

An Unrecorded Mill Site near Slad?

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When one thinks of the Stroud woollen cloth mills, it is only natural that the large mill complexes powered by the main water courses, nestling in the valley bottoms spring to mind. Although many of these sites are much older, most of the existing structures date at least partially from the first quarter of the 19th century, a period of intense activity in the local cloth trade. During this period, innumerable mills were either newly built or substantially rebuilt; as has often been commented, despite the growing introduction of steam power, good water-powered sites were not to be wasted and were frequently reused. Although steam clearly had many attractions, a reliable source of water power was essentially free of fuel costs. There were obviously a finite number of suitable mill sites available and as these were used up, attention was turned increasingly to smaller springs, stream and brooks. These were often diverted and impounded, the water stored in one or more small ponds until needed. Clearly such a limited amount of water could only power a small mill; some of these are difficult to distinguish as ever having been mills, almost all the survivors having been long converted to dwellings. In addition, their locations are often not obviously recognised as a water-powered site. All too frequently the water supply has diminished over the years, as water tables have been lowered through water abstraction for agricultural and commercial purposes.

During the period 1800-1825, major developments were taking place in the Stroud valleys (1), as large mill complexes replaced many of the small fulling mills that had operated on the same sites, often for centuries. Once all of these had been utilised, where suitable, other newly-built mills were slotted in between existing ones, often to the detriment of their neighbours; water resources clearly had their limitations. This situation prompted a number of cloth workers and minor clothiers to turn their attention to some of the previously untapped sites. Although incapable of powering a large cloth mill, there was the potential for operating one of a more modest size, even though the relative paucity of water might mean that only part-time operation was possible. For example, there were several such mills along the Washbrook, near Painswick, that were probably operated in such a fashion (2). This leads us to the building examined in this article, a previously unrecorded site near the village of Slad.

The "New" Mill

The cloth mills of the Slad Valley are well known, some having been of considerable size and importance (eg. Vatch Mill) however, evidence points to the site of another small mill, high up on the side of the valley, one that is likely to have gone out of use some time before the busiest period of cloth making in the area.

Not surprisingly, the building has undergone several metamorphoses since its original construction. It appears to have originally been a 17th century stone-built house, seen a period as a small water-powered mill, been converted to a public

house known as the Riflemans Arms, before reverting to a dwelling - the wheel eventually turned full circle. Although there is little documentary evidence to support the theory of a period as a mill, there is quite a lot of circumstantial evidence to support this hypothesis.

Firstly, let us consider the building itself. Several of the external walls show evidence of alterations at different periods, indicated by varying types and styles of construction and materials (3). For instance, high up in the rear gable is a wooden lintel, beneath which is a blocked doorway, a possible indication of industrial use. However, perhaps the most significant piece of evidence came to light when the present owner carried out excavations at the back of the house (c1960) in order to reduce the amount of water that percolated through the wall at this point. These excavations unearthed what appeared to have been a water wheel pit some 4-5ft in width. At its outer edge was a substantial structure composed of stone blocks, 3-4ft in width, each around 14 inches square and 4ft in length (4). The likely explanation is that this supported the outer bearing of the water wheel axle. The wheel was clearly an external one of modest dimensions and judging by the fall in the land at this point, was probably breastshot. At the corresponding section inside the house was a stone arch, now covered over by later additions (5).

What about the apparently non-existent water supply? At first sight, this would appear to be a most unlikely position for a mill of any size, yet along the side of the hill, below the wooded area known as Fennells, a number of perennial springs supply several small water courses. One such spring rises above what is now Abbey Farm. From the sketch taken from Daniel Pinder's Map of Stroud (No.2) (6), it can be seen that this supplied a triangular-shaped pond of moderate size. The water was then fed to a smaller circular pond immediately behind the mill. Inspection of this area in 1990 showed what appeared to be the remains of the lower pond embankment, now partially obliterated by a later wall. The site of the upper pond now forms part of Fennells (Abbey) Farm and interestingly, a large modern water tank now occupies its location, still fed by the spring (7). Precisely what happened to the water once it had passed through the mill itself is not clear; building work immediately downstream of the mill around 50 years ago, revealed the remains of some sort of stone channel, probably part of the tailrace from the wheel. Unfortunately, none of the aforementioned is now accessible for inspection.

Having turned the wheel, the water then made its way to the valley bottom in an open ditch, feeding into the mill pond of Vatch Mill (8). The supply from the upper (Abbey Farm) pond ran almost directly downhill to the mill's lower pond, the area between the two now being covered with cottages of the latter 19th century. During the 1950s, two large water pipes (of around 18 inch diameter) were laid under the lane leading down to the valley bottom; these now carry much of the flow from the spring.

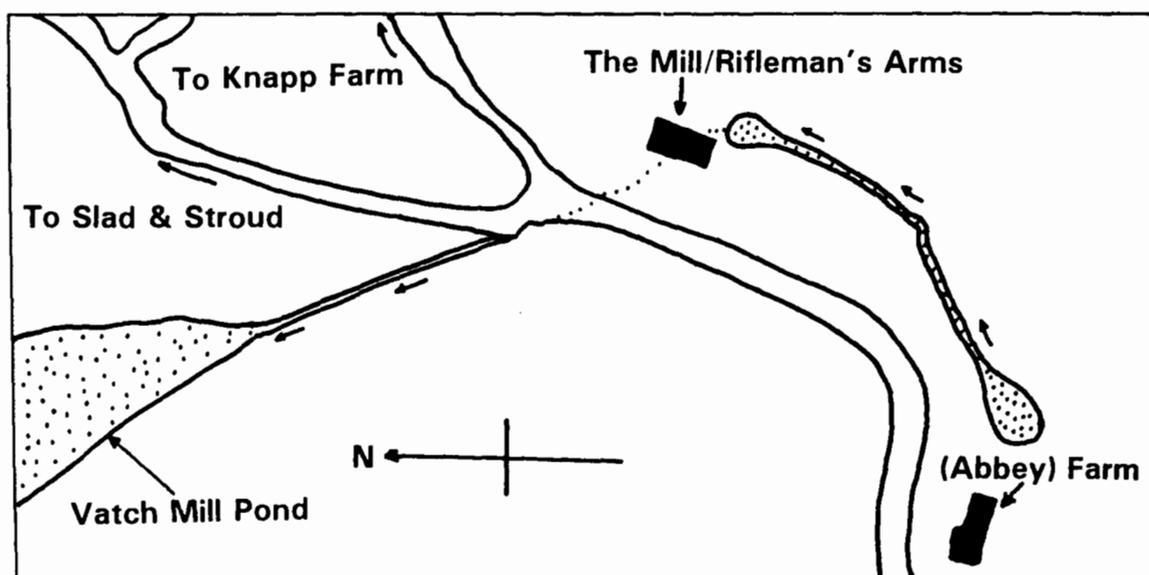
Although by no means conclusive, the above certainly suggests mill, albeit a small one. It was evidently only of limited power as the water supply would not have been great and the dimensions of the suggested water wheel are not large. But

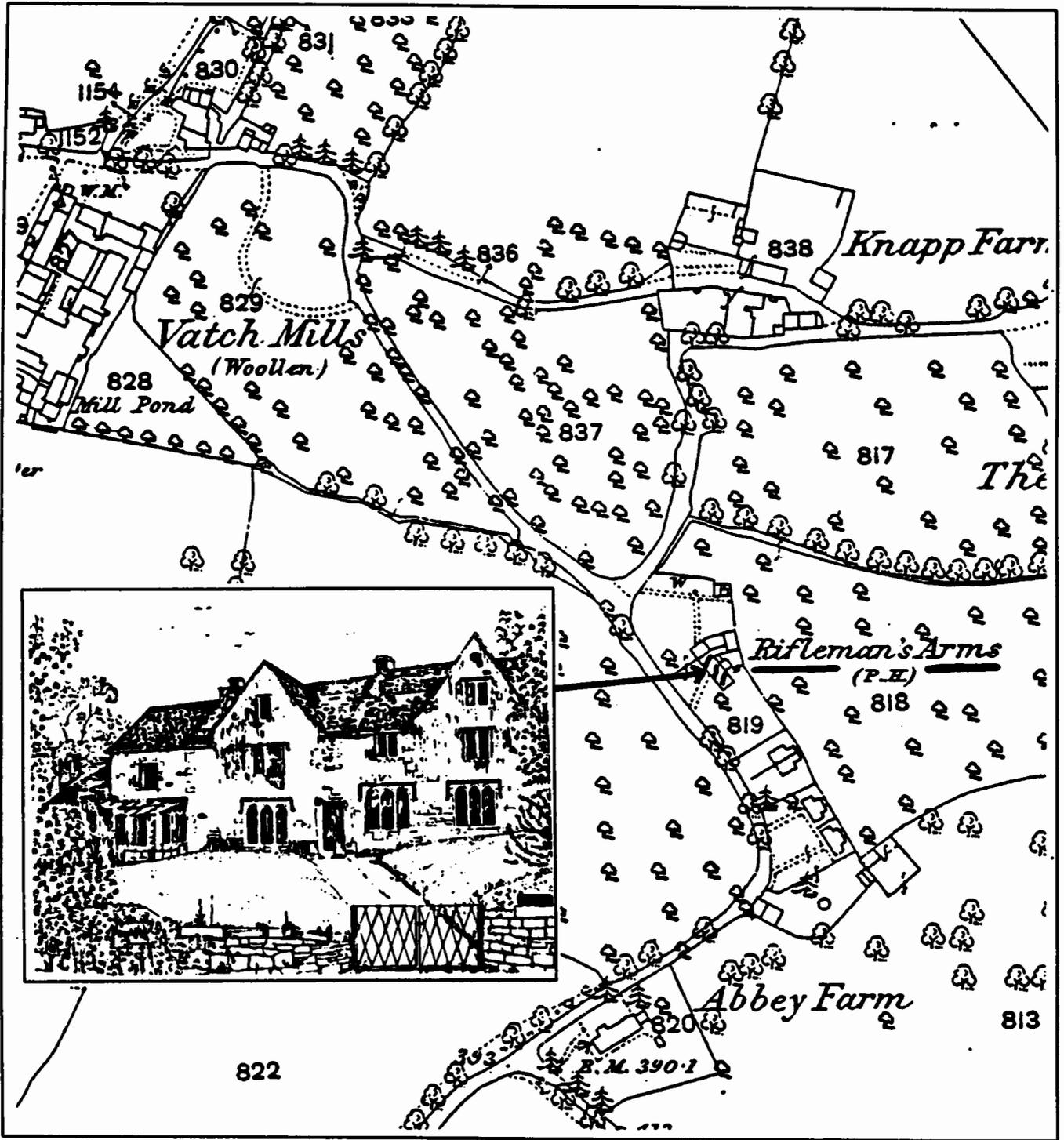
what was its use? It is impossible to be sure, but it is likely that it was connected with the cloth trade. Although agriculture played an important role in the surrounding area, it seems unlikely that it was operated as a corn mill. The most likely uses are all connected with the cloth trade and suggest a small mill, possibly used for spinning, scribbling or operating as a gig mill (9). It is even possible that it could have been a shear-grinding mill, as only modest power would have been necessary and part-time operation acceptable. Unless further documentary evidence is unearthed, we are unlikely to know with any degree of certainty. It is however, an interesting building, one that clearly has had a varied career, and one which illustrates the importance of not relying solely on first impressions.

References:

- 1 The Cotswolds - A New Survey p192-3. David & Charles 1973.
- 2 GSIA Journal - 1990
- 3 Site investigation by Author - 1990.
- 4 Information supplied by Mr F Craig
- 5 Ibid
- 6 Daniel Pinders Map of Stroud (No. 2). A sketch was taken from this by Mr Craig some years ago. The Author has been unable to trace the original.
- 7 Information supplied by tenant farmer - 1990.
- 8 First Edition OS Maps - XL1/16. c1844.
- 9 Private communication with Mr L Walrond.

Sketch based on Pinders Map of Stroud (No.2) and First Edition OS.





The Area Shown by the First Edition OS Map -XL1/16. c1844.