

SAWBRIDGEWORTH HISTORY.

LOCAL WATERMILLS.

AN INTRODUCTION.

Nowadays we all take for granted that power is available at the flick of a switch. Electricity and gas in our homes, and of course petrol/diesel in our cars. However, this has not always been so. As little as a hundred and fifty years ago there was none of this power generally available in Sawbridgeworth. In the Victorian period, steam power had become commonplace. But before this the options were extremely limited. Apart from animal muscle power, (human/horse/oxen), the only way of generating power for machinery was through the use of wind or water.

The use of wind to generate power has obvious problems. Wind direction is not constant, and wind strength is highly variable. If the wind is too weak, there is no power. If the wind is too strong, it could damage the machinery. These problems mean that for long periods a windmill can (or has to) remain motionless, and hence useless for production. The best place for them to be sited is at the top of a hill, which could be isolated, difficult to access, and therefore uneconomic, or on a wide plain. It is no accident that windmills are common in the flat lands of Norfolk. These are mainly used for pumping though, not milling.

Watermills do not suffer the same problems as windmills. Provided the water is flowing, then the machinery can turn and output is maintained. Watermills originated in the Near East and probably came to England with the Romans. Domesday in 1086 records 5,624 watermills in England, although research indicates the figure of 6,082 may be more accurate. This is because many mills in the North were omitted due to poor surveying there. Their value to communities was such that by the year 1300AD, there were between 10,000 and 15,000 in England.

Every mediaeval lord wanted to have a watermill. They were a good source of income for him. However, they were also beneficial to the surrounding community in general. The mill allowed to people who worked the land to produce enough food for themselves, and even generate a surplus, either to be sold for profit, or retained for bad years.

Sawbridgeworth and the surrounding villages are positioned in a what was a very prosperous area in the mediaeval period. The river Stort and its tributaries flow through the vicinity. It is therefore not surprising to find that a number of watermills were located nearby.

It is a misconception to think that all mills were used for grinding grain. As already mentioned, those of Norfolk were mainly pumps to drain the fens. The power of the mill could be utilized for many things. Other uses could be sawmills or fulling mills. Locally there were no sawmills, but a number of the mills in the Sawbridgeworth area were at times used as fulling mills. Fulling is a process in the production of woollen garments, whereby the wool is made thicker (fuller) and better for clothing. It involves scouring the wool to remove oil and grease, followed by pounding with wooden stocks. Apart from the power requirement, this process also uses a great deal of water, so it is no surprise to find watermills used for fulling. It should also be noted that locally there were a great number of sheep farms producing wool. These farms would have given the commercial impetus to the fulling mills.

I have looked at some of those mills local to Sawbridgeworth and produced a short history of each one. I have selected just 8 mills for this project, however, strictly speaking, 7 of these no longer exist, (although 3 still retain some associated buildings). The exact location of 4 of them is unknown! It is only at Little Hallingbury that we find a complete mill building. This is not to say though that everything has disappeared. Even a short walk around Sawbridgeworth reveals the impact of the local mills. In Bell Street, you can see the remains of malthouse buildings and towards the river and the station you cannot fail to see them. The economy here was centred upon milling and some of Sawbridgeworth's richest families were to make their money in this business. It can come as no surprise therefore that the richer milling families of Barnard, De'Ath and Pavitt were related by marriage, keeping it in the family as it were.



Millstone from Burton's (Sawbridgeworth) Mill displayed in Bakers Walk.

LOCAL WATERMILLS. No. 1. SHEERING MILL.

Domesday in 1086 records two mills for the Sheering area, one at Sheering itself, and another at Quicksbury. It is the second of these at Quicksbury which is the real subject of this article, however, some mention must firstly be made of the mill at Sheering.

The mill at Sheering was near Sheering Hall and was on Pincey Brook. Its precise location has been lost to history, but it cannot have been large. In 1086, it was recorded as owned by Peter de Valognes. It is known that by 1362 this mill was not in operation as it had no grinding stones. In c1401 this mill burnt down. It was however re-built and put back to use, although this was a temporary measure, and the mill was finally ruinous and redundant by 1431.

Nowadays, when people refer to Sheering Mill, it is the mill at Quicksbury to which they are truly referring. Thus, henceforth, this article will do the same and simply refer to 'Sheering Mill'. (Note that Quicksbury has also been known as just Quickbury and as Cowickbury. It is now better known as Lower Sheering).

As has been mentioned, what is now called Sheering Mill was mentioned in the Domesday survey of 1086. It was recorded as being owned at that time by William de Warenne. It was valued at 5/4d.

Sheering Mill was situated in Sheering Mill Lane (Road) on the river Stort next to the canal lock which bears its name on the Stort Navigation.

Sometime in the 13th century, and certainly by the year 1241, the mill had passed on (along with the Manor of Quickbury) into the possession of the monks of Bermondsey Priory.

By 1553, Sheering Mill was definitely a 'fulling mill', being used in woollen cloth making. However, it was probably converted over a hundred years previously in 1437 or soon afterwards, when it was acquired by a John Leventhorpe from three other people including a John Vantort. Both surnames are locally renown, and this John Leventhorpe was almost certainly the same person who dies in 1484 and was a major sheep farmer. It of course making excellent business sense for him to own this part of the woollen production process. The mill remaining in the Leventhorpe family until 1629.

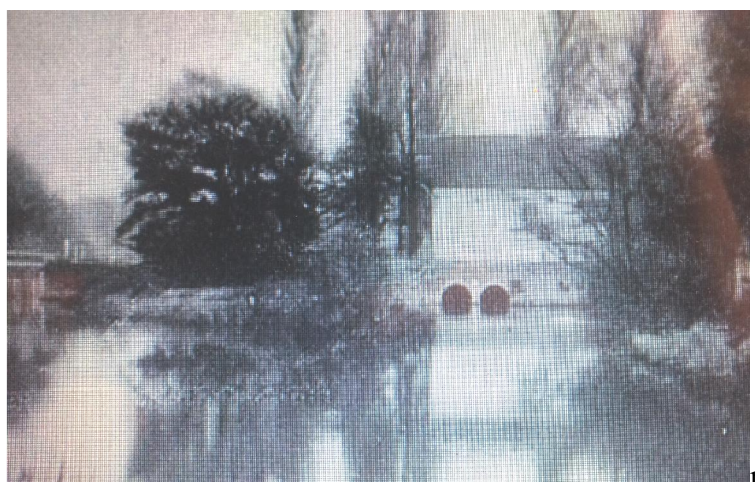
In 1627, it is recorded that there was a bridge over the river Stort at this point, and that this bridge was the responsibility of the miller of Sheering Mill.

Sheering Mill continued as a fulling mill until 1713 at which point a James Pynning is noted as milling corn there. From 1713 onwards, the mill remained a cereal mill.

Owning a mill was not without its problems. A reasonably high head of water had to be retained in order for the mill to operate correctly in times of little rain, but if not properly constrained, this water could escape and flood into neighbouring properties causing damage. Between 1729 and 1760 there were numerous complaints, and this was a constant legal headache for the incumbent miller at Sheering until it's final judgement and resolution in 1760 by the Courts of Sewers.

In 1729, an Andrew Little is recorded as the miller. This is interesting as an Andrew Littler is also listed as the miller at Sawbridgeworth Mill in 1734. They must be the same person. Furthermore, there is litigation at both mills at the same time regarding damage to neighbour's property through bad practice. Andrew does not seem to have been a caring neighbour.

In about 1840, another locally renown family, the Barnard family took over ownership of Sheering Mill. It remained in the hands of John Barnard until 1891, at which point production ceased. Although the mill was sold on, it remained empty and unoccupied, finally closing in 1914, and being demolished in 1917.



Sheering Mill c1905.

A sad note comes from the year 1892. In that year a boy aged just 15 drowned here whilst boating on the Stort. With a group of friends, he hired a boat from Sheering Mill Lock, fell in whilst steering and could not be saved.

Although the mill itself has gone, the Mill House is still standing. It is a timber framed building of the 17th century with later additions, being re-fronted in the 19th century. There is a miller's plate above the top gate. This is a Grade II listed building, English Heritage ID 118266. It is possible that this was originally 3 cottages which have been conjoined, but the evidence is uncertain.

Apart from the Mill House, the only other visible evidence for the former mill are the tail race tunnels which can still be seen.

LOCAL WATERMILLS. No. 2. SAWBRIDGEWORTH MILL.

Domesday in 1086 recorded two mills for Sawbridgeworth, one of which was most certainly that at Lower Sheering and the subject of another article by this writer. The other mill was at Sawbridgeworth proper. In 1086, this mill was recorded as being owned by Geoffrey de Mandeville with a value of 20/-, a lot of money at that time.

Sawbridgeworth Mill was situated just off Station Road (formerly Mill Lane) astride the river Stort.

Little is known of the early history of this mill. However, sometime prior to 1632 it was in the hands of the Leventhorpe family. An Edward Leventhorpe being noted as an owner.

In 1720 an Andrew Littler is named as the miller. This must be the same person as Andrew Little, who is named as the miller at Sheering Mill in 1729. However, by 1737 a Nathaniel Little has become the miller. This is presumably Andrew's son. Nathaniel remains as the miller until at least 1765. It is possible that the Little(r) family retain an interest in the mill of some sort after this because in 1911 a Fanny Littler (living at Sheering) is named in an agreement with the Lee Conservancy Board as a 'mortgagee' (Stort Deeds 202).

In order to keep a watermill running, especially in dry weather, a good head of water must be maintained. Andrew, and subsequently Nathaniel, did this though in a shoddy way by the simple (and cheap) expedient of raising a bank of earth 14 inches above the timberwork of the overfall. This resulted in damage to neighbouring properties and numerous consequential legal actions from 1729 until 1759 at the Courts of Sewers. Two of the successful litigants were the locally renown families of Barnard from Sawbridgeworth, and Sworder from Bishops Stortford.

The circumstantial evidence is that by 1830 the Barnard family were now the owners of the mill. At this time (1830), it has been noted by many commentators that 'Harlow Common Windmill' was dismantled, carted to Sawbridgeworth, and re-used in the structure of the (still existing) mill house. This was supposedly due to the new coach road being put through the Common. This however, appears to be a case of people subsequently quoting an original incorrect source without bothering to check the facts. The two windmills near Harlow Common were at Foster Street and Potter Street.

These were not dismantled until 1874 and 1891 respectively, and thus could not be them. The windmill which **was** moved must therefore have been John Barnard's Mill from Old Road Harlow. This was definitely removed 1830 – 1831. It must be remembered that the new coach road continued after the Common to the bridge near Harlow Mill, and thus near Old Road. Presumably, having newly acquired Sawbridgeworth Mill, the Barnard family wished to upgrade the site by the cheapest means, and recycling the old and redundant windmill which they already owned was a logical action.

From at least 1841 until sometime after 1871, a Daniel Barnard is named as a miller. Genealogical evidence shows that in the late 17th century, the Barnard family effectively split into three branches. As well as those at Sawbridgeworth, members of the family were now to be found at Cheshunt and Dunmow. Nonetheless, the family remain in close contact with each other. Accordingly, Daniel is found to be a member of the 'Dunmow Barnards'.

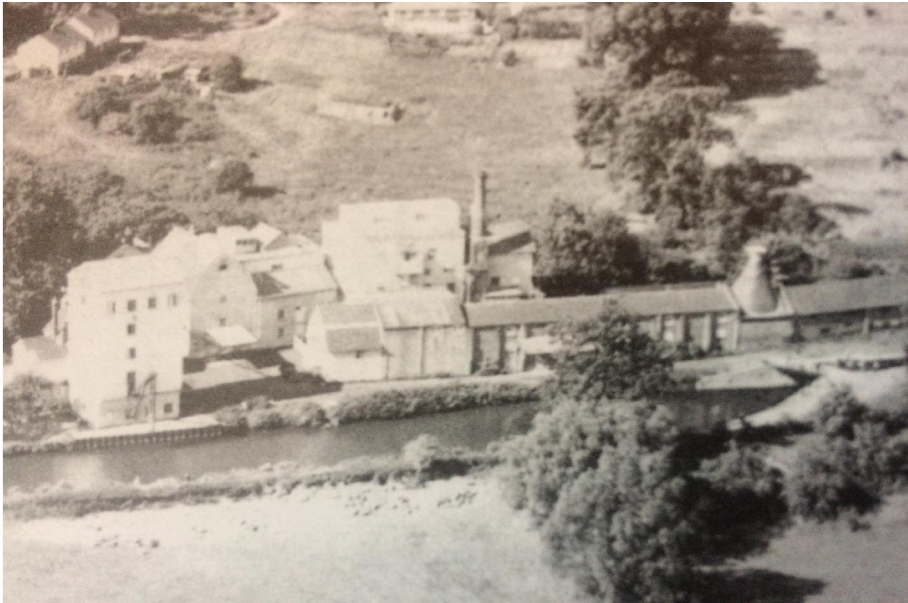
Of interest, sometime after 1861 an alehouse was opened within the buildings around the mill and was called 'The Mill Stream'. In 1871 the landlord was given as a Charles Pavely. It had a short life, being closed before 1911. One assumes that it was used to slake the thirsts of the workers at the mill and to give the Barnard family a means of recovering some of the wages they had to pay to them. William Barnard, the owner of the mill also owned the Fox Brewery at Bishops Stortford at this time. Presumably this was where the beer originated.



Sawbridgeworth Mill c1905.

Investments included in 1869 a large malthouse being added to the complex of buildings around the mill, with the mill itself being converted to the much more efficient steam power in about 1880.

In 1886 upon the death of his father William, Edmund Broughton Barnard inherited and became the owner of the mill. However, Edmund was a politician, not a miller. Accordingly, in 1891 he sold the mill to Thomas Burton. It remains in the hands of Thomas Burton Ltd. until 1962 when it was sold to Garfield Weston (Allinson's Flour), and finally closed in 1970.



Burton's (Sawbridgeworth) Mill 1955. The maltings added in 1869 are clearly seen to the right of the main mill building.

In 1975 there was a major fire at the mill, and the mill itself was destroyed. Many of the surrounding buildings survived though and are still to be seen today including the Mill House with its mansard roof. This is a Grade II listed building, English Heritage ID 160830. Also, the Old Grain Store, another Grade II listed building and the only surviving weatherboarded building from before the fire of 1975. English Heritage ID 160831. Additionally, in Bakers Walk just off Bell Street, there survives an old millstone now preserved and exhibited, labelled as being from Burton's Mill.



The Old Grain Store in 2017.



The Mill House in 2017.

LOCAL WATERMILLS. No. 3. HARLOW MILL.

The first mention in historical records of a mill at Harlow comes from the years 1041 and 1044. In 1041 there was a grant made to the abbey of Bury St. Edmunds (St. Edmundsbury) for a mill on the present site. This was followed in 1044 by the grant of land to form what would become the Manor of Harlowbury. Both these grants were made by Thurstan, son of Wine. Both of whom were prominent Saxon theigns.

Domesday in 1086 recorded several names in relation to the mill. The abbot Herlaua of Bury St. Edmunds is one, however, a Geoffrey and a Count Eustace are also mentioned. Presumably these were Geoffrey de Mandeville and Count Eustace II of Boulogne. Both were with William the Conqueror at Hastings and no doubt wanted their share of the spoils. (Geoffrey had already been granted Sawbridgeworth and Eustace died 1087). However, regardless of the Norman's claims, the abbey retained both the mill and the manor.

Harlow Mill is situated astride the river Stort between Sawbridgeworth and Harlow, just off Harlow Road/Cambridge Road (A1184).

Little is known of the early history of this mill. It may have been leased to others at times, but the abbey of Bury St. Edmunds retained ownership until its dissolution by Henry VIII in 1539. There was a bridge across the river at this point, also owned by the abbey. The Abbot's representative charging a penny toll in 1536 from every cart crossing here.

From 1544 until 1680 Harlow mill along with Harlowbury was owned by the Addington family. These were landed gentry living in Devon. There is no record of them ever coming to Harlow or Harlowbury, so presumably the mill was leased to others at this time. After 1680, the mill came into the possession of the North family, a descendant of whom at a much later date gains notoriety as Prime Minister Lord North who mismanaged and lost the American colonies.

It would seem that the bridge which had been owned by the abbey allowing a crossing of the river at this point had fallen into disrepair, and been removed. A ford was now noted in the early 18th century. However, in 1757 as part of the new turnpike road, a new toll bridge was constructed. This bridge cannot have been structurally secure, as in its turn is also replaced by 1831. This later bridge becoming a 'county bridge' (free to use) in 1858.

Definitely by 1760, but probably from 1725 onwards, the mill was leased by the North family to the Barnard family. The Barnard family later purchased the mill outright sometime after 1849, (the Victoria County History, Essex, gives the year as 1876). The Barnard family seem to have been good operators of the mill because unlike some other nearby mills with different owners, there is nothing really serious reported to the Courts of Sewers regarding damage to neighbouring properties. Harlow Mill continued to be owned and importantly operated by the Barnard family through the generations until 1911 when it was apparently leased out to another miller.

In 1901-02 at New Year's Eve there was what could have been a serious fire at the mill. The fire started in the Corn and Seed Store which was at that time leased by a Basil Scruby, (at that time the owner of Sheering Mill). Fortunately, the Sawbridgeworth Fire Brigade with their new steam fire engine attended and did a marvellous job of controlling and dousing the flames. There was £1,000 worth of damage to the stock (which was insured), but the mill was saved. A humorous aside to this story is that being New Year's Eve, a small crowd gathered by the fire to sing carols!

The Barnard family retained the ownership though until 1918. In this year, the owner, John Barnard died. He left virtually everything in his will, (including the mill), to a Miss Valentine Fane, with whom he had a long-term partnership. Miss Fane was independently wealthy, being related to the Earl of Westmoreland, and was definitely **not** a miller. Accordingly, in 1926, she sold the mill. Valentine Fane was noted as being against animal cruelty. Nonetheless, it is known that she allowed Game shooting on her lands, and at least once, in 1923, the Eastern Counties Otter Hounds gathered at Harlow Mill, hunting as far as Bishops Stortford before making a kill.



Harlow Mill c1900. The present restaurant is easily recognisable to the left of the picture. The rest of the building was destroyed by the fire of 1938.

Between 1929 and 1933 the new owners attempted to market the premises as an exclusive country club, but this was not successful.

In 1938 just prior to WW2 there is a major fire at the mill. Most of the mill itself was destroyed, and over the next few years the remaining machinery was dismantled and the mill building demolished. The mill house though survived almost intact and in 1978 this was renovated and opened as the Beefeater restaurant with a modern Premier Inn attached at the rear. This is a Grade II listed building, English Heritage ID 119438 and is reckoned to be 17th century in date.



Harlow Mill in 2017.

LOCAL WATERMILLS. No. 4. HALLINGBURY MILLS.

There were 2 watermills for Hallingbury. One at Great Hallingbury, the other at Little Hallingbury.

Part 1. Great Hallingbury Mill.

Very little is known about this mill. It no longer exists and its historical whereabouts are uncertain. It is mentioned in the Domesday survey of 1086 as existing in 1066. It was owned in 1086 by a Roger de Otberville. It was probably sited on the south bank of Latchmore Brook, west of Hallingbury Hall.

Of interest, and showing what politics was like in those days, in the 12th century c1120 – 1130, the monks of St. John's abbey, Colchester, attempted to acquire the estate of Great Hallingbury (including the mill). They did this through the production of Charters and documents which were held even then as being illegal forgeries! Needless to say, they failed.

There is an obscure mention of the mill again in 1275, otherwise there is nothing until 1571, when it is noted as a fulling mill. However, after this there is nothing.

Part 2. Little Hallingbury Mill.

A mill was noted here in the Domesday survey of 1086, however, it apparently did not exist in 1066 and was a new build. Its ownership at that time is obscured by the fact that it was seemingly shared by both Little Hallingbury manor **and** Monkbury manor. Little Hallingbury was held in 1086 by Swein of Essex, an Anglo-Danish nobleman. Monkbury was held in 1066 by Asgar the Staller and in 1086 by Geoffrey de Mandeville (both also previous lords of the manor of Sayesbury - Sawbridgeworth). Apart from this, nothing more is known of this particular mill. The historical site is unknown. It is almost certainly **not** the site of the present-day mill.

A mill is noted in the early 15th century for Little Hallingbury. Another obscure piece, this could be referring to either mill.

The first definite mention of a mill on the site of the mill we now know as Little Hallingbury Mill comes from the year 1641, when it is referred to as Tednam Mill. Local church records show it to have been a grist mill at this time. It is sited on the river Stort in Old Mill Lane, Gaston Green.

By 1693, the mill must have been in a dilapidated condition, because in that year it was demolished and completely re-built to be used as a silk mill. This was a function it was to perform until sometime after 1770. The mill must have been operated in a reasonable manner at this time, as unlike some, there are no major problems reported to the Courts of Sewers.

In 1778, the mill lease was acquired by James Pavitt and Richard Martin, who converted the mill to be used for grinding corn. Shortly after this, in 1800, George Pavitt bought the mill outright and it remained in the Pavitt family until 1856.



Little Hallingbury Mill viewed from the Marina.

An interesting story from 1843, is that an auction was held at the mill selling animals, produce and farm implements from the associated adjoining farm, the occupier having 'left the neighbourhood'. The list of items for auction show that the farm was also being used as a brewery!

By the latter half of the 19th century, the mill must have been once again in a dilapidated condition. Difficult to maintain and operate. This would explain why a new mill was constructed next to the old one, coming into use in 1874. The original mill was demolished in 1885. It stood on the site of the still existing granary building which replaced it.

Another interesting story from 1891, is that Messrs. Albert Sheldrake and Charles Saltmarsh were both charged and convicted of stealing 6 'tame ducks' from the mill with a value of 18/-. Albert (aged 27) was working at Sawbridgeworth Mill as a carpenter. Charles (aged 67) was a gardener at Bishops Stortford. They were both extremely lucky in that Edmund Broughton Barnard (who was Albert's employer), gave the men a good character reference. This resulted in the very lenient sentence of just 1 month's hard labour for both men.

In 1896 the lease for the mill, adjacent farmhouse and 25 acres of land was offered for sale at the princely sum of £135 per annum, however, the lessee had to pay any tithes.

In 1900, George Archibald Wallis purchased the mill for the sum of £1,500. In 1915, a Mr. G. E. Wallis aged 44 is reported in the newspapers as dying after a short illness. However, this is a typographical error and G. A. Wallis was meant. After his death, Georges widow assumed the ownership of the mill until sometime after 1919.

In 1917, Mr. E. Cooper was noted as the flour mill manager, and Mr. J. Eldred was a miller.

Little Hallingbury Mill continued to operate as a corn mill until 1952, at which point it was not economically viable, production being just 8-10 sacks per day.

After closure, the condition of the mill was allowed to deteriorate. A brief period as the headquarters of Lee and Stort Cruises Ltd. in 1966, was followed by its purchase in 1967 by a John Wilkinson. There followed a period of restoration of both the mill and the machinery 1967-1971, after which the mill was opened as an hotel and a wedding venue. A role in which it continues to this day. The mill is a Grade II* listed building, English Heritage ID 120539. The machinery is still to a limited extent operable, and would still be capable of producing small quantities of wholemeal flour.

LOCAL WATERMILLS. No. 5. GILSTON AND EASTWICK MILLS.

Part 1. Gilston Mill.

The village of Gilston did not exist at the time of the Domesday survey, being simply a part of the land and demesne of Sawbridgeworth, and under the same lordship. Indeed, it is said that prior to 1135, there was really nothing much there. Accordingly, it is somewhat surprising to find that in mediaeval times, Gilston had a watermill.

The first historical record of the mill dates to 1189-1199 where it was mentioned in Waltham Abbey Charters and was already extant. It is therefore likely that the mill was constructed c1150, which would put it in the Lordship and ownership of Geoffrey de Mandeville, 2nd Earl of Essex.

The mill no longer exists, and its exact historical location is uncertain. Some commentators believe that it was situated on the opposite bank of the river Stort to what is now Harlow Town station, and at the junction of the old and new rivers. However, evidence from the Waltham Abbey Charters indicates that it was probably a few hundred metres further upstream, where the Fiddlers' Brook enters the Stort.

The Waltham Abbey Charters are actually referring to the Abbey Mill of Nettleswell, (now known as Burnt Mill). They tell how this mill, together with that at Gilston, could not operate at the same time because of lack of water, and how a mutual agreement had to be found with the lord of Gilston to allow the operation of both. This in turn implies that the Gilston Mill not only pre-dated the Abbey Mill, but that the Gilston Mill must have been slightly upstream, and restricting the water flow to the newer Abbey Mill. No doubt much to the monk's annoyance.

The next confirmed reference to Gilston Mill comes from the 13th century and the reign of Edward I, where it is referred to in assizes as a fulling mill.

The final possible mention of the mill is once again from the Waltham Abbey Charters. In the Harley Manuscript 4809 dating to the 15th century, there is a mill mentioned at Gilston **and** Nettleswell. Note the singular term mill though. Is this therefore a reference to both mills, or just the Abbey Mill? Following this obscure mention, nothing more is heard of Gilston Mill and it is lost to history. It cannot have been very large, and following the building of the Abbey Mill close by, would have been difficult to operate profitably, and would have been uneconomic to repair, maintain, or re-build.

Part 2. Eastwick Mill.

Rather surprisingly, this mill is mentioned in Domesday. In 1066, it was owned by King Harold II with Wulfwin of Eastwick his tenant in chief. In 1089, the manor and the mill were owned by Geoffrey de Bech. The mill was listed as 5/- in value.

Eastwick Mill was next mentioned in 1301, where it was a fulling mill.

Following the death in 1317 of the then Lord of the Manor, Lawrence de Tany, (who was only 19 at the time), his 16 years old sister Margaret inherited the mill and a third of the rental income. However, it was noted at the time that the mill was in substantial disrepair, and that this was in reality worthless.

Little is known of the mill after this time. It is recorded as existing in 1607, but with no more information. It is next recorded in 1641, where ownership was transferred to Sir John Gore. However, in 1701, following the death of Sir John, the mill was not listed as part of the deceased persons estate.

The mill is lost to history after this time, with no further mentions. Even the site of the mill is unknown. It was probably close to the A414 on the River Stort, opposite where Eastwick Hall Lane is today, but that is not confirmed.

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Flt Lt Douglas Coe BSc RAFVR(T) Ret'd.
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