



THE HISTORY OF WORTON MILL

Worton is a small village in the heart of Wiltshire, about 3 miles from the centuries old market town of Devizes. Marston is the village adjacent to Worton. The two villages currently share the facilities of Church, school, public house and village hall.

The Mill known as Worton Mill is situated between the two villages. Over the years the population of the two villages has varied little as can be seen from the census figures taken from 'The History of Wiltshire' Volume 4 below:

Census population of Worton and Marston, 1801-1951

Year	Worton	Marston
1801	326	152
1811	286	158
1821	298	192
1831	302	175
1841	311	179
1851	349	168
1861	401	No data
1871	351	170
1881	340	164
1891	303	173
1901	318	139
1911	310	123
1921	282	108
1931	289	96
1941	No data	No data
1951	327	132

The Parish of Potterne, Worton and Marston, has several mills in close proximity, none of which are now working mills.

Worton Mill is situated on the watercourse known as Semington Brook, a constant and swift flowing clear stream. The brook is not wide but a good and constant stream of water passes through the channel.

The earliest documented record of ownership of a mill on the site of Worton Mill was by Thomas Potterne in 1660, from a copy of the court roll for that year! The lad was in leasehold ownership the lease being granted by the church commissions, Bishopric of Salisbury. It is quite possible that a mill was present on the site well before, even for several centuries as it was usual for every small community to have its own mill for the grinding of flour at the time of the feudal system, grinding flour with a hand quern was illegal, all corn having to be sent to the manorial mill for grinding. The local miller by the leave of the manorial lord could hold much wealth and power.

In 1770 ownership was transferred to Jacob Moore and some adjacent land as occupied by Mrs Ruth Moore. The map of 1735 shows the mill and some adjacent land as occupied by Mrs Moore. This is possibly Ruth Moore, perhaps by then a widow if indeed she was the wife of James. The map shows Semington Brook the natural watercourse, and the Mill stream upon which the mill building appears to be built. Although no sluice gate appears on the map. I think it can safely be assumed that the mill stream was an artificial channel dug for the purpose of feeding the mill with water at a sufficient head as the mill stream is several feet higher than the brook and water would not naturally take then higher course.

On 25th of October 1756 there appeared in the Salisbury Journal an advertisement reading as follows:

To be let on St Thomas Day next, a flour mill consisting of two pairs of stones, one French, the other Welch, also a Fulling Mill together with a dwelling house, bakehouse, garden and orchard, and also about 10 acres of rich water-meadow adjoining, situate in the WORTON in the parish of POTTERNE in this county, late in the possession of Mr John Moore deceased. For particulars enquire Mr Joseph Axford of IMBER.

From this it can be gathered that not only did the mill cease to be in the ownership of the Moore's but that it was a thriving flour mill, having two pairs of stones, also, fulling stocks for the wool making process. An examination of the map of 1735 shows two buildings next to the mill stream. The wording of the advertisement A flour mill ... also a fulling mill might suggest two mills on the site. If we are to take the illustrations of the buildings on the map as an indication of their structure, both buildings were a substantial size with chimneys. The building astride of the stream is clearly a mill, the other built against the waters edge could also have been a mill as there would seem little point in building a storehouse or dwelling house so close to the water if it were not for a purpose. The Fulling Mill is together with a dwelling house, bakehouse, garden and orchard the larger house is the one astride of the stream, also the tithe map of 1863 describes the mill and its adjoining land as watermill, garden and orchard. From this I would reach the conclusion that the fulling mill was the larger property and the flour mill the smaller.

To support the fact that the cloth making process was carried on at the mill is the occupation of the adjacent property – Plumbbush Cottage from 1756 by John STRAWBRIDGE described as a clothworker and Anne DOREY wife of George DOREY described as a shearmaker, also Michael CHESTERMAN. The nearest town where cloth is known to have been manufactured is MELKSHAM some seven miles away, a long way for Mr Strawbridge to walk every day to work. It is possible that the new leaseholder of Worton Mill took on the residents of Plumbbush Cottage as his employees. John Strawbridge together with Mrs Mary CHESTERMAN (widow perhaps to an unfortunate Michael CHESTERMAN is recorded to have still been in possession of the lease to Plumbbush Cottage in 1768 (Court Roll copy). The Victoria County History describes land cultivated in 1801 as follows:

Worton

131 acres of arable land 712 acres of grass 1¼ acres of woods

Marston

163 acres of arable land 679 acres of grass

It can be seen that there is a good proportion of grass for sustaining sheep and cattle; certainly the chalk uplands of the surrounding area was excellent sheep rearing country and much wealth was made from this in the wool towns of Trowbridge, Bradford-On-Avon and Melksham in the 18th and 19th centuries. A small mill like Worton may have served a small local demand either from fleeces supplied locally or imported from the nearby-larger wool-markets.

Whether the Joseph Axford mentioned in the advertisement succeeded Mr Moore as owner of the property on his death is unclear. Possibly as owner he was advertising as a tenant to run the mill.

In 1785 William and Charles Axford became leaseholders of the watermill and mill hams. In 1801 the lease was given up to the Lord of the Manor and in 1813 William and Charles Axford applied for a mortgage from Thomas Potter for £600 on the water-mill and mill hams. The circumstances of these transactions are not stated and it can only be guessed as to their purpose. The £600 mortgage may have been to regain the lease on the property or to make improvements to it.

On the site of the mill today stands a property called Mill House bearing the date 1835 above the front portal. This indicates that some renovation or addition to the existing building was made at that time.

The Axford family appear to have held the mill site from around 1750 until at least 1813. However, sometime between then and 1855 Mr George DOWSE became owner. An advertisement that appeared in the Devizes Gazette dated 30th August 1855 clearly indicates that great changes to the property occurred under the ownership of DOWSE. It reads as follows:

Advertisement - for sale by auction of Worton Mill on September 25th 1855.

The whole effects of the late Mr George Dowse consisting of 9 carthorses, 3 two year heifers, 2 millers wagons, 4 millers carts, 400 flour bags, 2 ricks of very superior winter hay, straw, household furniture and effects, etc.

At the same time and place will be offered that desirable and newly effected freehold and copyhold WATER GRIST MILL and residence known as WORTON MILL together with 12 acres of very productive water meadow and orchard land adjoining

The mill with it's 2 millers wagons, 4 millers carts and 400 flour bags appears to be a thriving local business but clearly know no longer a fulling mill. The most interesting fact is it's description as newly erected. The old fullings and flour mills appear to have been replaced by a new water Grist mill. (Grist being a mixture of grain, suggesting that all types of grain would be milled there). The wording of the advertisement may be misleading but the description. WATER GRIST MILL and residence known by the name of Worton Mill suggests that it was one building.

The arrangement of buildings has clearly changed. There is no longer a fulling mill or a bakehouse. Only by reference to the tithe map of 1863 can the new arrangement of buildings be established. The reliability of this map is suspect as Mr George Dowse is shown as owner and yet we already know that by 1855 he had died. So the assumption must be made that the survey for the map must have been made whilst he was still alive prior to 1855.

It is still, however, uncertain whether the newly erected property existed at the time of survey. The map shows a building described as house and watermill upon the millstream, the only other dwelling being at Mill Leaze across the lane on the property of James GLASS. The sight of the supposed old floor mill has become a barn or store. It is possible that Mr George Dowse decided to demolish the old flour mill and erect a new one on the site of the old fulling mill, which would be the site better suited to generate water power as a substantial drop in



level is achieved by means of an elevated mill race and sluice gate to hold the level before feeding onto the mill wheel. Why should Mr Dowse undertake the huge expense of erecting a new mill? No documented evidence is available to support any theory and so conjecture is all we can do.

At that time in the mid 1800's huge and powerful wool mills were operating in the newly industrial towns of Trowbridge, Bradford-On-

Avon and Melksham and probably some monopolisation of the wool-markets and cloth sales were making small fullings mills in outlying districts uneconomic. Another possibility is the destruction of the old fullings mill by fire; the processing of wool produces static electricity which commonly was the cause of such a disaster.

An enterprising mill owner may have turned this to his advantage by rebuilding using the newly available iron machinery for the purpose of milling the products in local demand, which would at that time have been grain for flour and meal. The smaller flour mills of the immediate vicinity with their less efficient wooden cog machinery and undershot wheels would have had difficulty in competing with one more modern and of higher output. AS the addition or renovation to the house was done in 1835 it may have been at the same time that the building of the mill took place.

In 1855 there were two bakers in Worton and so possibly the bakehouse in the mill would no longer have been required.

Names of owners are not known between 1855 and 1933 when a Mr Fry bought the property and site. However until 1926 T Kelson was tenant and miller and from that date R.J. Edmonds and Son took over business and tenancy buying the mill buildings, yard and stores/stables from Mr Fry in 1940.

A map dated 1924 shows that some changes had taken place in the interim. The building used as a dwelling was now separate from the mill itself. It is not clear when that change took place or why but it may have been a result of some updating of the power mechanism as this is where the change occurs.

A comparison of the map of 1924 and that of c.1975 shows a great change in the structure of the mill house. The North facing L-shaped section has been removed. The daughter of Mr Fry, who purchased the property in 1933, confirmed that the building at that time was as it stands today. Therefore the portion was removed between 1924 and 1933. Until recently one wall remained from this section. Recent renovation work to the wall revealed a doorway which would have led into the removed section of the building. Also discovered was a silver spoon with the hallmark ET and the initial A2 engraved on the handle. Miss Fry occupant of the Mill had on good authority from Southeby's that the spoon was made by Elisa Tookey towards the end of the 18th century. It would appear to be a spoon belonging to the AXFORD family who owned the mill and Mill House at that time. The wall already mentioned

and the portion of the house which now extends most northerly appear to be older than the rest of the buildings; the bricks are more weathered and the window lintels are of stone, unlike the brick arches above the door and the windows of the front façade, which bears the date 1835. It seems likely that this portion was part of the old fulling mill of the 1600's and 1700's. The map of 1924 shows an aqueduct, which although unconnected to the workings of the mill is an interesting feature. This was in the form of a trough which carried water to the meadow south of the brook to flood, promoting the growth of grass early in the spring and autumn. The building to the east of the mill was a two storey store house and stables. On the other side of the road on the land which was Mill Leaze are two cottages. The date that these were erected is not known but it is possible that they were built for mill workers at the time the grist mill was built between 1835 and 1855.



Sarah Ann Galpin, location unknown.

Henry & Mary (Polly) Galpin with daughter, Lilian. Photo probably taken in North Cadbury, c.1905.



The recent industrial history of Worton Mill is one of rapid expansion and demise. In 1940 when the mill and stables was sold to R.J Edmonds and Sons, the business expanded under their ownership and became a thriving and profitable mill. The area manager for R.J. Edmonds and Son at that time informed me that all manner of grain was milled their, Barley Meal for Pig Food, maize as well as wheat. Good baking flour was produced and animal and poultry meal. It seems that there was much money to be made during 1939-45 War years when at this time of food shortage anything could be grown for profit.



Don Raddon, with Mary (Polly) Galpin, his maternal grandmother at the gate of Mill Leaze (No.4 Mill Lane, Worton) c.1940

Harry GALPIN was the miller, who lived in the most westerly of the two cottages (now called Mill Leaze). His grandson informed me he used to draw water from the Mill Stream for domestic use before mains water was installed. I understand that ownership of these cottages still carries that right. Mill Cottage still has a well on its land

although the water is no longer pure enough to drink.

For many years in the employment of R. J. Edmonds and Son, Mr Sumner was owner of Mill Cottage. His occupation was tending the horses which were used to pull the mill wagons. Certainly several horseshoes big enough for carthorses have been found in the gardens of mill cottage. Eventually lorries took the place of horse drawn wagons and a plan dated 1950 shows the existence of a petrol pump and underground petrol tank in the mill yard. This plan shows the addition of an office on the front of the building and proposal for an extension to the site of the building which faces the road. The purpose of the extension is not stated but it may have been used to house and display farm machinery such as milking machinery which now formed part of the business in addition to milling.



Power was obtained by a water turbine and boosted by gas fuel when necessary. The plan dated 1970 shows an attachment to the rear of the building which I understand was the engine room.

In approximately 1962 R.F. Ford and Son purchased the Mill from Edmonds and continued running the business for eight years. By this time there was little call for water milling. The huge roller mills situated conveniently near to ports to receive imported grain and proved to be too great a competitor for almost every localised mill. R.F Ford and Sons dealing in the wholesaling and distribution of animal feeds had no further use for Worton Mill. Their product was more cheaply obtained from other manufacturers on a larger scale.

The plan of 1970 showed the mill as it existed before it was converted into a private residence two years later.

Today the Mill is still a private residence with a gallery which opens on the first weekend of every month. The exhibits in the gallery include original handmade jewellery and arts and crafts created by local artists from surrounding villages.

The main structure of the building remains as it was. The two porches and office have been removed and replaced by a concrete hard standing. The old mill yard between the house and stores outbuilding still maintains a right of way to Mill House.



A further footbridge has been built further upstream. The one time Stables and Stores have been reduced to a one storey garage block. Many of the original features still exist including the turbine gearing, above which is now built a conservatory, and a millstone which sits outside the door on the road side of the mill.

A floorboard, bearing the carved names of mill workers is preserved and hung inside the house. On the front wall of the building a stone with the initial C remains. At one time this was CF perhaps the initials of the builders of the mill. The letter F was removed during the 1972 conversion for unknown reasons.



The two mill cottages, although built for housing mill workers have always been freehold properties. They are still occupied as private dwellings but from their original state of two rooms upstairs and two rooms down with a garden earth closet have both been considerably extended and modernised. The Mill House has remained the same since 1933 although land has been sold for the building of Orchard Leigh and Willow House. Reference to the map of 1975 shows the site as it is today. The aqueduct has been removed. The old water meadow still retains the undulations resulting from drainage channels. In the garden of the Mill House can be found two millstones perhaps the French and the Welsh described in the advertisement of 1765.

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The mill is open to the public several days a year for more details please visit www.oldmillarts.co.uk