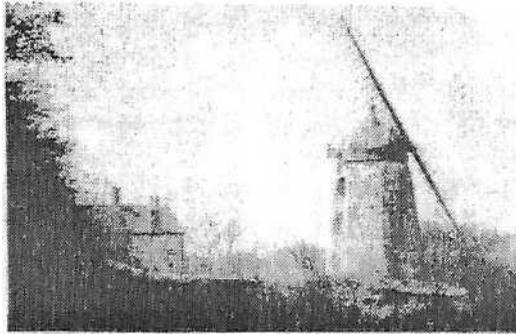


WHEATLEY WINDMILL



WHEATLEY WINDMILL

Wheatley mill is situated, on the south west of the village and is reached, along Windmill Lane, off Ladder Hill. The mill is owned by Mr Len Cripps, and it has been in the ownership of the Cripps family for over 120 years. The Wheatley Windmill Restoration Society has been formed with the object of repairing the mill to its former splendour as a working mill. It is also hoped that the mill will house a collection of rural artefacts and miller's tools.

The octagonal shape of this 18th Century tower mill is distinctly unusual - there are only two or three such towers in the country. The tower has three storeys: there are two fireplaces on the ground floor (some mills only had one, and others none at all) and a properly framed staircase leads to the 'stone floor', i.e. the first floor where the mill stones are set. The unusual framing of the cap can be examined in the admirable technical drawings by Mr Wilfred Foreman which are available. The original curved dome cap was copper clad and has been described as being 'picturesque without being elegant'. There were originally four sails (which turned clockwise rather than the more usual anti-clock) but for a time the windmill operated on two sails only. These were of the 'common' type with a wooden frame rigged with canvas which could be set according to the state of the wind and the amount of work the miller had to do. The canvas used was similar to that used on Thames barges.

TEE WHEATLEY WINDMILL

Mr Wilfrid Sheldon, who died in 1972, wrote, when he was an old man, 'I can remember clearly as a schoolboy seeing Cripps' windmill working - a very pleasant sight', and there are still a few local residents who can say the same. The history of the mill is obscure until the eighteenth century but it is clear that there must have been a mill long before that period, not only for the usual purpose of grinding corn for the neighbourhood but also for grinding ochre for a much wider distribution. Wheatley ochre is yellow and was used, among other things, for painting Oxfordshire wagons and, it is conjectured, for wall-paintings like those still to be seen in the Painted Room in Oxford and in some of our churches. At one time it was exported as far as China. The ochre, according to the Rev. Edward Elton (1817-1898) was 'of a very superior sort •• bright yellow and said to be the purest in the kingdom'. Mr Kiewe has had special dyes made to match samples from the local ochre pits for the wool he sells in Ship Street under the name of Oxford Ochre. In other parts of the country ochre is red and is sometimes known as reddle; this was the stock-in-trade of the reddleman in Thomas Hardy's 'The Return of the Native'. The machinery of the mill drove separate grinders for the ochre, outside the main tower.

The first written evidence of the mill occurs in 1671, when it is described as 'in a ruinous condition' but by 1702 William Jackson was paying rates of 2/- for it and from then on references are frequent though it has not been possible to disentangle the confusion arising from the fact that a second mill was standing on the other side of the road during part of the nineteenth century and was burnt down in 1875* This is shown on Bryant's map (published 1824) and in a picture in the possession of Mrs Paintin, daughter of the last working miller.

In 1760 there was much damage by wind and fire but it must have been quickly restored for in 1764 it was advertised in Jackson's Journal: 'New windmill to be let or sold. Enquiries to Webb, millwright, at Cuddesdon or Davis schoolmaster at Wheatley' but if anyone responded he did not work it long for it was advertised again in 1764 and in 1773 it had become 'Windmill to let almost new with house'. 1784 was an important year, for a surviving part of the machinery is still stamped with this date and the name of the Eagle Foundry.

In 1806 John Sheldon bought it from John Parish for £525 but he sold it in the next year, when its capacity was described as eight loads of wheat. From then until 1857 it passed fairly rapidly from one owner to another but in that year George Cripps, born in Aston Rowant, bought the mill and the house and except for seven years when he lost it through defaulting on a mortgage, it has remained in the possession of his family until the present day.

The Cripps family were famous throughout the area not only as millers but also for their contributions to local festivities. Ezra, son of George Cripps, married Rosina who was famous for the dress with a hundred pockets that she would wear to local fetes (a kind of living bran tub). She took part in many amateur musical productions and panto, mimes, and in 1953 she "was Coronation Queen of Wheatley, leading the procession through the streets. She and her husband celebrated their diamond wedding in 1956 and she lived to be 96. George's son, Obadiah, was in great demand as a fiddler for dances in local villages and it is even recorded that he played his fiddle while 'taking the grist cart round'. It is a curious fact that R.D. Blackmore chose the name Cripps for his story of 'Cripps the Carrier', set in the Beckley area, and that his characters shared the custom of using Old Testament names. The miller's family also included Ebenezer and Amos.

The vanes were destroyed by lightning in 1939 and for many years now the octagonal tower has been no more than a landmark, without sails and with the structure gradually deteriorating. In 1977» however, the Windmill Restoration Society was formed. The building was examined, a great many of the old mechanical parts were discovered and work was begun on the task of restoring the stonework. At present the tower looks particularly forlorn as the cap has had to be removed as a step in the restoration, but if only the necessary support in both labour and money can be found the mill will once again be a source of pride and pleasure to the locality and a tribute to the craftsmanship of our predecessors.

Visit the windmill's website at
www.advsys.co.uk./wheatleymill

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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