

The Tudor Water Mill. [by Peter James Corbally](#)

In 1543 Sir Robert Langley of Agecroft Hall, Lord of the Manor of Prestwich, built a weir across the River Irwell to provide water for a water mill. The weir was to raise the level of the river and pen back water that could be used to work the wheel at the mill.

The weir was 20 yards long and 28 inches high above the river level raising the river level by an extra 24 inches. Presumably there was a mill race which led a forceful stream of water to the wheel.

The mill and weir cost 300 marks to build and provided a profit of 40 marks per annum. It operated smoothly for four or so years.

Then on 20th June 1548, Thomas Holland, Lord of the Manor of Clifton came with six other men and broke down the end of the weir on the western bank. The water flowed out through the broken weir and the mill ceased operation.

Truth to tell the western end of the weir rested on Thomas Holland's land on the Clifton bank. Sir Robert Langley needed the co-operation of Thomas Holland in order to build the weir. The river must have been surveyed and the best spot for the weir must have rested on the Prestwich bank on the east and the Clifton bank on the west of the river. The two men, Sir Robert Langley and Thomas Holland, made a gentleman's agreement about the weir five years earlier and Sir Robert, trusting Thomas Holland's word, had gone ahead and built the project.

The original agreement had specified that the weir would be 28 inches above the river level. The two men had also exchanged a small quantity of land to give Sir Robert access to the weir on the Clifton side. Sir Robert had got 1 acre and five roods of a close called Calf Hey in Clifton and Thomas Holland had got 1 acre 15 roods of land in "the Lommes" (the Lumns, down Lumns Lane). In addition Sir Robert promised to make good any damage done by the waters of the Irwell (presumably from flooding) and was to have a way over the field called the Home to take materials to the weir and mill.

Sir Robert Langley trusted Thomas Holland so completely that " no deeds were sealed or delivered between them." The mill worked successfully but suddenly in June 1548 Thomas Holland went and broke down the weir to "*the great loss ... to all the country around as they have been accustomed to grind their corn at the said mill*".

Sir Robert Langley lodged a complaint with the Duchy of Lancaster in 1549 and sent a document about the affair to the Duchy Court at Lancaster. His complaint was published by the *Lancashire and Cheshire Record Society*, Vol 40. Sir Robert wanted the Duchy Court to issue an injunction against Thomas Holland in order to allow Sir Robert to rebuild the weir.

The case was put to two adjudicators chosen by the Earl of Derby. Sir Piers Legh, Sheriff of Lancashire and Sir William Radcliffe of Ordsall Hall deliberated on the

rival claims. Their verdict came on 19th June 1550 – two years after the weir had been wrecked.

The judgement of the referees was that Sir Robert had the right to rebuild the weir. The details of the height of the weir were reaffirmed and the exchange of lands was ratified. Sir Robert was also told to compensate Thomas Holland for any damage caused by the raised waters for two roods above the Head of Holme to the lands exchanged. Sir Robert had to keep the fences in repair around the area.

Thomas Holland also got something, all the “ways” that he had heretofore used through the lands of Sir Robert Langley from Clifton and Pendleton “and to the Church and Market”. He was guaranteed use of these “ways”.

So the dispute was settled and the weir restored. But what had the quarrel been about ? The two men, Sir Robert Langley and Thomas Holland, were actually brothers-in-law since Thomas was married to Robert’s sister Eleanor in 1516. Thomas Holland lived at Clifton Hall, just three quarters of a mile north of Agecroft Hall on the western edge of the Irwell valley.

Perhaps the water penned back in the river by the weir had damaged the banks or flooded over into Clifton. That could have been why Thomas broke the end of the weir that rested on his land. The insistence in the final agreement that Sir Robert had to make good damage caused by the water and compensate Thomas Holland for any damage suggests that might have been a cause.

The agreement also says that Sir Robert had to maintain the fences and stick to paths to and from the weir. Perhaps Langley men had been trampling willy-nilly over Holland’s crops and fields in going to and from the weir and mill.

Then again the final agreement also says Thomas Holland had to have his usual ways from Clifton and Pendleton to the Church and the market. Sir Robert might have been blockading Thomas Holland and stopping him using routes through Langley land. The church referred to could be Eccles or Prestwich and the market was probably in Manchester. We don’t know of course whether Sir Robert Langley had started restricting Holland’s access to these places before the weir was broken down – thus helping to cause it – or whether the restrictions placed on Thomas Holland’s routes in and out of Clifton Hall were a tit-for-tat reprisal for the damage to the weir.

Possibly Thomas Holland was being prevented from using Agecroft Bridge. Agecroft Bridge was an important transport link at the time (it still is). Five miles north of Manchester it was the next bridge over the River Irwell after Manchester although there was a ford at Broughton.

Another facet of the quarrel was that Sir Robert Langley and Thomas Holland had agreed that Langley’s daughter should marry Holland’s son. But no marriage like that took place – none of Sir Robert Langley’s four daughters married a Holland from Clifton Hall. If Sir Robert had reneged on the marriage agreement, that might have been a motive for Holland’s actions on the weir.

It could simply have been greed or jealousy on the part of Thomas Holland. The new mill seems to have been successful and profitable, perhaps Holland thought he deserved a share of the profits for his co-operation over the weir.

Another document from 1546 shows an agreement between Thomas Holland of Clifton and The Earl of Derby. The Earl gave Thomas Holland permission to build a weir across the Irwell between Clifton and Pilkington (owned by the Earl). So the breaking of the weir might simply have commercial rivalry by Thomas Holland. He saw the successful weir and mill on Langley land and wanted one of his own further up the Irwell. (LRO DDk/741/1)

Whatever the reason for the wrecking of the weir, it led to two years of feuding between the neighbours.

Later mentions of the mill.

In the Deed Poll of all Sir Robert Langley's estate in 1559 (*Agecroft Deed No. 124*), Sir Robert is said to own one water mill and one fulling mill. The water mill was this one described above on the River Irwell. The fulling mill might have been elsewhere on the Langley estates. The River Irk had fulling mills along it in this period so perhaps the Langley fulling mill was on the Irk on their land in Chadderton or Alkrington.

In *Agecroft Deed No. 130* (1561) the inheritance of Anne Langley was settled (she was the daughter who got Agecroft Hall). Among other things Anne got this mill on the Irwell ... "*all that my water mill in Prestwiche with all the profits etc thereto belonging*". This tells us that the weir was restored after 1550 and the mill was in full swing eleven years later. Anne Langley got Agecroft Hall, the Park of Agecroft and the twenty acres of land in Prestwich on the western (wrong) side of the Irwell. The fact that she got the watermill might very well suggest that the mill was actually in the detached portion of Prestwich parish on the Pendlebury side of the river that she inherited rather than on the actual Prestwich side of the river.

When the mill on the Irwell ceased operation is not definitely known. Anne Dauntessy (nee Langley) who inherited the mill in 1561 died in 1613. In her IPM (the list of property she owned when she died) there is mention of the mill in Prestwich. But when her son, William Dauntessy, died in 1625 there is no mill mentioned in his IPM which is otherwise virtually the same as his mother's. That puts a rough date on the mill ceasing work – between 1613 and 1625.

So it seems that the mill on the Irwell had been abandoned. Perhaps it never recovered from the breaking of the weir in 1548 ; perhaps the amount of water available in the Irwell was unreliable and the mill struggled to compete with the better position, better control of reliable water and better engineering at Kersal Mill.

Overshot waterwheels and breast shot wheels started to appear about 1600. They were more efficient and represented an advance in technology.

Kersal Mill was built just above the present Cusson's site on Moor lane. The Singleton Brook tumbled down onto the flood plain of the Irwell alongside Moor Lane. In fact the section alongside Moor Lane was actually called "Mill Brook". It was dammed to provide a millpond above an overshot waterwheel and mill. Kersal Mill was first mentioned in documents in the 1570s but it operated for several centuries. It seems to have been rebuilt in about 1612.

There is a seventeenth century Inventory of Kersal mill with the Will of one of the millers called Peter Worsley in the early 1670s. The broken ground above Cussons shows the site of the mill pond and dam.

Where were the weir and the mill on the Irwell ?

This is a major question because if the site is clear and relatively undisturbed then an archaeological dig might be possible. The site has not been conclusively identified at present and is the subject of ongoing research.

The mill was stated to have been in Prestwich but that does not necessarily mean it was on the Prestwich side of the river since there was a detached portion of Prestwich (twenty acres in extent) on the other side of the river.

If it was on the Prestwich side it was somewhere either in Drinkwater Park or up above that towards the site of the tip and sewage works. If it was near the former sewage works the mill site is likely to have been destroyed completely ; if somewhere in Drinkwater Park there is a better chance of the site surviving. There were two ancient water channels in that area called the Upper and Lower Fleams. Fleams is an old word which means a man-made water channel that is bigger than usual (often a mill race). The Fleams, being man-made, are another archaeological target, if only to obtain dating evidence for their construction and purpose.

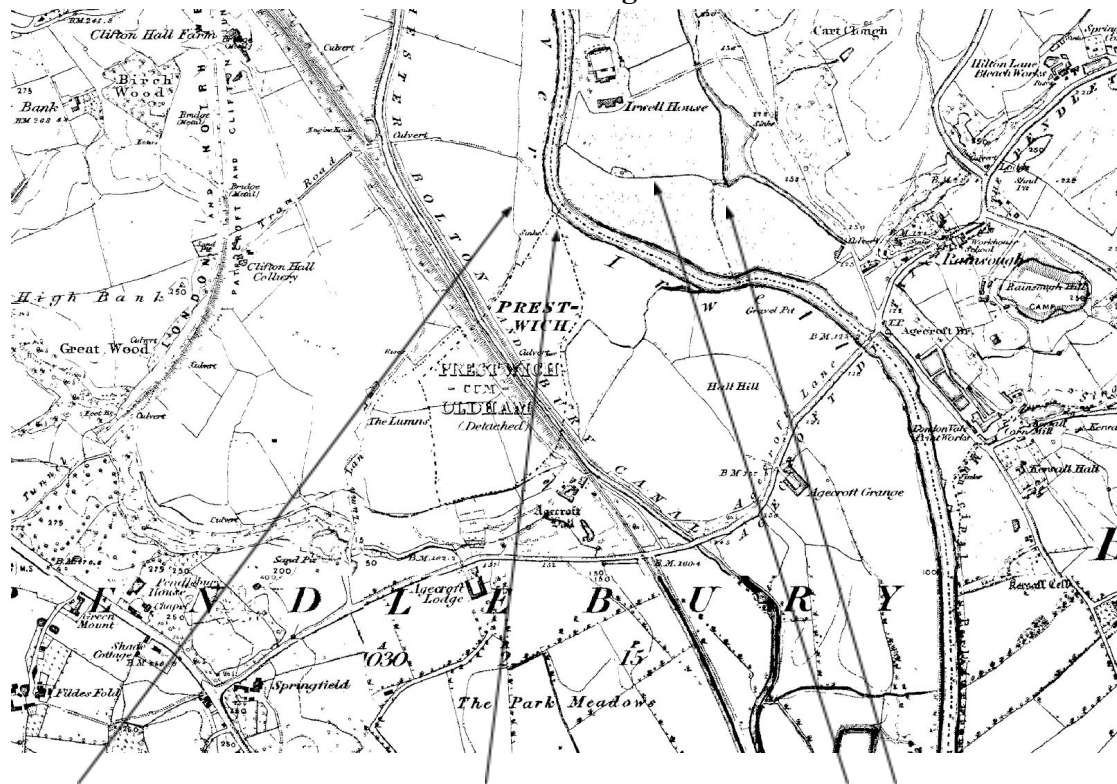
The water rides in Amusement Parks, such as Alton Towers, are known as "flumes". The dictionary definition of a flume is an "artificial channel conveying water for industrial use." Fleam could be a local/regional variant of flume. They seem to share the same origin – the Latin word *fluere* (to flow).

The weir would have had to raise the river level by two feet and the raised water would have to have been led off via a channel to the mill wheel. There are several intriguing water channels running through Drinkwater Park and the 1848 O.S. map shows some interesting buildings there as well. (see the map produced below).

The weir seems to have been where the Irwell made a turn towards the south-east because that is where the field called "Calf Hey", mentioned in the exchange of lands of 1550, is situated. Also at that point the 1848 map shows a curious dog leg channel coming off the river and returning to it. That channel could have been an overflow channel around the head of the weir or even the mill race leading water to the millwheel. It is also there at low water that a line across the river has been seen. Above the line in the river, pebbles congregate, below it there is smooth river bed with few pebbles. It was thought by one observer to have been another old ford but it

is more likely to be the base/foundation of the 1543 weir still in the bottom of the river.

The Drinkwater Park Area and workings on the River shown in 1848.



Calf Hey

Dog leg Channel on River Bank

Channels in Drinkwater Park

Conclusion.

The weir and the mill on the River Irwell definitely existed from 1543 to about 1625. But the exact site is as yet unknown. We have a very good pointer to its location through the field names involved (e.g. Calf Hay) and strange dog-leg channel on the west bank of the Irwell. Further research in the records and on the ground might pinpoint the site. If it is undisturbed a dig might be possible.

The conflict over the weir and mill is reminiscent of a similar conflict over the mill in Crompton which led to that mill being abandoned. Access to the mill was across another landholder's property and disputes about it escalated into open hostilities in 1638-40. (E. Ballard, *Chronicles of Crompton*, 1967)

There was mention of a much earlier watermill in Prestwich. This was in *Agecroft Deed No. 21* in 1338. In that year Thomas de Prestwich, who was leasing his manor to Sir Richard de Radcliffe, gave a quitclaim of all his right in the manor of Prestwich. This referred to the mill thus, “together with one water mill in the same vill”. We have no way of knowing, as yet, where the mill of 1338 was – on the Irwell, on Singleton Brook, in the Clough or on the lake in the Denehead. There does not seem to be any reference to mills in Prestwich between 1338 and 1543 so that medieval mill must also have gone out of operation at some time.

Intriguingly a longish narrow field alongside the Irwell near Bradley Ford in Prestwich was called the “Pingoit”. Goit is another old word for a man-made water channel bringing water to or from a mill. The word “pin” is also associated with old mills. A Pinmill was a simple watermill with a horizontal wheel.

It seems that the River Irwell was never allowed to flow peacefully through Prestwich but was continually being exploited by man ; to work watermills, to drain land, to flood water meadows etc. The remains of these workings, where extant, are another target for archaeological investigation.