



'The maid-servant that is behind the mill'. Grinding grain on a saddle quern, after an Egyptian statuette. (Drawing by Martin Watts).

# Women in milling

## The evolving role of women in the world's oldest industry

by Elizabeth Bartram (Director) & Mildred Cookson (Founding Trustee)

International Women's Day (March 8) is a global day celebrating the social, economic, cultural, and political achievements of women. The day also marks a call to action for accelerating women's equality.

In addition to this article, the 'People' page of the April edition of *Milling and Grain* magazine is also dedicated to recognising the achievements of our industry colleagues who are women, in what has traditionally been a very male dominated industry. To find out more turn to page 106.

Milling has a rich and immersive history. Women have always been involved in some aspect of milling, those roles and their level of involvement have reflected wider society's views on women, work and gender roles.

The detail (or even existence) of records documenting their roles has been patchy, but even though this is the case, there is still much we can say.

There is substantial archaeological and documentary evidence that, during ancient times, milling using hand mills was usually associated with women (although it was not usually considered a high-status role).

From ancient Mesopotamian texts, throughout the Bible to the 7th century laws of Æthelbert of Kent and to the writings of historians such as William Harrison, Documentary and also

Mildred Cookson altering the grain flow using the crook string at Mapledurham Mill, 1986 (Mills Archive Collection MCFC-1122134-12).



Woman carrying grain to a post mill. Supposedly from Luttrell Psalter Manuscript. However, what is strange is that a very similar version of this image is found in the Smithfield decretals (which also depicts a second 'scene' where the woman is setting fire to the mill). Possibly this was done first because the Smithfield decretals version is more detailed.



ethnographic evidence indicates that grinding foodstuffs on a quern is generally considered to be the work of women, slaves and prisoners.

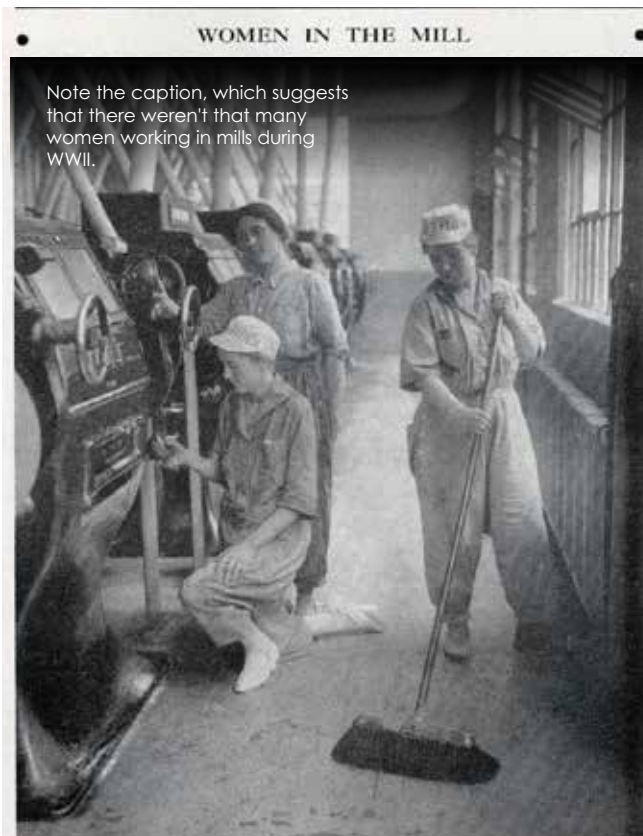
This involvement of women continued into medieval times, even as technology and society changed (The move from hand mills to watermills and windmills).

**Employed in a variety of related & essential roles**

During the Industrial Revolution, as more jobs were taken from out of the home and into factories, women still formed part of the work force. As in many processes that have become industrialised, the contributions of women have not always been noticed.

In recent centuries, women have helped to run a mill as part of the family, taking up the responsibility of miller when their father, husband or brother was unable to do so.

In the past 100 years, with the industrialisation of flour production in the West, women have been employed in a variety of related and essential roles, such as the home economic experts and nutritionists of the 1940s onwards, and the cereal chemists



Note the caption, which suggests that there weren't that many women working in mills during WWII.

No—look again. These aren't the women who work in your mill today—if any. They're the mill-hand women of World War I. In that preliminary skirmish there was many a feminine sweeper and oiler. The ones shown here were employed in a Kansas City mill.

and marketers today.

Women's participation in the work force increased significantly during the First and Second World Wars, when factories were hit hard by dwindling numbers of men who went to fight in the war.

The photograph below was published during the Second World War, in the *Northwestern Miller*, a weekly US milling journal. The photograph itself was taken during the First World War.

However, this seems at odds with the number of articles published in the same journal during the Second World War, which concerned making the workplace suitable for women, how to recruit women, and what their salaries should be.

This wartime work, combined with other social factors, helped to change perceptions of women's capabilities. They were widely thanked by the public, although some perceptions hadn't permanently changed at that stage - the end of the wars and the returning menfolk meant that many women had to relinquish their new positions.

### Struggling to profit due to increasing competition

As the World Wars ended, traditional windmills and watermills struggled to profit due to increasing competition with large-scale commercial milling, but both traditional and modern mills still benefitted from the involvement of women. There are examples of women – wives, widows, daughters – pursuing and continuing milling businesses.

Nowadays, women continue to perform vital functions, and there are a wide range of roles to be found within the milling industry today. There are women millers, although they remain uncommon. One of the founding trustees of the Mills Archive, Mildred Cookson, was a miller for more than 30 years.

She has also amassed a large and internationally importance

archival collection, with one of her specialisms being women in milling. To find out more about milling's influential women, and how the industry has viewed women over the centuries, go to <https://mymag.info/e/1367>



Collectable cigarette card from a series, depicting women working in a flour mill during the First World War (The Mildred Cookson Collection).