

Exhuming Oldfield

A house detective exercise

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How do you discover the history of a house with no deeds and which is completely absent from local or county archives? Marston Mill, lying in a valley about a mile north of Frome, appears at first glance to be a rather undistinguished miller's house with a large corn grist mill attached to the West end (see Figure 1). No external stonework remains, and estimates of its age varied wildly from Domesday to 17th Century, with a general consensus it was rebuilt sometime in the 18th Century.

A feature of the house is the main sitting room, which has a fireplace with a massive 11 feet [ft] (3.35m) bressumer apparently in situ on two equally massive stone piers. The room also has three wide-chamfered oak ceiling beams - wide chamfers being a characteristic of the medieval era, so in 2014 we commissioned a dendrochronological examination of these and other timbers. The ceiling beams had too few rings, while the roof timbers returned a date of 1746-7; but rather excitingly the bressumer beam was dated as 1506-1507, the end of the reign of Henry VII. Fireplaces in the early 16th Century were found only in houses of importance. Then an ex-English Heritage building auditor identified what we had thought was a buttress, as a disused external chimney breast, and behind some panelling he found the outline of a second fireplace which had been removed.

We concluded the western half of the house must have been residential before the mill was built, and this explained a number of other anomalies: the outline of an opening in the western gable with the sill at first floor level and too small to be a door, was most likely a window for a single storey hall; a sharp-angled 'A' frame embedded in the back of the central fireplace would have been part of the roof of this hall; and, most significant of all, a line of vertical stones adjacent to the central chimney stack marked the end of this hall building, showing that it must have pre-dated the 1507 fireplace. So now it seemed possible we had a 70 ft (21.3m) long medieval house with two fireplaces, the west end of which was a 40 ft x 20 ft (12m x 6m) single-storey hall built sometime earlier than 1507. Judging by a 5 ft (1.5m) high plinth at the eastern end, this hall would have had an attached barn to house animals, which was converted around 1507 into a kitchen with a great chamber above.

It seemed inconceivable that a house of this status should have escaped any record, so we decided to change tack and investigate why the property was part of the manor of Marston Bigot, more than four miles away. Scouring a range of old maps, we found the property was labelled Marston Mill on the 1886 Ordnance Survey, but the 1839 Marston Tithe Map, Greenwood's 1822 map, and Day's 1782 map did not record a name. The 1790 Dorset and Somerset Canal Act map called it Mr. Cooke's Mill, but none of these names elicited hits in an archive search.

Figure 1

Marston Mill House and Mill from the north, the Mill lies in a valley about a mile north of Frome.



However, a Frome Society map showing Frome prior to 1750, showed the area around our mill labelled as 'Oldfield'. Using this as a search term immediately produced scores of hits, amongst them a magnificent 1819 map of Orchardleigh (Figure 2) showing our mill as Old Field Mill (sic). After a day spent at Taunton Records Office we were able to establish the history of the mill and its owners back to 1603. We also found that prior to 1800 it had been a fulling (or tucking) mill, not a corn mill. But something continued to puzzle us. Our mill is set around 100 yards (91.4m) south of the river Mells, requiring a 450 yard (411m) leat and 150 yard (137m) tail race to be excavated to provide the water. Why build a mill so far from the river, when there were perfectly good sites on the river itself? Indeed, one site, known as Five Hatches, around 170 yards (155m) north and east of our house, looked like a perfect site for a mill, and showed clear signs of a building.

Then a local antiquarian, Clive Wilkes, unearthed a 1754 deed in which Richard Champneys and Joseph Jeffries, owners of Orchardleigh and Oldfield Mill respectively, proposed the building of a channel to irrigate the fields further to the east. This channel commenced at Five Hatches (hence the name), but what was significant was that the deed specified that the channel should run from 'the millpond'. This confirmed that Five Hatches was indeed the site of the original mill. The mill building at our house was probably constructed as a new purpose-built fulling mill, when the house was rebuilt in 1747. This suggests that prior to 1747, Oldfield was a hall house with a mill on the Mells Brook, which fits very well a 1540 quote from Leyland:

*"... and 'about 2 myles off I cam to a Botome, where there an other Broke ran into Frome. And in this Botome dwell certain good clothiars havynge fayre Howsys and Tukkyng Myles."*²

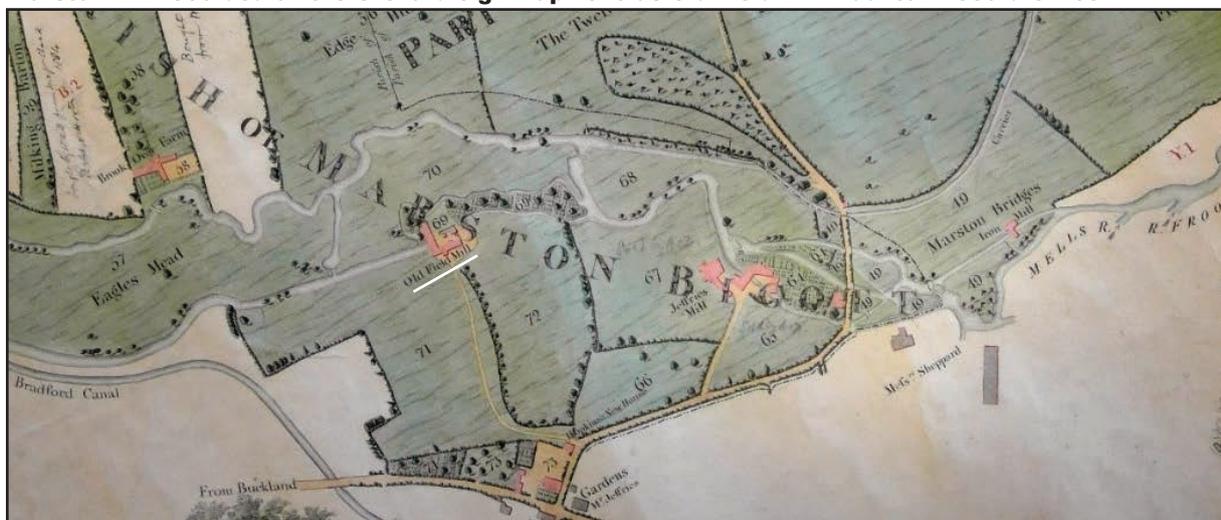
There is no mention of Oldfield in Domesday, so the next question we wanted to answer was who might have built this 'fayre howse' and mill? A quote from the Cirencester Cartullary, in McGarvie's book on Marston Bigot, provided an answer:

*"Richard is described as of 'Aldfeld', (Oldfield) in a charter dated between 1225 and 1233, in which he gave some land and a mill there to Cirencester Abbey... Richard lived in Spring Gardens, anciently called Oldfield, perhaps before succeeding to the main estate"*³

So we now had found an estate called Oldfield occupied by Richard Bigot, which in the early part of the 13th Century had a house and a mill. The house would have been the single-storey hall, probably thatched with a central fireplace and a smoke vent above. An outline drawing of what Oldfield Hall might have looked like is shown in Figure 3, the western hall is denoted in black, the eastern barn blue and those parts still extant shown in red.

Finally, the name: why was the estate already called Oldfield in 1223? A possible explanation comes from an 1160 reference to Odo FitzRichard, Lord of the Manor of Marston, who gifted the tithes of a Marston parishioner called 'Robert of Buckland' to Cirencester Abbey. McGarvie speculates that Robert of Buckland's holding was in Spring Gardens⁴, so possibly he was a scion of the Bigot (Bigod) family,

Figure 2
Marston Mill recorded on the Orchardleigh map 1819 as Old Field Mill: Taunton Record Office.



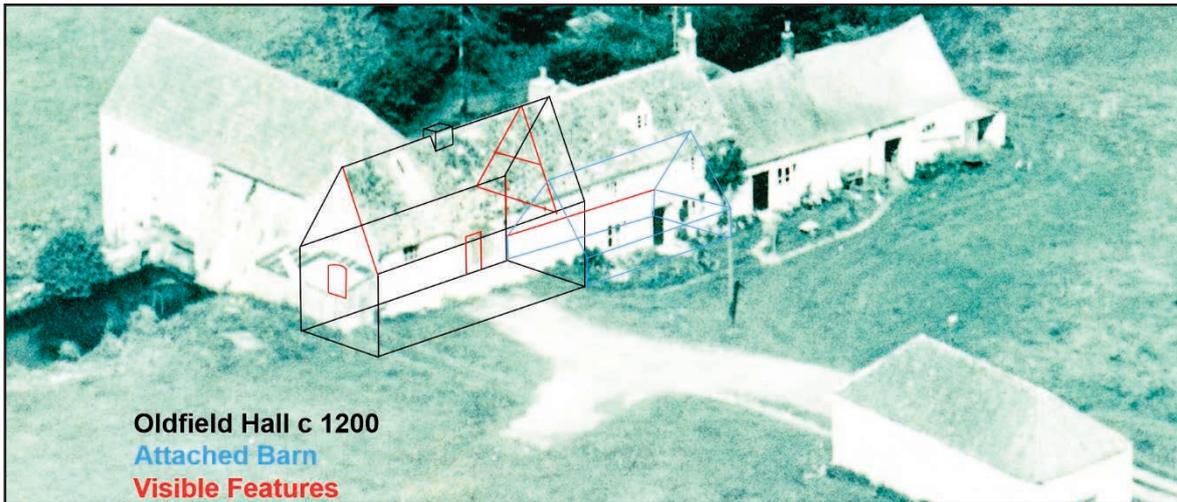


Figure 3

Marston Mill in the 19th century showing the outline of 13th century Oldfield Hall (provenance unknown).

whose increased influence towards the end of the 12th Century enabled his son Richard to acquire the Manor of Marston. Their original home would then have been referred to as their 'Old Field'.

So we now think the development of our 'undistinguished' house and mill looks like this:

1. An area of woodland owned by the Marston Manor was cleared sometime in the 11th or 12th Century. In 1160 it was let to Robert of Buckland.
2. At some point a stone hall with a barn was erected on it and a flour mill built nearby on the Mells Brook.
3. By the early 13th Century it was known as Aldfeld and occupied by Richard Bigot, who between 1225 and 1233 inherited the Marston Bigot Estate from his childless brother Robert and donated the proceeds of Aldfeld to Cirencester Abbey.
4. Sometime later the mill was converted to a tucking (fulling) mill.
5. Around 1507 a chimney stack was added to the north elevation of the hall, and the barn was converted to a kitchen with a Great Chamber above.
6. At some point before 1605 the freehold of Oldfield and its two fulling mills was acquired by Orchardleigh. In 1630 it was let to John Joyce, but by 1713 it was referred to as a farm and let to Joyce's daughter-in-law, Susannah Jeffries.
7. In 1747, Susannah Jeffries son Joseph dug a new leat across Eagles Mead, and erected a purpose-built fulling mill attached to the old medieval hall, which was incorporated into it. The rest of the house was extended and became the miller's residence.
8. By 1819 Old Field Mill (sic) was leased to a William Hopkins and was described as a 'Factory and Flour Mill'.
9. Sometime before 1863 the mill became known as Marston Mill, and a single storey stable extension was built on the eastern end.
10. In 1899 a new turbine was installed by Gilkes driving three mill wheels.
11. Finally, after the droughts of 1975 and 1976, the mill went out of business, and the property reverted to being a house in 1977.

Reviewing this, there is a strong evidence that Marston Mill conceals a Hall House significantly older than 1507. This lies on the site of a mill which in 1819 was called Old Field Mill, in an area known as Oldfield. We know that Oldfield (Aldfeld) was in 1223 home to Richard Bigot, and had a mill on a part of the Mells known as Five Hatches. But as yet, other than a 13th Century pottery jug handle excavated from the foundations there is nothing to prove the date of the remaining parts of the Hall. Archaeological investigation will continue in 2017 under the auspices of BACAS.

End notes

- A much-extended version of this article appears in The Frome Society for Local Studies Yearbook 2016.
 2 Somersetshire Archaeological and Natural History Society's Proceedings 1887, p.129
 3 McGarvie, M. (1987) The Book of Marston Bigot p.28
 4 Op. Cit. p.27