

Millstream Draft 110402

When Ethelwold became Abbot of Abingdon in 954, he made it one of the great institutions of the realm. He instituted a grand programme of rebuilding, enlarging, and beautifying it, but of his many and expensive works only the millstream now remains.

The millstream flows out of the Thames, defines the southern boundary of the abbey precinct in its course, and returns to the river close to the present bridge. It may originally have been longer, ending somewhere near the present St Helen's Church. Its purpose was twofold; to remove drainage and sewage from the precinct, and to work the abbey's mills. Domesday mentions two mills in the abbey. There must have been a weir built at the same time about where the Abingdon lock is now to regulate the millstream's flow.

By the time of the dissolution in 1538, there were three corn mills 'under one roof' near where the Upper Reaches Hotel stands now. There was also a fulling mill some way upstream. All these became crown property, and the leases were taken over by the entrepreneurial William Blacknall. Under the charter which was granted to Abingdon in 1556, the leases were to revert to the corporation, but Blacknall arranged to keep them in perpetuity. His family soon became one of the wealthiest in Abingdon.

Thus, the banks of the millstream seem to have been the industrial centre of Abingdon in the late sixteenth century, and the needs of the mills for a maximum head of water caused conflict with other river users. The lock was used to pen the Thames waters ever higher, pastures and water meadows were submerged, and fisheries disrupted. Blacknall and his successors were engaged in constant lawsuits for at least fifty years.

Corn mills were a necessity for day to day life, and there were at least two in Abingdon beside those in the abbey: the Hennor Mill and St Helen's mill, both on the River Ock. Many households will have baked their own bread with flour bought from the millers, but by the sixteenth century there were also several commercial bakers in Abingdon. Most of the bread will have been made from a mixture of wheat and inferior grains such as rye, or even ground-up peas or beans.

Fulling was one of the processes in the production of cloth, which was an important industry in Abingdon in the middle ages. The abbey's fulling mill was first mentioned in the early fifteenth century. Immediately before the dissolution, the mill was working under the control of John Audlett, the abbey's steward. The profits came to £33 6s 8d over the four years 1531-4, which Audlett was accused by the abbot of embezzling. This was part of a much bigger dispute between the abbey and its steward. It was finally resolved by the intervention of Thomas Cromwell, the king's minister, who saw it as a potential hindrance to his own nefarious plans. The abbot seems to have thought that Cromwell was doing him a favour!

In 1551, Blacknall and his associates applied to the regent, Protector Somerset, for improved lease terms so that he could rebuild the mill. He claimed that it was in decay, and pointed out that it was the only fulling mill within eight miles of Abingdon, and that local clothiers were at a disadvantage in having to take their cloth elsewhere for fulling and got inferior results because they couldn't stay to supervise the process. Later in the century, there were several fullers working in the town, although it is not clear whether they all used the same mill or whether more mills were built. The local wool industry by then was declining, and they were taking cloth from as far afield as Oxford. By 1584, they were in trouble with the church authorities for working seven days a week, and the defence was that they only 'set the rack in winter on Sundays before morning prayer'.

Fulling is a process that felts the newly-woven cloth, closing the gaps between the threads and also

removing grease so that the cloth can be dyed. It involves beating the cloth in water mixed with fuller's earth (a kind of clay, conveniently available from Baulking, nearby in the Vale of White Horse), urine, and certain soap extracts. Originally, this might be done using clubs, and the patron saint of fullers, St James the Less, may be shown holding a fuller's club. More often, it was by treading or 'walking' the cloth in a long shallow vat. The process was labour-intensive and costly, and was mechanised very early. In a mill, the beating is done in a specially-shaped tank by mallets or 'stocks' worked by the water-wheel.

Fulling, therefore, was an intensely smelly and noisy process, and we must imagine the monks of the abbey having their ears constantly assailed by the incessant thudding of the stocks in the fulling tanks close by, and their nostrils with the smell of stale urine. The meadows adjoining the millstream will not have been green and grassy, but will have been covered with newly-fulled cloth stretched on tenterhooks to regain some of the inevitable shrinkage and to bleach in the sun. Waggons laden with sacks of grain will have rumbled towards the corn mills, and borne sacks of flour away from them. Long before the dissolution, the abbey's original religious and other-worldly vocation had been overshadowed by its economic and industrial functions, and the millstream, dug by Ethelwold in the 900s, was at the centre of them.

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