

Memories of the Ver St Albans



St Albans Clock Tower stands at the heart of the town. Between 1403 and 1412 the townsmen of St Albans engaged Thomas Wolsey, formerly the Royal Mason, to build 'Le Clokkehouse' in their market place. Despite periods of neglect this four-stage tower still stands and is the only medieval town belfry in England. Its bell has also survived six hundred years of use.

The Tower's apparent simplicity conceals an ingenious design. It was based on the great Clock House at Westminster Palace built by the architect Henry Yevele (Wolsey's master) in 1365. This much larger tower stood until 1697, just west from where Big Ben stands today.

The Clock House was a political statement. St Albans Abbey had become immensely wealthy, partly because of its power to levy numerous taxes and income from the local townfolk – most resented of all was the ability of the Abbey to demand that all corn should be ground, not on hand-querns, but in its own watermills and thus was able to keep a share.

Memories of the Peasants Revolt of 1381 must still have been in the minds of many townsmen and the Clock Tower was a symbol of their freedom, power and wealth in the face of the premier Abbey in England.



Sited on higher ground, the Tower looked the Abbey in the eye and enabled the town to sound its own hours and, until 1863, the curfew. It also gave the alarm in case of 'fire or fray' – its bell rang out for the First Battle of St Albans in 1455 during the War of the Roses.

The Tower has had other uses, notably as a shop and as a government telegraph station from 1808 to 1814 in the Napoleonic Wars. (A naval shutter–telegraph system was installed on the roof, this could pass a message from Portsmouth to Great Yarmouth and back, [approx 300 miles], in five minutes – on a clear day).



The Tower is 64ft (19.6m) high. Its walls are 4ft (1.22m) thick to withstand the ringing of the bell; the flint rubble which forms the walls may well have been 'robbed' from the ruins of the Roman city in the valley. The spirelet and parapet are Victorian additions. The Clock House's original bell named for the Archangel 'Gabriel' is still in place in the belfry. It was cast at Aldgate in London and weighs one ton. Cast round the bell is the Latin rhyme "From Heaven I come/Gabriel My Name". The great bell last rang out for Queen Victoria's funeral in 1901. Its scissor-braced oak frame is now weak and the bell is 'clocked' on the side, but never swung.



Although the Tower's medieval clock is missing (the present one dates from 1866), it did certainly possess one when first constructed. Clocks were still an expensive novelty, but the Abbey already had a clock and the townsmen would not be outdone. The clock was housed in the low ceilinged room below the belfry. The clock keeper himself had to strike the hour indicated by the clock.

The ground floor of the Tower was a shop until the 20th Century. Its two medieval shop windows are rare survivals; a large window was essential to bring in the great bell before it was hoisted up to its frame.



Today, on summer weekends you can ascend the 93 very narrow spiral steps to the top for fascinating views of the town (especially on Market Day) and of the Ver Valley to the north and south. The so called 'Vale of St Albans', course of the proto-Thames, stretches away to the south between here and the Shenley ridge.

The area immediately in front of the Clock Tower is the heart of the town. The road here, to the Peahen junction at the top of Holywell Hill, is known as High Street.



Two noteworthy structures occupied a part of the area in front and to one side of the Clock Tower. Firstly, one of the tall and elaborate stone crosses marking the places where the body of Queen Eleanor, wife of King Edward I, rested on its journey from Lincolnshire to London was built here in the 1290's. Most of these, and probably including the one here in St Albans, were demolished in the 1640's during the Commonwealth. Secondly, the market cross and conduit (well) were constructed in approximately the same position in 1703. This was an octagonal canopy structure surmounted by a figure carrying scales, and bearing a sword; beneath was the 'conduit'

or well, water being drawn up by a large, hand-turned wheel and pulley mechanism. Later into the 19th Century, temporary wooden 'hustings' platforms were constructed here during Parliamentary elections.

'Holmhurst' is the former (Anglo-Saxon) name of the broad, gently sloping hill-top where Roman citizen and Verulamium resident Alban was executed and where, subsequently, a shrine to honour his name was established and St Albans Abbey was later founded in AD 793.

Holywell Hill – During the abbacy of Wolsin, around AD 950, the old Roman road that led from London to the south and Dunstable to the north (Watling Street), through Verulamium, was blocked so that travellers, merchants and pilgrims were forced to deviate up to the 'new' town of St Albans on the hill to the east of the River Ver.



"Abbot Wolsin was famous for his spiritual and worldly achievements. He loved the district and people of St Albans and looked after their interests. He brought the people from the surrounding area together and made them live in the town itself, providing and enlarging a market place. He helped them construct buildings by providing money and materials. He built the churches of St Peter to the north, St Stephen to the south and St Michael to the west, with a dedicated share of land, to improve both the appearance and the resources of the town and to care for its people".

(from 'Deeds of the Abbots of the Monastery of St Alban') 13th/14th Century.

The new road from the south, leading pilgrims across the Ver ('Halliwell Water') and up to the Saint's shrine at Holmhurst, thus become 'Halliwell (Holywell) Hill' associated as it was with the holy-well or spring which miraculously sprang to life at the feet of Saint Alban before his execution.

Holywell House – At the dissolution a portion of the Abbey lands at the foot of Holywell Hill, just north of the river crossing was granted to Ralph Rowlatt, merchant of the Staple.

He died in 1543, so it may have been his son Sir Ralph Rowlatt who built the original house on the street frontage here. Sir Ralph died in 1571.

The precise position and layout of the building is unclear, but the original line of the medieval road lay slightly to the west, through the plot now occupied by the Duke of Marlborough public house, to enter the ford/watersplash there. Holywell House would have stood on the line of the current road, approximately where the old waterworks building and the first 5/6 Victorian terraced houses stand today. It was demolished in 1837, and the road straightened over a new bridge.

Apparently the house remained largely unaltered. By the mid-1600's the property was owned by the Jennings family. Sarah (Jennings) Churchill inherited the house from her father; Sarah and her husband Lord John Churchill, later to become the Duke of Marlborough following his victory at the Battle of Blenheim, repaired and extended the house from 1684.

At that time Lord John Churchill served in the Duke of York's household at Court and was made Colonel of the King's Own Regiment of Dragoons, an appointment that aroused some jealousy:

'Let's cut our meat with spoons
The sense is as good
As that Churchill should
Be put in charge of the Dragoons'!

When at Court in London the Churchills lived at their house in Jermyn Street, but Holywell House was their home in the country. Here they could live a far more domestic life than was possible in London; and here, too, their children could play and learn their early lessons. Sarah wrote 'However ordinary [Holywell] may be, I would not part with it for any house I have seen'.

The travel writer Celia Fiennes, who was to ride through St Albans in the 1690's, described it as 'a pretty large town taking all', though 'the great church was much out of repaire so worn away that it mourns for some charitable person to help repair it'. 'There are several good houses about the town', she added, 'one of them, which stands by the bridge, on the River Ver belonging to the Churchills'.

Holywell House was remodelled and extended for them by William Talmon, who also worked for the Devonshires at Chatsworth. It stood in approximately twenty acres of ground which were laid out under Churchill's personal supervision; a flower garden, a large orchard, a kitchen garden where herbs, medicinal and vegetable plants were grown, and pasture for horses and a cow were created. There were also several ponds near the river, which itself was 'canalised' where it flowed through the garden. The largest pond was a long rectangular 'canal'; its remaining earthwork can be traced from its southern end next to the Ver, behind De Tany Court. The river too was straightened and formalised in similar style; the Duke enjoyed his "trouts" from the canalised section of river that flowed through his garden.

At home in St Albans, on Blenheim Day, 13 August 1712, John, Duke of Marlborough gave a garden party, receiving his guests on the bowling green, standing in the tent which had been a familiar sight in his campaigning days and which was now pitched there for the benefit of a curious public, who were admitted inside to inspect it for an entrance charge of sixpence a head.

The Cotton Mill (and the 'Water House')

John Edwin Cussons, Historian of Hertfordshire, or "A Professional Hertfordshire Tramp" wrote in the latter part of the 19th century:

"Scarcely a record of any kind but contains something of interest. These two leaves from some gazetteer inform us that the cotton mill was originally built for polishing diamonds, and, I presume other precious stones. "The Cotton Mill" was on the Ver, close by the ruins of Sopwell. It ceased to be a cotton mill about the year 1830 – perhaps a little later – but the remains of it were standing in 1870. Since that time it has been entirely swept away".

This footnote to pages relating to St Albans on Cussons' original documents now at the Herts Record Office refer to an unidentified, undated late 18th Century gazetteer possibly of an area within a circumscribed distance from London. The comment refers to the statement: "On the river Ver, is a curious mill, originally erected for the purpose of polishing diamonds, but now employed in the cotton manufactory". Later, it emerged that the note was compiled from 'The Ambulator or a Pocket Companion in a Tour Round London Within The Circuit of Twenty Five Miles', the tenth edition of which was published in 1807. It contains the same information with the additional clause at the end of the sentence " of Messrs Gill and Maxey".

Prior to 1768, this property, or a different structure on the same site, was known as the "Water House". There was a piped-water system to the town by the 17th Century. "Water is thrown up from the river for the use of the town, every inhabitant paying for it as at London".

St Albans Museum tells us that Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, had the waterworks closed down in the 1720's. However, it is shown on Drury and Andrews' large scale map of St Albans (1766), where it is called the "Water Works", and was the property of the Corporation of St Albans. Nothing is known of its workings and little of its history. These are the only details I have gleaned:

p. 94) Court held August 26th – Mr Whitfield and Mr Richards assigned Mr Greene's lease of the Waterworks to the Mayor and Alderman, and it was granted to Mr Yarnold. (Cottonmill Lane)

(p. 95) Court held June (?) – Ordered that Mr Yarnold appear at the next Court to produce his lease relating to the water. (Cottonmill Lane)

(p. 186) Court held April 23rd – Permission was granted to Mr Joseph Fowler, who was about to establish waterworks in the town, to lay the necessary pipes in the public roads, which were to be left in good condition by him. (Holywell Hill)

Piped water was a rarity until the 19th Century. Nicholas Bacon's house at Gorhambury, started in 1563, was extraordinary at the time in having a piped supply in many rooms, but by his son's Francis' time it had seized up and was too expensive to repair. By the 17th Century they had gone back to using wells like the rest of the populace.

Thus, the water supply in St Albans came from either the River Ver, or from wells sunk into the chalk bedrock. As the population grew, so did the demand for water, and pollution also. The river must have become a less palatable source as it can hardly have been pure when there was a tannery at St Michaels, upstream of the 17th Century waterworks!

In 1765, Earl Spencer set up a pump in the Market Place, next to the Clock Tower. There were other pumps: the 'Blue Pump', where the Old Town Hall is now, and another at the top of St Peters Street. The 'Blue Pump' was regularly out of action and, in 1820, one John Peele was imprisoned in the Abbey Gatehouse (then the town gaol) for 12 months for stealing copper pipes and a pump-barrel, valued at 25 shillings, from it!

The "Cotton Mill" later stood here, and gave the lane its name. But, as we have seen, it was initially used to polish precious stones. From 1768 to 1779 it was occupied by Henry Porter, who was assessed to the poor rates of the Abbey parish (Holywell Ward) during this decade for the "diamond mill". In 1779/80 it appears unassessed and from 1781 to 1791, described only as "the mill", it was leased successively by Mr Banks, Mr Bothorly and Mr Bourne. From 1791 to 1801, described as "The Cotton Mill", it was occupied by Mr Gill and Mr Maxey. In 1822, "The Cotton Mill" in the occupancy of Thomas Redford was registered as a meeting place for an independent congregation and as late as 1844, still bearing the name, one of its rooms was similarly registered as a meeting place for "Protestant Dissenters" and Thomas Harris was noted as occupier of the mill; the Harris family appears to have had a longer association with the mill, as in Pigot's Directory of 1826-27 William Harris is listed as "Cotton Spinner near Sopwell House".

So for most of its short life, the "cotton mill" was utilised for the spinning and weaving of cotton, and the manufacture of candlewicks. In 1840 around 40 people worked there. At the end of that decade output switched to Berlin tapestry wool, to satisfy a big demand in that product, but by the end of its useful life it is reported that grain is being processed here. After 1883 the site was used for St Albans' first open-air baths.

No trace of the mill now remains. Thus, the last of the watermills on the Ver to be constructed also had the shortest life. There are two known representations of the building, both in the Hertfordshire Record Office.

"The Corporation Records of St Albans" by A. E. Gibbs (pub. 1890)
(The notes and information in the above volume cover the period 1586 – 1889).

Rights of Fishery (and perambulation of boundaries).

(p.134) Court held March 3rd – The Mayor having been lately informed that the river belonging to the Corporation had been recently fished by persons having no rights to do so, it was ordered that a notice be affixed to the Market Cross warning people that anyone fishing without leave of the Mayor would be prosecuted.

Court held May 28th – it was agreed to perambulate the boundaries and fish the river.

(p.156) Court held September 18th – a perambulation of the Borough boundaries was this day made by the Mayor and Alderman, together with most of the twenty-four assistants, and many of the Burgesses and others. The line followed was that specified in the Chart of the Borough and Indenture of Perambulation, dated 10th April 1635. It was adjudged that part of the mill called the Cotton Mill, near Sopwell, was within the Borough, and the Mace was passed through the said Mill in the line of the boundary. Also the Mayor

did in the presence of the burgesses, inhabitants and others exercise the manorial right of fishery by fishing in the river as heretofore.

(p. 182) Court held October 6th – It was reported that the Mayor and others had perambulated the boundaries and had exercised the manorial rights of fishery by fishing in the river as heretofore. (The Macebearer complained that he had been assaulted by Joseph and George Taylor during the perambulations and that the mace had been taken from him and injured. Proceedings were ordered to be taken against the offenders).

(p. 234) Council Meeting held April 10th – It was reported that the perambulation of the boundaries had been made on the Prince of Wales's wedding day by the Mayor etc and that the Mayor exercised the manorial rights of fishing the river. The following expenses were allowed:-

	£	s	d
Charles Owen, bill for planking over river, ditches, etc, labourers with ladders etc	4	5	6
John Irons, bill for beer given away	2	8	0
Jarvis Osborn, bill for buns for Blue Coat School boys	0	12	0
TOTAL	<u>7</u>	<u>5</u>	<u>6</u>



Cottonmill Swimming Baths – In 1883 the Corporation of St Albans established the first swimming 'baths' for the town. Whether the former Cotton Mill was demolished at that time, or in the years previously, is not clear. Judging by the 1897 Ordnance Survey map of the area, facilities were basic at best. Indeed, it is clear that the river bank and river itself were adapted and modified to form the 'baths'. The following letter was printed in the 'Herts Advertiser' on 23rd August 1890:

"Sir - Anyone who visits the present institution in Cotton Mill Lane, dignified with the title of St Albans Swimming Baths will know what a dreadful travesty they are. A beginner who has to touch the bottom to learn is in fear that at any moment his feet may be cut by a sharp flint-stone, or else in the next minute he may be up to his knees in mud. The accommodation for diving is wretched, and the wooden planks which line the sides are covered with slime and are most unpleasant".

This appears almost comical by modern standards – but wait a moment, and consider more recent events. In 1905 a purpose-built outdoor complex was opened adjacent to the river, and fronting Cottonmill Lane and its new bridge: this was again modified in 1927. In 1971 the Westminster Lodge indoor pool, half a mile to the north, superseded the open, outdated Cottonmill baths; these remain as the base for St Albans Sub-Aqua Club. And now, currently, St Albans City and District Council have begun construction of an all new Westminster Lodge pool and leisure complex which has attracted criticism of its own. For example:

"Sir – The Council should engage its collective brain. Even during the best of times, a swimming pool that is not fit for purpose is a waste of money – our money. Now, in the worst of times, the decision to progress with this daft plan is senseless"

"Sir - ...We will have reduced main pool flexibility options (down to two options, slow lane swimming, and teaching). The new training pool will be similar to our present training pool – not suitable for adult overflow swimming.

"...Sadly you explain "No, just a school sized pool without diving boards and only two metre maximum depth".

"I fear there are going to be a lot of disappointed voters"

Nicholas Haran, Review, 27.10.2010

"Sir - ...You only have to go about 100 metres from the New Lodge site to find the overflow for the inadequately sized proposed main pool – it's at the bottom of Holywell Hill by Mud Lane.

"It's the River Ver and bridge and already it appears that the authorities have divided into two lanes with the bright yellow cone! [accompanying photo]. The advantage to the Council is that it is free and can be used 24/7. With no capital outlay, heating or management charges it releases money for the spa across the road costing an estimated £2.95million".

"For safety reasons you will not be allowed to dive off the River Ver bridge – you will have to go to Hemel or Hatfield for that ...".

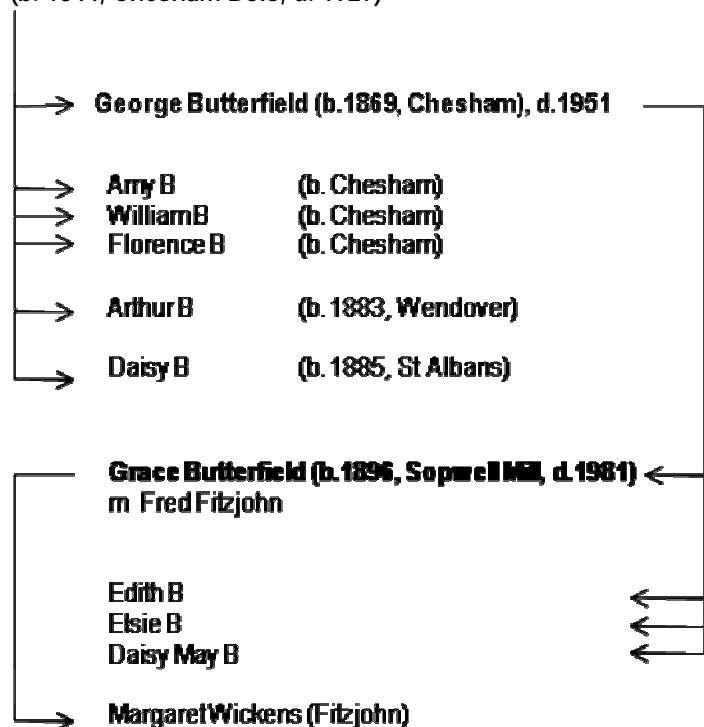
David Gilroy, Herts Ad. 18.01.2011

There is a delicious, sweet irony in this correspondence. All of which proves two things: firstly, Councillors need thick skins, and secondly that things don't really change, they just stay the same.

Sopwell Mill

Mrs Margaret Wickens – Barnfield Road, Marshalswick, St Albans
Family Recollections of Sopwell Mill, St Albans (private property, no access)
Taken down by Andy Webb, November/December 2001.

George Butterfield ----- Edward B ----- Thomas B
(b. 1844, Chesham Bois, d. 1927)



Mrs Wickens' mother, Grace Butterfield, born at Sopwell Mill in 1896. (She was born in the bedroom above and left of the front door).

Her Great-Grandfather, George Butterfield, first came to Sopwell Mill in either 1883 or 1884. Previously he had moved from Chesham Bois Mill to Wendover Mill in 1881. Family tradition has it that at these three mills George Butterfield Snr experienced each of the major power sources utilised for milling at that time, i.e. water (Bois), wind and steam (Wendover) and water (Sopwell).

Her Great-Grandfather was a "Master-Miller" and her Grandfather was a "Journeyman-Miller".

Sopwell Mill has been part of the Gorhambury Estate for centuries. In 1868 it suffered a catastrophic fire and was totally destroyed. Nothing of the old mill now remains. George Butterfield Snr came to St Albans in 1883/4 – Mrs Wickens' Mother maintained that "he came to rebuild the mill". However, it is unclear whether he supervised the rebuilding of the mill from scratch, or whether he was able to take possession of a newly completed watermill and mill house. Had the mill remained derelict since the disastrous fire of 1868? Probably not, as the 1871 Census shows that Edmund (53) and Lydia (67) Hinton occupied the mill ("Miller and farmer of 20 acres, employing one boy and one man"). Perhaps the mill house remained habitable? Inside, the mill certainly feels like a late-Victorian building in its construction with its rolled-steel girders supporting the upper floors, and concrete ground-floors in both mill and house.

George Butterfield Snr came to St Albans with his two brothers, Edward and Thomas and his wife and children.

Milling was not the sole source of income for the family. By the 1920's there was a dairy/bakery in Albert Street and another bakery in Albion Road. There was also scope for small-scale animal husbandry on the land around the mill and in the commodious barns and adjacent outbuildings. Cattle and pigs were kept here and it seems likely that Edward Butterfield was responsible for this side of the business. (The mill is sometimes known as 'Sopwell Mill Farm'). Thomas Butterfield was known to Grace Butterfield as "Uncle Tom from 'up the heath'" as he lived in the Bernards Heath area.

For the first half of the family's tenure of the mill, flour for human consumption continued to be produced at Sopwell Mill. But as the 20th Century progressed, competition from more modern roller-mills meant that small-scale local producers became 'grist' mills producing animal feed. (The next mill on the Ver, New Barnes Mill, was a larger, roller mill).

George Butterfield Jnr and his wife ran the two bakeries and dairy in St Albans. The freehold of both bakeries/shops were sold upon Great-Grandfather's death in 1927.

In 1907 George Butterfield Snr suffered a horrific accident. On a particularly cold winter's night, he went outside to clear ice from on and around the water wheel (breastshot). An icicle fell from the wheel and hit him on the head. As a result of his injuries he was rendered blind and deaf. He was never able to work again and for the rest of his life (d. 1927) he lived in the mill house, being looked after firstly by his wife (d. 1912) and then by his two unmarried daughters. This tragic accident was of enough importance to warrant some paragraphs in the Herts Advertiser newspaper.

Following the accident to his father, George Butterfield Jnr took over the mill business. He lived with his family in Albert Street until the mid 1920's when they moved to the mill house.

From the mill accounts for the period following World War One and into the 1920's, there were two men employed at the mill: Mr Swain (milling), paid £1 17s 3d per week; Mr Allsop (Cowman). Thus, by the 1920's the milling and other businesses (farming, baking and dairy retail) were supporting an extended Butterfield family, plus a number of employees. By 1931 the mill was no longer profitable. Demand for animal feed was decreasing. Indeed, by this time, the mill was owed £440 14s in unpaid bills. (There were dozens of local clients who owed money for the grinding of small quantities of meal). The family decided to relinquish their lease of the mill, after 47 years of tenancy. The sale of stock and mill/farm equipment took place on 7 September 1931. By January 1932, the family is living in Ramsbury Road.

I don't know what happened to the mill immediately after their departure and during the years prior to World War Two. In 1943 the mill was leased by the two Miss Blower's. They lived at Sopwell Mill for 50 years, 1943-1993. The two sisters owned a pet shop in London Road (Nos 66-68). I believe they had another shop in Harpenden. They also established pet boarding kennels at the mill. The lush water meadow behind the mill continued to be grazed by cattle in the summer months until quite recently.

When the Cottonmill Lane area was being developed for housing, sometime between 1943-1951, George B was approached by the council as the newly laid out roads were being named after local people and places. Thus, the road off Cottonmill Lane and overlooking the River Ver opposite New Barnes Mill and Sopwell House, became Butterfield Lane.

Mrs Wickens recalls a particular day shortly before her Grandfather's death in 1951. She returned home from work (71 Old London Road) to find that her Grandfather had a visitor asking whether he thought it might be possible to restore the waterwheel, who that person was and what became of the idea, isn't known.

In 1993 the Miss Blower's relinquished their lease and the mill was put on the market by Gorhambury agents Strutt and Parker for £10,000 per annum. Mark and Rebecca Boxer purchased the mill, on a 15 year lease. (At that time, soon after they had moved in, I was allowed to look around the mill. The millstones remained, as did most of the gearing. The Boxers expressed a wish to establish an artist's/pottery studio in the mill building and ancillary barns, but I don't know what became of their plans).

Mrs Wickens' Mother (Grace Butterfield) and Father (Frederick Fitzjohn) did some of their courting by rowing downstream to Park Street and back. Her Uncle learnt to swim in the River Ver.

New Barnes Mill – The current structure was built by the Earl of Verulam in the last decade of the 19th Century, although a mill has existed here for many centuries.

From the 'Gesta Abbatum' (Deeds of the Abbots of the Monastery of St Albans), c. 1130. "The monks' cellarer was due a thousand good eels a year from the four mills, that is Sopwell, Stanekfield [N.B. Mill], and the two of Park".



'New Barnes' is a comparatively recent name for this watermill; previously it had been known as 'Stanekford' or 'Staneford', probably meaning here 'stony ford'. The 'New Barnes' nomenclature arose after the medieval period to differentiate the 'Home Farm' barns opposite the Mill from those at Cell Barnes, about a mile away.

So, as we have seen, this Mill was in the possession of the Abbey. After the dissolution, in 1536, it eventually passed into the estate of the Earl of Verulam. In the 1920's New Barnes Mill was taken over by the British Flour Research Committee, who equipped it with the latest roller mill machinery. The flour mill was operated by the Co-op Wholesale Society in the 1930's and by Whitworth Bros. until 1957. The building has since been extended, and converted to office use.

Water used to flow under the mill through an 18 inch culvert to drive a Victorian cast-iron water-turbine; this was removed from the basement in 1976 when the building was being converted for its present use.



Turbines were developed in France as a more advanced form of waterwheel; with its horizontal veins turning about a vertical shaft, a turbine was ideally suited where there was an insufficient head of water (the mill pool was behind the mill, next to the river, subsequently filled in and used to graze sheep from Hedges Farm). Unlike waterwheels, few turbines have survived. At New Barnes, the turbine was still fully functional until 1963.

In 1905 a boiler-house was built to accommodate a steam generator, and in 1915 electricity became the principal source of power when an oil powered generator was installed. In 1930, the milling machinery ran 24 hours a day and had a capacity of 1200 sacks per

week. The small brick building alongside the bridge that spans the mill-race was the works canteen, and the nearby barn was used for threshing wheat, the sacks of which were kept in the building between the race and the bypass-channel. Both of these buildings have also been converted to office use.

Dhobie or Dhoby Lodge lies behind this second barn. This is where the laundry from New Barnes House, now Sopwell House Hotel, was cleaned. 'Dhoby' is a washerwoman, and is derived from the Sanskrit words 'Dhona' or 'Dau' meaning to wash. The Laundry was in the portion of the building closest to Butterfield Lane, with the Manager's house being next to the mill-race. Both are now private dwellings.

Sopwell House Hotel was formerly called New Barnes House. The older portion of what is now a thriving hotel and spa complex lies away from the river, facing north west up the valley slope; the present entrance is a much more recent addition to the building.

Prior to the Monastic Dissolution of 1536 the area lay in what was Abbey lands, and included the adjacent Mill, Home Farm and barns. The Abbey lands were granted to the military engineer Sir Richard Lee by Henry VIII and, later, passed to the Earl of Verulam and the Gorhambury Estate.

Various members of the extended Grimston family have lived here over the centuries, but other residents were Sir Ralph Sadlier (16th Century), Edward Strong (Christopher Wren's chief mason at St Paul's Cathedral, (17th Century), philanthropist Isabella Worley (19th Century), and Prince Louis of Battenburg, Admiral of the Fleet (early 20th Century). After WWII it became an old people's home; in 1968 Mr Newling-Ward purchased the house and it became the high-class hotel we see today, although it has been much enlarged.

Many football teams have stayed here prior to playing in the FA Cup Final at Wembley, as have the England squad when playing there or flying abroad.

River Memories:

From 'Deeds of the Abbots of the Monastery of St Alban'

Matthew Paris and Thomas Walsingham 13th/14th centuries "Threat to Abbey and town in the time of King Stephen".

"In the year 1142, King Stephen came to St Albans with a powerful force and captured William of Mandeville.

"But before he took him there was a bloody struggle, during which the Count of Arundel, fine soldier though he was, was knocked down together with his horse by a very strong fighter, Walkelin of Oxen. He fell in the middle of the water which is called Haliwell; all his limbs were injured and he was nearly drowned.

"However, the troops of St Alban, who were then living in the town next to the Monastery, in order to guard the Abbey Church and the town, which was surrounded by ditches bravely resisted the King to his face, until the King and his invading force personally gave satisfaction to the Church for damage which some of the King's ministers had caused".

Mr J W Golding born in Longmire (Riverside) Road, St Albans before W.W.II. The three large blocks of flats in Riverside Road (Riverside Court) were at one time allotments, and after heavy rainfall these would flood. On one occasion, when the river receded some small pike were left stranded in the remaining pools. Along the stretch of river that is now the Verulam Golf Club course it was possible to swim in places and he remembers many water-rats [water-voles].

Mrs J M Murray, married in 1937 and lived in Longmire Road. She remembered many tadpoles, and in summer hundreds of tiny frogs would congregate under the street lamps to feed on insects. She remembered a child drowning in the river in the stretch by the golf course. Wild flowers in or near the river: red campion, ladies smock, cowslips, cuckoo flower, forget-me-nots, yellow iris, bittercress, meadow saxifrage, ragged-robin, toadflax, kingcups and many butterflies; and there were also many partridges. In the 1950's, when the main sewer which took St Albans' effluent to Blackbirds Farm [near Radlett] was laid, many pumps were needed to drain the ditch before the pipes could be laid – as a result of this, the water-cress beds dried up. A house, 'The Dell' (where Riverside Close now stands), had a boathouse and a boat.

Brian Waters (from 'Thirteen Rivers to the Thames', pub. 1964)

"Miller Butterworth [of Sopwell Mill] enjoyed a river fish on his table no less than his riparian neighbour on the watercress beds below his farm enjoyed his evening's beer. The cress-gatherer had a small boat and a pitchfork for his occupation, and frequently speared a

good trout, the larger and easier, and sometimes a pike, for which the miller gave him a shilling which was quickly exchanged for six pints of good Hertfordshire Ale. Now there is no mill, no trout, no boat, and beer costs more than a shilling a pint!

"The golf course on the steeper bank to the river was under the plough and the rough by the lower mill a trout farm, though there is little evidence of its former fertility. Years later this reach of the river was stocked with five-hundred trout, but the watercress gatherer tells me that they were all washed away. However, as evidence of life in this part of the Ver, he saw an otter swimming during the hard weather of the winter of 1956".

"My Memories of St Albans" – an oral history of life and times in St Albans. Vol 1. Collected by David Broom for the Museum of St Albans, Y234.10



Claude Pinnock's family owned a several watercress beds in Park Street and other parts of Hertfordshire. In this interview with Tony Stevens of the Park Street and Frogmore Local History Society, Claude describes how the business came about, the processes involved in growing watercress, the long hours they were obliged to work and the way in which they supplied the finished crop to a variety of markets in the area and beyond. He also speaks of other aspects of life in Park Street and the wildlife in what was then a very rural area.

"Water dell [junction of lakes and Hyde Lane] ... the fisherman's car park was under water ... more often than not ... The number of young woodpeckers there were, it was amazing.

"Me dad passed away in 1954. He died when he was 82. He took the beds on the left below the station when he was 16. He borrowed £100 from the Midland Bank. He had old Maunders, the dairy bloke – 'cos he used to see to his horses for him – stand as guarantor, and he borrowed £100 from the Midland Bank and that's what he started with and he worked it all up and then he done them beds and he bought this bit of ground the other side of Burydell, and me three brothers they started workin' as well for him and I forget how many he had, oh about a dozen blokes there they dug all the gravel out there and old Freddy Toms with his horse and cart they used it, put the gravel on it and some of the houses round here was built with the gravel from there.

"We put our own bore holes in there, cause it was all surface springs then, we bought our own boring tackle and we put our own bore holes in and we used to go down about 70 foot. 'Cause what messed all that up was when they come through with the main sewer. They come through the allotments, top end of Burydell, through the front gardens of them five top cottages and through the top part of ours. Well of course they went thirty foot down and what a lot of people don't realise is, they went thirty foot down and they have these 'ere big diesel pumps pumping water out, only place they could pump it was in our beds. 'Cause all the diesel oil in it messed everythink all up, and of course they put all concrete at the bottom and they put these big pipes down and then covered up, they have a lot of land drainage pipes underneath to take the water and of course they're still there, that's where a lot of the water's running and then when they had finished pumping out 'cause there pumping down now and 'course they've got the natural river at the bottom. Of course, if you you're 30 foot down now and I'm up here you know who's going to get the water. Of course they dried us all up and all

the old man got then was about £230 pounds compensation. So of course it was no good so we had them filled in and that's all we could do. But up that way that was all right because that was further away we done the bores up there and when Redlands wanted to put the new borehole in over there at Harper Lane we objected in case they lowered our water table I had a water engineer from London come down, I had two blokes every day and they measured the water, put a trap in, there was two million gallons of spring water going out of there a day into the river.

"I was up there one day, cause I was on me own, and this bloke come up in a posh suit
'Ah,' he said, 'I can't understand it, the rivers dry up above but there's water in the river down below'.
'Oh' I said, 'it's coming from my bore holes'
So he said, 'How many have you got?'
So I said, 'I got five altogether', I said, 'there was one in that corner so I had six'
So he said, 'Oh well he said that's interesting'
So I said, 'Yeah, it looks like I'm supplying your river with water', I said, 'I shall have to start charging you!'
'You must be joking!' he said.
A week later I had notification, I had to pay a licence fee for each one of my bores.



What's involved in growing watercress?

"You want a nice gravel bottom if possible, it's got to have a fall, it must have a fall, see it's like you in the winter time if you stand about you get cold, well it's the same with water. When the water comes of that borehole that's round about 50 degrees. Well in the summer when it's 80 degrees it won't go above 51. In the wintertime it wouldn't drop below 50. So therefore, that's how we can grow the watercress 'cept when it's very frosty. You've got to have a fall on the bed to keep it moving through them. You've got to have spring water. In the summer time when it was ever so hot you didn't want nowhere near so much water so therefore you used to have locks on, we used to have these plugs. They've never gone dry! They must be still going well now.

"We started off with seed and then when you get the plants, you plant them in hardly any water and they start taking root and you let a little drop more water in and they thicken up and then once you've got them up well and then you can pull them for plants to plant more up and once you've got a good stock in the summer time you can cut them off like the tops and plant them and they'll take root. You have to plant them thicker. You always plant them heads down the river so the water's running over them and the roots back this way, that's how they come up. It was very interesting. In places down there, specially down near the waterfall it was a bit deep and there wasn't as much gravel there, but over this side where we put the bore holes, where dad and them got the gravel out in the first place, there was forty foot of gravel there, 'cause how we know is cause when you put a bore hole in you have eight foot tubes. Steel piping, threaded on one end, you have a collar you thread on there and you have a big weight to knock it down, take that off, you're all right then. But you must tube all through the gravel. That's how we know there's forty foot of gravel. Once you're in the chalk that hole don't fall in, not the chalk, that keeps solid then up it comes.

Who did you sell the cress to?

"The Abbey Flyer line used to be known as the 'Watercress Line', we used to go to Watford and all up north, Aston Villa at Liverpool, Barber of Leeds, Irelands of Leicester, Turner of Derby, Brown of Bedford, Whatshisname at Kettering. What I used to do, I used to load me lorry up, I used to go up to Park Street Station, where you went in you could open the gate, I used to back right onto the platform, the train come in, they'd open the double doors, then we'd work them in there and that was changed at Watford.

"I used to go to the Midland Station, that was all 'morning gathered', used to catch the 7.30 am train to London and the lorries would be waiting there to take them straight into Covent Garden, 'morning gathered'. In the afternoon we used to go up there and put them on the train to Bedford, Kettering, Derby, Leicester.

"Altogether, with the women bunching there, we had over twenty altogether working for us. We was one of the biggest and we was one of the first people in the country. The whatsername officer came from St Albans and tested our water about three times a year and it was always 100% and he got us to use this kind of Milton stuff. I used to buy it in big five gallon bottles and I used to put about a pint and a half in my dipping hole where we used to keep the cress cool until it was ready to go, had the block in, and we had this here white paper and you put it in and if it turned blue you'd know it was alright. We was the first people in the country to do that. Now it's done all the way through. Cause we used to have to put watercress baskets, half flats and quarter flats. Now it's all bunched and chipped now. You know put in chips.

"At the finish the old people used to think everything of it but the young 'uns today when I was up Durham Park Golf Club I took some up there and one of the young blokes said what's this then, what are you doing with this, see the young 'uns they're not interested, they don't want to prepare watercress or anything like that. It doesn't sell like it used to.

Did your family have any more cress beds?

"We had, down at Taylor's, Moor Mills; Sir Holland-Hibberts, we had 'em out there at Munden; old Colonel Ansell's at Codicote, we had the beds there, and we had Didlem Hall, that was down the bottom of Hollywell Hill where the swimming pool is. That over there was allotments there and the beds went right through the middle of that and they come out into the River just below the Duke of Marlborough and then we had up Gorhambury Drive, we had cress beds there, we was one of the biggest in the country in them days, oh yeah we got rid of some cress! We used to get up early every morning, we used to go up to Covent Garden at quarter to four some mornings, quarter to four/four o'clock then three mornings a week from Covent Garden over Waterloo Bridge, turn left into Borough Market round by Waterloo Station round by the Oval to Kennington Road and through to Brixton, that used to be me last drop. But Tuesdays and Fridays I used to have to come back through Kentish Town and that was the last drop then. We used to supply Watford market.

"The man that is trying to grow cress again says he is going to try trout again. He find he'll loose out cause the old herons will clear them out as fast as he puts them in there. They're buggers they are. I remember once there was a beautiful show of trout down the bottom and I got them and I put them up where one of my bore holes is and they was beauties like that, I should think there was about forty and I thought to meself, these bloody fish, they must be jumping, they're going somewhere. Anyway I had to go back one morning for something and I see there was these two herons, bloody great fish!

A grass snake

"I remember up there one day I'd cleared right at the top on the gravel and I was raking it all down cause you have to get the right level, it takes time to get the right fall and I chucked me jacket on the bank when I came to pick it up there was a bloody great grass snake, over three feet long, it wasn't half thick, and it went into the ditch so I put my rake on it and held it down for ten minutes and thought now you bugger that's don yer. As soon as I took me rake off, it was gone.

Kingfishers and other birds

"Up that end I used to have six kingfishers and I used to talk to them. The old birds use to come and see me especially in the bunching shed and I used to have a little Jenny Wren always used to nest in there and when I was on the bunching table bunching and as I'd clear the stuff along the wren would be on the table beside me peck the grubs out. If my wife came up there to help me it would be sit on the ledge up the top there swearing something awful saying what's she doing here?! It would not come nowhere near when she was there but it got used to me, same as kingfishers. They used to come up there like that almost to the end of the board then they'd go like that and just drop down. And they'd sit there motionless, all of a sudden there would be a flash of wings and they'd come up with a minnow. I used to talk to them. I was 'cressing up there one day and I looked and one had been shot with a bloody airgun pellet. Boys across the river had an airgun 'cause I was up there one day and pchinggg it went and I hollered at them and that was bloody dangerous. Cor I weren't half upset, shot one of my kingfishers, beautiful birds.

"Me elder brother he used to have a bit of an allotment up there, he come in one day
'Can I borrow one of your rakes? I want to rattle the ground down and put some seed in'.
I looked up and said, 'No you can't, a robins got its' nest up there'.
'Well I'll be dammed' he said, 'I won't then, I'm not going to disturb it'
The birds I used to get up thereI used to talk to them ...When I was in the ditchpeople used to think I was round the bloody bend!
They get used to you [the birds] they come up by the side of you. Everything's the same, they know if you're going to harm them, its
the same with a horse, same with a dog, oh yes."