

Memories of the River Ver – Park Street



Introduction: The 'Manor of Hanstead' from the Domesday Survey of Hertfordshire, 1086; at that time this included the villages we know today as Park Street (and Frogmore) and Bricket Wood.

“In CASHIO Hundred

The Abbot of St Albans holds HENĀMESTEDA. It answers for 20 hides. Land for 20 ploughs. In Lordship 6 hides; 3 ploughs there; a fourth possible. 26 villagers with 4 Frenchmen have 13 ploughs; a further 3 possible. 3 smallholders; 1 slave. 2 mills at 20s [Moor Mill and Park Mill]; meadow for 3 ploughs and 13s too; pasture for the livestock; woodland, 1000 pigs. The total value is and was £22 10s; before 1066 £25.

This manor lay and lies in the lordship of St Albans Church”.

Later, Park or Park Street would become a 'Manor' itself, the manorial house being sited at Old Parkbury.

Derivation of: Park Street – as this manor belonged from the earliest times to the Abbot of St Albans, it is not very likely that 'park' had the usual manorial sense of 'enclosure for hunting'. Instead, it is from the original sense of enclosure, 'pearroc' and is the equivalent of the manorial 'bury'. It is from OE socn, 'jurisdiction'. The 'street' element refers to Watling Street which passes through the heart of the district and along which the village became established between the mill and the ford across the River Ver.

Frogmore – possibly from OE word 'focga', the source of dialect 'fog' meaning 'corse reeds' near a river or stream. 'Moor Mill' is derived from OE 'mor', a marshy or boggy place and from where we also get the name for the familiar moor-hen.

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

Memories of the River Ver: Submission (No: 39) by Peggy and Rob Pollock of 214 Radlett Road, Colney Street; resident 1939-2007 compiled by Ruth Partington, Ver Valley Society in advance of the Halcrow study on low flow in the river (1988).

“At Park Street itself stood yet another Mill – Colville Mill – a listed building at present under renovation and to be used as offices. Behind are watercress beds (owned by Mrs. Pinnock of Branch Road), and north of Bury Dell Lane. To the right of Bury Dell Lane were watercress beds also, but long since filled in resulting in a delightful and quite different flora from the rest of this part. Being keen gardeners, one reason for buying our property in 1959 was because of the good soil – we purchased in the summer when one would expect the ground to be drier, and for many years we had a flourishing garden, but gradually we have found each summer that the ground dries out progressively faster. In the farmyard beside us there was a pond in which bulrushes grew – long since disappeared. Now for much of the year everywhere is dust. Is this due to extensive gravel digging, intensive farming, water abstraction or a combination of all three?”



Sand and gravel deposits – present and past

The sand and gravel deposits along the lower Ver and Colne valleys have given rise to extensive commercial extraction during the 20th Century, (and continue today in the Colne Valley around London Colney). This industry is evident along much of our route on Ver Valley Walk 8.

The bands of gravel which overlay the chalk aquifer through Hertfordshire, lie in the “Vale of St Albans”. This was the course of the ‘proto-Thames’ where it flowed east through what we know now as Essex, Suffolk and Norfolk into the North Sea – further north than the River Thames today. The gravel beds were formed by the action of this ancient river as it deposited vast quantities of sand and pebbles, washed down from the Midlands approximately 2 million years ago. Later, during the last (Anglian) Ice Age 450,000 years ago, the River Thames was forced southwards by the advancing ice-sheet to follow its present course to the sea. The River Ver too, met this ice-sheet in the Sopwell area and was forced to deviate sharply south/south-west.



North of the M25 embankment and Moor Mill Lane we enter the site of the Moor Mill pits which were operational in the 1960's and 70's. They affected both sides of the river, up to Watling Street to the east and to the railway in the west. This particular area is marked by the remains of the former gravel washing plant, as evidenced by the concrete hard-standing and other debris. Levelled and built over as it was this area presents quite a bleak picture at times but nature is beginning to reclaim parts. This area, and the Park Street and Frogmore pits to the north are still owned by Lafarge Aggregated Ltd, the successor to the various companies that have extracted gravel hereabouts during the 20th Century.



North of Hyde Lane we enter the Frogmore and Park Street pits area. Commercial sand and gravel



extraction began here between the two World Wars, starting at the northern pit bordered by Branch Road and Watling Street in the 1920's, and moving progressively southwards to Hyde Lane in the 1930's and 40's. The footpath and the two larger, flooded pits were formerly the grounds of Frogmore House which fronts onto Watling Street east of the river.



Before commercial extraction began here in the 1930's, the house grounds were laid out as parkland with golf-links and trout hatchery.

Cyril Martin – “The side of Frogmore House facing the river was really the front. It looked out onto a bend in the rivers' source. In the Wigg's time [former owners] the land in the bend was also parkland, planted with sweet-chestnuts, walnuts, cedars and firs and beyond the river was just arable land.

“Sidney Brunton [a wealthy stockbroker who had purchased the Park Valley Estate and Frogmore House prior to WWI] arranged for an ornamental canal to be dug right across the bend so that a part of the river could flow quite near to the house. On it he built a hatchery and bred trout for re-stocking the river from time to time. On the other side of the river he constructed an 18-hole golf course. Wooden bridges across canal and river gave access to the golf-links and a brick and timber golf-house was built on the side nearest the house.

“From then on the Park Valley Estate began to acquire a 'new look'. The house and grounds became immaculate, Sidney himself always looked immaculate, the pride of Wrights, the local tailors. Every weekday morning dressed in a smart grey or lilac coloured suit and a grey topper, his lavender waistcoat disporting a substantial gold chain, a carnation decorating the lapel of his morning coat; he awaited the coach driven by Mr Hill, the head coachman to take him to the station from where he caught the city train.

“At weekends he could be seen somewhere around the Estate attractively dressed in heavy tweeds ready to go golfing, fishing or shooting with some of his colleagues from the Stock Exchange. Under his influence the day-to-day prosperity of the village considerably increased. All in all he created many new jobs for the village people. Men were needed to work on the golf-links, the grounds or gardens, in the woods or along the rivers; while many women found work as servants in the house or in the private laundry as laundry-maids. Much of the Squire's opulence began to 'rub-off' on to the whole community. It was a time of cornucopia.

from “An Edwardian Village and its People”)



Watling Street Bridge and Ford

The Ver is accompanied on its journey from source to confluence by the Roman London (Londinium) to Chester (Devas) highway, known to us today as Watling Street. This ancient road crosses, and originally forded the river at six points north to south:

- ½ a mile north of Markyate
- London Road, Markyate
- Friars Wash
- Redbourn High Street
- Dolittle Mill
- Park Street/Frogmore

Although roads were useful to British civilians and traders, the main purpose of the Roman road system was the smooth-running of the Empire. The imperial government relied upon the road system both as means of moving military forces rapidly from place to place, and as a way of quickly communicating governmental information and decisions. The imperial post was known as the 'cursus publicus'. These main roads were covered with regular post-houses, at intervals of about fifteen miles with more elaborate inns or 'mansiones' about thirty miles apart. There were fifteen such arterial routes in Britain.



So this river crossing has been in existence for at least 2,000 years; what we know now as Watling Street is thought to have been built around 70AD. Perhaps originally there was a simple ford here, but it seems logical that later a wooden bridge structure would have spanned the river. The road has been progressively embanked on the approaches to the bridge as the river would have been much wider.



On the south-west side of the ford/bridge is the former Red Lion PH, once a landmark on the Ver. Sadly it was closed in 2008 and is now the offices of a vehicle hire company.



Park Street Roman Villa (and River Wharf?)

In June 1943 a Roman Villa was found during gravel digging at Park Street, west of the river and south of Hyde Lane. Later that year, and in 1944 the site was excavated and recorded. During the summer of 1954 further discoveries of buildings were made as the gravel digging extended into the field east of the villa. Excavation of these features and other fieldwork was undertaken as gravel extraction continued here until 1957. During this time a bath-house, other structures, and a twin-burial site were found and recorded. But of more interest on our river Walk 8 are the following remarks, extracted from:

'The Roman Villa at Park Street; a report on excavations 1943-5' – Helen O'Neil (St Albans Central Library)

'Excavations at Park Street, 1954-57', A. D. Saunders, The Archaeological Journal CXVIII, 1961.

"The site of Park Street Villa is an open pasture 'known as Bricket Field, some two hundred and thirty yards west of the River Ver, two and a quarter miles south of Verulamium. Across the river, Watling Street, which here deviates slightly to avoid a loop of the river, lies in full view of the villa. The villa lay on the slightly higher portion of the field, which is on a terrace of glacial gravel, based on chalk, some thirty to forty feet above river level'.

"No remains were visible on the surface of the ground and no tradition seems have lingered in the neighbourhood of the existence of any building, except for one hazy memory of the field as containing the remains of a supposed monastery used in medieval times as arable land, and is known to have been under plough in very recent times for both corn and potatoes".

"Riverside Structures - gravel digging revealed a timber construction along what may be an old course of the River Ver. A double row of oak piles was found on the west side of an extensive deposit of black river silt filling a depression in the gravel which marked an early water-course. Roughly squared posts, pointed at one end, had been driven into the natural gravel every 4ft to 4ft 6ins. Thirty-one such piles were recorded in the western row and seven in the parallel eastern row, the rows being 20ft apart. Between them the gravel had a level surface over which in one place beams, and in two areas thin oak boards had been laid horizontally. They were generally laid directly on the gravel ... elsewhere between the posts were large flints and much tile, some of it having been used previously for building. On average, the piles themselves were about 6ins square in section.

"It is most unlikely that the Ver was ever wide enough to require a rivetment 20ft wide on its banks, and the double row of piles suggests some form of wharf on the river sideits proximity to the villa also suggest a connection and a reason for its construction.

"... Summary and Discussion of great interest and importance is the evidence for the activity along the riverside and the use made of it. The River Ver at this point has changed its course over the centuries, and river silt was traced as far as 460ft west of the present stream. The area is marshy and has several small streams which indicate certain movement of course. Gravel digging too over the years must have assisted natural changes. Traces of timber work, therefore, have occurred well to the west of the present river.

The discoveries were chance ones and without a great deal of excavation it was impossible to follow the early river course or to learn more of such a feature as the drain or aqueduct.

The significant discovery must be the wharf or quay immediately east of the villa complex. Such a substantial timber structure seems to point only to this interpretation, and whether it was at the side of the river or of a canal leading from it, the implication is that of water transport. Although Watling Street lay so close it is feasible that the traffic of bulky cargoes would have been effected by water Communications by these means could have connected Verulamium, higher up stream, with the Thames at Staines by the River Colne".

Archaeological techniques and practices have moved on since the 1950's, and are far more forensic today; modern archaeologists are sceptical about the interpretation of these features placed on them at the time.

Nevertheless, it remains interesting for us to conjecture that some form of water transport was possible on the Ver.



Park Street Mill

Cyril Martin writes, in his books 'Park Street's Past' and 'An Edwardian Village and its People':

"...It was found necessary to divert the river near Sopwell and make it follow a course hugging the north-west foothills. To prevent the new stream from flowing back over the valley it was banked up with timber cut from the Eywood forest with clay and chalk...."

"Thomas Goddard held the mill property from 1802-39. He was one of those proprietors, of which there were many, who could enjoy a full life on the proceeds from the land he owned, which enabled him to take part in a great many of the social activities of the county ..."

"George and Ann Beament took over the Mill from Mr Goddard. They came to Park Street from New Barnes. The Beaments were farmers by tradition as well as millers"



"The Beaments hadn't been in the village long before they set about rebuilding the last of the timber mills in attractive red and grey brick, in a style common during the Industrial Revolution. They did away with most of the old timber structures that surrounded the mill, including the ancient workshop, but kept the chimney-stack and turned that part into a bakehouse; at the same time they reinforced some of the old flint walls along the river and around the garden with brickwork. At that period there was no brick bridge over the by-pass stream in Burydell Lane which ran further along, parallel to the lane, and joined the back of the ancient river near where there had once been a ford. The present bridge was built in 1866, but before that another smithy workshop was built to replace the one bordering the main street, which was demolished."

"The mill house stood opposite us, quite an attractive building majestically painted in white with green sashes and doors. It was owned in those days by Stanley Giddins who was assumed to be a gentleman, in so much as he appeared to have plenty of money to spend and to gamble with and did no real work. Leslie, his youngest boy ... and I soon became inseparable playmates and we spent hours together in his house and the old mill. His father kept the downstairs room on the corner of the Dell as an office and entertainment room. You had to go up three hefty steps to get to it. There was a cellar, underneath where Stanley kept beer, spirits and wine and which during the Great War was used as a shelter from Zeppelin raids. Farmers and dealers were constantly calling at the mill house as well as many of his gambling friends who would go into this room and sit and drink and play cards with him

"Some mornings, if my breakfast wasn't ready, I'd go round the Dell corner and sit on the bridge facing the mill. It was the tallest building in the village and when I was small it seemed to reach up into the sky. It had a gay facade then, red brick and white paint with flour dust everywhere. Layers of it on the window sills and between the bricks where the wind had blown it and where it lay like fresh mortar. Even the cobwebs over the windows were highlighted by a thick layer of flour, making them look like giant eyes peering at you from under great white lashes.

"Every year the swifts came all the way from Africa, somebody told me. They went screaming and wheeling around the roof before swooping onto the clusters of nests under the projecting gables and eaves. Some of those nests must have been there for years. They were as hard as concrete and resisted the stick we used to poke them to get the eggs.

"Sometimes I would be sitting on the bridge when old George Wheeler (nicknamed 'Foghorn') came to open the mill. He was a big slightly round-shouldered man ... he would stop in front of the door and fish out an iron key from one of his voluminous pockets then he'd unlock the top half of the door. The mill doors were in two halves just like those of the cottages. He'd unbolt the bottom half and reach round for an old mill-stone that he kept just inside to prop back the doors. That stone must have weighed a hundredweight or more but Foghorn lifted it with apparent ease. As soon as he got inside he'd take his coat off and put on his working coat which he kept hanging on a nail. It was a dusty old coat with the pockets stuffed with string and usually had several sewing needles threaded into the lapel. A short while after he'd arrived there'd be a foaming rush of water under the bridge where I was sitting, then came a clapping of leather belts, a loud noise of machinery and a grinding of stone against stone and the day's work had begun

"There were three more villagers that worked at Hedges Farm that came past Dad's workshop early in the morning. They were Harry Lewis, his son 'Grinder' Lewis and his daughter Nell. They lived up the White Horse Yard. None of them could read or write or even tell the time by a clock. Old Mrs Lewis the Mother was very small and had a tiny wrinkled brown face like a walnut. All the family enjoyed exceptionally good health, never seeming to have much wrong with them.

"During the Great War Grinder distinguished himself on the Western Front by earning the Military Medal, it was awarded posthumously. His sister Nell also distinguished herself she managed to get 5 children from as many different fathers and only lost one day's work with each.

"Throughout the war Stanley Giddins gradually fell into the grip of alcoholism, just before it ended he was taken way to hospital with a bout of D.T's. It was a long time before he recovered sufficiently to be trusted on his own. Meanwhile he had fallen heavily into debt and his creditors were pressing for a settlement.

"It is sad to think that the old mill, the mill house and its occupants after having been the centre-piece of village life since time immemorial should have come to such an untimely end. The good times that the Giddins children had had, with their dancing classes twice a week, the penny entertainments that they'd organised in the stables at the side of the mill, the happy hours spent along the river and in the walled garden where the gaily painted dolls-house stood, large enough for them to get inside; all gone forever

"The mill property was sold just after the war ended. The mill itself and the mill house was bought by Mr Christmas. The chicken field was sold to Mr Tansley, who soon started digging it up for gravel. After Mr Tansley's death Jim Pinnock bought it and made another cress-bed there ... he had already acquired the meadow in front of Bury Dell Cottages from the Oliver family about 1919.

"Ronald Beach Christmas came to Park Street from Abbots Langley where he once owned a chicken farm. He purchased the mill property intending to convert it from a flour-mill to a glue-factory. The internal water driven machinery was removed, boilers installed and steam driven machinery introduced.

“A steam operated ‘bone digester’ was built extending from the ground floor to the top floor, and a metal lift capable of transporting half a ton of bones at a time ... My father carried out all the necessary metal work needed to complete the ‘change-over’ When the work was complete, Christmas ran the place as a glue-factory with the help of his two men, Mr Darvil and Mr Kerrison. The stink of that process permeated the whole village; what with the Friday night ‘sanitary cart’ and the foetid odour of those old bones, Park Street was fast becoming the ‘Smell of the Year’. Eventually, Christmas began to realise the local people’s objections. He sold the mill property and leased some woods at Bricket Wood where he set up another Fun Fair [in 1924].

“It was bought by Captain Harry Hopkinson and his wife Cordelia. After his career in the army, Harry seemed to have no interest in the mill, either as a building or as a business. It stood for many years just as Christmas had left it, smelly and becoming over-run with rats ... His wounded leg caused him to walk in a manner that soon earned him the nickname ‘Hoppy’. With his army tales and his abortive attempts to sell what was left of the glue in the mill, he became a well-known figure in the village, especially in the pubs where he regaled the customers with his army experiences.

“During WWII he leased the mill, first to a firm known as Zinnermans as a store for aluminium scrap, later on to Brookside Metal Company to store salvaged marine scrap. Hoppy survived the war but died a year or so afterwards.

“In July 1950 Mrs Hopkinson applied for permission to use the mill for mixing, packing and storing dyestuff ... After she and her son left the mill house it stood empty until it was pulled down in 1959 to widen the road through the village.

“In 1951 the Chapman brothers, Ernest and Stan, acquired the property. They were engineers and scrap merchants. A part of the mill was still in use for mixing and storing dyestuff.

“In February 1984 Monto Properties Ltd applied to get the mill listed and to make certain structural changes to it. Not long after the application Ernest Chapman began to clear away some scrap that had been dumped in the garden near the smithy during the last war and found an unexploded bomb. In June of that year Jarvis Ltd obtained the contract to convert the mill to office use. During the rebuilding process some of the foundation timbers of previous mills were found deep in the mud beneath it in a splendid state of preservation



Park Street Station – Cyril Martin writes: “The making of [chestnut] hurdles was one of the Park Street Village industries. They were made in a timber yard at the back of the station-master’s house. The station-master was my uncle and I used to go there quite a lot to play with my cousin Bert. We liked to go into the timber yard and watch the men making the hurdles.

“One man would be boring holes in end pieces, one would be splitting heavy billets into long thin pieces while another would be putting all the pieces together and nailing on the cross-struts.

“When the hurdles were finished they were piled into high towers so that the wind would dry and harden them.

“We used to love climbing to the top of these towers and pretending that we were in a fort. The towers were made with a hole down the middle like a factory chimney. We used to climb down the hole and stand with just our heads above and fire pea-shooters at each other”.

Mr G Hall “Towards the end of the 1920’s we bathed and swam in a stretch of the river we called the ‘Tar’ near the village of Park Street, where boats could be seen sometimes from the railway”.



Cathy Sinfield “We locally called it the ‘Tar’ river down by New Barnes Mill, where Cottonmill Lane dog-legs, then downstream towards Park Street where the two [mill] streams reunite”.

Joan Forder and Margaret Wickens also knew the river here as ‘Tar’, as did Mrs Forder’s parents [although the river upstream as it wound around St Albans, was known as the ‘Ver’].

Evidently, for reasons that are unclear, locals knew the stretch of river between New Barnes Mill and Park Street as the ‘Tar’ river; in particular, that section of river where the mill-race channel and bypass channel reunite. The name ‘Tar’ could be merely prosaic in that it may refer to deep, silty areas which existed hereabouts, or some sort of pollution – but it is interesting to note that there are instances around the country where the prefix ‘tar’ is associated with other river or ‘watery’ village names, most notably Tarrant in Dorset, a Celtic river name, possibly meaning ‘the trespasser’, i.e. ‘river liable to floods’, and Tarvin, Cheshire, a Celtic river name meaning ‘boundary stream’.

Cyril Martin was born and brought up in Park Street prior to W.W.I; his father ran the village smithy which was situated next to the Mill Yard. He wrote three books detailing the history of the village, and surrounding area (‘The Book of Park Street, and Frogmore’, ‘An Edwardian Village and its People’ and ‘Park Street’s Past’) all giving a fascinating insight to the period of his boyhood in particular.

“George and I spent many warm days paddling in the clear water that flowed each side of the cress. Using our cupped hands we caught brown and green minnows and pink and blue sticklebacks. Kingfishers sat in the willows at the side of the river, awaiting the chance of a quick meal. There were plenty of big fish in the river at that time ... One day Frank was filling the smithy water-trough from the river, when quite by chance he scooped up a fish with the bucket. Mr Lewis, the watercress man drove over from St Albans each day in his horse and cart. He lent a single barrel sports gun to my father, asking him to shoot wild ducks that damaged the cress. When we were tired of fishing we’d roll up our shirt-sleeves and plunge our naked arms deep into the soft clay of the bank pulling some out to make clay models....; That soft grey clay, heavily doped with chalk is typical of the low, marshy land, wild and untilled that extends up the valley of the Ver as far as Sopwell. George and I explored it all.

"The river ran deep in some places making slow passage through reeds and overhanging willows; at others it was shallow and swift, gurgling and sparkling over brown and white stones and strands of water-weed. There, we would lay on our bellies and drink great draughts of it, suffering no harm. We often found remains of trees buried deep in the soft soil of the marsh. In the Spring it blossomed with milkmaids, ragged-robins, dog-daisies, harebells and masses of tall quivering grasses we called quakers. Along the ditches and around the ponds, blue and yellow irises grew, we called them 'flags', they made a wonderful sight standing proudly among the reeds and clumps of bulrushes. Clusters of marsh-marigolds, better known to us as 'king-cups' bordered the pools, while the lush grass of the meadow by the left bank was interspersed with tall buttercups.

"That was the place where huge black and white cattle roamed. They came from the farm on the hill owned at that time, by a family named Brown [Hedge's].

"The bank on the right of the river where it came flowing from the mill [New Barnes] was very steep and it had trees and a thick hedge along the top of it. Although it was possible to paddle there, the bank was too steep and the hedge too thick to be able to climb out of the water on that side. One of the workmen at the mill found that out when he got trapped in the water by a bull which had broken its tether and chased him into the river. It was winter time and he had to stand in the icy water up to his knees until a farm hand came and took the bull away. The thick hedge and trees formed a home for a great variety of birds like blackbirds, thrushes, hedge and tree sparrows, chaffinches and bullfinches, and I often found nests of rare birds like buntings, whitethroats, yellowhammers and wrens. Behind the hedge, where the ground rises steeply from the river right up to the railway line, hundreds of sheep used to graze.

"Of course in those days there was no main motor road running across the fields and river as there is today. The only road at that time was the cart-track to Brown's farm. It ran down to the red brick bridge over the river. It is still there but has many of its bricks crumbling and displaced. From there it ran up the sloping fields to another narrow brick bridge over the railway. The two stone cottages just near the old road were called Flint Cottages. They were owned by Lady Barnet, a relation of the Earl of Verulam. She lived in the house now known as the Sopwell House Hotel.

"The sheep-fields were ideal places to gather mushrooms. They would pop up overnight in such quantity that we could fill a large basket in no time at all.

"Between Flint Cottages and the big house was a swampy wood called Chalkdell, a habitat for owls and woodpeckers.

"Near the little bridge over the railway, wild strawberries grew. They were quite a good size and tasted sweet and juicy. Near the bridge over the river I could paddle across when I was eight. The water came just above my knees. But in most places along there it came up to my neck. There were a few places where it was too deep for even a full-grown man to walk across.

"Although tall reeds and weeds lined the banks the middle part of the river was always kept clear so that there was always a good flow of water to the mill at Park Street.

"Most of the houses in the village with gardens bordering the river had a boat of some sort – it was a status symbol in those days; we would often see the people that we knew 'paddling' or 'punting' their boat up the deep middle channel. But faulty navigation would often get them stuck in the reeds or on a mud bank. Then, if it was warm enough we would undress, get into the water and give them a hand to push them off again, and be rewarded, if we were lucky, with a halfpenny for sweets.

"The reeds along there were home for scores of moorhens, coots and wild ducks. I once found a wild duck's nest up a willow tree. It had twenty eggs in it, although quite a number were obviously rotten and would never hatch out.

"Sometimes, when summer was drawing to a close, when the cricket season was over and most of the out-of-doors sports finished, when there were no more garden parties, and the annual flower show had come and gone, and there were no more donkey rides on the village green to look forward to, the local minstrels would organise a water regatta.

"It was great excitement riding in one of the gaily decorated boats, the nights were beginning to draw in, so each boat had Chinese lanterns with lighted candles in them. They were fixed by wire to the boat on top of small poles. Each boat had a minstrel or somebody who could play in it. Then, as they began to play, the long line of boats moved off up stream. Slowly, they crept away from the landing stages at the bottom of each garden. Then, if they didn't get caught in the giant wild rhubarb which grew on the opposite

bank, they wended their way up stream in a long joyous procession. Then the whole river would come alive with the screams of laughter or shouts of impending disaster. And all to the strains of music”.

“The stringent conditions that the village families were subject to during the war [WWI] didn’t prevent the boys from finding amusement, once their chores were over. During the long hot days of summer we acquired a passion for the river, most of us learning to swim at an early age. Those that couldn’t swim made rafts from pieces of wood bound together with some of the buoyant water lily weeds and floated down the river on them. Once we’d learned to swim and dive my friends and I bathed in the deep millfalls at the back of the mill garden. We found it really exciting diving from the garden wall into the foaming mass of water that plunged from the upper river to the pool below. Passers-by along Bury Dell Lane would halt on the bridge to watch us. We often tricked them into believing that we’d been drowned by coming up behind the falls out of sight of the watchers on the bridge; then we’d sit there, for a few nail-biting moments with the raging torrent flowing harmlessly over our heads, before plunging into the back of the falls to suddenly re-appear in the middle of the pool, as if we’d been in the water all the time”.

“After Dad stopped paying the rent for next door, Alf Hornet and his wife moved in. They had one son George who was about my age. We soon became fast friends and played together in the Dell, in the fields surrounding it, and along the river. One day George twisted his ankle so badly that he couldn’t walk and suffered considerable pain just putting his foot to the ground. The Doctor told his Mother that she must bathe it every day, with water as cold as possible. Each day, after school, I used to carry him on my back to an ice-cold spring, the boundary of three properties that joined near the Old Line water bridge on the other side of the river from Park Valley farm-yard and house where Mr Mead lived. That’s been built on now and is called Sycamore Drive and The Beeches. The Dell path ran on a high bank at that spot, and the spring bubbled out of the ground just beneath it. Close by were three poplar trees, the tallest in the village. The water from the spring ran ice-cold and made marvellous drinking water on a hot summer’s day. The cottages from the Dell dug a deep hole so that they could collect some of it in a bucket. It tasted much better than the well water. When the river wasn’t wanted to work the mill, the by-pass sluice gates were opened wide, then the stream burst, like a miniature Niagara, into a deep hole below, before rushing, a cascade of white foam along the 15 foot wall skirting the mill kitchen garden. It joined the mill-stream near the farm-yard. Between the garden wall and the lane-bridge stood the village Smithy which, until my Father’s time had been overshadowed by a walnut tree. Both tree and Smithy have long since disappeared. The bypass stream, after leaving the bridge now turns at right angles to join the mill-stream at the back of the new three storey flats.

“Both sides of the river opposite the Smithy went thro’ a succession of changes after the ground was acquired by the Pinnock family just after the Great War. They had already taken over the first cress-bed from Mr Lewis who had gone bankrupt.

“First came extraction of gravel, then an artesian well was sunk to provide clear water for more cress. A part of the meadow in front of our cottages was used as a market garden. Later on the cress beds were filled in, the river deflected and work done to turn the territory into building land”.

Mr Martin identifies the area of land between the Mill race and bypass channels as ‘Pickbourne Meadow’, an interesting name now lost and never used by residents today. It may, come from OE pīc, ‘point’ and bourne, ‘stream’ or ‘channel’, i.e. ‘the pointed meadow between the two streams’. It remains derelict, and unused.