

Bishops Caundle Mill (also known as Knights Mill)

A brief history of the water grist mill in the Parish of Bishops Caundle, Dorset



At the entrance to the mill, the old five-barred oak gate epitomises the dereliction of the mill site

Photo: Karen Parsons

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Introduction.

Growing up in the North Dorset village of Bishops Caundle, my childhood days were filled with the sights and sounds of the countryside. On fine days, we would walk the lanes and often ended up a Cornford Bridge and the nearby remains of the Old Mill, accessed by a gated sunken track leading from the road.

This was the mid 1960's and I never remembered any mill buildings remaining. All we saw were a small number of crab apple trees, vestiges of an orchard that was on site and a long stone wall flanking the mill leat, punctuated by a hole where the sluice used to be. All traces of the mill and wheel had gone.

Moving forward 50 years, I decided to revisit this childhood playground. The change in what I saw was worrying. The small meadow where we had plucked flowers was badly overgrown and accessing the river difficult. Once there, the mill pond had all but silted up, with just the normal river flow passing through it – certainly not the deep wide expanse of my youth. The leat stone wall was still there, thankfully, but seeing this natural decay, only to be expected really, it stirred my thoughts to try and find out about this site, how long it had been there, what happened to it and if possible, who lived here?

The result of this initial research follows. It is incomplete in as much as the mill equipment and design is not known, neither are all the millers. However, enough is known or can be reasonable surmised to record and be added to should further information come to light.

Why here?

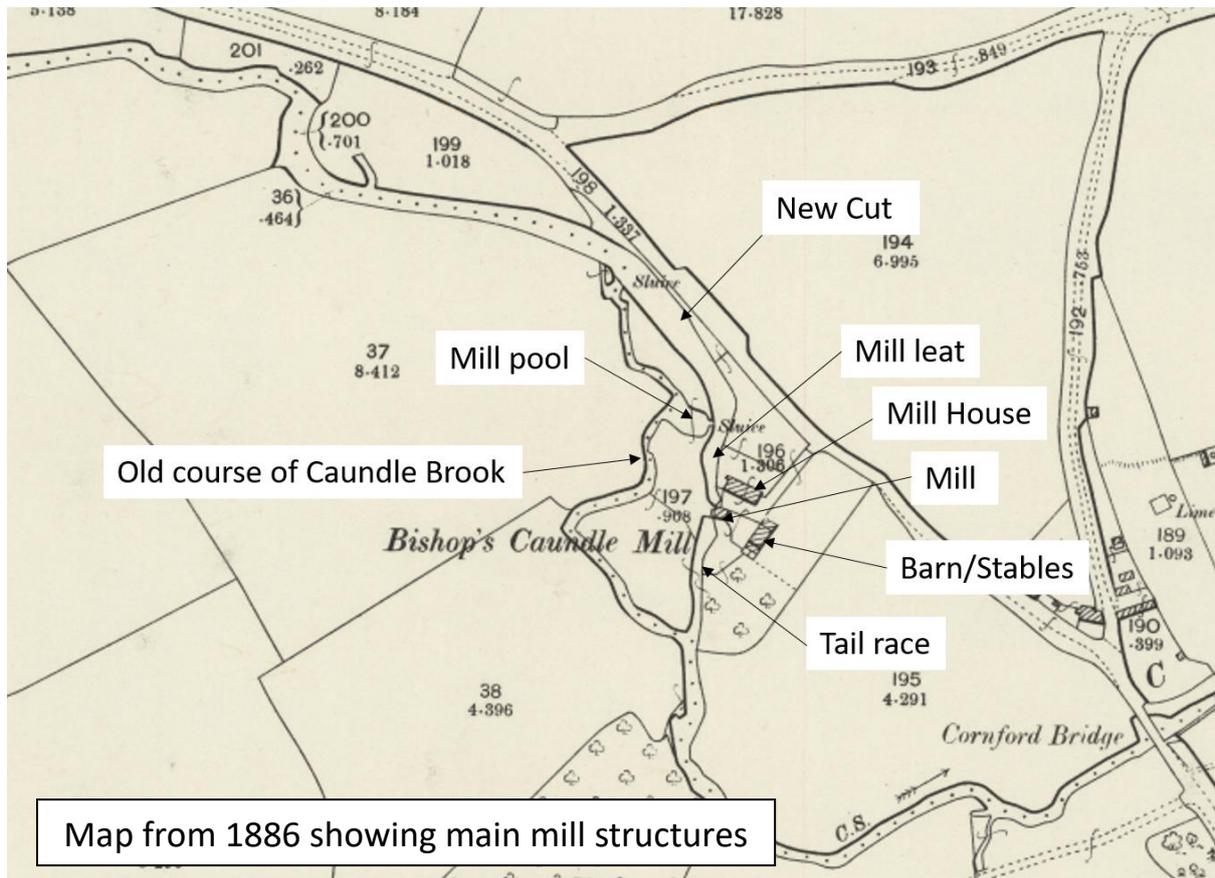
Why choose this spot to build a mill? Many mills are quite old, occupying land in one form or another for many centuries. This mill was no exception.

The mill at Bishops Caundle is sited at NGR ST 689 121 on the Caundle Brook, a tributary of the Dorset River Stour. Entrance is off the south side of the C-class road between Holwell and Caundle Marsh. It is within the parish of Bishops Caundle, just, the Parish boundary following the river at this point. Bishops Caundle itself lies to the north east nearly one mile away, sitting on a low hill composed of cornbrash limestone, a feature that lends itself to good corn growing and indeed, to this day, wheat and barley are regularly harvested. Historically, this land has been bound to the Estates of Sherborne Castle in one form or another. This may have influenced the choice of site as one of a number of mills built to process grain produced on the estate lands.

The first consideration is access. The current site is just off an ancient route that crossed the river at Cornford bridge, built in mediaeval times and headed towards Font Le Roi, a farmstead of equal heritage at Caundle Marsh. As such, access to the mill from farms in surrounding villages not blessed with their own facilities would have been easy.

The next consideration is water supply. Upstream of the mill, the Caundle Brook and the unnamed tributary from Caundle Marsh together drain a catchment of some 14 square miles. At Cornford Bridge, all the water must squeeze through a gap in the hills between Bishops Caundle to the north and Holwell to the south. As such, the river upstream of the bridge follows a level course for some two miles. The catchment, being mainly clay, would provide

plentiful water in wet times, but in the drier, rain free months, river flow would decrease drastically, so any facility would need storage of some sort. This level stretch provided this quite adequately.



Map from 1886 showing main mill structures

The final consideration must be site infrastructure (as we would call it today!). The mill needed to be able to harness the river-provided storage yet be sufficiently elevated to minimise flooding as would inevitably happen in this clay-bound land. Larger mills further down the Stour catchment would cast across the river great weirs, with controlling sluices, to create the storage and head of water needed for the wheel but such undertakings are expensive and to some extent, necessary when controlling a large river. For this small river, such grand schemes would be out of proportion for the need and instead, the designers looked to the meandering course for the answer. At this point on the river, it loops to the south west allowing it to be by-passed with a channel to the north east, cutting off the neck, so to speak. This would mean that instead of a great weir, the natural land could be utilised to hold the weight of water back, and allow only small, inexpensive hatches to control the flow to the wheel. In addition, with the site adjacent to a shallow bluff to the north, the contours were such that the mill buildings and house could be quite close to the water, yet still be out of the usual flood level.

How Long has there been a Mill?

The short answer to this question is “A long time”! Study of archives available back through the years shows the mill to be present on amongst others, the 1842 Tithe Map, surveyed by J Poole, Land Surveyor as a result of the 1836 Tithe Act when physical tithes were commuted to monetary sums. Prior to this, in 1778, William England of Shaftesbury surveyed the manor

land of Caundle Bishop and Bishops Down for Lord Digby and the resultant map shows the mill and sluices present, though does not delineate a mill pool. ⁽¹⁾.

Manor records prove most valuable. In particular for this mill, a manorial survey of 1630 for the Sherborne Castle Estates, records under the land at "Caundelle Buishoppe" the granting of a Copyhold tenancy for a water grist mill "...bearinge date the 18th daie of October in the 35th year of our late Quene Elizabeth" (This would be 1593) ⁽²⁾

Prior to this date, records become slim. Information held by Dorset History Centre suggest that in 1299, mention was made in the De Banco Roll of "One watermill in Caundle Boymyn"⁽³⁾. The same source suggests a record from, not surprisingly, Domesday, where it simply states "Mollinus Reddens 3s" – Mill Rental of 3 shillings⁽⁴⁾.

So there we have it. Corn was ground at this site for more than 800 years.

Works to the River.

The mill was constructed between the 65 metre and 60 metre contour levels. The distance taken for the Caundle Brook to fall this height is some 3.9 kilometres, giving a fall of 1 metre in height for every 780 metre in length. The mill buildings were situated between the 64m and 63m contours. At a point upstream of the mill, a new wide river channel was cut to bypass the loop of the river, this new cut extending to some 80 metres to the mill pool. It has an effective depth from bed to bank top of about 0.925 metres (3 feet). From the mill pool, a further cut was made of some 40 metres leading to the water wheel, this leat narrowing to 2.4 metres (8 feet) in the run up to the wheel. Finally, a mill tail race of some 50 metres length to re-join water flows to the river. The whole new cut bypassed approximately 230 metres of the brook, which looped round to the south west.

At the start of the new cut, a sluice was constructed to divert water if required into the original course of the river. The reason for this is unclear, however, the Caundle Brook at this point is the boundary between the parishes of Bishops Caundle and Holwell and it is quite likely a small quantity was allowed to pass to maintain a flow in that part of the Brook and hence, the Parish Boundary. Additionally, at times of high-water flows, the sluice could have been used in addition to the main sluice to control flood water passing to the mill. Such is the dereliction of this sluice that it is not possible to accurately give its original size, but this has been estimated at 1.2 metres (4 feet).

Downstream, a second main sluice was constructed at the end of the wide new cut to allow the river, when the mill wheel was not in use, to return to the original river course. The flow was such that it carved and maintained a large mill pool of some 12 metres diameter. It is this fact that suggests the upstream sluice was rarely used as its corresponding pool is small and insignificant. This main sluice is estimated to have been 2.4 metres (8 feet) wide.

Separating the new cut from the mill pool, beginning just upstream of the main sluice and extending downstream to the mill wheel on the south bank, a wide stone retaining wall of about 0.925 metres (3 feet) width, was built. With a height of 2 metres (6 feet 8 inches), its function was not only to hold the water back behind the main sluice, but to direct it to the wheel without causing scour of the adjacent land. No such wall was required on the uphill

side of the channel as the land being elevated, there was no danger of breaching and loss of water to the original river channel. However at the immediate approach to the wheel, a wall was constructed on the uphill side to prevent scour of land on which the mill was built and also narrow the mill leat to a width of 1.2 metres (4 feet) to feed the water more directly to the wheel sluice itself.

Below the wheel, the cut was quite basic, its function simply to take the used water quickly back to the river.

Mill equipment.

It is not possible to say exactly what the mill was equipped with. As it was in existence for several centuries, its exact design will have evolved over the years. We know it had a water wheel, but the size and the machinery it drove is, with our present knowledge, lost in the mists of time. Taking measurements from maps, the mill building is likely to have been approximately 6 metres (20 feet) square, with the wheel pit on its south western wall. This size of building may have been able to house two mill stones. It is also likely, and ultimately in its life, to have been roofed in tiles. Whilst thatch was cheap, the danger of fire, either from without, or the equipment within would mean the extra investment in a non-combustible material would have been well spent.

The river layout and levels suggest that the head of water available to drive the wheel would be in the region of 1 to 1.2 metres (3 to 4 feet). This water would have been stored in the river, held back by the two upstream sluices. The volume of water available would have been quite extensive as due to the shallow gradient of the river, with the above quoted level at the mill, the river would have “backed up” some considerable distance. For example, a 1 metre head at the wheel sluice would cause the river to be raised for a distance of 0.8 kilometres upstream. Old maps do confirm the river as quite wide for this distance, suggesting the water level therein to be high and taking up the full river channel width.

When it comes to the design of water wheel, the height of the stored water would mean an overshot wheel would not have been possible. Likewise, the relative low flow (and hence velocity) of the river would mean an undershot wheel would not receive sufficient impetus. Therefore, it was probably breastshot and most likely to be low breastshot in design, where the stored water would have been released by a specially designed sluice to hit the wheel paddles about a quarter of the way up from the bottom. Using the head of water previously mentioned (1 metre), the velocity of water released in this position would have been quite sufficient to drive the wheel. As for wheel dimensions, again pure conjecture, but the width of the mill leat at the point of delivery combined with the height of the leat stone wall suggest a wheel of around 4 metres diameter by 1.2 metre wide (12 feet by 4 feet)

Other buildings.

As with the mill equipment, the ancillary buildings would have evolved over time. The Elizabethan Manor Survey of 1630 describes “*one Tenement and a water gristmill containe a dwelling, a barne stable mill house backside and garden containe 1 yard of pasture*”

The maps through the years show largely the same building footprint. At the end of the road access track, on the north west side of it, stood the millers house. From measurements taken this appears quite substantial in size, being almost twice the size of the more usual workers

cottage. It is likely to have been built of stone and thatched, in common with many local houses, the straw being a relatively cheap commodity.

To the south of the miller's house and at right angles to it, facing the mill building was a series of outbuildings. With a footprint of some 10 metres (30 feet) wide by 20 metres (60 feet) long, it is difficult again to pinpoint exactly what they consisted of, however using their rendition on the maps as guidance, it is possible the central part was an open fronted barn, with against the north side of this, stables and on the south side, pig sties. Again, a thatch roof is most likely. It is just possible (at the time of writing) to make out this area location on the ground.

As for ancillary land, the 1630 Survey quotes *"1 close of meadowe called Barnhails containinge 1 acre 1 close of meadow called the ha_____ containinge 2 acres and half, and 1 acre and half of pasture lying nere the river One withybedd cont half an acre of pasture, and 2 closes of arable lande cont 6 acres"*

Incidentally, in 1630, the mill and its land carried a rent of *"20 shillings a year plus 2 capon at Easter"*.

Not surprisingly, little remains to inform on construction materials. All the works to the river utilised stone for the sluice and leat walling and the presence of some large flagstones suggest the leat wall was capped with them. These capping flagstones were quite sizeable and dressed in a fashion that suggests they had a double use as paving, forming the path from the mill to the sluices. In the bottom mud of the mill leat, remnants of bricks have been found. These are marked with a 'D' and have no frog (the indentation to contain mortar to assist in binding with neighbouring bricks) suggesting they were made before the 1600's. These could have been used to frame windows and doors rather than for walls, which were likely to be of local stone. Several other estate cottages in the vicinity are also stone built, the stone possibly coming from two now long redundant quarries nearby just downstream of Cornford bridge.

So who lived here?

Finding who the millers were that plied their trade is not easy prior to the early 1800's when parish records (which are particularly good for Bishops Caundle) only record names, not occupations.

The 1630 survey tells us that *"John Bunter and Richard Bunter doth hold by Copie by the grant of Sir Walter Raleigh"*. Richard does not appear in the parish Records – perhaps as he lived in another parish, but a John Bunter appears frequently after 1626 and clearly became the miller for a number of years. When he finished is not clear, but a manorial survey of 1677 states that Henry Dunning held a 99-year Copyhold for *"A tenement and water grist mill – formerly Bunters"* ⁽⁵⁾.

By 1687, Dunning (who died in 1729) had relinquished his Copyhold and on 11th June of that year, Leonard Bunter, Son of John, entered into a Tenancy Agreement with John Digby, the Earl of Bristol, for the mill⁽⁶⁾. Leonard and his second wife Hannah were settled in the parish as their names appear frequently over the years in the Parish records, whilst Leonard also became a Church Warden. He died in 1703.

The next reference comes in 1759 when Parish rental records show receipts for a Mr Notley for the mill. A similar receipt is seen in 1762 from George Notley⁽⁷⁾. The Notley family held the tenancy of one of the farms within the Manor. As farmers, they obviously had an interest in the mill and may have taken it on to ensure an advantageous rate for their milled corn.

By 1797, the mill is again recorded in another name. The Reverend Charles Digby managed the Tithes paid to the Manor and his Account Books for that year show a payment from a Mr Drake for an Orchard and Mill. Mr Drake appears again in 1799, but the entry for the Tithe dinner held at Michaelmas 1800 shows the mill Tithes received from William Knight, with a note that “*½ year paid by James Drake*”⁽⁸⁾.

William Knight came to the Mill at Bishops Caundle from Okeford Fitzpaine. He bought with him his Wife Jane and their two sons, Peter (the eldest) and George, beginning a dynasty that would last 100 years, giving the mill its alternative name of Knights Mill. His time at Bishops Caundle was short as he died (of Dropsy) on 2nd July that year. A draft survey of Estate land held by Earl Digby showed that four days later, on the 6th July 1800, a young George Knight took over the House, Mill and Orchard⁽⁹⁾. Marrying Elizabeth, their only known Son, Joseph was born in 1816. There is an anomaly here in that Joseph was born near Birmingham, begging the question as to who looked after the mill? The answer is not yet clear. Reverend Digby's Accounts for 1814 show a receipt from Peter Knight. Did Peter act *in loco parentis* whilst George was away? Either way, George appears to have become relatively wealthy. The Tithe map shows Apportionment 152 in the Parish of Caundle Bishops to be owned freehold by George Knight. The land consisting of Mill House, Orchard and Garden extended to 2 acres 1 Rod 3 Perches⁽¹⁰⁾. No mention is made of the mill itself here, suggesting it remained in the ownership of the Sherborne Castle Estates, with George leasing it, along with other land elsewhere in the Parish.

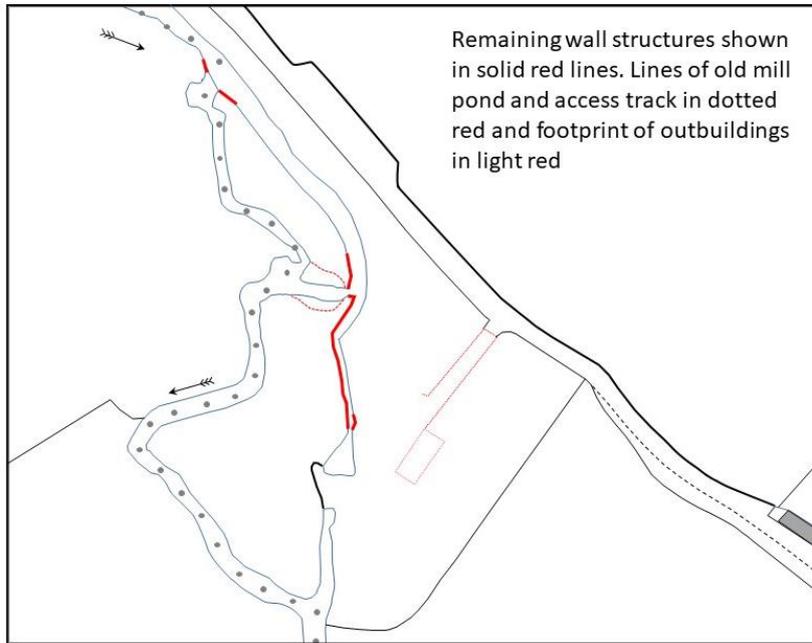
In 1841, George's Son, Joseph, married Susanna Loader who lived at nearby Bishops Down. Their union proved quite fertile and six children (four boys and two girls) followed over a period of sixteen years. Of these, James, born in 1856 was destined to become the miller after his father Joseph died in 1881, a year after Susanna. James married Georgina House and had three children, all five of them recorded in the 1891 census as living at the mill along with one John Ryall, a widower.

By 1901, it appears milling had ceased, the mill house being occupied by Sarah Barker who lived by her own means.

The end and remaining structures.

By 1911, no-one is recorded as living at the mill. At some point the mill house, mill and wheel were removed, along with the metalwork of the two sluices. The buildings, shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1903⁽¹¹⁾ (similar to previous renditions) gradually decayed and I suspect, were raided for the stone to use elsewhere on the Estate lands. The Ordnance Survey map of 1928⁽¹²⁾ shows no mill or mill house and only remnants of the barn. The Ordnance Survey map of 1962⁽¹³⁾ shows similar structures remaining, but I suspect the mappers used old data for this part of the new map as the Authors personal memories of the site from the 1960's do not include any buildings extant. This is how it remains today, gradually returning to nature.

Access to the mill site, still in the ownership of Sherborne Castle Estates, is now difficult. The site is seriously overgrown, with fallen trees and shrubby vegetation. General view photography is compromised. In winter, water flows are such that it is not possible to fully explore the remaining structures. This is only possible in summer, during low river flows.



Substantial remains of the stone leat wall can be seen, together with the feed to the wheel. Some foundation work of the mill remains in the vicinity of the wheel pit. Remnants of a stone wall by the upper sluice are visible. At the lower sluice, the upstream abutment to the sluice gates is still in good order, apart from stone loss where the ironwork was removed. The downstream abutment though has suffered from the twin effects of a tree and being

in the direct force of flood waters, the combined efforts of which have considerably destroyed the abutment face. The mill pool is heavily silted, whilst the old course of the river receives little flow during the summer and as it is open to the adjacent farmland, is trafficked by farm stock, thereby slowly losing its identity. The wheel pit does not exist, instead there is a hole from where it was excavated out and just downstream, an ad-hoc vehicular crossing has destroyed the old tail race at that point.

The former access track is still very visible, and it is just possible to make out the footprint of the former barn/stables.

It would be good if these last remains were preserved. In addition, the gradual loss of the old river course, along with a defined Parish Boundary that has been in existence for many centuries, is of concern. Alas, the land, by its nature, cannot be farmed successfully. Much effort, beyond that which would yield benefit, would be needed to clear the former mill grounds of fallen trees and decaying vegetation. Perhaps that is the natural order of things, but it would be a shame if were lost completely.

My thanks go to Sherborne Castle Estate for permission to place this research into the public domain and to the staff at Dorset History Centre for access to the relevant archives.

Kevin Parsons
Weymouth 2020.

Appendices.

A number of photographs, held elsewhere accompany this brief history. These show as best possible, the remaining structures. A Key assists with understanding their location and direction.

References.

- (1) Dorset History Centre Ref: D-FFO/38/4 - William England survey 1778
- (2) Dorset History Centre Ref: D-SHC/KG 1456 - 1630 Manorial Survey
- (3) 1299 De Banco Roll 130m 164d Fry's Transcript Vol G4 p814
- (4) Eyton pp17-118
- (5) Dorset History Centre Ref: D-SHC/KG 2633 - Manor Survey 1677
- (6) Dorset History Centre Ref: D-SHC/KG 146/31 - Tenancy Agreement
- (7) Dorset History Centre Ref: D-SHC/KG 2631 A & B - Bishops Caundle Rentals
- (8) Dorset History Centre Ref: D-FFo/14/57 - Account Books for Tithes Paid
- (9) Dorset History Centre Ref: D-FFO/KY 297 - Draft Manor Survey
- (10) Dorset History Centre Ref: County Tithe Maps with Apportionment Ref: T/BCD
- (11) Ordnance Survey County Series 1903 1:2,5000
- (12) Ordnance Survey County Series 1928 1:2,5000
- (13) Ordnance Survey Plan 1962 1: 1928 1:10.560

Ordnance Survey maps from 1886, 1901, 1927 and 2020 GIS Base Mapping