

## Wessex Flour Mill, Wantage

**Ruth Andrews**

Pictures by Keith Andrews

Wessex Mill Clarks (Wantage) Ltd now operate what is believed to be the smallest roller-milling still in commercial use in the UK. Nevertheless it now processes 30 tons of wheat a day, 5 days a week, with 35 staff working two shifts a day, 16 hours in total, and producing flour at the rate of 2 tons per hour. 800-900 tons of wheat are stored on-site at any one time. Its 29 varieties of flour are sold wholesale worldwide to craft bakers and directly to the public. It is clearly a very thriving business. 10000 tons of wheat are grown and collected yearly from a 30-mile catchment area; in addition about 10% of Canadian wheat is also used as it is a harder grain with the higher gluten content needed for bread making.



Grain straight from the combine harvester is cleaned in a venerable Robinson separator (*above*) which uses airflow and sieves to remove straw, clods of earth, stones and so on, and in a much more modern cylindrical trieur separator (*right*) which removes non-wheat seeds.



The grain's moisture content is then adjusted (conditioned) 24 hours before it is transported in modern pneumatic conveying pipes to the 1935 Henry Simon roller mills, which came from a mill in Glasgow which closed. These 80-year old machines run slowly and quietly with the minimum of



maintenance, which means that the flour produced isn't heated as much as in a more modern plant. This has allowed the mill to establish a very successful niche market as its flour has a significantly different taste which appeals to craft bakers.



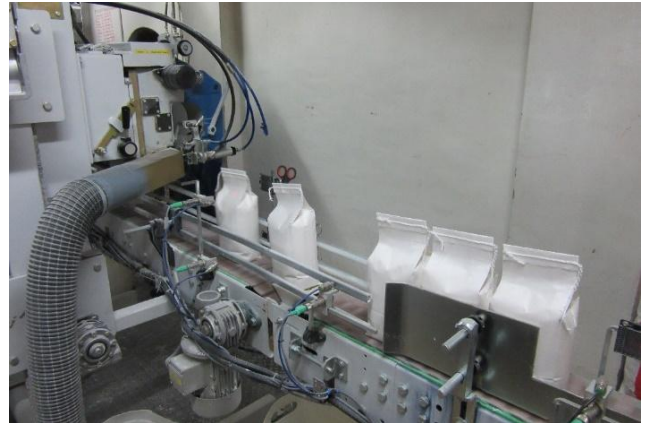
Mill manager Richard Sampford who showed us round very kindly opened several of the working roller sets to show us the different stages of breakdown of the grain. The mill has 4 fluted break rolls to allow wheatgerm and bran to be extracted and 8 smooth reduction rolls to gradually turn the endosperm into semolina, middlings, and ultimately flour. After passing through each roll the different sizes of particles are sieved in the plansifters upstairs. The picture below left shows the result of the sieving. The flour is tested hourly using a near-inframatic analyser (*below right*) to monitor protein content, moisture, colour, and so on.



Once the flour has been produced it is blended, after which it is weighed, bagged (in pre-labelled 16kg sacks for wholesale and 1.5kg bags for public sale), stitched (both sacks and bags), and date-stamped. All the machinery used for these processes is modern and custom-built, although quite a few of the 29 varieties of flour have additional ingredients which are mixed manually in small batches.

On the next page are two pictures of the bagging process.





I would like to thank Richard for giving us such an informative and thorough tour, also the various staff members who allowed us to get in their way and obstruct progress. Congratulations and thanks to Sheila Viner for arranging such a fascinating visit. The mill can only easily handle groups of 10 or less, but I know she has also organised a second visit for those who couldn't manage the first date.

For more information about Wessex Mill Clarks (Wantage) Ltd, all the flours they produce, and the history of the Munsey family who own the business visit [wessexmill.co.uk](http://wessexmill.co.uk).



Sacks and bags showing the large number of varieties of flour, and the eye-catching design on them which features King Alfred, who was born in Wantage