

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - October 2000

Watermills on the River Loddon

Brian Eigheten was the guest at the October meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society when he gave an illustrated talk on *Watermills on the River Loddon*.

Brian explained that his interest in water mills began when he began work for Sindlesham Mill in 1951, which still produced flour for Huntley and Palmers until the 1960s. There were over 5000 water mills listed in the Domesday Survey of 1086, and although most have now disappeared, many remain - some in use as residences, whilst locally Sonning Mill is a theatre and Mapledurham is a tourist attraction.

Brian included various tributaries of the Loddon, as well as that river itself, in his 'tour'. The first was a relatively small wooden framed mill at Dogmersfield - near Fleet on the River Hart.. Another near Fleet was knocked down about 3 years ago, whilst those at Hook and Dipley are now converted into homes. Many mills like this had packed up in the early 1900s or the 1930s. Next came Bramshott Mill, and its mill house. This had a long history. Most mills stood on the site of a mill recorded in the Domesday book, but this one has much earlier origins, and is now a listed building.

Another tributary of the Loddon is the River Whitewater, on which a mill stood at Riseley. One distinctive feature of a mill building, as could be seen here, was the loocum. This was a timber box projecting from the wall at the top of the building, to protect the chain hoist used to haul sacks of grain up to the top of the mill. The River Blackwater also flows to the Loddon, and on that river stood a mill at Eversley, close by the ford. Like many, it continued to produce animal feed until the 1950s, but was then sold and converted into a restaurant.

The Loddon itself rises near Basingstoke, and Basing Mill stood on the Loddon at Old Basing. It was a substantial building, of 4 floors, with a later extension at one end. Although no longer used for milling, much of the machinery was still in place quite recently. Further downstream, at Sherfield on Loddon was another animal feed mill that lasted to the 1950s and is now a restaurant, whilst not far away at Hartley Wespall the mill has been converted to a home, with the water wheel still in place inside, where it can be viewed from the dining room. The mill at Stratfield Saye was, sadly, in poor condition, not having been used since the 1930s, although the Duke of Wellington's estate hoped to renovate it to working condition. This was unlike the mills mentioned so far, as the power was not taken from the river by a water wheel, but by 3 turbines. Next down stream was Swallowfield, alongside the old Basingstoke road until it burnt down in the 1960s. Fire was a hazard that affected many mills, with the dry and dusty conditions, maybe a flint catching between the millstones, an over heating bearing, or just a miller wanting a new mill ! Another damaged by fire was Arborfield Mill - also with pre- Domesday origins - but this had in later years been a paper mill. Sindlesham Mill Brian was able to speak about in some detail from personal knowledge - recalling a petrol tank under the gas fire heated offices, with a vent pipe

ending by the window of a worker who enjoyed a smoke The mill - also turbine driven - dates from the late 1800s, but some timbers were found to be of much earlier date. At one time belonging to the Simmonds family (brewers and bankers in Reading), it was later taken over by Garfield Weston. It produced half a ton of flour per hour - most for Huntley and Palmers, until it closed in the 1960s, before becoming a Nightspot and later Moat House hotel.

Sandford Mill -mentioned in reports of the Civil War - had two waterwheels, and continued to produce animal feed until the 1950s. The listed building was converted to a home a few years ago. Lastly was Twyford Mill. Another very historic mill, with its own railway siding, this had been a silk mill, then a flour mill, before ending its days making animal feed. It had suffered from several fires, and consequent rebuildings, over the years. Eventually the demand for feed reduced so much that the owners, BBO Farmers, went bankrupt, and the site was eventually cleared for the present housing.
