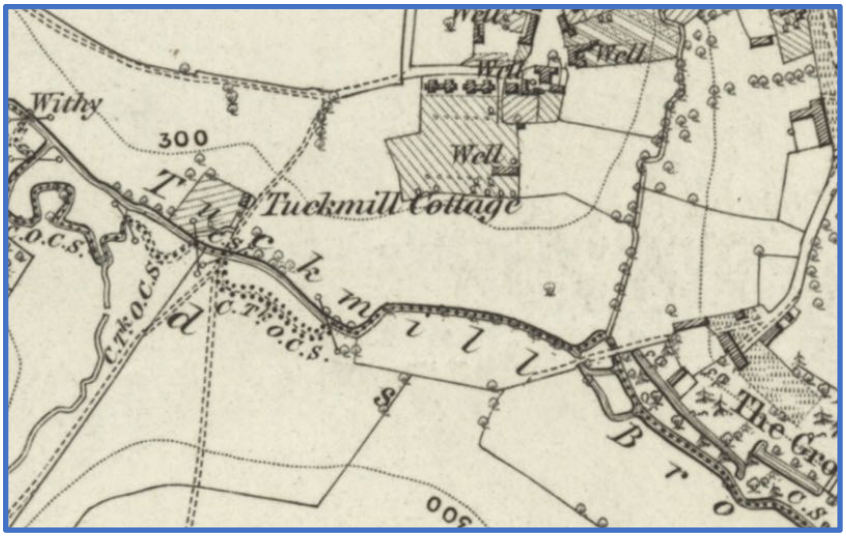


Nothing now remains of any part of the buildings associated with the mill. We can only speculate what the mill house may have looked like. It would likely have been a wooden structure to begin with in its early period and perhaps built of rubble stone towards the end. But either way, it would have needed to be quite sturdy to be able to support the large wheel and turning gear. (Example below).

The cottage managed to survive into the 20th century and was occupied until 1969 and eventually burned down by local vandals in 1972. We do have some photos and drawings of it, the first being on the front cover of the book. It's a lovely water

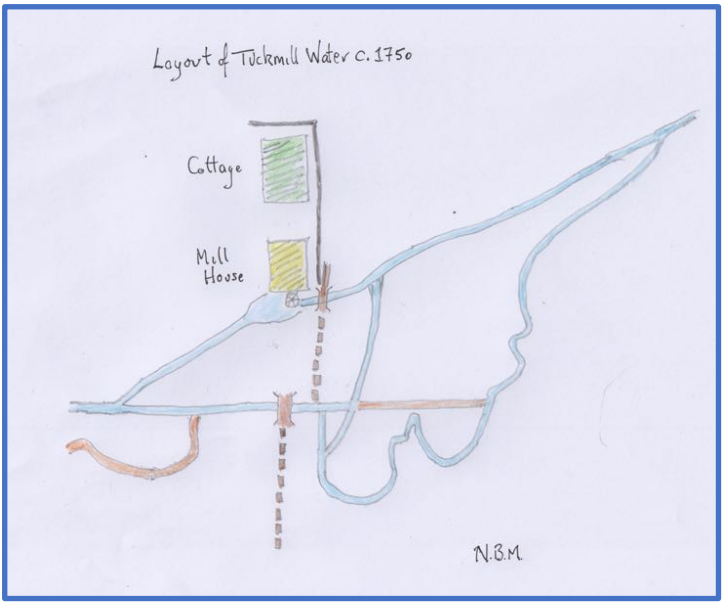
colour but unfortunately has no signature or name attached. The year written at the bottom suggests that it was painted in 1983, so possibly from a photograph. (Below. Photo taken from the west and a water colour from the east – artists unknown).

All water mills must have a reliable water source and there are several ways in which it can be done. The water must be managed in such a way that it arrives at the paddles of the large millwheel in a steady stream. Clearly the source of water at Tuckmill is from the brook and so it is important to understand how it was delivered to the wheel. The two pictures above showing the whole layout of the farm provided the answer in a very long channel called a *'Leat.'* The coloured drawing shows it in blue. In both drawings it heads from the centre at about the 2 o'clock position. The Leat channel is distinct and separate from the brook stream below it and it is very long, approximately 300 metres. The long length would have the same effect as a Mill Pond in that it would hold a large amount of water. Both drawings show a point just before the mill where a sluice would have diverted the water into the brook when necessary. But what is unclear is where the water entered the Leat. The channel appears to go as far as Squires Copse at the bottom of Barrington Road. This is close to the site of the original Watchfield House, an early 18th century Georgian Mansion. Research at this site has revealed that there was water management of the brook where the Tuckmill Leat is heading in the two drawings. (Below, extract OS Map 1873). It was suspected that this was the site of an earlier mill, but it seems possible that it was the management of Tuckmill Leat. More investigation will be required to solve it.



To make clearer how the water connected with the millwheel, some minor excavations were carried out near Tuckmill Bridge. The result of this concluded that the Leat channel went directly to the wheel and that a small footbridge allowed pedestrian access over it. There was no channel from the brook by the bridge to the wheel. The excavations also revealed the course of the old, stone pathway, on a different alignment to the present bridge. (Below. Photos by the author). The white line is the course of the Leat channel. The old steppingstones on a different alignment to the stones on the opposite side.

The implications of the recent research on Tuckmill have influenced other aspects of the site. The long Leat channel providing the water to drive the wheel implies that the natural course of the brook was never used for that purpose. This gives weight to the theory that the original meanders were cut off naturally rather than being straightened manually, which would have been much work for no beneficial purpose. The course of the steppingstones on the north side of the brook not being aligned with those on the south, suggest that they are from two periods. So perhaps the folklore story of the large sarsen stones on the south being donated by the Barringtons in the mid 19th century could be true, although no documentary evidence has yet been discovered.



The documentary evidence and minor archaeological evidence suggest that the mill could have been working alongside the farm at the very beginning of the 17th century. Certainly, the farm was owned and occupied by the Fairthornes through that century and nearly halfway into the 18th. It was the tenure of Thomas Fairthorne who would bring the Fairthorne dynasty to an end at Watchfield. He had inherited the farm and mill from his cousin Edward in the early part of the 18th century. His wife Mary died in September 1735, leaving their daughters Sarah, aged 8, Mary, aged 5 and Anne, aged 3. In the immediate period after her death, Thomas made provision for his daughters by

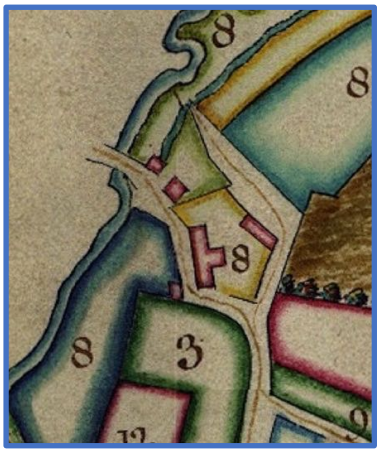
leaving a detailed Will of what each of them would receive as a personal gift from him. The clause in the Will that would cause the litigation was the inaction of his Trustees. *'I give and bequeath to Richard Eyloe of Shrivenham, Lional Rich of Great Faringdon, Gent, and James Reynolds of Great Faringdon, Yeoman, all my Stock of Cattle, Corn, Implements of Husbandry and other Goods and Chattels, Personal Estate and Effects whatsoever not heretofore bequeathed, upon trust that they and the survivors shall as soon as conveniently may be after my decease sell and dispose thereof for the best price and prices that can be gotten and pay and apply the money as follows. Item. I give to Richard Eyloe, Lional Rich and James Reynolds all that my freehold Messuages and Tenements wherein I now dwell in Watchfield otherwise Watchinfield and also all those six Yardlands thereunto belonging with the Appurtenances lying and being in Watchfield and in Shrivenham, that they shall sell for the best price first to pay my Funeral expenses, then the residue to be divided among my three daughters equally in shares and proportions according to their respective ages of 21 years or days of marriage, and if any die before then that share shall be divided among the others.'* He directed that the money from Rents and Profits of the Farm should go towards the upkeep of his daughters. He made Richard Eyloe, Lional Rich and James Reynolds Joint Executors and also Curators and Guardians of his daughters, *'The care and tuition of whom during their respective minorities I do commit and leave to them, desiring them to place my said daughters to some Boarding School or Schools where they may be properly educated with quality and degree, and I give them*

one Guinea apiece for their trouble in executing the Trusts hereby in them reposed.'

However, in the years that followed, the Executors did not sell the Estate, and other Fairthorne relatives took legal action. The court papers stated that the Executors, *'Do refuse to sell or dispose of the same premises or make any assurance thereof to any purchaser thereby to obstruct and hinder the performance of the Trust …'* The situation was made more complicated by one of the Executors, Lional Rich, dying during that period, leaving Richard Eyloe and James Reynolds to administer the Estate. But they were accused that they, *'Do give out and pretend that the said premises cannot be sold because the three coheirs are under the age of 21 years.'* This was not the case as the Executors had been granted Guardianship of the three girls and had the legal power to execute the instructions in the Will. But of this they were also accused, '*that the defendants have not the said Will nor the Probate thereof, the same lyeth in the hands of the Confrates.'* It's quite understandable to see why the Executors and the daughters would be reluctant to sell the family property, but there were considerable debts to be paid and Thomas Fairthorne's Will was most specific. Consequently, on 13th February 1745, an order was made by the High Court of Chancery that the Estate should be sold, and as Sir Mark Stuart Pleydell of Coleshill had made the best offer of £1650 then it should be sold to him, less the amount of money that he had loaned Thomas Fairthorne (£792.4.2). There is a note within the

documents that has written on the back by the Executors, *'Received from Sir Mark Stuart Pleydell the sum of £857. 15. 10.'*

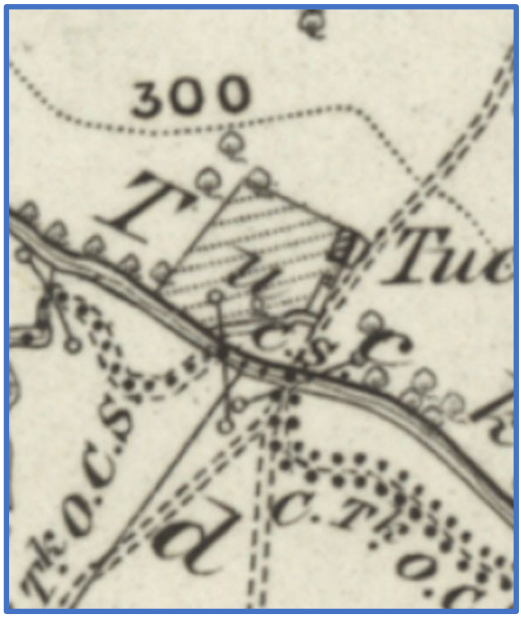
So, this explains how Little Mill and Farm at Watchfield came into the ownership of what would become the Radnor Estate at Coleshill. (Below. Extract from the Willington Map of Watchfield of 1758, showing the farmhouse, cottage and mill house. SHS Listing N344).



The notes that were with the case papers assembled for the court hearing, show that when Sir Mark took possession of the farm, he made note that the mill was leased out to a man called Gearing. Henry Gearing was a Watchfield man and was of the *'Yeoman'* class. But we don't have any detailed information about him other than his gravestone at Shrivenham. It's unlikely that

he would have operated the mill himself but would have one of his workers live in the cottage and operate the mill. It's unfortunate that we don't know who made the decision to change the operation of the mill from grinding grain to fulling cloth, but sometime over the following 40 years, that is what happened. It would have taken considerable effort and expense to convert the mill so it must have made economic sense to do so. It may also have been very successful, but towards that latter part of the 18th century, the big steam driven mills were becoming prevalent making small business' uneconomical, casualties of the *'Industrial Revolution.'*

Also, at some time during this period the mill with its cottage and garden became part of the Barrington Estate. It's not known yet how this came about, but confirmation of it is from the Barrington Estate Disbursement Book (See SHS N1429). There are payments made by the estate for Poor and Land Tax in 1769, 1770 and 1780 for *'Little Mill'* as it was known. Then in 1789, Lord Barrington exchanged it for land in Watchfield with Mark Pleydell. The exchanges were usually like for like wherever possible. The size of Tuckmill was measured as 16 perches which translated into modern measure is 404 square metres. (Below). There was a dry-stone wall around the north and east side of the enclosure but only fenced on the west.


300


Site of Little Farm
Site of Little Mill

The last piece of documentary evidence directly relating to the mill is the exchange between Lord Barrington and Sir Mark Stuart Pleydell in 1789 mentioned above. It has been suggested that by that time it was already out of use, and presently there is no further evidence to suggest otherwise. Just as it would have been expensive to change its use from corn grinding to tucking, it would have been equally expensive to change it back again. The extraordinary length of the leat must have also presented problems with silting up and would have likely needed regular maintenance. Historically, the mill was known as *"Little Mill,"* and therein lies another clue as to its possible demise. When grinding corn, it was likely to have been equipped with one pair of stones, restricting output to only small amounts. Whereas about two miles downstream lay West Mill, which was equipped with three pairs of stones and continued as a working mill until the 1950s. It is likely that the change from grinding to tucking was an attempt to make the mill profitable that simply didn't work. However, it must be stated that this paragraph is conjecture and may be reviewed in the light of new documentary evidence being discovered, or perhaps more non-invasive archaeology as technology advances.

The cottage however, continued to be occupied through to the 1960s and any reference to it is as '*Tuckmill Cottage.*' The earliest reference is from the census of 1861 when it was occupied by James Knapp. His occupation was a Mason & Bricklayer, and he was with his wife Jane and their six children. It is unclear when

he first moved into the cottage and he must have left it sometime after 1871.

A newspaper article provided the information that Curtis Fowler was in occupation with his wife in 1904. He worked for Mr Snook of Sandhill Farm as a Shepherd and was found dead in bed by his wife. (Faringdon Adver 19th March 1904).

The 1911 census list simply that a Mr Hearn was living in Tuckmill Cottage on the day that the Census Commissioner called.

Most people will have heard of Beatrix Potter, the famous author of some of the best loved children's stories ever written. She met a lady called Eleanor Choyce (who became known a Louie) during the period of World War One, and she helped with her garden at one of her farms. Beatrix and Louie became firm friends and wrote many letters to each other. It's not known of the circumstances of how it came about, but Eleanor Choyce lived at Tuckmill Cottage from at least the mid 1930s and possibly earlier. Doris Braidwood Allen talks about her in her self-published autobiography called *'A Family Patchwork Quilt,'* a copy of which is held by Shrivenham Heritage Society Ref N649. She described how beautiful the cottage garden was kept and full of flowers.

For reasons that have yet to be uncovered by documentation, some of the land and the mill site itself, were still part of the

Barrington Estate in 1937. When Beckett Park was sold to the government War Department in that year, Tuckmill was sold with it. Eleanor Choyce and her husband Thomas Henry were still recorded on the Electoral Register of 1945, but then for a short period of 1951 – 1953, recorded at the cottage were Harry and Susan Ault and Robert and Dorothy Wade-West. One of the couples had the lease and against the terms of the lease, sub-let it to Victor Paget early in 1950 when he and his wife Linda and family moved in.

Victor became curious about the name Tuckmill, so much so that he decided to write a small booklet on it. For the most part he simply recorded what he gleaned from the Victoria County History, and he made assumptions on everything else. But he wasn't familiar with searching archives and the internet was barely in its infancy. However, he did carry out some basic archaeology in an area of the cottage garden where the mill house had been located. He wrote that he uncovered a stone-lined channel under the footpath which would have been the leat. He also found the millers working floor that he described as a *'stone floor that had been sunk into the earth edgewise that covered an area of about 25 feet by 10 feet.'* This would have been contained within the mill building, long since taken down. Victor also wrote a *'Potted history of Tuckmill'* which describes in considerable detail the internal layout of the cottage and his excavations, and has been added at the end of this book.

After Victor and his family were evicted by the military in 1969, the cottage remained empty until 1972. (Above - Victor left, wife Linda & John Manners at Tuckmill Cottage – courtesy of Andrea Murphy). It was eventually broken into and set on fire by local vandals. The land was purchased by the owner of the golf course surrounding the site, who levelled it with machinery and made it part of a fairway on the golf course. Some recent, minor archaeology was carried out to uncover the old footpath and the foundation of one side of a bridge that pedestrians would have used to cross the leat. It would be satisfying the think that someone in the future might confirm the brick working floor uncovered by Victor. (Below. In the

snow. The dark coloured Yew tree marks the approximate position of the Mill Wheel. Rescued from the demolished cottage, the lock & key to the door – courtesy of Robert Steele).

We are grateful to Andrea Murphy whose mother Judith was the eldest daughter of Victor and Linda Paget, the last occupiers of Tuckmill Cottage. When Judith passed away in May of 2024, Andrea and her family brought her ashes along with her husband's, *'back home to Tuckmill.'* She loaned us the writings of her Grandfather Victor, who during his time at Tuckmill made many observations of the layout and features of the cottage. These make interesting reading for the historical record and are herewith included in this book. Below - Judith Steele (nee Paget).

Tuckmill in Watchfield

A Potted History - by Victor Paget

In 1950 when I first saw it there was no apparent sign of the original mill but there was a cottage there which bore the name Tuck Mill. A pretty, thatched roofed, stone built cottage, two storeys high with a garden an eighth of an acre in size and walled in on two sides. I'd seen it advertised to rent and as I was living in a flat with my wife and four small daughters, I was keen to get hold of it. It was said to be at least three hundred years old, some estimates putting it at four hundred years. I was lucky enough to get the cottage and early in 1950 I moved in with my family.

To say the place was isolated was a bit of an understatement. There was not a dwelling to be seen from the mill. Although the slope of the fields the other side of the brook was quite gentle there was not a light to be seen at night from Shrivenham and even though I knew Watchfield village was just at the top of the rise not a sight could be seen of it. It was all a bit scary after town life.

The old lady who rented the cottage to me was no country bumpkin but a well-educated person who lived there with her brother, a retired professor as she informed me. She had at one time been the governess to the children of the Lord of the Manor who lived at Beckett House in Shrivenham. The whole of the land at Watchfield apart from a few small lots but including Beckett House and its lands had been some time earlier sold to the War Department. The old lady's services no longer being required Tuck Mill was reconditioned and re-furbished

and alterations were made to the interior to accommodate a lady and a gentleman. As I learned later, it was a" grace and favour" house.

The old lady must have liked the look of me as she told me a little about her younger days. She was, or had been, an associate of William Morris and Burne-Jones and the circle they moved in. She was most concerned that we did not remove the wall paper that adorned the cottage walls, it was, she said one of Morris's earlier designs and she was most anxious that it should remain "in situ". Hanging on one wall was a pencil drawing or cartoon of some angelic looking ladies and this was signed by Burne-Jones himself. Also in the cottage was an oak chest, intricately carved and date 1605 about four feet by three feet by two feet. These two pieces before she left the cottage she left in my care. I believe she went to Eastbourne to live with her brother as that was where I had to send my rent once a month.

Once I had moved in with my family, I was able to study the interior at my leisure. All the wood inside the cottage was oak, a massive oak beam running the length of the building, the beam being a foot square. The walls were of solid stone eighteen inches thick at the window sill, but were buttressed on the inside from the window sills to the floor. The floor was of inch thick quarry tiles. The fireplace didn't suit the room at all. It was a typical cast iron Victorian grate, far too small for the room and looked totally out of place. Even the red brick that surrounded it didn't improve the look of it. Alongside this grate was a bake oven with a stone recess above it fitted with a small oak door. Behind the Victorian fireplace I felt sure there was a much bigger open fireplace which seemed to be confirmed by the chimney sweep one day. He got his brushes up the chimney alright but when he came to pull them down, there was an almighty clatter and four foot of chain

came tumbling down. The chain had a hook attached at its lower end and was firmly fixed to a bar set in the chimney piece higher up. In the oak beam at the fireplace end were driven at intervals, several wrought iron hooks, sunk well into the wood and absolutely immovable, heavy enough to take a good weight.

There were two casement windows in the room, a double one at the front of the cottage and a single one on the opposite wall, both of which had sills of one and a half inch thick oak. Close by the single window was a recess in the wall a foot deep that had shelves in it and this part of the cottage proved exceedingly damp. The big oak beam was no more than five feet ten inches from the floor level and as I am only five feet nine inches tall I could just walk under it without banging my head. The room itself had been about twenty feet square but to suit the old lady five feet had been divided off to provide her with a kitchen and a larder. Three feet higher than the kitchen and extending from it was a space about six feet by twelve which held a paraffin cooking stove and a bath. Whether this was an integral part of the old cottage I cannot say but I think it was. The structure had no sign of newness about it, the thickness of the walls being the same as the big room and the window in it being identical to the other windows.

From the living room a narrow flight of curling staircase led to the bedrooms. Once again this room had been divided to make two bedrooms the size of the division being exactly the same as the downstairs room but at the other end of the cottage which balanced everything up. This room had oak floor boards and the ceiling, like the one downstairs had been boarded over. The big room took a double bed and two single beds fairly comfortably (one time I thanked the Lord for having five daughters) and the other room took a three

quarter bed. So my big worry about whether it would be big enough to live in was overcome. The cottage was built with the front of it facing roughly West so the cottage got plenty of sunshine. The garden was about an eighth of an acre in size and a jungle. In the far corner stood an old orchard bounded by a tall hedge much much older. To the north the garden was hemmed in by a six foot high thick stone wall running from the hedge to the wall of the cottage with which the wall was incorporated. Halfway along the wall was a well which was always full, the overflow running as a rivulet and bisecting the garden to the brook below. On the south side of the garden ran the brook itself.

From the east wall of the cottage ran another wall which stopped some eight feet short of the brook but had another short wall about nine feet long built on to it at right angles. These two walls unlike the north wall, were solid stone fourteen inches thick while the north wall was a hollow one filled with rubble and eighteen inches thick. This area then, encompassed the site of the original Tuck Mill.

I'd been in the cottage for about three years most of which time I'd spent getting the garden into shape and by 1953 it was looking very good. One day an old fellow who said he was 93 poked his head over the gate and asked for a drink of the "spring water" from the well. I invited him into the cottage where he at once remarked on how the place had changed. This old chap had moved into the cottage when he had got married in 1880 and had brought up nine children there, so he said. There had been no staircase in those days he told me, just a hole in the bedroom floor with a ladder leading up to it. The spring water that he was drinking he said, didn't come from a tap but had to be pumped up from a spring outside the recess in the wall which had in his time been a door.

The fireplace as I suspected, had been a large open one over which his wife had cooked. The bake oven he said was used weekly and the hooks in the beam were used for smoking pig meat. The raised portion that held the bath and oven had once been part of the whole building and had been on the same level, but was separate from the living room. That had been where he had kept his pig and his gardening utensils. He also told me how they took the bristles off a pig. When there were sufficient pigs to be slaughtered a deep trench would be dug and filled with dry straw and brushwood. A chain would be put through the ring on the pig's nose and the fuel in the trench set alight. The live pig would then be pushed and pulled through the burning trench and as soon as it emerged at the other end its throat would be cut and the job would be over. It saved a whole lot of trouble the old man said but I thought it rather horrific.

I had this story corroborated later on where the same method was practised in Swindon.

Having finished his drink he walked with me round the garden, claiming to be the man who had planted the orchard and remarking on the size of the hop bines intertwined in the hedge. These had been there when he moved in and were an integral part of all cottagers' gardens as they were used for the making of their beer. He pointed out a large depression under an old yew tree, told me it had been a mill pool and then left with a promise to come back again. He never did though!

The old fellow's mention of a mill pool set me thinking. If that was a mill pool still in evidence, what else might there be to find. I made up

my mind to try and find out. Over the pool was a huge old yew tree that hid the pool from sight. When I looked closer I saw that there were two yew trees, one in the garden and one on the bank of the brook. They had both grown towards each other during the years and had merged together about a third of the way up their trunks, the branches and foliage forming a matted crown above the pool. The pool was full of mud and rubble, broken crocks, holed pots and pans, an old fender, a tin bath and sundry other junk. So I started to clear it out and having got the rubble out I probed around the bottom of the hole, throwing loads of mud up onto the edge of the garden. The hole kept on filling up with water though so I began to dig a trench from it to the brook to drain the water away. To my surprise I found a trench had already been dug. It was silted up and overgrown but it was definitely a trench. It was about eighteen inches wide, the same depth and was lined on each side by slabs of stone and it ran right down to the brookside. As I dug deeper I found the bottom of the channel was also lined with stone. It seemed obvious to me that it was an overflow channel and had been put there to carry away excess water from the pool.

As I had a job to do I couldn't spend all my time investigating the site of the old mill and one weekend as I wanted to build a new chicken run I thought the space enclosed by the short garden wall and its right-angled abutment would be just the place to put it. That meant I would only have two sides to put wire netting up so getting a dozen stakes together, I prepared to drive them into the earth. The stakes all had good points on them but into the earth they wouldn't go. I could drive them down a foot but that was as far as they would go. So, changing my tactics I tried to dig holes for the posts but once again I was foiled, the spades would not go deeper than a foot either. Unwilling to be

beaten I decided to clear the whole area of soil to see what was giving me the trouble and I started to dig, visualising a Roman mosaic floor or something like it under the earth. I dug very carefully, whatever it was it was very hard, but with a rake to help me I gradually got the plot cleared of soil and eventually uncovered a stone floor. The stones were all sunk into the earth foot deep with their edges up giving a cobbled effect and the exposed edge worn smooth with wear. It covered the whole of the expanse between the two walls and the depth at which I uncovered it gave the walls another foot in height bringing them to six feet plus. Looking at the two walls and the floor in situ led me to think that with a roof on it I could be looking at the remains of a long, low, open fronted building that at one time might have been roofed. As both walls though had been capped with a semi-circle of cement, I could find nothing to suggest that the walls had supported rafters of any kind. The short end wall did have what could have been a clue in it. Central in the wall and about three feet from the floor was a square shaped stone, quite flat and different from the surrounding stonework which looked as if it had been put there to block up a hole. Not being able to see the other side of the wall to see if the odd white stone went right through, because of the heavy undergrowth, I decided to leave it for another day.

There was an odd thing about the end wall of the cottage as well. Interspersed amongst the stonework every here and there were blocks of heavy oak. These were more than a foot square and were fitted flush with the rest of the wall. Try as I would though, I couldn't get any of these wooden blocks to correspond with the measurements of the white stone in the wall further down. My thoughts of course, were running along the lines of supports or bearings for the wooden machinery that must have been in use in those far off days. Eager now

to have a look at the other side of the short wall, by dint of much hard work and a great many scratches, I got the brambles and undergrowth away from it and there sure enough was the white stone which seemed proof enough to me that there had at some time been a hole through the wall, which surely must have supported something! And that something, in my opinion, had to be a water wheel.

Opposite the wall with the white sone in it was the bank of the brook. The bank was considerably higher at this point than the level of the cottage garden, being higher even than the white stone. It kept this height to the end of the pool under the yew tree and then dropped away. It still maintained its height right to the edge of the brook but it didn't look natural and I felt it had been man-made. My concern at the time, however, was the white stone so I concentrated on the area nearest that wall. It didn't take me long to find a noticeable depression where all the brambles and suchlike had been, silted up and waterlogged of course but plain to see. So I began moving muck and mud again.

From the centre of the stone the depression was about four feet deep, seven feet long and three feet wide. The wall itself ran deep into the ground and on the bankside was a wall of flat stone, heavy and square, the top of it hiding underneath the turf of the bank. This wall was seven feet long as well, and like my other diggings filled with water as soon as I got below ground level. I probed this channel hopefully for any sign of timber fixings of any sort but again I was unlucky.

The only solution I could think of to explain the shortage of timber on the mill site was that possibly a lot of it had been used in the building of the cottage and the rest had been cannibalised by the local village

people after the mill's demise. There was no shortage of stone, though. It lay about all over the place, brick sized pieces and lumps three feet square. I was leaning over the garden gate one day pondering this abundance of stone and wondering where it had all come from when I saw what I think was the answer. From the village above, making a curved sweep round the high ground to the right of the cottage and then descending in a straight line to the wall of the cottage itself was a wide track, wide enough to take the wheels of a waggon. The track was stone paved up to the curve, the stone disappearing under grass for the rest of its length. From the garden wall looking towards the village, the righthand side of the track was bounded by a bank some four feet higher than the other side of it which was level with the track and descending to a hollow the length of the garden wall rising sharply again at the wall's and.

Forty yards up the field rising sharply to the height of the grass-land around was a ridge four feet high and several yards long and the face of this ridge was of natural stone. Cracked, weatherbeaten and worn, but nevertheless, stone. I was convinced that from this ridge and the depression down to the garden wall came the stone used at the mill site. The field on the right hand side of the waggon track to my mind bore out this theory of mine. This as I mentioned was four feet higher than the track running flat and level to about twenty feet from the brook where it descended steeply in rocky shelves to the bank of the brook. On this side of the track stood a row of huge old elms beginning at the curve of the track and ending on top of the rocky bank leading down to the brook.

It seemed quite logical to me that these elms had been planted for a purpose. Namely as markers for the carters who had used the track. With the trees on their left they were on a safe route, with the trees on their right hand they would have finished at the bottom of the bank in the brook. I wouldn't like to speculate on the age of the elms but the one nearest to the cottage had a diameter of some four feet and was hollow for nearly five feet up. From where the cart track ended at the mill, it narrowed sharply to a footpath no more than three feet wide. A footpath that was always wet and muddy and no matter how hard I tried to cure it, always stayed wet and muddy. This footpath ran along the east side and close up to the cottage wall, the side where the old man had told me there was once a pump. This, I thought, was why it was always so wet. The footpath ran right down to the bank of the brook, widening out considerably six feet away from it. At the end of the path was once again more stonework, this time a heavy wall rising from the bed of the brook to a height of three feet, about five feet long and fourteen inches thick. Four feet away from this on the other side of the brook was a corresponding wall; these two walls arrowing the width of the brook from eight feet to four feet.

Scattered for several yards around the two walls were masses of tumbled stonework lying in the bed of the brook. They ranged from stones of a size I could hardly move down to stones of about fourteen pounds in weight. They lay on each side of the walls upstream and downstream and obviously had at one time been put there for a purpose. This purpose came to light one day purely by accident.

During 1958 my old landlady died. The first I knew of this was when her solicitor and another man arrived to collect the oak sheet and the Burne-Jones drawing. The William Morris wallpaper had long since

been papered over. The next visit I had was from the War Department Land Agent who was somewhat surprised to see me in occupation. This, he told me was highly irregular. As a "grace and favour" residence the lady had no right whatever to sublet it. He agreed though that it was no fault of mine and as I had four children, he said I could stay on as "tenant at will" which meant that either side could give or receive a week's notice at any time.

Across the walls when I first went into Tuck Mill was a flimsy wooden bridge, this had been replaced later on by the War Dept with a solid steel and timber bridge, sufficiently strong to carry the soldiers from the camp at Watchfield who used the surrounding fields for their manoeuvres. My daughters were growing up fast now and the brook and its water had become a favourite playground. They had discovered that by piling all the loose stones up between the two walls, hemming the brook in, they could create a pool large enough and deep enough to swim in.

Up to the base, my daughters with the help of other girls from the village above, would pack the gap between the walls with stones from the bed of the brook. Half a day after this was done, the brook, held by the dam, would have built a pool four feet deep and some fifteen feet in diameter. The water being held on the far side of the brook by its bank, the pool formed on the cottage side of the brook and its middle was virtually in line with the cutting that in my mind held a water wheel.

The dam that held the water back would, in my mind, have been quite a simple affair. With the heavy stones lying around in the area of the two walls it would have been easy to have built a substantial pier in

front of each wall spaced some six inches away from it leaving a slot. Into this slot would have been dropped oaken planks, the bottom one partially buried in the bed of the brook and on top of this would have been placed the other planks, say five in all, four to five inches thick, a foot wide and six feet long. This dam would have been strong enough to hold the head of water and could have been lowered at will by removing separate planks as required.

Five or six feet from the mill race I had uncovered, the footpath broadened out considerably. From the mill race to the brookside it ran as a wide grassy bank past the mill pool tapering gently until it merged with the bank of the brook that formed the boundary of the garden. Through this grassy bank had been cut the overflow channel from the mill pool.

From the left hand side of the footpath the ground ran in a gentle inward sweeping curve to the dam wall. In this curve there was a huge mass of large stones, some embedded deep in the muddy soil with other stones still standing on them and the curve itself full of fallen stones. Under layer upon layer of dead and rotting reeds lay yet more stones, none of them less than a foot square and many of them larger than that. After a few weeks work with a sickle and rake cutting down and clearing the mass of dead reeds and grass from the area most of the stonework lay exposed and from the high bank just below the big Elm I was able to get a fairly clear picture of what must have been a stone wall running in a gentle curve from the dam wall to the shallow bank of the brook on the mill side of it. To my mind this could have been only one thing, a containing wall to hold the head of water the dam provided and prevent it from flooding over the path and the surrounding area.

The standing stones were all well embedded in the side of the footpath and if the tumbled stones had come from the top of these stones the wall would have been slightly higher that the dam walls. If my reasoning was correct somewhere in this wall opposite the mill race there should be a sluice gate built in the same way as the dam of oaken planks fitting in a slot. To explain my theory of a sluice satisfactorily there should have been a channel cut through the footpath itself joining the mill race but there wasn't. There was each side of where I thought a sluice gate should be though, piled up heap of heavy fallen stones, far too heavy for me to move but would have lent themselves to the building of two stone walls similar to the dam walls. Although there was no positive sign of the clue I was looking for, there was the suggestion that I was thinking along the right lines.

The fallen stones seemed to lie on each side of two rows of stones embedded deep in the mud and sludge of the bank looking for all the world as if somebody in the past had stood between the channel I was searching for and toppled the stones outwards. With that I had to be content for the time being.

With the mill not working now and a footpath being available, nobody using the footpath would want to step or jump over a three foot gap with water in it. So, it was quite simply filled in. I would liked to have dug across the path to make sure, but the path and the surrounding property being War Department property and the path being used most days by the troops from the camp at Watchfield, I didn't feel that I could properly do that. So, I used the method that old rubbish dump treasure hunters use. I prodded with a sharp pointed probe. And it worked! On each side of my suspected channel the probe would merely go down a few inches before hitting stone, in the middle and

along the length of it the probe entered the soil quite easily to a depth of a foot. Thus, with a great deal of satisfaction, I came to the end of my exploration of how the mill obtained its motive power and where it came from.

Note: *It was a logical conclusion for Victor to have reached. However, recent research at the Royal Berkshire Archives discovered that there was a separate Leet (water filled trench) extending 300 meters to the south-east to the corner of Squires Copse. This was connected to the brook by a sluice. The trench full of water would have been the source to drive the mill wheel. The Leet was likely filled in towards the end of the 18th century.*

In 1969 I got the dreaded week notice, a fear had lurked in my mind for over a decade, but something I could do nothing about and so after 19 years of happiness, with three daughters being married from it and the footbridge now known locally as Paget's Bridge, one winter afternoon I left Tuck Mill. As a souvenir of the much-loved cottage I kept one of the big front door keys. Three days after I left I went back to collect one or two treasured plants and the cottage was completely boarded up, ready I suppose for the impending sale of the mill and its surrounding land to the highest bidder and there it stood for a year looking as forlorn and derelict as I had felt when I left it.

In 1971 the place still hadn't been sold and one day at work one of the villagers from Watchfield came up to me and told me that the mill had been burned down in the night before, so as soon as I had finished work I drove over to see what had happened. The place had indeed burned down and to me it was a terrible sight. The scorched and charred thatch lay thick and soggy on the ground around the cottage. The walls had fallen inwards and in the middle of all this stone the

main oak beam, charred but still solid, pointed upwards towards the sky like an accusing finger. Poking around where the front door had been, buried under the fallen thatch, I found the front door itself, quite whole and undamaged and with the wooden door lock still firmly fitted. With the aid of a screwdriver from the car I unfastened it and took it home, thus giving me not only the lock but the key that went with it. (***Note**: this lock and key is now displayed at the Heritage Centre, Memorial Hall, Shrivenham – courtesy of Robert Steele, Victor's Grandson).*

The land and ruins of the mil were finally sold in 1982/3 during which time the oak beam disappeared and that I am told now surrounds a fireplace on another cottage thereabouts. Cannibalisation once again. My wife and I visited the place at least once a year to reminisce and children still swam in the pool may daughters had built. By 1984 the whole of the land between Shrivenham and Watchfield had been turned into a golf course. Although many assurances were given that Tuck Mill cottage would be rebuilt in its original form it never came about and in 1985 the site of the ancient mill, and the cottage that stood upon it, was razed to the ground. The swimming pool was dismantled and there was not a stone left showing above ground. Though part of the old orchard and the yew tree is still there, the line of elms disappeared when the Dutch elm disease struck and unless one knew the place as I knew it, it would be impossible to recognise it as the place where a very old cottage and a far much older mill once stood. Now, the site isa natural hazard on a modern golf course.

Thus, disappeared for ever a little piece of England's history. My feelings about it? I was well pleased with my discoveries but more so with an affinity I felt I had, being the last person to live there, with the first people who had lived there.