

# WOMEN IN MILLING

**This month contains an annual event close to my heart: International Women's Day. And so it feels timely to celebrate the contributions of women to milling, past and present.**


by Elizabeth Bartram, Director of The Mills Archive Trust, UK

**T**he history of women in milling has in some ways been a hidden one. And yet women have played important and interesting roles in the processing of grain and the production of flour over the course of history.

At the Mills Archive Trust, we care for 3 million photographs, drawings, letters, reports, books, journals and small artefacts revealing global stories of milling and the people who have been responsible for feeding the world. Our records include snapshots and memoirs of some of the women who have been millers or have been connected to milling in some way. It is not usually easy to find this information, since the recorders of



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



Some of the watermills  
in the Ounien Valley  
and a woman milling  
at Tamsoult n'Ougard  
(Michael Harverson  
Collection)

history have not always captured the full accounts of women. However, the threads are there, and I am grateful to have this opportunity to share some of their stories with you.

Milling grain and creating flour is not a new process. Archaeological evidence for milling of some form goes back millennia. As the centuries passed, women around the world have continued to support the feeding of their household and their local community.

Some stories of specific women can be found going back hundreds of years, such as to the medieval mystic Margery Kempe, who lived in England during the 1300s. She sought a variety of business ventures, including running a donkey powered mill, though it doesn't sound like it was a very successful project! She is reputedly the first woman to write her autobiography (with the help of a literate monk who wrote down her words), which is still in print today. She became renowned for her religious experiences and she travelled around the world on pilgrimages.

Moving forward to more recent times, I am a fan of Canadian agronomist and journalist, Dr Cora Hind who made a name for herself during the first half of the 20th century due to her uncanny ability to accurately predict future grain harvests. She also received funding to travel to 29 countries to explore how Canada might market its grain to other countries. Cora must have been a very

some of the watermills in the Ounien Valley and a woman milling at Tamsoult n'Ougard (Michael Harverson Collection)



unusual woman in those days, some grain merchants were not keen on her crop forecasts, which could affect pricing, and gave her the nickname 'Calamity Cora!'

### Morocco's women millers

There is a group of women about whom I would like to know more. In one of our collections are photographs and written notes about women living in Morocco's Atlas Mountains during the 1980s.

Visiting Morocco in 1985, Michael Harverson wrote that the women were responsible for grinding the corn for their bread, couscous and soup. They would 'adjust their routine to take account of each day's priorities so far as the outflow from the pond is concerned. They grind for a very few day's needs at a time; each mill serves only a handful of families and, if a small queue forms, one is chatting to one's neighbours in the shade of the walnut trees which seem to flourish beside Atlas watermills: a restful contrast to the hard work of harvest or weeding or household chores like fetching fodder, fuel and water. Incidentally, a more usual figure quoted for grinding

barley was about seven kilos per hour; a typical family will consume about thirty kilos of flour per week'.

Much closer to home is our founding Trustee, Mildred Cookson, who also has a regular column in 'Milling & Grain.' Mildred was a miller at an historic watermill in South-east England for 30 years, so she knows a thing or two! I'm particularly fascinated by her expertise in the traditional craft skill of millstone dressing, which historically required a skilled craftsman to cut grooves

into millstones by hand. A painstaking process, this skill is at risk of dying out. Mildred's own extensive and important archive is one of our foundation collections.

We are keen to find expand our knowledge of women's roles in milling, around the world, in times past and nowadays. If you are such a woman, or you know of a woman or group of women who you feel should be recorded in our archive for future generations, please email me at [director@millsarchive.org](mailto:director@millsarchive.org)



Miller Mildred Cookson working in Mapledurham Watermill during the 1980s (Mildred Cookson Collection)



Dr E. Cora Hind, a picture from her obituary in a 1942 issue of the US Northwestern Miller magazine