

Riot at Houghton

Bridget Flanagan from the Great Ouse Valley Trust describes 'great violence and might' at Houghton Mill!

Our River Great Ouse is generally a slow-moving and peaceful river. However, for centuries the management and use of its water caused fierce arguments which, at times, spilled over into civil disobedience and riot!

The disputes were centred on the watermills, some of which were recorded in the Domesday Survey as the wealthiest in England. They were variously owned by the Crown, the Church as Ramsey Abbey and the Huntingdon Priory, and aristocratic families. And, as ever, such wealthy elites were determined to protect their assets for their own advantage.

In the late 13th Century there was a string of complaints that the mill owners had blocked the river - at Hemingford, Houghton and Hartford - with weirs and dams to keep the water levels high to power their mill waterwheels. Despite petitions to Parliament – particularly by the borough of Huntingdon which said it had suffered a considerable loss of revenue in trade carried by ships to and from the coast at Kings Lynn – the weirs remained. River transport was reduced to the use of small boats which had to load and unload their goods at each mill dam. It was not until the construction of locks around each mill in the early 17th century that the river was restored to be a 'highway' again, eventually to Bedford.

The most bitter grievances were about flooding. If the gates of the mill dams were kept too high then water backed up and fields and crops were flooded. Time and again the townspeople of Godmanchester complained about the height of mill gates at Houghton and Hartford. The courts ruled for arbitration and agreement between the millers and the town. They tried to implement direct supervision of the gates. But to no avail. In 1500 we read that the men of Godmanchester '*assembled themselves in riotous manner with bows, bills, swords, bucklers, and other weapons contrary to the peace and laws of our Sovereign Lord the King, and with great violence and might took and carried away the floodgates of the Mills of Houghton*'. By 1515 it was realised that the situation was untenable, and a court ruling gave the borough of Godmanchester the authority to control the mill gates in times of flood. An uneasy peace ensued, with, at last, some realisation that the river and its water had to be a shared resource.



A tranquil scene today but with a turbulent past.
Photograph courtesy of The National Trust

The Great Ouse Valley Trust promotes for public benefit the conservation, restoration and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and heritage of the Great Ouse Valley and environs in the county of Cambridgeshire. For more information about the Trust please visit www.greatousevalleytrust.org.uk

