2.4 Taplow Riverside Conservation Area

Much of the Site lies within the Taplow Riverside Conservation Area.

Until 1991, the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead (RBWM) extended across the Thames and took in some of the Taplow riverside, including parts of the Skindles site. These were incorporated into the Maidenhead Bridge and Guard’s Club Island Conservation Area, designated in 1989. In 1991, following administrative boundary changes, parts of the Maidenhead Bridge and Guard’s Club Island Conservation Area were transferred to Buckinghamshire and were subsequently incorporated into the Taplow Riverside Conservation Area, which was designated by South Bucks District Council in 1999 and extended and re-designated in 2006.

The 2006 re-designation involved the inclusion of certain areas which were not in the original conservation area, including properties in Mill Lane to the north of Skindles, up to and including Taplow Paper Mill and part of Glen Island.

The conservation area forms a long narrow strip sitting on land between the Thames to the west and the Jubilee Relief River to the east. The road and railway bridges divide the area into three zones which display different characters, albeit with certain common themes. North of the A4 Bath Road, there is a mixed character, residential but mainly commercial. In the middle part, between the A4 and the Brunel railway bridge, a suburban character predominates, whilst the southern end consists of larger houses, more generously spaced in a rural setting. However, the Thames so dominates the area that it unites all three by generating a feeling of leisure, the use which now prevails on the water.

The Site occupies most of the northern zone of the conservation area, and incorporates all the buildings of the former Paper Mill, together with Glen Island House and its Stable Block, Mill Island House, Mill Island Cottage, Dunloe Lodge and the western buildings of the former Skindles Hotel, including No. 5 Mill Lane. These buildings are all discussed in detail below. Also within this northern zone but outside the Site boundary are a number of further buildings, including: ‘Driftwood Cottage’, the former lodge to Dunloe Lodge; the Old and New Boathouses; the ‘Tower House’; ‘Mallard’s Reach’; ‘Page’s Wharf’; and the boathouse to the south of Skindles.
Driftwood Cottage

The Old and New Boathouses

The Tower House, with Page's Wharf beyond

Mallard's Reach, with No. 5 Mill Lane and Skindles beyond

Page's Wharf

The boathouse to the south of Skindles; this is a replacement structure from the 1920s as explained in more detail in the text
2.5 The Paper Mill

2.5.1 The mill complex

By 1840, as discussed above, the paper mill was being operated by George and Charles Venables. At this time, it was owned by the 5th Earl of Orkney, but it was purchased (for £11,000) in 1852 by Charles Pascoe Grenfell. The 1852 sales particulars identified 'Lot 26' as 'Clifden Mills', which apparently comprised two paper mills operated by Charles Venables and a flour mill operated by George Norrington. Corn milling continued on the site until 1864.

The Venables' leading position in the paper-making industry is illustrated by the fact that the Great Exhibition of 1851 included:

- The excellent and well-arranged selection of Messrs. Venables – which comprised, besides papers of their own make, most of the varieties manufactured in Great Britain, with the name of each maker prominently stated. Amongst them we noticed the universally-celebrated drawing papers of Mr. J. Whatman and those of Mr. George Wilmot. There were also brown papers, in which the most highly polished steel goods may be safely packed without fear of rust; together with the unrivalled plate papers of Mr. Charles Venables, and the hand papers by his relative, George Venables. (Tallis, 1854:225)

A plan of the paper mill in 1868 shows the extent of the mill buildings at this time. There appear to have been two machines; ‘Mill No. 1’ was located in a long range to the east of the present Mill Island Cottage, whilst ‘Mill No. 2’ was a little further north opposite the present Power House. To the east of each of the mills were further structures including boiler houses, engine houses, a chemical store, a ‘chop house’ and a ‘rag house’. To the north was a short range identified as cottages. As is discussed in more detail below, the present Mill Island House and Mill Island Cottage formed part of the mill complex, the former being identified as a ‘residence’ (in Charles Venables’ occupation by 1869) and the latter as a ‘manager’s house’.

By 1876, a further short east-west aligned range (perhaps further dwellings for mill workers) had been erected to the north of the cottages, enclosing a further small yard.

A further, undated, but post-1876 plan of the complex indicates that many of the buildings across the site in the last quarter of the 19th century comprised only a single storey, and that nothing was higher than two storeys.

The plan-form of the mill complex appears to have remained essentially the same into the 20th century, although the Taplow Riverside Conservation Area Character Appraisal (2007:24) relates that there was a serious fire on Coronation Day in 1902, necessitating some rebuilding. Drawings indicate that the first-floor level of the buildings at the southern end of the complex, opposite the present Mill Island Cottage, was rebuilt at this time. In 1909, plans were drawn up for the rebuilding of the cottages at the northern end of the complex. This appears to have occurred between 1912 and 1931. As the mill was owned by Lord Desborough, all of these changes were drawn up by or for the Estate Office, Taplow Court.

According to the Hitcham and Taplow Preservation Society Newsletter (Spring 2007:3), the mill became a limited company in 1918, at which point it still had two machines making brown papers. Bankruptcy in 1930 was followed by the registration in 1933 of New Taplow Paper Mills Limited, with four directors, all from the Reed & Smith Company in the West Country. The two old machines were apparently dismantled, and a single 72-inch machine constructed from the parts. The Taplow Riverside Conservation Area Character Appraisal (2007:24) suggests that the launch of the new company was followed by another bout of rebuilding. Certainly, the appearance of the mill’s former Power House (discussed below), erected between 1931 and 1955, suggests that it dates from the 1930s.

By 1955, the mill complex had been extended slightly with a short range extending southwards along the eastern side of Mill Lane to the east of the mill stream. This land had earlier been identified as ‘settling ponds’. By 1965, the short southern range had been extended further to its present extent.

The Reed & Smith connection was strengthened in 1957 when that group bought the mill. The original machine was replaced in 1963 by a 120-inch machine.

In the 1960s, Reed & Smith acquired the land to the south of the mill, on the other side of Mill Lane, a field identified in the 18th and 19th centuries as ‘Lay Chequer’. This subsequently became a storage area and then a paper recycling site operated by Reed & Smith’s subsidiary Severnside.

At the end of 1977, the Reed & Smith group was acquired by the St Regis Paper Company, one of the oldest and largest paper groups in the world. They set about modernising and updating the mill, and production was expanded from 37,000 to 50,000 tonnes per year. After 1965, and probably following the St Regis’ acquisition, all of the buildings at the northern end of the mill complex, including the cottages cited above, were demolished and replaced with the huge industrial structures now present. As discussed below, Glen Island House and its Stables were acquired by the mill business, perhaps as early as the 1930s, and the house subsequently accommodated offices. The truncation of the Stables’ east range was presumably undertaken in the 1970s or ‘80s expressly to allow for the erection of the industrial shed that occupies the space to the south of the Stables and to the east of the house.

Whilst the buildings at the southern end of the mill complex to the east of Mill Island Cottage incorporate some Flemish bond brickwork and metal-framed windows, perhaps indicating some pre-1930 survival, it is clear, particularly when viewed from the air, that these structures were largely rebuilt behind their western elevations at this time. These elevations clearly also underwent much alteration, including the cladding of their upper parts.

Due to changing patterns of world demand for paper processing, the Taplow mills ultimately proved to be uneconomic and operations formally closed down in October 2006, since when the buildings have lain vacant.
The mill: map regression

Taplow Enclosure Map of 1787, corrected to 1838

Plan of Taplow Paper Mills, 1868
The mill: map regression

Undated plan of Taplow Paper Mills, post-1876; this indicates that many of the buildings across the site in the last quarter of the 19th century comprised only a single storey, and that nothing was higher than two storeys.

Ordnance Survey, 1876
The mill: map regression
The mill: map regression

Ordnance Survey, 1912

Undated plan of Taplow Paper Mills, 1912-31
The mill: map regression
The mill: map regression

Plan of Taplow Paper Mills, 1965

Aerial photograph, 2014
**'Plan of New Buildings at the Paper Mills, Taplow, for W. H. Grenfell Esq. M.P.', 1902**

**Proposed pair of new cottages to be built at Taplow Paper Mills for the Right Hon. William Henry Baron Desborough', c.1909**

**Aerial view of the mill today**
View northwards from Mill Island Cottage

The range to the east of Mill Island Cottage

View north, with Glen Island House at left; the Stables can just be glimpsed through the green plastic-roofed open shed
View eastwards from Glen Island House

The northern end of the principal mill buildings, with Glen Island Stables at right

View southwards along the Jubilee Relief River

View south towards Glen Island Stables
2.5.2 The Power House

As detailed above, the Power House was erected between 1931 and 1955, most likely in the 1930s. The Ordnance Survey maps of 1931 and 1955 suggest that it was built on land that had previously belonged to Glen Island House, and its relatively high quality for an industrial building was presumably because of its proximity to the house.

The original purpose of the building is not known, but the Taplow Riverside Conservation Area Character Appraisal (2007) notes that a St Regis site plan identified it as a ‘roll store’.

The extensions at the building’s western end and north-eastern corner are relatively-recent additions.

Description

Constructed of stock brick laid in English bond with a hipped copper-clad roof, the Power House is arranged over a single storey and has an ‘industrial classical’ appearance with pilasters and a prominent rendered cornice (now partially covered over with prominent cable brackets). It presents a plain brick elevation to the rear (north), whilst to the east and west are tall multi-pane casement windows. The elevation to the south appears to have undergone some alteration, but may originally have had seven large, square-headed openings separated by brick piers. Some of these have been infilled, whilst others are occupied by modern heavy shutter doors.

Internally, the steel truss roof suggests that the building originally comprised a single volume, although it is now divided into two by a low partition wall. Running around the inside of the external walls is green faience dado tiling, probably original.
The lean-to extension at the western end

The brick extensions at the north-eastern corner

Interior view

Probably original green faience dado tiling
2.6 Glen Island

2.6.1 Glen Island House

Glen Island (or ‘Glenisland’) House was built for Lieutenant-General Sir Roger William Henry Palmer (1832-1910) in 1869. Despite the house’s proximity to the paper mill that dominates this stretch of the river, and which forms its setting, it historically had no connection with the mill business.

The eyot on which Glen Island House stands appears to have been undeveloped until the late 1860s, when it was acquired by Palmer. The Palmer family originated from Norfolk, but by the late 17th century they had established themselves as major landowners in Ireland. Roger William Henry’s great-grandfather, Roger Palmer (d.c.1790), was created the 1st Baronet in 1777. By the time Roger William Henry Palmer succeeded his father as the 5th Baronet in 1869, the family had residences at Kenure Park, Rush, County Dublin; Keenagh Lodge, Crossmolina, County Mayo; Castle Lackin, County Mayo; and Cefn Park, Wrexham; together with some 115,000 acres of land in Ireland, Wales and Berkshire.

Palmer served as MP for Mayo between 1857 and 1865, but he is best known for his participation in the Charge of the Light Brigade (1854), an assault by British light cavalry against Russian forces during the Crimean War (1853-6).
The attraction of the Taplow riverside – described at this time as ‘truly rural and unpolluted’ despite the presence of the mill – appears to have been what first drew Palmer to the site, for he was a keen steam launch enthusiast. He became a well-known personality in the life of the river; he took a keen interest in the annual regatta of the Brigade of Guards Boating Club and occasionally acted as umpire, lending one of his launches for the purpose.

Glen Island House was amongst the first of the gentlemen’s villas erected along this stretch of the Thames, there reportedly being ‘not a single house on the west bank’ between the bridge and the Ray Mead (‘Raymead’) Hotel opposite (present by 1875).

The list description suggests that, as originally built, Glen Island House comprised the western half of the present house, and that Palmer extended it eastwards in 1884, doubling its size to create something akin to a small country house. Certainly, the date stones in the two western gables to the south read ‘1869’, whilst that in the eastern gable to the south reads ‘1884’. However, the Ordnance Survey map of 1876 shows that the house at this date essentially covered most of its present irregular footprint. As shown on the Ordnance Survey map of 1899, the additions of 1884 appear to have comprised the two-storey gabled range extending southwards at the eastern end of the building, which the list description identifies as the billiard room, together with the single-storey annexe projecting eastwards from it. The extension was built in the same materials – buff brick and stone – and in an identical style, the southern end of the billiard room range following the form of the two-storey canted bays of the original house, and the mullion-and-transom window in the single-storey annexe to the east taking as its model that at the western end of the house. To the south, between the western half of the original house and the billiard room projection, there may have been a conservatory or winter garden. The lower parts of the extant curved walls here may survive from this feature, although the present windows, door and roof above are all late 20th century interventions.

In 1880, at around the same time as he was extending the house, Palmer had the present Stable Block erected a little to the north east. A boathouse was present to the north west of the house in 1876; a second one, slightly further north, had appeared by 1899.

The architect of the house, its extension, and the Stables, is not known. The Taplow Riverside Conservation Area Character Appraisal (2007:22), notes that its architectural style, and particularly its tower with conical roof, might offer a nod to Taplow Court (dated 1855) on the hill above.

Glen Island House was described in a 1941 recollection by ‘F.J.B.’ of ‘local personality’ Palmer as a polished gem of Nature set in a superb and unrivalled landscape; the sparkling features of the house and its characteristic adornments giving a double value to the scene, reflecting in the glistening river, which pouring down in convoluting volumes from the weir seemed ever to be murmuring

Tennyson’s refrain:
I ripple, ripple as I flow
For I’m the brimming river;
And men may come and men may go
But I go on for ever.

One of the chief and unforgettable things which marked the picture were the stout white stakes or posts, to which were moored the infinitely small, slender and beautifully proportioned steam launches, with the white funnels, which always looked as if they had just received a fresh coat of white paint. (F.J.B., 1941)

As this description fails to mention the mill or other buildings to the east, it seems that the key value of the house was perceived in its appearance and situation along the riverside.

Palmer died at Cefn Park in 1910 and was buried in the family vault in Wrexham Parish Church. His widow Gertrude Millicent (d.1929) appears to have retained Glen Island House until at least 1919, when she (‘wishing to offer something useful to the town in memory of her late husband who was keenly interested during his life here, in the welfare of the place’ [F.J.B., 1941]) provided Maidenhead with a motorised fire engine, which was christened ‘Sir Roger’.

In 1920, the hallway was photographed for Howard & Sons, upholsterers and interior decorators, suggesting that the house had recently been decorated for continued residential use. At some point thereafter, however, the house became offices for the paper company. In 1929, the year of Gertrude Millicent’s death, the site of Glen Island House was identified (on a plan relating to the lease of Mill Island House) as ‘formerly belonging to Sir Roger Palmer’. This suggests that the house was acquired by the paper company at around this time, and that the house did not pass to the Palmers’ great-nephew, Colonel Roderick Henry Fenwick-Palmer (d.1968), as did both Kenure Park, Rush, and Cefn Park, Wrexham.

It is most likely in connection with the house’s use as offices that a single-storey addition was built alongside the billiard room annexe on the eastern side of the house (present by 1931), and that at least the upper parts of the curved link range to the south were erected (later in the 20th century). Alterations were also made internally, including some knocking-through and subdivision, and the removal of chimney-pieces on the first floor, but the general plan-form survives along with much original joinery and plaster decoration.

During the second half of the 20th century, the mill expanded enormously and Portacabins were placed immediately to the north of the house, presumably to provide ancillary office accommodation.

Glen Island House was statutorily listed at Grade II in 2006, when it became vacant following the winding up of the paper-making business.

Description

Glen Island House is arranged over two storeys, with its principal entrance – in a two-storey gabled projection in the western half of the house – orientated northwards. East of this, and marking the junction between the two halves of the house, is a polygonal turret with conical roof. The principal elevations are to the west, towards the river, and the south, towards the garden, each with identical two-storey canted bays under projecting barge-boarded gables – one to the west and three to the south (two to the 1869 house, linked by an open veranda, and one to the 1884 billiard room
extension. The western elevation also features a single-storey, straight-sided bay window almost wholly taken up with a mullion-and-transom window, a feature replicated in the single-storey annexe to the billiard room to the east. A 20th century single-storey addition stands immediately to the north of the latter. The eastern elevation of the original house is dominated visually by a row of four half-dormer windows and by a full gable at its northern end. Projecting northwards from the house’s north-eastern corner is a short single-storey service range. On the south elevation, a single-storey curved element provides independent access to the two sides of the house; most of the fabric of this appears to date from the late 20th century, although, as noted above, the lower parts of the walls may conceivably relate to an earlier structure such as a conservatory or winter garden.

Internally, the western side of the house contains a large, double-height staircase hall with panelling to picture rail level, a 17th century style fireplace, and foliate plaster frieze. The main staircase has spiral-twist balusters and panelled newell posts with finials. Off the hall, the two main living rooms open to the west, overlooking the river. Both these rooms retain original joinery including doors, skirting boards and window shutters, and that to the south has a heavily carved 17th century style chimneypiece. In the 20th century, these rooms were partly knocked through. Also opening off the hall is a south-facing reception room with heavily-carved fireplace and decorative plaster cornice (now subdivided), and the south-facing former dining room, with heavily carved fireplace, built-in sideboard, and ornate plaster cornice to its ceiling.

The billiard room, which occupies the southern part of the eastern side of the house, has dado panelling as well as a very fine chimneypiece with coloured tiles depicting Mother Hubbard and Taffy the Welshman. Above the fireplace is a window with stained glass depictions of the Palmer arms and the monograms ‘RWHP’ for Roger William Henry Palmer and ‘GMP’ for Gertrude Millicent Palmer. East of the billiard room is a small panelled annexe, perhaps a smoking room. This space has undergone some subdivision in the 20th century.

On the first floor, despite the conversion of the house to offices, the general plan-form survives along with much original joinery and plaster cornices, although no historic chimneypieces appear to survive. At present there is notable water ingress in several parts of the west range.

As noted in the Taplow Riverside Conservation Area Character Appraisal (2007:15), Glen Island House had ornamental and kitchen gardens, lawns, an orchard and specimen trees. Lawns remain but gardens have been grassed over, and there are probably rather more trees now than during its Victorian heyday.
One of the original gables to the south

The gable at the southern end of the billiard room range

The billiard room range and its single-storey annexe to the east

The lower parts of the link range between the western half of the original house and the billiard room projection may have formed part of a conservatory or winter garden enclosure
The single-storey service range to the north, note the adaptation of one of the windows to form a cashier’s window.

The Portacabins to the north.

The junction between the service range and the Portacabins to the north.

A modern casement window at the northern end of the service range.

The single-storey addition alongside the billiard room annexe.
One of the historic chimneypieces on the ground floor

The hallway, looking north

The principal staircase

The hallway, looking east

One of the historic chimneypieces on the ground floor