

Ferries, bridges and battles

The Lower Lode just south of the Ham was the site of a ferry and a ford at times of drought across the Severn. A second ferry was situated further upstream at the Upper Lode. An important road crossed the Ham to this second ferry. These ancient river crossings were significant factors in the location of the battle of Tewkesbury in 1471; the Ham became a killing field for remnants of the Lancastrian army trying to cross the Swilgate.

Telford's Mythe Bridge built in 1826 largely replaced the other Severn crossings. John Rennie, the first engineer involved with the Mythe Bridge, initially suggested a site between the two ferries for a bridge with a raised road right across the Ham from near the Abbey Mill. Had he succeeded the meadow would be very different today.

As a "leat" to drive water-mills, the Mill Avon was probably dug out in Saxon times but certainly no later than the 12th century. There may even have been defensive reasons for its construction; in 1643 a Parliamentarian force sailing from Gloucester, after disembarking, crossed the Ham to attack the town but were held up at the Mill Avon before briefly expelling the Royalists.



Industry, trade and transport

From medieval times two water mills existed where the present 18th century Abbey Mill now stands. This mill features as Abel Fletcher's Mill in Mrs. Craik's novel "John Halifax, Gentleman" and is now converted into flats. In 1865 a new steam-driven Town Mill, also known as Healings Mill, was built next to the Ham's town quay and adjacent malt houses and warehouses. It was then the largest and most efficient mill in the country. A fleet of barges and a railway that crossed the Avon at the bottom of Quay Street onto the Ham transported grain and flour. The railway closed in 1961; the barges were sold and the mill now stands empty awaiting its destiny.

Historically, people had free access to the town quay and Ham through the Town Mill site. This pedestrian right of way was extinguished in 1987 and replaced by the present access to the Ham via the footbridge from Back of Avon.

The Ham was the site of the earliest town quay - the "Pale Pill". Elizabeth I briefly granted Tewkesbury the status of port in 1580 and just twenty years later Tewkesbury boats accounted for up to half the cargoes passing through Gloucester. Until the Avon was made navigable in 1638 most of the traded goods for the whole of Avon Vale passed through the town quay.

Big, flat-bottomed, square-sailed trows, many doubtless built locally, were prolific on the Severn, as were smaller barges often pulled by men (termed "bow-hauliers") walking along the banks. Men were replaced by horses in the 1830s.

"The Severn Trow", "The Mermaid", "The Admiral Benbow" and "The Star" once stood on the quayside, places for quenching the thirst of many a boatman, mill-hand, maltster or warehouseman.

Despite alternative site considerations, Parliamentary defeats, problems with financing due to the Crimean War and even opposition from the Admiralty, the Upper Lode Lock was built in 1858. At the time it was the biggest in the country, accommodating a tug and its complement of barges in one locking and was part of the canalising of the Severn. It was a Severn Commissioners' project to a design by Mr Leader Williams having been underwritten by The Staffordshire & Worcester Canal Company with a budget of £34,000.

Cutting the lock and adjacent weir reduced the Ham by 21 acres to 166 acres. Clay dug from the sites provided the raw material for brick-making at a works on the Ham near the weir but nothing remains of these brickworks.



Leisure and features

The raised "Bund" along the Mill Avon river bank opposite the town consists of the silt dredged from the water by POWs after the last war. It is high enough to form a convenient way of viewing the floods. The only archaeology officially recorded on the Ham is the pattern of ditches dug in the 1940s to prevent enemy aircraft from landing.

A catastrophe was avoided when the Ham was rejected in 1864 as the site for the Waterworks in favour of the present site near the Mythe. There are water pipelines from the works crossing underneath the Lower Avon and the Ham, then over the lower Mill Avon on their way to Cheltenham.

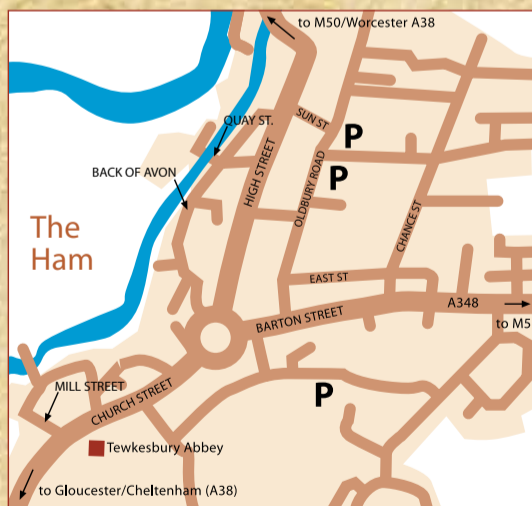
In the 18th and 19th centuries horse racing took place here, known as the Tewkesbury and Gloucestershire Races. George III visited the town at this time and donated a gold cup. Later the racing was transferred to Cheltenham, as was the cup. In the 1800s the Gloucestershire Agricultural Show, which included flower-shows, a regatta and "athletic sports", was held on the Ham.

Tewkesburians learned to swim in the rivers until the opening of swimming baths. An old sand pit called The Sandy on the Severn bank of the Ham was a favourite place, even sporting some changing huts, a raft and diving board. Between the wars up to 2000 fishermen could descend on Tewkesbury at weekends, many to fish from the Ham.

Information

The Ham is a wonderful place to walk, explore and enjoy. After a visit to our beautiful market town you can discover this watermeadow and explore its history whilst admiring the views; perfect for stretching your legs. Take your camera!

Access is by footbridges from The Abbey Mill at the bottom of Mill Street or near Healings Mill at the bottom of Quay Street off Back of Avon.



Please be wild-life friendly during the Spring nesting and hay growing seasons by keeping to the paths. The Ham can be very muddy at the centre after the seasonal floods - please take care.

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The Severn Ham Tewkesbury

Walking with History



From the opposite bank stretched a wide green level called the Ham.

John Halifax, Gentleman.