

# A Timeline History of Yarmouth

Isle of Wight

compiled by

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on behalf of

**The Yarmouth Society**

## Geography

Situated on the eastern bank at the mouth of the Western Yar, 10 miles west of Newport, the Island's capital, Yarmouth now has a population of approx.1000. It is almost an island, triangular in shape. Bounded by the Solent to the north-west, the river to the south-west and the Thorley Brook and the marshes to the south and east, the town comprises only 57 acres within its walls, 93 in total. A thin neck of land between the Solent and the marshes carries the main road to Newport. In 1662 this was breached to make Yarmouth an island and in 1664 a drawbridge was installed as part of the town's defences. It was still in existence in 1673.

### 1<sup>st</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> Centuries AD

At the time of Christ the Isle of Wight was inhabited by Belgae. In 43AD the Roman Emperor Claudius conquered England and a legion led by Vespasian subdued the Island, known then as Vectis. It was invaded and settled by Jutes and Saxons under Cedric in 530AD and they remained in control until the Danish invasion in 787AD. Thorley was the original western haven for ships, coming largely from the mainland, but as Thorley Creek gradually silted up a landing place nearer to the sea had to be found. This was at the mouth of the River Yar on the eastern shore and was called Ermud, (the Saxon name for "muddy estuary").

This was Yarmouth's first name and, by the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, it had evolved through several variations to Yaremthe. Yarmouth High Street today follows the line of the original track from the landing place to Thorley, then the main centre of population.

### 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> Centuries

The first record of a settlement here was in King Ethelred the Unready's record of the Danegeld tax of 991AD. Two Saxons named Aluric and Wislac were shown as living in Ermud. These names are mentioned again in the Domesday Book, although in view of the 95 year interval they are likely to have been sons or even grandsons of the original pair.

At the time of the Conquest Yarmouth was a small settlement but increasing in importance as Thorley Haven silted up and declined. The Normans planned Yarmouth on the grid system and it grew rapidly, being given its first Charter as a town in 1135. This Charter has been lost but its terms are known. Given to the town by Baldwin de Redvers, Lord of the Isle of Wight, it conferred on the inhabitants, their heirs and successors, all the

liberties and customs belonging to free burgesses, that is to say security of tenure and a release from the slavery of serfdom. As a result Yarmouth became the most important town and port on the Island.

A "Hospital", or Place of Refuge, was founded c.1200 by William de Vernon, Lord of the Island, in the High Street. This was known as The Refuge until the 19th Century and is now The Towers.

1066	Norman Conquest
1086	Domesday Survey
1135	Yarmouth granted its first Charter
c1200	Hospital of Eremue founded

### 13<sup>th</sup> Century

The 13<sup>th</sup> Century saw a continuing growth in the size of Yarmouth and saw it established as a town. By the end of the century the population probably exceeded 250 and the town was invited to send a representative to Parliament. This privilege lasted through 1584, when the number of representatives was increased to two, until the Reform Act of 1832.

1206	Yarmouth had two churches, one at the eastern end of the town in the vicinity of the present Churchyard and dedicated to St. John the Baptist, the other in the market place, or on the site of the later Castle, and possibly dedicated to St. James.
1206	King John stayed in the town for four days on his way to invade France. The house in which he stayed became known as the King's House, believed to be the site of the present George Hotel.
1214	The King stayed again, this time for a week, to recover his lost possessions after his second unsuccessful invasion of France.
1224	Yarmouth, Southampton and Portsmouth were regarded as the principal ports on the south coast of England.
1272	The market was held on the site now occupied by the Town Hall.
1295	Yarmouth was invited to send a representative to the Parliament called by Edward the First.
1299	A survey stated that there were 141 persons paying taxes in Yarmouth.

## 14<sup>th</sup> Century

The 14<sup>th</sup> Century was a disastrous one for Yarmouth. There were frequent invasion scares interspersed with calls on the town to provide ships and men to invade France. To bolster morale Edward III gave the town a second Charter confirming that given by Baldwin de Redvers in 1135.

There were so many invasion scares that landowners sent their wives and families to the mainland for safety during the summer months (the invasion season ran from Easter to end-September). Sanctions had to be introduced to prevent the Island from becoming deserted. Sir Theobald Russell was appointed to re-organise the defences. He made the following regulations:-

1. Only three ports on the Island to be recognised, La Riche (Ryde), Shamblord (Cowes) and Eremue (Yarmouth).
2. A Warden was appointed to each port to prevent people leaving and to prevent the export of grain.
3. Only licensed boats to be allowed.
4. The Militia was re-organised and watches set.
5. The Clergy were called upon to help.

In 1349 the Black Death killed approximately a third of the population, including many young and healthy males, and the morale of the town was reduced to a very low ebb. Before it had time to recover there came a massive raid by a combined French and Castillion force. August 1377 saw Yarmouth's blackest days with the town burned almost to the ground and many people killed. In 1385 Richard II granted the town a third Charter but the climb back to prosperity was to be slow and painful.

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| 1305 | Yarmouth said to consist of fifty houses. Probable population 200-250. Church of Blessed John the Baptist erected at the east end of the town.                               |
| 1324 | One ship and crew supplied as directed to Edward II for his intended invasion of Aquitaine.  |
| 1334 | Second Charter granted by Edward III confirming the liberties and privileges given in the Charter of 1135AD.   |
| 1340 | Defences of the Island re-organised in the face of increasing invasion scares.   |
| 1349 | Yarmouth was badly hit by the Black Death.   |
| 1377 | Combined French and Spanish raid burned Yarmouth and killed many people. Church of St. John the Baptist destroyed and Church of St. James in the market place badly damaged. |
| 1385 | Third Charter granted by Richard II.   |

## 15<sup>th</sup> Century

The slow recovery of Yarmouth continued in the face of frequent invasion scares and marauding raids by the French. The principal progress was the formation of the Borough which status continued until 1890. Records of this century are very scanty.

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| 1417 | A large body of French troops landed on the north coast, east of Yarmouth, in December and announced their intention of spending Christmas in the Island. The Militia, however, very quickly drove them off. |
| 1439 | A Fourth Charter was granted by Henry VI at Westminster on 1 <sup>st</sup> July. As a result the townsmen were encouraged to develop Yarmouth into a Borough.  |
| 1440 | The new Borough of Yarmouth was approved and permission granted for the election of a Mayor.   |
| 1450 | A plea was sent to the King (Henry VI) that the defences of the whole Island were in a poor state.   |
| 1466 | On 20 <sup>th</sup> November a Fifth Charter was granted by Edward IV at Westminster.  |

## 16<sup>th</sup> Century

Until the building of the Castle raids on the Island by the French continued and in 1544 the town of Yarmouth was reputed to have been burned down again. Legend has it that the church bells were carried off to Cherbourg (or Boulogne!). Another account, however, says that when Edward VI, son of Henry VIII, ordered church images to be pulled down (the Reformation) one of the three bells in Yarmouth was taken down to be sold but soldiers of the Castle "arrested it" and retained it. Where did they dispose of it? Perhaps they buried it in their Castle.

In 1545 Henry VIII, on a visit to Southsea to watch the fleet set sail to meet the French, witnessed the sinking of the flagship, "Mary Rose." He subsequently ordered the building of Yarmouth Castle as part of a chain of castles around the Solent. Yarmouth Castle was built by Richard Worsley, Captain of the Isle of Wight, to a new design incorporating an arrow-head bastion, the first in the country. Much of the stone used came from the monasteries of Quarr and Beaulieu, recently demolished with many others on Henry's orders. One piece of stone bearing an ecclesiastical carving is still to be seen under the floor of the Long Room.

The first Captain was Richard Udall. In 1556, with William Girling, Captain of the Island, and others, he was involved in a plot which included robbing the Exchequer and seizing the Isle of Wight, (the first attempt at UDI?!). Some of the conspirators escaped, a few were pardoned, but Udall and eight others were tried and executed.

A Government Survey was carried out in 1559 which listed all householders and boat owners in the Borough of Yarmouth. The number of houses listed was twenty-six which means that the population was probably no more than 100. Many of the names recorded

survived in Yarmouth for the next two to three hundred years but only one still exists, that of Wavill (now Wavell).

The Sixth Charter, granted by Elizabeth I in 1560, is a particularly attractive document and includes a sketch of the Queen.

The completion of the Castle in 1547 brought peace and security to Yarmouth and the population began to increase dramatically. Since that date there have been no further hostile invasions.

1544	Town reputed to have again been burned down by the French and the two churches destroyed Date unsure but best authority quotes this 35th year of Henry VIII's reign.
1544	Church of St. John the Baptist at east end of town rebuilt.
1545	The sinking of the "Mary Rose" was followed by the decision to build Yarmouth Castle and others.
1547	Castle operational. Built on site of church destroyed by French.
1556	Richard Udall (or Ewdale), Captain of the Castle, committed to the Tower for treason.
1559	Survey taken of the town and inhabitants. Number of houses - 26.
1560	Sixth Charter granted by Elizabeth I.
1584	Representation in Parliament increased from one to two.

## 17<sup>th</sup> Century

As the town became more prosperous so a struggle for power developed. To become a Member of Parliament had a cash value and greed became the principal motivation. Many of the representatives were not even local men and there were no elections, just cash payments to the town council - hence the Governor's letter to the Mayor saying that he himself would select the representatives and the subsequent struggle by the Mayor and the Burgesses to retain control. However, the seeds of corruption had already been sown and were beginning to grow. The Great Charter of 1609 may have been an attempt to arrest this growth. In addition to confirming the status of the town as a Free Borough with a Common Seal and a Mace, the town was granted a market to be held every Wednesday and an annual fair on St, James' Day (25 July), the eve before and the day after.

The church of St. John the Baptist, at the east end of the town, was decaying, and in 1614 construction of the present church of St. James was commenced. It was consecrated in 1626. Sir John Oglander, the historian, attended the service and has left a full account of it. St. John's was demolished in 1635.

In 1629 Sir John Oglander led a deputation to the King with a plea to make Yarmouth and Freshwater into islands for defence purposes. The King made sympathetic noises but nothing was done until 1662 when a moat was cut through from the Solent to the marshes.

For two years Yarmouth was without contact with the rest of the Island, except by boat, until a drawbridge was erected in 1664. This was still in use when Charles I visited Yarmouth in 1671 but no record has been found of its dismantling.

During the Civil War the Island was strongly Royalist so during the subsequent Commonwealth period (1649-1660) Cromwell kept a large garrison here at the Castle. However, it never experienced a shot fired in anger and by 1670 it had become the residence of the Governor of the Island.

The appointment of Sir Robert Holmes as Governor of the Island in 1668 was an important event in Yarmouth's history as he made the town his home when in the Island. Holmes brought stability to Yarmouth and control of the town remained in his hands until his death. By the end of the century the population had increased to about 400.

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| 1601      | The Governor of the Island informed the Mayor and Burgesses that he himself will select the two representatives of Yarmouth to attend the forthcoming Parliament.   |
| 1609      | The Seventh Charter, known as the Great Charter, was granted by James I.  |
| 1614-1626 | The present church of St. James was built. Consecrated in 1626.   |
| 1629      | A plan was put forward by Sir John Oglander to convert Yarmouth into an island by cutting through the narrow neck of land between the Solent and the Draft Haven (Thorley Marshes) to the east of the town. This was eventually done in 1662. |
| 1630      | A fleet of nine ships carrying immigrants to the New World assembled in Yarmouth Roads. The leader of the party, John Winthrop, subsequently became Governor of New England.  |
| 1635      | Church of St. John Baptist unsafe. Decision by town to demolish it.   |
| 1640      | Sir John Oglander, an Island historian who lived at Nunwell and who had represented Yarmouth in Parliament, quarrelled with the Mayor and Corporation.  |
| 1647      | Charles I visited the town and was entertained at Thorley by Alice, wife of Capt. John Urry.  |
| 1648      | In December Charles I passed through Yarmouth as a prisoner en route from Carisbrooke to Hurst Castle and, eventually, London.  |
| 1660      | Charles II presented his hand mace to the town in appreciation of Yarmouth's loyalty to his father.   |
| 1662      | A passage was cut to the east of the town between the Solent and Thorley Brook to make Yarmouth an island. An   |

old map of 1610 shows ships still anchoring in the Haven at that time.

- 1664 A drawbridge was installed to connect the town to the rest of the Island. The Mill causeway was built to seal off Thorley Haven, perhaps to form a mill pond, also, possibly, the first (wooden) tide mill was built at this time.
- 1668 Sir Robert Holmes became Governor of the Island and decided to live in Yarmouth at the Castle. He reduced its size, filled in the moat and built himself a house (now the George Hotel) on the edge of it.
- 1671-1675 Charles II stayed in Yarmouth with his friend, Sir Robert Holmes.
- 1679 The Church clock, made by Nicholas Paris of Warwick, was installed, also the single bell presented by Sir Richard Mason.
- 1692 1<sup>st</sup> November, Sir Robert Holmes died.
- 1693 Holmes Chapel built in St. James' Church.

## 18<sup>th</sup> Century

With the death of Sir Robert Holmes in 1692 the struggle for power revived and the town entered a phase of moral and political decay. This rapidly developed into a battle between the Holmes family and a faction led by Anthony Morgan of Wolverton Manor. During the 18th Century the population fell to about 240.

An indication of the corruption which existed was the election of Benjamin Leigh as Mayor for the year 1763. Only two Burgesses were present at the meeting, Leigh and the retiring Mayor, Thomas Lord Holmes (Sir Robert Holmes grandson). The plaque on the front of the Town Hall commemorates this election. In the following year the same two changed places and Thomas Lord Holmes became Mayor again.

On 18th October 1784 Lieut. Cunningham Crooke was invited to dinner at "The George" following a meeting of the Court Leet (viz. twelve "elete" citizens elected as town arbiters for the day). After dinner, thinking that the Town Chest contained wine for his further consumption, he took it back to his ship in Yarmouth Roads. The Town records were never recovered, though two years later a fair copy of the Minute Book for the years 1710-1785 was returned. Action was taken against Crooke and damages of £10,000 claimed but the Court awarded only £500 to the Corporation.

There has been a tide mill at Yarmouth since the 17th Century but the present Mill was built in 1793 by William Porter, a colourful character from Newport. Porter was a self-made man who could neither read nor write and Yarmouth Mill was his last venture. The Newport Bank, which had financed him, took fright at the extent of his empire and withdrew their support and he was ruined. Steam power was introduced later to supplement the weaker tides and was certainly predominant in 1875.

At the end of the 18th Century there were six inns in Yarmouth:-

The George (named after George III)  
The Queen's Head (now The King's Head)  
The Bull's Head (now The Bugle)  
The Wheatsheaf  
The Whyte Lion (now a private residence,-Port House in St. James' Street)  
The New Inn (now an antiques shop, Marlborough House, High Street)

The town had four gates in the 18th Century:-

The Sea Gate - on the Quay  
The Inner Town Gate, or East Gate - at the top of the High Street  
The Outer Town Gate - at the end of the Common  
The Hither Gate - in St. James' Street near the junction with Tennyson Road, sometimes called the Lithergate

1706            Ferry across the river from Yarmouth to Norton established.

1711            "The Refuge" in the High Street, originally the Hospital of Eremue, was rebuilt by Capt. David Urry.

1752            The Holmes Trust was set up by Thomas Lord Holmes in memory of his son. Small amounts of money are distributed annually on 11th July to poor people in the town and the ceremony is held in the church to this day.

1763            The Town Hall, originally known as the Guildhall, was rebuilt by Thomas Lord Holmes. Date of original unknown--Market house (plain brick building) recorded there 1706.

1764            Thomas Lord Holmes, Governor of the Island, died and his house, adjacent to the Castle, became the George Inn.

1766            Population now 240 in 59 houses.

1784            Lieut. Charles Cunningham Crooke, of His Majesty's Cutter "Expedition," purloined the Town Chest which contained many important town records.

1793            Present Yarmouth Mill was built by William Porter of Newport.

1795            Population now 333 in 63 houses.

1799            George Morland, the artist, stayed at "The George" and painted a portrait of the landlord, Mr. Plumbley. This was subsequently used as the inn sign and a later version is still in use today.

## 19<sup>th</sup> Century

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century was a period of great growth for Yarmouth although there was still apathy in its management with only a few men taking any interest in the town's affairs. There was a growing realisation that all was not well and that a more democratic method of running the town was required. Unfortunately this came too late to avoid the loss of its municipal status.

There were, however, a number of major developments:-

The establishment of the regular ferry service  
The building of the breakwater  
The building of the bridge  
The building of the pier  
The coming of the railway

All these had a profound effect on the town and changed its character. By the end of the Century the population had increased to 948, much the same as it is today.

In September 1875 Mr. J. Blake, the miller, "entertained his workmen and their wives in his commodious steam mill." Steam power had been introduced, certainly by 1845 (old map of that date), to supplement the tidal stream and the mill was still working. It was unoccupied by the time of the 1901 Census.

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| 1809 | The Mount, Yarmouth's largest-ever house, was built by Rev. George Burrard as a Rectory.  |
| 1830 | The first regular steamship ferry to Lymington was inaugurated by the SS Glasgow, a wooden hulled paddle steamer of 17tons. The journey took 30minutes, much the same as today.                           |
| 1831 | The church tower was raised by 30ft,--paid for by Daniel Alexander in memory of his son. Alexander was one of England's most famous architects. He also transformed "The Towers " at this time.           |
| 1832 | The Reform Act deprived Yarmouth of its two Members of Parliament, a privilege held since 1584.   |
| 1836 | Tow Boats were introduced on the ferry crossing. These were towed behind the Glasgow to carry livestock and carriages.  |
| 1841 | The first ever Census gave the population of Yarmouth as 567 in 114 houses. A second boat, the Solent, of 34tons was introduced on the ferry service.   |
| 1843 | The harbour breakwater commenced. Completed in 1847 at a cost of £1200.   |
| 1851 | Alum Bay sand, which had been exported through Yarmouth for glass-making in Cheshire, was supplanted by French sand It had been stored for shipment in the Sand House, now a building in Hayles boatyard. |
| 1855 | The Yarmouth Church School was built at a cost of £1100.  |
| 1859 | Gas works erected adjacent to Mill.   |
| 1860 | The Yar Bridge was opened, a single-track timber toll bridge. Gas works built beside the Mill.  |
| 1862 | Coastguard Cottages and South Street Chapel built.  |

- 1863 The ancient Court Leet was suspended by the Mayor and Corporation "until further notice."
- 1867 The crane, which still stands on the Quay, was donated to the Town by Admiral Ommaney Love.
- 1871 Population 806 in 182 houses.
- 1875 The Castle garrison was withdrawn as being no longer required. The larger guns had been dismantled in 1869.
- 1876 The Pier was opened and served as a terminus for the ferries.
- 1877 One night in August the new gates at the shore end of the Pier were forcibly removed by the townsfolk after complaints that they restricted access to the beach had been ignored.
- 1878 Solent Yacht Club formed with HQ in George Hotel. Remained there until present premises built in 1894. First sewage pipes laid in Yarmouth.
- 1889 The Freshwater, Yarmouth and Newport Railway opened in July.
- 1890 The Corporation of Yarmouth was wound up on 27th February having been declared a "Rotten Borough" by the Municipal Corporations Commission in 1880. The Yarmouth Town Trust was appointed by the Charity Commissioners in 1891 to act on their behalf and to manage the town property, the harbour, the quay and the pier.
- 1894 The Parish Council was formed under the Parish Councils Act of that year. Pier Square was formed by demolishing old houses in Bank Street.
- 1895 The Isle of Wight and Lymington Steam Laundry Co. Ltd established in Heytesbury Road. Generated its own electricity which was then introduced into the town.
- 1897 Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee was celebrated in August. Electricity from the Steam Laundry was used in the Square for the first time to illuminate the dancing. In the same year the George Inn was extended and renamed The Pier Hotel.

## **20<sup>th</sup> Century**

The Parish Council, established in 1894, changed its status to that of Town Council on 1st April 1974 after a special resolution to that effect passed at the Parish Council meeting on 5th March. The Chairman, Mr. D.J.G. Smith, became the first Mayor. This change of status was made under the provisions of the Local Govt. Act 1972 which allowed Parish Councils to become Town Councils if they so desired.

The first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw the beginning of the breakdown of Victorian society with its rigid class distinctions and the unequal distribution of wealth. This culminated in the 1914 -18 war which heralded the social revolution which is still ongoing. Traffic increased and tourism became increasingly important to the town. Nevertheless it is

still a working port with a small fishing fleet and the regular ferry service to and from Lymington on the mainland. It is also a popular yachting harbour with many resident boats and, in the summer, even more visiting craft.

- 1900 Electric light was installed in the church, the first church on the Island to be so lit. Piped water to the town was also installed about the same time.
- 1901 Population now 948.
- 1908 The sinking of HMS Gladiator and SS St. Paul in collision off Black Rock. Thirty lives lost.
- 1925 The first lifeboat, stationed at Yarmouth the previous year, was christened by the Prince of Wales. It was named B.A.S.P. these being the initials of the donors, Blackburn, Armstrong, Smart and Price.
- 1934 Yarmouth Pier and Harbour Commissioners established under the Yarmouth Harbour Act 1931 and took over the responsibility for the harbour and the pier. The Town Trust was reformed under the Charity Commission with responsibility for the Town Hall, the Common, the Recreation Ground, Mill Terrace and the town's artefacts and archives.
- 1934 The Yar Bridge was bought by the Isle of Wight Council and freed from tolls.
- 1938 Introduction of an improved ferry service with a "Roll on / roll off" ship, the "Lymington," (known as the "Crab" because of its ability to go sideways) to replace the tow boats. New slipway built.
- 1948 Population now given as 850 in 200 houses.
- 1953 The closure of the railway, never having made a profit.
- 1965 The visit of HM The Queen when she visited the Island to install Earl Mountbatten as Governor of the Island. She arrived by hovercraft which broke down on the return journey.
- 1966 The Mount was demolished to make way for the new main road out of the town to the east.
- 1974 The Parish Council became the Town Council.
- 1977 A new high-speed Arun class lifeboat entered service (to be itself replaced by the latest Severn class in the year 2000).
- 1987 Planning for the present Yar Bridge was started in 1963 but, because of planning disputes, was not opened to traffic until this year on 25 September.

## **The Mace and the Seal of the Old Borough of Yarmouth**

The mace is silver gilt and approx 19 inches long overall. It was presented to Yarmouth by Charles II in recognition of the town's loyalty to his father, Charles I.

The handle is designed after the style of an old battle mace. On the head are the letters C.R. and the Royal Coat of Arms which at that time included the French fleur de lys. On the handle are the initials C.R.II and the date 1660. It was the King's hand sceptre.

It has been established that the ship shown on the seal is a heraldic representation of a vessel of the Elizabethan Navy, as also are the globular shapes hanging from the yards. These are supposed to show furled sails.

The letters S . COMMU . DE EREMUE can be translated as "The Common Seal of the Borough of Yarmouth" but no-one who has been consulted has given a meaning to the letters HG. Some regard them as being an error.

*(The above description is from A.G.Cole's book "Yarmouth, Isle of Wight")*

## **Yarmouth Mill**

The Mill causeway was built in 1664 to seal off Thorley Haven which had silted up. This would have formed a mill pond for the first (wooden) mill, believed to have been built at this time.

The present Mill was built in 1793 by William Porter of Newport. He was a colourful character, a self-made man who could neither read nor write. Yarmouth Mill was his last venture as the Newport Bank, which had financed him, took fright at the extent of his empire and withdrew its support. Porter was ruined.

Steam power was introduced at a later date, certainly by 1845 (old map of that year), to supplement the weaker tides. The remains of the old brick chimney can be seen to this day at the north-east corner of the building. In September 1875 Mr J. Blake, the miller, "entertained his workers and their wives in his commodious steam mill".

An agreement dated 10 October 1899, held by the County Record Office, Newport, (ref..ELD87/38/11/55) between James Blake, merchant of Yarmouth, and Alan Bradbury, coal merchant of Southampton, was for "the lease of a further part of Yarmouth Mill for six months and for the purchase of the stock in trade of the Mill" The adjacent gas works had been built in 1859. A further document (ref. ELD87/38/11/66) dated 19 March 1900 concerns the transfer of the legal estate, including the Mill, mortgaged by James Blake for £1641. In the 1901 Census the Mill is shown as unoccupied.

In later years the Mill became a private residence and was eventually owned by A.J.P.Taylor, the historian and TV personality. It is still owned by his sons, Giles and Sebastian, but it now comprises a number of holiday apartments for renting.

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