

A tale of three mills

Peter Barrington celebrates the restoration of three well-known windmills, open to the public for National Mills Weekend



Karl Bettles
pictured
working on
Wheatley mill in
May last year

Photograph: Ed Nix

A century after corn was last ground at Brill, the village's iconic windmill has restored and is now well prepared to face whatever the next 100 years has in store for it.

A new set of sails has been fixed in place, a brick roundhouse has been rebuilt and a ladder has been installed to give easier access. Sadly, despite the £300,000 spent on restoration, it cannot grind wheat to produce flour.

However, Joy Molyneux, windmill project officer for the Brill Society, explained: "To get the milling machinery running again would have been too expensive. And we did not see ourselves dressing up in smocks and milling flour. But the mill is now in good condition — and it should remain that way for the next 100 years."

Brill mill, which stands on the village common overlooking the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire countryside, is owned by Buckingham County' Council and Brill Society', a conservation and preservation group, which keeps an eye on it and runs the open afternoons on Sundays between Easter and September.

No one knows exactly when the Brill mill was built, but it contains oak timbers dating from the 17th century that were cut from the neighbouring Bernwood or Bernwode forest.

The roundhouse was constructed out of Brill bricks, the clay being excavated from the common, and was also used for Brill pottery.

During the renovations the roundhouse had to be completely re-built because large holes were made in the walls to remove timbers for repair.

"We hoped to keep the original Brill bricks but they crumbled to pieces because they were deteriorating because cement, rather than mortar, had been used to build the roundhouse," Joy said.

The restoration was the first major work undertaken to the mill since the 1970s, when a steel frame was inserted inside to ensure the mill would remain standing. Unfortunately, this meant the sails could not turn and the main body of the mill could not be turned on its central post.

However, the addition of the ladder at the rear means visitors can now get a better idea of how the mill operated.

While the sails cannot be turned in the wind, they can be manually manipulated to different positions to ensure rainwater cannot damage the timber.

Turning sails was also a way that millers in the past relayed messages.

Joy explained: "The usual position of sails is in the St Andrew's cross shape, but in the past sails were changed to give messages to the village, such as alerts for danger and also for celebrations."

Brill's post mill is one of three mills within a few miles of each other that have been restored. The other two are both tower mills — at Wheatley and Quainton — although Quainton is the only one where flour is milled regularly.

However, the mill at Wheatley could be grinding corn again on May 8 and 9 when a special event for National Mills Weekend will mark the success of its restoration project.

Mavis Ramsden, daughter of Leonard Cripps, the last owner of the mill, explained: "We are organising a grand open weekend when the Lord Lieutenant of Oxfordshire, Tim



Brill post mill Photograph: Ian Bricknell

'The Unver was split in the storm when it was struck by lightning. While that might have been a disaster it did keep people out as it was realised the mill was in a dangerous state. '

Stevenson, will be declaring the mill open. We also hope to mill some grain, which will be the first time since 1914 that flour has been produced at the mill."

Apart from some finishing touches the brick and stone tower mill has been restored in a project that began in 1977.

The mill is owned privately but has been renovated by the Wheatley Windmill Restoration Society'.

Caroline Dalton, chairman of the society, said the mill had been derelict for decades and suffered damage during a severe storm in 1939.

"The tower was split in the storm when it was struck by lightning. While that might have been a disaster, it did keep people out as it was realised the mill was in a dangerous state."

Members of the society' raised the money for restoration after an initial contribution from South Oxfordshire District Council.

Volunteers took 20 years to restore Quainton mill that dominates the skyline of the Buckinghamshire village.

Restoration began in 1974 and by February, 1997 — about 100 years after it stopped operating — the first milling was achieved under wind power when wheat was ground between the French Burr stones. The whole project cost a modest £60,000.

Patrick Tooms, secretary of Quainton Windmill Society', said: "It was a big step forward when we were able to mill flour. It took a lot of determination and enthusiasm to

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May 2010 Oxfordshire Limited Edition 45



Wheatley mill in 1975 (top) and (above) as it is today after restoration and replacement of the sailcloths.

reach that stage. It was a wonderful feeling too when the cap and sails were back in place."

The 65ft mill dates from the 1830s and adding in another 10ft for the cap, it is the tallest mill in Buckinghamshire.

At one time it was powered by a steam engine, but coal was not easy to come by as it had to be hauled from the nearest railhead at Winslow.

Competition from mills on the coast helped the demise of the mill and the engine and boiler were sold for scrap in 1914.

■ National Mills Weekend is a celebration of the UK's milling heritage held on the second weekend of May each year. The weekend is organised by the Mills Section of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (founded by William Morris in 1877). Many wind and water mills will be open over the weekend. For more information visit the website: www.nationalmillsweekend.co.uk