

# Stamford's Millstream

*Local resident Nicholas Rudd-Jones looks into the history, construction, wildlife and ongoing conservation of this fabulous asset for the town*

**F**OR A QUARTER OF A CENTURY, my life has been intertwined with that of the millstream. It was the thing that clinched my decision to move to the home we live in today, gazing down to the bottom of the garden and watching the millstream flowing (slowly) through it. And the

thought of being a riparian owner conjured up images of rights and privileges, although in fact it has really just turned out to mean plopping into the bottom in my waders each year and wrenching out the reeds to stop the whole thing clogging up.

And for 24 of those 25 years, I felt certain in my mind that the millstream I waded into was the same one that fed the King's Mill, mentioned back in 1086 in the Domesday Book, where it still is today in King's Mill Lane.

But at a St Peter's Community group event, our neighbour John broke the news to me: 'You do realise that it is not the original millstream at the bottom of your garden?' I was shocked, almost disbelieving, and decided the very next day to start the search. And, sure enough, it turned out John was right.



**LEFT:** By the old Mill today, with the two millstreams visible.



to create the three new fields that lie between the drainage ditch and the current millstream – today you can still see the boundaries that separate the fields, but in 1933 the stewardship was passed across to the Freeman of the Meadows, and the fields now look like an integral part of the Meadows.

**River Rerouting**

River rerouting is something that happened at fairly regular intervals throughout our history:

1) William Reyner is recorded in the 1274–75 Hundred Rolls as having diverted the River Welland close to the town. ‘They say that Robert de Aunby encroached upon the River

Welland within the liberty of the abbot of Peterborough in the town of Stamford by raising a wall in the same river further out than he ought by 20 feet in length and two feet in width, to the loss and hurt of the town of 12d. a year.’

2) Old maps show all sorts of twists and turns that are not there today, as the river has been straightened – most notably ‘Brand’s Canal’ in the 1930s (see 5, below), which straightened the river and left the ‘oxbow’ of Minnow Pond that townsfolk still have memories of to this day as a place they swam in as kids.

3) When the railway line was built in the 1840s they rerouted parts of the river to ensure that it didn’t go under the railway embankment.



## Natural Landscape Change

Furthermore, natural landscape change has been at play throughout history. As rivers reach large meadows with little gradient change from one end to the other, so they are more likely to burst their banks in flood conditions and create secondary flows. This is called river braiding (fast changing), or anastomosing (semi-permanent), and when you look at old maps you can see this has happened many times to the river.

Take a look at the county boundary between Lincolnshire and the counties to the south, and you will see that the river now takes a very different route from the one it must have had when the county boundaries were first formed, when they would have run along the main river.

## Power Struggles: the Origin of King's Mill

Stamford's mill was originally known as North Mill when it was recorded in the Domesday Book. It changed its name to the King's Mill when it became the property of King John in the early 13th century, as part of Stamford Castle. It seems, however, that it was never a very powerful or efficient mill. The 'ancient' millstream was in the middle of the meadow at its lowest point, and it regularly flooded. Also, there is barely any drop in height from where the old millstream took off water from the old river to the mill, so it must have produced a rather puny flow.

In 1561, Queen Elizabeth I granted Sir William Cecil of Burghley House ownership of the mill. Residents were legally required to grind all their grain at King's Mill, leading to long-running disputes when the mill's capacity proved insufficient for the growing population. And rather than wait long periods for their corn and malt to be ground, they surreptitiously used other mills, especially Hudd's Mill downstream and Tinwell Mill upstream.

*'We used to call the wood area and the steep drop as the millstream gets closer to the weir "The Fairy Glen" – we would often meet up there and play games as young children'*

Worse still, the banks and sluices at Hudd's Mill were extended, with the result that 'by often and sudden stoppinge and lettinge downe of the said fludgates and sluices, (King's Mill) had been oftentimes held in by back waters and soe choaked therewith that it was not able to goe'.

And in 1637, William Cecil brought an action against William Robinson, tenant of Tinwell Mill for grinding corn at half the price of King's Mill. To add insult to injury, Robinson had expanded his mill dam, thus depriving

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*OPPOSITE: So many people enjoy the millstream path today. One lovely comment we heard while researching referred to the area shown opposite. 'We used to call the wood area and the steep drop as the millstream gets closer to the weir "The Fairy Glen" – we would often meet up there and play games as young children.'*

*Other comments include: 'I remember happy times swimming and fishing by the little bridge at Water Furlong.' Also: 'In the great flood at Easter 1998 a swan set up a nest in the garden of the Vale House because the waters were so high. Hours of fun for the children watching the cygnets grow. After that there were lots of fish (perhaps because of the flood), so one glorious day we were able to observe an otter swimming round and round eating them.'*







King's Mill of water so 'that oft tymes it cannot grinde for fowre and twentie howers together.' At other times, Robinson would suddenly open his sluice gates 'whereby the waters gushing downe the streame in great quantities with muche violence doe overflowe and breake the Bankes of the saide Earles mill dames'. Consequently, William Cecil had to covenant with a landowner to repair the banks of the new dyke and prevent flooding.

The matter came to a head, and finally The Court of Exchequer decreed that the inhabitants and residents of Stamford must bring their corn and grain to be ground only at King's Mill, with the critical qualification that 'if it cannot bee ground there within eight and ffortie howers that then they may take it awaye to bee ground elsewhere'.

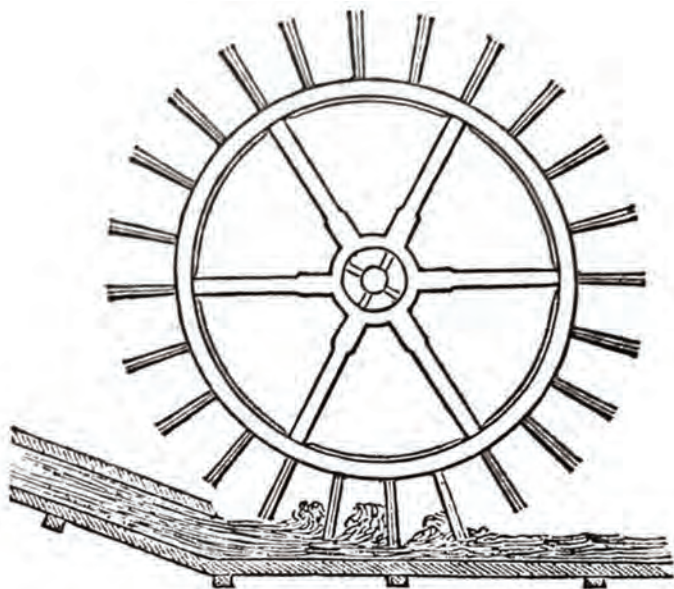
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**BELOW: An undershot waterwheel.**

## THE CURRENT MILL & MILLSTREAM (1640–PRESENT)

That qualifier clearly spurred William Cecil into action so that there would no longer be a backlog that allowed customers to 'shop elsewhere'. He commissioned a much bigger mill (see ⑥, p3) slightly to the west of the previous mill (see ②, p3), with a header pond to power two undershot tandem waterwheels, on the north and south gables; and got to building a new, much more powerful millstream. This effectively transformed the mill from a 'single track' into a 'dual carriageway' in terms of energy generation.

The new (and current) millstream, constructed during the 1630s, was placed at the edge of the meadow where quite a marked slope begins (see ⑦, p3), and it's never flooded by the river overflowing. And over its much longer length – about a mile – there is a drop of 15 feet, thus ensuring a much more sustained flow.



# Melancholy Walk

## WHAT'S IN A NAME?

**The first mention of the name that I can find is in the 1797 Burghley map, where it is referred to as ‘Melancholy Walk on the Bank’, which is rather evocative. The atmosphere down here would often have felt melancholic, with fog sweeping across the meadows and a rather inhospitable feeling outside the safety of the town’s walls. Dark, misty, uninviting, going nowhere. A grim dog-walking day, basically!**

*There is no definitive answer to why the name was chosen, but these are two theories:*

1) *The Executioner’s Route:* The path was the final route taken by prisoners being led from the town to the gallows outside the town’s walls. The name captures the ‘melancholy’ state of the condemned individual on their way to execution. The problem with this theory is that the gallows were situated up on Tinwell Road, so this would have been rather a long diversion. Unless, of course, it was just a clever convict who wanted to live a little bit longer...

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***BELOW: Out  
with the dog on  
Melancholy Walk.***

*‘Dark, misty, uninviting,  
going nowhere’*

2) *Melancholic Contemplation:* The path goes below the ruins of the Austinian monastery and monks were renowned for being contemplative. In the Middle Ages, ‘melancholy’ was often referred to as the ‘monk’s disease’. And Robert Burton’s bestseller ‘The Anatomy of Melancholy’, first published in 1621, would have been at the height of its popularity when the current millstream was built (and presumably the path alongside it) in the 1630s. Nature, for Burton, was key for alleviating symptoms of melancholy.

*I’ll let you decide which of the above you prefer!  
Personally, for me it’s the second theory.*



## MAN-MADE, NATURAL OR HYBRID?

A millstream<sup>1</sup> is usually a man-made channel, whereas a mill river is the natural river, often modified, that provides the water. Very interestingly, in the 1797 Burghley Map, the old millstream is referred to as ‘the ancient millstream’, whilst the new/current millstream is labelled the ‘Mill River’. Could it be that at least part of this route runs along an old watercourse? Also, the 1842 Tithe Map below (full title: ‘Plan of the titheable lands in the Parish of All Saints with Saint Peter’s in the Borough of Stamford and County of Lincoln’) in fact labels the millstream upstream as the River Welland (A), which comes as a bit of a surprise. It is therefore

not clear as to whether the millstream from King’s Mill to the weir is entirely man-made or not, but these are my thoughts:

**First stretch:** From the King’s Mill to the end of Melancholy Walk (B), where it meets with Water Furlong – all man-made. Why? Totally straight, substantially banked up, well above the level of the meadows. Melancholy Walk, alongside it, was likely created at the same time.

**Second stretch:** Water Furlong to the Broadeng Bridge coppice (C). Harder to say. This section is more sinuous, and, in some ways, more ‘natural-looking’, but it might be that it is just following the contours like a contour canal does. It is also embanked in most places, and is well above the level of the meadows. It could well be that this

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**BELOW: 1842 Tithe Map.**





second stretch is a hybrid – in other words, that there was a medieval watercourse or drainage ditch that was channelled and embanked to improve flow. Hopefully we will find out more as the research deepens.

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One curious thing is that on the 1842 Tithe Map you can see that there were two parts to the millstream just to the west of Water Furlong (D). The occupier of Plot 18 was an ozier (small willow trees, coppiced and the long twigs used for basket making); and Plot 86 also produced wood. Could it be that in previous centuries this had been something of a 'brake' to reduce the risk of flooding along Melancholy Walk (the dyke)? When you look at it today it is still a marshy area, with willow trees (no longer pollarded!)

**Third stretch:** From the start of the Broadeng coppice to the weir (A). The millstream cuts deep into the slope here, and rises more sharply to meet the weir. I have always thought this was man-made, or certainly man-augmented, to give some extra height rather than joining the river at Broadeng Bridge (E). More research needed!

## THE 20TH CENTURY

The current mill stopped working just before World War I, c.1913, when the last tenants, Molesworth and Springthorpe, vacated the premises. The buildings were subsequently used as workshops and then as a dairy. Part of the mill (the Granary) was converted into a Scope Day Care Centre in the mid-1960s, and at this

time the millpool was filled in and replaced with a car park. The buildings behind that housed the millwheels and they were converted into a private home in the 1990s. Much of the mill machinery has been retained as a feature. The granary is now the office of Bishopsgate Corporate Finance.

## The Last Miller

The last miller was a Mr Croft, who was the subject of an article in the *Stamford Mercury*:

*The mill wheel was worked by water power, and, every time he wanted to grind, he had to walk through the meadows to the sluice gates and open them to provide the volume of water necessary to turn the mill wheel. When he had finished he had to go and close them again. 'Sometimes the water used to come over the tops of my boots in bad weather,' said Mr Croft, who recalled that when there were floods he had to go and open the gates wide.*

## Gradual Decline of the Millstream

From the 1910s began the gradual decline of the millstream as a free-flowing waterway now that its maintenance was no longer crucial. A further big change came with the de-maining of the millstream as a consequence of the installation of the Rutland Water extraction facility at Tinwell Pumping Station in the early 1970s. The millstream was cut off from the river, and although a small pump was installed in 1973, there was far less flow than there had been previously. The waterway was officially 'de-mained' in 1975, which then meant that no one was responsible any more for its upkeep. Stamford Town Council agreed to pay for the pump's electricity in the early days, but as the bills increased, they were forced to back away from this commitment.

Inevitably, once the commercial imperative to keep the millstream flowing was gone, that



*LEFT: The Mill Pond today and the millstream at the bottom of Austin Friars Lane.*



flow reduced to a trickle, and the maintenance fell into inexorable decline, occasionally delayed a few years by valiant voluntary effort that stopped it disappearing altogether. The only major work done on the millstream in the 20th

century was in the period 1946–48, but this only covered the stretch passing through the Town Meadows. An excavator was used to deepen and widen the channel, and this stretch has been maintained fairly well ever since.

In 1992 Councillor Jefferies did succeed in persuading the District Council to clean and improve the Melancholy Walk stretch, but the problem of water flow remained.

## **THE 21ST CENTURY & STAMFORD MILLSTREAM GROUP**

In the summer of 2002, the Stamford Millstream Group was formed, comprising local residents and interested citizens, to see what could be done. A large amount of voluntary time was put into improving the condition of the millstream, notably by Newage International, Network Scouts and the Burghley Estate.

Anglian Water thoroughly overhauled the pump and cleared out the sump chamber and arranged for the water to flow for six hours a day. This was a critical development without which all other efforts would have been futile. There was also an initiative to install wooden berms in the Melancholy Walk part of the stream, designed to increase flow by reducing width and to improve aquatic habitats. The Freemen of the Meadows have kindly supported these initiatives, and the Skells Trust helped to finance several of them.

## **FROM POWER SUPPLY TO NATURE CORRIDOR**

Of course, the millstream now has an entirely different benefit from when it supplied energy, and that is as a wildlife corridor. It is especially important because it is an ‘edgeland’ between town and country, very worthy of protection

# Wildlife Spotting

*Today the millstream teems with wildlife and is an absolute joy to walk along. Here are some of the species spotted:*

## WILD FLOWERS

Blackthorn, common daisy, creeping buttercup, daffodils, dandelion, ground ivy, lesser celandine, lords and ladies, primroses, red dead nettle, snowdrops, violets, white dead nettle. Bluebells, too, in the early summer months.

## BIRDS

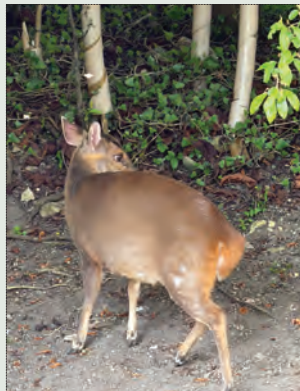
Blackbird, blackcap, Cetti's warbler, chiffchaff, dunnock, egret, goldfinch, great tit, kingfisher, linnet, long-tailed tit, magpie, mallard, moorhen, red kite, redstart, robin, siskin, skylark, sparrow, sparrowhawk, willow warbler, woodpigeon and wren.

## BUTTERFLIES

Brimstone, Comma, Holly Blue, Large White, Meadow Brown, Orange Tip, Painted Lady, Peacock, Red Admiral, Small Skipper, Small Tortoiseshell, Small White and Speckled Wood.

## ANIMALS

Badgers (tracks), frogs, moles, muntjac, roe deer, squirrels, rabbits and water voles.



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*RIGHT: Egret, muntjac, water vole and kingfisher photographed along the millstream.*



and nurturing, as it is accessible to so many people and brings nature right into the heart of the town. It creates a ‘green lung’ of community wellbeing. I do a dog walk just about every day of the year along its route and I never cease to be amazed by the sheer abundance of wildlife that is drawn to the water, the tree cover and the wild flowers.

The goal of the Stamford Millstream Group today is to bring all of the strands of support together in order to ensure that the flow

continues to be maintained (currently the pump is working fine) and making sure that the route remains walkable and to help make it a haven for wildlife.

In 2026, there was a further generous donation by the Skells Trust, which has enabled the Group to: carry out more clearance along the millstream route, making it much more accessible between Water Furlong and the weir; plant more wild flowers on the banks; and create interpretation boards.

# Thanks

## **Special thanks for help with the conservation and maintenance of the millstream:**

*Anglian Water*

*Burghley House Preservation Trust*

*Cecil Estate Family Trust/Ceres Property*

*East Mercia Rivers Trust – Rachel Butler*

*Environment Agency – Andy Sadler*

*Freemen of the Meadows – Neil Scholes*

*St Peter’s Community Group, the grant holder of the Skells Trust grant*

*Stamford Town Council*

*The Civic Society*

*The millstream volunteers past and present, with special mention to the late Michael Dronfield*

*The Skells Trust*

## **Special thanks for help with this leaflet:**

*Curator of Burghley House, Jon Culverhouse*

*Stamford Local History Society*

*Stamford Town Council Heritage Team*

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## *Get in touch and volunteer*

**If you can offer voluntary time to help maintain the millstream, we’d love to hear from you. Please contact Keith Norman, the Chair of the Stamford Millstream Group, at [keith@keithnorman.com](mailto:keith@keithnorman.com)**