

## MILLS of the ESSEX - SUFFOLK BORDERS

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The River Stour rises in Cambridgeshire near where the Essex, Suffolk and Cambridgeshire borders meet. For most of its length it forms the border between Essex and Suffolk, and it may be this divided loyalty which has prevented anything substantial being written about the mills of the Stour.

From Sudbury to Manningtree, a distance of about 40 km, the river was made into a navigation in the early 18th century (the Act is dated 1705). Originally the navigation had 13 locks and 13 staunches. At closure there were 15 locks along a length of river that had 12 mills. These were granted free transport of millstones and building materials (from John Boyes' account of the navigation).

Below Manningtree the river forms a large estuary that, together with the Orwell, drains into the North Sea between Harwich and Felixstowe. The estuary remains navigable and large coasters still call at Mistley Quay, which at one time was used for the transhipment of goods to and from the Stour lighters.

The main river Stour is fed by several tributaries, of which the Brett and the Box are the largest, but there are smaller tributaries such as the River Glem and the Cambridge Brook. Small streams and creeks also feed into the estuary and the whole system drains a narrow strip of northern Essex as well as a substantial part of south Suffolk.

So far I have been able to identify on this system some 55 definite mill sites, with a possible 11 others. Most of the known sites are recorded in the Research Group's computer file. Although my investigations have been almost entirely confined to paper rather than the field, the recorded visits of other researchers indicates a breakdown of the 55 known sites as follows:

Twenty-seven are represented only by sites, foundations or other minor remains, although the mill from one of these sites - Alton Mill or Stutton Old Mill - is now rebuilt at the Museum of East Anglian Life in Stowmarket. Fifteen are accounted for by conversions into houses, hotels, a field study centre and the like.

Empty buildings, garages, etc. - four others.

Modern mills, three - one closed.

Believed to be in good order, three.

Working, one.

The remaining two I do not know about.

Perhaps it is unnecessary to state that both Suffolk and Essex have been, or are, the subject of publications dealing with windmills. Many Essex watermills have been dealt with in Hervey Benham's "Some Essex Watermills", published first in 1976 (second edition 1983). This however deals with the central and eastern rivers, and apart from a few references to the Essex coast of the estuary, it contains little about the Stour. Rex Wailes delivered a Newcomen Society paper in 1965 on Suffolk Watermills and includes most, but not all, of the Suffolk mills on the Stour and its tributaries. However, as the river forms a county boundary, mills on the Essex bank and on Essex boundary do not get a mention. This is nevertheless an important source, and

contains much technical information that sadly is no longer available.

A number of general books have been written on the River Stour, but these usually make only passing references to mills, which may or may not be accurate. Dedham and Flatford, because of their artistic associations, attract plentiful passages of purple prose with precious little information, making it important to be aware of what I shall call the "First Law of Pessimistic Research". This states that the accuracy of an historical statement is in inverse proportion to its frequency of publication.

In seeking out information on Stour mills I am therefore aware that although there appears to be no specific comprehensive publication, most of the available source material, of which there is a very great amount, must at some time have been consulted and studied, and other researchers probably hold far more information in their own notes than I have so far collected. A few items from the Essex bank may be of interest.

Shirburn Mill, on a small tributary at Lawford, appears to have been a double mill. In the early 19th century they were described as "The upper and lower mills, in which are four pairs of French stones. The wheel of the upper mill is 18 feet (5.49 m) in diameter and 6 feet (1.83 m) wide with two pair of 4 foot (1.22 m) French stones. The frame of the mill is 60 feet (18.3 m) long by 18 feet (5.49 m) wide. The water when used in the upper mill drives two pairs of stones in the lower mill with a waterwheel 18 feet in diameter and 5 feet (1.52 m) wide". The lower mill survives, but the upper one has gone. A head of water approaching 40 feet (12.2 m) seems quite astonishing in Essex, but site measurements would be needed to confirm this.

Henny Street Mill has several interesting observations recorded about it in Philip Morant's "History and Antiquities of the County of Essex" of 1768. Recording that the mills were originally held by the Veres, Earls of Oxford, he lists their history until they were sold to Martin Cole on 13 June 1600, together with 13 acres of meadow. He goes on; "Martin Cole, sometime of Sudby, Draper, charged, by his will, Shernford Mills in Great Henny, and two meadows in Lammmarsh, called Great and Little Holmes, 13 acres, with the payment of fourteen pounds, on the first day of May for ever at the town hall in Sudbury, to certain foefees in whom he vested estate of inheritance in those mills and meadows for the purposes following: to buy 200 yards of French canvas for 50 shirts and 50 smocks to be given to the poor of Sudbury on Ascension day 10 1. For making them 1!" He then goes on to list minor payments to clergy and corporation in order that his munificence might not be forgotten.

The same history of Essex records of Wrabness, on the estuary, that Sir John Hende, a rich citizen of London who died in 1418 held "the maner of Wrabnase, with a Sea-water mill, of the Abbot of Bury". This is quite an exciting discovery as it adds a new entry to the list of known English tide mill sites. I have not yet identified the exact location of this mill.

Ramsey is already quoted as a tide mill site, mostly on Hervey Benham's authority, but I have yet to find independant support for this. Map evidence suggests tidal power but can only confirm that it was a corn mill. Great Oakley had a mill but it is not clear if this was a river mill higher up the Ramsey Brook or a tide mill fed from Hamford Water.

I have not been able to check the Domesday account for all the sites,

but the 20 sites for which I have the records are rather interesting. The Domesday surveyors recorded how things had been before the conquest and contrasted them with the situation at the time of the survey. In many parts of the country this reveals decline, due mostly to the Norman troops, but from the count of mills this area seems to have fared rather better. Of course, the usual caveat needs to be made that the Domesday record may refer to animal mills, and the presence of a mill cannot be assumed to refer to a present-day site.

For all that, the survey records the loss of only two sites; Gestingthorpe, almost impossibly high up the Belchamp Brook, and Manningtree. Five manors increase from having one mill to two. This may of course refer to pairs of stones, but it is interesting nevertheless that one of these is Lawford where there was the double mill mentioned earlier.

Five sites appear for the first time after the conquest. Again it is interesting that three of these are the possible tide mill sites of Ramsey, Wrabness and Great Oakley. Three is far too small and uncertain a sample to reach any conclusions, but if this pattern were continued at other sites, it might suggest the Norman introduction of this type of mill. These manors also had salt pans, which raises the question of whether there might be a link between impounding the sea to drive a mill and impounding it to extract salt.

So far I have made no reference to the uses these mills were put to. The majority of sites were used for corn milling, while later years saw such uses as spice grinding at Brantham and electricity generation at Nayland. Paper, oil, and silk mills were also found, but as the area had a very substantial mediaeval cloth industry, historically the second-largest use must have been fulling. I have not yet found much information relating to this, although Dedham is known to have been used for both milling and fulling in 1777 - probably a rather unhealthy combination. About 2.5 km upstream, Stratford St Mary had one of the larger mills on the river; once producing oil, but later having an engine, 12 pairs of stones and 3 marble macaroni pans. Now only about 2.5 m of outer wall remain.

#### Discussion

The editor regrets that the record of the discussion of this contribution has been lost, due to a tape fault.

Key to Mill Sites on the Map off the Stour Basin

1	Holbrook	30	Wissington
2	Stutton, Alton Mill	31	Wormingford
3	Bentley	32	Assington
4	Ramsey	33	Bures
5	Stutton, New Mill	34	Great Henny
6	Capel St. Mary	35	Great Cornard
7	Wrabness	36	Sudbury
8	Manningtree	37	Sudbury, Brundon Mill
9	Lawford	38	Belchamp Walter
10	Brantham	39	Borley
11	Flatford	40	Long Melford, Withindale Mill
12	Dedham	41	Liston
13	Stratford St. Mary	42	Long Melford, Paper Mill
14	Langham	43	Long Melford, Hall Mill
15	Higham	44	Alpheton
16	Raydon	45	Glemsford
17	Langham	46	Glemsford, Silk Mill
18	Hadleigh, Toppesfield Mill	47	Glemsford, Weston Mill
19	Hadleigh, Bridge St. Mill	48	Pentlow
20	Hadleigh, Aldham Mill	49	Cavendish
21	Kersey	50	Clare
22	Nedging	51	Ashen
23	Monks Eleigh, Cobbold's Mill	52	Stoke by Clare
24	Monks Eleigh	53	Birdbrook, Baythorn End Mill
25	Thorrington Street	54	Wixoe
26	Polstead	55	Kedington
27	Boxford	56	Oakley
28	Boxted	57	Gestingthorpe
29	Nayland	65	

