

THE MILL FIRE

1864

By
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The ancient wooden watermill that stood for centuries straddling the millstream just round the corner from the Pied Bull Inn was a large structure with signs of many additions and alterations over time. During the mid 1800s Mr Richard Hunt was leasing the mill from the New River Company and was keen to modernise the mill. In 1857 he had replaced the old wooden machinery with metal gears and shafts leaving just the water wheel still constructed of wood. In the mid 1860s Mr Hunt embarked on a considerable programme of modernisation that commenced with the building of a steam boiler and engine driving six mill stones in a brand new brick building at the rear of the existing mill. This was completed and put into operation some two weeks before the fire which destroyed the old wooden mill and also damaged the new construction. Once the steam powered mill stones were in operation a section of the millstream upstream from the mill was dammed up and drained in preparation for cleaning it out. Plans were in place to begin the demolition of the ancient wooden part of the mill due to commence on Monday 29th August 1864 in preparation for replacing in brick.

THE OLD WOODEN MILL IN ROYDON ROAD



A sketch based on an old photograph of the mill showing how it would have appeared not long before it burnt down in August 1864. The chimney is part of the steam driven mill which came into use in late August 1864 and the only part of the structure left standing after the fire.

The fire was first detected at 11.45 pm on Sunday 28th August by Charles Ashley an employee of Mr Hunt when he noticed flames escaping the building near the new furnace. He immediately informed Mr Hunt who lived opposite the mill in the Mill House. Almost immediately an old woman who lived in a cottage close to the mill and Mr Smith the proprietor of the Red Lion Inn became aware of the fire and the news was rapidly circulated through the village. It must be remembered that fire was a long feared thing in towns and villages where the wooden buildings could easily catch fire and many places suffered badly when the flames leapt from building to building. The need to rapidly control the fire would have dominated people's thoughts and actions at this early stage of tackling the fire.

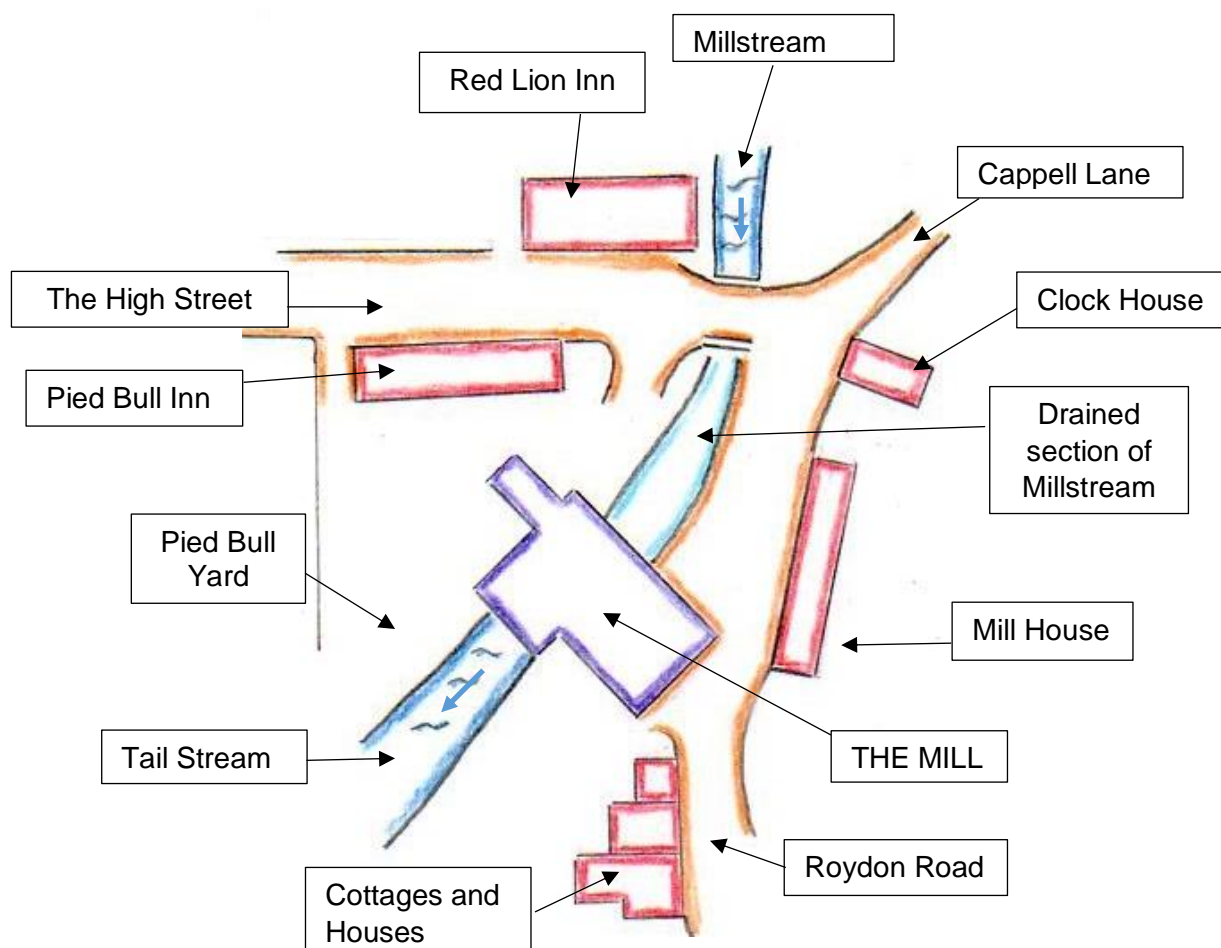
Within just a few minutes the entire wooden part of the mill was ablaze. The village fire engine owned by Mr Lawrence was soon on the scene and placed so that its water pick up pipe could be lowered into the tail stream of the mill. It was evident from the start that the mill could never be saved as the dry wood was fiercely ablaze and beyond being extinguished. However Mr Lawrence's engine did a superb job early on in preventing the fire spreading to adjacent cottages and houses. Meanwhile Mr Hunt had ensured messages were sent to Hertford, Ware and Hoddesdon to ask if their fire engines could be sent.

Mr Smith from the Red Lion almost immediately sprang into action when he noticed a pile of old timber, already burning, leaning against the wall of the Pied Bull. This was clearly an immediate threat to the Pied Bull and he organised help to remove the burning wood and dampen down the wall. As the heat from the blaze rose a gentle breeze was blowing the flames towards Mr Hunt's house on the other side of the road. Fortunately Mr John Bigg a local farmer, who was soon on the scene, provided sound advice and organisational ability and did much to save Mr Hunt's home, the upstairs window frames of which caught fire at least three times threatening the whole building.

At Hertford the red glow in the sky had already been noticed just before midnight and the fire engine was made ready and was about to set out when Mr Hunt's telegram asking for help was received. When the Hertford engine arrived in Stanstead Abbots the mill had totally collapsed and was burning fiercely and emitting a great deal of heat. The Hertford engine pulled into the Pied Bull yard in order to access water from the tail stream of the mill. However an ornamental fence barred their way and would need to be removed in order to reach the supply of much needed water. On board the Hertford machine was a Mr Eldred Smith of North Road Hertford who stepped forward and made short work of removing the fence. As the Hertford crew were attempting to lower their water pick up pipe into the stream the Hoddesdon engine turned up and rushed into the same yard and almost collided with the Hertford engine. This caused a Police Constable who had been brought from Hoddesdon on the engine to be hurt. Valuable time was lost in reversing the Hoddesdon engine and tending to the policeman. He was fairly rapidly sent back home to Hoddesdon on a small pony and trap for his wounds to be tended. Meanwhile the Hertford engine had got to work and almost immediately the Ware engine turned up and soon all four engines were fully engaged in pouring large volumes of water onto the fire. This combined effort was effective in stopping the flames consuming the cottages and houses close to the mill although the occupants were already being helped to remove their possession into the street just in case.

Things were not so straight forward across the road where the Mill House was still under threat. By this time the wall facing the mill was blackened the glass all shattered and the paintwork on the widow casements on the upper floor was blistered and were showing signs of catching fire from time to time. Great concern centred around the Mill House because should it fully catch fire then the spread of flames to other buildings and the risk of widespread destruction was feared. Given that the millstream that crossed the open space between the mill and the Mill House had been drained of water, buckets of water were resorted to in damping down the building. This involved a considerable number of men who under the direction of Mr Bigg successfully prevented the fire spreading across the road.

Locational Map



Map indicates the relative positions of the features mentioned in the text

By 3 a.m. all danger of the flames spreading out from the mill had passed, the Ware engine left followed by the Hertford engine at about 4 a.m. with the Hoddesdon engine leaving sometime after. Later that day a large number of people arrived in Stanstead Abbots to see the aftermath of the fire. No doubt many stories were told about the happenings of the previous night and the pubs no doubt did a brisk trade with these sightseers. The fire was in fact still smouldering for some days mainly due to some wheat that had been in storage in the mill continuing to burn. The following Thursday Mr Lawrence's fire engine spent a fair amount of time soaking it in water and eventually extinguishing the smouldering compacted mass.

In the aftermath Mr Hunt was left to count the cost of the fire. The mill was completely destroyed including the loss of 16 pairs of fine quality and difficult to replace millstones, ten driven by the water wheel and 6 by the steam engine. A "Counting House" [office] as well as an unoccupied dwelling very close to the mill had also been destroyed. No doubt Mr Hunt was at least relieved that his account books and other records had been rescued and his house although badly scorched had been saved from the flames. He had also lost 150 quarters of wheat that had been in storage in the mill and the boiler and the engine in the remains of his recently erected steam mill were damaged but not beyond being repaired. However his insurance did not cover all his losses so he no doubt had to dip into his considerable wealth to reinstate the mill.

For the village the loss of the mill was serious but perhaps the fact that the flames had been contained and the village had not suffered widespread damage was more on the villager's minds. They would have been only too well aware of other places that had suffered serious losses of homes and businesses following such a large fire. Certainly had the wind been stronger and blowing towards the Pied Bull and the Red Lion much of that end of the High Street would have been at a high risk of being burnt to the ground.

It appears that on the Saturday the fire in the furnace at the mill had not been extinguished but banked up keeping the boiler warm for a quick start on the Monday morning. It is very likely that this fire caused some timbers to smoulder and eventually catch fire. Once started it would have rapidly spread to the tinder dry ancient wood of the main part of the mill which of course once alight burnt furiously and unstopably.



A 1970s view of Mr Hunt's new mill of 1866

Mr Hunt already had his plans to hand for fully rebuilding his mill and he made quick progress in building a substantial brick mill on a site just to the east of the old wooden mill. This new mill still retained the use of a water wheel but the mill was an entirely modernised design compared to the old and somewhat ramshackle mill it replaced. The new mill was at least partially operational by 1866. Interestingly the use of this new mill to grind large quantities of wheat into flour was not to last that long. As foreign grown wheat began to arrive in large amounts from the New World local mills like the one at Stanstead Abbots found it difficult to remain economically viable. In 1884 part of the mill at least had been altered into a grist mill. This used cheaper coarse millstones which could not be used to make flour but instead was producing animal feed, for use on local farms. Parts of the mill were being used to store wheat and malt awaiting transport by barge, mainly to London. The business at the mill had changed over quite a short period of time to be more focused on the selling wholesale of large volumes of grain and malt. The importance of the mill for the production of flour, so historically important for the local economy over the centuries, was by the 1880s much reduced.