



A tale of two mills

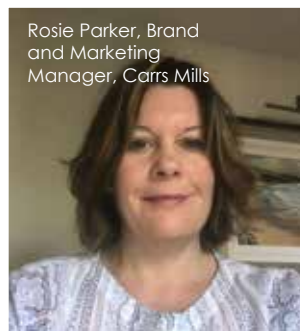
by Vaughn Entwistle, Managing Editor,
Milling and Grain

I recently interviewed millers and bakers at a wide variety of locations across the UK to find out how they were coping with keeping their vital businesses running during a pandemic. The two milling companies Carr's mills, Fife, Scotland and Wessex mill, Wantage, Oxfordshire, are widely separated by geography, and by size and capacity. In fact, Carr's mills operates three mills: the Hutchison mill in Kirkcaldy, Scotland, The Silloth mill in Cumbria, and the Malden mill in Essex, England. The Hutchison mill is the largest and most technically advanced mill in the UK. By contrast, the Wessex mill in Wantage, Oxfordshire represents the opposite end of the spectrum in terms of size, but it shares many of the same issues when dealing with the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Carr's in the driver's seat

Rosie Parker is the Brand and Marketing Manager at Carr's Flour Mills. I asked her if Carr's was struggling to meet increased demand for flour as many other mills around the UK were reporting.

"In terms of keeping up with consumer demand for bags of flour in retail," Parker answered, "our mills have been running at maximum capacity, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, since the crisis began. We produce retail bags at our mill in Silloth, Cumbria and they are currently producing over 300,000 bags of flour for retail every week. This equates to more than double our production before the crisis began.



Rosie Parker, Brand
and Marketing
Manager, Carr's Mills



Tim Hall, Operations
Director, Carr's Mills

"In order to produce as many bags of flour as possible, we have also reduced our range to help save time on production changeovers. We have literally tried everything to maximise output. It is certainly a challenging time and there is such an immense consumer demand currently for flour. It seems flour is the new gold!"

So Carr's, like so many other mills, is running hard just to keep up, but next I asked if the supply chain was also able to keep up.

"We do source locally produced wheat for our self-raising and plain flours," Ms Parker explained. "At the moment the supply chain has been robust, and we haven't experienced any supply issues as the result of the current crisis. A lot of our flour for the Silloth and Kirkcaldy mills is delivered by boat, because there are ports adjacent to the mill.

"The shippers and stevedores on these boats have been fantastic in keeping up with the increased demand. Luckily boat

crews ‘naturally self-isolate’ by spending most of the time at sea, but they have risen to the challenge and have been able to turn on extra capacity at short notice. Probably the hardest issue has been managing flour supply to the retail customers, due to the massive increased consumer demand. Ironically, it is packaging stock and production capacity that are the current challenges to the market rather than wheat supply.”

Biosecurity is a huge consideration for all mill owners. Now that concern is being added to by the need to observe strict social distancing procedures for staff.

“As you can imagine it is quite a challenging time for millers trying to run flour mills in these very difficult circumstances,” Parker agreed. “At the mill we only have two people on shift, so achieving social distancing isn’t a problem.

“We have also worked closely with our customers to ensure social distancing for our drivers is observed when they arrive on site. It is probably the engineering department that is experiencing the most challenges, as the nature of the job means that engineers mainly work in pairs. The welfare and morale of our employees is particularly important to us, especially with the uncertainty in the country the crisis has created. We have regular briefings and weekly newsletters, but I know, that Tim Hall, the Operations Director for the Carr’s mill in Kirkcaldy, recognises a concern for the mental well-being of employees. The mills are integral to the local community and many employees live and work close to the mills. In order to help the community during this time of crisis we have set up a Carr’s Crisis Fund”

The Carr’s Crisis Fund

Dr Angus Turnbull, an Intensive Care Trainee at Victoria Hospital in Kirkcaldy initially contacted Carr’s Flour, asking if they could help. This provided the impetus to set up a centrally managed Carr’s Crisis Fund to help provide local support for each of the three mills.

“With the help of Dr Angus Turnbull, Carr’s purchased camp beds for the medical and nursing staff to use during busy night shifts,” Parker said. “They have been shared with three hospitals, across the NHS Lothian Trust—distributed between St John’s Hospital, The Western General and The Royal Infirmary. We have also donated an industrial microwave to the temporary Wellbeing Hub for nursing and medical staff to use, at the Victoria Hospital which is local to the Kirkcaldy mill.”

At the Maldon mill in Essex, Carr’s and the Maldon management team have made a donation to a local charity



associated with Colchester and Ipswich Hospitals which are running a COVID-19 Staff Well Being Appeal to support local NHS staff. A further donation was also made to the Maldon District COVID-19 Community Response Fund.

Parker added, “The team at Silloth chose to donate to a number of local care homes in the area, to help bring a bit of much-needed cheer to the staff and residents. A donation was also given to the ICU Staff Fund at the Cumberland Infirmary in Carlisle.”

Wessex Mill

Tucked away in the small Oxfordshire town of Wantage sits Wessex Mill, run by father and daughter team, Paul and Emily Munsey. Although small in comparison to many of the UK’s bigger flour mills, the award-winning establishment boasts a strong milling history, with Emily joining in 2017 to continue a

heritage that spans five generations.

The Wessex mill's story began in 1895 when Emily's great great-grandfather, William Henry, was forced to relocate from Cambridge to Oxford following a devastating outbreak of foot and mouth at his farm. As a consequence, William transitioned from farming into flour milling. Originally starting as a partnership with Archer Cowley, the mill situated in Osney in Oxford became WH Munsey Ltd, with William Henry taking complete ownership of the business in 1911. The family venture continued as sons Ellis and Keith joined the workforce but with the outbreak of World War I and milling not being essential work, Henry's sons both left Oxford to fight in The Great War.

Surviving the war, the brothers returned and settled back into milling, but in 1927 with the country in post-war depression, land owners Christ Church issued an ultimatum meaning the Munseys must purchase the land or vacate the mill. They managed to borrow the money and shortly after buying the mill, William Henry died.

Ellis and Keith continued to run the mill through the 1930s and, now being too old, avoided having to fight in World War II. The war ended and the business continued, but in 1946 disaster struck with a fire that burned the Osney mill to the ground. With the country short of building supplies after the war, permission to rebuild the mill in Oxford was denied, so the brothers purchased Mr Clark's biscuit flour mill in Wantage to continue milling.

The mill carried on into its third generation with cousins Dick and Bill (sons of Ellis and Keith, respectively), and with a more stable global economic and political landscape for the remainder of the 20th century. Bill's son Paul joined the business in 1982.

Today Tony, Bill's younger son runs the old mill site in Osney which in 2010 was converted into housing and includes a marina and hydroelectric screw.

With Emily and Paul at the helm, Wessex Mill has continued to succeed and grow as the quality producer of artisan flour it is today, shipping throughout the UK, and beyond.

And then came the coronavirus

Recently, a photo appeared in the Telegraph newspaper of a crouching miller using a hand scoop to fill a 1.5kg bag of flour from a 60kg bag. Of course, all of us in the industry instantly guessed that the photo was carefully staged, but still it told the story of what the flour industry is currently dealing with.

The miller in the photo was, in fact, Emily Munsey. When interviewed by Milling and Grain, Emily told me that her mill has been receiving a lot of attention lately, because of COVID-19.

"In addition to the Telegraph, they've also fielded phone interviews from the BBC and even a television film crew from Austria!" Munsey added that Wessex mill has seen a five-fold increase in demand for our flour, principally in our smaller 1.5g bags purchased at supermarkets for home bakers."

In response to the increased demand, Wessex mill has added a Saturday shift and a night shift dedicated to packaging 1.5kg bags."

I've been constantly impressed with the milling industry's huge outpouring of heart and generosity as COVID-19 has unfolded. Not only have they risen the challenge of producing more in a time of crisis, they are reaching out to their own communities to help others. What a wonderful example to set.

www.carrsflour.co.uk

www.wessexmill.co.uk