

The Rex Wailes Collection

Eccentric millers of old

by Nathanael Hodge, Mills Archive trust

From a typescript in the Rex Wailes Collection...

The attention of the antiquary has been attracted by the old time miller. Apparently, he dabbled in the arts, as witness the eccentric Master Oliver, whose tomb upon Highdown Hill, near Worthing, was and still is an object visited by the curious.

It was prepared by himself with scripture texts and verses of his own composing. He was carried to the grave in 1793, by folk garbed in white, and a girl in white read a sermon as a requiem. This suggests a latent Druidism, faint traces of which do exist.

But the strangest miller in the traditions of the Sussex Downs was Master Coombs, whose boast it was that his antique little mill, not far from Newhaven, had belonged to his ancestors from the days of Henry VIII. He once made a strong assertion as to a statement he had put forth, that if it were not true, he would never enter his mill again.

Upon the statement being proved incorrect, he kept his word. He would spend hours every day upon the upper step of the mill stairs, but never to the end of his life did he enter the building.

One of his freaks was the painting of his mill horse. The hues varied frequently. One week a whole market town would be startled by an animal which was pea green; next month it would be blue – then rose pink. Perhaps someone had told him about chameleons.

Millers' carts were almost unknown in his day (1780), and

the grists were carried home on horseback.

Master Coombs, as he rode with several bags and observed that his steed was overladed, used instead of dismounting to take one of the bags upon his own shoulders, complacently saying "The merciful man is merciful to his beasts".

His marriage scarcely came up to his ideal, and in expansive moments he owned that this was in a measure his own fault. "For," he said, "as I was a gooin across Excete Lane to be married at Denton Church, I heard a voice from Heaven a-saying unto me, 'Willyam Coombs! Willyam Coombs! If so be that you marry Mary Briggs, you'll always be a miserable man! And so I've always found it,'" he added, "and I be a miserable man."

There was a general belief that an honest miller had a tuft – or "tot" – of hair growing in the palm of each hand, and that the only honest miller ever known with such a tot lived at Chalvington near Lewes. Finding success in business impossible he hanged himself in his own mill. Master Coombs had no such tot, and he no reason for one.

This did not impair his length of days, however.

