

Ham Mill and Mill House, Wells Road, Bowlish

Ham Mill is situated about 270 yards west of and downstream from the hamlet of Bowlish along the Sheppey River. The watermill here was fed by a leat about 1/5th mile in length rising at Bowlish hamlet and diverting water from the Sheppey River either via the tail race of the mill(s) at Bowlish or directly from the river (see maps middle and lower right).

The mill and mill house were built in Ham Tithing, a detached part of the parish of Pilton. The historical background for this lies in the early medieval period when the newly formed parish of Shepton Mallet separated from the much larger Pilton Parish. Pilton retained Ham Tithing despite it now being geographically isolated from Pilton but the resources contained in Ham were apparently too valuable to lose. Many centuries later in 1884 the parish boundaries were changed again and Ham Tithing was transferred to Croscombe Parish.

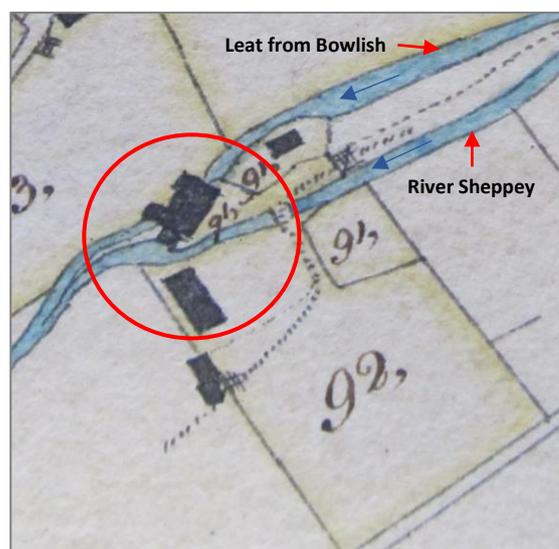
The site of Ham Mill may well be medieval in origin but the mill buildings are probably late 17th-18th century in date (see HER listing next page). The attached dwelling house at the western end may be later. In the opinion of experts on mill building, the external plan and size of Ham Mill is compatible with a grist/corn mill but it may have had an earlier function in fulling cloth.

17th-18th century: The Ham Strode family, owners

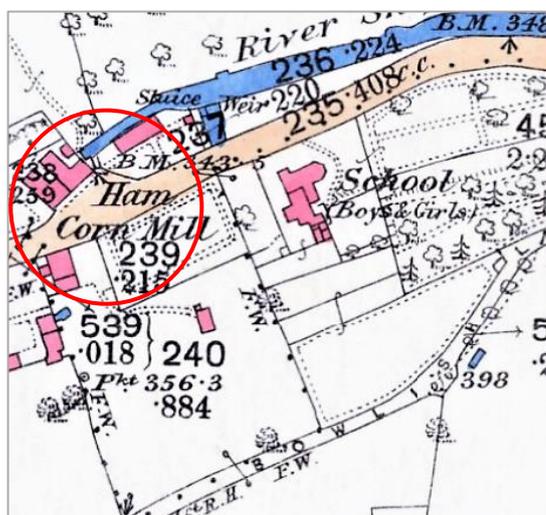
The mill was part of the Strode family estate in Ham Tithing which included the "capital" dwelling house (see Old Manor) situated on Ham Lane just above the mill. The family were copyhold occupiers of Pilton Manor from the 17th century and bought the freehold from the Earl of Ailsbury in the early 1700s. The mill presumably descended with Old Manor through the Strode family although there are no documents found so far that provide specific information until the late 18th century. The mill was in the hands of Barnard Strode of Ham (c1730-1815) when it was leased



Above: Ham Mill, photograph 1980s, courtesy The Mills Archive



Above: 1809 Pilton parish map, Ham Mill circled in red, water flow direction blue arrows



Above: 1885 OS map, Ham Mill and mill house circled in red, river now culverted under road

to the woollen cloth manufacturer Abraham Brodribb of Bowlish (see Coombe House) to store his stock and utensils from 1789 to 1805¹. There is no evidence that the mill had any association with cloth manufacture after this date and it retained its function as a grist or grain mill until the 20th century.

1815-1905: The Strode Penny family, owners

1815-1841: Eleanor Strode Penny, owner

On the death of her father in 1815 Eleanor Penny née Strode (1768-1841) youngest daughter of Barnard Strode and his wife Mary Syme(s) inherited the Ham Estate including Ham Mill now referred to as Strode's Mill. She married Joseph Penny from a local land owning family in 1790 and the couple had five children, three sons and two daughters before he died in 1827. Eleanor Penny died in 1841 at Old Manor in Ham and ownership not only of the mill but of the old family home on Ham Lane passed to Barnard Strode Penny her youngest son (see Old Manor for more detail).

1830s-1905: Barnard Strode Penny, miller and farmer and his eldest son William Strode Penny

At the time of his mother's death in 1841 Barnard Strode Penny (1807-1875) was not only managing Ham Mill but also living there with his wife Ann (née Davis) who he had married in 1833. The three eldest of their four surviving children; William, Eleanor, and Barnard Strode Penny were born at the mill between 1835 and 1841. The family moved to Old Manor after the death of Eleanor Strode Penny in 1841 and the mill was let to John Child an experienced miller from Gloucestershire and his family. They stayed until the early 1850s.

Construction of the Shepton to Wells Turnpike road between 1852 and 1856 had profound effects on Ham Mill. It divided the mill from its paddocks and outbuildings, and the tail race and the river were channelled under the road (see maps previous page). During this period William Strode Penny (1835-1917), Barnard Penny's eldest son (also a miller) occupied the mill house with his sister Eleanor (1837-1915) as housekeeper.

HER LISTING for Ham Lane, Wells Rd

20052: HER number:1173716; Grade II
Corn mill, now house. Circa 1700 much altered C19. Rubble, squared quoins, freestone detail, tile roof, coped verges brick stack. 2-storeys and attic, 3-bays. In two halves; to left house with stone architrave to doorway, 6-panelled door. 3-light casement window in stone surround. First storey slightly set back above string course running whole length of facade. Two 3-light casements similar to ground floor with relieving arches above. To right on ground floor wide doorway, plank door, ashlar surround, with stone mullion windows of 2- and 3-lights to its right. On first floor further door opening above that on ground floor, plank door and mullion window. Gable wing to left return. Remains of mill-wheel to rear.

The Strode Pennys were well compensated by the Wells Turnpike Trust for resumed land and lost business, and some of the 19th century renovations to the grist mill and mill house probably took place at this time.

Barnard Strode Penny let Ham Mill during the 1860s to the miller George Coombs. In 1871 John Young a local miller took over the lease and remained associated with Ham Mill until his retirement in 1910 (see below).

Barnard Strode Penny died at Old Manor, Ham in 1875 but by this time all his children; William, Eleanor, Barnard and Alfred had emigrated and settled in New Zealand. His wife Ann remained at Old Manor until the early 1880s before joining the family in New Zealand where she died in 1905. William Strode Penny returned to Shepton Mallet in 1905 to finalise the estate. Ham Mill was eventually sold in about 1907 to Mr Albert E. Orledge an established miller of Croscombe.

1871-1910: Mr John Young, miller and small holder, tenant

John Young (1823/4-1912) was born in Kent but how or why he came to Somerset is unclear. By 1850 he had met and married Eliza Harding (c1830-1880) of Alhampton and set up as a miller in Croscombe where his first four children were

born. This included John Harding Young (c1854-1916) who would eventually own Ham Manor Farm and house at Lower Ham. By 1861 the Young family had moved to Cuttern Mill and Farm in Evercreech where they stayed for 10 years before returning to Croscombe.

In 1871 John Young took over the lease of Ham Mill described as a “water grist mill driving two pairs of stones and machinery with a bakehouse, oven, dwelling house, gardens, paddock and outbuildings”². He retained his investment in one of the Croscombe mills and in 1872 (Morris Directory) was listed as a water miller in both Ham Mill and at Croscombe. In 1875 John Young’s youngest child Kate was born at Ham Mill but in 1880 his wife Eliza sadly died.

By 1883 John was managing Town Mill in Corn Street, Shepton Mallet when in 1885 he married his second wife Charlotte Ward (1839-1929) in Lewisham, London. John sub-let Ham Mill firstly to William Pitman a miller and baker and then in 1890 to Alfred Shire a miller and corn dealer who undertook further renovations of the mill house on behalf of the Strode Pennys. The property was advertised for a quick let in 1891 as “a Capital water grist mill, dwelling house and bakehouse, gardens, two pasture paddocks, with stable, cart-house, pigsties etc in extent about 3 acres”³ but Alfred Shire remained until March 1892. John Smith replaced him as miller for the rest of 1892.

John Young returned to Ham Mill in early 1893 and continued to work until injured in a severe milling accident in 1908⁴. He finally retired in 1910 and moved to Laurel Cottage (see Laurel Cottage) where he died in 1912.

c1907-1914: Albert Edward Orledge, miller, owner

Albert Orledge (1863-1940) was born in Pensford and came from a large milling family with strong links to Croscombe. After working for his older brother Francis, a miller in Kilmersdon, he joined his brother Robert in the late 1880s running the Middle Mill and corn dealership in Croscombe. By 1901 he was working the water and steam grist

Mill by himself, had married Rose Gane of Croscombe and had two children. After buying Ham Mill in 1907 he continued to run the Middle Croscombe Mill and remained resident there leaving the dwelling house at Ham Mill unoccupied (Census 1911). However, in 1914 Alfred sold both mills with their contents. The Orledge family remained in Croscombe and Albert was still a miller in 1922.

c1915-1976: Pratt & Son, haulage contractors

Ham Mill was bought in about 1915 by William Charles Pratt from Leigh-on-Mendip for £350. William Pratt had been an apprentice miller in the East Mendip area until 1915 when he commenced business as a haulage contractor at Leigh-on-Mendip. William bought Ham Mill to combine the haulage and milling businesses and had moved there by 1919⁵. The disused mill was renovated and milling started again. However, he was deeply in debt and by 1921 the business was in receivership. It is likely that the Pratts discontinued milling in the early 1920s but had let the mill to Arcadia Feeding Mills Co of London by 1926⁶. It is not known how long this enterprise lasted but in 1941 the wheel mechanism in the grist mill broke and was never repaired.

William Pratt continued trading through the 1920s in the lorry and car repair business. In the 1930s he was joined by his son Cecil to form Pratt and Son trading as coal and coke merchants, and haulage providers. Despite continued financial challenges, by the 1950s they had lucrative contracts for animal feed delivery. The mill building became a bulk feed store and Ham Mills Yard opposite the mill held a fleet of six lorries for feed distribution and tipper lorries for stone and tarmac delivery.

In 1966 the Pratt family moved from Ham Mill to Woodville in Bowlsh Lane and the mill remained empty for 10 years after which it was sold to Bill Sharples. Pratt & Son continued their haulage business from Ham Mills Yard site into the 1980s.

1976-1981: Bill and Jane Sharples, owners

Bill and Jane Sharples had lived and worked for

some years in Kenya before returning to the UK, and then to Radstock where Bill worked as an industrial chemist with Coates Bros. & Co. Ltd., manufacturers of printing inks.

William Lawrence "Bill" Sharples (1945-2006) was born in Lancashire and married Jane Clare Francis (1947-2000) from Yorkshire in 1968 in Blackpool. They purchased Ham Mill in 1976 but found the mill restoration quite challenging after it having been unoccupied for 10 years. Bill and Jane sold the property in 1981 and moved to Chelynch, just outside Shepton Mallet, and then to Swanage, Dorset, where they opened the Green Room restaurant. However, after a few years they sold the restaurant business and returned to Shepton Mallet. Following Jane's death in 2000 Bill remarried and settled in France, where he passed away in 2006.

1981-Current: Andie F, residential owner

It was some years after the purchase that Andie actually moved into the Mill and he spent several years renovating the property.

References:

1. Sunfire Insurance Policy, 1790, Vol 364, Number 564230, Metropolitan Archives, London
2. Western Daily Press, April 5th 1871
3. Shepton Mallet Journal, Aug 14th and 28th 1891
4. Shepton Mallet Journal, Oct 9th 1908
5. Shepton Mallet Journal, Nov 21st 1919
6. Somerset & West of England Advertiser, Jan 29th 1926

