

## **Botley Mills – A Thousand Years of Heritage Powering a Modern Business Community**

Tucked along the banks of the River Hamble, Botley Mills is one of Hampshire's most distinctive business hubs – a place with real personality, shaped by its heritage and kept alive by the businesses and community that call it home.

Today, Botley Mills remains in the hands of the Appleby family, who have looked after the site since 1921 and continue to guide its evolution. Led by Joe Appleby, it is far more than a historic landmark. It has grown into a thriving micro-economy of around 45 independent businesses, all coexisting within buildings whose origins stretch back centuries.

### **A Place Rooted in History**

Botley Mills' story begins in 1086, when a mill on the site was first recorded in the Domesday Book. While the original wooden structure is long gone, the present complex still carries substantial historical weight.

The Grade II Listed buildings that give the site its character today are largely Georgian. Parts of the timber-framed central interior structure date from the mid-16th century, while the red-brick frontage was added around 1770, typical of the period.

Surrounding buildings, including the Mill House, were added later in the 18th century, forming much of the layout still recognisable today.

Together, these structures form the historic heart of Botley Mills – a place where centuries of milling heritage remain visible in the fabric of the site.

Despite the depth of history, Botley Mills is anything but a static museum piece. Joe said: "Originally, it would have been a wooden structure, and mills like this notoriously burned down, so it would have been rebuilt several times."

### **Community, Variety and Accessibility – Diverse Businesses, Carefully Curated**

What truly distinguishes Botley Mills is Joe's management ethos – one that prioritises diversity, flexibility and long-term relationships over commercial standardisation.

Joe and his family personally manage every tenant relationship, ensuring that no two businesses compete directly. He explains: "If someone applies to start a coffee roastery and we already have one, we'll say no. We want the site to stay interesting."

This approach has certainly created an eclectic mix of independent traders, including:

- Artisan food and drink producers

- Craft and gift shops
- Creative studios
- Health and wellbeing practitioners
- Service specialists, from florists to dog groomers to tattoo artists

Two significant contributors to Botley Mills' growing reputation as a destination are The Mill restaurant and 1086 Wine Bar. The restaurant is owned by James and Sam Davies, who also co-own the wine bar with Joe's wife, Joanna. Together, these two venues have become major draws for visitors and have played a pivotal role in propelling the site into the vibrant hub it is today.

It's clearly a model that keeps Botley Mills fully let throughout the year.

### **Easy In, Easy Out Agreements**

Flexibility sits at the heart of the business model. The tenancies operate on monthly licence agreements, rather than long-term leases. This reduces risk for start-ups and gives established businesses the freedom to grow or relocate when needed.

Joe says: "In theory, this could lead to sudden vacancies, but in practice, the opposite is true. Our average tenancy is eight to ten years, with one tenant here for 35 years. People stay because we look after them and they look after us."

### **A True Family Enterprise**

Botley Mills is, at its heart, a family-run operation. Joe and his wife, Joanna, manage the site alongside his father – now nearing 80 – who is still involved on a daily basis. Joe's son, currently studying business at university, hopes to join the enterprise in the future, becoming the fifth generation of the family to do so.

The Appleby's don't just manage the site; they also run two long-standing businesses there. Their primary company, Botley Flour Milling Company, now operates Botley Mills Country Store, a well-established retail outlet, and TGS Outdoors, a specialist countryside and shooting shop.

These businesses keep the family closely connected to the daily life of the retail hub, working alongside the independent traders they support.

This hands-on approach means tenants enjoy an exceptional level of support.

"If someone has a problem – say a leak – they come straight to my office. We sort it immediately. There's no distance between us," says Joe.

That proximity builds trust and fosters a genuinely collaborative internal community where businesses naturally support one another.

As Joe puts it: “If you look at my credit card bill, it’s all Botley Mills. The butcher, the barber, the jeweller. And everyone here does the same. It’s a proper community.”

### **Growing Footfall and Expanding the Experience**

For years, the local attraction has drawn visitors seeking a distinctive day out, and recent developments have enhanced that appeal even more.

An upper floor added to the west-side craft units has created space for a thriving Reformer Pilates studio, which brings in new visitors and encourages cross-business experiences such as Pilates with Coffee and Pilates with Flower Arranging.

### **The Heritage Centre**

Opened recently, the free Botley Mills Heritage Centre offers a curated look at the history of flour milling across a millennium, the Appleby family’s own milling heritage, along with stories, artefacts and displays created by local craftspeople.

It has quickly become a quiet favourite for families, school groups and scout and brownie packs, who explore the site through themed treasure hunts.

“The kids absolutely love it,” Joe says. “It’s one of the few free things you can do these days and it gives them a real sense of place.”

### **Wildlife and the Riverbank**

Nature remains one of the site’s great draws, with kingfishers flashing fleetingly along the river and plenty of quiet spots for picnics by the water.

The Hidden Tap brewery – one of Botley Mills’ long-standing tenants – has added its own charm to the riverside, regularly welcoming paddleboarders, kayakers and even the odd jet skier who arrive directly via the Hamble. On reaching the river wall, they ring a bell and a special box is lowered down so they can buy drinks, ice creams and snacks – a quirky ritual that’s proving to be very popular during the summer.

### **Balancing Growth with Legacy**

Although demand far exceeds the space available, Joe remains cautious and strategic about any future expansion.

He explains: “Longevity is everything. We’re not driven by shareholder pressure. We grow slowly, responsibly, and with the right people. We’re also keen to maintain the sensitive balance required on a listed site within a conservation area.”

## **A Thriving Hub Within a Thriving Village**

Botley Mills now represents around half of all the businesses in Botley, making it a major contributor to the village's economic identity. Its success is driven not just by thoughtful management, but by a genuine desire to preserve something special – a place where independent traders can flourish, visitors can discover something new and heritage is woven into everyday life.

And as Hampshire increasingly champions its independent business culture, Botley Mills stands as proof that, with the right community behind it, history and enterprise can thrive side by side.

To find out more about Botley Mills, visit [www.botleymills.co.uk](http://www.botleymills.co.uk)