

Whitchurch Mill in the 1960s

In March 2017, Roger Wright got in touch from London to say he had seen the article about the Mill on the Whitchurch Web and he could tell us something about its history. He had worked at the Mill for three years in the late 1960s, on research and development of products for



the Tube Investments group. He sent the photo here, which he took in August 1967 from the window of his workshop above the waterwheel, looking upstream along the mill leat. A small cabin cruiser can be seen in the distance.

Roger says the whole building was used for industrial purposes at that time and John Dolphin, a director of the company, lived in the adjacent Mill Cottage. His name lives on in the Dolphin Centre across the river in Pangbourne. (The remarkable career of Major John Dolphin CBE in the wartime Special Operations Executive and later in the atomic industry, before he came to Whitchurch, is described [here](#).)

Roger recalls:

“John Dolphin was my boss. His office and that of his secretary Pam Brewer, were at the front of the Mill, above the waterwheel and overlooking the mill pool. The Tube Investments Group, during my time, included a consortium of disparate companies, the main five being: Creda (cookers), Russell Hobbs (toasters), Raleigh (bicycles), Kings (mechanical handling) and Lansing Bagnall (forklift trucks). We had

metalwork and woodwork machinery, modelling shops, illustrators and a drawing office in the Mill and we did R & D work, sometimes secret, for these companies. The classic Metro car body style was created in the Mill, and utilised by Austin-Morris, though not to be seen publicly for another decade.

We were a team of 12 and one of the projects I worked on was a secret electric car, which attracted industrial espionage which I had to fend off. The design was sold and all our records destroyed. Colleagues and I used to test the car along the farm roads to the north of Whitchurch and also at the test track in Chobham, dodging fast military tanks. Other projects were static cycle-exercise machines, an articulated electric tricycle (a forerunner of the mobility scooter), a milk warmer, an egg boiler and the first jug-kettle as a matching set in stainless steel. We made a model of a futuristic port for container handling and storage which was exhibited at Earl's Court. Several items were featured on the BBC's Tomorrow's World programme. One of John Dolphin's developments was sheet pile revetments and the technique was used to secure the edges of the island.

By the end of the 1960s the work had outgrown the limited facilities at the Mill and the companies undertook their R & D work elsewhere.

John Dolphin's beautiful period slipper launch 'Knight Errant' (right) was kept in the Mill pond.



I thoroughly enjoyed my time at the Mill, in really wonderful surroundings, winter and summer. My view along the leat included the garden of a house which dozens of cats regarded as home and swans used to visit. I think the house belonged to the Ducker family.

It was a delight to arrive early, before work started, particularly to tend to the needs of the waterwheel's flotsam screen and sluices. There was a specially designed rake to lift out debris, accessed from a wooden

catwalk immediately behind the waterwheel. My role was electro-mechanical, and I particularly remember the testing of the final motor for the electric car. We built a test rig in my room directly above the waterwheel. It was carefully positioned so that if the stall test went wrong the motor would go straight out of the window and into the leat, avoiding any human beings. Fortunately, it didn't go wrong.

We had a brief fire once in the metalwork shop, where we used oxy-acetylene, but four of us managed to extinguish it quite promptly. Just as well, or the Mill wouldn't be here today."

A second member of the research team has also been in touch recently, following a phone call from Whitchurch resident Eric Hartley. John Frayling, now 90 and living in Anglesey, worked at the Mill in the 1960s. He says he lived in the westernmost of the first six houses to be built in Swanston Field, alongside Hardwick Road. He joined the team shortly after John Dolphin acquired the Mill, the Cottage and the Island early in the 1960s. His first work there was for Lansing Bagnall electric vehicles. He believes the Mill was occupied by American servicemen during the war and that the hydro scheme was running then but not at all during the 1960s. He understands that John Dolphin converted the Mill into his own private home towards the end of the 1960s.

Richard Wingfield, Whitchurch Web News Editor, March 2017.