West Mill, Watchfield

A general history by Neil B. Maw



The great Survey of England in 1086, commonly called, '*Domesday*,' showed that Watchfield had one Mill within the parish. We cannot be certain, but it is very likely that it was the one located where the road to Highworth crosses the River Cole, anciently called the '*Lenta*.' It is located at the western extremity of the parish, hence the name West Mill. We have no indication from documentary sources or archaeological, of how the mill was laid out in the 11th century and it's quite possible that there could have been a mill there much earlier in the Saxon or even Roman periods.

The earliest documentary evidence we have is from the late 16th century. Hester Harrington owned the Manor of Watchfield which she passed to her husband William Stubbs when they married in 1574. Research carried out on the Wills of William and Hester enabled it to be confirmed that they lived at West Mill House. (For further information on this please see SHS Listing No N127). The building that housed the mill mechanism was separate from the house. (See aerial photo). The house that stands in a north-south

alignment next to the mill, was the Millers house. It appears to be of early 19th century origin and it's likely that it replaced an earlier building. The large farmhouse next door on an east-west alignment called West Mill House is part 17th century with an early 19th century addition. This was the main dwelling house of William and Hester Stubbs and although William owned the mill, there were various Millers who operated it; Thomas Forshe, Stephen West, Richard Hillier and Thomas Greene, between the years 1617 and 1627. *(BCA Shrivenham Manor Court Records)*

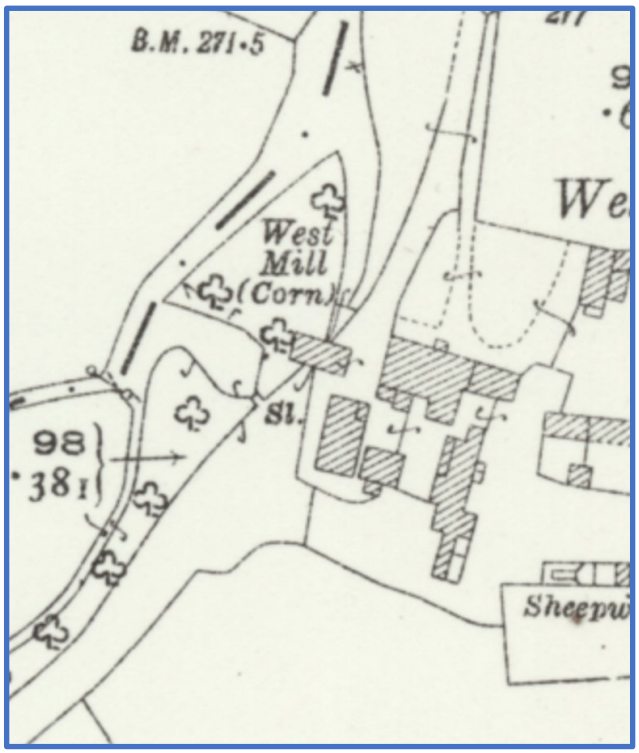
The file held by the Berkshire County Archives D/EPB - T46 contains many interesting documents concerning the Fairthorne family. From these documents we can determine that around 1640, the Mill was owned by Sir Humphrey Forster of Aldermarston, Berkshire. In 1648 he sold it to William Fairthorne and his son Edward. We also learn that the previous Miller under Forster's ownership was Richard Fisher of a well-known family of Millers within the district.

From a bundle of documents contained within the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre Archives (WSHC), we learn from an Indenture dated 20th March 1697 the information that Christopher Willoughby of Bishopstone, Wilts, Esq, (Lord of the Manor of Watchfield) Farm Lett to John Young the elder, *'All those three water Grist Mills known by the name of West Mill.'* The lease included various plots of meadows, millpond, and a stable.

Two Indentures, one dated 12th September 1727, an assignment and a mortgage for £23 and a further £10. The second is dated 6th November 1727. In both Indentures the principal person involved is Robert Young and his wife Susanna, but they are dealing with Fryars Mill and West Mill.

There is a considerable length of time before any more documentary evidence is available as to who was owing or operating West Mill. From the Vestry Minutes and the Overseers of the Poor Accounts for Watchfield, it seems likely that it was still in the hands of the Fairthorne family, but we have no firm evidence as yet for this. A Counterpart of a Lease held by Shrivenham Heritage Society, dated 16th April 1796, confirmed that Tharp Stevens ran the mill until his recent death. The mill was owned

by the Right Hon Henry Richard Lord Holland and had been since 25th September 1787. It was Tharp's son William, age 39, who took on, '*All those three Water Grist Mills with the appurtenances being in Watchfield commonly called West Mills.*' The 99year lease was also on the life of William's brother called John, age 31 and William's son aged four. The description of Three Water Grist Mills, refers to the number of pairs of stones. This represents a large set up and required a good flow of water over the wheel.



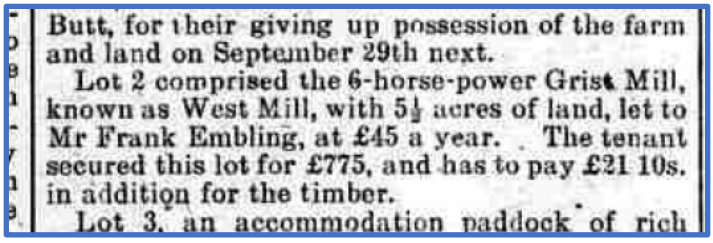
By 1814, the Mill was in the hands of William Smith. The information is provided by a document from the Wilts & Berks Canal Company records at the Wilts County Archive: *Ref No: 2424/300, dated 29th September 1814*, that states, '*It was agreed between Joseph Priestly as Agent for the Wilts and Berks Canal Co and William Smith the occupier and live holder of the Mill called West Mill in the Parish of Watchfield that the Canal Co shall from the 25th March next (Lady Day) pay William Smith the annual sum of 9 guineas as a compensation*

for all damages he may sustain by the company taking water to the Canal from the Wanborough, Swindon and Idstone Brooks. The first payment to be made on 25th March 1816.'

William Vines is shown as the Miller at West Mill in the census for 1841. He was 65 years of age and had a son called Richard who was 35 and described as a Taylor. His father died in 1850 and was buried at Highworth on 9th March. This left Richard to change his profession and take over the mill. He was joined by his sister Mary, both of whom are shown on the 1851 census as joint occupants and they also employed two men. Richard Vines died in 1857 and was buried at Highworth on 7th February. His sister continued to occupy the mill, but she employed George Looker to operate it. The census for 1861 informed that he was born in 1829 and from Highworth. In 1871, Mary was still at the mill, and George still operated it. A document from the Canal Company reference 2424/252 informed that George Looker officially took over the lease of the mill on the 21st January 1874, and we also learn that his tenancy ceased on 5th August 1895. The mill configuration was still being described at this time as, '*Three Water Grist Mills*.' However, the census of 1901 showed 70years old George Looker still at the mill, so it seems likely that he again leased it from the Pleydell-Bouverie Estate at Coleshill who then owned the property. George died on 18th February 1911 at the age of 82 and was buried in St Andrews churchyard, Shrivenham. He had been at the mill for a total of 62 years. (George Looker's stone below).



In 1918, a large amount of property was sold by the Pleydell-Bouverie Estate at Coleshill. The sale took place at the end of July at the Goddard Arms, Swindon and West Mill was sold to the then occupier, Frank Embling. A newspaper article gave some information as can be seen in the cutting below (Swindon Advertiser 3rd August 1918).



Butt, for their giving up possession of the farm and land on September 29th next.

Lot 2 comprised the 6-horse-power Grist Mill, known as West Mill, with 5½ acres of land, let to Mr Frank Embling, at £45 a year. The tenant secured this lot for £775, and has to pay £21 10s. in addition for the timber.

Lot 3, an accommodation paddock of rich

Frank Embling's tenure was to be a long one and he had clearly been successful at his job to have been able to buy the mill when it came up for auction. We learned much information about Frank from his nephew Paul Embling who contacted Shrivenham Heritage Society in 2023 about visiting the property. He had been born in the mill dwelling house in 1940 and had spent much time there with his uncle and aunt when he was a boy. He also had two old family photo albums that provided much information about how the mill house was laid out. The photo below shows Frank himself stood outside the farm at the bottom of the hill circa 1930s. Note how the road then was just a dirt track with a separate footpath.















The above photos show how the mill looked when it was working apart from the last one in sequence (above) which shows how it was converted from a working mill house to a sitting room. The Leet is the channel that brought the water towards the wheel. A sluice in the natural river course diverted the water into the Leet where it was further sluiced onto the wheel. The wheel sluice in the photo above has now been paved over but the channel that once housed the sluice that allowed the water to run back out to the river, only the footbridge remains. The mill wheel was covered by a brick lean-to type structure that can be seen to the left of the lady standing on the bridge. This was removed in the 1960s when the mill house was converted. Also above is a photo of the mechanism, part of which is still in the sitting room as a feature.

We also learned from Paul Embling's visit, was that Frank was operating the Mill right up to the 1950s when he sold it.



The photo above shows where the water flowed when the mill was working. (courtesy of Paul Williams). The area now has been grassed over. (See drawing below).

The Electoral Registers for 1961 list that Derek G. Dolman and Margaret A. Dolman were registered at the mill and remained so when the series of registers ended in 1965. At the moment we have no information as to who took over from the Dolmans and our knowledge of occupiers is incomplete until the recent years of 2020. The mill house and grounds are now owned and occupied by Adam and Liz Twine and we are grateful to them for allowing us to look at the property with a view to understanding how the mill operated. Below. An AI interpretation of how the mill may have looked.

If you would like to add to this history of West Mill please contact us at

info@shrivenhamheritagesociety.co.uk

