

Childhood Memories of Havant Mill

Below, is a letter written by Tony Percival to our President - John Silman

Dear John, My Memories of Havant Mill

It is now 2015. I was born in Havant in 1939 and have lived in the area all my life. Havant Mill was my playground for as long as I can remember. In the house attached to the mill lived an 'old lady' known to us as 'Old Mother Wakeford'. She walked slowly with a stick and always seemed to be around to tell us off if we did anything out of the ordinary.

In her latter years, she became a target of many a prank. The most serious one was very dangerous indeed. My friends and I half filled a 'Gerry can' with petrol and, after knocking on Mrs Wakeford's door, floated the can in the stream and lit the fuse. We ran away of course and, as Mrs Wakeford came scuttling along, there was an enormous explosion sending water high into the air. She shouted and waved her stick at us but, as no damage was done, nothing came of it. We were very lucky.

The mill was fed by two, three feet deep streams plus water from a nearby watercress bed. These waters were crystal clear and were often used by us lads and passers-by, to quench our thirst, without a thought of contamination. Over the years, the only water creatures I saw were minnows in their thousands, small dogfish and, in the shallows, in the season, tadpoles. This remained so except for one period of a few months, around 1948, when a shoal of brown trout appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. One older boy who I recall was named Mickey Cooper, tried for days to catch them without success.

The best way for me to see the trout was to lean over the concrete topped wall, immediately above a pipe which carried overflow water from the nearby watercress beds. The pipe, about eighteen inches in diameter, was an ideal hiding place for the fish. I could often see their tails, keeping them still against the current and well hidden from the likes of me. However, if I went to the watercress end of the pipe and stirred up the water, the fish would retreat into the open water, waiting for it to clear. Then I could see them, about eight or so in number. I waited many a long few minutes, perfectly still, hoping to spear them. Needless to say, without result.

I never knew where the fish came from nor where they went but they were in evidence for only a few months in one year.

I recall nesting grey wagtails (in a hole where the water wheel had been) but the eggs were soon taken by the local lads or by the many rats living in the mill. There were moorhens which nested in the stream's east bank along with a variety of other birds. Rabbits lived in the surrounding fields and were often shot for Sunday lunch.

I do not recall the mill being used for anything other than for the storage of grain, straw, hay and other bulky products. But, as a social gathering area, the grass and surrounding fields were very popular with picnickers and courting couples. On some fine weekend days, it was not unusual to see fifteen to twenty people enjoying the area.

On one occasion, a friend of mine who walked to school across the fields and past the mill, saw the body of a local man who, apparently, was depressed and used the mill water to end his days.

About 50 yards to the north of the mill was a piece of land known as 'The Island' because it was surrounded by the two streams feeding the mill. The waters were clear but dangerous because of the mud and silt beds but it suited the wildlife, especially the birds.

Some of the mill walls are still standing but industry has largely taken over, along with the A27 road. This saddens me because, in my mind, I can still see what was once a beautiful building. I am a poor artist but I did make several attempts at capturing the mill before it was torn down. You are welcome to keep and use the enclosed painting as you wish. I do not want it back.

My very kindest regards, Tony Percival.



Tony's painting of Havant Mill as seen on the front page of this Newsletter

My thanks to John Silman for sharing this letter and lovely painting with us.

The original is now safely wrapped up and will be returned to John ASAPRos