

Washabrook Mill

The Mill was built around 1680, and the “miller’s cottage” was added on in the early 1700’s. It was built from stone quarried a little way up the track, which leads to Bowcombe, in the very plain style of other local mills. There would have been an earlier mill on the site, as fragments of millstones are incorporated in the walls, and there is a reference in a review of **Glebe Lands in Dodbrooke Parish dated 1613**.

The local stone is soft and sometimes crumbly, and until the 20th century mortar was made from sand from local beaches and therefore hydroscopic. There are several exposed stone walls indoors, which lend character, but damp and dirt can be tiresome. There are slate floors, which again tend to erode, and in one place you can see the subsoil/rock.

There are two floor-to-ceiling wooden **pillars**, which used to support the grindstones, and a large **fireplace with a massive slate lintel**. When one of the ceilings had to be removed we found that 18th century plaster contained a substantial amount of animal hair (quite short, like the combings from a horse). There were two sets of millstones, one for flour and one for coarser animal feed.

Milling ceased in the 1920’s, and the machinery was sold to Noyce’s for scrap metal during WW11. Nothing (except a photograph) remains of the enormous water-wheel - one story is that an American serviceman training over here arranged for it to be shipped back to America.

The stream which runs through the valley could not be guaranteed to produce enough power when it was needed, so a leat was dug along a contour line from Luke’s Addlehole to feed the millpond (now an orchard) at the top of the garden. There is still one stone pillar in the garden, which supported the water-pipe. (The leat now stops just short of our boundary, and the water runs down a culvert into a pool in the paddock).

In the 19th century there were about 15 acres of land, but most of this has been sold off, so that there are now about 3. In the 1960s farmers were given subsidies to convert old orchards to pasture or arable, and sadly that happened at Washabrook. We have been told by a passer-by that when he was a schoolboy the then owner had a cider press in one of the barns, and would offer a drink if he was feeling generous.

The mill was converted in the early 1970’s, as were the former stables which are now a 3-bedroom cottage.

Another small barn was converted to a Studio, where the then owner gave painting lessons and held occasional exhibitions. The stream flowed through one corner, and was still there when we came. We were told that the probable reason for this was that when an animal was slaughtered it could be hung up for the blood to drain directly into the stream. Unfortunately, there was such a small opening (and at a right-angle to the stream) that it contributed to serious flooding, and we had to have a much larger culvert constructed under the lane.

The Shippen (an old word for a cow-byre) still has the remains of mangers, and a channel which could be flushed with water from the mill-wheel.

Hugh Cuming was born at Washabrook in 1791, and knew Colonel Montagu, who encouraged his interest in natural history. After an apprenticeship as a sailmaker he went to South America, and made enough money to build his own yacht, especially fitted to hold his collections. He travelled the world, and corresponded with Darwin, Hooker and other scientists. To quote from an obituary

he was “the possessor of the finest and most extensive conchological collection that has ever been formed”. There is a collection of his shells in the British Museum.