



## Trials and Tribulations overcome by a Miller (part 2)

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### Milling journals of the past at The Mills Archive



**R**obert John Read rose to prominence in the first two decades of the 20th century. His earlier milling experiences, covered in my previous article, demonstrated his ability and determination to overcome a succession of disasters and mishaps not uncommon in the late 19th century.

In 1896, Robert John as he was widely known bought St Swithins Mills in Norwich and it did not take him long to expand the business, remodeling the mills on several occasions.

In 1906 he started producing self-raising flour and this became a staple part of his business, which later became known as The City Flour Mills. In 1910 Read bought Horstead Mills from Kings College, Cambridge.

#### The great flood in Norwich

Sadly in 1912 another disaster overtook him, this was the great

flood in Norwich. Nine feet of water flooded into the mill and boiler house causing untold damage, but worse was to happen to the bakery that had been set up to supply bread to the British army who were on maneuvers in the area, which was partly washed away down river.

Robert John Read was one of the leaders in the foundation of the East Anglian Flour Millers Association and their chairman in 1911 and 1912. He was elected as Vice-President of the National Association of British and Irish Millers in 1913 and their President in 1914, with their annual convention that year held in Norwich.

During the 1914-1918 war the mill suffered a broken crankshaft that completely wrecked the steam engine. As a temporary measure an electric motor was installed and this actually worked so well that electric drives were then permanently used in the mill. Production was increased at Horstead for a period to maintain supplies.

New City Mills riverside view



The plansifter floor



Sadly, after overcoming all the obstacles put in his way, on 3 October 1920 Robert John died. The business was converted to a limited liability company in 1921 with three directors: RJ (Jack) Read, Hector Read, and FG Turner.

### **Working through the World Wars**

An article in Milling (12 June 1926) describes in detail how, just prior to the War, capacity had been increased to eight sacks per hour. In 1923 Henry Simon installed a new wheat cleaning plant with additional bins for wheat and a large concrete warehouse for the mill products to be stored. Three years later Simon remodeled the mill with new Simon rolls, and their “Alphega-Plansifter” system.

By 1930, it was realised that further expansion was no longer possible, so premises were purchased further down the river with wharves large enough for steamers to come alongside.

Known as the Albion Mills, the premises were originally a worstead spinning mill, then a biscuit factory and on conversion were renamed as the New City Flour Mills.

Mr Reads’ first move was to erect a maize flaking plant, starting production of “Recero” flaked maize in June 1932. This product quickly took off and within two years the plant was quadrupled in size. A 1,000-ton concrete silo was erected between the maize mill and the flour mill.

The latter then had a new ten-sack plant installed by Simon, enabling flour production to start in September 1935. Further property was purchased again in order to construct a 1000-ton interlaced wood silo to deal with English wheat. The offices and provender departments were then moved and the transition from St. Swithins mills was complete.



Read's Norwich Mills ca 1925



Horstead Mills

During World War II the first bombs to fall on Norwich came within 100 yards of the City Flour Mills. The mills escaped, suffering no damage. Continuing to run seven days a week, with only a break at Christmas and Easter Bank Holiday, the constant air raid warnings, with their wailings affected production for a time until the company joined others to find a solution to this problem.

A crash warning system from the Bracondale lookout tower was arranged to identify real threats and stoppages then became less frequent

Bracondale Beacon is an early 17th century tower built of brick and flint rubble, which was three stories tall with a flight of 20th century steps. At the top a crenelated parapet and below ground level was a barrel-vaulted cellar. The tower was listed Grade II\* in 1954.

## Receiving national recognition

Throughout the war the employees made every effort to ensure the vital supply of flour. This was recognised by one of the Company employees representing the Milling Industry at the Thanksgiving Service in St Paul's Cathedral at the end of the War.

Robert John Read (1851-1920)



Confining their production output to local districts, within 25 miles of Norwich, the flour was carried to customers in Foden lorries and motor wagons, sadly replacing the horse drawn wagons, proudly owned by the founder of the firm.

Due to increased competition and limited space to expand, the City Flour Mills closed its doors for the last time in 1993.

Robert John Read's story and his legacy is a lasting tribute to the character of the man who started out with a humble post mill and went on with perseverance and determination to succeed in spite of all setbacks.

His two sons followed in his footsteps successfully running the family's business. An attractive, short film about Mr Read's Flour mill is available free to view here:

<https://player.bfi.org.uk/freel/film/watch-reads-flour-mill-1993-online>



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