

Wheatley Windmill in History and Today

1 the background to milling in England.

As with so many subjects, certain knowledge of mills in England begins with the creation of Domesday Book in 1085. The compilers of this document recorded the existence of 5624 mills at 3000 locations. These were however all watermills. Windmills first made their appearance about one hundred years after the date of Domesday Book. They soon caught the imagination of artists and drawings of windmills appear in more than one surviving thirteenth century medieval manuscript. It was once thought that English crusaders returning from the eastern Mediterranean brought this technology to England. Edward J Kealey, the author of *Harvesting the Air, Windmill Pioneers in Twelfth Century England*, argues that on the contrary, construction of post mills, the earliest type of windmill, was an English innovation which spread across Europe to the near east. The earliest mention of a windmill he has found in Oxfordshire was at Claydon, where in 1196 Henry d'Oilli granted Osney Abbey free entrance and exit across his land to use the windmill. The great advantage of windmills over watermills is that whereas watermills could be prevented from working by freezing weather or drought or by hostile people upstream diverting the water supply, no one has ever been able to stop the wind blowing.

2 mills in Oxfordshire.

In 1983 Wilfred Foreman's book, *Oxfordshire Mills* was published by Phillimore. This book was the result of thorough field and desk work particularly in the gazetteer section, where the writer identified the sites and documentary sources of 227 watermills and 76 windmills in pre-1974 Oxfordshire. Some random documentary examples are; there was a windmill between Begbroke and Yarnton shown on Davis's county map of 1794. There is a mill field in Holton, which however has now only a watermill. There was a post mill at the north end of St Giles in Oxford which Wilfred found drawn on a map of Holywell parish dated 1660 in Merton College Library. There was also within living memory a watermill next to Oxford Castle. This mill had the distinction of being mentioned both in Domesday Book and in Wilfred Foreman's book written 877 years later. Wilfred began his book with chapters on the uses of mills. These can be summarised as for fulling cloth, for pounding rags to make paper, for scutching flax, for grinding bones to make fertiliser, for grinding the ingredients of gunpowder and for grinding grain.

3 the historical background to Wheatley Windmill

Wheatley Windmill is a tower mill built of local limestone patched with local brick. In its heyday it had an ogival cap and four sails, which turned into the wind on conical roller bearings. It is one of the three remaining stone tower mills in Oxfordshire. The other two are at North Leigh and Great

Haseley. It is the only one which is being restored to working order. This is because it still possesses nearly all its machinery, with many spares. It stands on a hill half a mile south west of Wheatley, equidistant from Horspath and Cuddesdon and two miles from Garsington. We can assume therefore that people from all four villages brought their corn crops to Wheatley mill to be ground. From the tower you can see the windmill at Brill and Haseley Mill. You will also soon be able to see Chinnor mill. The tower of Wheatley windmill is an unusual octagonal shape.

There has been a mill here since 1671 when it was described as being 'in a ruinous condition.' By 1702 it must have been repaired because a miller called William Jackson was paying a parish rate of 2 shillings for it. In 1760 that mill, or its successor, was 'damaged by wind and fire.' The present mill is probably the one advertised in Jackson's Oxford Journal of 1764 as 'a newly built windmill to be let or sold; enquiries to Webb, millwright at Cuddesdon or Davis, schoolmaster at Wheatley.'

The windshaft of the present mill has been salvaged and recycled from a post mill, which stood about 500 yards nearer Wheatley on the site of present day Post Mill House. The post mill and the tower mill appear on Bryant's map published in 1824 but the post mill burnt down in 1875. The cast iron cannister box of our mill was made in 1784 at the Eagle Foundry, Oxford, forerunner of the present day Lucy's Iron Works, which was until very recently in Walton Well Road but has now moved to Thame. In 1806 John Sheldon bought the mill from John Parish for £525 but he sold it the next year, when the advertisement described its capacity as eight loads of wheat. For 50 years the mill passed rapidly from one owner to another. Then in 1857 George Cripps of Aston Rowant bought the mill and the adjoining cottage. The two buildings have been in his family ever since then, with the exception of a few years when one member defaulted on a mortgage. The current owner is Len Cripps, who now lives in Horspath but was brought up in Windmill Cottage next door to the mill. Len has left the mill to his son Roy Crippsc in trust for his grandchildren Sarah and Paul.

The mill was last used regularly during Len's parents' lifetime, in 1914. At that time it had two sails left out of the original four and could grind grain; there was also an ochre mill, which was used to grind the raw ochre extracted from the pits on Shotover. The power for the ochre mill came from the windmill central shaft, transmitted by a belt. The grinding mechanism stood just outside the mill, so that the ochre dust would not contaminate the flour. The ochre was yellow and was famous well beyond the Oxfordshire region but in Oxfordshire it was the traditional colour for farm waggons.

Between the two world wars the mill was reasonably complete but not in good repair. Len Cripps still has a copy of a report on its condition, written in 1932 by Rex Wailes of The Society for

the Preservation of Ancient Buildings. Rex Wailes was the man who set up the wind and watermill section within the society. His report begins by saying 'The mill has been allowed to get into a very bad state of repair and it would be unwise to attempt any restoration of the fan or sails owing to the rotten state of the cap generally.' Rex Wailes thought that all the necessary work could be handled by the millwright who inspected the mill with him, T. Hunt junior. He made five recommendations for repairs:

The cap needed to be patched with unspecified sheet metal. At the time of inspection it was patched indiscriminately with iron and zinc over wooden boards. The oak finial was rotten and let in water, so he also wanted this to be waterproofed.

The mill needed new shutters fore and aft in the cap.

The mill needed a new petticoat round the cap. This circle of vertical boards prevents rain from getting in below the cap and saturating the running gear.

The mill needed new windows or glazed shutters and at least one new door.

The stonework was in bad condition, especially round the window and door openings and needed repointing.

The report went on to say 'The mill is at present used as a storehouse by the owner.... If he parted with the mill, the owner would no doubt require a price which would cover the erection of a shed for storage, but if the mill was repaired and left in the owner's hands I think he could be easily persuaded to enter into an undertaking to see that the mill was kept weatherproof and it could be subjected to a periodical inspection.' I should estimate the cost of repairs indicated above to be approximately £100 (one hundred pounds) but this estimate is put forward without any knowledge of local prices.'

This report was sensible and thorough. It indicates that in 1932 while all the specialised machinery was in working order, if not in prime condition, the structure of the mill imperilled the machinery because it was not waterproof. No work was done on the mill though. It is extremely unlikely that Len Cripps' father Ezra had £100 to spend on the mill. In any case, he had given up milling, in favour of a job at the brickworks in Littleworth. So for a few more years the mill stood, shabby and leaking but not in a desperate state.

Matters took a disastrous turn for the structure when Len was a young man. One night in October 1939 lightning struck the mill fan. The force of the electrical charge split the tower from parapet to foundations. The noise of this startled Len's parents so much that they both fell out of their bed in the cottage. Unfortunately the windmill was not insured, so Len's parents had no means of repairing it. Nevertheless they both knew it was worth keeping, even if it was a ruin. On her

deathbed Len's mother made him promise not to part with the mill. Funds and by then technical knowledge for repair still eluded him. The structure became gradually more ramshackle with every passing winter. By 1963 nearly all the cap had collapsed and blown away. Ruins of the brake wheel protruded above parapet level at the top of the tower, while the one remaining sail spar hung forlornly down towards the ground. The building was generally regarded as too dangerous to enter. The split in the tower masonry had caused joists to move off the wall plates, so that much of the machinery was hanging over a void. On the positive side, undoubtedly the danger had prevented anyone from giving the metal parts to the war effort and had kept vandals away. It had also meant that no one attempted to convert the tower into a cottage.

4 Establishment of a restoration society

Not surprisingly, it was Wilfred Foreman who started this project. He convened a public meeting in May 1976, which resulted in the foundation of Wheatley Windmill Restoration Society. Its objects, defined in the second clause of the constitution, are "to preserve, restore and open to the public at specified times the Wheatley Windmill at Windmill Lane, Wheatley, Oxon., for the benefit of the village of Wheatley, and, to those ends, to conclude an agreement with the owner of the said windmill for the continuing co-operation between the owner and the society." Since early days therefore the society has operated within the framework of a rolling legal agreement with Len Cripps, who retains ownership, while allowing the society to undertake restoration work and open the mill periodically to the public.

There have been many steps along the way, both recorded and unrecorded. The members of the Oxford cine film club shot a film in 1977, showing events on the day a crane driver lifted down dangerous machinery from the top of the tower. At that stage restoration society members made a big mistake in not numbering and storing everything they brought down. It has been a hard matter in later years to identify useful remains of the curb, cap and other woodwork. We have two albums of photographs showing the gradual progress Rex Powell, a founder member, and his helpers Jim Munt and others, made in restoring the stone tower to parapet level. They finally got there in April 1991, 15 years after the foundation of the society. We also have minutes of committee meetings, mostly recording efforts at fund raising, rather than restoration work.

In 1994 the restoration society was at its wits end about what to do next, how to afford it and who would carry out any plans we could formulate. Nick Doggett, the conservation officer of SODC suggested that the society apply for planning permission to put a temporary canvas and timber cap on the mill, on the grounds that there were no funds for further work. This we duly did. Since there was an objection, a site meeting was held. The outcome was that SODC refused our application to cover the mill with a temporary cap but instead offered to find the society

some financial help to go on restoring the mill.

By coincidence the society had just been awarded £500 by the Co-operative Wholesale Society of Great Britain for running a restoration project with and for local people. Then by another extremely fortunate coincidence Christopher Wallis, a Buckinghamshire millwright, read in the local press that SODC would not let us put a temporary cap on the mill. Rashly but enthusiastically he wrote and offered his services for the next stage. He was rash because he had no idea what he would find, or not find on site. Using our £500, we were able to commission a survey and drawings from Christopher in late 1994. This involved him and his assistant in borderline archaeological work over midwinter, hunting missing beams and ironmongery among the nettle stalks and soggy overgrown grass. From then on we have followed his recommendations as speedily as we could afford them. He began on the curb and centring ring for the top of the parapet in 1995. After that he made a new cage for the running gear and installed it with the conical roller bearings in December 1996 and January 1997. In May 1997 he turned a new oak finial to the same profile as the old one condemned by Rex Wailes in 1932. In 1998 he began to construct a replacement cap for the mill, using the original ribs with the replacement finial.

All the construction of the cap took place outside Christopher Wallis's workshop at Widmer End Farm, near High Wycombe. Some of the neighbours joked that he and his colleague David Empringham were building a wooden space capsule. The completed structure came to Wheatley on the back of a low loader with a police escort on 8th October 2000. A crane driver lifted it onto the top of the mill tower. It fitted perfectly.

Repair of the large rotten hole in the original wind shaft and refixing the cast iron cannister block into the front end of it were the next major jobs Christopher Wallis undertook. They were completed by January 2002, when once again, a crane driver, appropriately named Bill Mills of Marsh Plant, lifted them back through the front hatch of the cap. The inner end of the windshaft then needed a new tailbeam to support it. Meanwhile, David Empringham put a wooden patch into the main shaft so that Christopher Wallis could make and install the wallower wheel at its top end, using the original wooden frame but constructing a new rim and cogs. All this arrived in time for the annual general meeting of 2003. With the wallower wheel and windshaft in their correct positions, it was possible to make measurements which would give the correct size for the brake wheel. This wheel has to be an almost complete restoration, as the original one broke up when it was lifted from the mill in Autumn 1976. At time of writing, March 2005, it is complete but awaits preservation, after which it will be brought to the mill in sections for installation. The millwrights have also made two staircases, to connect the upper three floors of the mill, done much preparatory work on the sail timbers and laid the wooden floor at ground level.

Target tasks for the remaining months of 2005 are to complete further work on the sail timbers on site then take them to Jewsons timber yard for preservation. In 2006, if all goes well, they will be put onto the mill.

6 Changes to the society's structure and funding.

While the millwrights have continued to complete tasks according to a programme of work drawn up in December 2000, the administrative structure backing their work has changed. As a condition of contributing grant money, South Oxfordshire District Council asked the owner for an assurance that the windmill would continue to open to the public for a number of years in the future. The owner signed an agreement with the council to the effect that the mill would be open at specified times for twenty five years from the date of completion of the cap. He also signed a matching agreement to the same effect with the restoration society. This gave the society the opportunity to apply for and gain charitable status. It became registered charity number 1079601 in February 2000. With charitable status achieved, we could appeal to grant giving trusts for funds, which in turn led to a successful application to South Oxfordshire District Council's community trust fund in April 2002. The council has agreed to fund the programme of restoration at the rate of 50.6%, so that restoration could be ongoing, rather than stopping every time we ran short of money. Twenty nine years from the start of the project, we are approaching a successful conclusion.

7 rationale behind restoration.

You could ask, why is Wheatley mill worth restoring? There are several reasons. It is part of our local history and demonstrates a stage in the industrial revolution. There is enough machinery there to make a working mill. There are hardly any other octagonal stone tower mills in the country, so this one must be worth saving as an example. It is important to preserve the skill of grinding grain with wind power. It could conceivably be useful again, if not to us then to people overseas. And the last reason, possibly the best one for restoring the mill, is that it will be beautiful and environmentally neutral, if not benign.

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