

Andrew Osborne, Recollections on ‘the stream’¹, December 2022

I was born in 1931 in Faversham. My father was vicar at The Brents and Davington from 1929 to 1964.

In 1939 I was a pupil at St Ann’s Preparatory School (where Spillet Close is now, off School Road). For the first term after war was declared schools in Faversham were closed, because they didn’t have air raid shelters. Instead, once a week we went to 14 Forbes Road to collect our work. My mother had a degree (she was probably the first married woman in Faversham to have one) so she taught us in the morning and in the afternoon we were let off the leash to entertain ourselves.

I’m not quite sure why we started going up to the lake at White Hill. I was 8 years old and my sister was 6 and we used to walk from The Brents up to White Hill almost every afternoon. We were introduced to it by a boy whose parents ran the store in Plantation Road (I can’t remember his name). We used to spend the afternoon dragging watercress out of the stream – just because it was fun clearing the stream. The lake was quite big. The remains of it can be faintly seen in Lorenden Park.

There was a footpath from the lake at White Hill to Ospringe, you can see it on the old maps. Part of the footpath ran through a hop garden which stretched to the banks of the stream. The stream wound down the valley, (apart from a section parallel to Water Lane where it must have been diverted and was very straight) until it crossed back under Water Lane to the east side of the road. The stream was a couple of metres wide and about 3ft deep, all year round.

The footpath was closed in the 1970s because of hop wilt and the hop garden was removed a little later.

A spur of the stream ran from a spring at the mortuary at Ospringe Church to join the main stream then flowed behind Queen’s Court, passed Mill Pond to Water Lane in Ospringe village.

From the Mill Pond to Ospringe Street water ran down Water Lane, all year round. It was about a foot deep. The stream then crossed under the road and railway, passed the Gunpower Mills² (to the south of the Lower Road) and then ran underneath Lower Road.

The stream then ran into the watercress beds, which had been the head pond to supply the Chart Mills, and then passed across a ford at West Street and then under a small bridge into Stonebridge Pond which fed four more mills at the head of the creek. The mills were demolished in the early 1940s to avoid the Germans thinking that they were working and bombing them.

¹ In my youth the stream was never known as the Westbrook but a name that has been given to it by newcomers to the town.

² In the 1960s two men who were cutting the wheel at the Gunpowder Mills at Ospringe up for scrap were killed when the walls of the building fell in and killed them.

Abstraction

Before the 1960s Faversham's drinking water came from one borehole at Copton, supplied by The Faversham Water Company. In 1963 the Faversham Water Company was taken over by the Mid Kent Water company and they started to abstract right up through the Ospringe valley. It was at this stage that water started to disappear from the Westbrook. The only fresh water that supplies the stream now (apart from a few small springs along its course) is that from the artesian springs in the willow beds behind The Knole.

The surface water from the nearby section of the motorway also feeds into the stream through a conduit on Water Lane. This conduit re-joins the stream at Chart Mills through the brick retaining wall on the opposite bank to the mills.

Many people think the water dried up when the motorway was built (in the late 50s/early 60s), however this isn't right. The motorway engineers diverted the stream into the conduit which they constructed under Water Lane so water disappeared from Water Lane, but it was still flowing underground.

It was following increased abstraction after 1963 by the Mid Kent Water Company which led to the stream drying up.

In the 1960s/70s the cress beds upstream of Chart Mills was drained to build the St Ann's Estate. At around this time I worked on the design and rebuilding of Chart Mills, now a Scheduled Monument and which had fallen into dis-repair through neglect. The grinding stone came from Bysingwood, or the Pond, and the Royal Engineers (through a training scheme) made the axel vanes and the bearings. Fullers remade the timber wheel and built the structure and Seagers Foundry made all the teeth.

There was a water pump which pumped water from Chart Mills to St Ann's House. I remember St Ann's house burning down - it was riddled with dry rot. The water pump was probably the reason the building of one mill (Chart Mills) remained but was neglected when mains water was installed in the house.