

Community sails to the rescue

FIRST PERSON

Geoff Stephens, chairman of Wheatley Windmill Preservation Society, talks about the recent £10,000 restoration project



Preservation society chairman Geoff Stephens by Wheatley Windmill, which has undergone £10,000 repairs Picture: Richard Cave

I first got involved with the Wheatley Windmill Preservation Society just over 10 years ago as it neared the end of a major restoration process that had started when the windmill was a virtual ruin in 1997.

I have to admit that at first my motives were entirely selfish, as the mill is the first thing that I see when I draw back the curtains each morning and I wanted to make sure the restoration was permanent.

Since then, I have enjoyed the challenge of helping to arrange our regular open days (on the second Sunday of each month May-October), and meeting the wide variety of people of all ages that these have drawn in from near and far. I currently serve the Preservation Society in the role of chairman.

I find that one aspect of the mill that particularly fascinates visitors is the uses that different types of wood have been put to.

These days, we are familiar with plastics, alloys and other exotic materials being designed and manufactured to precise tolerances to do a specific job, but when mills such as ours were built, the builders often only had materials which were available locally and easy to work with using simple hand tools.

Examples of such materials include pitch pine for long straight shafts, oak for structural components, hornbeam for the teeth of gears and elm for flooring. For younger visitors, I contrast this with their mobile phones which are packed with an incredible amount of technology using microscopic components that have been manufactured and shipped from all four points of the compass.

A big setback for us last year was the failure of a substantial timber leading to the loss of one of our four wooden sails. This presented two big challenges: how to raise the £10,000 necessary to finance the repair, and how to

mobilise the local community to provide the necessary physical labour in order to minimise our costs. I am pleased to say that the local community rose to this challenge by providing teams of volunteers to clean the remaining sails and paint them with several coats of special paint.

One of the things I've learnt is that with demonstrable local interest and support, it is possible to engage with other local organisations to seek their assistance. In Wheatley, we are fortunate to have the CES Language School, which attracts students from

all round the world, and two groups of them stood out in particular for the help they gave us in lifting and moving the sails: a Portuguese group to whom we gave maximum points for efficiency; and an Italian group to whom we gave maximum points for doing it in style. The financial challenge was more of a hurdle, but I found that once we had got the ball rolling with a successful appeal to members of the preservation society and local residents, it was possible to get other organisations to donate too. Going forward, I would like to see better use made of the mill as an educational resource because it has the capacity for teaching visitors about food production, industrial history,

mechanisms and, excusing my personal prejudice, can even make mathematics an interesting subject!

Finally, I came to volunteering quite late on after a busy working life, and in a fairly modest way at that. It has brought me into contact with lots of people I would not otherwise have met and given me many enjoyable experiences. To anyone thinking of doing the same I would just say "have a go"! ■