

## Vanishing Windmills of Leicestershire

Woodhouse Eaves once played a prominent part in *molinological* circles. And if that phrase isn't familiar then let's just say the 'study of mills.' With the support and encouragement of several locals I have started to bring together the stories and images that exist of the windmills which at one time were a common feature in our county. Virtually every village had a mill of some sort; a watermill if a suitable stream flowed conveniently through the parish or, if not, a windmill ideally placed in an elevated position so its sails could catch the wind.

Every family's diet included bread which relied on a constant supply of fresh flour. The further the flour had to be carried the more expensive it became. If you could grow enough wheat on your own land to produce flour you still needed grinding facilities to create it. Small quantities could be ground using primitive hand-mills or querns but the work was laborious and you needed the services of a real mill if you were going to set up any form of bakehouse and produce enough bread to sell to your friends and neighbours.

From the late 12<sup>th</sup> century windmills appeared across the local landscape. At their peak in 1835 there were reckoned to be 152 mills in the county. The early windmills were simple wooden structures resembling garden shed on trestles with the sails poking out one gable; some early carvings and drawings show these. My studies have not focussed on those long gone but on those mills that survived into the photographic age, evidence for which can be found in local and national archive collections from about 1870.

However, tracking good images down has not been easy. Trawling through files at the record office in Wigston and Loughborough's local history collection has revealed some wonderful sepia images of lost mills: those at Sproxton, Redmile, Gilmorton and of course Woodhouse Eaves were frequently captured on paper. Others that still elude me including Seagrave, Desford, Shearsby and Saddington.

The post-mill at Broad Hill, Mountsorrel had to be removed when the quarry extended its workings in the 1870s. I thought it unlikely any pictures of it survived but luckily some railway buff taking pictures of the granite sidings from the River Soar also manage to capture a small image of the mill in the distance.

Milling stories are as fascinating as the mills themselves. The miller at Cotgrave, (yes I know it's in Nottinghamshire) had an interesting party trick. He would challenge locals from the village inn to a feat of strength by carrying a 18cwt sack of grain around the mill and up the mill steps faster than anyone who dared to challenge him. He cited his devout faith and adherence to teetotalism as being responsible for his great strength. One year, however, he was outwitted when the landlord of a local pub pulled in a "ringer" onto their team. The strongman from a local circus challenged the miller and with the contest drawn the millers pride was somewhat deflated.

Only one of the wooden post-mills survives in the county, that at Kibworth. Once owned by Merton college, Oxford, it has an interesting history but looks in a sorry state at the moment having lost all its sails. Only last August when the sails were being inspected for rot, one of the sweeps broke off and the remaining sails rotated to restore the balance causing the opposite sail stock also to snap off. Within weeks the remaining two sails were removed and a repair scheme is currently being devised to restore them.

The sites of post-mills are not easy to trace. At Markfield the brick foundations of the piers supporting the trestle of Raunsccliffe mill can still be seen on Altar Stones Lane. Beyond the railway arch on the Barrow to Sileby Road are thought to be the remains of one brick pier of the old post mill, revealed after recent excavation work being carried out by the Gypsum company.

There are more substantial brick remains indicating the presence of tower mills. Some of these like those at Arnesby, Long Clawson, Morcott, Waltham and Shepshed have been successfully converted into houses, whilst others like Gaddesby, Ketton and South Luffemham remain as empty shells.

There are a small number of tower mills that do still contain machinery although not in working order. Ullesthorpe mill although in a precarious state contains a lot of its original wooden machinery from the early 1800s. Hough's mill at Swannington has been completely restored with newly crafted cogwheels although it is still without sails. The mill at Wymondham has no cap at the moment because a restoration project is now underway to get it back into working order.

Strictly speaking Whissendine mill is in Rutland but it is the only example of a working corn mill producing flour for many local tearooms and bakeries in the Oakham and Melton areas. The miller, Nigel Moon, is the county's leading authority on windmills having written the only comprehensive history of Leicestershire and Rutland mills back in 1980.

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