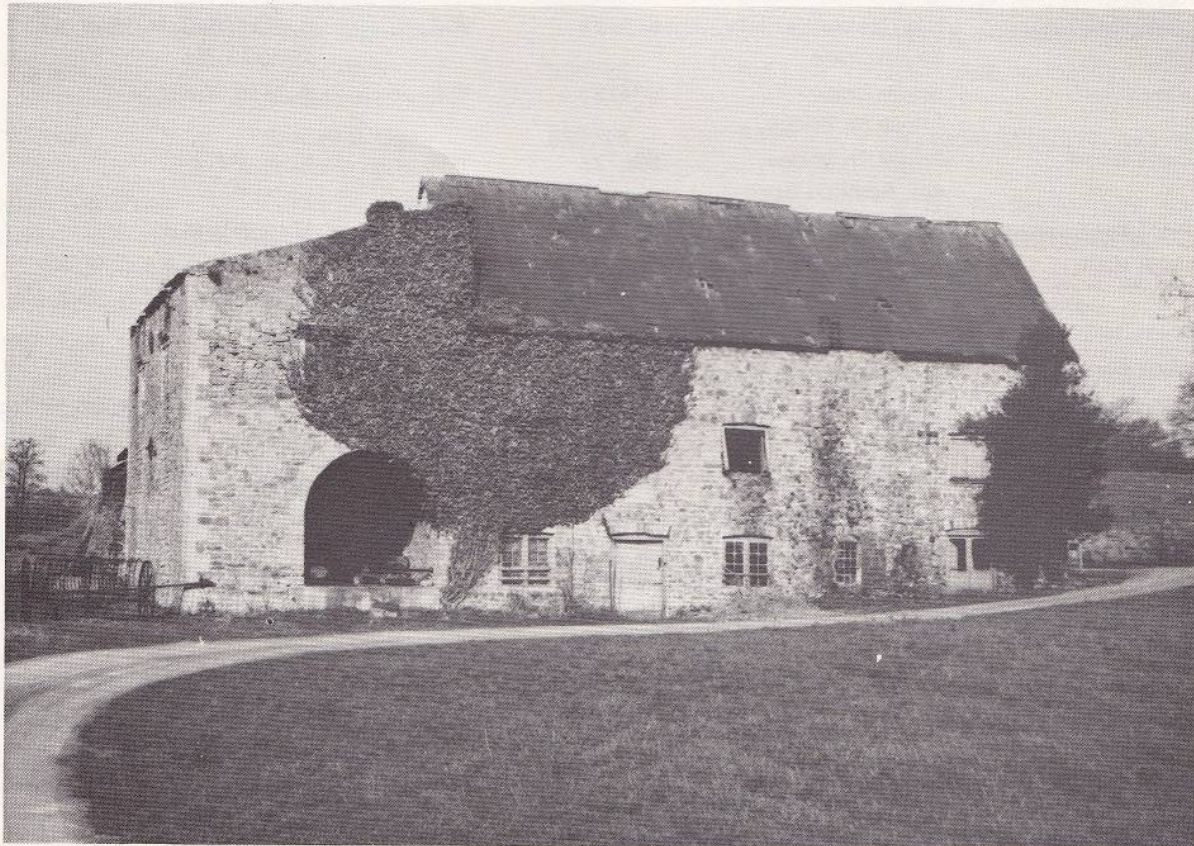


THE NETTLEBRIDGE VALLEY by Robin Atthill

The Nettlebridge Valley runs roughly east and west for about 10 miles as the crow flies from Emborough (ST 614508) to the outskirts of Frome near Spring Gardens (ST 775497). Streams that rise in Emborough Pool and Gurney Slade Bottom are joined by a number of tributaries to form a considerable volume of water by the time it emerges from Vallis Vale. Only in the last mile or so do the Ordnance Surveyors deign to give it a name: Mells River.

This extraordinarily beautiful and almost unknown little valley has turned out to be an industrial archaeologist's paradise. Coal was being mined in Kilmersdon parish by 1305; the prosperity of Mells, as symbolised by its magnificent 15th-century church, derived from the medieval woollen industry; Robert Morden's map (1695) shows the valley already dotted with "Cole Pitts"; and during the last two centuries, water-power has been harnessed to a great variety of uses all along the river. There were corn/grist mills everywhere: Gurney Slade mill (ST 635496), now razed to ground floor level, figures in Doomsday Book; Coleford mill (ST 685486), rebuilt in 1794, was latterly used as a pumping station to raise water to the upper part of the village, and now belongs to an architect who is in process of restoring the building and hopes to get the machinery in working order, in particular the water-wheel in which BIAS has already shown interest.



Ham Mill from the East, showing the 1845 building on the right.

An 18th-century logwood mill in Stoke Bottom (ST 659479) became a 19th-century paper mill; and quite apart from Fussells ironworks at Mells and neighbouring villages, there were five other small edge tool works, including one in Ashwick Grove (ST 652479) marked "tool grinder" and "smiths shop" on the 1760 map of Stoke Lane manor which even shows the water-wheel.

Water-power also served the collieries: from two small reservoirs marked on the 1817 O.S. map a leat carried water half a mile to Coal Barton (ST 681491) where pumping was carried on into the 1860s by means of a primitive bucket-chain; and east of Coleford a mile-long "canal" served Old Vobster pit until 1850.

Less strictly "industrial" were the cress beds in Crock's Bottom (ST 632502), and two very interesting sets of water-meadows which were part of the Ashwick Grove estate (ST 655481 and 673486). Long leats carried the water along the hillsides and a complex pattern of sluices and feeders distributed it over a number of pastures, some of them sloping quite steeply to the valley bottom. Some of the channels are marked on the 1841 Tithe map, and the water-meadows were maintained by the Stracheys at least in part until the 1930s, the rich early grass being cut by scythe to make silage. The estate had previously belonged to John Billingsley, the agricultural improver (1747-1811), who was familiar with George Boswell's classic treatise on water-meadows (1779), and indeed himself urged the extension of the system in other parts of Somerset, though not on Mendip. Perhaps he regarded this experiment as a failure?

A little further down the valley is Ham Mill (ST 675486). In 1845 Julius Tapp (whose initials are carved above the doorway) had declared his intention of erecting a grist mill here "with two pair of French stones and overshot water-wheel with convenient gear and running tackle", and of expending at least £500 on same. But one wing of the building is palpably older than 1845: it might well be 17th century, and the name of the adjoining field, Dye House ground, suggests a link with the woollen trade. It is in fact a complex building which has been considerably altered at different times and much of its

history has still to be deciphered. When grinding ceased about 1925, the new owner established a brickworks on the site, using water-power to generate his own domestic electricity and to winch tubs in from the clay face in the hillside, and building two brick ovens, partly constructed of older buildings which he had demolished. Since 1939 the mill has merely stored hay, firewood and farm machinery. It remains in good condition except for the floors, rather curiously situated, at some little height above the stream from which it was fed by an underground leat from an upstream weir: the tail leat also ran underground for nearly half a mile before reaching the river near Hittits (Hightides?) Bridge (ST 680482).

The 1845 building comprises four storeys; a large archway was cut in the end wall of the earlier building to form a loading bay; above this there were once domestic quarters. The wheel survives *in situ*, with its axle, but no longer connected to the main drive shaft: a pair of grindstones survive on the first floor, made by Barron & Co. of Gloucester; and the floor is supported on the ground by cast-iron columns and beams from Eagles Bush Foundry. Hardly a trace of the "convenient gear and running tackle" survives.

Apart from the danger of rotten floors, it has proved an excellent site for a group of boys to work on. The accompanying drawing was made by Robin Barlow who was then organising the industrial section of the Downside School Archaeological Society, who since 1964 have been engaged on an extensive survey of the industrial history of the Nettlebridge Valley.

Further information can be found in:

Industrial Archaeology Vol. 1 No. 4 (January 1965) pp. 237 - 241.

Old Mendip Chapter 12

Industrial Archaeology of the Bristol Region Chapter 4

SECTION TO SHOW MAIN FEATURES

