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## THE OLD MILL, BEXLEY

By B. D. and A. J. STOYEL

THE destruction by fire of the Old Mill at Bexley in 1966 makes it appropriate to place on record a few historical and descriptive details of what had been one of the best-loved and most characteristic features of the neighbourhood. The large weatherboarded mill was built across the River Cray at the southern fringe of the village of Old Bexley, in proximity to the parish church, and, with a large weeping willow growing on either side of the river in front of the building, the scene was a highly attractive one when viewed from the nearby road or railway.

As is the case with so many watermills, the site is no doubt an ancient one and almost certainly dates back to the Saxon period. A succession of mill buildings will have followed one another in approximately the same position, use being made of any natural advantages of the original site, as well as subsequent artificial improvements, and perhaps even incorporating portions of an earlier structure.

Domesday Book credits 'Bix' (Bexley) with three mills and there is little doubt that this was one of them. It formed part of the demesne of the Manor of Bexley until modern times. The Manor was held by Christ Church Priory, Canterbury, from A.D. 814, but by the time of Domesday it had been acquired by the Archbishop of Canterbury, in whose hands it remained until the Reformation. There are numerous references to the mill throughout the medieval period. In 1255, for instance, the miller was Auxellus and appears to have held the mill on the condition of guarding prisoners entrusted to his care, as he was censured for allowing a suspected murderer to escape.<sup>1</sup> The Manor Court Roll refers in 1280-81 to the thatching of the mill, the purchase of a new millstone and the sale of an old one.<sup>2</sup> In 1283-84 it is recorded that all the men on the Manor were obliged to make use of the mill of the Archbishop,<sup>3</sup> as was so often the case with manorial mills.

In 1300-01 a new millstone was installed at a cost of no less than 55s. 6d.<sup>4</sup> In 1517-18 repairs costing £8 were carried out, and details are given in the Court Roll of the materials used, nails, timber, etc. A man was employed for ten days on this work, for which he received 'le day'

<sup>1</sup> K. C. Reid, 'The Watermills of Kent' in *Kent County Journal*, Summer 1939, 8.

<sup>2</sup> D. Wolfe, in *Transactions of the Dartford District Antiquarian Society*, vi (1936), 25.

<sup>3</sup> F. R. H. Du Boulay, *Medieval Bexley*, Bexley (1961), 52-3.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

sevenpence.<sup>5</sup> In 1530 the watermill was to have been leased by Archbishop Warham to John Mascall, together with the Manor and desmesne lands, for a period of 30 years, but there is evidence that this lease did not materialize.<sup>6</sup>

In 1537 the Manor of Bexley came into the hands of the Crown and subsequently passed to Sir John Spilman. Justinian Champneis, of Hall Place, Bexley, evidently had some interest in it as his will (1596) makes reference to 'certain years to come (i.e. before expiration of lease) in Court Lodge in the Manor of Bexley where Justinian Kington dwelles in the town mill called Bexley Mill in occupation of Robert Bexley'.<sup>7</sup>

Later the Manor was in the hands of William Camden, who left it in 1623 to Oxford University to endow a chair of history. No doubt the mill changed hands with the Manor each time and it was certainly still in the ownership of the University in 1822,<sup>8</sup> although it was recorded as being the property of Queen's College in 1808.<sup>9</sup>

The last mill on the site was reputed to have been built during the reign of Queen Anne,<sup>10</sup> but the date 1779 appeared on one of the beams and this may well represent the period at which the building as a whole was constructed. At all events, by Hasted's time it was evidently something more than a small village mill, as in his first edition he describes it as the 'large corn mill', although in his 1797 edition this is amended to the 'corn mill belonging to the Lord of the Manor'.

As can be seen very well from three large-sized photographs preserved in Bexley Heath Reference Library and dated c. 1900, c. 1912 and March 1956 respectively, the mill was a large building of three storeys of weatherboarding upon one of brick, with a tiled roof. The weatherboarding was painted cream or pale yellow in modern times. The mill was separated from the road by the tail-race, which is crossed by a bridge at this point. To the left of the mill, when viewed from the road, was a three-storey brick addition, to which reference will be made later. On the top floor of the extension, and adjoining the older building, a lucomb was a prominent feature (i.e. a projecting compartment from which a hoist could operate to raise or lower sacks).

There were two approaches to the mill, one on each side of the tail-race, and at the extreme right end of the older building was a passage-

<sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, note 2.

<sup>6</sup> 'Calendar of the Demesne Leases made by Archbishop Warham (1503-32)', *Kent Records*, xviii (1964), 293.

<sup>7</sup> Cutting from *Kentish Times*, c. 1952-53; information from the then Bexley Borough Librarian, W. Threlfell, per P. J. Tester.

<sup>8</sup> Survey and Valuation of Rateable Property in Bexley, 1822, Bexley Borough Library.

<sup>9</sup> Survey and Valuation, 1808, Bexley Borough Library.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Buckland, MS. *History of Bexley*, Bexley Borough Library.

way through it to the rear which enabled carts to load and unload within the mill.<sup>11</sup>

An interior undershot waterwheel, approximately 14 ft. in diameter and 10 ft. wide, latterly drove four pairs of stones which were said to have been blue ones of about 6 ft. diameter. These stones were used to grind barley and maize, no flour having been produced since about 1910.

The waterwheel, wheel-shaft and gearing were of wood, but by 1925 the first-mentioned was literally falling to pieces. It was thought worth while to replace it and a new cast-iron wheel was ordered from Seagers Ltd., of Dartford. This was very much heavier than the old wooden one and weighed approximately 3 tons. When it was fitted up and set in motion for the first time, in the words of the mill-hand who provided much of the above information 'it seemed as though the whole mill was turning also'.

The wheel was hastily stopped and, as it was evident that it was too heavy for the structure of the mill, it and the other machinery were removed and not replaced. In the place of the wheel a new floor was built over the water inside the building, leaving a very low brick breast, where the water had previously been held against the wheel, beneath the floor. The marks made on the walls by the revolving wheel could still be seen after its removal.

Many years previously, probably in about 1884, the mill had been enlarged and it was decided that the power available from the water of the Cray was no longer adequate. A steam-engine was provided as an additional or alternative source of power, and a square brick chimney was erected at the rear of the building by a Mr. Hart.<sup>12</sup> This steeple-jack, who came from Lancashire, was unfortunate enough to fall from the top of the stack during the course of repair work a few years later, and he was seriously injured when he crashed through the slate roof of the engine house.<sup>13</sup>

The succession of millers during the nineteenth century is very difficult to follow, partly owing to the frequency with which the mill changed hands during the earlier years and later owing to the number of members of the Cannon family who were involved.

In a Survey and Valuation of Bexley in 1808<sup>14</sup> the mill was stated to belong to Queen's College, Oxford, as already mentioned, and to have been occupied by T. Snelling, a member of a well-known West Kent milling family, some of whose descendants still live in St. Mary Cray. In a later Survey dated 1822,<sup>15</sup> the University of Oxford are given as owners and John Cook as occupier.

<sup>11</sup> Information from H. E. S. Simmons.

<sup>12</sup> *Op. cit.*, note 9.

<sup>13</sup> *Kentish Times*, 6th February, 1931, per H. E. S. Simmons.

<sup>14</sup> *Idem*, note 9.

<sup>15</sup> *Idem*, note 8.

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The following notice from the *London Gazette*, 4th July, 1826, may also possibly refer to Bexley Mill:

‘George Robert Fowle, formerly of Bexley, Kent, Farmer, Brick Maker and Miller, and late of Maidstone, Kent, Brickmaker and Corn Dealer, Bankrupt.’<sup>16</sup>

From this point it may be convenient to list the successive millers in tabular form, showing the period during which each is known to have been at Bexley Mill:

1828-29	George Wilding <sup>17</sup>
1832-34	Thomas Payne <sup>18</sup>
1838	R. Wilson <sup>19</sup>
1839	Stephen Cannon <sup>20, 21, 22</sup>
1841-42	William Cannon <sup>23</sup>
1845-91	Stephen Cannon <sup>24</sup>
1895-1907	Cannon & Gaze <sup>25</sup>
1915-27	Queenfisher Flour Company <sup>26</sup>

The ramifications of the Cannon family are somewhat obscure and the above table is an over-simplification of the true position. It seems that Stephen, the youngest son of Stephen Cannon, commenced business as a corn factor in 1832, and in 1839 took a mill at Bexley.<sup>27</sup> There is, however, other and somewhat conflicting evidence that William Cannon occupied not this mill but the one at Hall Place, Bexley,<sup>28</sup> and it is possible that the 1841-42 references to William Cannon really relate to the latter mill. On the other hand it has been stated<sup>29</sup> that Hall Place Mill was not acquired by the Cannon family until 1882.

The younger Stephen Cannon mentioned above was born in about 1812 and died in 1872,<sup>30</sup> but it is not clear what his relationship was to William Cannon, who was said to be the miller in 1841-42. His eldest son was also named Stephen, and was born about 1836 and died in 1917.<sup>31</sup> The latter is said to have taken over the mill at the age of 14, i.e. in

<sup>16</sup> *Idem*, note 11.

<sup>17</sup> Pigot's Directory.

<sup>18</sup> Directory references per H. E. S. Simmons.

<sup>19</sup> Survey and Valuation, 1838, Bexley Borough Library.

<sup>20</sup> *Idem*, note 18.

<sup>21</sup> *Idem*, note 19.

<sup>22</sup> Bexley Tithe Charge Apportionment, 1839, per Bexley Borough Library.

<sup>23</sup> *Idem*, note 18.

<sup>24</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>25</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>26</sup> *Idem*.

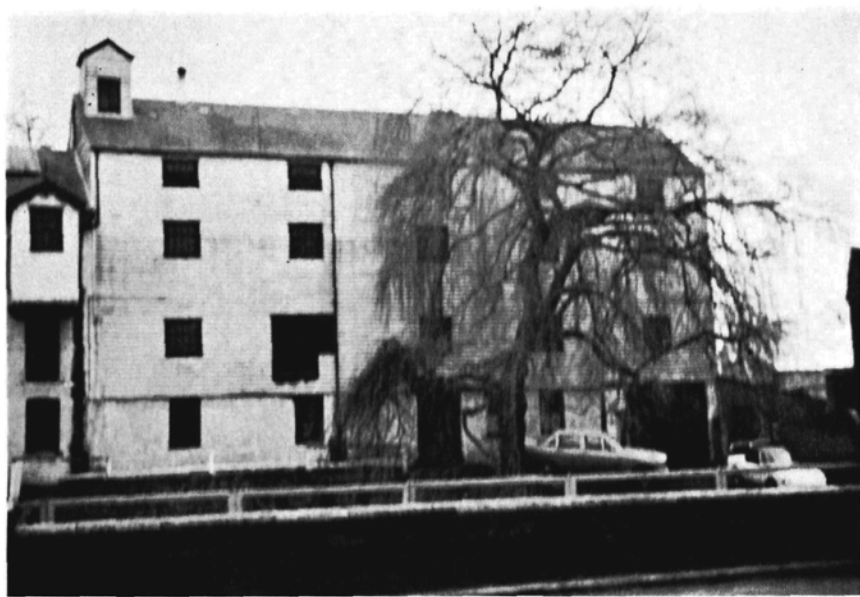
<sup>27</sup> *The Miller*, 1893, per H. E. S. Simmons.

<sup>28</sup> Robson's Directory.

<sup>29</sup> *Idem*, note 11.

<sup>30</sup> Tombstone inscriptions in Bexley Churchyard.

<sup>31</sup> *Idem*.



Bexley Mill from the road, February 1966.

*P. J. Tester*

PLATE II



*A. J. Stoyel*

Bexley Mill from upstream, April 1954.



*A. J. Stoyel*

Bexley Mill after the fire of May 1966,

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about 1850, owing to his father's ill-health.<sup>32</sup> The story is still further complicated by the fact that the last-mentioned Stephen had 13 children, the eldest of whom was yet another Stephen, c. 1860-81; the latter also seems to have been associated with the mill, as was a brother, Thomas Neville Cannon, 1864-1932.<sup>33</sup>

As stated above, the Cannon family also had Hall Place Mill at Bexley. In 1877 Stephen Cannon bought Erith Mills and in 1882 the Royal Victoria Mill at Dartford. He was later joined in partnership by J. T. Gaze. Accordingly the firm of Cannon & Gaze Ltd. were for a time operating four different flour mills in north-west Kent. It is said that it was due to the great success which Stephen Cannon had made of Bexley Mill that his firm embarked upon a big expansion project involving the refitting of the Erith Mills in 1891 with a much enlarged capacity.<sup>34</sup> Subsequently they gave up their mills at Bexley and Dartford.<sup>35</sup>

It may be of interest to record that one of the Stephen Cannons was reputed to be the most skilled mill-stone dresser in Kent. For a time he occupied Bridge House, an attractive Georgian building nearly opposite the mill. Reference has already been made to the pair of weeping willows in front of the mill: by 1928 the original trees had become much decayed and were replaced by new trees planted by Thomas Nevill Cannon and Harry, another member of the family, on the north and south sides of the river respectively.<sup>36</sup> There was a legend that the original two trees were planted in memory of two lovers drowned in the River Cray!<sup>37</sup>

In recent years all connection with milling had virtually disappeared as the building was used for the manufacture of sacks by Firmin & Co. (London) Ltd. The mill was owned by Mr. H. E. Epps, who lives in Bridge House, and leased to Firmin & Co., when the tragic fire occurred which destroyed the structure completely on 12th May, 1966.<sup>38, 39</sup>

Of the three photographs reproduced, Plate I differs from most views of the mill in that it is relatively little obscured by the trees in front of it, being taken in winter after one tree had been removed. Plate II also shows a view not often seen by the public since it was taken from the rear. Plate III, taken soon after the fire, shows how completely the old building was destroyed, even revealing the rectangular chimney at the rear of the mill.

<sup>32</sup> *Op. cit.*, note 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Idem*, note 30.

<sup>34</sup> Information from E. Hammond.

<sup>35</sup> *Idem*, note 11.

<sup>36</sup> *Op. cit.*, note 10.

<sup>37</sup> Bertha Stamp, 'Bexley Mill' in *Kent County Journal*, August 1939, 90.

<sup>38</sup> *Sidcup and Kentish Times*, 13th and 20th May, 1966.

<sup>39</sup> P. J. Tester, Bexley Local Secretary's Report, *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxi (1966), liv.

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### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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