

THE MILLER'S HOUSE

Water mills are thought to have been introduced into this country by the Romans; windmills arrived very much later in the last quarter of the 12th century. The mill in Playford was just one of some 5,000 such mills in use in Britain at the time of Domesday and was fed from the same spring in the Alder Carr for over 800 years. The mill buildings, so obviously of a later date, have most likely been replaced more than once, but their site is original as is the mill stream that leads to it. The remnants of this stream can still be clearly seen both in the Alder Carr Meadows and again more conspicuously in the meadow by Bridge Cottage; its intermediate route through what are now the grounds of Playford Hall was leveled in 1874 when the mill stopped working and was absorbed into the gardens without trace. Evidence from Bristol Estate records, though incomplete, comes available from the late 18th century and, together with contemporary accounts, newspaper advertisements and family reminiscences, a picture can be built up of the working mill at the end of its life.



The mill stream acted as a 'giant reservoir' holding back water as far as the Alder Carr

The years c.1800 - 1842

With the tenancy went some three acres of pasture around the mill together with a detached two acre field of arable on the other side of the river of which the Playing Field is now half.¹ Only a modest enterprise even by the standards of the day, in terms of earnings it was about the size of a 40 acre farm when its rent is scaled against that of other holdings. But such rent comparisons can be

¹ Suffolk Record Office, Bury St Edmunds: SROB HA 507/3/765. The field was known as the Miller's Field. In 1896 the western half was purchased from the Bristol Estate as a site for the Parish Hall and for allotments.

misleading as the rent for the mill was held deliberately low as tenants had, most unusually, to carry the burden of maintenance themselves. Such a practice proved self-defeating for while it attracted a steady stream of new applicants at times when there were vacancies, many tenants quickly became unwilling, or even unable, to bear the costs.

Problems started to build up in the lean years following the Napoleonic Wars and, wearied by a constant change in tenancy, the Estate put the mill up for sale in 1827.² There were no buyers but an advertisement for an apprentice seven years later suggests that it been let out yet again. The following year, in 1835, a further sale notice appeared but again there were no buyers and another tenancy was set up.³ John Hearn, the applicant, could well have been a relative of the Robert Hearn who had died in harness there in 1801 and therefore from a milling family but he was declared bankrupt within the short space of three years.⁴ Still with no problems in attracting fresh tenants, he was quickly followed by John Kindred who survived for a similar length of time before he too was declared insolvent in 1841.

Not put off in any way by such setbacks that must have been widely known about in the trade, another hopeful tenant, Joseph Button, came with his father to view the mill. He later wrote to the Steward telling him that he had found it

‘in a most dilapidated state; the House is nothing like habitable, the floors and ceilings are much damaged by rats; the front is decaying from dampness and want of attention. Respecting the Mill, I find all and everything belong to the tenant, which is certainly not customary for in no instance can I hear but what the two first motions (viz. the Water and pit wheels) should be the landlord’s property. At all events the former should without exception. The floodgate, which belongs to the Landlord is in such a state as to be past any repairing. Still, I should have no objection becoming a tenant if we can come to terms.....If you think that I have at all exaggerated in my statements I feel obliged by your getting Mr Biddell to look over the concern’.

A month later William Boby of Walton near Felixstowe also found the mill

‘in a very dilapidated state, no place can look more distressed. Before I say whether I should like it for my Nephew I beg to ask in what way you propose letting it, whether the Marquis will put it into a going state as the inside will require to be almost all new. Also the Rent and term intended to be given’⁵.

Stung by the two bankruptcies in such quick succession and the comments of the two prospective tenants, the Estate set about the necessary refurbishment itself. They called in John Whitmore of Wickham Market, the famous Suffolk millwright who had only a few years before in 1836 erected Buttrum’s Mill in Woodbridge, one of the finest tower mills in England.⁶ Whitmore has left behind

² Suffolk Chronicle, 28 April 1827.

³ Ipswich Journal, 15 August 1835: ‘a mill with land to be sold or let. Enquire of Mr A Biddell, Playford’.

⁴ Suffolk Chronicle, 31 December 1836, 22 June 1839. London Gazette, 13 April 1841: John Hearn, formerly of Playford, Suffolk, Miller and Farmer, Corn and Coal Merchant, later of Lambeth, Surrey, Baker, and since having two shops 22 Wentworth Street, Whitechapel and 20 Wheeler Street, Spitalfields, as Baker, both in Middlesex. Insolvent debtor.

⁵ SROB 941/83/7 and quoted in Suffolk Mills Group *Newsletter*, No. 51, June 1991.

⁶ In 1868, the company became Whitmore & Binyon. It made huge strides opening an office in London’s Mark Lane, venturing into the export business and in the 1880s embraced the new technology of roller milling. See *Whitmore and Binyon, Engineers and Millwrights of Wickham Market* by Phyllis Cockburn, 2005

two very detailed inventories together with an itemised estimate for repairs and, as soon as work was completed, he wrote to the Estate Office on 31 October 1842 saying that

‘I take the liberty of informing you that the Playford Water Mill is now got to work driving two pair of stones with less than one third the water it use to take to drive one pair. It have been at work driving one pair of stones some time. I think I may say that Mr Baker and Denny [his fellow miller] are both perfectly satisfied with the mill..... The only part that I can see defective will be the flood gates.....’

After such a costly overhaul, both mill and tenants unsurprisingly settled down. George Baker, from Combs near Stowmarket, was the first and enjoyed a very successful ten years there. He was still only 31 when he left. Classed as a master miller, he was the employer of three men: a labourer and a 17 year old apprentice who lived in and a journeyman miller who lodged elsewhere in the village. He was succeeded, but only briefly and for a matter of months, by Samuel Cadman, the only post-refurbishment tenant to run into difficulties. His troubles however arose not within his new mill at Playford but from his previous one at Wickham Market.⁷

Thomas Bixby then quickly followed and for most of his years in Playford is recorded as running a second mill at far away Whepstead in West Suffolk. After six or eight years he too had moved, his place being taken by William Howell, a miller of great experience and one who was to stay for a longer time than any of his predecessors.

William Howell



William Howell (1821 - 1902)

Far more is known about Howell than any other Playford miller as the Howell family are, remarkably, still in business not just as millers but as millers who continue to use water power. Bill Howell, his great-grandson, died only in 2009; he had a life long interest in traditional milling and in his family’s history; he was widely known in milling circles and his obituary in *Mill News*, the newsletter of the mills section of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, had a full page spread. He was an occasional visitor to Playford where he would relate stories about the mill’s operation that had passed down the generations and a debt of gratitude is owed to him for much of what is known today.

William Howell was born in Parham in 1821 the son of a blacksmith who later kept the Willoughby Arms there. At the age of 20 and still living at home, he was described as a miller suggesting that he might have served his apprenticeship with Edward Gray in that village. Today the Grays are farmers at Parham Hall; the two families were known to have been very friendly in those early days.

William married at Framlingham in 1841 and changed mills several times before settling at Playford: in 1842 he was at Kettleburgh, in 1844 in the parish of St Mary Stoke, Ipswich, in 1848 in

⁷ London Gazette, 12 November 1852. Petition of Samuel Cadman, late of Wickham Market.... Miller.... now of Playford.... Miller....Insolvent Debtor. To appear at County Court at Woodbridge 20 November inst.

Rope Walk and in 1852 he was running two mills at the top of Woodbridge Road one of which ground corn, the other spices. Here he was self employed for the first time and, because of his involvement with mustard, became friendly with Jeremiah Colman a fellow Quaker.

William came to Playford in 1859, the same year as the railway opened and appears in the 1861 Census with his wife and nine children squeezed into the tiny miller's house; a journeyman miller, Hezekiah Deverson, lived out in the village. The eldest girl, Louisa 18, helped indoors; the second daughter, Emily 16, worked from home as a straw bonnet maker; the remaining seven children, with ages from fourteen down to four, were at school most probably in the village.

Tragically William's time in Playford was blighted by the early deaths from tuberculosis of six young members of his family. All died at around the age of twenty and between the years 1868 and 1871, without doubt their death due to their damp and overcrowded conditions.⁸ They are buried in the churchyard behind the Airy graves just to the south of the chancel and under the yew that the family planted there. Two more died later when they were around thirty; the sole survivor, Edmund

John, was to expand the family business and transfer its operations to the other side of the country.



Playford Mill: a copy of a painting by Henry Davy, 1852.

The Mill at Work

Playford water mill was unique in having two sources of water: the first was the totally inadequate mill pond in front of the mill and house (see picture⁹) sufficient just to keep it running for an hour and a second was held back in the mill stream which Biddell described as 'a giant reservoir'.¹⁰ The water would back up almost to the Alder Carr, flooding The Wash at the entrance to Hall Meadow,

held back by a sluice in Bridge Meadow without which the tiny mill pond would have overflowed into both mill and house alike. When the pond was approaching empty, the miller went off into the meadow and released the second supply, the two sources together being sufficient for some four hours work. Refilling took all night. The output of the Alder Carr spring seems surprisingly constant through the seasons but water was always in short supply particularly in summer due to evaporation from the long shallow stream. Estimates of the mill's output have therefore take such considerations into account.

⁸ Eliza Jane died 1868 aged 14, Emily Lucy died 1868 aged 21, Ellen Maria died 1869 aged 21, Martha Ann died 1870 aged 21, William George died 1871 aged 19 and Arthur Alfred died 1871 aged 22.

⁹ Henry Davy (1793-1865) was a prominent Suffolk artist noted for his sketches of many of the county's antiquities.

¹⁰ SROI qS Playford 9, Herman Biddell in Thomas Clarkson and Playford Hall, p.22.

The mill had two pairs of stones but, contrary to Whitmore's earlier comments, the wheel was big enough to drive just one pair at a time. One pair would have been French burrs, hard stones for grinding wheat, and it is known that William used 60% of the English variety Yeoman and 40% of imported Manitoba in his grist. The second pair would have been the softer Derbyshire or Peak stones used for grinding barley for animal feed; their use would have alternated with the burrs according to demand and while one set of stones was out of work opportunity might have been taken to dress them (that is, to sharpen them) although at such low levels of production this would have been necessary only about once a year. William Howell used to buy all his grain for Albion Mills in Woodbridge Road, Ipswich, and for Playford at Ipswich Corn Exchange or occasionally from Mark Lane in London when he would collect it direct from the Wet Dock in town. Two pairs of Peak stones were seen lying in the grounds on a visit by the Suffolk Mills Group in 1975 but by 2007 only a single stone remained. It was considered unlikely that they came from the mill and more probable that they had been dropped off by a local farmer for dressing as was routine.

With regard to output, a single pair of stones will produce in an hour about 4cwt. of finished flour suggesting that Playford Mill might have made some four tons in a week much depending on the supply of water. Delivery to customers was by tumbril and two Suffolk Punches, a ton at a time, a job that could usually be fitted into the working day while water was being replenished. It is of interest to note that towards the end of Howell's time in Playford, deliveries towards Ipswich would have been over the new railway bridge rather than by the level crossing; only a dozen years after the line had been opened, the gates were replaced with a bridge in 1871 as trains had repeatedly smashed in to them. The new ascent was much steeper than the old one and was of concern in the days of horses but it lacked the scenic beauty which Biddell has described as 'a pretty drive'. The old route can still be clearly seen to the east of the present road beyond the bridge. John Pryke, the labourer living in during Baker's time, was classed as a 'carter' after Howell's arrival and his replacement James Frost was similarly described in the census that followed but there can be no doubt that both were quite capable of running the mill. Indeed when Howell took on the additional responsibility of a mill at Martlesham and actually went there to live, Frost moved into the miller's house at Playford and took charge of it for the last few years of its life.¹¹

Status in the village.

In terms of social ranking, the miller stood somewhere between the farmers and the smallholders and, in an ordered society, had the job of Overseer. The Overseer of the Poor was required to work out the amount of poor relief that was needed, set a Poor Rate accordingly and administer that relief in the form of money, food and clothing. The law required two Overseers to be elected at every Easter Vestry but this had not always happened in Playford. Howell shared the job with Manfred Biddell, doing it for some fourteen years, even after he had left the village and gone to Martlesham. It is clear from the records that at that time the office went with the miller's job despite a chequered history: of the two who were declared bankrupt in the late 1830s and early '40s, Hearn ran off with the money while Kindred's accounts were never 'verified'. The two successful millers who succeeded them, Baker and Bixby, seem to have held the post without incident.

¹¹ James Frost was José Booker's great grandfather and is rightly credited with being the last person to have operated the mill. James' father, William, came from Ramsholt in the early 1820s and the family have lived in the village ever since. Chloë and Sophie Welham are the eighth generation.

The Howells after Playford



E J Howell's delivery cart, c. 1910



Wm. Howell's new model T Ford, 1918



C D Howell & Son: modern transport

The mill at Martlesham was fairly new having been built in 1830. It was large with four pairs of French stones and stood at the top of Mill Lane not far from the present day Tesco goods entrance while the Mill House was on the old A12 a quarter of a mile east of the Black Tiles pub. By 1888 William Howell was no longer being described as 'miller' appearing instead as 'corn and flour dealer' later branching into coal. The mill had stopped working, a victim of Cranfield's new roller mill on the Wet Dock in Ipswich which had opened in 1884. William lived in Martlesham for thirty years, dying in 1902 at the age of 81 and is buried in Playford churchyard.

Two further disasters befell William at Martlesham. Within weeks of moving there, his wife Louisa died at the early age of 49 and ten years later in 1883 his second youngest son, Elijah James, died aged 26.¹² Yet a further blow was the departure to the US in 1877 of his son Edmund, a move driven not so much by any spirit of adventure as by a need to distance himself from his father's second wife. Edmund reached Liverpool but on arrival met someone coming off the boat who advised him strongly to proceed no further as conditions in the milling industry were as bad in America as they were at home. With that he set about looking for employment in the immediate area, took a job as foreman miller in Chester before moving to Blackburn where he became self employed for the first time. The family have remained in milling in Staffordshire ever since with the fifth and sixth generations, father and son, now running the water mill at Offley Brook supplying the Asian market in Birmingham with stone ground chapati flour.

The family are committed millers. For six

¹² Louisa died in 1873 and is buried with William and their six children. Elijah James is buried at Martlesham.

generations - and some 180 years – from the time that William left school and served his apprenticeship in or around Parham in the 1830s to his great-great-great grandson David Howell at Offley Brook today, they have done little else. The fourth generation, in the middle years of the last century, saw all five brothers at separate mills across the county. There are no frills to their method of working and they most certainly do not have open days for the public. It has always been a hard commercial life, never easy and the threat of the bigger players has been ever present. But for now they have found a satisfactory niche in the market which it is hoped will keep them going for a few more years. By contrast Cranfield's new roller mill which opened on the Wet Dock in 1884 grew by leaps and bounds. By the time of its take over in 1972 it was the country's largest independent production unit making 100,000 tons of flour a year; their new owners, Associated British Foods, now have an annual output of a million tonnes. The survival of a small family business in the face of such competition is remarkable.

The Buildings after closure

Soon after the mill had stopped working, the machinery was stripped out, a second storey added to the stables (now Mill Cottage) and both were converted into cottages for Lux Farm.¹³ In terms of size the former mill was described as 'quite small', smaller for example than the accommodation



Mill Cottages, empty in 1961, prior to refurbishment

provided by the 1882 cottages on Playford Corner, while the original miller's house, by comparison, was 'quite spacious'.¹⁴ James Frost stayed on in the miller's house throughout the alterations perhaps until his wife's death in 1900 as he is recorded as living elsewhere in the village the following year. The Bristol report of 1870 had highlighted a shortage of cottages on Lux Farm, a fact no doubt at the front of the minds of those who decided against repairing the damaged mill stream only four years later.¹⁵

Apart from evacuees during the war, the three cottages housed workers on Lux Farm for some 80 years until in 1959 they were sold to private owners.

Following the death of the 4th Marquis in 1951, the Playford part of the estate was sold off and Lux Farm was bought by George Stennett the sitting tenant. He sold the former mill and miller's house to John Haywood Smith, a partner in Ipswich Estate agents Robert Bond, who converted them into a single house. At the same time, Stennett sold all the land between the railway and the river to Charles Lofts of Hill Farm, much of it waste and inaccessible from his farm. Included in the sale were the former stables which in 1963 Lofts sold on to Daphne Yetton, daughter of Henry Bond who had bought Archway House from the Biddells in 1935. She lived there for 44 years.

¹³ Manfred Biddell wrote that the mill was converted in 1878; a brick in the south wall of the former stables testifies that the additional storey was added in the same year.

¹⁴ Anne and Jim Woods, the last occupants of the former mill shown left in the picture; they moved up to Playford Corner in 1961 where they spent the next 40 years.

¹⁵ SROB 507/3/747.

