

SPAB'S September Sunshine Somerset Tour 2009

by Sheila Miles Viner

Seven Hampshire Mills Group members took part in a four day conducted tour which visited seventeen watermills and two windmills across the length and breadth of Somerset. Most mills were privately owned and special viewings were granted to the organisers, the Mills Section of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. The Hampshire Seven included Margaret Croker, our distant member from Lancashire and a lady dedicated to Marsh Mill, Thornton, her local windmill. It was delightful to meet Margaret and share the coach journeys with her and to meet many of the other SPAB members who had arrived from all over England. HMG members were Sheila and Bob Sharp, Peter Mobbs, Tony Yoward, Mildred Cookson and myself.



The two windmills were very similar in build and we were able to climb up into Ashton Mill at Chapel Allerton; however, Stembridge Mill near High Ham, the only remaining thatched tower mill, was shrouded in scaffolding following extension renovations which precluded an interior viewing. Millwright at Stembridge, Martin Watts, gave us an illuminating oral insight into the problems and progress as works neared completion. Two similar windmills under two dissimilar ownerships: the National Trust own Stembridge; Ashton Windmill is owned by Sedgemoor District Council, represented that day by Jessica Vale of the Council's Museum.

Stembridge Windmill Photo P Morgan

Joining us at Ashton was Julian Orhlbach who is updating Nicholas Pevsner's Somerset volume of the Buildings of Britain series. Mr Pevsner rarely gave ratings to the importance of wind or watermills and Julian is now hopefully redressing the balance.

The watermills varied in their uses, design, build and states of restoration or decay; only Burcott Mill, Wookey, is fully working, producing stone ground, wholemeal flour. On arrival home it was learned that Ian Burt, the owner, has sold the mill. According to its website the mill will continue producing flour and remain open to the public.

We explored former sawmills at Timberscombe and Oakfordbridge (just over the border into Devon) as well as mills which had been important to their communities grinding flour at Kingsbury Episcopi, Norton-sub-Hamdon, Crewkerne, Pitcombe (nr Bruton), Evercreech, Somerton, Ashill, Sampford Brett, Allerford, Dunster, Exton, Milverton and finally coming to a halt at Bishop's Lydeard where we were directed to the church in order to view the carved pew end depicting a windmill. Plot these locations on a map and you'll see how much we criss-crossed the county.

Martin Bodman produced an excellent guide book to the mills, some copies of which are freely available from myself or Simon Hudson at SPAB. It is a must for anyone wanting to know the technical attributes of each mill site -sorry but space precludes listing them all here.

Possibly the most memorable mills for me were:



Piles Mill Allerford
Photo P Morgan



Lower Clapton Mill in 2006



Iron launder

Lower Clapton Mill: Two water sources feed this former corn mill, one is a leat from the River Axe whilst the other is a massive, and very long, iron launder channelling water from the Hewish Brook. The launder was extended after the Upper Clapton mill fell into disuse and the one surviving Clapton Mill was remodelled in the mid nineteenth century. A wealth of mill machinery awaits attention including at least one bearing the “Armfield” logo. One room of the mill house is given over to a museum where technical drawings are on display. Owner Craig Taylor, a member of the South Somerset Hydropower Group, operates a turbine selling business here whilst his wife, Gale oversees the tea room, shop and museum.

Gants Mill: Owners Brian and Alison Shingler have developed their mill site into a wonderful garden where weddings are held and are instrumental in furthering the cause of turbine installation at mills. No doubt that Theophilus Perceval - who spent £10,000 creating Gants as a silk mill to accommodate 200 silk throwsters back in the early 1800s - would be rather pleased with their entrepreneurial ventures. As founders of the South Somerset Hydropower Group,

courses and tours are organised here to help with understanding aspects of turbine installations for mill owners.

Rowland's Mill, Ashill: Situated on the delightfully named River Ding, this mill simply took one's breath away. Joan and Peter Speke from Canada, inherited this late 17th century watermill and mill house built of coursed Ham stone with part brickwork; apparently rare in Somerset before the 18th century. Restoration was carried out under Martin Watts' guidance with the aid of an English Heritage grant.



Rowlands Mill, Ashill on the River Ding Photo P Morgan

Bishop's Lydeard (aka Lower) Mill: has an excellently presented static display of milling and rural activities which children and adults alike can enjoy.

Survival of many of these fascinating buildings, which form such an important part of Somerset's industrial and social history, seems dependent on tourism. To this end, several of the mill owners have created tearooms as well as opportunities for staying on site as they have adapted granaries, barns and cottages to holiday use.

Owners of Lower Mill, Bishop's Lydeard (our final stop), Yvonne and Charlie Back, had reconnoitred and charted the route with author and researcher, Martin Bodman. Basing us at the Holiday Inn, Taunton, they did a superb job in setting up a very interesting tour over and across a vast area of Somerset, so we extend our very grateful thanks to them and all of the mill owners, as well, of course, Simon Hudson of S.P.A.B., for overseeing the whole trip. I am extremely indebted to Peter Morgan for allowing use of his photographs.



Somertown Mill, owned by SPAB Mills Section Chairman Graham Deane



Thorney Mill, Kingsbury



Sampford Mill at Sampford Brett



Oakfordbridge Mill Photo P Morgan



Cowbridge Mill at Timberscombe



Bridgetown Mill Photo P Morgan



Little Norton Mill Photo P Morgan