

THE MILLS OF THE BRISTOL FROME

by Owen Ward

In the one and a half miles of the Bristol Frome between Wickham Weir and Cleeve there were at one time no less than eight mills working. This is about one third of the number in the whole of the Frome watershed, but the concentration is easily explained. The level of the bed drops some fifty feet over this section, is neatly contained within a gorge which it has cut for itself so minimising banking and other works associated with watercourses, and it is fed by a large number of tributary streams and springs along the way.

In spite of this swiftly-flowing and copious water supply the proximity of these mills to one another might have led to some animosity over a head of water, but none of the mills is provided with much in the way of a pond. The leats themselves, none of them very long, seem to have held sufficient water. The situation was a good one for grist mills as it was in farming country, yet near to Bristol and the Old Gloucester Road in to the city. Whether there was enough business to keep these mills, together with their neighbours, fully occupied is another question. This may be the reason why several of them turned to snuff and other industries in the middle of the eighteenth century, to the extent that the Corporation threatened some sort of action to compel millers to keep to flour milling because there was a shortage for the town bakers. It is not clear that the threat had much effect, probably because it was difficult to enforce it, but some mills did revert to corn towards the end of the century. (See Appendix A).

All these sites are nowadays either accessible or else clearly visible across the stream from the footpaths laid by the Corporation along the banks of the Frome. The only exceptions are Frenchay Flock Mill and Cleeve Mill which can be seen from nearby road bridges. (See Appendix B).

LATHBURY MILL (*ST678759 - right bank*)

This was situated downstream from Wickham Bridge, its weir (Wickham Weir) still maintained by the Bristol Avon River Authority who have a control gate there. The tail race probably re-entered the river through an archway still in the wall below Colston's School playing fields. Existing in 1620, it is referred to in 1842 as a grist mill, until Colston's School used the weir to supply water to its swimming bath about 1859.

CURTIS MILL (*ST622766 - left bank*)

This was finally obliterated by the widening of the bridge over the Frome just by the entrance to Snuff Mills Park. The weir is still maintained just upstream of the bridge, and known as Broomhill Weir. The Berkeleys conveyed the mill, a grist mill in 1620, to the then tenant William Curtis, but it was already known as Wyatt's Mill at that date so is obviously older. Right up to 1890 it does not seem to have changed its use.

WHITWOOD MILL (*ST625765 - right bank*)

What most Bristolians know as Snuff Mills, this has a much-repaired iron wheel running in its leat, and the sluice is still apparently in working order. There is even a millstone erected as a bench or table in the pathway between the wheel and the weir. The wheel is probably typical of this group of mills - the leats were narrow and the weirs high, but not high enough to serve overshot wheels. This mill ground corn from 1810 onwards (although apparently was used as a snuff mill before that date) and in 1899 was described in an auctioneer's handbill as "that capital flour mill and machinery situate at Broomhill, for many years past successfully carried on by the present owner, Mr. Josiah Bell, . . . The Machinery comprises . . . a 12-Horse-Power Water Wheel, three pairs of stones, Oat, Malt and Bean Crusher and Dressing Mill."

WITHERLY'S MILL (*ST629765 - right bank*)

Known as Snuffy Jack's, this is now a turf-covered heap of stones just below the footbridge known as Ha'penny Bridge; remnants of the masonry structure of the mill are discernible. There was a grist mill here before 1498, but in 1790 it was occupied by a firm of tobacconists who must have ground snuff there before they handed over to the first Wills in 1792. It remained as a W. D. & H.O. Wills snuff mill until 1843 when, final degradation, Thomas Saint turned to manufacturing flocks and carding wool there. Thomas Lusty took over the mill for the same purpose until in 1877 it was void, and seems to have remained so. A painting of this mill served as a model for the sign of the Snuff Mill Inn in Frenchay Flood.

KING'S MILL (*ST631767 - right bank*)

The site is now completely derelict, though a few courses of the wall still remain under the ivy, and the

stones litter the site. The weir, a high one of perhaps eight feet, is still maintained. The site, like Witherly's, seems to have been occupied by 1498 by a grist mill, but from 1771 onwards Francis Collins ran a snuff mill there, and it was still apparently used in this capacity at least until shortly before 1842.

FRENCHAY MILL (ST638773 - right bank)

This building was cleared about 1958 as part of a River Board scheme, and although the weir remains, the only other visible vestiges of this mill are a rotting sluice gate *in situ*, and a millstone with a rosebush planted in its eye which marks the site of the old mill. Snuff was being ground here in 1753, but in 1882 it was in use as a flour mill, ceasing work in 1905.

FRENCHAY FLOCK MILL (ST642773 - right bank)

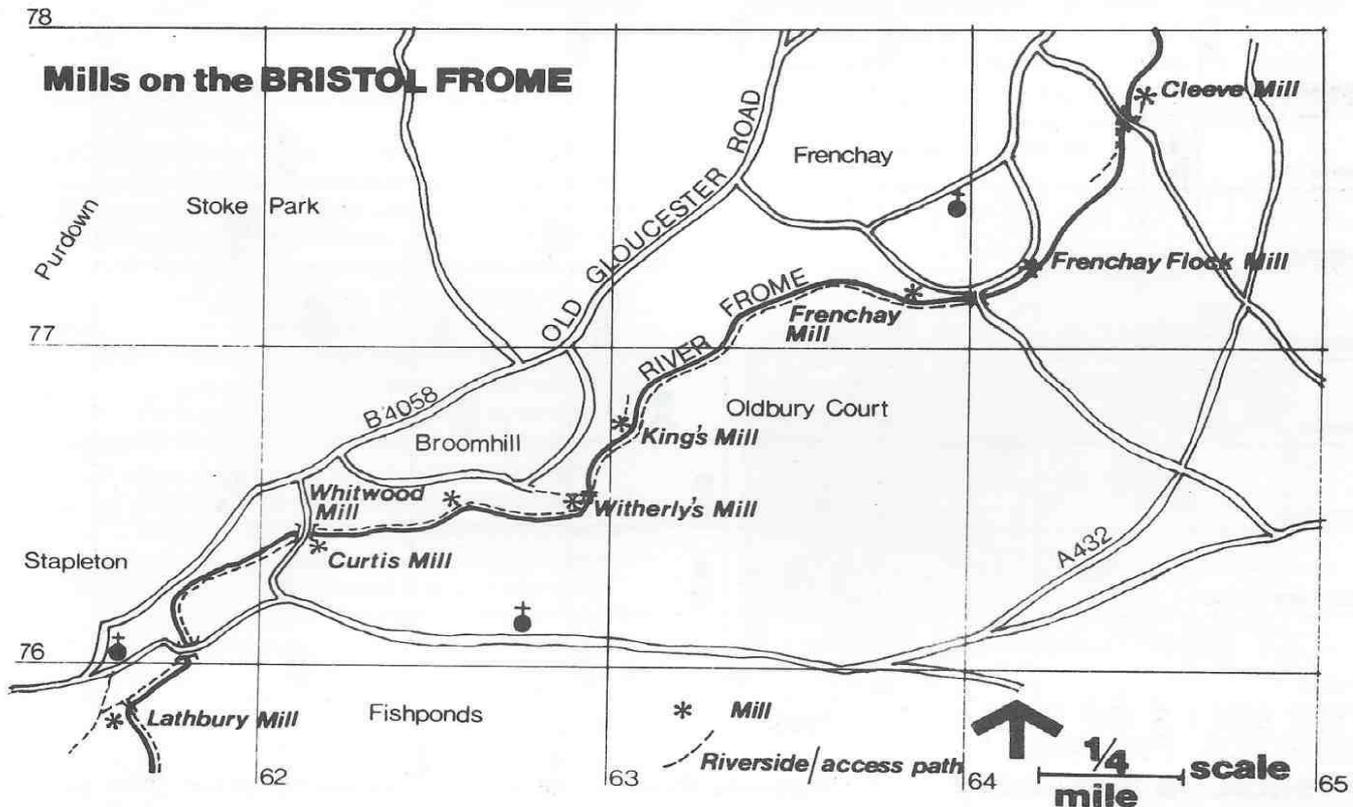
The crenellated mill house was removed in 1968 by the river authority as part of their improvement and clearance scheme, and the tail race and main river thrown into one by the removal of the intervening peninsula. The mill building is now let to several light industrial concerns; it is generally inaccessible with its original entrance at the top of a short flight of steps which have gone. Not built until 1761, this mill served only as an iron works until it was taken over, sometime after 1880, for use as a flock mill. During its iron-working days spades, shovels and hoes (including out-size ones for export to the West Indies) were produced, while the chief use of the water-power was for grinding and file-cutting. As a flock mill it survived until present

living memory, tearing and mixing old and new mattress fillings for the citizens of Bristol who could not afford brand new.

CLEEVE MILL (ST644777 - left bank)

Like the attendant cottages, this mill is still inhabited, but has no machinery in it. It is an attractive white building about a hundred yards above the road bridge at Cleeve. The surrounding land is private though an angling club has permission to fish from the bank above the weir. At one time a grist mill, it was converted some time prior to 1798 to an iron mill, when it was used by Frenchay Iron Co., like Frenchay Flock Mill, for the production of agricultural implements, being known as the Upper Works. After about 1885 the mill ceased production, and the premises were used as a tea garden offering boating as a recreation. A turbine generating electricity was taken out as recently as 1960, and the chimney of the engine house was dismantled at about the same time.

All these mills had access roads, and most of them may still be approached by way of these, though some are private property. Most sites, however, have been bought by the Corporation of Bristol for one purpose or another and now form part of a pleasant riverside park which extends from Eastville Park to Cleeve. The Bristol Avon River Authority has had to clear much of the debris from the banks of the stream, but the old weirs (except Snuffly Jack's) have become part of the river's geography, and are maintained in the interests of flood control.



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	1600	1620	1650	1700	1750	1800	1850	1900	1950
LATHBURY	*						*g	*d	
CURTIS	*g							*d	
WHITWOOD					*s	*c			*d
WITHERLY'S	*g					*s	*f	*d	
KING'S	*g				*s		*d		
FRENCHAY					*s			*f	*d
FRENCHAY FLOCK					*i			*f	*d
CLEEVE					*g	*i		*d	

THE MILLS OF THE BRISTOL FROME a tentative summary

key

- * mill existing
- *i iron mill
- *c corn mill
- *d mill disused
- *f flock mill
- *g grist mill