

CHELTENHAM MILLS

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Four GSIA members walked the mills: Ray Wilson, Norman Hodgkinson, Frank Richmond and Amina Chatwin. Ray provided maps of the 1850s.

The Mills in Cheltenham

Before the Conquest Cheltenham was owned directly by King Edward and Domesday notes that there were two mills "of 11s.8d." William the Conqueror added three more mills - "of these two are the king's; the third is the Steward's." (1)

Mill sites do not change much and one of the original mills will undoubtedly have been the main town mill at Cambray, usually known as Cheltenham Mill, also after the name of one of the owners as Barrett's Mill. There were medieval mills in the thithings of Arle, Alstone, and Sandford so these are likely to have been three more of the five. There is some contention over the site of the fifth mill - it may have been a second mill at Arle or one in Charlton Kings. (2 p 8)

In Isaac Taylor's map of 1777 he marks seven mills in Cheltenham though of course they may not all have been corn mills. There are none marked in Charlton Kings. At the other end of the town there are two at Arle (Ale) and two at Alstone (Halston). There is Cheltenham mill at the end of the High Street and, oddly, there is another small mill between this and Sandford Mill - of this more later.

Undoubtedly the two most important mills were those in Cambray, which I shall refer to as Cheltenham mill, and the one further up stream - Sandford Mill - adjacent to Sandford Mill Road and Cox's Meadow. Rather confusingly Cheltenham Mill is now to be found on the edge of Sandford Park. These were the mills whose workings most affected the people of the town.

Where to find the River and the mill sites as they remain at present. Individual mills are described separately later. A map of modern Cheltenham would be helpful to you.

It is still possible to follow the River Chelt through the town and see where most of the mills were situated. Start at Sandford Mill Road where Sandford Mill lies back (towards the south end of the road) on the south side. Cross the road and peer over a newly made bridge at the river below. This site was important enough to be called Sandford Bridge in 1806. A footpath follows beside the river, past the back of the Fire

Station and College Baths, and comes out into Keynsham Road. Cross over and follow the path beside the river until you reach College Road, and on similarly through Sandford Park until you reach the Cheltenham (or Town) Mill. Looking towards the mill building one sees a cast iron bollard in the middle of the path (plate 1) and on ones right the water begins to fall before



Plate 1 Cheltenham (or Town) Mill

going down the sluice at the side of the mill building. However it is difficult to know where the water would have been released down the main street, (See section on Townspeople and the Mills) as the course of the river seems to have been slightly altered from time to time. Go down the path to the left and descend the uneven rockery steps and turning right at the bottom will bring you into a position to see the other side of the mill building (unfortunate that it has been covered with semi-circular sweeps of rendering) and the pond with the sluice at the far end of the building. The River runs down the side of the gardens and crosses underneath Bath Road at the side of the Salvation Army property. It can be seen again by peering over a wall in Wellington Street, an area where the river sometimes used to flood in the 1930s. It

continues down the side of the Rodney Road car park, where it is worth looking carefully at the building on the opposite side of the road - remembering the mill unaccounted for on Taylor's map.

On Taylor's map the scale is very small and there are few indications to locate this mill. However, the Turnpike is marked, which would have been the "New Turnpike" at the end of Hewlett Road, and Gallipot Farm which was where the Suffolk Flats are now, on the corner of Suffolk Square. Draw a line between these two points and do the same on the larger scale map of 1806 and in roughly the position (although Taylor is way out of true with the Cheltenham Mill) there is a building which I have long thought might once have been a mill. It is a fascinating building, The Woodlands, 71 Rodney Road, now an estate agents, standing on the corner of Rodney Road and Regent Street. The house has a porch with cast iron panels which may be an addition to the original house, and it seems likely that the end of the house on Regent Street has had the charming ogee headed windows inserted. Look closely and downwards at the end of the building and the back, and note the filled in arches, and remembering that this building stood exactly with this end abutting on the River Chelt, and the possibility of it having been originally a mill seems not at all unlikely. On the other side of Rodney Road there was what looks like a round pond on the 1806 map and a round pond or marsh in the same place in 1820. There is the possibility it had been caused by digging for clay to make bricks, but alternatively could it be the remains of a mill pond? (Fig 1)

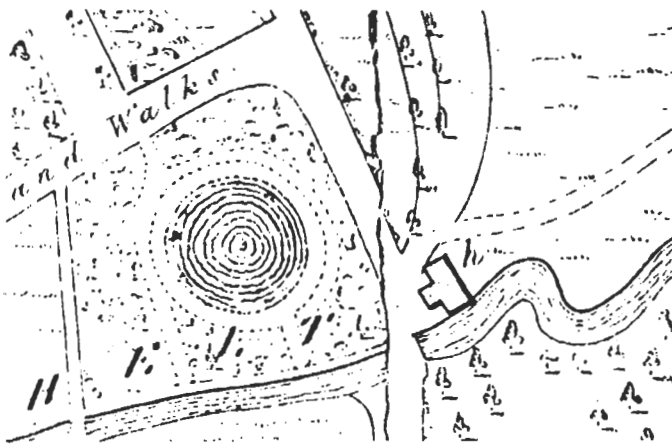


Figure 1 Possible Mill Site

Returning from this "seductive green path" to following the course of the river. It is culverted beneath the Promenade. It runs under Roy Scott House. The previous building on the site was a Cinema, and if my memory serves me correctly, the opening (about 1938) was delayed when the water rose in the front of the stalls. It is not possible to see the river in the open again until the area known as "Little Venice" or Royal

Well Lane, where a bridge leading to some old houses crosses the Chelt and makes a relatively picturesque area as one nears the Synagogue. One way to reach this neighbourhood is down an alleyway from St. George's Road (down the side of the George Hotel). Where the river turns, on the left of the Alley, it is now the Chelt Walk passing the backs of new buildings and an enormous car park. Following the river to the end of the car park will bring you out into a waste area (where a path leads on the left to the cycle and walk track along what was once the railway line) and, if the gate of a works entrance is open,

into Great Western Road. Turn right down the hill and as soon as you come to a brick wall, on the right, look over the wall (only possible at the end where the ground is highest) you will see about an 8ft fall of water. This is the key to the site of the Upper Alstone Mill, the remains of which have been swept away. We believe it was situated a little back behind the present fencing and telephone box. Behind this fence there is a very old, slightly curved brick wall, which may have been the retaining wall for the millpond (see more under mill).

On the opposite side of the road it is worth noticing "Alstone Spa" a little "house" or shelter, erected in 1903, and beside it the old pump which probably dates back to the early Spa.

The whole area has been much changed by the coming of the railway. The river now crosses underground from the brick wall, under the railway bridge, and can still be seen along the side of Millbrook Street. At first it is behind a fence and then follows on behind the houses.

Lower Alstone Mill was on the other side of the Gloucester Road about where Arle Avenue makes a sharp bend across the river - the site is commemorated by Lower Mill Lane (formerly Coach Road) which led to it. Six Chimneys Farm was South West of it and the Gas Works were built on the area adjacent to the mill on the east. The building is now the Gas Company's recreation centre.

Of the two mills at Arle one, Arle Mill, was owned by John of Arle in 1320 and was situated slightly to the east of Arle Village and the old original Arle Court. According to Dowty's "History of Arle" it stood where "The Homesteads" now stands. Mills and Riemer speak of further mills, beyond the confines of the town, one at Withybridge, one at Boddington and one, Slate or Slad Mill, which from the first edition of the O.S. map was at Knightsbridge. They also mention a little corn mill at Norton as being the last on the River Chelt.

The Townspeople and the Mills

From the 1500s it was the custom to release part of the River Chelt down the centre of the High Street (Cheltenham was mainly one street) in order to cleanse it. There were stepping stones so that pedestrians could cross the street when this was happening, but between times the street was muddy and often stagnant and offensive. However by 1786 there was a good road through the town with a channel on each side for the water. An Act of this year appointed 58 commissioners (sometimes known as Paving and sometimes as Town Commissioners) among whom were two millers - James Arkell of Sandford and Thomas Humphreys of Cheltenham (Cambray) Mill. But things did not always go so smoothly and later a long struggle developed over the right of the town to use water from the mill pond. In 1807 the then

miller William Humphris Barret (a descendant relative perhaps?) agreed "to permit water to run down the street as heretofore, on his being indemnified by the Commissioners against claims for damages by the owners of mills on the stream below." Despite this agreement notice had to be served on him again in 1813 and as late as 1822 a demand was made for the use of the water. Shortly afterwards a Water Company was formed and nothing more was heard of the problem. (2 p271)

In the 1870s the Council purchased the old mills at Cambray (Cheltenham Mill) and Alstone in order to lower the level of the river and prevent flooding which was then a frequent occurrence. (2 p357)

Sandford Mill

The River Chelt comes from the South-East; it was dammed to form the Dowdeswell Reservoir in 1886. At Charlton Kings it is augmented by the Ham and the Lilley brooks. Originally it



Figure 2 Sandford Mill c. 1830

meandered down the centre of Cox's Meadow, the large field immediately south of the Sandford Mill. It was embanked to bring the mill leat round both sides of the back of Sandford Mill. This is shown on Bettison's map of 1825 with the water course nearest Cox's Meadow coming close round the south end of the mill. A rare print (Fig. 2), of c. 1830 by Henry Lamb, (6) shows a bridge certainly over this piece of water; and near here the stream across the meadow joined it. Later a millpond was made behind the mill. There was a spillway channel to the north, which no longer exists, the narrowest part on Fig 3.

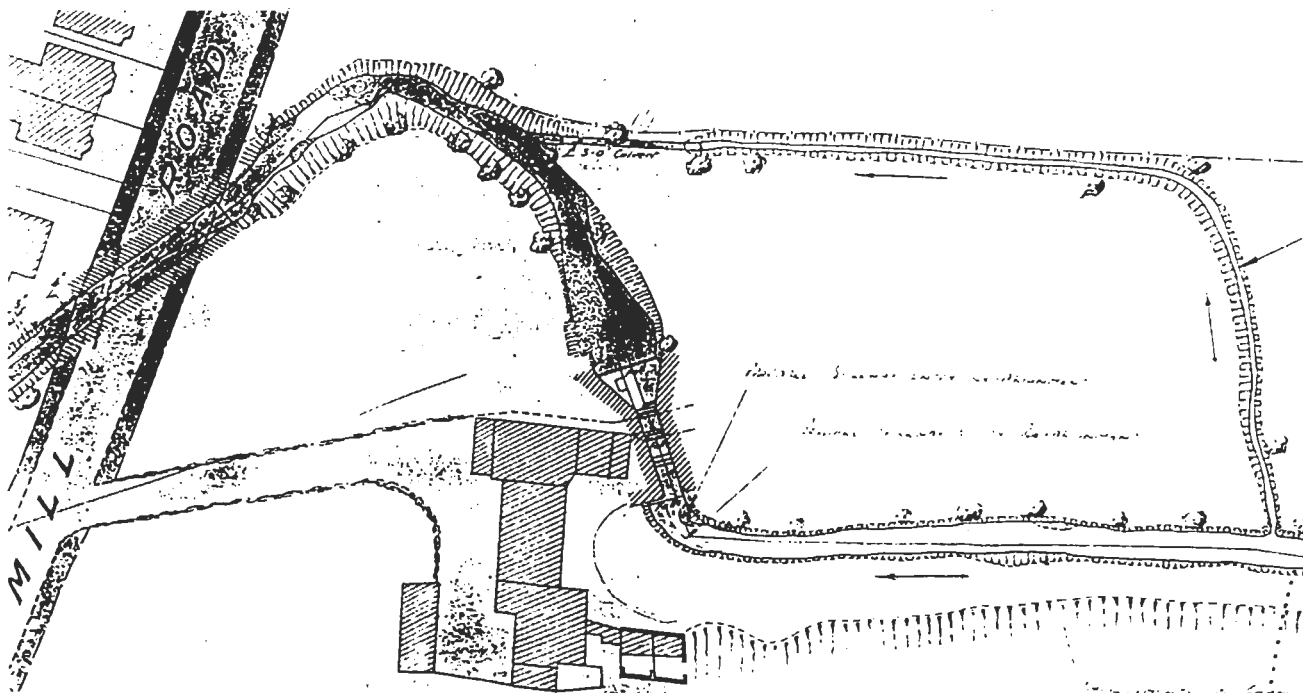


Figure 3 Sandford Mill c. 1850

The mill (plate 2) was beautifully restored as a house by Mr and Mrs Leonard Bailey between 1986-88. Before that the mill had been derelict. The machinery had been taken out and sold in 1929. (5) The mill house was still at one end, and steps led up to the mill entrance, as shown in the print; which was the case until the alterations.

At the back of the mill (private property) quite a lot of work has been done by the council to smooth the bend in the course of the river, where it follows round the end of the mill, and to improve the edging walls. (plate 3) Originally this would have been an escape of water. A long mill pool had its broadest part across what is now a smooth lawn and water entered the mill building by the lower port on your left of plate 4.

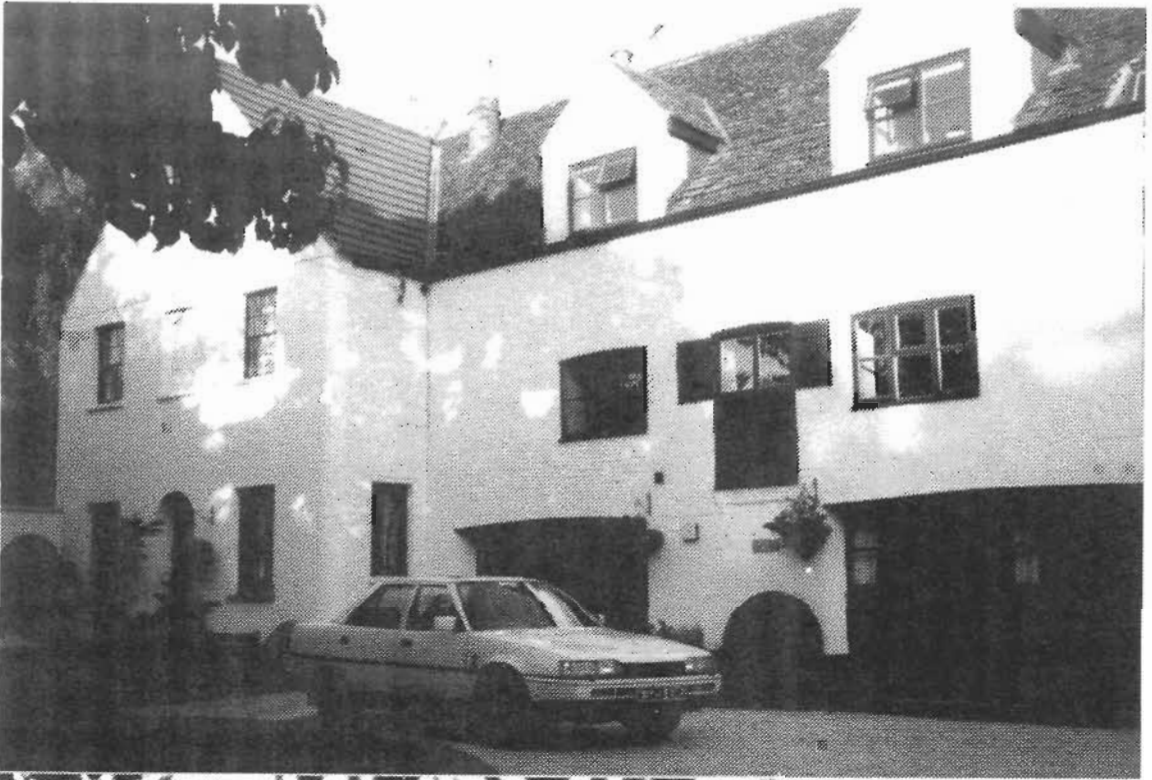


Plate 2 Sandford Mill



Plate 3 Sandford Mill



Plate 4 Sandford Mill

As we have seen James Arkell was miller here in 1786; in 1822 a James Arkell was operating Alstone Upper Mill and Richard Hobbs was at Sandford in 1831. (Reference to directories could probably produce more names. I have only consulted those readily available to me.)

Cheltenham Mill (Cambray, Town or Barrett's Mill)

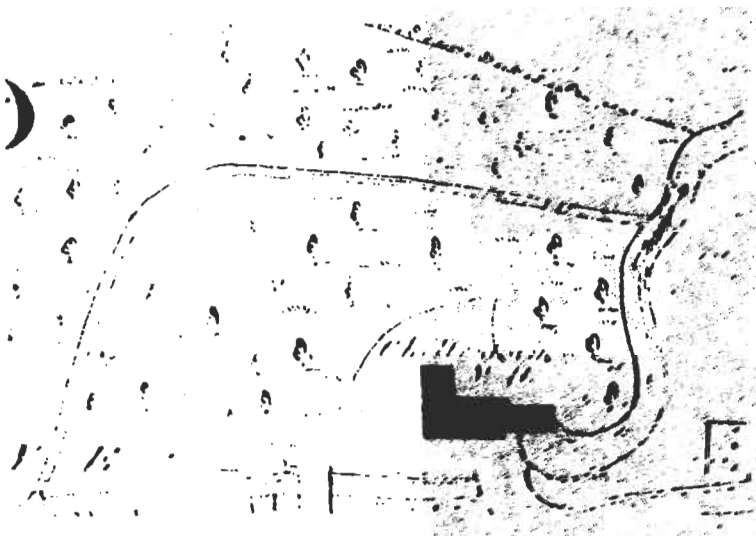


Figure 4 Cheltenham Mill, 1820

A plan of 1782 shows the mill as a three gabled house and a drawing of 1804 (3) gives a very rustic impression with an open water wheel. The earlier plan seems to show the sluice down the side of the building more or less as it is today.

Mention has already been made of problems with the owner of this mill and their reluctance to allow

water from the mill pool down the main street of the town.

On maps of 1806 and 1820 a diversionary leat, is shown coming off the river above the mill and curving with a right angle bend to rejoin below the mill. (Fig. 4) It looks as though this spillway was covered in when the extra buildings were erected. Since the Council bought the land and laid out the gardens it is again visible where the water cascades down the rocks and is crossed by a footbridge before rejoining the river.

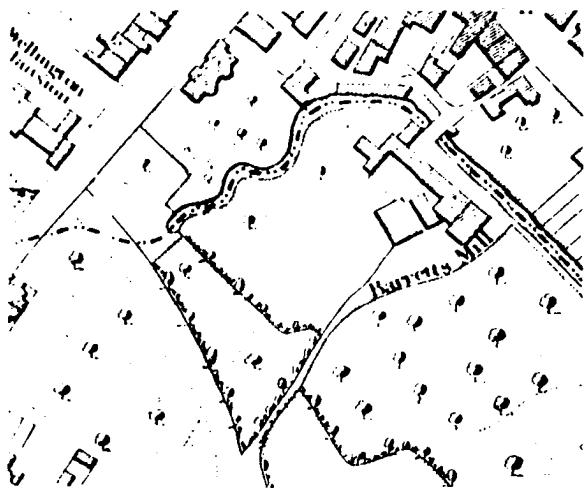


Figure 5 Cheltenham
(or Barrett's) Mill, 1835

In Merrett's map of 1834 a large range of buildings, probably sheds of a not very substantial nature, is shown within the park area and it is named Barrett's Mill Fig. 5. No variation of width seems to appear in the river. (Although mill ponds are shown on other mills on the same map.) In a large scale map of the 1850s much the same buildings seem to be shown but with the addition of a chimney marked as a square base. Also marked are the present pool below the mill and a long mill pond up stream of the mill Fig 6.

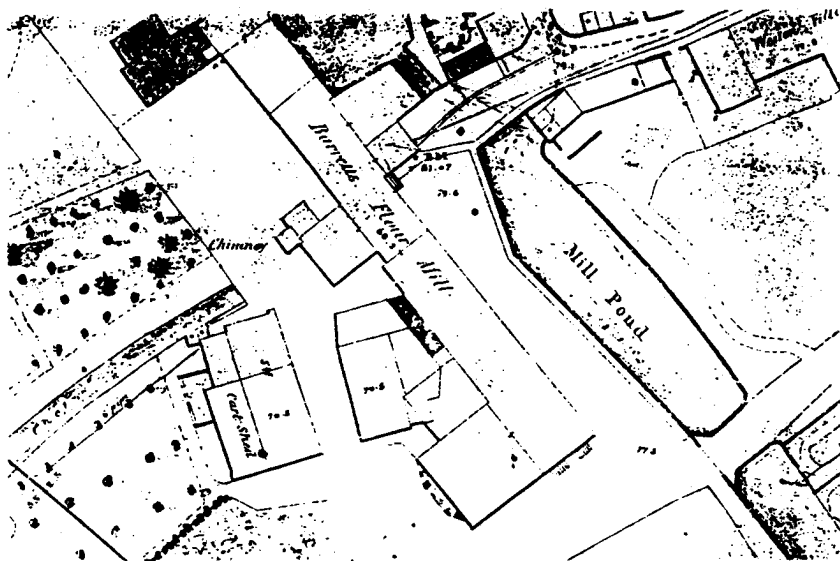
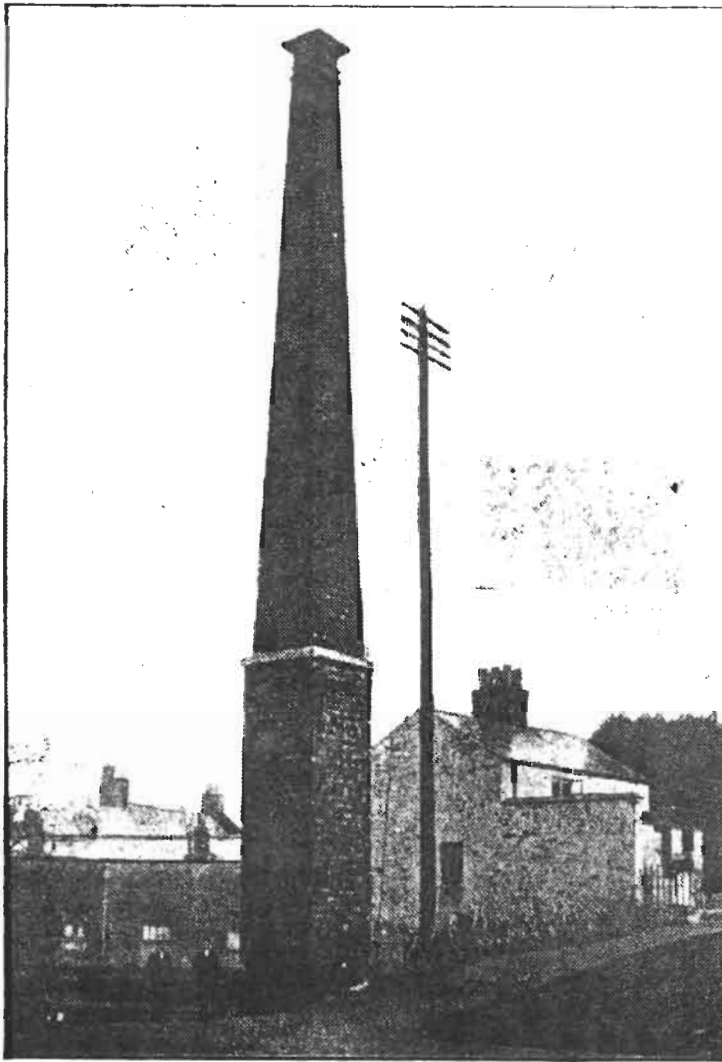


Figure 6 Cheltenham Mill c. 1850

The Cheltenham Chronicle and Graphic of Jan. 26th 1907 contains several pictures of felling a high brick chimney at the mill. It was undermined by steeplejacks taking away bricks near the base. It fell in one piece not breaking until it reached the ground. From its position it appears to be the same as the chimney marked on the map but surrounding buildings are no longer



standing. The low buildings beyond are cottages (later workshops) in Vernon Place on the far side of the downstream pool Fig. 7.

Upper Alstone Mill

The best map we have of the mill and its position on the river is Merrett's map of 1834. (Fig. 9) It is very difficult to place the mill site exactly as the railway and new roads have drastically altered the area. Remaining points of reference are the river and the junction of Market Street and New Street marked on Merrett's map as The Knapp (Knapp Road joins New Street a few hundred yards to the east.) Millbrook Street (unnamed on the early map) remains in position with the river on the north east side. What is today Great Western Road follows the line of roads

Figure 7 The Chimney at Cheltenham Mill and footpaths on Merrett from 'The Knapp' uphill towards St. George's Road.

It has been said that Upper Alstone Road was on the site of the later Alstone Baths, but if this is the case they could only have been on part of the site. Westley's map (after 1879) shows the mill neatly tucked in the corner between the river (on the south) and Great Western Road on the west. The real key to the position is the fall of water, already mentioned, this must have been a release of water from the mill pool south of the mill. A print by Henry Lamb (6) "At Alstone" c 1830 is most interesting, Fig. 8. Through a magnifying glass it can be seen that the water issues from several holes in a sluice confirming that it is no natural waterfall. Looking at it alongside Merrett's map of 1834 we can see the narrow footbridge marked and confirm that the fall was always west of the mill and that the eastern water course went through the mill. The little



Figure 8 "At Alstone" by Henry Lamb, 1830

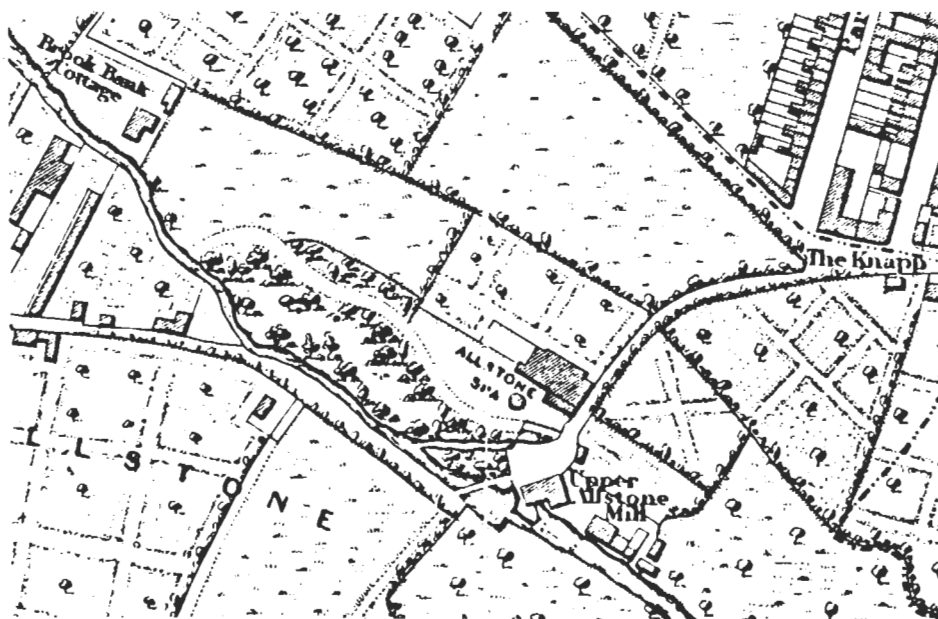


Figure 9 Upper Alstone Mill, 1835

"prow" of land north of the footbridge was also marked on the earlier 1820 map. (Fig.10)

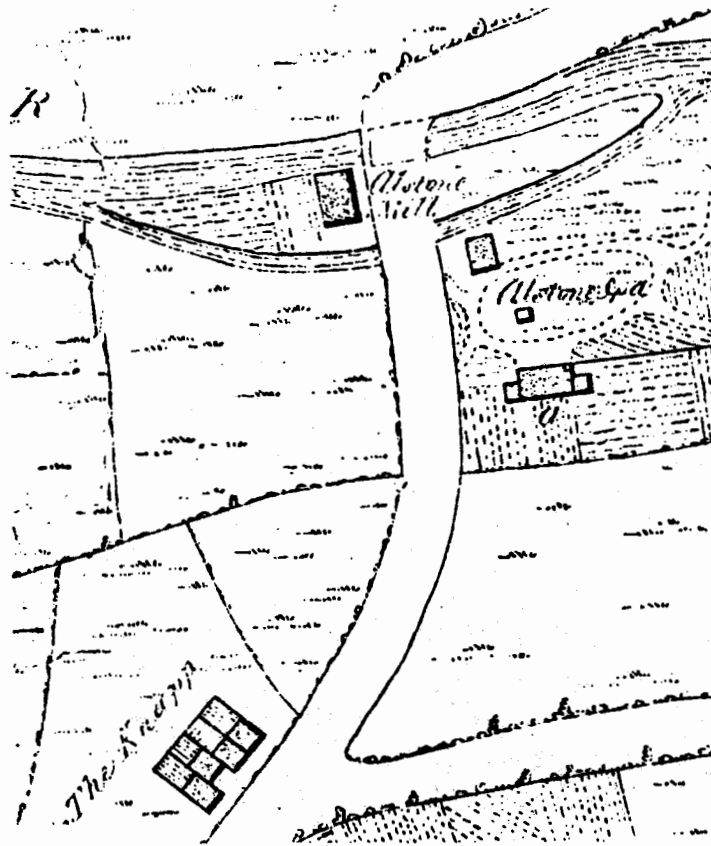


Figure 10 Upper Alstone Mill, 1820

It looks as if the forecourt of the mill was altered though the road to the Knapp (later Great Western Road) and Millbrook Street, still follow much the same line. The coming of the railways somewhat altered the junction of the roads and doubtless the levels, particularly in the steep rise of Great Western Road up to St. George's Road.

The position of the Alstone Spa, the actual spring, has doubtless remained constant, about opposite the mill. It was a little known spa opened by a Mr Smith at Alstone Villa in 1809. Presumably the trees and grounds shown in the 1834 Merrett's map are those described in a guide of 1811 (Fig. 6)

"Great merit is due to the proprietor of this spring for the delightful manner in which the ground is laid out, in which no trouble or expense has been omitted to furnish its visitors with walks as pleasant and desirable as those at any other place or similar resort. The well stands near the entrance into the place, over which is erected a temporary room. - The principal walk, which occurs immediately after you leave the well, has a pleasant effect, being shaded on either side with a plantation of lime and other trees, having a green 'plat' in the centre through which runs the river Chelt." A far cry from later in the century when the mill would be surrounded by the railway, by goods stations, wagon works and coal yards.

We have seen that it was operated by James Arkell, Mealman, in 1822 (Pigot's Directory). Three names are connected with the Alstone Mills in 1840 (Robsons) J. Bricknell, Joseph Dun and Thomas Perry, but with no definition of Upper or Lower Mill.

Upper Alstone Mill was worked in the 1860s by Elijah Snowsell and by the 1890s William Ride and Co. were working the mill using steam power.

Lower Alstone Mill

This mill (Fig. 11) was near Six Chimney's Farm and on later maps is sometimes called Six Chimney's Mill. From the Tewkesbury Road, Coach Road led in the direction of the mill, and is now called Lower Mill Street. The Albion Brewery was not far away on the other side of the Gloucester Road.

In the 1860s Fredrick Boulter was the miller and towards the end of the century c 1891 George Gardner, who had earlier worked Arle Mill.

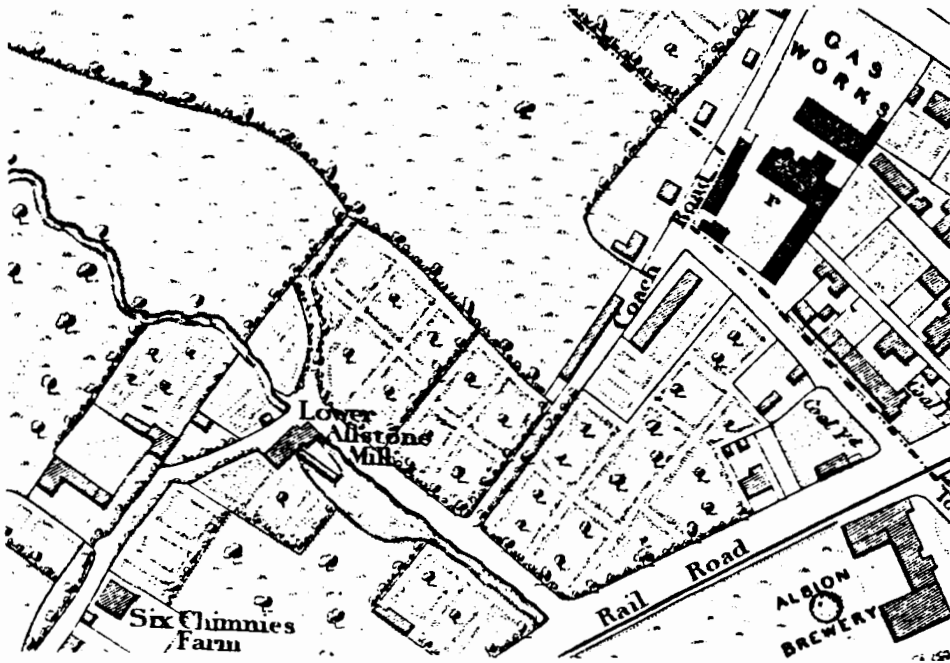


Figure 11 Lower Alstone Mill, 1834

Source Notes.

- 1) Samuel Rudder
- 2) Gwen Hart History of Cheltenham
- 3) Blake and Beacham Book of Cheltenham.
- 4) Mills and Riemer The Mills of Gloucestershire
- 5) Information from Norman Hodgkinson.
- 6) Old Print provided by David Bick.