

Nancy's memories of her father and uncles accounts of their youth at Hildersham Mill.

Recorded in a notebook by Nancy French only daughter of Arthur William French, the eldest son of Arthur Pratt French who ran Hildersham Mill from 1881 to 1904.

A few miles from the edge of the fens where the land begins to dip and heave before becoming hilly there is a hollow, lush and green, threaded with tree lined streams and in its centre is the watermill where my father and his brothers spent their magical childhood. It coloured their lives, they were always talking about it, even the brother who went to the States and never returned to England.

They were poor, but not to the point of being cold and hungry, and, according to their memories they lived in a state of ecstasy as the seasons followed one another each with its own rapturous pleasures. The focal point of most of their games was the river. It meandered round the house and mill, where it spread into the mill pool, deep and dark, then it flowed out under the willows and through the fields. When heavy rains came the fields were flooded and the mill stood in a sheet of water approached by a built up road.

In the summer the boys jumped out of bed, raced down and dived into the mill pool. Most of them became very good swimmers. They also had canoes on the river and they put sails on these and went down the river at terrific speeds. I think the only way to stop was to steer for the bank.

I don't know where these canoes came from, perhaps somebody in the mill them for the boys, or my Grandfather may have taken them for a debt. The launch in Cambridge was acquired in this way. A customer came to him and said " I can't pay you Mr French, would you take the boat instead ?" "Yes" answered Grandpa, a kind old man, " I'll take the boat and cancel the debt"

I've heard my father say that he used to go off in the canoe on a summers day, tie it up under one of the thick willows that spread like bedraggled tents over the stream and read for hours one of the cheap adventure stories known as 'penny dreadfuls'