

Memories of the River Ver – Bricket Wood

Derivation of: Bricket Wood – this area was once heavily wooded, indeed vestiges of this ancient wood remain today. Apparently the name is a compound of OE ‘beorht’ (briht), ‘bright, light’ and ‘iggoð’, ‘islet’. As the Rivers Ver and Colne lay some distance away, this may refer to the original tiny settlement of ‘Smug Oak’ which in turn may refer to a ‘small, hollowed-out place’, secret place’, i.e. an ‘island’ homestead carved from the surrounding woodland.

From ‘Park Street’s Past’ by Cyril Martin (1995).



Moor Mill, Past and Present’ (chap. 4).

“... The Domesday book states that there was a mill here, on this part of the River Ver, controlled by the Saxon Manor of Hanstead.

“During the terms of office of the first five Norman abbots from Paul de Caen to Robert de Gorham, just over a hundred years, Moremyll had to be partly altered and its water-courses widened and deepened. About that time a record in the Park (Manor) Court book (1237-1460) carried information that eighteen offenders were punished for hunting in the Abbot’s wood and twenty-one for poaching fish of various kinds in his waters. One offender was captured several times poaching trout in the Ver at Moremyll. The control of the mill had apparently passed from Hanstead to the Manor of Park.

“In 1330, during the term of office of the 15th Norman Abbot Richard de Wallingford, further structural changes were made and recorded which improved the building and mill-gear.

“A few years later Abbot John Moore (1349-96) rebuilt both Parkye Mill and Moremyll at a recorded cost of £22. He also rebuilt the Manor House at Parkye or Park Biri (Bury) just across the Watling Street from the mill.

“... Permission was granted, at that time, for the miller to use his own lines, nets or traps to catch various fish and eels in the water adjacent to the mill, providing that he send a regular supply to the monastery table. In fact eels became such a popular dish at the monastery that they became the sole rent the miller was asked to pay” (they were probably ‘farmed’ in the mill-pond behind the mill).

List of tenants and owners, AD 800 – present day:



c 800-1537	Lord of the Manor of Hanstead and Park (i.e. St Albans Abbey), owner.
1401	John Wyndsor.
1529-42	John Redwood, tenant.
1670	John and Elizabeth Beldon, tenant.
1686	Abraham Priden, tenant.
1722	Brian Marlborough, tenant.
1735	William Fuller, tenant.
1769	John Woodward, tenant.
1800-45	Thomas Woodward, tenant.
1845-74	Alfred Cook, tenant.
1874-75	Ebenezer Cook, tenant.
1875-1923	Tom Gee, tenant.
1923	Freehold conveyance Trinity College Oxford and Sidney Sussex College Cambridge to: L. A. P. Taylor, owner.
1923-44	L. A. P. Taylor, owner.
1944-65	G. Taylor, owner.
1965-80	G. Taylor, tenant. Inns and Co 286 Pentonville Road, London, landlord.
1984-89	Department of Transport, owner.
1989-mid 1990's	Reconstruction by Regent Inns (restaurant/bar).
mid 1990's-present day	Whitbread plc (Beefeater and Premier Inn).



'Memories of a lively Moormill 1913-18' (chap. 5)

“At least once a week, just before and during the Great War, I used to walk to Moormill from my home in Park Street to buy rabbit food. We kept chickens and rabbits to eke out our scanty meat ration. I often accompanied other village boys who were on similar errands. Sometimes my friend Gordon Drennan would join us but he wanted skimmed milk. His mother was a Scot and could make delectable Scotch scones with it. Our path led us across the village squire’s private golf-links to follow the right bank of the river. Halfway to the mill, alongside the river bank, were some watercress beds, fed by a cold spring which bubbled down from a part of the mill farmland known as Upper Grounds.

We would separate at the Mill, Gordon would take his milk can to the mill house while we went over the mill-race bridge and through a heavy wooden door into the place where the miller weighed and served us with our toppings or bran. The miller at that time was a Mr Hart who lived at Colney Street. He had a typical ‘millers thumb’ – stumpy and worn smooth as silk by constantly testing flour.



“We could see over the water-wheels from where we waited. There were two of them which drove some huge gear-wheels and lengths of shafting. The grindstones were worked directly by the gears downstairs and upstairs. Other machines could be set in motion by long wooden ‘striker-arms’ which slid their belts on to the shafting. A chain pulley could be activated in the same way to lift heavy objects like sacks of corn to the top floor. Other machines sifted or sorted produce from the farm or chopped it into cattle or pig food. Down below

was a wood burning stove which heated air for drying the grain. Several fans driven from the shaft forced the air through a series of wooden ducts to where it was needed to dry or winnow the grain. In those days the place was a real hive of industry. When the clean, dry corn was shovelled into the hoppers with large wooden shovels, and the grinding began, the noise became deafening. The men in the carts below, waiting under the chain lifts, had to shout at the top of their voices so that Mr Hart could hear when they were ready for the sacks to be hauled up.

“We boys liked to watch the men going about their various tasks. One particular product of the mill fascinated us. Horse beans were grown in the fields and they came to the mill to be processed. They were cooked, roasted and dried to end up a brown chocolate colour. They tasted almost as good as chocolate too. We called them ‘locusts’. Our school teacher told us they were what John the Baptist fed on in the wilderness. Sweets were in short supply during the Great War and we often helped ourselves from the bin where the ‘locusts’ were kept.

“Not only was the mill busy during those years but so too were the men working in the surrounding fields. There was always work for several men ploughing, sowing and reaping as well as looking after cows and pigs. Of course most of the heavy work was done by horses at that time. One labourer had an all-year-round job cutting the hedges and clearing the weeds along the waterways to the mill.

“On the way home we would often stop for a drink of water from the spring near the watercress beds. An exciting thing happened there during the last war (WWII). A Handley Page bomber returning to the aerodrome just across Watling Street developed engine trouble and ‘pancaked’ right into the watercress beds”.

Cyril Martin on Tom Gee, Miller at Moor Mill 1875-1923.

“He had been a farmer in Chesham and when he came to the mill he brought some of his workers with him ... Tom Gee was a big man and drove around everywhere in his horse and cart, much the same as people of today do in their cars. He even went rabbit shooting in it. He took a whippet dog with him that he’d trained as a retriever. He’d shoot a rabbit while sitting in the cart, then the whippet would go bounding out of the cart to fetch it. Old Tom was very cantankerous and fussy about the work that was done for him. Nothing seemed to please him. It had to be done his way or not at all. Due to his size he found great difficulty in getting into the cart”



Memories of the River Ver: compiled by Ruth Partington, Ver Valley Society in advance of the Halcrow study on low flow in the river (1988).

Submission (No: 39) by Peggy and Rob Pollock of 214 Radlett Road, Colney Street; resident 1939-2007. Area concerned Park Street to Confluence.

“The land alongside the River Ver between the confluence and Moor Mill, Colney Street has changed drastically over the last 27¹/₂ years. The land was previously owned by Miss Yule who kept an Aberdeen Angus herd and bred race horses. It was well managed, well fenced and much of it meadowland abundant with harebells, cowslips, yellow bedstraw etc, and a haven for a variety of birdlife, both land and aquatic. Through it meandered a deep sparkling river full of a variety of fish, leeches, snails, water-boatman etc. A haunt of naturalists, artists and bird watchers. A serene, lazy countryside which was a times liable to considerable flooding from the two rivers. Following Miss Yule’s death, and the sale of the estate, the land on the east side of the river was sold to St Albans Sand and Gravel Co and Redland Aggregates which resulted in destruction one way and another. The River Ver was ‘restored’ to a straight monotonous channel alongside Drop Lane – gravel digging began along its banks and a gravel washing plant was erected on the Moor Mill end, west bank of the river. There was swift deterioration of the river – the water became orange and a thick layer of orange sand was deposited on the bottom of the river, with the result that aquatic life, both animal and plant, quickly disappeared, and although efforts have since been made to re-establish fish-life there is now very little sign of this – perhaps a few minnows, sticklebacks and some water crowfoot and reed, but nothing like the variety previously found.

“Hitherto, the water had been so deep that at the confluence, presumably Thames Water Authority erected a water-level marker in the river. Sadly this gradually became a mockery because it stood far from the waters’ edge, let alone in it, soon after. Moreover, the water was deep enough for our children to learn to swim in and at the bridge carrying what was then Moor Mill Lane (before Smug Oak Lane was built) over the river, was a beautifully clean gravel area of the river to which people from far off came with their children to paddle and picnic.

“The St Albans Sand and Gravel Co ceased digging a while ago and fortunately the land alongside was acquired by Herts County Council which, with the help of local people and others, was planted with trees and made part of the Watford to Redbourn walkway. A little of the former charm has therefore been recreated. However, rarely does one see or hear even a coot, moorhen or duck when formerly these and swans and herons were commonplace, along with snipe and ringed plover.



“As for the land purchased by Redland Aggregates, two attempts to obtain permission to dig for gravel in the land adjacent to that alongside the east

bank of the river at the Moor Mill end have been turned down. There was a great local outcry at the possibility of almost the last part of this area to escape such desecration, being allowed to go ahead. In the meantime, the land is let to a local farmer with the result that even this area bears no relation to its former self, being now turned into vast areas of cultivation with trees and hedges disappearing, not to mention the use of chemical fertilisers etc right up to the river.

“With the large industrial development nearby on the east side of the A5183, and land on the west side in the hands of the gravel companies, we wonder how much longer the river can withstand further deterioration. Certainly, unless authorities show that they do care about our historic river and its environment it will, in this area, become just a drainage ditch.

“The once particularly beautiful area around Moor Mill, where artists frequently came to paint saw, in addition to gravel digging, the creation of a “public dump” – since closed by the authorities, but still used by the public. Also, the erection of a sludge tanker station and the construction of an entrance to the gravel-diggings towards Frogmore, and of course subsequently the construction of the M25. Certainly, nobody could come to picnic here nowadays from far off or even locally, such has been the ignominies to which the river has been allowed to fall.

“Proceeding upstream from Moor Mill, land alongside the river, right along to Branch Road, Park Street; has been destroyed by gravel digging – possibly from as long ago as 50 years. It is owned by Redlands, and digging has now ceased. For years parts of the river were lost to the public because of dangerous settling beds, but much of the area was traversed by public footpaths. The hard standing where the washing-plant once stood by Moor Mill Lane, we have been told by Councillor Ruth East is probably unsuitable for return to agriculture, and is too contaminated for housing development and its only possible future is industrial development. Northwards, towards Frogmore, the old gravel workings have been landscaped and the water-filled pits requiring to be filled – this will be by “domestic waste” infilling. Our last experience of this was an invasion of foul smells and flies.

“All of this surrounds our River Ver and adds to its deterioration.

P Pollok



M25 Motorway – A motorway ring around London had been planned for many years. Shorter lengths had been constructed and opened separately, before the whole ring itself was completed; the section between J23-24, Potters Bar was one such.

The section of motorway across the Ver Valley immediately north of Moor Mill was constructed between 1980-84 as the ring was completed and, as such, represents the latest phase in which the river and its valley has been modified: the watercourse had been moved and straightened, perhaps in Saxon times, to provide

waterpower for Moor Mill; the remaining springs and ditches alongside the millstream on the valley floor, the ghost of its natural course, had been modified to facilitate watercress production; the surface sand and gravel deposits have been extracted creating large pits, and some of these have subsequently been infilled with vast quantities of domestic and building waste and reshaping the landscape entirely; finally, the motorway embankments were laid from east and west across the river valley.

The Hanstead Ditch (or Brook) is the final tributary of the River Ver; its apparent insignificance, in fact, belies its importance to the river as it approaches its confluence with the River Colne.

There are two arms to the stream: the northern arm emanates from the area of How Wood, flowing under the M25 and Smug Oak Lane to meet the southern arm in the grounds of Hanstead House which itself drains from the plateau around Bricket Wood Station. After their combination the stream flows due south to meet the Ver at Lower Stud on Drop Lane.

Before the building of Drop Lane and Netherwyld Pumping Stations in the 1950's, the flow from the Hanstead Ditch would have contributed greatly to the overall mass of water as the Ver and Colne merged nearby. The River Ver, in particular, meandered across a wide, flat valley floor as it approached the confluence.



Hanstead House: The Yule family owned the House and Estate for much of the 20th Century. The Yule Memorial, which lies adjacent to our route on Walk 8, represents the desk and chair of Sir David Yule, a multi-millionaire who made his fortune in India and bought the Estate in 1902.

While the House was undergoing refurbishment, Sir David and his family lived in the half-timbered cottage which had been built for that purpose and was later used by the Yules as a Trophy Room. Unfortunately Sir David never lived to occupy the restored Hanstead House; nowadays most of it has been modernised, but some parts retain their original state.



His wife, Lady Henrietta Yule, became a well known horse-breeder; the impressive stables in Drop Lane remain, albeit converted to a house, whilst Waterside Cottage opposite was the laundry for the complex. The horses of this enterprise were often to be seen grazing the lush riverside pastures in the valley nearby. (This continues today, as there are currently three riding stables operating hereabouts, and horses and riders can often be seen on the local bridleway network).

Their daughter, Gladys Yule, continued to manage the Estate until her death in 1957. It was then sold to the American based Radio Church of God and renamed Ambassadors College. After they left in the early 1980's there was speculation that it might become a training camp for the England Football Squad or a countryside 'Holiday Camp', but it was eventually acquired by the then Central Electricity Generating Board as a staff college and training centre. Nowadays it is owned and run by HSBC for a similar purpose.



The Confluence – 'noun, a flowing together: a meeting place, as of rivers: a concourse, a running into one: a stream uniting and flowing with another'.

Old maps and a hand-drawn diagram by Cyril Martin, show the River Ver with its natural 'tortuous' meanders as it nears its end. The braided nature of the river channel indicates that, at times, the two rivers combined to form one, impressive sheet of water, filling the whole of the valley floor.



This wide, flat river valley was once the west-to-east course of the so-called proto-Thames which flowed here before the last Ice Age 450,000 years ago. (To get a better idea of the scale of this valley, climb to the top of St Albans Clock tower on a clear summer's day, and face south-west towards the ridge-line occupied by the Shenley Hospital water-tower).

John Norden, author 'Speculam Britanniae – The Description of Hertfordshire', pub. 1593:

“...This Verlame or Redbourne River not much belowe Albans towne, offererth her selfe to the Colne, a river that embraceth her, and drowning both the names of Verlame and Redbourne, usurpeth the whole title and glorie to her selfe”.

Sir Henry Chauncey, author 'The Historical Antiquities of Hertfordshire', pub.1700:

“... The Colne, which springs forth near Tittenhanger, thence passeth the road at Colney-Street, and running above two miles in length, meets the Verlume near Park-Street; but tho' the Verlume is much the greater stream, yet the Colne usurps the Glory of her own name, and floweth thence to Watford ...”

George Dwar, 'South Country Trout Streams', pub. 1898.

“About the mills some very heavy trout may occasionally be seen in the summer evenings and the average weight of the fish will scarcely be under 1¹/₂ lbs.

Below St Albans and at Park Street, and near its junction with the Colne, the Ver is a much more taking looking trout stream, reminding one in parts of the genuine South Country Trout Stream”.

The River Ver's water is crystal clear and lusty in its flow; the River Colne is torpid and murky. Following the rivers' confluence the river-water remains in the state of the latter, hence it retains the name 'Colne' as it flows onwards to the Thames at Staines.



Drop Lane Pumping Station is one of the so-called 'Clay Lane Group' of ground water pumping stations which, together, supply drinking water to the population around Watford and parts of N.W. London. A huge quantity of water is needed and thus abstracted from the chalk aquifer along the Colne Valley over the next dozen or so miles.

The building here, along with those at Netherwyde and Wall Hall, was constructed in a barn-like style at the behest of Lady Yule, so that they fitted into the rural landscape.



Drop Lane – 'Drop' probably refers to the steep decline of the lane from its western end at Smug Oak/Bricket Wood Railway Station. The level section alongside the river was formerly known as 'Waterside'.

The 'Riverside Way' footpath and bridleway was created in 1980. So that sand and gravel could be extracted from the broad Ver valley between Smug Oak Lane and its confluence with the River Colne, a new straightened 'canal' was constructed alongside Drop Lane, bypassing its old sinuous, meandering course on the valley floor. Extraction took place in the 1960's and 70's. Subsequently importation and disposal of inert building waste was allowed during the 1980's and 90's.

In 1980 Herts County Council purchased the approximately 1m/1½ kms stretch of the new river adjacent to the worked out gravel pits. The site was then developed as an informal riverside recreation area with a footpath and bridleway along its south bank. At various points there is access to the river; a car park has been made at the eastern/Smug Oak Lane end, with access off Drop Lane.



Netherwyde Farm It is possible to return to Moor Mill by crossing the River Colne, then following the footpath along the far bank of that river past the farm. After the house, turn north onto the footpath, back to Smug Oak Lane.

Netherwyde (or Lower Wild Farm) is so called to differentiate this once prosperous agricultural estate from its neighbour Hither (or Near) Wild Farm on the other side of Watling Street