

Mills Research Group Conference News from David Plunkett.

Ros and I attended the Mills Research Group Conference on the weekend of 8th & 9th October, near Sudbury in Suffolk. My role in this conference was as chairman of this small UK wide group of mill researchers. In fact, I am one of the founder members. We hold an annual conference at a different venue yearly and this year it was based at The River Stour Trust premises in the village of Great Cornard, just south of Sudbury. A very fitting spot alongside the old Stour Navigation with the nearest water mill, Baker's Mill, (now a recent re-development by Barrett Homes and sited about 150 yards down the road).

Our venue was a classroom sized hall with first floor offices within a modern timber framed and clad structure with all facilities built in. All raised and founded on multiple concrete piles, to escape possible flooding. This suited our purposes very well though parking was at a premium on the restricted site, next to a large modern housing development.

Conference highlights in the order of presentation: -

Guy Blythman with 'English Windmills – Regional Variations - Part 2'. The latest account of his research into the history and technology of surviving English windmills.

An interesting paper by Dr Alan Crocker with 'A Miller's Probate Inventory of 1739'. Milling research from a different perspective.

The afternoon session commenced with our Secretary, Philip Graves, with family connections on the island of Mallorca, giving an account of his research of 'The Flour Windmills of Mallorca'. A serious study of some of the previous 800 flour windmills on this Mediterranean island which is about the size of Suffolk. Illustrated with many early black & white photographs, maps and post cards views.

Chairman David Plunkett with 'An Overview of the Minchinton and Goodchild Collections.' Illustrated extracts from the two archives held at the Mills Archive Trust, in the names of Walter Minchinton and Michael Goodchild who specialised in Tide Mills research over the past forty years.

Glynis Crocker with a talk on, 'An unpublished paper on fulling mills, by the late Mike Davies-Shiel'.

This included the Cumbria use of potash from bracken burning kilns for use in processing of local wool cloth.

Finally, Peter Filby with 'Post and Smock Windmills of Norfolk' illustrated with many historic photographs, from this specialist in drainage mills..

Overnight accommodation was left to our own needs but Ros and I had pre-booked a village pub (George and Dragon Inn) with enhanced B&B reviews, in the village of Long Melford. A spacious and convenient, ensuite room, well suited to our needs for two nights.

On a bright Sunday morning after a hearty breakfast we made our way with passenger Guy Blythman, to our first mill for a 10.30 am start. This was the brick tower windmill outside the village of Stansfield in fine rising countryside. In private hands with well kept mill house and adjacent pond, necessary for the steam engine late power source. An interesting history as explained by the owner, with a current temporary cap, after previous years of neglect and decay. Mill floors and gearing are in a collapsed but stable state, partly propped and suspended

from above with just a little of the machinery. Only minor restoration to date but it has been stabilised in an unusual form by Suffolk Mills Group members.



Next a drive into the centre of Sudbury to the banks of the Stour River, and site of the large and spacious Mill Hotel conversion where we viewed the large surviving workable iron waterwheel and sluice gate, where we then had a quality cooked Sunday lunch.



Next a drive out into the countryside, to the very rural Nedging Mill on the River Brett. This timber framed with white painted weather boarded and brick structure has had dramatic main gearing and waterwheel changes in the late 19th century. It had formerly had an internal but central wide waterwheel and main gearing which was swept away to be replaced by a single outside but enclosed iron waterwheel of about 1900 with new main gearing and raised hursting with millstones in a now, disused static state.



Next – travelling east to St Mary Mill, Bures, a very large merchant mill on the river Stour with adjacent classic mill house which operated successfully, well into the 20th century. The current owner delighted in explaining its past history and showing us around the grounds and throughout the mill. Parts of the later industrial extended mill structures have been demolished but the surviving main timber structure is largely complete with some roller mills, elevators and augers. Another surviving but redundant feature, was the fire sprinkler system.



Finally – further east to Thorington Street Mill, on the River Box, to this normally closed but delightful and compact watermill, which worked up to 1963 and was demonstrating slowly for us. Much restoration has been completed and the mill lovingly maintained as a fine regional example.

So with darkness descending upon us, we dragged our selves away to our cars and eventually all the way home. One of our best conferences for quite a few years. If you are serious about researching topics related to Mills, then talk to Dave Plunkett; the MRG would be most interested in having you on board as a member.

