

# SUFFOLK MILLS GROUP

## Newsletter

[www.suffolkmills.org.uk](http://www.suffolkmills.org.uk)

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Our public meeting back in early March was a success. It had snowed heavily the previous day, but luckily it soon melted and weather conditions on the night were dry and clear. We are indebted to Dave Pearce, not just for being the speaker, but for gamely setting up a Powerpoint projector with which he was unfamiliar, taking instructions from his son via a mobile phone! The enforced change of venue did not cause any problem (apart from one member - no names - who forgot to check his newsletter and went to the library!) - indeed, the Friends' Meeting House proved very suitable for our purposes and we may use it again.

There was a small but enthusiastic turnout of members to look round Friston mill in April. Some had come a considerable distance for a chance to get inside this famous mill, and everyone enjoyed it greatly.

On the subject of post mills, two encouraging stories. Firstly, work has finally started on repairs at Drinkstone (see inside). Secondly, on a recent visit to Stanton I was extremely impressed by the immaculate state of the mill and the well-stocked sales point in the roundhouse. This must be one of the most rewarding post mills to visit in the country. Well done to new owners Dominic and Linda Grixti, and keep up the good work!

We have some exciting visits coming up, starting with the A.G.M. at Burgh mill on July 3rd. Please do try to support this and the other events listed below.

S.M.G. Annual General Meeting	Sunday July 3rd
S.M.G. visit to Drinkstone post mill	Sunday July 17th
S.M.G. visit to Ixworth watermill	Sunday August 14th
SPAB Mills Section weekend tour	September 1st-4th

Mark Barnard

## LAST OF THE GREAT DERELICTS (1) Bob Paterson

### BAKER STREET SMOCK MILL, ORSETT, ESSEX

As an introduction to this series, Mark Barnard and myself caught the early train down for this year's Spring Mills Section meeting in London and I suggested 'Wouldn't it be interesting to recount our first visits to some of the country's most famous (windmill) wrecks?' 'Yes!' was the answer, so here goes.

I was born in 1971, by which time a lot of the best known derelicts had long since gone. It was 1978 by the time that I started exploring outside of the area that I was brought up (Surrey). In fact it was July 1978, and my mother drove us around East Anglia with our dog Bonnie looking at windmills. We based our

trip on Brian Flint's small guide *Windmills of East Anglia* and on R.J. Brown's wonderful *Windmills of England*. Our first visit was to the Baker Street smock mill in Orsett, Essex, which seems to be a good place to start as any. Ironically, had I started a year earlier, I would've been able to score a brace. Sadly the smock at South Ockenden collapsed in November 1977, and I never got a chance to see it.

You can imagine the expectations of a six-year old. Having never seen a photograph of the windmill, I was hoping for something more than an inaccessible 'thing' in the middle of a field. My mother was rather disappointed too, and refers to this windmill fondly to this very day.

The windmill was built in 1765 and ceased work somewhere between 1912 and 1917. Two sails were destroyed by lightning in about 1926, thereafter the mill started to fall into disrepair. It was already derelict by the 1930's and by 1978 it had lost its fantail and most of its cap. The windshaft carried the remains of one sail, although it was difficult to get anywhere near. We could see the derelict steam mill adjacent to it, with a chimney. All was in a serious state of dereliction. My mother was able to get a photograph by squeezing the lens of her camera through the iron gratings encompassing the car park of the nearby pub and we trotted off, presumably to Upminster smock mill.



Baker Street mill in 1936  
(from *Essex Windmills, Millers & Millwrights* by Ken Farries)

We did revisit the windmill site in 1980 - but still only got as far as the pub! By January 1985 restoration of the entire site had long started by owner John Smith and the steam mill and chimney had been converted into a house and the windshaft (with sail part) had been removed and the smock entirely engulfed with scaffolding. Fast forward to January 1992, the smock completely reboarded, with a gallery around the first floor of the brick base.

I next saw the mill in 2000, some 22 years after my first visit and quite a contrast, it has to be said. The windmill fully restored with four shuttered patent sails, all painted white and looking quite a picture (from the pub still...). Maybe one day I will get closer, but the security gates at the entrance to the site and threat of guard dogs does put me off. I doubt if the windmill is ever open to the public. Anthony Mudd had since bought the property from John Smith at the point where the smock had been reclad. The windmill and the work done on it was awarded with a Mills Section plaque on 2nd September 1999.

It does lead me to say, while I am happy that this lovely old wreck is now preserved for the visual benefit of future generations, the romantic side of seeing a derelict - vulnerable, open to the elements in the middle of a pretty horrible field inhabited by electricity pylons - has gone. I've been lucky in recently acquiring a copy of Reverend Peter Hemming's lovely book on Sussex windmills written in 1936. There he writes about his visits to 'idle' windmills in the Sussex countryside, his brief but fond encounters with the windmill owners (or last millers in some cases). He was given full access to the windmills and it makes wonderful reading, a far cry from the kind of reception we can expect when visiting windmills these days.



Baker Street mill in July 2003

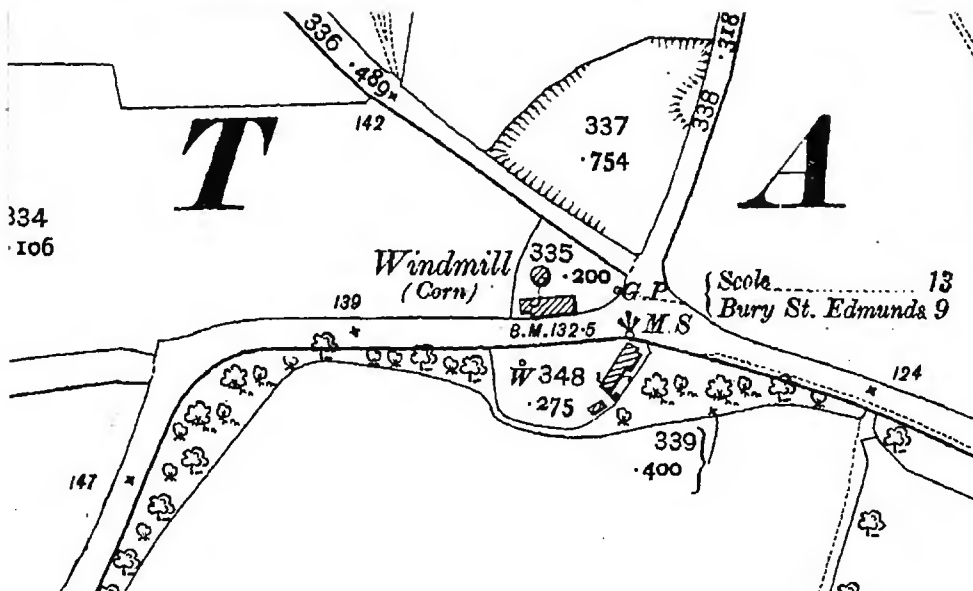
## MILLS ON THE MAP

This issue we feature the handsome smock mill which once stood at the west end of the village of Stanton, shown in this undated postcard view. Left of centre is the main road to Ixworth (no bypass in those days!). On the extreme left is the corner of the Mill House; both this and the outbuildings next to the mill are clearly shown on the extract from the 1904 25-inch O.S. map (not to scale). Also shown on the map is the fingerpost in front of the mill (as G.P., for guide post), and the track apparently leading into the mill yard must be the lane running north-west on the map.

The mill ceased work by wind power in about 1931, when the sails were removed, although two pairs of hurst-mounted stones in the base continued to be run by oil engine until at least the late 1930's. It was pulled down in 1945 and a modern house now stands on the site.



THE MILL, STANTON.



## REMINISCENCES OF A COUNTRY MILLER (4)

Harold Hitchcock

We continue the account of country milling written in 1946 by Harold Hitchcock, proprietor of the roller mill at Rattlesden.

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I will now try and tell a little of stone dressing, perhaps the most skilful job in a windmillers' life. To the onlooker, watching the monotonous tap, tap, tap of the stone dresser's bill upon the stone it may seem very dull. There is however quite an absorbing interest in the work of 'cracking' the face of the stone, that is scoring regular and straight 'cracks' on the grinding face.

The dress of millstones varies according to the work they are required to perform, as does the kind of stones used. Our stones were of the kind known as French Burr, which are built up of pieces of stone of irregular shape called 'burrs'. These are held together with plaster of Paris and the whole held tight by one wide and two or three narrower hoops. The thickness of a new runner stone (the one which revolves) may be 10 inches and a very common size 4 feet in diameter, although in some mills up to 5 feet stones are used. The weight of this stone may be nearly one ton while the bed stone (or fixed stone) is 2-3 inches less in thickness and correspondingly lighter.

French burr stones are good 'all-round' stones suitable for grinding barley, oats, peas, beans, maize, etc, and were of course used a generation ago for the grinding of wheat for flour. They do not have a natural gritty surface as a blacksmith's grindstone for instance and in the course of use they become smooth and almost polished. The cutting action must therefore be given by the scoring of very fine 'cracks' mentioned previously, the sharp edges of which perform the reduction of corn into meal. Once these 'cracks' are nearly worn out, there is no sharp edge to perform this work so the stones must be re-dressed to maintain their proper output and quality of work done.

Before this can be commenced, it is of course necessary to dismantle the wood surrounds, known as vats and raise the runner stone so that it may be turned face upward. In Sally we had a very neat little crane with which to perform this task, although there was little room to spare in which to turn the stone over. In some post windmills where the windshaft lies immediately over the stones they are taken up by securing a strong rope from the runner stone and given two or three turns over the windshaft with the mill stopped. As the slack is held the mill is allowed to revolve slowly, winding up the stone as if on a windlass and when the required lift is obtained it is an easy matter to stop the mill and gradually lower the stone now turned face upward.

Different millers have varied ideas of the best dress to use. We had our stones divided into 10 quarters, each having 4 furrows and the main or master furrow had a drift of 4 inches. This drift is the distance the furrow is out from the centre, were it continued. In other words the furrows are tangents to a circle of 4 inches radius at the centre of the stone.

The surface of the stone between the furrows are the lands and it is these parts which have to be 'cracked'. The furrows are  $1\frac{1}{4}$  to  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches wide and are shelving, the fore-edge of which is the grinding edge is shallow and deepens towards the back-edge. Furrowing is a bug-bear with all stone dressers. To cut furrows out of the solid is a very slow and laborious task on a French burr stone, and many an aching arm and shoulder is known before the stone is re-furrowed.

Mill bills or chisels used for the work must be of the very best steel to stand up to the work of cutting the stone. When new they weigh 3-3 $\frac{1}{2}$ lbs and so it can well be understood the constant raising and hammering with these develops the stone dresser's biceps. They must be tempered to exactly the correct hardness or they are of little use. A bill that is slightly soft will just turn up its nose as soon as it is used on the stone and makes no impression whereas one a trifle too hard is inclined to 'fly', that is pieces of the bill will chip off and very soon the thin cutting part is ruined.

To ensure the surface of the stone is kept perfectly true, it is 'staffed' before the dressing starts. This staff is either of oak or mahogany and is itself kept perfectly true by frequent testing on a steel proof. The face of the staff is moistened with a mixture of soot and water and brushed evenly over. Then laying the face of the staff to the face of the stone, not straight across the stone, but keeping outside the circle of the eye, it is gently but firmly pressed over the whole circumference. Any spots which have become proud or slightly high are noted and deeper



The surviving pair of millstones in Rattlesden tower mill ('Sally'). The cramped conditions are evident.

cracks are cut in these parts, or even the surface may have to be taken off, while low spots are almost missed entirely so that they may, in the process of wear, come up to the surface again. The work is naturally undertaken when the mill is idle through lack of wind and, drawing near an idle mill, one would be sure to hear two or three floors up the tap tap of the stone dresser at work.

While working on the runner stone, which is generally placed face upward on the bed stone or upon wood blocks nearby, one is able to sit upon the edge of the stone fairly comfortably. To dress the bedstone, there is only one practical position and that is upon one's knees. After an hour or two in this posture, it is not surprising one becomes somewhat cramped and a little rest and a good stretch are needed. It is a cold job in the winter time, there being no central heating in a windmill and I have noticed our old friend John would get right into a sack in winter months. This, he said, kept the draught off his feet and legs.

I was rather amused recently while reading a book (no names, no pack drill) of a watermill which had been closed owing to a careless stone-dresser having split the stone! Well, all I can say is, to parody the words of our great war leader, 'Some stonedresser, some strength'.

Although to an inexperienced eye, all French Burr stones may look very much alike, they vary much in their nature. Some are very hard to dress and would not retain a cutting edge for long; these old type millers call 'dumb'. Others are quite a joy to dress, the stone is much easier scored and are called 'tender'. This type of stone will, rather surprisingly, hold its dress longer than a harder one and, even when partly dulled, will do better work than a 'dumb' stone freshly dressed.

When millstones were used for the grinding of wheat for flour, the dressing of these was really a fine art. The cracks were evenly spaced, not more than one sixteenth of an inch apart and the furrows very carefully and evenly cut. Considering the grinding was done in one operation, while in modern roller mills there may be from 12 to 20 stages in the grinding, it is readily seen what care and skill was needed both in the dressing and the handling of the stones, to produce a flour of tolerable colour and, at the same time, to clean all flour from the bran.

Years before I came upon the scene, our old Sally had been used for grinding wheat in flour production. Owing to her small girth, there was really no room to install one of the old type flour bolters. The practice seemed to be to grind wheat with Sally, then cart it across to her larger counterpart where there was considerable room for dressing down into flour.

In those days, before steam power was largely used, both of the old mills had to be kept running, day and night, whenever there was wind. A good supply of wheat was shot off into the bins during the daytime and one man alone was left to attend to both mills during the night. There was no proper lighting of the mills in those distant days, either a candle or a very smoky and poor kind of lamp with a naked flame was used. Our old engine driver William has told me of the nights when he was on duty with both mills and how these so-called lamps would blow out when he had

gone up into the cap of the mill to grease the neck bearing of the windshaft. Not a very enviable position to be in, with the wind blowing strongly and a large gearwheel revolving just at one's back!

I do not think any overtime was paid in those days, when there was wind the men in turns were expected to keep the mills going.

## **WHITMORE & BINYON: A BRIEF HISTORY** Peter Dolman

*About fifteen years ago, as a contribution towards the display now inside Buttrum's Mill, Peter Dolman prepared some notes on the history of the Wickham Market millwrights Whitmore & Binyon. Recently your editor came across these again, and realised this is still the most reliable and complete account available, a tribute to Peter's remarkable knowledge and diligent research. It is reproduced below, with a small amount of additional information.*

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According to Redstone this firm began in 1780 under Nathaniel Whitmore. This must be incorrect though as he was only 12 at the time. An advert in the *Suffolk Chronicle* in July 1858 stated that the firm was established in 1798, a more likely date. No millwright of this name is recorded elsewhere though and it is probable that he was associated with Butcher the Wickham Market millwright, who died in 1810. His son, John, was born in 1801 and was apprenticed in 1815 'to a neighbouring mechanic' (possibly Collins?). Nathaniel died in 1811, the business being carried on by his widow Elizabeth. John entered the firm in 1822 and when he took his sons into partnership in January 1860 referred to the firm as having been going for '35 years' i.e. since 1824/5.

At first he was a millwright alone but on marrying Harriet Crane (in 1827) he acquired the site of the works (now 200-202 High Street) and established his ironworks. Foundry work was being done by 1836 when a 'moulder' was advertised for. In White's 1844 directory he is described as 'Engineer, Millwright and iron founder'. In 1853 (Kelly's directory) he was in addition 'agent for Blackmore & Co's flour bolting cloths, for the Clerical, Medical & General Life, and for the Suffolk Alliance Fire Offices'. As well as a millwright he did building work locally and was very active in local affairs, being churchwarden from 1842 to 1857.

In January 1858 a letter in the *Suffolk Chronicle* referred to the 'gradually increasing ironworks' which were lit by gaslight from the work's own gasworks. In 1850 20 men were employed.

On January 1st 1860 John took his two eldest sons, William Nathaniel (b.1833) and John (b.1839) into partnership, as 'Whitmore & Sons'. John junior almost immediately left owing to ill health and the firm continued under William, John senior effectively retiring to a farm at Pettistree. They were then known as 'Whitmore & Son'. The sluice at Dedham mill is dated 'Whitmore & Son - 1867'. John died in 1872 and is buried in Wickham Market churchyard. His large tomb is inscribed 'THE FOUNDER OF THE IRON WORKS IN THIS PARISH'.





John Whitmore's tomb in Wickham Market churchyard

In 1868 the twenty year old George Binyon, an engineer from Lancashire, was taken into partnership by William Nathaniel. He stayed at Wickham Market for three years then moved to London to manage the London office (originally Gracechurch Street, then 28 and finally 64 Mark Lane).

As Whitmore & Binyon the firm continued until 1893 when William Nathaniel's son William John (1861-1938) and W.J. Perrett were taken into partnership.

In 1885 the works were rebuilt, the foundry being enlarged in 1892, having three furnaces of five, three and two tons melt capacity. Machine moulding was undertaken and the machine shop had a turning and boring machine which could take work 20 feet in diameter.

New workshops were built in 1900 after the firm became Whitmore & Binyon Ltd. in January 1899, with William Nathaniel as chairman and George Binyon as secretary. There were 3350 preference shares with Alfred Haward and Arthur Hayward as main shareholders, and £45,000 worth of ordinary shares with Binyon, Perrett and William John and William Nathaniel as main shareholders.

In March 1901 a mortgage for £500 was obtained on the works and on 3rd April 1901 the company went into liquidation. An attempt was made to sell it as a going concern on May 22nd when it was valued at £6000 premises, £5000 plant and machinery and £2000 motive power. No purchaser was forthcoming and the premises were sold by auction on March 14th 1902 for almost nominal sums and demolished. The company was wound up on 19th August 1908.

The houses, shops and offices remain on the street frontage, the shop now being a bicycle shop. The offices were converted into houses in 1987-8.

## NEWS

### WORK STARTS AT DRINKSTONE

We are delighted to report that repairs to Drinkstone post mill are finally under way. The mill has disappeared under an enveloping cloak of scaffolding, complete with roof, which will allow work to proceed regardless of weather conditions. The fantail, fan carriage and steps have been removed, the intention being to reinstate the tailpole winding which was only superseded by the fantail in the late 1960's. At the time of writing (early June) the buck roof, sack hoist and bin floor have been carefully dismantled and the windshaft with head and tail wheels is shortly to be craned out, along with the millstones. The poll end -



View from the top of the scaffold on June 9th showing the windshaft assembly ready to be lifted out.

windshaft junction will then be assessed, and strengthening work designed before re-assembly. Further recording work will be carried out as the boards are removed, to try to piece together more about the history of this remarkable structure. Much of the repair work is plating and otherwise reinforcing existing timbers, restoring continuity and removing the worst of the distortion. The only major timber scheduled for renewal is the weather beam. The main contractors are R & J Hogg Ltd, well known for repairs to listed buildings, with Neil Medcalf retained as consultant millwright, under the supervision of conservation architect Tim Buxbaum.

S.M.G. is arranging a visit in July to give members the opportunity to hear about the repair work (see below). (M.B.)

### ROLLER MILL NEWS

The RHM mill at Felixstowe dock closed on 2nd March, ending nearly a century of milling at the site. Production will be switched to some of the other 10 mills within the company. S.M.G. was able to record the mill on video just before the closure, and we would like to thank RHM for allowing us to do this.

Demolition work is about to start at the former Cranfields roller mill in Ipswich. Although some of the buildings will be retained, a great deal including two huge concrete silos is being removed and the work will take several months. (M.B.)

### LAYHAM MILL WHEEL REPAIRS

Repair work is currently under way to the waterwheel at Layham mill. Many of the starts are being renewed as they are broken, and new buckets are being fabricated from Corten steel. The work is being carried out by Armour Engineering.

### BUTLEY MILL CONVERSION PROPOSAL

The disused and rather plain brick mill buildings at Butley (pictured below) have been the subject of a planning application for conversion to five holiday homes. As well as the 2½-storey former watermill with mill pond behind, there is an attached 3½-storey steam mill. All are understood to be empty of machinery, the watermill being gutted in the 1950's. S.M.G. raised no objection to the application, although we expressed the wish that some of the cast iron windows are retained. No habitable rooms are allowed on the ground floor because of the flood risk. (M.B.)

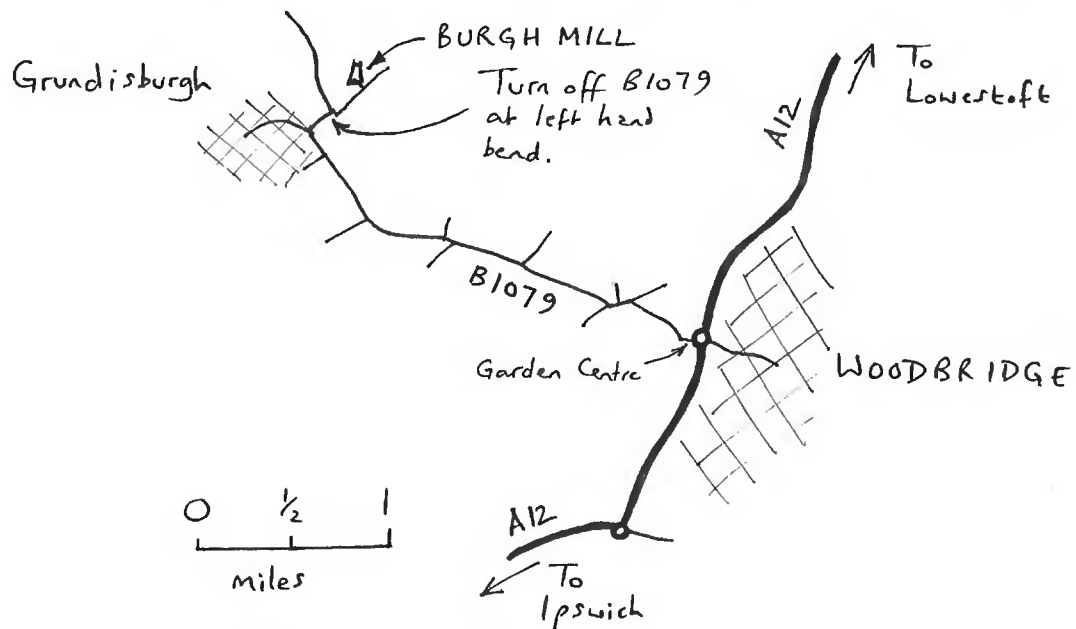


## EVENTS

### S.M.G. 2005 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING AT BURGH MILL: SUNDAY JULY 3rd, commencing 11am

This year's A.G.M. will be held in the granary at Burgh mill, by kind permission of Edward and Penny Creasy. Both the windmill tower (Suffolk's largest) and the attached granary were extensively repaired in 2003, including the addition of an aluminium-clad ogee roof with viewing gallery. There is also a new four-board display all about the mill and its history, with a special feature on the Observer Corps, who used the tower during the war as a lookout.

The mill is on a minor road, just off the B1079 close to Grundisburgh (see map below). Coming from the Woodbridge direction, you need to make a 'blind' right turn just as the B1079 swings round to the left. PLEASE BRING A FOLDING CHAIR IF YOU CAN.



### VISIT TO DRINKSTONE POST MILL: SUNDAY JULY 17th, from 2.30pm

This visit has been arranged so members can see for themselves the repairs to the mill, which by this time should be well under way. John Hogg of R & J Hogg Ltd, the main contractor, hopes to be on hand to explain the work and answer questions.

### VISIT TO IXWORTH WATERMILL: SUNDAY AUGUST 14th, from 2.30pm

This mill recently changed hands and new owners David Drake and Nicola Gooch have kindly agreed to allow us to visit. This is one of the finest of the county's watermills, with a prominent building date 1800 plus many other interesting and early inscriptions. There are three pairs of stones and live water. It is in a secluded location on the bypassed portion of the Thetford Road, about half a mile out of the village.

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