

The Watermills of Kent By KENNETH C. REID

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MANY watermills still survive in Kent despite the break up of the agricultural community on one hand, and the inroads of industrial prosperity on the other, and most readers will be able to recall some examples of age or beauty with which they are familiar. And for those that would go in search of watermills, they will be rewarded with many a delightful walk through scenery of great variety and the sight of many a pleasant piece of folk architecture. Watermills in general are a wide and intricate a subject. They were first invented in Greece, and introduced into Britain apparently after the withdrawal of the Romans; the building of them increased until they were nearly as numerous as churches. They have for the most part succumbed to modern economic conditions.

Influences which moulded the development of the watermill included milling soke, which compelled the tenants of the manor to use the manorial mill. The building materials were local and the architectural detail followed the tradition of the neighbouring barns and farmsteads; though the noticeable characteristic appearance of old watermills is generally given by the gambrel roof common from the 18th century onwards.

Here follows a few words upon some of the watermills in the county; they disappear so rapidly that some may have been pulled down since I visited them. Let us start with the Addington Brook which rises near Wrotham, and drives a typical 17th century mill opposite Ford Manor, that fine old manor house. This mill has had its interior gutted, but over the wall you can see a large wooden cogwheel in the manor house garden.

Even the site of the mill which once existed below Addington church is not to be located to-day, though like others on this stream, it had its record in Domesday. The stream flows onward through well cultivated landscape, past Ryarsh church and then to a mill of the same name situated below the "Wheatsheaf" Inn on the Maidstone Road. Though disused, the interior of Ryarsh mill has considerable interest. Inside on the ground floor can be seen rubble masonry from an earlier building, and an immense cogwheel with smaller brethren constituting the remaining machinery. On the floor above, one set of grinding stones was still in position when I made my visit, and in the grain store on the second floor were stacks of potatoes and up further stairs, in the attic, disused apparatus lay rusting on the floor. Ryarsh mill with a silent water-wheel at its side is typical of both the beauty and economic despair of the small cornmills.

The rest of the mills on this river have not the charm of the last one. A Victorian example stands near the turn of the road at Leybourne, and another stood near the church at Snodland, now represented by a large paper factory. A rather gawdy red brick watermill of little age, near the Park at Holborough, is the descendant of one presented to Bishop Beormode of Rochester in 836 and which kept with the See for centuries afterwards. Its value increased from £1 in 1100 to £5 in 1255 (including Snodland's mill). It is recorded that the property of the See of Rochester fell into great disrepair during the episcopate of Bishop Hamo de Hithe, including this mill, which however was rebuilt in 1323 for £10.

Let us pass to some mills hidden well away in the country south of the downs among the streams that feed the higher reaches of the Medway. Well known is the lovely village of Groombridge, and in the dip of the road stands the old mill so typically Wealden in its abundant tilehanging and in its well preserved age; for the mill's appearance has changed little in the last few centuries, though its waterwheel works no longer.

A mile or so away in the large parish of Chiddingstone stands Bassett's Mill, an attractive little structure that to-day presents a woeful scene of decay and sad air of resignation. When I saw it, ivy covered the roof, weeds entangled the broken water-wheel, the pool had been allowed to drain away, while immense buttresses were showing up the bulging walls and the heavy old wooden machinery on the upper floor. When a mill still does trade in grinding corn, it is fascinating to prowl about (with due care!) in the interior amid the roar and rumble, and in an atmosphere of mealy dust, with eager eye on watch for interesting bits of construction or ancient windows hidden behind the hanging cobwebs of many years growth. Also there's the cumbersome wooden machinery that will be sure to fascinate with its curious beauty.

Near the county town lies a valley that once resounded with the hum of many water-mills. This hard-worked stream, the Loose, was closely dotted with them, from the time when some of the 10 mills credited to East Farleigh and Maidstone by Domesday were certainly situated on this stream. In medieval times, the Wealden clothiers, made use of the Loose mills for dressing the cloth brought from their workshops on the backs of packhorses. Lambarde mentioned 13 falling mills and a corn mill that brought in a profit of £1,400 per annum, an enormous sum for the late 16th century. By the time of Harris however, the cloth trade had deserted to the north, but 2 falling mills still found custom and a paper mill had been established by 1719, the remainder being by then just corn grist mills.

Later the purity of the Loose led to the establishment of more paper mills but apart from those that grew into modern factories, the rest of the Loose mills were demolished in the 19th century. Nevertheless to visit their sites from Boughton quarries, along the footpath that follows the sparkling and pellucid Loose, is the prettiest walk in those parts for until reaching Tovil one is completely unaware of industrialism or suburbia that lies so near at hand, while in early May when the myriad apple trees that cover the valley sides are in blossom, the sight is fair indeed.

The Loose rising at Langley drove its first mill below the ancient manor house of Brishling Court, after which it disappears in its extraordinary way underground and comes up to earth at the Boughton quarries. From here it flows by some well restored Kentish yeoman cottages, through meadows until at the road from Salts Manor, it received the outlet from Upper Mill pond. The ancient and picturesque mill that gave the pond its name has been demolished and leaves little except the dam to suggest its existence. A similar fate has befallen Old Mill below the Hastings Road Viaduct, where only a few feet of walling marks the site of an extensive mill here, but the mill-house stands across a lawn beckoning invitingly from under the shade of two large apple trees.

The village of Loose is well noted for its situation and beauty, and at the far end stood the old corn mill, fed from the lake and pool on either side of the footpath by the Churchyard wall. The mill-house remains and also the walls that carried the axle of the overshot waterwheel, but the neat weatherboarded mill which was probably the one mentioned by Lambard has gone, and where the floors creaked under the vibration of rumbling cogs and whirling millstones, now exists a peaceful garden well stocked with daisies and sunflowers.

A short step along the valley path leading to Bockingford stood Little Ivy mill; now only the residence remains. The next, Ivy Mill, has been demolished except for a small portion which may well be late 15th century in date. The rest, a more modern building, has been partly pulled down but there still remains the wide pool, tumbling weir, and garden and trees, altogether making it a pleasant spot to linger at. Tradition derives the name from an ivy covered farmhouse at Cripple Street on the hill to the east, the house of a one-time owner.

Further down stream the Loose drove a "washing" mill, now converted into dwellings, beside the "Bockingford Arms." It is not of a high order in picturesqueness, but from the mill tail you can see the frame of the waterwheel. The next, Hayle Mill, today a noted and flourishing concern that has grown up from an unusual mill erected in 1808. Continuing, the road leads past a flagstone wall to Upper Christbrook Mill whose wheel drives water pumping machinery inside the 17th century mill. Within a stone's throw lies Lower Christbrook Mill. This specimen is an ordinary example of late 18th century watermill, weatherboarded, tile roof, well proportioned and has a disused waterwheel which still can be easily seen by the curious. The last two mills belonged from early times, first to the convent, and later to the Dean and Chapter of Christ-church, Canterbury.

The Loose having reached Tovil, its beauty is at an end. There are still some remains of three water mills hidden among factories before the stream joins the Medway. The last one, Bridge Mill was once a falling mill, the property of Maidstone College and later the profits from it went to Frances, Countess of Kildare, the lady famous or rather infamous for abandoning her second husband, Henry Brooke, Lord Cobham after his disgrace following the Arabella Stuart conspiracy. In the 18th century it sprang up as a gunpowder mill, and tradition records an explosion taking place that caused a heavy toll in life.

The River Cray once was well endowed with mills but only two remain to-day. Near the Cross Roads at Orpington stands an old mill now used, but not for corn grinding, by the United Dairies. The other is the grave-looking Victorian specimen that breaks the monotony of Bexley's main street, with its drooping ash tree, and pleasant murmuring of water that tumbles through the arches. Auxellus the miller here in 1255 was censured for allowing to escape a suspected murderer ; probably here was to be found one of those cases where the miller held his mill on the condition of guarding prisoners entrusted to his care.

Illustrations of watermills at Loose (Ivy Mill), Chiddingstone (Bassett's Mill), Ryarsh, Upper Christbrook and Orpington accompany the article.