**The Mill on the Exe and the Water Engine**

The Mill on the Exe public house is situated on an important historical site adjacent to the river Exe famous from the 12th century for the mills that harnessed the power of the river to drive the wheels and as the location for the first water plant that delivered fresh water to the citizens of Exeter.

(+illus Mill on the Exe pub with Backaller Weir in the foreground provided by MS in attached document)

(+audio ‘river exe’ section of the St Davids Symphony of Sounds )

**Leats & weirs**

Leats or open watercourses and weirs were required to provide water for the mills. This area was serviced by the Higher leat and the Head and Blackaller Weirs. Although the leats have disappeared under roads or building developments the weirs remain and the Blackaller Weir provides a great setting for the Mill on the Exe as do the Weare Cliffs, now a site of special scientific interest.

(+**illus** map of the river Exe, the 2 weirs and the leats from maps emailed by Russ)

(+ **illus** of remaining open leat just off Bonhay Road – see image 1 provided by MS in separate document)

(+ **illus** of the Weare Cliffs from images of maps provided by Russ)

(Story 1 The Weare Cliffs SSI

This is a small area of exposed river cliff. It results from a cutting made for the construction of Bonhay Rd. Primarily of Sandstone and Mudstone, it is part of a geological strata, which runs from the Bristol Channel across Devon to Germany. Growing into the cliff are protected flora and fauna. Fossils in the rock date the strata. The formation occurred 320 million years ago. Believe it or not, it was originally on the sea floor!)

**Mills**

Exeter had a number of ‘grist’ mills grinding grain and later corn, malt, bone, snuff or driving bellows for leather tanning, dyeing etc. As the centre of the SW woollen trade woollen cloth was hammered and ‘rackfields’, where the wool was hung on wooden tenterhooks to dry, were a common sight.

(+ **illus** map of area showing rackfields from images of maps provided by Russ, possibly Donn 1765)

(Story 2 Early wool production

Exeter was the centre of the woollen trade in the SW from the 16th through to the 18th century and by 1700 it involved 1,200 weavers. The woollen merchants belonged to the Guild of the Fullers and Tuckers and their headquarters can still be seen at the impressive Truckers Hall in Fore Street Exeter.

The fulling mills and water wheels beside the river Exe provided the power to ‘full’ the cloth - initially kersey and later ‘serge’. When Celia Fiennes visited Exeter in 1698 she wrote

‘the whole town and surrounding countryside for at least 20 miles round is employed in spinning, weaving, dressing and scouring, fulling and drying of serge’s. It turns the most money in a weeke of anything in England’.

Stale urine was used to wash the cloth as it contained cleansing agents ammonia and potash. A wooden holding cradle and large hammers, driven by the water wheel, were used to cleanse it further and thicken the fibres. The resulting cloth was then washed in river water to prevent it shrinking and hung on sheds or in rack fields to dry. The saying ’on tenterhooks’ comes from hanging the serge on tenters, using tenterhooks. The fulling mills were surrounded by rack fields or tenter grounds. The urine was collected mainly women with piss carts from the nearby houses and taverns.)

There was a fulling mill just below the Blackaller weir from the 16th century. Records show that in 1787 it was let for milling corn and in 1798 Edward Pim started making paper and by 1799 it was known as ‘Head Weir water paper mill’. A sale notice in the Flying Post in 1829 describes a large site but in 1882 the mill was damaged by fire and re-built in brick with a steam engine installed for when the River Exe’s flow was low. After WW1 the mill was acquired by E S & A Robinson a Bristol paper, printing and packaging company. It was producing 50 tons of paper per week for tickets, sugar paper and laminating before it closed in 1967.

Powhay was another group of mills further along Bonhay Road, (now Powhay Mills apartments), which operated until the early 20th century. Bodies were always being fished out of the leats but in 1879 the torso of a baby, Reginald Hyde, was found in the leat beneath Powhay Mills, with other body part found nearby. Annie Tooke was convicted and hung for his murder following a sensational trial.

(+**illus** of Powhay Mills **from** Exeter Memories page on Powhay Mills 1st image captioned ‘Powhay Mill in the 19th century original note Powhay Flour Mills where the body was found on the actual image)

(Story 3 Bodies in the leats

It was a fairly regular occurrence for bodies to be found in the leats. In 1872 the body of a new born baby wrapped in brown paper was found in the leat at Powhay Mills. In 1873 a young mother and her baby were found drowned near the same mill and in 1872 the torso of an 18 month old baby boy – Reginald Hyde - was found in the leat beneath Powhay Mills, the head and other body parts were found in other parts of the leats. The inquest was carried out at the Princess Alexandra Inn next to the Head Weir Mill (now residential flats Alexandra House) and the ensuing trial was covered by all the national newspapers. The mother Mary Hoskins, from Cornwall, had been living in Ide before the birth and left the baby with a ‘baby farmer, Annie Tooke of South Street, who was found guilty of the murder and executed on 11 August 1879.)

During the 19th century mill workers were drawn from Exe Street and other local streets, often passing down through generation. A few examples of the sort of people working at the paper mill in the 19th century - Eliza Smith papermaker 3 Quay Lane born in Herts father John was a papermaker 1851, Ann Tottle, Phillips Court Exe Street born Exeter 1830, Susan Tout rag dresser Preston street born 1825/6. Other professions related to paper flourished in the area including printers, booksellers, stationers, bookbinding, wallpaper making, quill and pen manufacturer.

**The Water engine**

Water had long been drawn from the Exe and delivered by water carriers but with the growth in population at the end of the 17th century required a better water supply. A water company was set up in 1693 and an engine (a large water wheel attached to a pump) installed. The engine house was at Engine Bridge at the corner of Exe Street and Bonhay Road taking power from a leat fed from the Head Weir. Water was pumped up to a lead lined holding tank ‘Back Grate’ at the rear of the Guild Hall which held 600 hodshead of water from where it was distributed around the city. In need of modernization, James Golsworthy bought the water company in 1822 and installed a more powerful pump and new metal pipes to reduce leakages but correspondence in the local paper continued to highlight the lack of water for domestic use and the prohibitive cost. The Corporation seemed incapable of resolving the situation and nothing was done until after an acute outbreak of cholera hit the city in 1832 killing 440 people. The next year the Exeter Water Company was established, new works set up at Pynes and a reservoir created at Danes Castle. The original engine house was converted to a grist mill and the Guildhall cistern became redundant.

(+**illus** Notice of sale of a share in the Exeter Water Works 1766 from Minchinton p24)

(+**illus** of the site of Exeter Water Works at Engine Bridge c.1849 from Minchinton p24)

(+**illus** of ‘the Exeter water engine, from a painting from Emmanuel Jeffery from Minchinton p22)

(+**illus** of ‘steam engine house at Pynes 1856 from Minchinton p 43)

(+**illus** of

(Story 4 The Cholera outbreak of 1832

Cholera reached Exeter in July 1832, brought into the city from Plymouth by a young mother and her children residing in North Street. Fear of cholera had been prevalent since the 1818 when there was an outbreak in India. A second wave started in 1826 reaching Europe in 1830 and in the autumn of 1831 an outbreak in Sunderland signalled its arrival in England. The city had been preparing for an outbreak for some time but had not taken a very rigorous approach. A Board of Health was set up which included representatives from the Corporation for the Poor and the Commissioners of Improvement was set up to prepare for the outbreak. They aimed to cleanse open drains, install sewers and provide water for street cleansing. Many of the poorest parts of the city were knee deep in rubbish and many did not have access to sufficient water. There were not enough wells and those that exist had fallen into disrepair. James Golsworthy’s waterworks did not service the entire city and in any case many could not afford the water the provided. He did make efforts to clean more streets and get water to more families but it was acknowledged that the water supply was not fit for purpose. That ‘the occasional wells and conduits of old ties and the scanty bucketful of the water carrier; the mains of the ancient waterworks laid but in a few parts of the city, and even then but scantily applied to; the streets unwatered save a portion of the High Street and that only by public subscription of the inhabitants of the establishment of the first water cart’ were not enough to fight cholera one of the great afflictions of the Victorian age. So things had to change. Exeter suffered a shorter outbreak than some areas. Of population of 32,000 including St Thomas, 1400 fell victim to the disease and 440 died. Most were from the poorer south west parts of the city and 48 were from St Thomas.)

(+**illus** of the cholera map of Exeter from images emailed by Russ)

**The Mill on the Exe**

Many think the Mill on the Exe was a conversion of the Head Weir Mill but in fact the mill site was bought by aa builder, Seamus O’Reilly and the mill demolished in 1982 to make way for the new pub which opened in 1983. The area around the Head and Blackaller weirs had been used for recreational swimming in the 19th century so the pub continued that tradition of recreational use. Hearsay has it that the planning process and building of the new pub did not always go smoothly! Proximity to the Exe and having a leat running under the pub had its drawbacks as it was often flooded. The new flood relief scheme has helped, with the Cofferdam removed, the Mill Channel reinstated and then removable flood barriers installed in the pub garden in 2017.

The pub was bought by the St Austell brewery in 1994 who continue to enhance it and incorporated Head Weir House, the original Mill house, in 20?? To create a pub with rooms.

(+illus of Head Weir House provided by MS in attached document)

The milling history continues to be reflected in the Millers Crossing footbridge built in 2002 which has a counterweight in the form of a mill wheel.

(+**illus** of Head Weir Mill being demolished from the Exeter Memories website page the Mill on the Exe, Bonhay Road caption Demolition in full swing at the mill site, in 1982)

(+illus of Head Weir House provided by MS in attached document)

(+**illus** of flooding of pub garden from Exeter Memories website Mill on the Exe page)

(+possibly video of the river in flood by the Blackaller weir provided by MS in separate document)

(+**illus** of Millers Crossing bridge with the mill stone prominent provided by MS in separate document )

(Story 7 Head Weir Bathing Place  
From the early 19thcentury the locals used the river above the Head Weir for bathing and s swimming. It was an unregulated and dangerous activity; and this did lead to significant loss of life, as there were no rescue facilities. So much so, that in 1867 the City Council took over the site and built platforms and huts.    Subsequently, an annual swimming match became a local event.

Frank Shooter, a larger than life character and pugilist was Superintendent of the bathing area from 1871 – 1908. As a professional swimmer and swimming instructor he was the ideal choice for the job. Shooter became renowned for preventing many drownings and over the years was awarded 'Medals for Bravery' by the Royal Humane Society and feted by the Council for the rescue of a young boy who almost drowned when he got stuck in the leat beneath the Head Weir Mill in 1893. Shooter is buried in Exwick Cemetery. The bathing place continued to be used by the swimming but some events were moved to the canal basin which had better facilities for spectators. The last recorded use was in 1940.)

(+**illus** of head Weir Bathing site from the Exeter Memories website ‘Head Weir Bathing Place captioned Head Weir open bathing place 1910’)  
(+**illus** of Shooters grave supplied by MS in a separate document).