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1

Hertfordshire's milling heritage

Hertfordshire has an unusually rich and diverse milling heritage. Apart from the long tradition of corn milling, which is not untypical of the home counties, Hertfordshire enjoyed an extensive and wide-ranging reputation for the milling of a whole variety of products. The county shared with its eastern neighbours the capacity to produce great amounts of wheat, and processing this wheat kept the vast majority of the county's mills busy. However, there is also a long history of pioneering paper-making, primarily in the west of the county, as well as a legacy of the manufacture of gunpowder and small arms in the east and of silk mills, fulling mills, leather works and mills for oil seed cake, cotton and artificial stone for rockeries made from clystone. Despite this rich history, little of this heritage remains today. The decline of local corn milling and the concentration of flour production in very large industrial mills, mainly outside the county, are typical of the region as a whole. What makes the situation in Hertfordshire special is that the county's other kinds of milling all but disappeared within a few years, making the contraction of milling far more pronounced than elsewhere.

In Hertfordshire, as in other counties, milling, in the form of watermills, can be traced back to Saxon times. The mills themselves may have been rebuilt several times, but their sites did not change. Local mills served village communities and often enjoyed a monopoly throughout the medieval period. This began to change only at the start of the nineteenth century, when there was an increase in the demand for flour from an expanding population in the growing cities. The next hundred years are often described as 'the golden age of milling' because of an ever-increasing demand for flour. It is this period of rapid evolution with which this book is mainly concerned.

Changes to the milling community in this period were the result of national and international developments, technical changes and increasingly sophisticated marketing opportunities. Any one of these developments would have had a significant impact on milling practices: coming together, they brought a complete revolution to the millers' world. For instance, mill owners began to augment their water and wind power by steam engines. New mills were built that relied wholly on steam and were footloose in terms of where they could be located. Mills sited adjacent to railway stations had great advantages: Sherriffs at Hatfield, Bowmans at Hitchin, Smiths at Station Mill, Royston and Chapmans at New Mill, Standon are examples.

The success, or otherwise, of the mill owners in meeting these challenges depended on the extent to which individual millers were able to adapt to these evolving economic circumstances. Up-to-date milling equipment and good access to both imported grain and expanding markets were the key to survival. The individual mills in the county bear the evidence of how far millers were willing or able to go to confront the new challenges of technologies, transport and the increasingly sophisticated markets for bread and confectionery products. At one extreme they built new industrial-style mills located next to modern transport links and equipped with the latest in roller milling technologies; at the other, they persevered with obsolete equipment in rural backwaters until declining profitability forced their closure. Between these extremes most millers went some way to adapting to the changing economic environment by modernising their mills and adapting their existing transport links. By these means they were able to extend the working lives of their mills until their sheer lack of capacity rendered them redundant. The following chapters will explore the extent to which the individual mills were adapted to these evolving conditions and how successful they were in meeting these challenges.

Many mill buildings have subsequently found new uses, ensuring that a small but significant part of the county's milling heritage has been preserved. Many watermills have been converted to dwellings or offices. Lemsford Mill, for example, now the offices of Ramblers Worldwide Holidays, offers an intriguing vision of a sustainable use of water power. Here an historic building enjoys a new lease of life as a modern commercial office whose electricity is generated by a new waterwheel which harvests the power of the river Lea. Hertfordshire's HER reveals 110 watermill sites, of which seven are now accessible to the public and 31 have survived in a reasonable state of preservation: of these, 15 have been converted into houses or apartments. A further 64 have been demolished. There are also records of 71 windmills, of which seven have tangible remains; only one, Cromer post mill, is well preserved in its original form and open to the public.

There were several milling dynasties in Hertfordshire ready to take advantage of the new circumstances. They included Meads (who sold out to Heygates) at New Mill (otherwise known as Gannel Mill), Tring; Bowmans at Hitchin and subsequently at Ickleford; Edwards (subsequently Allinson) at Beech Mill (or Town Mill) at Bishops Stortford; and Cereform at Station Mill at Royston. All continue in production today, specialising in niche-market flour products. There were also the Knowles of Bourne End and Castle Mill, Berkhamsted, the Chapmans of New Mill, Standon (Figure 1.1), the Burtons of Sawbridgeworth (Figure 1.2), the Browns and Frenchs of Ware Flour Mills, the Coles of Hyde Mill, Harpenden, the Garratts of Sele Mill, Hertford and the Pulhams of Broxbourne. Some of their mills, such as the Town Mill in Ware, New Mill in Standon and Sele Mill in Hertford, were closed down only after being taken over by one of the big milling conglomerates after World War II. All were substantial

buildings that have enjoyed a new life as apartments. Others, such as Toovey's Mill at Kings Langley, have been demolished, and Sawbridgeworth Town Mill has been lost to fire. Some older rural mills, such as Bourne End Mill near Hemel Hempstead and Hyde Mill near Harpenden, were also successfully updated and continued in production for many years.

The losers were the newly constructed tower windmills† and those watermills that had been re-equipped with the latest millstone technology, which was itself, within a few decades, rendered obsolete by the widespread adoption of the much more efficient roller mills (Figure 1.3). Several of these brick-built windmills, the final flowering of windmill technology, were built towards the end of the 'golden age', at Colney Heath (1854), Great Offley (1855), Goff's Oak, near Cheshunt (1860) Breachwood Green, near King's Walden (1860), Patmore Heath, near Albury (1860/1) and Much Hadham (1892). The Browns flour mill at Ware was newly built in 1851 with five sets of stones, but appears to have fallen out of use by 1880. It was augmented by a new mill when J.W. French and Co took over the site in 1897. These mills all had the disadvantage of using millstones, which, at the time of their construction, were already becoming obsolete, and were also remote from modern transport links. They can hardly have repaid the substantial investment that their construction had incurred. Reliance on wind power was a further disadvantage, as a comment concerning Goff's Oak windmill demonstrates: 'Sometimes, however, owing to lack of wind (or too strong a wind) the Mill would be idle for as long as 10–14 days at a time.'¹

These changing economic circumstances and new technologies, and the limitations of wind and water power, were summarised nearly 50 years ago by W. Branch Johnson, the noted antiquary who did so much to record Hertfordshire's built heritage immediately after World War II. In his seminal work *Industrial monuments in Hertfordshire*, which traced the history of Hertfordshire's industries, he said:

The decline in the Hertfordshire milling industry over the last century may be accounted for generally by the advantages enjoyed by port millers in being able to unload grain from overseas direct from ship to silo and, particularly in Hertfordshire, by the steady fall in the water table, which has put more than one old-established mill out of action. Where capital was lacking millers had no means either of modernising their plant or of meeting the cost of transport.

From the middle third of the 19th century water mills, and a few windmills, began to supplement their water or wind power by steam; later mills were built wholly for steam. From the 1880s mills began to adopt roller milling, thus doing away with the old fashioned millstones.²

The chief influences on the economic environment for milling from the middle of the nineteenth century can be summarised as the free trade movement, the increasing impact of London and its docks, the revolution in milling technology and the growing importance of access to modern transport, as explored below.