

Lincolnshire Mills and Millers in Wartime

First World War

Great disruption to the operation of the smaller traditional mills caused by the loss of able body staff to the armed forces, frequently leading to death or serious injuries making them disabled and often unemployable when peace returned. After the war many younger men took the opportunity of entering professions with more regular hours and better rates of pay. It must also be remembered that more people died in the Spanish flu epidemic, starting in 1918, than during the war! Both mills and millwrights had to cope during the war with reduced and older staff and often female staff and female family members had to play a vital role. The size of sacks of grain were reduced in both world wars influenced by this increased role of female labour. Millwrights although classed as retained craftsmen also were involved in military duties. Robert Thompson senior, millwright of Alford lost some of his younger staff to the war effort and his son John Edgar (Jack) became Colour Sgt involved with training troops at nearby camps and younger son Robert fought in the war when he became of age.

During the war various government edicts were issued to maximize the extraction of flour from grain. The milling of wheat for flour on millstones was banned, the much more efficient extraction using roller mills was stepped up to meet the nation's needs. Wind and watermills that did not have small roller mill plant installed reverted purely to provender grinding for animal feed. The supply of grain from the farms was strictly regulated and monitored. The use of flour to dust baking tins before the dough was inserted was banned. This led to some amusing tales. The millwright Jack Thompson told me a tale about his wife's uncle, Mr Chambers, who ran Addlethorpe tower mill and bakery during World War I:

‘He received a printed instruction during the war from the Ministry of food that to save flour, baking tins were not to be dusted with it before the dough was put in. In reply he wrote: ‘In this bakehouse we are so careful that every time we catch a fly we shake the flour off its feet before we let it go.’

At Waltham mill, miller Rogers was accused of signaling to the enemy in the Humber by a new policeman posted to the area. He was working after dark with a lantern as his light, the rotating sails gave the effect of Morse code being sent when viewed from a distance!

East Halton smock mill near Immingham was demolished by the owner during the war after a bomb was dropped from an airship at the end of Mill Lane and he considered the mill was being used as a landmark by the enemy.

Burton on Stather post mill had a sail broken off by a low-flying German airship and Hemswell post mill (Roving Molly) had a sail knocked off by a biplane taking off from the airfield nearby, ending its working life, milling continued for a while using an oil engine to drive a pair of stones.

World War II

Several tower windmills in the county were either demolished or greatly dismantled as they were considered a danger to returning planes to airfields, there was also a worry that they were being used as landmarks to home in enemy bombers attempting to put on bomber stations etc out of commission. Examples of this are as follows:

Binbrook six sailed mill standing in the village overlooking the nearby Aerodrome was demolished in 1938 and the bricks used for hard-core in the new runways.

Coleby Heath six sailed tower mill was demolished to a two storey stump for the same reason even though it was in full working order at the time. It was later totally demolished leaving just the mill house and granary.

Ludford Parva, four sailed tower mill was demolished to a stump in similar circumstances. This survives today as a grain store.

Waddington, tower mill, although derelict without sails was again reduced to a stump being near to Waddington Aerodrome. There were other examples around the county.

Both Kexby and Heapham towermills were in danger of being demolished in the war as they were in line with the approaches to different runways of a airfield to be built at Sturgate, (see details in Hewitt S.F book Hewitt's windmill heap in Lincolnshire pp75-76) they were saved from demolition by the intervention of captain H. Croockshank (later Viscount Croockshank of Gainsborough) then MP for Gainsborough.

Other mills were put out of commission because of the lack of suitable timber to make sails, Wrawby mill can be quoted as an example of this. Most former windmills by this time of course were either totally operated by engine power or had auxiliary engine power attached.

The tower mills at Heapham and Kexby, near Gainsborough, had their caps and sails painted battleship grey so that it would not stand out in the landscape. Huttoft tower mill was similarly painted grey, it lost its sails in 1945 following gale damage.

Hibaldstow wind and water mill, had a beacon fitted on top of the tower as a homing device guiding planes onto the runway of the nearby fighter station. (It was at this airfield that a WAF girl was accidentally carried up on the rear of the fuselage and did a couple of circuits of the airfield before she was spotted from the control tower and the pilot informed! It was a practice before that time for a person to sit in front of the tailfin while the fighter plane taxied down the runway while testing after the ground crew had finished their work.

At Waltham at the time that the new bomber station was being constructed on the outskirts of the village (known as RAF Grimsby) the RAF wished to demolish it as it caused the same problems as those at Heapham, Kexby and elsewhere. When RAF personnel went to discuss the matter with George Rodgers, the miller, after earlier letters had failed to get a satisfactory reply, he marched them off the premises with a double barrel shotgun, the mill survives intact today restored to its former glory of six sails.

Thompson's mill at Epworth had its curb distorted and jammed by a enemy bomb falling nearby.

Brooks mill, again at Epworth had two sails fitted with zinc covered shades before the Second World War. During the war a fresh local policeman took the flashing of these shutters in the moonlight as the sails turned to be signals to the enemy. William Brooks the owner was summonsed for the offence but the case was quickly dismissed by the local JPs who knew the miller and the mill well!