

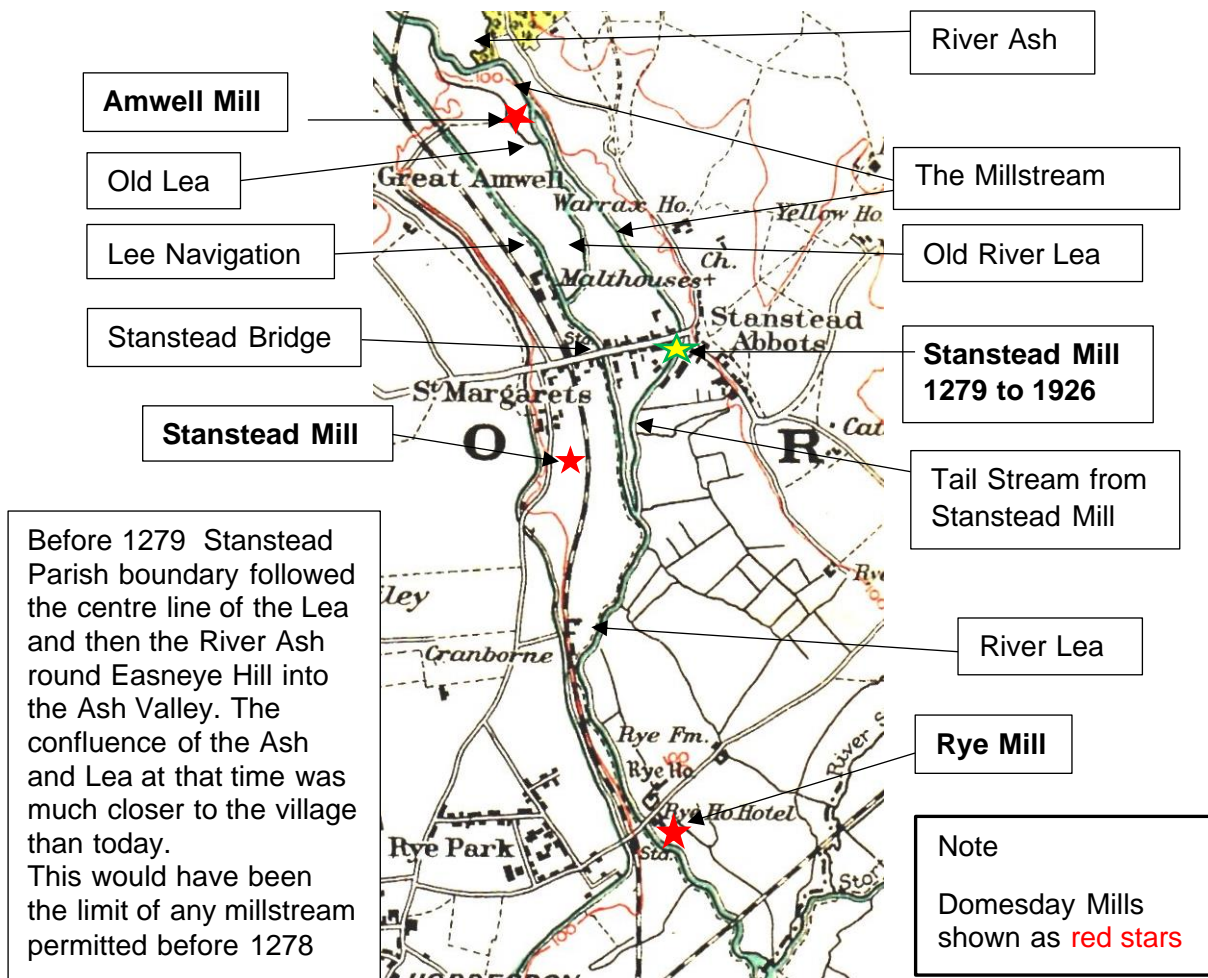
Four Watermills & One Millstream

By

Stuart Moye

For centuries the village of Stanstead Abbots was a place which used the power of water from the River Lea to grind wheat into flour producing more than could be consumed locally. The majority of the surplus being sent down the river for the London market. The historic records provide evidence that since 1086 there have been three watermills located within the Parish of Stanstead. A watermill also once existed beside the old course of the River Lea some 1,000 yards upstream from Stanstead Bridge. This fourth local watermill was located just over the parish boundary in Great Amwell.

LOCATION OF LOCAL WATERMILLS



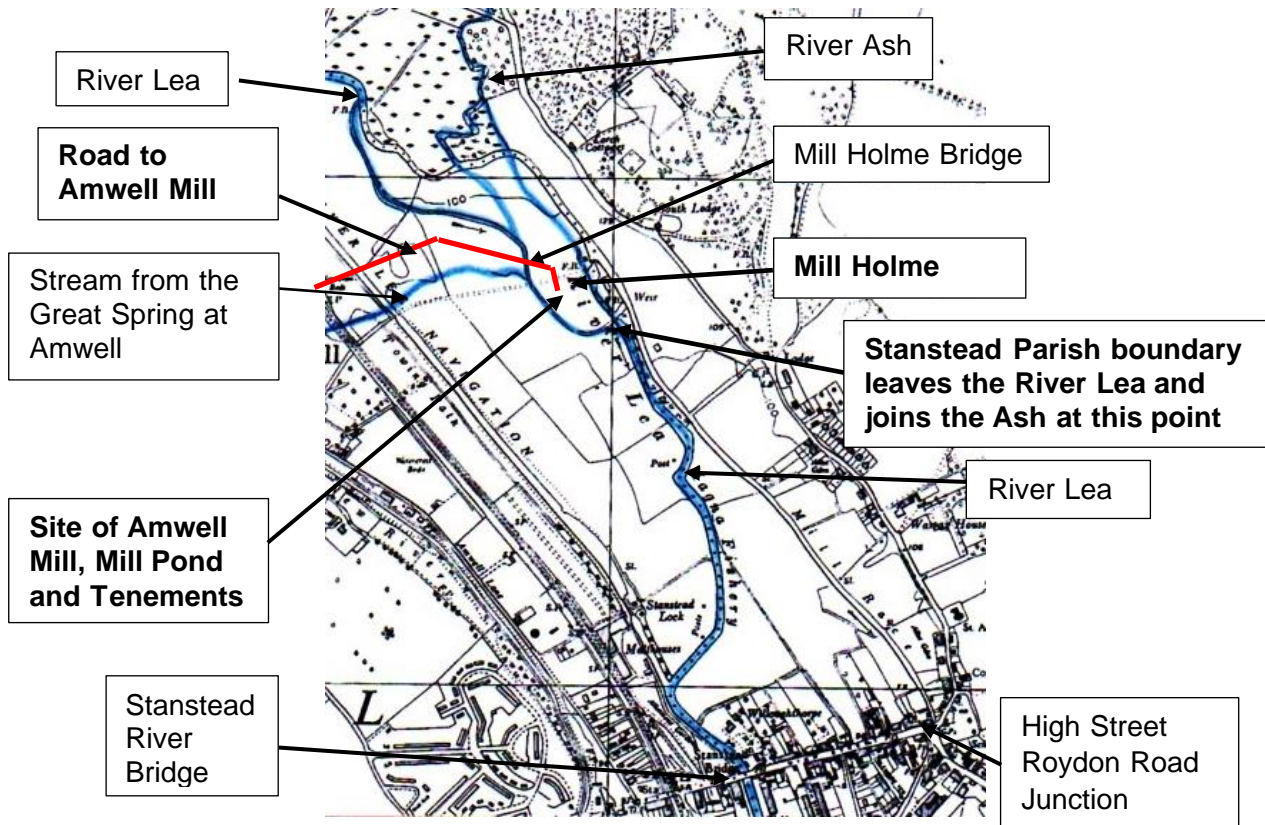
Readers may be familiar with the fact that many writers describe Stanstead Abbots at Domesday as having only one watermill. This misunderstanding has occurred mainly because the Domesday Book had the information within it arranged to suit its tax collecting purposes, information being by and large arranged under Tenants in Chief. This meant that the Rye, where the Tenant in Chief was Bishop Odo of Bayeux, appears in another part of the Domesday Book to the major part of the information regarding Stanstead. In the original Domesday Book the RYE is spelt "EIA" which further confused the issue. The mill at the Rye is valued in 1086 at 3/- per year and is located in an area somewhat isolated from the rest of Stanstead with much unproductive land in the intervening space. The Rye was an area, much of which was wet and marshy ground, which derived its value from eels, hay, meadows and limited plough lands. The River Lea in those early days split into at least three channels at the Rye providing ample opportunities for a smallish watermill and the fishing weirs. This would have been possible without interfering with navigation on the main channel. Unfortunately, the actual site of the mill at The Rye remains unknown.

As an aside, it may seem odd that the Domesday Book suggests no one was living at the Rye despite its annual value being given as £1 earned mostly from labour intensive activities. This situation arises from the fact that only those people that the Domesday investigators thought worthy as relevant for tax purposes at a particular place were recorded. Therefore, it is very likely that a small community of poor workers tied to the land and their Lord lived at the Rye.

Unfortunately, the early history of the Rye remains lost in the mist of time until 1443 when Sir Andrew Ogard began to build the Rye House and improve the area of the Rye more widely. This was to include the building of a bridge to replace the ford across the main channel of the Lea and improve the road by the construction of a causeway and improved road surface all the way to the Old Church. By this time the Rye Mill no longer existed and no record of the date it ceased to operate has been found. However more than one mill was referred to as existing in Stanstead Abbots in a tithe dispute adjudicated on by the Dean of Chichester and others on the 18th March 1230. Given that the millstream was yet to be built it might be reasonable to deduce that both the early Stanstead Mill on the Lea and the Rye Mill were both still in operation and paying tithes in 1230. The reader may be pleased to hear that the dispute between the religious houses at Waltham and Merton was amicably settled.

Some 80 years after taking ownership of the Manor of Stanstead the Abbot of Waltham was subjected like all major landowners to a Quo Warranto investigation by Edward I. This required the presentation of proof of ownership, land owners' rights and responsibilities. This forced landowners to look carefully at what they could ask for or claim rights to. At the same time Lords of the Manor tended to re-access what additional monies might be made from their properties. Waltham faced a Quo Warranto investigation into his holdings in Stanstead at Hertford in 1278. At the hearing, held before Richard De Rygate, the Abbot's representatives claimed ownership of their lands as well as the right of fishing in the Lea within their manor and all the way to the Town of Ware. In those days such a claim also meant they would have the right to water. There is no existing evidence that suggests a right to fishing was in the initial gift by Henry II in 1182, but it was claimed that it had been granted additionally by Henry III in a charter on March 30th 1253. Documentary evidence suggests Henry III had only granted fishing rights for the Lea and other channels within the Manor of Stanstead. Nonetheless their claim was fully upheld by Justice Richard De Rygate. This meant that Waltham had the water and fishing rights from the Town of Ware to Stanstead on the Lea. There is no record of why this additional right to water outside the Manor boundary was allowed by Justice Rygate. What we can be sure about is that he could not have granted these extra rights unless authorised by Edward I. In making this grant he made it possible for the Abbot of Waltham to build a much more powerful and economically worthwhile water mill.

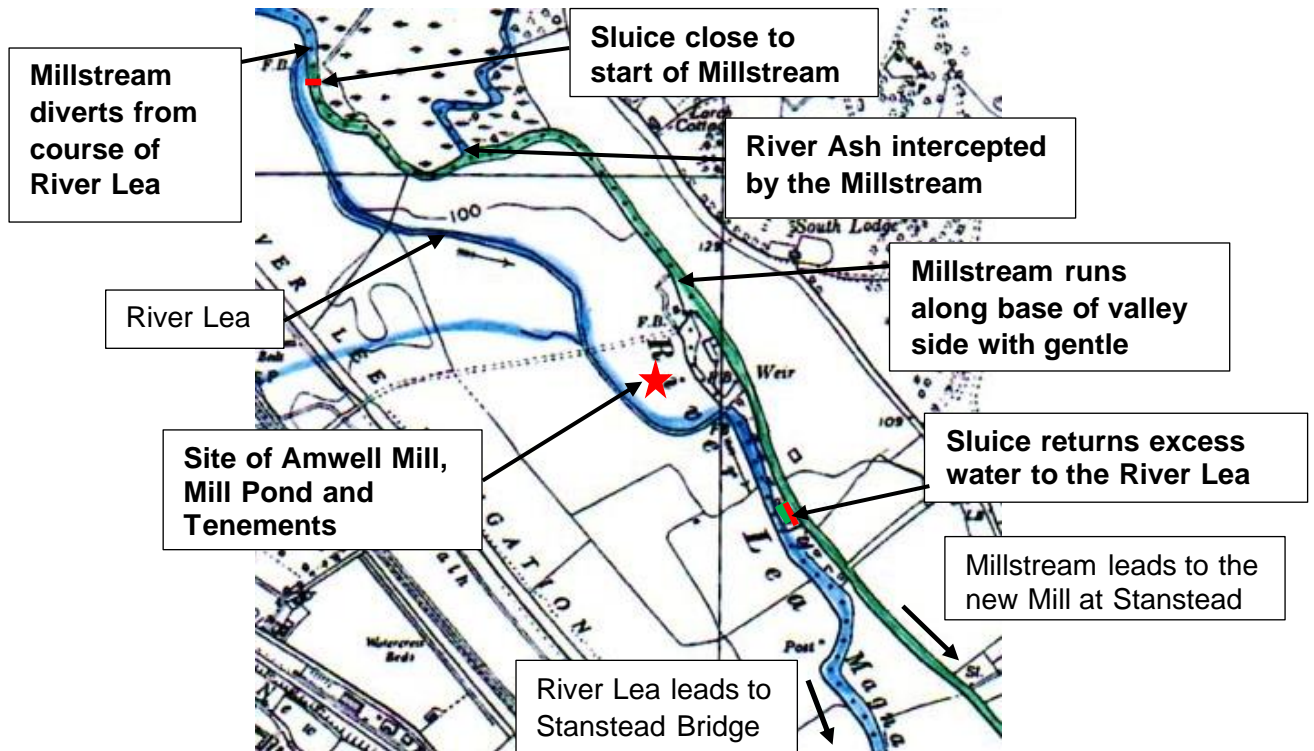
AMWELL MILL & WATERCOURSES 1278



The map above shows in blue the reconstructed watercourses that existed about the time of the Quo Warranto investigation into the holdings of the Abbot of Waltham in Stanstead. A track leading from the later site of Sheepcote Farm on Lower Road in Amwell, [now a residential development], led to Amwell Mill. The track headed across the valley over Hardmead to cross the River Lea by Mill Holme Bridge leading into a meadow called Mill Holme in which Amwell Mill stood. Thus situated Amwell Mill could benefit from water taken from the River Lea downstream of the point where it was supplemented by a very reliable and abundant source of additional water from the Great Spring at Amwell. Close by the Mill there was the mill pond, sluices and a few small tenements forming an isolated little community.

Once the rights to fishing and water from the Lea all the way to Ware had been confirmed by the Quo Warranto hearing, the Abbot of Waltham wasted no time in setting about the construction of a new mill in his Manor of Stanstead. Using the rights to water confirmed by the Quo Warranto ruling, Waltham was now able to divert water from the Lea into a millstream upstream of the boundary of the Manor of Stanstead. From the start the new works were to cause a conflict between the Abbots of Waltham and Westminster. On July 17th 1279 the Abbot of Westminster raised a complaint against the Abbot of Waltham in the King's Court. The essence of the complaint was that Waltham had erected new sluices which were causing flooding and damage to Amwell Mill and the homes close by it. The sluices of course being required to direct water from the River Lea down the Millstream. Little seems to have changed two years later when in the Close Rolls we find an entry on August 3rd 1281 which repeats the complaint. The newly erected sluices it was claimed had frequently caused damage by flooding Amwell Mill and associated houses as well as several fields belonging to the Manor of Amwell. The ruling issued in September was that the Abbot of Waltham was to repair Amwell Mill, its mill pond, the pond, dam and other damage caused by his sluices, at his own expense and as speedily as possible. On October 28th 1283 arbitrators were appointed to examine whether the Abbot of Waltham had repaired the mill at Amwell with its pond and dam as they were before his new sluices had caused them to be damaged. Later that year the arbitrators reported that all had been repaired as laid down by the King's Court.

THE MILLSTREAM AS BUILT



The map above shows the Abbot of Waltham's millstream in green. It was constructed to allow it to abstract water from the Lea, controlled by a sluice, with the waters of the River Ash fully diverted down the millstream. As there was more than adequate water in the Lea for both mills and for maintaining navigation on the River Lea the water supply for each mill was otherwise separate one from the other. It is not known exactly how many sluices the Abbot of Waltham built but those shown on the map were the minimum required to manage the waters in the upper reaches of the millstream. In addition, two sluices would be required just upstream of the mill one for directing water to the mill wheel the other a bypass sluice. It is unlikely that the flooding of the Amwell properties and fields was deliberate but an outcome of insufficient care in the regular attendance at the weirs to manage an ever-changing water flow. A problem that was to occur throughout the history of the millstream being in operation. The flooding of Amwell Mill was undoubtedly caused by the mismanagement of the sluice at the entrance to the millstream.

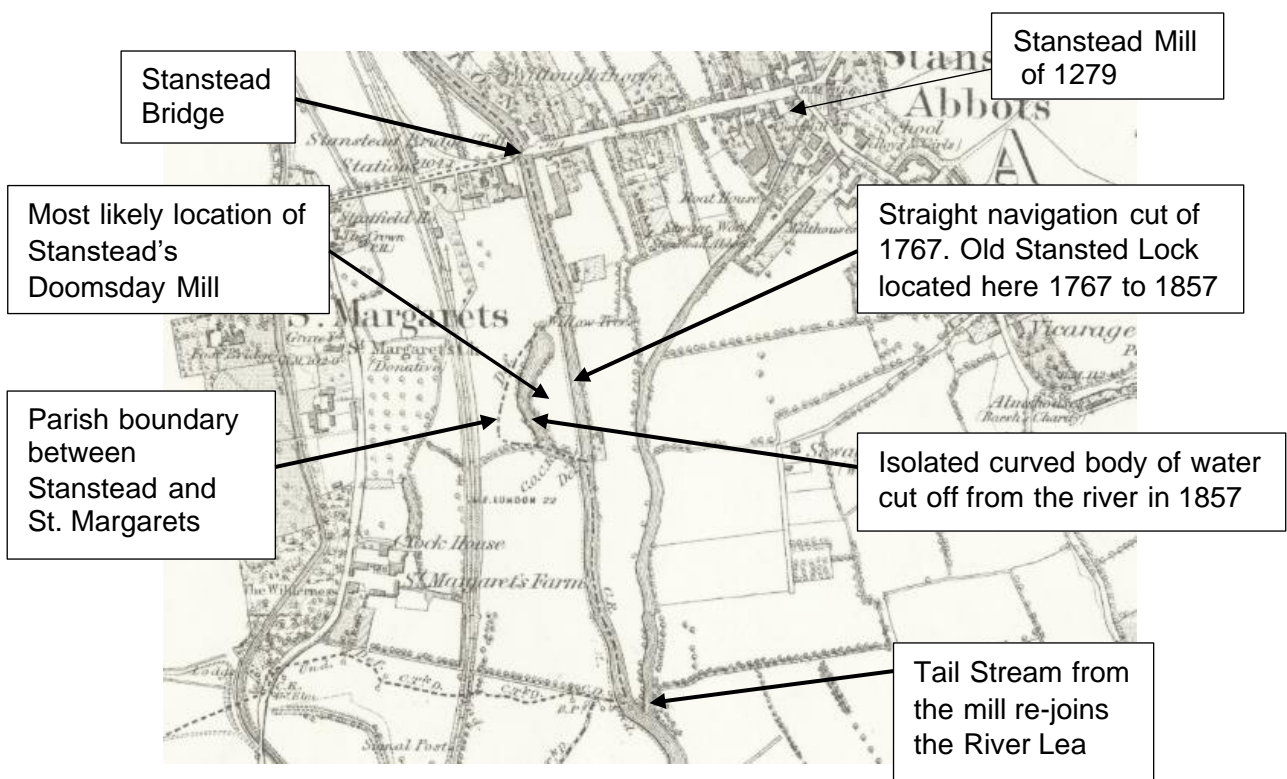
The millstream was constructed in such a way that it had a much gentler gradient than the natural river. This was achieved by digging a channel from the Lea across the flood plain towards the valley side and then turning through ninety degrees and by the expedient of an ever-heightening embankment took the water down the valley to the mill. The millstream from the Lea down to the mill is approximately 1 mile and 280 yards long with the gentle gradient providing a head of water at the mill wheel in excess of 6 feet. The effective head of water was about twice that which would have been possible before the additional powers were granted at the Quo Warranto hearing in 1278. The mill as built would have been considerably more powerful than the other three mills mentioned in this article. This is no doubt a reflection of the growing importance of trade with London that was taking place during the 1200s. The building of a riverside warehouse on the St Margarets side of the river some 30 years earlier in 1248 is further evidence of the growth in trade and economic opportunities at that time. The tail stream for the mill is itself today some 870 yards long, somewhat shorter than originally. It needed to be so long in order to empty its water into the Lea downstream of where there was a sudden drop of about 3 feet 6 inches in the channel of the Lea. Even as late as the 1850s this drop was being managed by Old Stanstead Lock downstream of Stanstead Bridge.



An early 1930s view of Stanstead Abbots Mill, as preparations are being made for changing the road layout to its present form. . In the foreground can be seen the millstream passing under Roydon Road on its way to the mill under an ornate but rather narrow bridge. This brick-built mill, still in commercial use today, dates from the 1860s. It replaced the previous wooden mill which burnt to the ground on the night of the 28th to 29th August 1864. The impressive projecting lucum [corridor in the sky] is a reminder of the use of the tail stream of the mill by barges for the transport of goods downstream to London. By 1884 the mill had been in large part converted to a grist mill and was producing animal feed for local use. It was also serving as a warehouse for grain awaiting transport by river. Its last years as a mill saw no flour being produced at all and the building had ceased to operate as a mill by 1926.

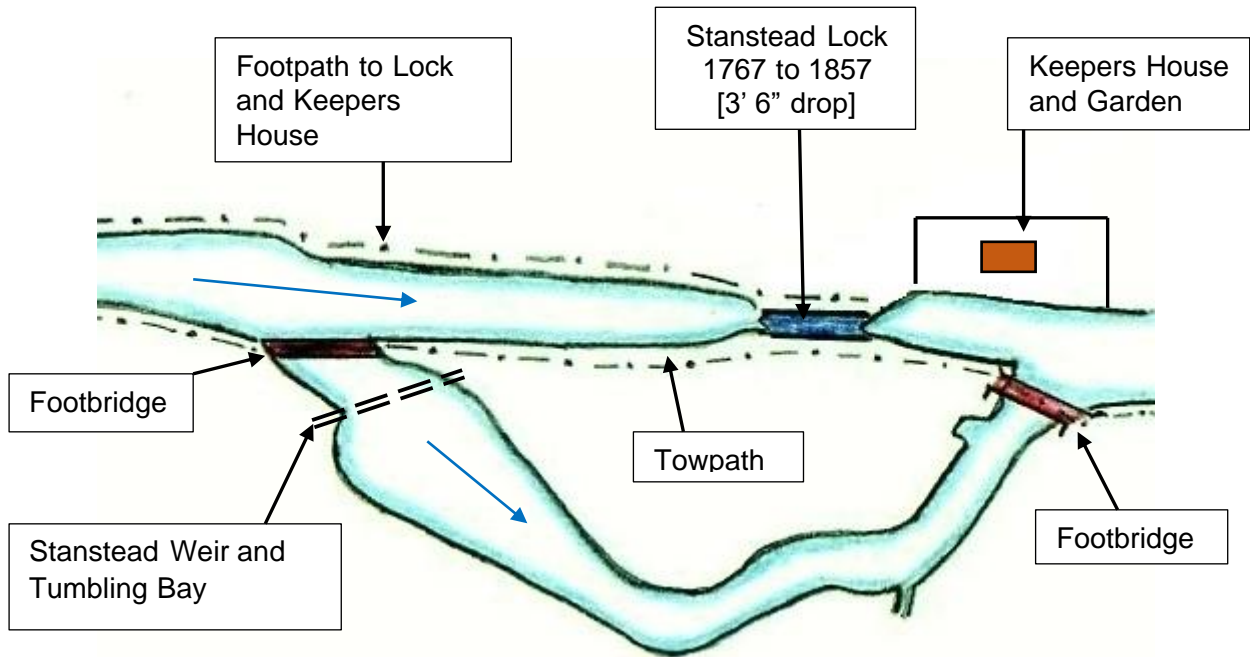
As far as Amwell Mill is concerned, after it had been repaired in 1283, it continued in use appearing in documents at intervals. In 1289 and 1355 a fishery is recorded in the mill pond, the second time in connection with a complaint from William De Lymsey the tenant of Amwell Mill. His concerns involved the neglect by the Abbot of Waltham in not keeping his sluices and mill at Stanstead in good repair. He stated that the sluice upstream of his mill and a sluice at Stanstead Mill were so dilapidated that the water of the Lea [La Leygh] cannot be arrested by either as used to happen and boats, [through lack of water], were unable to pass between Ware and Stanstead. No further records exist on this matter but bad fortune was once again to impose itself on Amwell Mill. On January 15th 1362 the storm known as "The Great Wind", one of the severest storms ever recorded, severely damaged Amwell Mill. The records of the Abbot of Westminster show that later in 1362 money was paid out for the repairs to Amwell Mill. Apart from a record of a fishery still existing in Amwell Mill Pond in 1398 no further reference to Amwell Mill has yet been found. Thanks to the contemporary writings of a Vicar of Amwell, we know that by 1605 the mill, associated works and buildings at Amwell were no longer in existence with just a riverside meadow, still called Mill Holme, left to mark the site.

The Domesday Stanstead Mill poses a much bigger problem for the local historian as very little information exists about it other than its existence in 1086 and in 1230. One would expect such a mill to be located on the main river of the parish and would in some way hold back some water, away from the main channel of navigation. In most parishes there was usually only one location that was particularly suited for siting the Lord of the Manors Mill. A site which on most occasions was dictated by nature rather than for the convenience of the community. With regard to the River Lea as it flowed through the Manor of Stanstead there is only one location that historically particularly stands out for this purpose. This location is some 350 yards downstream from Stanstead Bridge on land which is now in the parish of St. Margarets and took its water from an ancient channel of the River Lea that no longer exists. A glimpse of the past downstream from Stanstead Bridge was still evident when the 1873 survey was carried out. The survey took place some eight years after Old Stanstead Lock had been removed. However, it still showed the ancient line of the parish boundary which had once been along the centre of an abandoned meander of the Lea. The map also shows the remains of another channel still existing as an isolated curved pond.

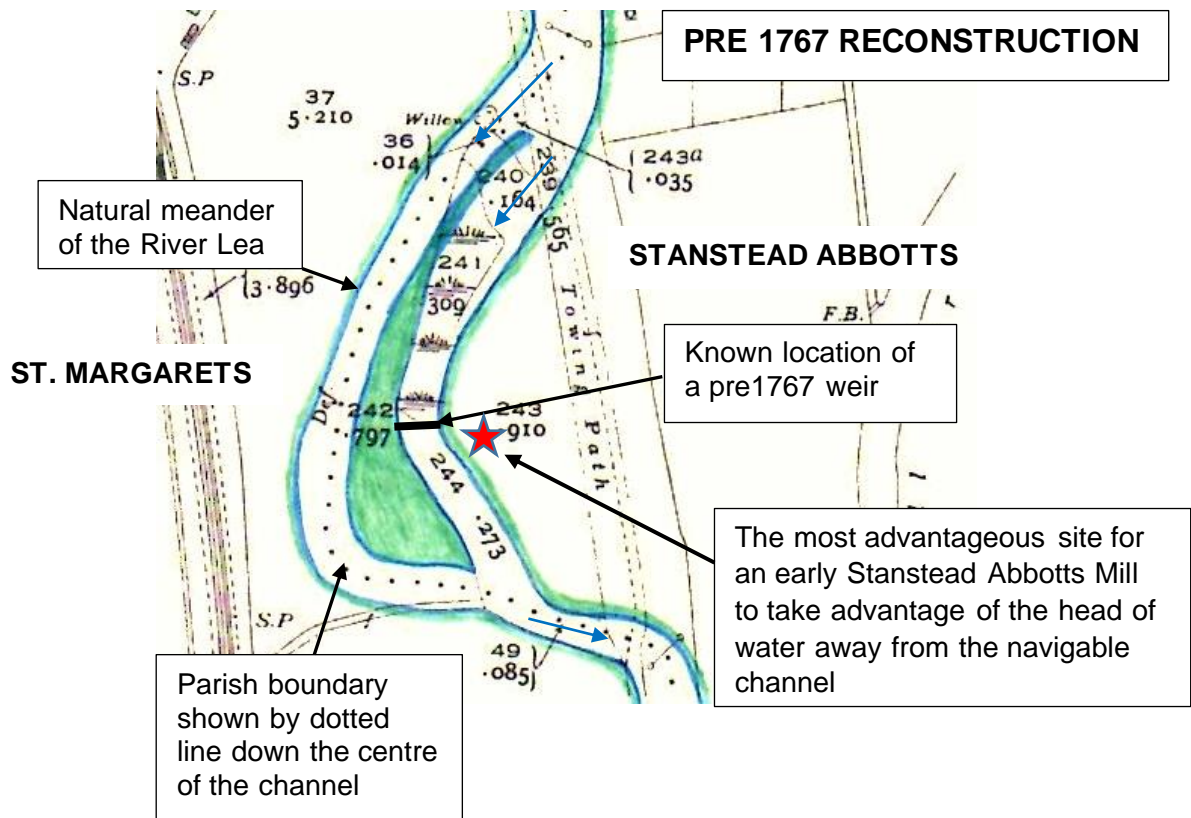


The 1873 surveyed map above indicates the most likely site for the Domesday Mill at Stanstead. The location 350 yards downstream from the road bridge historically had a drop in the level of the river of 3 feet 6 inches controlled by weirs and locks. The weirs and locks being essential in maintaining a reasonable depth of water upstream to beyond Stanstead Bridge. This was especially important for barges that used the wharves either side of the river just downstream of the bridge. It can be noticed how the millstream was extended past this part of the river before re-joining the Lea. This meant a lower level of water in the tail stream of the Roydon Road Mill effectively providing a greater head of water at the mill wheel. Although in 1873 some remnants of the past still lingered 350 yards downstream from the bridge, today it is part of a residential area known as Lawrence Avenue in the Parish of St. Margarets.

Fortunately, the records of the River Lea Trust allow us to look back at this location as it was between 1767 and 1857. The map below shows the detail from a larger plan of the river downstream of Stanstead Bridge as it was during this 90-year period.



The diagram below is a reconstruction overlain on a C20th map of the location and shows the earlier and longer meander in the river, which was the natural navigable channel of the River Lea before 1767. It was subsequently abandoned and slowly silted up.



The evidence on the ground for the possibility of an old mill to have historically existed here began to significantly disappear in 1767 with the abandonment of the large natural meander of the Lea downstream of Stanstead Bridge. In 1857 the removal of Old Stanstead Lock saw its 3 feet 6 inch drop in water level incorporated into the current Stanstead Lock located upstream of Stanstead Bridge. 1857 also saw the removal of the shorter channel that had incorporated the weir and tumbling bay and had historically [before 1767] had a weir located on it. Although both abandoned channels could be seen in the landscape in various stages of silting up well into the C20th nothing today remains to be seen. In the 1970s considerable deepening and widening of the channel took place as part of a wider flood relief scheme. This further considerably changed the appearance of the river at this location. The Parish Boundary continued to follow the centre line of the earlier large meander of the River Lea long after it was abandoned and silted up. The boundary was not moved to its present position down the centre of the modern straight navigation cut until 1990. Land being transferred from Stanstead Abbots to St Margarets as part of a Statutory Order concerning multiple boundary changes in East Hertfordshire. This was probably the last vestige of physical evidence of the historic waterways in this spot downstream of Stanstead Bridge. In historical documents the Domesday Mill at Stanstead is last mentioned in 1230 and it remains at this time unknown as to when it went out of use and was demolished. It might be reasonable to suggest that it was surplus to requirements when the new mill of 1279 became operational and was soon abandoned.



One part of the milling history of the village that is still with us is the old mill building in Roydon Road close to its junction with the High Street. This 2012 picture shows how it has been thoughtfully renovated and repurposed as modern offices. The original site of the mill was in the right foreground now used as a car park. The white railings to the right guard the drop down into the tail stream of the mill where water once began its journey from the water wheel down the tail stream to re-join the River Lea.

Stuart Moye June 2020 Additions made July 2021