

Bratton Mills

by Jean Morrison

First published by Bratton History Association in 1992–1993 as 'Bratton Woollen Mills' Parts I and II, now amalgamated and edited for the website in 2015

Before the invention of the steam-engine in the early 18th century, the only sources of power for industrial purposes were streams, rivers and the wind. In 1086 William the Conqueror's Domesday Book commissioners knew that water-mills were an important source of revenue for the king, and in their survey of 9,250 manors they recorded 5,624 water-mills. The concentration on some rivers was remarkable: on the Wylye in Wiltshire they found 30 mills along some ten miles of water – three per mile.

Although our small stream at Stradbrook was not mentioned in the Domesday Book, we know that there have been mills driven by water power in Bratton at least as far back as written records take us. In AD 968 a charter recording the grant of lands in Edington by King Edgar to the nunnery at Romsey sets out the boundary with Bratton in Anglo-Saxon (Old English), beginning:

Erest on Mulbourne Ewelmen ... on than Forde ...(First to the great springs of Milbourne, [from thence] to the Ford ...)

This corresponds with the perambulation of Westbury parish as set out in c.1611 [see *editor's update notes at the end of this article*], and with the present parish boundary. We now call the stream Stradbrook. The name Milbourne shows that in Saxon days there was a mill there, and the name Milbourne, Mulbourne or Melbourne was applied to the hamlet which grew up along its banks. It survives in the name Melbourne Street for that stretch of the B3098 that runs down to the stream. The mill in question would have been a grist mill belonging to the lord of the manor, where all the corn grown by his tenants was ground into flour.

In 1086 six mills were recorded in the Domesday Book as being in the Westbury area, but Bratton is not mentioned by name. We know that at least one mill continued in Milbourne, and later there were at least two. Mention of these occurs in old grants and leases of property, and in inquisitions *post mortem* (i.e. enquiries into property after the death of a landowner).

At some period in the 12th century a new use was found for some water-mills, in the preparation of woollen cloth. Spinning and weaving were cottage industries, as was the finishing of the woven cloth. This involved washing out the grease and shrinking the cloth in order to felt the threads together and make a thicker fabric. Scouring and beating – known as fulling – was done in tubs, in which the cloth was soaked and trodden until the required texture was obtained, and then the cloth was hung out to dry on a rack or tenter, where tenter-hooks stretched it out to an even width. There is frequent mention of a 'Rack Close' beside mills which had been converted into fulling mills. Some unknown genius had worked out how to thump the cloth repeatedly in

water with huge wooden mallets lifted by a rotating water-wheel. Immediately it became possible to treat longer, wider pieces than could be easily done by hand, and west of England broadcloth became one of our principal exports. At its thickest and closest the threads were so matted together that they did not fray, and a tailor had no need to hem a coat. He simply cut out the pieces, stitched them together, and left the edges without hems. The collar and cuffs would not fray. Cloth merchants took over the mills, sent out wool to local spinners and weavers, and took back the cloth to the fulling or tucking mill, where all the finishing was done: not only the fulling, but also the scouring with ammonia in the form of urine collected for the purpose, the cleaning with fuller's earth, the pressing, the raising of nap where required, and shearing the surface to obtain an even surface. The law required that all this be done to an acceptable standard, and that each cloth be stamped with the merchant's mark.

The earliest mention of a fulling mill in Wiltshire occurs in a charter granted to the Abbot of Stanley in 1189, but they did not become general for another century, as they needed considerable water-power, involving millponds, leats to take the water to the mills, and sluices to control the flow.

Shortly before 1221, William de Anasya (an early form of the name Dansey) granted to Walter de Dene the tenement which his father held, the mill of Mulebourne and half a virgate of land. The mill and half-virgate passed to Richard de Dene, and then to Walter and Isabella de Dene. In 1299 Roger de Stoke granted to his daughter Agnes houses, mill, dovecote and land, which he had by the death of Walter de Dene. In 1332 Agnes granted to her daughter Isabella houses, mills, waters, ponds, sluices and land. So we know there were properly-regulated millponds controlled by sluices.

In the Edington Cartulary is a memorandum dating from sometime after 1250 concerning the 'fee [holding] formerly Dansyes', and the lands of Nicholas Brook in Bratton and Milbourne held of the same fee, itemising first the mill with its ponds and yardlands in Upper Milbourne. This appears to be the earliest reference to the forerunner of Upper Mill, which stood on the site now occupied by Cleeve Terrace. In 1348, at an inquisition following the death of a Richard Dansey, he was declared to have possessed a fulling mill worth six shillings and eight pence (half a mark, or one third of a pound) and two water-mills worth 26 shillings and eight pence. Because his manor also covered Dilton, we cannot be certain where all the mills were, but this is generally taken to be the earliest clear mention of fulling in Bratton. There were evidently considerable waterworks earlier than that, which may indicate an early introduction of fulling mills.

There are sufficient references to mills in Milbourne between 1350 and 1500 to prove their continued existence during this time. In 1522 the chance survival of the 'presentments' of the Bratton manor court held on 25 September sheds further light on the subject:

Item. John Abathe, who had in the last court sufficiently to repair his mill before this under the penalty of 10s, hitherto has not repaired the said mill. Therefore he is in mercy. And further he has a day with the next court for repairing the said mill under pain of 20s.

There is no mention of the mill in the record of the court held the following March, so presumably it had been repaired. At this period the Abathe family is frequently referred to as 'alias Whitaker', and it seems likely that this is the Lower Mill, which is known to have been leased by Whitakers later in the century.

Lower Mill

Two brothers, Christopher and William Whitaker [*possibly great-grandsons of John Abathe alias Whitaker – Ed.*], sold the lease of their grist mill in 1585. It was soon to change into a fulling mill. The perambulation of the parish made around 1611 describes how the boundary passes along a ditch between Bratton East Marsh and Edington West Field by ...

... a little Close Called the Rack Close in the tenure of Widow Whitaker, and by the Said Ditch ... unto the river, up the Same River to the Flood Hatch of Bretttons Mill in the Tenure of Widow Whitacre, and so up the River to Another Flood Hatch in Bratton in the Tenure of Widow Aldridge, and from the Flood Hatch by the Ditch between Eddington field and the Mill Close on the River and up it to the Meeting of the Two Springs anciently called Ewelme.

This exactly matches the course along the river called Milbourne in the 968 charter. Widow Whitaker's mill was Lower Mill or Old Mill, down Mill Lane off Lower Road, where the water still runs swiftly between high banks. Rack Close, where there were racks to dry the woollen cloth after fulling, was still so called in the 19th century. Widow Aldridge's mill was Upper Mill or Aldridge's Mill, which is explored later in this article.

Lower Mill was later taken up by Jeffery Whitaker of Tinhead, described as a 'clothman'. Dying in 1601, he left his eldest son Nashe Whitaker 'the benefit of the seale of my mill at Bratton', together with other property. In 1606 Nashe Whitaker ran into trouble with the inspectors who checked the quality of the cloth being produced. The case came up at Quarter Sessions:

We the searchers of Woollen cloth within the hundred of Westbury for this present year 1606 doe present Nashe Whitaker of Tinhead in the parish of Edington for that we came upon the nineteenth day of September last past into the racke close of the said Whitaker and there wee found in one of his rackes one broad woollen white cloth being stretched and strayned with one lower bar pinned downe at both ends of the same bar contrary to the statute.

The cloth had been left too long in the water and had shrunk too much, so an effort had been made to stretch it to the required width. White undyed broadcloth was then one of England's principal exports to the continent. It was important that standards were maintained to keep up the reputation and price of the cloth.

Nine years after his father's death, in a will dated 15 October 1610, Nashe Whitaker bequeathed to Jeffery, his son: all his household stuff and implements in his house at Tinhead, all his implements at his mill at Bratton for the dressing of cloth and all household stuff there, a silver salt and a beaker which his father gave him, six best silver spoons, and 'my best cloathe marke, called the Yellow Crosse, with N and W thereunto annexed'. He died before the end of the year, and his wife Mary was the Widow Whitaker in the perambulation. Little Jeffery was only a child at the time [*and*

died at the age of 20; his mother remarried in 1613 – Ed.]. Lack of documents makes it impossible to discover when they gave up the mill, which was part of Bratton manor.

Forty years later Nathaniel Cook held it from William Bromwich, who was then lord of the manor, by a copyhold lease dated 14 October 1650. It was described as two fulling mills, half an acre of land in Milbourne and an acre of pasture called Racke Acre, with the appurtenances. The reference to two fulling mills does not indicate two mill buildings, only two sets of fulling stocks within the one mill. By 1682 Nathaniel's son Robert Cook had inherited 'a dwelling house and fulling mill, a garden and orchard on the millham'. The rent was 30 shillings (£1.50) annually, and the lease ended with his death in May 1690. An inventory of his goods includes the simple furnishings of a two-roomed cottage and mill house, together with tools of his trade, a pair of shears, a press, three tubs and a grinding stone.

On 21 October 1690 John Elkins was admitted at the court of Thomas, Viscount Weymouth, now lord of the manor of Bratton, to a tenement and two fulling mills in Melbourne, formerly held by Robert Cook, for the lives of John Elkins, his son John Elkins junior and William son of Roger Carter. John Elkins did not hold the mill for long. In 1704 Lord Weymouth granted the lease to John Merrett and his sons John and Francis. It seems likely that Elkins had already assigned it to Merrett, as he did not have to pay a fine on entering the tenancy, the copyhold agreement having been surrendered. The rent was 30 shillings and a capon yearly.

There is a list of Bratton rate-payers dated 24 April 1705, in the reign of Queen Anne, copied into an account book kept by Philip Ballard, the yeoman farmer of Ballard's Home Living (now known as Grange Farm). It includes 'John Merrett for Tukung Mill 6s, for his home 4s'. In another, undated, list John Hopkins paid 15 shillings for the same property, perhaps when John Merrett grew old and less active. His son John predeceased him in 1727, and his other son Francis was a wheelwright who, when his father died in 1730, did not work the mill himself but continued his work as a wheelwright. When he died in 1744 his wife still held the mill for her widowhood, and it was not until 1756, 52 years after the copyhold was granted, that Viscount Weymouth could let it to a new tenant. In the meantime it had become a grist mill. Presumably whoever had been working it for the widow had no knowledge of the cloth trade. It was never again a fulling mill, but continued as a corn mill until the end of the Second World War.

In 1756 it was in a ruinous condition. Perhaps it was difficult to let in such a poor condition, for the new tenant was a curious choice. It was leased on 25 March 1756 to William Mattock of Bratton, a barber and peruke-maker, for his own life and the lives of his sons Thomas and William Mattock, on payment of a fine (or fee) of £10, and on condition that he rebuilt the house and mill. From an interesting series of letters which survived with the lease, we know that William Mattock was unable to afford the rebuilding of the mill, and found a miller, Thomas Lancaster, to undertake the restoration and the working of the mill. Rate-books show that Lancaster was paying rates on the mill in the 1760s, though he did not lease it until William Mattock's death in 1771. The mill does not appear on Andrews' and Dury's map of Wiltshire published in

1773, as it was probably not yet in working order when they were surveying the district sometime before this date.

William Mattock's son Thomas was a shoemaker, and though his name was on the lease, he took no part in running the mill. The younger son William had left the village and done well, for when he was finally traced to Brompton, he had enough money to live on, although he had suffered a stroke. Lancaster's widow Gertrude, nicknamed Gattey in the letters, moved to Leominster in Herefordshire, and her daughter Mrs Gertrude Nicholls lived at Tottenham. After the death of Thomas Mattock in 1790 it became urgent to discover where the other tenants were, if indeed they were still alive. It was this that led to the letters. In the meantime a John Norris ran the mill, agreeing to keep it in repair, and in 1792 it was assigned to William Witherington. For the next 30 years or so it was always referred to as Witherington's Mill and, as we have said, continued to function as a grist mill until the end of the last war. It is now a private dwelling house.

Upper Mill – early history

In the course of time the Stradbrook, with its source in Luccombe Springs, was to power four mills. Upper or Aldridge's Mill stood in the lane now called Stradbrook, near its junction with Imber Road, until the end of the 19th century. As has already been described, its origins go back to at least the 13th century.

In the early 1600s, whilst Lower Mill had become a fulling mill, Upper Mill was almost certainly a corn mill, and in 1682 it is clearly stated in a lease to be a grist (corn) mill. The earliest known copyhold lease was granted by Thomas Thynne of Longleat on 21 April 1676. The subject was a messuage or tenement and one water-mill, a two-acre close of mead called Millham, two closes of meadow called Dangers amounting to about six acres. three acres of pasture in the Marsh and 25 acres of arable land in the common fields of Bratton. In 1682 the tenants were William Aldridge and his son Jonathan.

In 1698 William Aldridge died unexpectedly at the age of about 38, leaving everything by a nuncupative (oral) will in the capable hands of his wife Margaret. They lived in a house just north of the mill, now much altered and made into two cottages. There is an inventory of the contents of the house and of the farm stock. His son Jonathan died in 1742 aged about 60, and the mill was left to his widow and to his sister Mary who survived into her nineties. In 1762, when Jonathan's widow was dead and his sister was too old to look after the property, a lease was granted to James Newman of Erlestoke, and his sister Margaret, subject to a consideration of the rights of the old lady Mary Aldridge, who did not die until October 1770.

In November 1770 a new lease was granted to James Newman, miller, now of Bratton, and Thomas Miles, edge-tool maker, also of Bratton but formerly of Erlestoke, who had married Margaret Newman. James and Margaret were the first two 'lives' on the lease; the third was John Bendy aged 21, son of William Bendy, wool-stapler of Erlestoke. So the mill's lease now named men with three separate skills – a miller, an edge-tool maker and a wool-stapler (i.e. a merchant who bought wool from the producer, graded

it and sold it to a manufacturer). Thomas Miles' edge tools were probably shears for the wool industry, and smaller ones for shearing sheep.

John Bendy died in the spring of 1787, aged about 38, and James Newman, now aged about 51, surrendered his share of the mill and negotiated a new lease in his own name, along with those of his sister Margaret Miles and of Henry Smith, aged 18. James had already bought out Thomas Miles' share. The Millham and two other small butts of land were retained, but the remaining land was let to John Nevill, a local farmer. Margaret died in 1789, and James Newman in 1797, leaving Henry Smith the remaining leaseholder. He had a somewhat obscure relationship with Thomas Miles, being the illegitimate son of Peggy Smith, spinster of Bratton, herself the illegitimate daughter of a Mary Miles.

By the end of the 18th century the mill was run down. Newman, Miles and Bendy were all gone, taking with them their various skills. Henry Smith, without their skilled training, took a new lease in 1800 and ran the business as a corn mill. The building was in bad repair and Smith had no son to leave it to, and no money. This was at the beginning of the Napoleonic Wars, which brought about an upsurge in the woollen trade. Business was booming in the Trowbridge area. Many enterprising clothiers were looking for existing corn mills and other sites which could be developed as woollen mills by installing the new machines for spinning and other processes. Thomas Jarvis from Trowbridge took his opportunity in Bratton, where Upper or Stradbrook Mill was ripe for takeover. His occupation of the mill appears to have begun in 1805, and he installed new machinery for the preparation and spinning of wool. Although the mill or 'factory' was advertised for sale in 1814, Jarvis seems to have retained this mill as under-tenant of the leaseholder as long as he continued in trade. The story of Stradbrook Mill is picked up again later.

The mills of Jarvis and Brent – Stradbrook, Bridge and Luccombe

Thomas Jarvis built his first new mill just north of the bridge over the Stradbrook that carries the road to Edington (B3098). Beside the house now known as Mill Vale was a small piece of land suitable for a mill [*then owned by Charles Mitchell and purchased by Jarvis in 1803 – Ed.*]. There was not much room for a millpond. but as Jarvis controlled the sluices and pond upstream, a small one would do. To provide supplementary power when required, in 1807 he bought a six-horsepower steam-engine for his new mill. We know from the rate-books that he lived for a while at Mill Vale House, before moving some time after 1809 to his new house at Luccombe.

Luccombe Springs provided an unfailing water supply, and a site on the Edington side of the stream was available on which Jarvis was to build his second new mill, as well as his splendid new house. Longleat-owned tenements called Withy Bed and Deanly on the Bratton side of the boundary were also necessary acquisitions, to allow for construction of a pond and access. Withy Bed was described in 1741 as a roofless tenement [*i.e. one without a dwelling – Ed.*] when it was leased by the lord of the manor to Merari Whitaker, brother of the diarist Jeffery. By 1805 the tenant was Thomas Williams, who sold his interest in the part of it called Deanly Coppice to Thomas Jarvis, and there are records stating that 'Mr Jarvis' factory adjoins this' and 'part of pond and a shed are

upon it, also a small stable and barn'. John Whitaker, whose family had held the lease of the tenement called Dearly since the early 16th century, was willing to sublet land for the construction of an access road. He had previously let portions of land to local villagers, and he was only taking on a new tenant. He continued to reserve for himself the right to coppice the wood. The agreement, finalised on 17 December 1805, gave Jarvis the 14-year lease of something over an acre extending to and including the stream. After John Whitaker's death his leases were all bought into hand by the Marquess of Bath and new leases were issued in 1809. In 1822 we find Jarvis renewing his lease of the piece of land 'called Withy Bed, containing one acre, together with the barn, stable and other buildings, built by the said Thomas Jarvis on the said Close (part of which Close is covered with water)'. Although the house and mill were outside the boundary of the manor, a sketch map in the Longleat papers notes 'Jarvis' factory in Edington Parish'; it also has 'Waterworks [and] Factory' written by Upper (Aldridge's) Mill and 'Mill' by the Mill Vale site. None of these occur on the printed enclosure map of 1808, as they were not involved in the enclosures.

We know from evidence that Jarvis gave before the Select Committee on the 'state of children employed in manufactories' that in 1816 he employed 45 people, 24 of them aged between ten and 14, and two under ten. Of these, four could neither read nor write, only ten could write, but the rest claimed to be able to read. In 1838, 73 people were employed, of whom eight were under 13 years of age. Thomas Jarvis insured his factories in 1819, and was then described as a spinner, and he had power-driven scribbling (wool-carding) machinery. The policy suggests that his three factories were water-driven, but confirms that the Bridge Mill had an auxiliary steam-engine for times when the flow of water was inadequate.

In 1822 Thomas Jarvis retired, and his three mills were run by Isaac Brent, a former clothworker. When Jarvis died in 1839, Samuel Brent, who had taken over from his father Isaac sometime in the 1830s, retained the two upper mills at Stradbrook and Luccombe.

In 1852 the lease of Stradbrook Mill or the 'Old Factory' was up for sale by Jarvis' executors. The mill was described as consisting of a basement with three upper storeys, 39½ by 16 feet (12m X 5m), powered by a 15-foot (4½m) overshot wheel and a six-horsepower steam-engine [*brought from Bridge Mill when a larger one was installed there – Ed.*]. It was bought by George Brent, whose father Samuel continued to run Luccombe Mill. Samuel died in 1865, and in 1872 George Brent bought the freehold of Stradbrook Mill from Lord Bath. The valuer had described the property as an old grist mill converted and used for scribbling. Although in 1851 only two men and ten women were employed in the two mills, George Brent continued in business as a wool carder and spinner until about 1890. Stradbrook Mill was demolished in 1909, and the present Cleeve Terrace was built on its foundations.

Luccombe Mill, advertised in 1839 as a 'capital cloth factory or water mill, with overshot wheel and mill gear', acquired a steam-engine in 1847. An old surviving photograph shows an L-shaped three-storey building and a square chimney stack, but after Brent's business collapsed Luccombe Mill too was demolished.

When Thomas Jarvis died, Bridge Mill passed to a relative named John Coombs. He had been a clothier in Trowbridge, and was known as a 'cassimere and broadcloth manufacturer'. Coombs lived in Mill Vale House until his death in 1840, when the business was sold to William England, who already had a business at Wellhead in Westbury. England & Son eventually went bankrupt, and in 1859 Bridge Mill was bought by R & J Reeves of Bratton. From 1870 to 1877 the mill was worked by the spinners and carders Wilkins and Cogswell, but it then ceased to be a mill, and has since been used as a dairy depot, and later as a builder's workshop and store. Once five storeys high with an adjoining four-storey wing, the two remaining storeys of the old mill still display the standard type of mill windows. [*One building has been converted into a private house, and there is still (2015) some business use on the site. – Ed.*]

The most impressive remaining testimony to the former prosperity of Bratton's woollen industry is Luccombe House. Ignored by the guidebooks, and standing in a secluded hollow below Imber Road on the Edington side of the parish boundary, this fine old Regency-style mill-owner's house has a most picturesque setting, with a wide sheet of water in front and wooded hill slopes behind. The lake was originally the millpond. Fed by the nearby Luccombe Springs, it supplied water to all four Bratton mills.

The south front is of fine-quality stone, with the central portion brought forward to lend importance to the main door. Old photographs show a shallow pediment over the door, providing a pleasant break in the roofline and giving height and dignity to the facade. The stone surround of the central first-floor window culminated in a peak echoing the roofline. Now the shallow slate roof is straight and close over the windows, and the proportions are spoilt. There are three matching sash windows on the first floor. Triple semicircular-headed windows west of the door, which has a short flight of steps and carved detail on the surround, have glazing bars in the centre window that follow the curve of the frame. East of the door are double semicircular-headed windows. The sides and rear of the house are of brick. On the west end of the house is a lower two-storey annexe, also stone-fronted, with brick behind.

Immediately west of the house is a jumble of mixed stone walls, part of which has been converted into a summerhouse. This is all that is left of Luccombe woollen mill. Some of the remaining stone window frames show the segmented heads that are typical of mills at Trowbridge, Bradford-on-Avon and other places built at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries.

Editor's update, 2015:

Research by Alison Maddock, published in the journal of the Wiltshire Archaeological & Natural History Society, has shown that the Westbury Perambulation, given the date 1575 in Sir Richard Colt Hoare's History of Modern Wiltshire (1830), actually dates from c.1611. This date has therefore been inserted in place of the 1575 one used by Mrs Morrison, and some small consequent alterations made to the text.

The original printing had a considerably confused set of paragraphs covering the later histories of the Upper and Luccombe mills, so the opportunity has also been taken to rearrange the text into a more coherent sequence, and briefly to insert some snippets of new information, shown in italics. (AJM)