

THREE MILLS ON THE STREAM

Whilton Local History Society met on Friday 27th March 2015, to hear stories of three local watermills, some of which are recalled here.

Brockhall Mill

There was no record of a watermill at Brockhall in the Domesday Book of 1086. Sometime after the conquest, Brockhall acquired a water mill, and by 1364 there was a miller called "John ate mulne". This mill continued to serve Brockhall for several centuries, although there was never a large population.

This mill's useful life came to an end under the ambitious garden works of Thomas Thornton. The Mill Pond was kept as part of his first garden plan, but the mill did not fit with the gardens as they grew and in 1780 it was demolished. Brockhall was the shortest lived of the three mills and there is no trace of it today, as in a later garden redevelopment, the site became part of the serpentine lake in the park.

Muscott Mill

Muscott's highest population ever recorded was in 1301, when there were 48 tax payers. As this did not include the women and children, this was a substantial settlement for the time. A charter dating from before 1267 suggests that the mill at Muscott was in existence then. But after the disaster of what was probably the Black Death there were only 5 people to pay the Poll Tax there in 1377. The mill, however, did not disappear with most of the community.

In 1596 the mill was sold to Sir John Spencer of "Old Throppe". This particular change of ownership affected the rest of Muscott Mill's story, as it is still in the ownership of the Spencers of Althorp today.

By 1900 almost all rural watermills had ceased commercial production. Muscott Mill followed the pattern, despite the introduction of steam power. It was lying empty, except for a few pieces of equipment left about inside. In January 1900 the engine and boiler were sold. Three brothers helped with moving these out, making a hole in the wall to achieve this. They were Alfred Botterill of Whilton, and William and Walter Botterill of Flore, Thomas Higgs, the Muscott farmer, became the tenant of the mill, but did not use it. He always kept the doors locked, but knew anyone could get in through the gap in the wall made by taking out the engine.

By the end of 1900 Thomas Higgs became aware that brass and belts were disappearing from the mill. Meanwhile Ebenezer Allchin, a Northampton iron founder, was being offered and buying quantities of brass. Alfred Botterill sold him 25 pounds of it, while William brought him 44 pounds. Lord Spencer brought in an engineer to investigate and he found much evidence of missing items. In March 1901 Police Sergeant Chapman visited Alfred Botterill at his house at Whilton.

All the brothers made protestation when accused, Walter stating: "No, I wish God would strike my arm off if I know anything of any belts." Alfred's statement was read to them at Daventry Police Station. "My brother Will told me that he had been and fetched some and sold it in Northampton, and he told me that there was one pair left, and those I went and fetched one night. My brother went with me twice to sell brass and we divided the money, and he told me he went once himself."

In court it was stated that Lord Spencer did not wish to press the case. Alfred from Whilton now pleaded guilty to stealing scrap brass, William to taking one bit of brass, and Walter pleaded not guilty. The Bench discharged Walter. William was fined £2 and Alfred Botterill of Whilton, who had previous convictions recorded against him, was committed for one month with hard labour.

Thus ended this chapter of Muscott Mill's history, and the mill no longer stands.

Whilton Mill

Whilton Mill already existed in 1086. The lord of the manor owned the mill. At the time of Whilton enclosure in 1778, the Freeman family held the manor and continued to let the mill through middle men, as they had been doing for some time, finally selling it in 1850.

A number of local families were associated with the mill, often combining milling with farming. Among these farming and milling families were the Hardings in Elizabethan times, the Carrs, Watsons and the Davies family in the 18th century, and then the Humphreys and Judkins in the 19th century. The Humphreys were farmers and butchers, but some of them were millers too.

In 1837 Francis Humphrey had two lodgers in Whilton Mill, Samuel Collis and James Troughton who was 17. On 6th February Samuel Collis was in the mill, when he noticed young James Troughton come into the lower storey and take some barley flour. Samuel followed him out to the stable, where James' father had some horses. Samuel challenged James, who said he took the meal for his horses. It was in a sack with the mouth tied up.

James was arrested and taken to court. "The learned judge in summing up, said there was some reason to doubt whether the meal was taken with a felonious intent. He might have supposed the meal to belong to his father, being on the same premises with the stable which was occupied by his father's horses. Guilty, but recommended to mercy." James was imprisoned in the house of correction for a month. Was this merciful? After that there is no further record of him in Whilton.

Francis Humphrey left Whilton Mill in 1841 and sold up both mill contents and most of his farm. This included his household furniture from dining tables to candlesticks, pots and kettles. He also sold 40 "famous young in lamb ewes", a barren cow, cart horse, cart mare, four years old; cart filly, three years old, a two-year-old colt by Cardinal Wolsey and a quantity of poultry. There were four acres of a superior crop of swede turnips, two ten pillar and two eight pillar staddle stones, wagons, carts, ploughs, harrows, two French millstones, a grinding stone, a malt mill and other items, including saddles and harness. This description helps to illustrate how farming and milling were intermixed.

Milling was a heavy and potentially dangerous occupation. Flour for bread sometimes came at a cost. In October 1847 Thomas Judkins, of Whilton Mill: "was attending to the mill, and it was presumed he got into the cog-pit to make some alteration, when, unfortunately, he got caught by some part of the machinery, and he was found at the bottom of the pit, with the left side of his chest completely smashed in. Death must have been instantaneous. An inquest was held the following day before Mr. Hicks, when a verdict of accident was returned."

Whilton Mill was the only one of the three mills to incorporate an inn for its customers. By 1841, 84 year old Ann Humphrey was the publican of the Mill Inn. The mill was used for a variety of public purposes, and these may have given more trade to the pub. Sometimes the mill was the venue for property auctions, sometimes more sadly for public inquests. For example after the drowning of Edward Gibson in 1810 the inquest happened at the mill, and as late as 1913 the auction of the farming stock of Whilton Lodge took place at the Mill. This may be the reason that the Mill Inn continued to function when there was very little milling going on, although farming continued there.

Exactly 62 years before our meeting, on 27 March 1953: "a sow and nine pigs and six store pigs were burned to death in a fire which gutted a barn at Whilton Mill Farm. A farm worker, Mr Francis Allen Middleton [great uncle of Maurice Clements], discovered the blaze and tried to rescue the pigs, but the flames were too severe. Daventry Fire Brigade eventually extinguished the fire. The pigs were owned by Mr Francis Spencer Ashby of Muscott Mill Farm."

Today Whilton Mill has changed its use, and its milling equipment is purely for decoration, but the building stands as a reminder of past history.