

St Leonard's Mill, Winchelsea, East Sussex.

My earliest memories of this mill date from the mid 1950s, when I walked across the pasture from the road in the town with my father to look at the sail-less post mill.

It was early in the year, and the sheep grazing all around had just lambed. The black body of the mill loomed large through the mist, and appeared to be in good condition externally. The steps were in place, carried by a carriage with cast-iron wheels and some gears from the former roof-mounted fantail. On the ground were some shafts and gears that had once transmitted the drive from the fan down the back of the mill to the carriage wheels. The ground fell away sharply behind the mill, the town of Winchelsea standing on top of a high hill surrounded by flat land, with the mill perched on the edge in a very exposed position.

The door was locked, and I didn't get in that day, but I visited the mill a number of times in the following years, my last visit being shortly after the famous "hurricane" of October 16th 1987 which felled it. I measured the remains, and was able to record the structure accurately before the site was cleared. Subsequently I was able to make the drawings reproduced here.

The Rev. Peter Hemming (*Windmills in Sussex*, 1936) suggests a date of 1760 for the mill, but I am more convinced by Martin Brunnarius' dates of 1813-1823 (*The Windmills of Sussex*, 1979), with a possible move in between from a site nearby. The only potentially early feature of the mill was the near straight-pitched roof shape, the body framing being akin to other mills of later date such as Herstmonceux (1814).

The body was very large, being 13 feet wide and 20 feet long, and this also suggests a nineteenth century date. The total height to the ridge was 40ft. 6ins. The studding in the breast of the mill was horizontal to accept vertical plank boarding to which the exterior weather-boarding was fixed. This double skin on the "weather" side became a common feature of the later Sussex post-mills. The use of corner posts "jowled" or thickened at the top continued later in Sussex than in most other counties. The jowl allowed the head of the post to be tenoned into two timbers at right-angles to each other, making a stronger joint, but the practice required more timber and time to make, and was eventually abandoned.

An old feature dropped by Sussex millwrights quite early was the fitting of a timber "collar" around the post just below the sheers, and housed over the heads of the quarter-bars. This was supposed to act as a "washer" to transmit some of the load of the body direct from the sheers to the trestle. This was absent at Winchelsea, but would have been a standard fitting in Essex and other areas at that time. A collar was even fitted as late as 1868 at Chillenden Mill in Kent, the last to be built in that county.

Thus, Winchelsea Mill had jowled corner posts, but no collar. Internally, the mill body had braces from the front and rear corner posts rising inwards to meet tie beams

under the stone floor. This feature was typical of Sussex, but not normally found elsewhere. In the breast of Winchelsea Mill, the braces were jointed into an extra tie beam set below that actually supporting the millstones. That feature seems to have been peculiar to Winchelsea, and has not been noted elsewhere.

The trestle was set on low brick piers with the bottom cross-tree only about 22 inches above the floor. The roundhouse wall was 6ft 3ins high and 22ft 6ins in diameter, almost dwarfed by the huge body above. The main post was 28 inches square at the base, and rather slender, with some waney edges. There was a cast-iron cap on top, with an internal web to locate with a slot cut in the top of the post, rather like a screwdriver and slotted screw. This cap had a pintle to locate in a cast-iron plate fixed under the crown-tree. The neck of the post between the sheers was clad with wrought-iron to take the wear, and there was an iron band just under the top cap to prevent splitting.

The two main pairs of stones, 48 inch burrs and 51 inch Peaks were over driven from the large and rather slender wooden clasp-arm brake- and tail wheels respectively, the stone nuts being of cast-iron. The bridge-trees and brays were of wood.

A third, much smaller pair of stones was set up at bin floor level just behind the tail wheel. This was a pair of 37 ½ inch Peaks for grinding beans, and was over driven by belt. Exactly how this pair was driven is not known, but Brunnarius suggests a vertical shaft driven from the tail wheel cogs with a pulley and belt connection. To create more headroom for these stones and the bin-work, the roof appeared to have been raised by about 2 feet, and a purlin inserted to support it.

I first gained entry to the mill in 1960 while on a mill-visiting holiday with Rodney de Little. We spent some time looking over it, hampered somewhat by its being used as a store for hay and straw, which occupied the entire spout floor beyond the post. Rodney photographed the interior, his electronic flash being capable of penetrating the gloom of the almost windowless body. Although the main elements of the machinery remained, much of the lighter equipment had gone. The huge roof space was entirely bereft of bins and sack-hoist, nothing remained of the stone cases, and the flour dresser and its drive were absent.

The wind-shaft had been wholly of wood, with the midlings mortised through its head. The old shaft had been removed long ago, the brake- and tail-wheels being supported by a length of steel girder placed approximately where the wind-shaft had been. The crown-tree was very badly rotted and had broken through near the middle, but had been supplemented by two rather small lengths of steel girder and some bolts. However, the sheers were good, and seemed to be taking most of the weight. The following year, the mill was shored up under the corner posts from the roundhouse floor, which provided more support and stability.

The mill worked until about 1900 when the sweeps, two common and two spring, turned for the last time. In 1935 the first repair as a landmark was carried out, by

which time the sweeps had gone. Brunnarius states that a token set of short sweeps were fitted to the repaired body, but they could not have lasted long. Another repair was carried out in 1955, photographs of which could be seen in the Town Museum. In 1961 the body was shored up, and its future seemed assured, particularly as it was subsequently taken over by the National Trust in 1975.

Unfortunately, it was not well maintained, and the tail end of the body blew out in 1978, exposing the tail stones and the upper stones to view. It became clear that major repairs were needed. Some scaffolding went up, and not much changed for a while, but the following year more scaffolding arrived, and all the machinery was taken out and was left lying on the ground. The body was repaired as a shell, the crown-tree being replaced by two RSJs, and a new, lower roof was fitted, eliminating the extra height and purlin inserted long ago to accommodate the third pair of stones. Subsequently, the machinery disappeared from the site leaving the mill a mere shadow of its former self, empty of floors and machinery.

In 1987 the hurricane-force wind blew on the huge side of the empty body. Lightened of its millstones and machinery, the trestle could not resist the forces acting on the post, which rose up clear of the crosstrees and flipped over, depositing the body on its side on the ground. The body was wrecked, and the new roof flew off clear of it.

Shortly after the disaster, the site was cleared, and today only scant remains of the roundhouse wall and piers survive, together with a millstone or two. After the work was done in 1979, rumours circulated that the mill's machinery was stored somewhere, possibly at another NT property, Batemans near Burwash. Later, a bridge tree, stone spindle and quant were seen at Stelling Minnis Mill in Kent. On a visit to that mill recently, the quant had gone, but the other items were present, and were measured. If anyone knows where any other relics from the mill are to be found, I would be keen to hear about it so that more information on the mill's machinery can be garnered.

Recently there has been interest within the town to rebuild the mill, and I was commissioned to make the drawings accompanying this article from my records. Apparently the National Trust aren't very keen to participate, but anything is possible if the will to do it is there. Maybe a new mill will rise on the site if sufficient money can be raised. That would make it even more important to find any existing parts from the mill that could be incorporated into the new.

Vincent Pargeter

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