



Len Cripps (pictured in 2003) who this month celebrates his 100th birthday, surveys the countryside from the top of his mill at Wheatley.

The last miller

There is something deeply fascinating about windmills. Perhaps it is a primitive instinct reminding us that bread is one of life's staples, perhaps we remember Don Quixote tilting at windmills. Whatever the reason, windmills retain a certain rural romance.

The mill at Wheatley certainly qualifies as a romantic mill. It is reached by winding your way up and down Ladder Hill, turning into Windmill Lane, where, as you climb the hill, you find it on your right, in the grounds of Windmill Cottage.

As mills go, it is not imposing — more of a good, family-sized building — appropriate, as during its working years the mill was a family business. This year the Cripps family are celebrating 150 years of ownership and the 100th birthday of the grandson of the first owner!

Len Cripps, the present owner of the mill, will celebrate his 100th birthday this month. He was born at the windmill on September 19, 1907, the son of Ezra Amos (1872-1957) and grandson of George (1824-1900) who

As the Cripps family of Wheatley celebrate a double anniversary, Linora Lawrence looks back at the colourful history of their now restored windmill — and the family who have owned it for 150 years

bought the Mill in 1850.

The stories of the Cripps family and Wheatley Mill are intricately intertwined. It is recorded that George Cripps, a miller from Quainton in Buckinghamshire, married Ellen Croxford from Sydenham, Buckinghamshire, on October 1, 1850. In the same year he bought the Post Mill in Wheatley — slightly lower down the hill than the present one.

He 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, George 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.

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 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 uncle 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.

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Wheatley mill also developed a nice little sideline — grinding ochre which was dug out at neighbouring Shotover. Ochre is clay and hydrated iron oxide.

The Reverend E. Elton of Wheatley (1850-1854) wrote in his diary that the ochre from Shotover produced "the purest, bright yellow ochre in the kingdom"

Shotover ochre was certainly used in medieval frescos in South Leigh, Coombe, Kidlington Churches, and probably much farther afield. The ochre ground at Wheatley mill was used for dyeing wool.

To 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 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.

The nine Cripps children grew and it became evident that one mill could not support 11 adults. Some of the sons

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The violin-shaped weathervane at Wheatley mill, celebrating the Cripps family's musical tradition

Photograph: KT Bruce



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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 any family this size there is often one who is a bit of a rebel. As soon as Tom was old enough he moved out of the house, preferring to sleep in a small, stone building next to the pig sties, alternating with the apple house at the bottom of the garden.

He assisted his father at the mill, one duty being that of helping with 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, as they were, that they had seen a ghost.

At one time Tom was responsible for the running the mill at Holton but, unfortunately, he was a heavy drinker. However, he must have had some charms as he found himself a lady friend and they were saving up to get married. No doubt she put more into the savings account that he did and, while he did make an effort for a while, he ruined his chances by drawing out all the money and going on a drinking spree.

That, needless to say, was the end of any marriage prospects and Tom 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, though grinding had ceased in 1914.

The fortunes of the now somewhat forlorn mill were to change. In 1976, Will Foreman decided to write a book on windmills in Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire. In the course of his research he visited Len Cripps and the Wheatley Windmill Restoration Society was born.

Progress was slow at first, but the original windshaft has been repaired and reinstalled; a new break wheel has been painstakingly reproduced. The cap with some new ribs, but as many as possible repaired, has been replaced and

numerous other items are in the process of restoration.

On July 30, the mill's new sails, crafted by Chris Wallis Engineering and David Empringham of High Wycombe, were hoisted. The wood used is larch, felled on the Shotover Estate and then given to the restoration team by the late Sir John Miller. Sir John was on the windmill committee and was a keen supporter until his death last year.

Many Wheatley-born folk keep in touch with events at the mill through a website, created by a member of the younger generation of the Cripps family.

A number of names are associated with the restoration of the mill and should not be forgotten. Rex Powell and Jim Munt for their work on the stone. Dr Desmond Kaye, who laboured with Len Cripps on the internal woodwork, and Christopher Wallace, who worked on the mechanics. He had, of course, been working towards the final goal of getting up the new sails.

Sadly, Christopher died in April 2006 and a search began for one of the few people in the country with the expertise to undertake the rest of the work.

Luckily, David Empringham has taken over and this has led to the culmination of all the hard work of the family, the restoration society, Oxfordshire County Council and individual supporters.

A grand party was held on August 4, when 65 members of the family gathered, along with 21 members of the restoration society, to mark the mill's two anniversaries in style.

Wheatley Mill is within walking distance of the local primary school and it is hoped it will become a teaching aid for school groups from there and further afield.

® There are regular open days at Wheatley Mill —the remaining dates for this year are: September 9, (2-6pm) and October 14 (2-5pm). Free admission. For more details visit the website: www.wheatleymill.co.uk



From top, Len Cripps, Ellen Cripps with her granddaughter, Cassie, and George Alfred Cripps