

WATERMILLS ON THE CRAY AND DARENT

Robert Cumming

According to the Domesday survey, there were about 20 mills on the River Cray, and 35 on the River Darent. Now surviving on the Cray are the remains of four corn mills, a disused paper mill, a working paper mill, and the remains of a silk mill and a former iron mill. On the Darent there ten corn mills, three paper mills and a water-powered roller mill.

The Cray

Working upstream, there were two mills at Bexley. One of these was at Hall Place, a large mansion by the river. This was built in about 1750 and was demolished in 1929. The weatherboarding was white, like most Kent mills, and it had a stone ground floor. A few bricks, a wall, and a millstone are all that remains of it.

Further along the Cray is the Old Mill in Bexley. The Cannon family owned it from 1839 to 1907, and in 1884 they installed a steam engine, but the vibration so shook the building that it had to be removed. The mill was destroyed by fire on the 12th May 1966. Schooner Inns Ltd bought the site and rebuilt the mill as a restaurant with an artificial waterwheel.

At Foots Cray, near Sidcup, was a fine silk mill. This was built by a Frenchman, Benjamin Harenc, in 1775. It was demolished in 1929 but a small portion remains under the road.

St Mary Cray had two paper mills. One was Joynson's Paper Mills, which were built in about 1820. It stopped work in 1930 and became Veg and Parchment Mills. Now there are only a few walls and outbuildings remaining. The other, called Nash's Mill is working commercially. It was built in 1817.

At Orpington there was a mill worked by the Hodsoll's, a resident family. It was demolished in 1937.

The Darent

The lowest mill on the Darent is at Hawley. I have not yet visited it, but I heard that it is very mutilated and used as a builder's yard. Darent once had a fine old mill, which was demolished, probably about 15 years ago.

There were once three mills in South Darent, of which two remain. The Old Roller Mill - built around 1800 - is now known as the Repitition Works Ltd. It is used for woodworking. Around the corner is Frog Lane Mill. It's appearance has changed completely, and now looks like a 1930's built house.

Going past Horton Kirby Paper Mills, we come to Westminster Mills, Horton Kirby, where there is a small brick building which probably belonged to a watermill.

The next mill is the fine mill at Farningham. It has little internal machinery, and the stones were removed in 1900. The present building was built in 1790, next to a mansion now known as The Mill House. It is owned by the Colyer family, but is leased. It drove a circular saw until last Christmas and then stopped, but it may begin work again next spring.

Where Farningham borders on Eynsford, there were the Eynsford Paper Mills, which were the third paper mills set up in England. They finally closed in 1952. In the centre of Eynsford, by the Worten Bridge, is a very odd mill, with a barrel roof. It was

Probably converted into a house in Victorian times, but there seems to be no record of this.

We now take a long leap to Shoreham, where there were once many mills at work. The Old Mill at Shoreham, built in 1826, is very picturesque, and was once thatched. It was converted into a house about 15 years ago and has no machinery left except the millstones. At Watermill Farm in Shoreham there is a Mill House which was once a large paper mill.

At Otford, near Shoreham, are the remains of a watermill. Half of it was burnt down in 1926, but the other half was saved and remained derelict until 1978, when it was converted into a house, with an upper storey added.

Chipstead, near Sevenoaks, has what is called the Old Mill. I have not yet been able to visit it, but I am told it has been converted into a house. At Brasted there is a mill built in 1881, now house converted. Nothing else is known about this mill and no machinery survives.

Finally, we come to Westerham, where because there were so many rivers, there were four mills. The last of these stood until about 1970, when it was controversially pulled down overnight. The river was dammed up, and now only half a wall survives. The Westerham Society are now considering rebuilding it.

I hope this survey proves that the Kent watermill index requires revision.

Discussion

- Plunkett I got the impression that most of the mills in this area are house conversions. Is that so?
- Cumming Yes, they are all house conversions, apart from Farningham Mill.
- Bryan Does that have a wheel, or is it a turbine.
- Cumming I haven't seen a turbine, but if it was working up to last Christmas, it must have some power source.
- Bryan If there was a large waterwheel, surely the owner would be sure that he had it!
- Cumming He is not sure what he has. The visible drive shaft is like a horizontal wheel.
- Bryan In which case it would be a turbine.
- Jones It is a very ornate building; presumably a lot of that decoration is fairly recent.
- Cumming It was built like that in 1790, and hasn't really changed at all.
- Jones Even with the birds on either side?
- Cumming Oh, they have always been there.
- Jones This is really a most interesting item, as that sort of elaboration in mill buildings is so unusual.
- Freedman Is it brick and weatherboarding?
- Cumming Timber framed. Many mills in West Kent are timber and white weatherboarding.