

DOORWAYS OPENING OFF THE STONE FLOORS IN SMOCK AND TOWER MILLS

Paul Jarvis

A number of Kentish tower and smock mills have external doors, which being well above the stage at meal floor level, open out into 'thin air'. Few mills having this arrangement survive and the use of these doors is open to conjecture unless positive information is available.

The Evidence

A survey of Benenden smock mill showed a doorway leading off the stone floor. Its sill is some 1' 5" (43 cm) below the stone floor level. Woodchurch Lower Mill, which is currently being reconstructed has a similar which is kept in the new structure.

A study of 122 of the photographs in 'Watermills and Windmills' by W Coles Finch shows this door clearly on one tower mill and eleven smock mills, with a possible one more tower and four smock mills possessing it. As photographs show slightly less than halfway round a mill, these figures should probably be doubled at least.

Their Use

The true purpose of these doors is uncertain, but their use may be surmised. One is lead to presume that the door is in essence a maintenance facility, but that with the clear infrequency of use it could be troubled with rusted hinges etc, besides water ingress problems. It seems likely that the south to west sides were avoided.

One may suppose that the door was used to bring in and out machinery parts which are too big to handle via the stairways or sack hoist route, but the infrequency of this requirement would hardly seem to warrant fitting a doorway for the purpose.

Perhaps a more frequent use was the handling of millstones which would otherwise need floorboards to be lifted for passing them up. However, the doorways do not seem to be well suited to this as the weight would necessitate powerful lifting equipment which requires a good suspension point. Another problem would be to avoid damage to the smock weatherboarding and the even more difficult one of negotiating the stage, which when spring sails or common sails were fitted would typically be some 8 - 9' (2.5 m) wide and even further than this distance from the doorway situated part way the sloping side of the mill. There is a possibility of finding a suitable anchor point on the cap if it were turned to an appropriate position.

Unanswered Questions

- 1) What was the true purpose of these doorways ?
- 2) Why did only a small proportion of mills have them if they were of material benefit ?
- 3) What sort of lifting arrangements were used if millstones were lifted ?
- 4) What is the distribution of mills having this feature - are they confined to Kent or to the south east of England ?

Discussion

Plunkett Did you say that the feature occurs with most types of mill in Kent ?
Jarvis Smock mills and tower mills. I have found one tower mill which is pretty certain, and another which is rather vague. Many of the

pictures in Coles-Finch are of mediocre quality, taken from some distance away, and it is not always certain what markings on the side may be - whether a doorway, a patch of roofing felt, or what. That is why I have a number of possibilities rather than certainties.

- Plunkett There is no difference in the position of these doors ?
- Jarvis No, they all appear to be one storey up from the stage, which is always at meal floor level.
- Bryan Are you sure that the level of the stage has not been altered, for instance when sails were changed from common to patent ?
- Jarvis I think it highly unlikely, as photographs exist of the mill when it had a wooden windshaft (though it had spring sails), which was replaced by iron in the 1890's. The joists of the stage were set into the brickwork and there is no evidence that they were ever changed.
- Davison Would it be for use in constructing the mill, which would not be used afterwards ?
- Jarvis If such an opening were needed for that purpose, I feel sure they would have left that panel off and boarded it up after the machinery had gone in. The door was equipped with a pair of hinges and a fastener on the inside in the usual fashion of doors of the period.
- Norchi How about access to the sails ?
- Jarvis No, in this mill they came right down to the sails; there was no difficulty in getting to them at all.
- Harverson Was there a trap in the stage under it ?
- Jarvis The stage was in such poor condition when I first saw it, there was no possibility of surveying it properly. I am unaware of any traps in the stage, nevertheless, it is conceivable.
- Bryan What about light and air on the stone floor ?
- Jarvis This particular mill (Benenden) was better provided with light on the stone floor than any other mill in Kent. It has simply enormous windows which show signs of having been increased in size by about one half to a third, from old mortice holes. People have questioned the big windows, but they are shown in pictures of the mill when it had its wooden windshaft, so they are original - or genuine, shall we say.
- Bryan It was usual to work a windmill with the door open for a bit of fresh air -
- Jarvis On the meal floor, yes; not so much on the stone floor.
- Bryan Well, somewhere in the working area, anyway. Some of the post millers used to work with the door open - just the bottom half.
- Jarvis Oh yes, and Benenden Mill had on various floors - I don't remember how many, but probably four or five - little shuttered doors which I would expect to have been used as you suggest.
- Norchi Could it have been for clearing rubbish out ?
- Jarvis Well that is a possibility.

Norchi Our experienc with a watermill was that it didn't take a lot to get it going, but a great deal of work clear the muck out. There is no other way, except sweeping it out, and in watermills you do get doors leading out to nowhere.

Jarvis Yes, but a watermill is rather different. With a windmill, a door in this poition is a decided disadvantage from the weatherproofing point of view.

Harverson Are there any hooks for suspending a ladder, as a fire escape.

Jarvis No, I don't subscribe to that theory; it is a nice thought, but I very much doubt if it was a fire escape. It would be more reliable to go down the stairway you know than jump out of the upper door.

Jones When you get to the stage, where do you go? The only way down is back inside. It seems unlikely to be something that was used every day, as the chances are that the sails might obstruct it.

Jarvis That wouldn't necessarily be such an impediment, because the prevailing wind came from the south to south-west. The door at Benenden was on the north-east, while the one at Woodchurch appears to be about north-west. The sails don't often come round that side. They pass through, but they don't dwell there for very long, as a rule.

Jones I am sure that we can agree that this is a question worth answering. We can't dismiss them as a piece of ill-judgement; there are too many of them for that.

Jarvis Exactly, especially as they were all done by different builders. But has anyone got any idea of whether they occur on mills elsewhere in the country?

Bryan We'll look for them now!

Jarvis Well, it seems that we will have to let the matter rest for the moment, with no solution in sight!