

STREATLEY WATERMILL

For over 900 years the Streatley watermill served the people of the village and the surrounding areas of the Berkshire Downs. Its early history has been summarised by Simon Draper, the researcher compiling the Goring section of the Oxfordshire *Victoria County History*.

Streatley mill, the greater part of which stood in Goring parish, was one of two mills on Streatley manor in 1086. Both later belonged to Goring priory, Streatley mill having been given before 1181 by William de Mandeville, earl of Essex and lord of Streatley. In 1535 both of the priory's Streatley mills were let for £4 annual rent, and together they owed 6s. a year in tithes to the prior of Hurley (Berks.) as rector of Streatley. Two years later they were held from the Crown by William Stafford or Stratford for £5 annual rent, and in 1546 were bought by Giles and Gregory Iseham. Changing ownership a number of times, Streatley mill continued as a corn-grist mill until 1922, its millers including William Bartholomew (1790 and 1800), John Strange (1867 and 1883), and Charles Hobbs (1887 and 1920).

Streatley Mill from the north east [Mills Archive Trust]

Charles Hobbs was the last miller and lived in the Mill House, formerly known as Mill Cottage, after retirement and until his death in 1943. Wilfred his son, a chartered accountant, was the car magnate Lord Nuffield's personal assistant. The

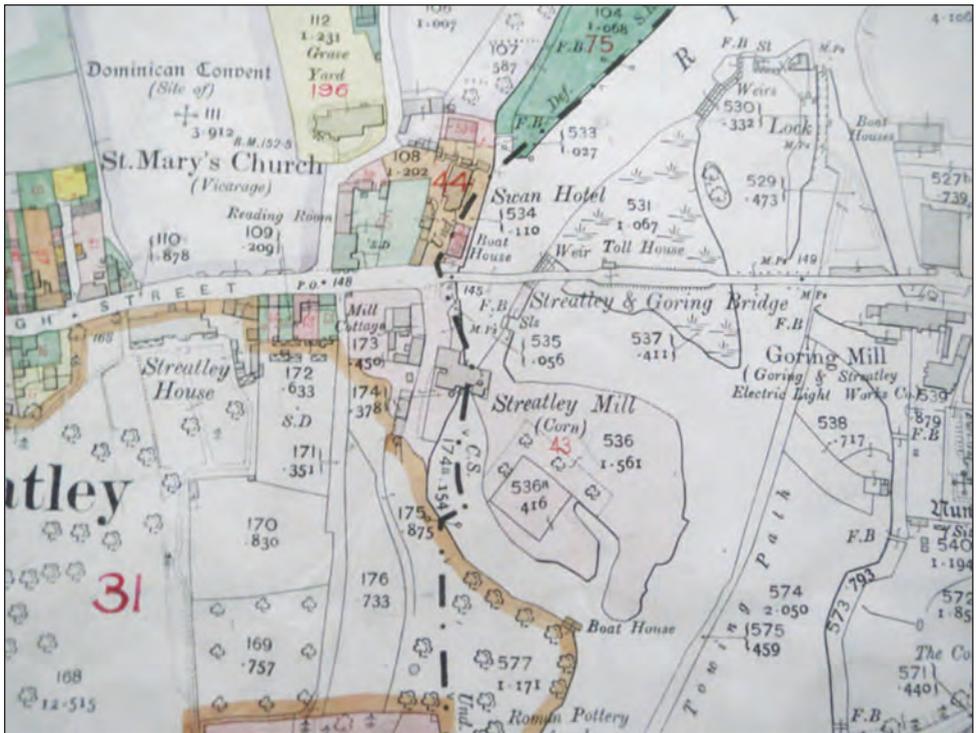


former William Morris lived at Nuffield Place a few miles away from Streatley. Lady Nuffield was a friend of Mrs Hobbs and used to take tea with her in Streatley.

The rise and fall of Thames watermills

There were weirs with flash locks at both Goring and Streatley which were controlled by the millers. 1787 saw the first pound locks built at Goring and Cleeve. The first river bridge linking Streatley and Goring was constructed in 1837 at a cost of £7000.

Although weirs and flash locks allowed barges to travel up and down the river more swiftly, their passage led to conflicts between the bargemen who wanted the water flow held up whilst they passed through and the millers who wanted a constant flow of water



1879 Ordnance Survey map showing location of Streatley Mill [GGLHS]

to drive their mill wheels. Fishermen also complained that their 'kiddles' – posts driven into the river bed with mats of woven twigs to catch the fish – were being damaged.

In 1665 the Great Plague of London drove many wealthy citizens to flee the city and the Royal Court moved to Oxford. Millers in the Thames Valley were quick and eager to profit from the new business the Londoners brought to the area. At the same time the farmers also prospered as new and more productive systems of crop rotation and husbandry were developed.

However with the ending of the plague, life in London revived and many people returned to the capital. Demand for flour for its inhabitants increased as it did for bran and crushed oats for the cab and dray trade and the needs of dairy cattle farmers. Mills continued to flourish.

In the 18c century a new threat arose. Increasingly huge quantities of American and Canadian grain were being imported into England at a lower price than that charged by English farmers. The milling business fell into decline leaving the Thames Valley watermills to produce little except cattle food.

The smaller barges carrying mainly coal and wood that plied the upper reaches of the



Streatley Mill from the south [GGLHS]

Thames were less affected but the coming of the Great Western Railway in 1840 brought about a further decline in goods traffic, which by 1900 had largely died out although a number of mills including Streatley subsequently converted to electricity generation.

The miller's life

Milling was a tough job: unheated dusty premises together with demanding physical work involving the lifting of $2\frac{1}{4}$ cwt sacks of corn; long hours were normal. The two Streatley millstones could grind five tons of flour daily although this was often limited by the volume of water flowing through the mill race.

Streatley Mill c.1900 with carts [GGLHS]

Day books showed that five men were regularly employed: the carter and his boy, three millers plus casual help at peak demand times such as harvest. The mill produced white and brown flour and animal feedstuffs using machinery for the varying stages of the milling process that had remained almost unchanged for over 200 years.



The early days of electricity

The Goring Lighting Undertaking was founded at Goring Mill by boatbuilder Samuel Saunders in 1895, with the aim of recharging the batteries of the new battery powered boats and illuminating local boathouses. He appointed Mr GA Ellis as manager together with the running of his boat business by Goring bridge. In 1899 Sam Saunders moved his boat works upriver to Springfield and he sold the Goring premises to George Ellis, along with the lease to Goring Mill, the site of the electricity plant.

In 1902 the Goring and Streatley Lighting Undertaking notified Streatley Parish Council that they intended to apply to the Board of Trade under the Electric Lights Acts of 1892 and 1900 for authority to supply electrical energy for public and private use in the parish. In June 1908 Mr Ellis decided to sell up and an auction took place in the former Saunders boathouse for the sale of the Goring Electric Light and Power Company and the Ellis (late Saunders) boat business. The sale catalogue stated that the company had been started with the main objective of lighting boat houses and adjacent properties. This

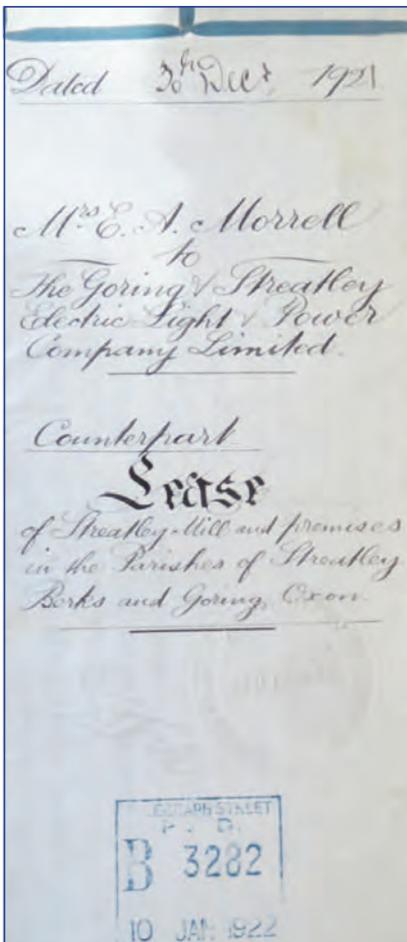
would subsequently be extended to some of the larger houses whose owners had requested the service. At the same time a cable had been laid under the river to supply Cleeve Court, the only Streatley property to be connected.

The auction included the generation and distribution plant, a high pressure engine, batteries, cable and "one box of odd china plugs".

Lease of Streatley Mill 1921 [Janet Hurst]

In December 1921 Mrs Emily Morrell, owner of the Morrell Brewery in Oxford and most of the property and land in Streatley, agreed a 40 year lease for Streatley Mill and premises to the Goring and Streatley Electric Light and Power Company. The lease stipulated that "all the water corn mill called or known by the name of Streatley Mill together with the dwelling house adjoining, and including the garden, stabling and manure pit on the other side of the road leading to the mill" contained a clause which required the company to insure the premises and equipment against fire and that any payout should be used to rebuild or replace any losses.

In 1922 Streatley Mill was formally taken over by the company who then used its two water wheels to add extra generating capacity.



WF Dyer, manager of the Electric Light and Power Company, at the controls at Streatley Mill [Keith Dyer]

The Times 7 August 1926
[British Newspapers Online]



STREATLEY MILL.

PLANS FOR REBUILDING.

(FROM OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT.)

GORING, Aug. 5.

Streatley Mill, so famed in pictorial art, is burnt down; and the twin villages of Goring, in Oxfordshire, and Streatley, in Berkshire, connected by a wooden bridge over the Thames, have lost their most ancient and picturesque possession.

Goring is regarded as the loveliest part of the Thames. The river, leaving the broad plain of its upper course, runs here through the wooded bluffs of the chalk hills, down to Maidenhead, and its charm is—or was, till the other day—enhanced by two beautiful old mills and their weirs and locks, which, with willow-covered eyots, interrupt its current. These mills of Goring and Streatley have stood on the banks of the Thames, directly opposite each other, for many centuries—there is authority for saying there were mills here in Saxon times—and, as this district has always been noted for its corn, the busy hum of their wheels and grinding-stones was heard down to recent times. The Streatley mill stopped working only in 1922, when, on its lease falling in, it was taken over by the Goring and Streatley Electric Light Company, which at that time had possession also of the Goring mill. Both mills have been painted by many Thames artists during the past 200 years. Streatley Mill was the favourite, and a thing of rare beauty it was, with its rose-tinted bricks, and its two wheels straddling a back stream of the river on the Berkshire side. Now it is a heap of blackened girders and wheels amid tumbled-down walls.

The cause of the fire has not been discovered. A postman beginning his early rounds one morning last week saw flames issuing from the mill, and though his alarm was promptly answered by the Wallingford and Goring and Pangbourne fire brigade, the building could not be saved. The loss in money is estimated at several thousands of pounds. It is said also that the destruction of the electric light works has caused no inconvenience to Goring and Streatley, as the company has a reserve power station in the Goring mill. But that is another story. The company proposes to rebuild the mill as its power station as far as possible in its old form; and when it is completed, in a year or so, and Goring Mill is vacated by the company, it is hoped here that Goring Mill may be preserved from the fate of Streatley by being made a national possession as an ancient relic of agricultural and social England.

The fire

On the morning of Saturday 26 July 1926 fire broke out at Streatley Mill. It burned fiercely and rapidly and within hours the entire mill, living accommodation and its barns had been destroyed.

The disaster was reported in both national and local papers. *The Times* in its issue of 7 August highlighted the possibility of plans for rebuilding and expressed sorrow for the loss of a river mill loved by many local artists. However it also noted that “the Streatley Mill stopped working only in 1922 when, on its lease falling in, it was taken over by the Goring and Streatley Electric Light Company”.

The Reading Chronicle provided a more detailed local report on the fire itself and the dangers faced by the Goring, Pangbourne and Wallingford fire brigades.

Crowds of spectators, many still in their night clothes, watched the inferno. On the Saturday and Sunday many more people stood on the river bridge looking at the devastation.

Mrs Marjorie May, who lived nearby, well remembered the night of excitement and sorrow for the village. The mill had only recently been converted for electricity generation.



Spectators at the burnt out ruins of the mill. [GGLHS]

Mrs Violet Shears who lived at 2 Place Manor Cottages, also remembered the occasion. "It was early in the morning when I was woken up by a big bang. It was just daylight and our windows were open. It was a fine day. The bang was caused by the fire brigade letting the maroon off. We heard lots of crackling and there was a terrible smell of smoke. I put my clothes on and was just in time to see the mill collapse into one big heap with sparks and smouldering wood."

There also appeared a brief report in the *Gloucester Citizen*. This was almost certainly because of the imminent setting up of a new national electricity generating system – to be called the National Grid. This would limit the number of companies that would have the right to supply electricity via the Grid. The Goring and Streatley Electric Light and Power Company would be absorbed by Wessex Electricity which would also be taking over other small supply firms. Its head office was based at Cairncross near Stroud in Gloucestershire.

Fire at Electricity Station.

**BUILDINGS COMPLETELY BURNT
DOWN.**

London, Saturday.

The Goring and Streatley electric lighting station was completely burnt down early this morning. The Wallingford, Pangbourne and Goring brigades were unable to save the buildings.

Gloucester Citizen 24 July 1926
[British Newspapers Online]

At the beginning of January 1927 Goring Electricity under the direction of its manager Mr WF Dyer, claimed to have connected the whole of Streatley to its electricity supply. In early 1929 a change from DC to AC current

took place. A new supply line linking Streatley to the National Grid was brought into use. It started at Fulscot near Didcot and was connected to a sub-station at the foot of The Downs behind Streatley.

The Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, who, it was said, had instigated the 1926 National Grid Act, claimed that the AC generated electricity would only cost a farthing a unit. At that time Goring and Streatley consumers were repaying a shilling a unit, equal to 48 farthings!

Postscript

Streatley Mill was never rebuilt. Perhaps the introduction of the National Grid, the rise of large electricity undertakings and the likely cost of the mill's replacement would have been prohibitive.

But many were saddened by its demise. It had inspired numerous artists and writers such as Kenneth Grahame. In his book *The Wind in the Willows* he described a picnic scene in which Ratty introduces his new friend Mole to the delights of riverside life referring to "our backwater where we are going for lunch" (which is believed to refer to Streatley).

Michael Brodie

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Janet Hurst, Jenny Emerton, the late Violet Shears, Marjorie May, Rose Vincent and Jenny Boler.

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