

Len Cripps - The Last Miller

In 2007 the Cripps family celebrated 150 years of ownership of Wheatley Windmill, and the 100th birthday of the grandson of the first owner.

Len Cripps, the present owner of the mill, was born at the windmill on September 19th 1907. He was the son of Ezra Amos (1872-1957) and Grandson of George (1824-1900) who bought the Mill in 1850.

The stories of the Cripps family and Wheatley Mill are intricately intertwined. It is recorded that George Cripps, miller from Quainton in Buckinghamshire, married Ellen Croxford from Sydenham, Buckinghamshire, on October 1st 1850. In the same year he bought the Post Mill in Wheatley - slightly lower down the hill than the present mill. George and Ellen moved in, worked the mill and started to produce a typically large Victorian family - George, Alfred, Ezra, Ebenezer, Obadiah, William, Tom, Ellen, Selina and Sarah. In 1857, he purchased the second (present) mill, over the road and further up the hill. The original mill burnt down in 1870 and there is now no trace of exactly where it stood.

Wheatley Mill ground wheat for a number of local farmers, including the well-known local names of Curtis, Shepherd, and Bell, plus Andrew Bell from Cuddesdon and the Walkers from Horspath. It also ground ochre which was dug out at neighbouring Shotover.

Shotover ochre was certainly used in medieval frescoes in South Leigh, Coombe, Kidlington churches, and probably much further afield. The Vicar of Wheatley, Rev. Edward Elton, (1850 - 1854) wrote in his diary that the ochre from Shotover produced "the purest, bright yellow ochre in the kingdom." The ochre ground at Wheatley mill was used for dyeing wool. But, to avoid any possible pollution of the flour, the grinding mechanism for the ochre was outside the main mill.

The particular shade of yellow that comes from the ochre was, for a long time, the traditional shade for Oxfordshire farm carts. For many years Crown Road Farm in Wheatley supplied paint made from the ground ochre mixed with boiled fish oil.

George and Ellen's children proved to be very musical. Ezra was a talented violinist and ran a dance band playing, not only in Wheatley, but also in many of the surrounding villages including Great Milton, Piddington, Cuddesdon, Waterperry and Waterstock. The talent was clearly inherited as uncle Obadiah used to make violins in his windmill, as did George at High Wycombe. The weathervane on top of Wheatley Mill is in the shape of a violin, as a tribute to this musical family.

The nine Cripps children grew and it became evident that one mill could not support eleven adults. Some of the sons found work at other mills; others followed different occupations such as gardening. Obadiah emigrated to Australia, where he became a music teacher. One of his sisters went with him and married an Australian. Ezra found employment at Grubb's Mill (Castle Mill) in Oxford, and walked to and from work every day.

And then there was Tom. In a family this size, there is often one who is a bit of a rebel. As soon as Tom was old enough to move out of the house, he preferred to sleep in a small stone building next to the pig sties, or in the apple house at the bottom of the garden!

He assisted his father at the mill, one duty being that of helping with the flour deliveries. On one memorable occasion he managed to cover himself in flour from a split sack. It was an early winter's

morning (in other words - still fairly dark) and, meeting some school boys along the road, he managed to frighten them half to death, convinced they had seen a ghost! Com grinding ceased in 1914.

At one time Tom was responsible for running the mill at Holton but, unfortunately, he was a heavy drinker. However, he must have had some charm because he found himself a lady friend and they were planning to get married. No doubt she put more into the savings account than he did, and he ruined his chances by drawing out all the money and going on a drinking spree. That was the end of his marriage prospects, and he died in 1929.

In 1939 Wheatley Mill was struck by lightning. The crack of thunder and reverberations were so sudden and so violent that Len Cripps and his wife, Rosina, are said to have fallen out of their bed in Mill Cottage. The resulting damage was the beginning of the mill's physical decay.

However, in 1976, Wilfred Foreman decided to write a book on 'Windmills in Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire'. In the course of this research he visited Len Cripps - and the Wheatley Windmill Restoration Society was born.

Progress was slow at first, but the original windshaft was repaired and reinstalled - and a new brake-wheel was built. Some of the ribs of the cap were repaired, and new ones made to replace those beyond repair. There are still other items in the process of restoration.

On July 30 2007, the mill's new sails, crafted by Chris Wallis Engineering and David Empringham of High Wycombe, were hoisted. The wood used was larch, from the Shotover estate, given by the late Sir John Miller, who had been a keen supporter of the restoration project, and a member of the committee until his death in 2006.

Others associated with the restoration of the mill in the early days included Rex Powell and Jim Munt who worked on the stone of the tower; Dr Desmond Kaye who, with Len Cripps, worked on the internal woodwork; and Christopher Wallace who worked on the mechanics of the mill and had been working on the final goal of getting up the sails when he died in April 2006.

David Empringham oversaw the final stages of the restoration and a grand party was held at the Mill on August 4th 2007, when 65 members of the Cripps' family, and 21 members of Wheatley Windmill Restoration Society gathered to celebrate the restoration of the Mill, and the one hundredth birthday of Len Cripps.

(Information from an article by Linora Lawrence, in 'Oxfordshire' September 2007)

Sadly, Len died on September 14th (check), just five days short of his birthday, but he had enjoyed the very special day on August 4th, surrounded by all his family and well-wishers.)