

The Mill by the Railway



'The Biscuit'

From the mid-1950s, local people nicknamed Station Mill 'The Biscuit' as it became the site of a unique recycling project.

McVities asked Clark & Butcher to find a use for their broken biscuits. After some trial and error they re-deployed a traditional threshing machine to process waste biscuits and cake into meal for animal feed.

The 'thrashing tackle' proved so effective it could separate the flour-based biscuit from chocolate, raisins and even wrappers.

Powered by a diesel engine housed under a tin roof, it was owned and operated by the Cooper family who processed eight tons of biscuits every week. Biscuit processing ended in the 1980s.

The tackle was sold and towed to its new home in Manchester by tractor - the journey took three days!



■ McVities asked Clark & Butcher to relieve them of their waste biscuits. After processing here, the biscuit meal went to be mixed with maize for animal feed. *The Advertising Archives*

Station Mill

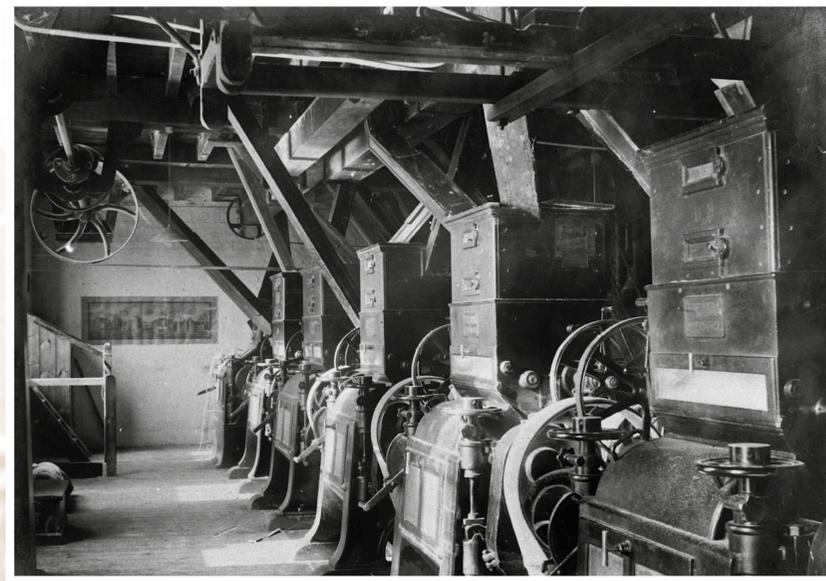
Established by Reuben Long and Sons, Station Mill opened its doors around 1911. Its name reflected the close relationship between mill and rail with trains delivering Canadian wheat to the mill's own siding.

Powered by coke engines, the roller mill thrived, employing six workers. During the First World War (1914-18), three of them were exempted from military service to meet a major government contract. They worked 16-hour days to produce 2000 sacks of wheatmeal and flour every week.

After Reuben Long retired, the company continued as Long Brothers until 1934 when it ceased trading and Station Mill fell silent.

Rivals Clark & Butcher bought the mill for grain storage and removed the milling machinery. It was requisitioned during the Second World War (1939-45) to store imported grain stocks away from bombing at the London Docks.

Having no loading hoppers, wheat was shovelled manually into the storage bins which held 300 tons.



■ Interior of Clark & Butcher's Roller Mill, the rivals to Station Mill. *Cambridgeshire Libraries Collection*

Timeline



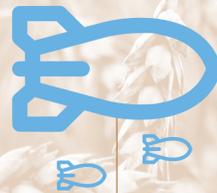
1910-1914
Station Mill built by R Long and Sons, milling imported Canadian wheat

1915
Six mill workers employed. Jacob Howe injured in a fall from the 2nd floor

1930 -1934
Reuben Long retired. Company continued as Long Brothers



1939-1945
Requisitioned as a wartime grain store



1955- 1980s
'The Biscuit' Processing biscuit waste for animal feed



1980s
'The Old Biscuit Mill' Leased to a suitcase manufacturer



■ Shotblasters IronOx took delivery of this Chieftain tank in 1994 for paint removal after it had been a prop in a Gulf War film. Upon unloading it promptly crushed the gas main. *Photo courtesy of Neville Crowson*

1990s
Spencer's Mill - named after Spencer's Drove. Occupied by Shotblasters IronOx

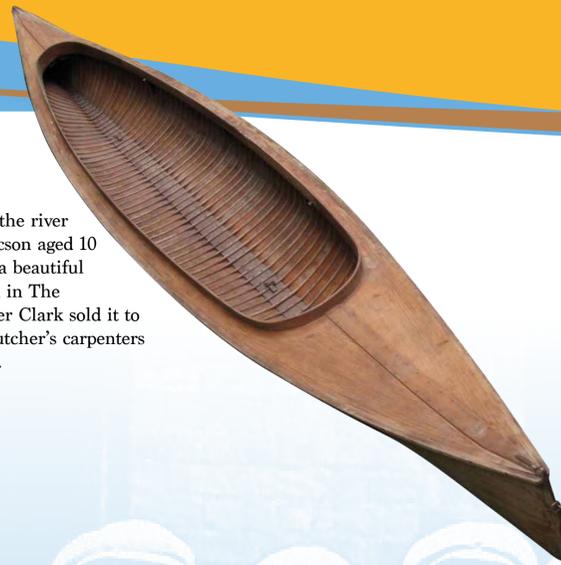
1998-2018
Standing empty. Various planning applications submitted



2018
Viva Mill Theatre - bought for conversion to a theatre

The Men of the Mill

■ A lifelong love of the river began for Terry Isaacson aged 10 when he discovered a beautiful wooden canoe stored in The Biscuit in 1970. Roger Clark sold it to him and Clark & Butcher's carpenters hand-crafted his oar.



A First Job 'up The Biscuit'

"I used to throw the bags of biscuits onto the platform and old Tom Jones used to tip them into the top drum".

Teenager Nick Bridge joined his grandfather Bill Shaw and a team of older men working the 'thrashing tackle' to process broken biscuits with the Cooper family in the 1970s. "I had to stand there with a stick when the motor started to prevent the belt sliding off the pulley".

The Mill was largely empty apart from some wooden benches "used for our docky time"*. The thrashing process produced loose wrappers and other waste - "...we kept a two-day bonfire going at the edge of the property". Smoke, diesel fumes and the sweet smell of biscuits hung in the air.

*Docky Time: A lunch-break. East Anglian agricultural term referring to pay docked for taking a mid-day rest.

The First Owner

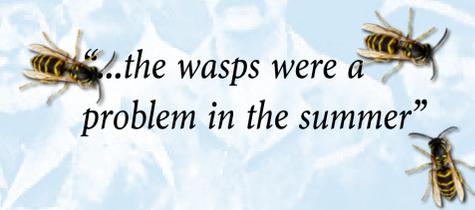
Reuben Long was a local corn merchant. Around 1911 he and his sons established Station Mill grinding imported Canadian wheat and employing six workers.

Reuben had lost an arm in a machine accident aged 17 while apprenticed at Hunt's Millwrights in Soham in 1883. Despite this he built a successful milling and grain merchant's business, and became an active member of the community, serving on the Parish Council and as Deacon at the Congregational Chapel.

■ Long's Mill, Fordham Road c.1890. Reuben Long started milling with his brother John around 1885. He established Station Mill with his sons Herbert, Archibald and Charles in 1911. Photo courtesy of Barbara Harlow



■ Clark & Butcher Millworkers 1910. R Long and Sons employed six at the smaller Station Mill. Cambridgeshire Collection



"...the wasps were a problem in the summer"

Risky Business

Like most industrial workplaces of the time, mill accidents were frequent.

In 1915, employee Jacob Howe survived a serious fall from an unguarded second-floor doorway down to the railway siding below

By the 1970s, the mill was a shell - cold, damp and deafening from the drive-belt of the thrashing tackle, and home to vermin. Workers chased rats away.

Children were warned against playing in the semi-derelect mill but delighted in scrumping biscuits.



"We used to go and scrump for biscuits after school"

Gerald Hobbs

"We would kick the door open to scare away the rats. Some were as big as cats!"

Terry Isaacson

A Rich Landscape

A Rare View

Imagine two and a half square miles of lake out there, serving for centuries as a transport channel and home for wildlife: this window offers a unique view of Soham Mere.

Drained by 1840, it left a bed of rich earth, recognised in 1915 as 'some of the best land in the district'. Soham Mere's soil is classified today as Fen Peat Soil and it is legendary for growing wheat that made 'better biscuits than anywhere else in the world'.



■ **Soham Mere drainage pump 1931.** Soham Mere wind pump was the last of its kind when it was dismantled in 1946. Drainage began around 1827 using a gas-powered vacuum engine which failed and was replaced by a huge steam engine. Together, wind and steam kept the ploughland drained for 120 years. *The Mills Archive*

East of the Great North Road

Professional millers say that for good biscuit flour, one should never go West of the Great North Road – today's A1 – for the wheat.

East of the A1 and with mild winters and free-draining, lime-rich, loamy soil, Soham is in a naturally rare spot. Rare because such soil is present in less than four percent of England's arable land.

Even neighbouring fields lack the same rich composition. It produces flour that 'stretches' to make fine biscuits.



■ **Single-furrow ploughing 1910.** 16 miles of walking to plough an acre: Soham Mere smallholdings supported 53 tenants and labourers – a high figure for its 660 acres. *Museum of Lincolnshire Life*

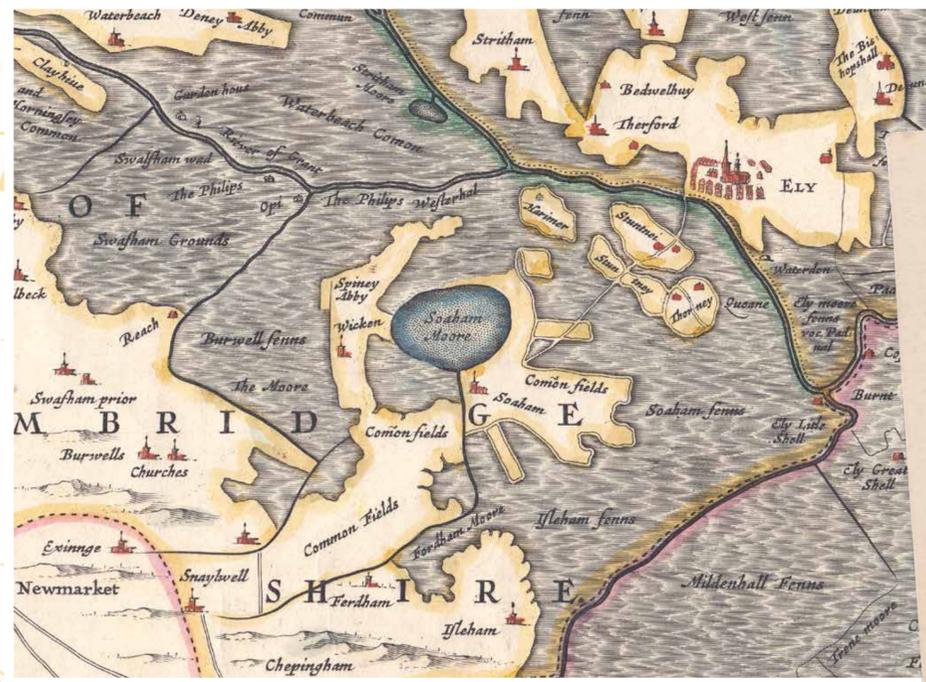
Sharing the Land

In 1908 Cambridgeshire County Council established small-holdings on the 660-acre Tilehouse Farm on the Mere's drained bed.

They provided opportunities for 24 tenants to work the fertile land. They farmed their crop fields as individuals but shared the pasture lands, with each holder grazing up to three animals.

Small-holders formed their own limited company to buy tools, farming implements and other supplies.

■ **Morning Chronicle 1851.** 'Bitterns and wild-fowl still haunted Soham Mere;... great tracts of fenland still remained in their pristine wild-ness, tenanted by cattle in the summer, and in winter affording miles upon miles of ice for the amusement of skaters'. *Soham Mere 1780 Cambridgeshire Collection*



■ **Soham Mere covered 1600 acres.** A double capacity, 40 horsepower steam engine was needed to drain it due to the 14 foot high lift. *Blaeu's Map 'Regiones Inundatae' 1648 Cambridgeshire Collection*



■ **Aerial view** To this day, chalk deposits washed into the bed of the lake and the peaty ring around the edge can clearly be seen from above. *Reproduced with permission of the Cambridge University Collection of Aerial Photography © Copyright reserved*

