

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - September 2013

Life and Times of a Miller at Mapledurham

Mildred Cookson, who was the Mapledurham miller for about 30 years (and the only lady miller in the country), and is also a leading member of the Mills Archive Trust, recalled the Life and Times of a Miller at Mapledurham, at the September meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society.

A mill had existed at Mapledurham for a very long time, and it was valued at 12/- in the Domesday survey of 1086. This was a valuable property then, as most mills on the Thames were valued at 5/- or 6/-. It had been built for the Lord of the Manor, to provide him with an income. Even now, there are 12 working farms on the Mapledurham Estate, and everyone on the estate had to have their grain milled at the Mapledurham Mill (or pay a fine). There were 'two sides' to the miller - 'honest', as he had to be loyal to the Lord of the Manor, and keep the mill in good order, or 'thief', as the miller was entitled to take 1/16 of every bag of flour for himself - but would often take more. There were authorised grain measures, marked inside the bottom and outside at the top, but an unscrupulous miller might then add a false bottom after the stamps had been struck! The barge men also had to pay the miller, to pass through the flash lock - which could lead to arguments when the mill was working and needed the water flow. After the Lord of the Manor, the miller was probably the wealthiest person on an estate.

The earliest part of the original mill that is still standing has been dated to 1626. There were additions both upstream and down in the mid 18th century, and a granary added on the island in 1777 - some 'graffiti' on the back of the mill dating from the 1760s. A rebuilding, planned in the 1820s, to make it like Hambleden Mill, fortunately never took place.

The mill had two waterwheels, each of which ran two mill stones on the first floor, although only the larger one, on the Thames side, remains. The busiest months were from July (when barley was milled), through August (wheat) and September (oats) with other grains for animal feed to follow. By April and May, the mill would be relatively quiet. Typically, the miller, his assistant and two 14 year old boys would work the mill - the latter doing the heavy work. Fortunately, on most estates, (unlike what happened in towns), if the mill was no longer working, it was just locked up and left. As a result, many of them survived. The demand for milling was much reduced, as after about 1900, wheat grown on the Canadian prairies was processed by roller mills on the dockside at the major British ports.

At Mapledurham, one of the wheels was taken out by 1920, and a turbine installed instead to generate electricity (although the head of water was not really right for that), and the mill continued to function until 1947. Fortunately, the start of a fire in November 1955, caused when the turbine overheated, was spotted just in time for the mill to be saved.

There then followed a period when, with the owner not living on the estate, little happened. When the new owner, then in the army, inherited it in 1966, he decided to restore the house, and to get the mill working again. There was no funding available from councils etc, but a film company was said that the house, mill and estate was 'just what they wanted' - the problem being that at the end, the mill would be blown up! A false end to the mill and waterwheel were then put on the end of the building - and were blown up - and the money from the film company paid for the mill to be restored to working order.

A new floor had to be laid upstairs to support the mill stones - each stone weighing \hat{A} ½ ton. The gearing is with wood on iron - and Mildred explained that it was important to use the right type of wood - elm for

the waterwheel paddles, oak for its spokes and the teeth on the lowest gear wheel, beechwood on the wheel above, and applewood (which is close grained) for the crown wheel at the top. A miller's skill includes knowing the correct type of wood to use - the wrong type being liable to break - as well as river conditions types of grain, etc. A simple alarm system comprises a strip of leather held down by the weight of grain in the feed to the millstones, which when the level gets low releases a bell to ring. At that point the miller has about a minute to either stop the mill or add more grain - otherwise an explosion could result. The whole building being timber framed, it tends to move whilst working in the summer - in winter the pegs swell to hold everything tight. Amongst other regular tasks to be dealt with, the miller has to keep the pegs tight, clean out the machine that separates the different grades of flour (a whole day job 3 or 4 times a year). The millstones come from France, and can last about 50 years, but have to be re-cut about every 3 or 4 months. This takes 3 days to do, and in time past might be done by an itinerant stone dresser. If someone came to the mill offering to do this for the miller, he would be asked to 'show us your metal', which mean show your hands - an experienced man would have specks of metal imbedded in his skin from doing the work.

Mildred's fascinating talk included illustrations showing the mill at varying times in its history, and she also brought along some of the tools that were used in the mill, as well as examples of cog teeth made from the various types of wood.

The next meeting will be on Tuesday, October 8th when Norman Rees will talk about his Experiences as an ITN Reporter, when he worked in many of the world's troublespots, and then on Tuesday, November 12th, Elise Fraser will tell us about The Archaeology of Silchester, where she is the finds manager for the excavations of the Roman town.