



Wiltshire Notes and Queries.

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THE OLD MILL AT PURTON: AN ATTEMPT TO IDENTIFY IT.

On the western bank of the river Ray—a small tributary of the Thames which forms the eastern boundary of the parish of Purton—stands an old and now disused water mill, known as the Ridgeway Mill. From time immemorial the parish has possessed its mill, but unfortunately the exact position of the building has not been recorded, and as a second mill, also not localised, was erected in the 13th century by William of Colerne, Abbot of Malmesbury, some confusion has arisen as to which of the two mills may be rightly described as standing on the foundation of the original Purton Mill. There are some slight indications which serve, as will be hereafter shown, to promote the opinion that with the subject of our sketch—the old building on the Ray—rests the balance of probability.

Rather more than a mile to the west of the Ridgeway Mill stands the other, now called Purton Mill; it is built on the banks of a tiny streamlet that rises on the high ground near the old farm-house of Restrop. Flowing in an easterly direction the rill passes near the south wall of the Churchyard, through the lower portion of the Vicarage garden and the grounds of Purton House, past the Old Milk House and so on to Purton Mill; from thence it winds through the meadows



Newman's Mill, formerly the Ridgeway Mill.

and under the Railway from Swindon to Cheltenham, falling into the Ray, about a stone's throw from the Ridgeway Mill. Both of these mills have already been mentioned in the pages of this Magazine, as having formed part of the possessions of Malmesbury Abbey. The question therefore remains : Which of these two stands on the more ancient foundation ?

From an examination of the two buildings nothing can be gleaned, for the oldest part of the Ridgeway Mill, to which an approximate date can be assigned, is certainly not earlier than Queen Elizabeth's reign and may possibly be later, and Purton Mill has evidently been entirely re-built sometime during the last half century. But if we take into consideration the design of these mills and their respective situations with regard to the village the results are less barren. In the first place it is fairly reasonable to suppose that whatever congregation of dwellings there were in Purton in early times, these would be gathered somewhere near the Church, the Market Place, or some other social centre. The only ancient institutions which can now be localised are the Church and the Play Close. Both of these are near together and practically in the village, therefore it seems probable that the village proper has always been somewhere near its present position. Now the builder of a second mill in a parish would, when choosing a site, endeavour, so far as natural conditions would admit, to obtain one in some way more convenient for the villagers, either by being nearer the village itself or close to a good road leading thither ; in the hope of gaining thereby some advantage over the original mill. Otherwise, unless backed by some form of compulsion—which in this case would have been improbable considering that the Abbey owned both mills, and therefore could derive no benefit by compelling the villagers to use one mill rather than the other—the new mill would be hardly likely to succeed. The advantage of position rests in this case entirely with Purton Mill, which is only a short half mile from the Church and within a hundred yards of the highway, whereas the Ridgeway Mill stands at the extreme eastern edge

of the parish, and is nearly two-thirds of a mile from the road. The actual reason may of course have been that one mill was quite inadequate to the needs of the parish, but there is no evidence to show that this was the case, and the builder of the second mill was, according to all accounts, a builder more for the work's sake than for necessity's sake.

Then, if we consider the design of these mills, we find that at the Ridgeway the mill-pond is small, and the stoned escarpment of very limited extent, also that the system adopted is capable of much improvement; but at Purton Mill the mill-pond is large, well-constructed, and extensively edged with stone, the system too is simple and efficient, and the general superiority of this mill points it out as the work of an able and wealthy person, such as we know Abbot William of Colerne to have been. Finally, this view is much strengthened by the allusion made in the Malmesbury Register¹ to the pond which is therein described as a fishpond, and is evidently considered of sufficient importance to be specially noted. Therefore, unless we choose to assume that it would not have been inconsistent with the character of this wealthy Prelate, to erect a mill inferior in design and inconvenient in position when compared with the others, we are bound to concede that at all events the probability above advanced, *i.e.*, that the Ridgeway Mill occupies the site of the ancient Purton Mill, is fairly reasonable. And thus the Wiltshire farmer of the nineteenth century who used the Ridgeway Mill may, in this instance have carried his corn for grinding to the identical spot to which his sturdy ancestor the Saxon ceoil resorted for the same purpose more than a 1000 years ago.

The exact period of the introduction of the Water Mill into England is unknown, but numerous mills are recorded in Domesday throughout the length and breadth of the land most of which we are justified in concluding had long existed under the Saxon rule, and among them the mill at Purton. It

¹*Reg. Malm.*, vol. ii, 366.

was then valued at 5s. and was retained under the direct control of the Abbey. The millers of ancient times were a jovial well-to-do race, if we may judge by Chaucer's tale, and their calling was hereditary. Thus in 1241 we find a final concord was made between a certain William, son of Richard (presumably both millers) and John Abbot of Malmesbury, wherein Purton Mill and about 20 acres of land, roughly speaking, were granted to William and his heirs for ever for the rent of 13s. 4½*d.* per annum.¹ Later, in 1284, Radolph the miller is mentioned in the Abbey rent roll as paying 2s. yearly in four equal portions.² Another ancient document relating to a Purton Mill dated 1306 is extant, but by this time William of Colerne, the builder of the second mill, had been dead 12 years, and there is nothing in the text whereby to decide which mill is concerned. At the Dissolution the Abbey lands in Purton were split up and sold piece-meal and in many instances bought only to be sold again. The Ridgeway Mill ultimately passed into the possession of Pembroke College, Oxford.

Until about 6 months ago the old mill, though sadly in want, not of repair but of complete rebuilding, still managed to perform what was required of it, but an accident then happened to the axle of the wheel, which silenced the busy hum that had continued for centuries, and now, with its wheel decaying, its stone-work falling away, its cottage walls full of gaping fissures, and its roofs well-nigh useless to keep out the rain; it stands a pathetic example of a building that has outlasted its use.

¹ *Reg. Malm.*, vol. ii, 320.

² *Reg. Malm.*, vol. i, 159.