

Ewelme Mill

Extract from ‘Our Stream, the story of the Ewelme/Benson Brook’ by David Solomon.

No details of any mills in Ewelme Parish were mentioned in Domesday, but by the thirteenth century two were recorded; these must both have been on the brook. The site of one is presumed to be alongside the Benson Road at the location occupied by a mill until 1886, but the other is something of a mystery. A likely location for this second mill is at the outfall of King’s Pool; a reliable flow of water with a head drop of the order of a half a metre is unlikely to have gone unexploited in the centre of the village. Indeed, it is possible that the pond was created specifically for milling. However, no documentary evidence appears to exist to support the idea of a mill at the outfall of the pond. Perhaps one day an archaeological dig, or a thorough examination of historic documents, might shed some light.

Ewelme Mill situated beside the Benson Road was being used more than 700 years ago. We know that the rent in 1350 was 6s 8d, and that in the 16th Century the mill and attached mill cottage were usually let for 21 years at £7 6s 8d; at this time the property included both malt and wheat milling facilitiesⁱ. The first real detail we have comes from a notice of sale in 1831ⁱⁱ. The mill was being sold following the death of the owner, John Dean.

The sale notice describes the property:-

“Lot 1. All that excellent water corn mill now in full trade, known by the name of the Ewelme Mill, carrying two pairs of stones and fitted up with every convenience; a constant supply of water, a mill house¹, with garden, stabling for three horses, gig house, piggeries, and other outhouses; and a close of pasture land adjoining, &c. Also a comfortable detached dwelling house, with every necessary convenience, a large garden, orchard, and Close of good pasture land, behind the same, with thriving timber thereon, and two cow commons; the whole in the occupation of Mr Ashby, tenant at will.”

After the sale Mr Ashby continued as the tenant at the mill. The 1841 census shows him living there with his family although his occupation is now described as ‘Mealman’ (someone who is a dealer in grain and flour) and the occupation of miller is given to George Bunce who was also living at the Mill with his family.

The tithe map of 1840 gives us the first detailed plan of the layout of the site (Figure 1). The retained head on the mill pool appears to be higher than the present-day level of the water in the cress beds, and it extends to upstream of the road bridge.

According to the Tithe Survey the owner of the mill was Thomas Bishop Greenwood. Thomas was a farmer of 300 acres living in Chalgrove, and was probably the purchaser of the mill in 1831.

By 1851 the occupier of the mill had changed; it was John Gregory who was described as a miller (journeyman²).

Sometime within the next ten years Thomas Bishop Greenwood decided to leave Chalgrove and make Ewelme his home. He installed his son George Porter Greenwood in the Mill house and his son Walter was living next door (probably also part of the Mill House) (1861 census). The occupation of both brothers is described as ‘mealman (master)’ and they were thus probably engaged with the workings of the mill. The brothers lived there with their wives and young families and presumably made a good living as each employed a ‘live-in’ servant. The actual milling was done by Joseph Durbridge who is described as a journeyman miller. A year later (1862) George fell into financial difficulties and became bankrupt in the Augustⁱⁱⁱ. Funds must have been forthcoming from somewhere because his bankruptcy was discharged six weeks later. In about 1867 George

¹ This “mill house” is presumed to be the mill cottage attached to the mill, and the “comfortable detached dwelling house” refers to the building that was later known as the Mill House.

² A contract worker.

moved to the Mill at South Moreton to continue his profession as a 'mealman'. At about the same time George's brother Walter also left Ewelme to take up farming at Greenfield.



Figure 1. Ewelme Mill site in 1840 from the Tithe map.

George and Walter had a younger brother Horatio and he became the miller (1871 census). Horatio lived in the Mill House with his sister and parents (Thomas B and Sarah Greenwood) who had also moved in. How much of the milling Horatio did is not known as the census shows that William Turner, a miller, was also living on site in the mill cottage.

The 1871 Ordnance Survey Map (Figure 2) shows a similar layout of waterways and buildings to that shown in the Tithe map. The exception is that much of the long extension of the mill running along the edge of the mill pool appears to have been removed.

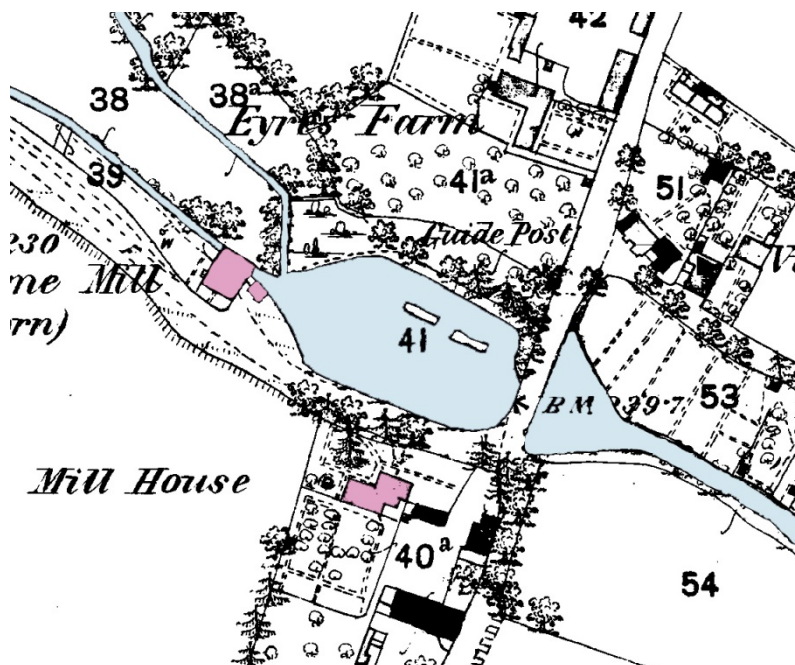


Figure 2. Ewelme Mill in 1881, based on OS 1:2500 map. The mill and mill house are shown in pink.

A photograph (Figure 3) of the mill from about this time confirms the absence of this extension, and gives a clear picture of the structure. The part of the building to the left was the old mill cottage, by this time used for housing employees and for storage. To the right is the wooden building of the mill itself. It is likely that the removed long extension had comprised the stables, piggery and gig house mentioned in the 1831 sale notice.

Thomas Bishop Greenwood died on 14 December 1879, his wife having predeceased him by two years. His will was proved on January 6 1880. Presumably his estate had to be divided between his four sons and three daughters. The mill was put up for sale and was sold on July 16 to a Mr John Slade from Dorchester for £925. The mill sale included the Mill House, the mill cottage and a small meadow^{iv}.

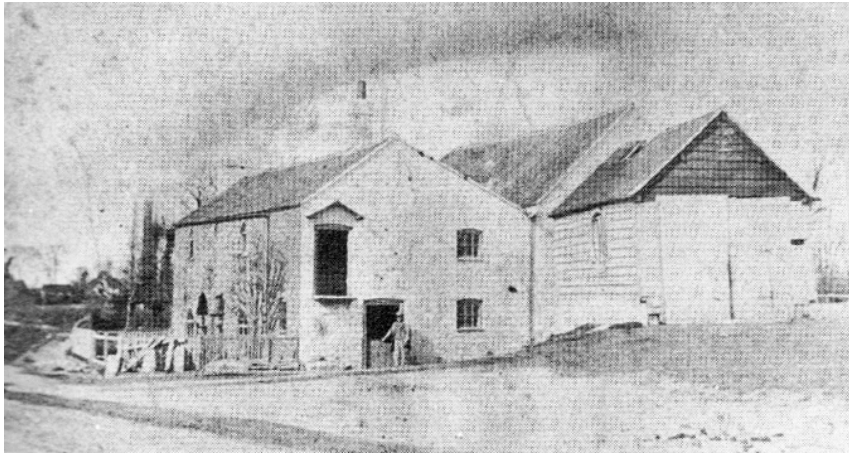


Figure 3. Ewelme Mill in about 1880, from the SE. The building on the left was the mill cottage (destroyed by fire in 1881), and the wooden building on the right the mill itself (destroyed by fire in 1886). In the 1960s this photograph was in the possession of Tom Greenwood, grandson of the former owner Thomas Bishop Greenwood, who said that the figure in the doorway was William Turner.

Horatio, the son who had been living with his parents, married later that year and he and his wife Hannah remained living in the Mill House, presumably as tenants of John Slade. In the 1881 census Horatio gives his occupation as 'living on interest of money'. He later moved to Tidmarsh Lane.

A few months later John Slade, the new owner of Ewelme Mill bought Benson Mill. Benson Mill had been auctioned following the death of its owner Alfred Saunders who had died in 1879.

John Slade didn't take up residence at either mill at that time but remained living in Dorchester. William Turner carried on as miller at Ewelme (whether as tenant or employee of Slade is not certain), and William Mines remained as tenant at Benson Mill. The 1881 census shows John Slade living with his widowed mother and two sisters in the High Street at Dorchester. John was only 23 years old and presumably the funds necessary for the purchase of the mills had been inherited.

John Slade's father William Slade had also been a mill owner, having a corn mill at Hurstbourne on a tributary of the River Test, and a paper mill at Bagnor on the Lambourne near Newbury. At the time of the 1851 census, aged just 24, William employed ten men in the latter business. However, he was declared bankrupt in 1858^v, and died of consumption two years after this at the age of 33^{vi}; his son John was then just three years old. William Slade's father (John's grandfather) is reputed to have invented blotting paper at East Hagbourne Mill, but this lucrative product had been bought out by William's brother-in-law, Thomas Ford, in 1855^{vii}. Also of interest is that, a year or so before being declared bankrupt, William's assets included the sum of £949 4s "received as compensation from the Norwich Union Office for the destruction by fire of Hurstbourne Mill"^{viii}. Despite the bankruptcy and death of William, the family must have retained or regained funds because in 1861 John, age 13, is at a private boarding school in Ewelme (Mrs Garlick's at Westcourt) and his mother is described in the census as living on an annuity.

In January 1881 the Mill Cottage at Ewelme (adjoining the mill, not to be confused with the grander Mill House across the road) was destroyed by fire^{ix}:-

"Fire at Ewelme Mill. In the evening of Monday January 17th the village was alarmed by the cry of fire, and it was soon known that the mill cottage was in flames. A gale was blowing from the east, which was a safeguard to the mill itself, but caused the flames to spread within the dwelling with fearful rapidity. The roof before long fell in, and on the next day the flames burst out again from the interior under the fierce wind, which hourly

gained strength. At length, however, the fire burnt itself out, leaving the walls still standing. The building, it is believed, was fully insured. The Benson engine was soon on the spot, though, as is often the case in rural districts it might have been in better working condition."

Four years later, in February 1885, there was an arson attack on Benson Mill^x:-

"On Wednesday morning, at about half-past seven o'clock, James Holloway, gardener to Mr Merritt, who resides near Benson Mill, saw smoke coming from the roof of the building and immediately gave the alarm. J H Mines, son of the occupier of the mill, at once rushed into the building and threw water over the burning parts. He was quickly joined by his father and others, and the fire was soon extinguished, not however till some six quarters of corn had been spoiled by the fire and water, and the woodwork and tackle considerably damaged. The fire is believed to be the work of an incendiary. It appears that the mill was entered where the water runs into it by the removal of the board, and footmarks are visible. We understand that the owner of the property has offered a reward for information that will lead to the discovery and conviction of the offender."

The following year Ewelme Mill itself was destroyed by another fire that started in the early hours of January 31 1886^{xi}. John Slade had been working with one or more of his employees until about midnight on Saturday, when they shut the mill down^{xii}. Mr Slade returned to his home across the road (the Mill House), and soon afterwards his sister noticed smoke coming from the mill roof. He immediately returned to the mill but found it well alight. The Benson fire brigade was sent-for, and many local residents turned out, but the wooden building was in such a grip of the fire that nothing could be done to save the buildings or their contents. The fire burned for more than 24 hours. The Wallingford Times noted that *"Mr Slade was heavily insured in the 'Law Office' "*.



Figure 4. The Benson horse-drawn fire engine that attended all the mill fires at Ewelme and Benson. The pump was operated by a team of men each side raising and lowering the long hand poles. Photo reproduced courtesy of the Bensington History Group.

In about 1888 John Slade took over the running of the Benson mill himself. In October 1890 there was yet another fire at Benson Mill. It was recorded in detail in the local paper:-

"About 10 o'clock on Monday Morning, another fire broke out at Benson Mill, which is owned and occupied by Mr John Slade, and in the course of two hours, so quickly did the flames spread, the building was completely gutted. The Benson fire engine, under the guidance of Mr John West, was on the spot very soon after the alarm was given, and was found to be in a complete state of efficiency. The mill itself being all ablaze, it was deemed advisable to try and save the dwelling house, and with this object, the hose was brought to play on that part of the property connecting the two buildings. The Benson people worked most energetically at the pumping, and there being plenty of water close at hand, the safety of the house, after an-hour-and-a-half's tussle, was assured. Meanwhile all its contents had been removed, and the Wallingford fire engine had been telegraphed for to assist. This arrived about half-past 12, and got to work at the back of the premises, without delay, and the combined efforts of the two, so soddened the smouldering debris and the surroundings that by two o'clock all

further danger was at an end. Mr Slade tells us that at the time the fire broke out one pair of stones and the flour machine were running, and that when he opened the cylinder in which the brushes revolve a flame issued forth which ignited all that was inflammable within reach, and spread with such extraordinary speed that the mill was almost simultaneously enveloped in flames, his hands, eyebrows and cap being singed as he retreated to the door. He thinks an insufficiency of oil in the bearings of the flour machine led to the combustion, and this is his theory of the cause of the outbreak of the fire. There was not a very large stock in the mill, its principal business being gristing, but it is said that as much as £150 has been spent on new machinery during the last two years..... The building was a substantial one, but being old the woodwork was dry, and as will be seen very readily took fire. The property was fully insured in the Norwich Union Office, through Mr Bullford's Watlington Agency, and the loss is estimated by Mr Slade at from £1,000 to £1,200."

The only person present when the fire broke out was John Slade. There must have been some suspicion about how the fires started; I wonder if such thoughts were in mind when the following Editorial was written in the Berks and Oxford Advertiser^{xiii}:-

"A fire is always a regrettable occurrence, for if the value of what is destroyed is covered by insurance, there is a loss to the community nevertheless. By the destruction of Benson Mill this week a familiar object is gone; and though a new mill may or may not take its place, the individuality of the old spot is lost, and people coming to their native place will find something different, and it will be an eye-sore. The mill had two narrow escapes before, but it has gone at last. No-one, it seems, was near when the outbreak occurred but Mr Slade himself, and we give elsewhere his version of the cause of its origin, and also a letter on the matter from an expert, both of which will no doubt be read by the villagers with a good deal of interest.

By the enclosure of the common lands at Benson, a number of springs which helped to feed the mill stream were cut-off by underdrainage. Prior to this the mill was a very valuable property, and was capable, except in the autumn when the springs are low, of turning out a good deal of work. Of late years, however, it has been little more than a grist mill; still it was a convenience to agriculturists and cottagers, and its destruction is to be much regretted."

Old mills were extremely vulnerable to the risk of fire, being constructed of dry and dusty timber and housing powerful moving machinery in a dust-laden atmosphere, and great care was required to minimise the risks. Any suggestion that this last fire was anything other than accidental was of course very carefully worded in this editorial. Similarly, all the press reports of the fires involving significant loss mentioned that the loss was "fully" or "well" covered by insurance and left it at that, though one report^{xiv} did observe that Mr Slade "has been singularly unfortunate in respect of fires".

Presumably all the insurance claims were honoured, as ten years later Slade is recorded in the 1901 census, age 43, as a "retired farmer and miller" living with his family in a comfortable detached villa in Worthing (Durham Villa in Railway Approach). At the time of the 1911 census John (still listed as retired) and his family have moved to Tower Road in Worthing. He died in 1930.

Neither mill was rebuilt. Interestingly, a couple of months after the fire destroyed Benson Mill, John Slade placed an advertisement in the local press^{xv}:- "Tenders are invited for the removal of silt from Benson Mill Pond. The owner will not be bound to accept the lowest or any tender." Perhaps he had hopes of rebuilding the mill, or of maximising the value of the asset for resale.

Shortly after the final fire at Ewelme Mill, the site was incorporated into the new watercress beds. The waterways and some of the original mill brickwork can still be seen at the fall in the centre of the lower beds.

Slade put the remains of Benson mill up for auction in May 1891^{xvi}, including the adjacent dwelling, the mill pond and water rights, a total area of just over two acres. At the same auction he sold the Mill House at Ewelme, where he had been living; perhaps he was moving on as he felt he had run out of local mills!



Figure 5. The site of Ewelme Mill in about 1940. Remains of the old building can be seen.

And thus ended more than 700 years of probably continuous harnessing of the power of the Ewelme Brook to drive mills.

ⁱ Townley (2016)

ⁱⁱ Reading Mercury, August 1 1831.

ⁱⁱⁱ Simmons collection of records relating to British Watermills and Windmills. Science Museum Library, Wroughton.

^{iv} Oxford Journal, July 24 1880.

^v Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette, December 30 1858.

^{vi} Berkshire Chronicle, January 21 1860.

^{vii} East Hagbourne website; <http://easthagbourne.net/village-history/blotting-paper/>

^{viii} Berkshire Chronicle, February 5 1859.

^{ix} Ewelme Recorder, February 1881. Copy held in Ewelme Society Archive.

^x Reading Mercury, February 14 1885.

^{xi} Wallingford Times, February 5 1886.

^{xii} The Miller, March 1 1886

^{xiii} Berkshire and Oxfordshire Advertiser, October 17 1890.

^{xiv} Reading Mercury, October 18 1890.

^{xv} Berkshire and Oxfordshire Advertiser, December 12 1890.

^{xvi} Oxford Times, May 2 1891.