

5. Venn Mill

THE **Tuesday** PAGE

GEOLOGISTS' WATER POWER DREAM:



Alan Stoyel inspects the water wheel

Turning back time at Venn Mill...

IN THE Domesday Book of 1086, Venn Mill, Garford, was entered as church property, a working water mill worth just 7s 6d.

It was sited in peaceful woodland and all that could be heard was the powerful rush and splash of the Childrey Brook (tributary of the River Ock) as it turned the water wheel.

Now, heavy traffic roars past the site daily en route from Oxford to Wantage on the A338.

By **VALERIE GREEN**

Dying elms partly surround it. But behind the solid grey brick — the mill was completely re-built in 1808 — a transformation is gradually taking place.

The Mill — which for part of this century has been a chicken house, a garage and a workshop — is being restored so that it can mill flour in precisely the same way as it did centuries before.

Once this is achieved it will be a tribute to the vision and persistence of one very dedicated man. Mr Alan Stoyel has been touring water mills, drawing water mills, writing about and photographing water mills as a hobby from the age of 12.

His savings

After graduating as a geologist from London University, his work as a mining specialist took him to Scotland to Canada and to Spain. He married, and had two daughters. His yen to own a water mill remained. Eventually he heard that Venn Mill, Garford, near East Hanney might be launched on the market.

He gave notice to his employers and put a large part of his savings into the purchase of the mill and the miller's house.

Alan Stoyel, mill owner, miller-to-be, is now a poorer but happier man!

For the last six months he has been cleaning out the mill and gradually piecing together all its working parts. For instance

one vital sack hoist lever he found abandoned in a pile of firewood; part of the 1808 water wheel had been part buried in a nearby field.

He has also managed to salvage a small waterwheel which was originally positioned above the main 13ft 5 inch wheel, and which acted as a flood alarm.

When the water rose to flood level it would turn the small wheel. Spokes on one side of the wheel would pull a cable which ran across the road and into the miller's house, ringing a special alarm bell. At the sound of the bell the miller would rush across and open the sluice gates.

Main task

Alan's main task now is to get hold of a piece of seasoned oak 18 inches across and 12 feet long, which he can use to replace the rotting wheel shaft. When the mill was re-built in 1808 a special niche in the wall was provided so that such replacement could be made without a lot of fuss, but the work involved will still be very costly.

"What is so marvellous and so unusual about this mill, however, is that everything is so well-made in most places the workings are more boxed in. Here, people can see everything as it happens."

"People think of millstones as great lumbering things. But actually they can move very fast — this mill stone will do about 120 revs a minute."

Once he has the mill ready for use, Alan believes he will be able to get the equivalent of five to ten horse power from the water flow through the mill.

Though there is still plenty of restoration work to be done at the mill, there is already a great deal to see, and many interesting exhibits of old milling equipment from Britain and abroad.

Alan has started to open the mill to the public on Sundays from 10 till 5. Eventually he hopes to open for longer and build a proper car park in a field on the opposite side of the road.

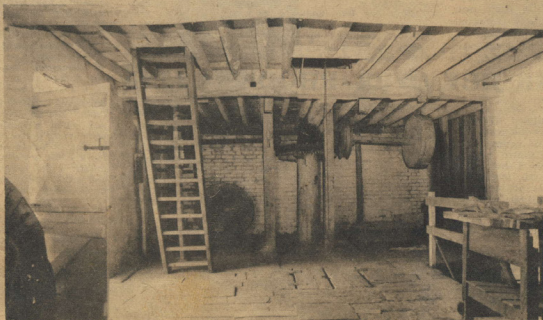
More pressing right now is the drilling work being carried out to provide him and his family with a new water well.

The property's original well became polluted, and since the nearest mains supply is a mile away, Alan was forced to call in private contractors to make a new well.

"At present we collect our drinking water along with our bread from the baker at East Hanney, who has been most helpful."

Already there has been strong local interest in the project, and Alan hopes there will be more.

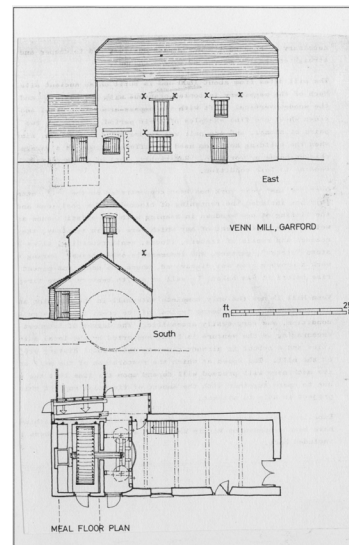
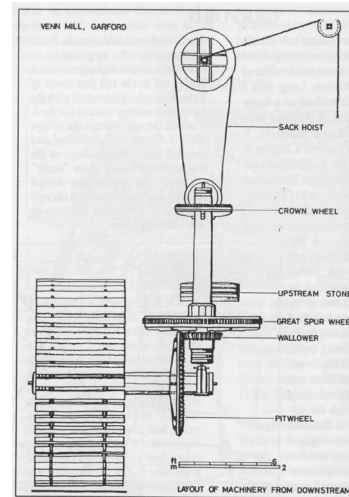
"I am particularly interested to hear from anyone who has any photographs or snippets of information about the mill in the past. It think it is important local people should see it at an early stage and be aware of it, and take pride in part of their heritage which is being kept up."



One of the upper floors of the mill now being restored



1897 - some the family at Venn Mill: Eleanor, Sarah, Emma, Will, Molly, Heber, WWW & Ruth



Letter from Alan Stoyel in 1990

I have been through the trade directory references that I have for Venn Mill. The only "West" entries that I can see at the moment are for 1903 and 1907, when "West Wm W, Garford, Abingdon (water)" and "West J" are given as millers respectively, in Kelly's directory for Berkshire. By 1911 the miller at Venn Mill is Chas. Cotterell.

At Lower Mill, East Hanney, Kelly's directory first gives a "West" (but no initial) in 1868. Daniel West is shown as miller here in 1869, 1877, 1883, 1887, 1891, 1895, 1899 and 1903.

At Grove the only reference that I have in my records is in the 1851 census, when Daniel West, a journeyman miller, born at Aston Tirrold, is given as a lodger - probably at the Lower Mill.

I can find no mention of a West at Blewbury, I am afraid, nor do the directories seem to note a West at Marcham Mill. However I do have some information about the last named mill that may interest you.

In the Berkshire Record Office is a bundle of documents (Ref. No. D/EL TL15) relating to Marcham Mill, and the following notes are extracted from this:

25.4.1901 A letter was sent by Wm. Daniel West of Ven Mill, offering £50 for a 2 year term of tenancy of Marcham Mill by 4 half-yearly instalments of £12.10s, commencing on May 1st.

29.4.1901 A letter was sent by William W. West of Fyfield, Abingdon, to say that, if his son's offer was accepted, he would guarantee the payment of the rent.

22.10.1909 A letter was written to William Daniel West, who was now at Sutton Wick, Abingdon, offering a yearly tenancy from Christmas at £30 per annum rising to £35 after 4 years. An interesting stipulation was that "—should you vacate Marcham Mill at any time you must not set up in any other Mill within a radius of four miles thereof." This letter was written by George James Wicks, who was the owner of the mill between 1902 and 1914.

23.10.1909 William Daniel West wrote to accept the tenancy.

I have the Poor Rate Book for Garford parish from 1902 to 1904 here at home, as I was given it about 15 years ago. This is largely in William West's hand and, of course, it gives a great deal of detail concerning the various properties of Garford, their owners, occupiers, areas, rentals, rateable values, etc. You must see this when you are over here next and, if there is any information that you require from it in the meantime, just let me know. Until you mentioned William West's involvement in Poor Relief to me I had not appreciated how interesting you might find this book.

Hoping that this will have been of use, and wishing you all a very Happy New Year,

Yours sincerely,



Venn Mill race in 2013