

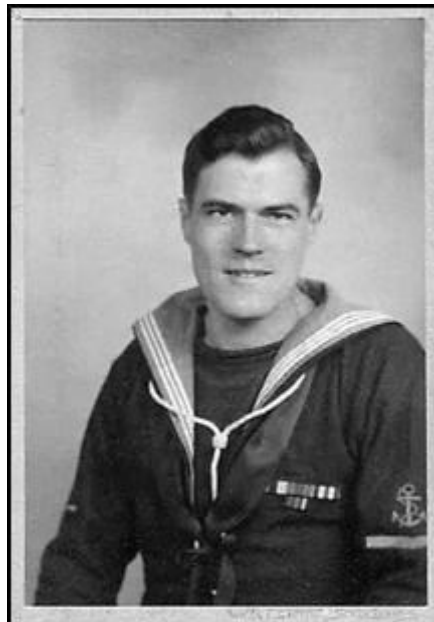
FREDERICK JOHN G KEEVIL 1915 – 2009

By Michael Carden

John's family moved to Winchester in 1928 when he was 13, his father having bought Abbey Mill in preference to remaining in Calne where milling was in decline. Sadly, however, the decline was national and in 1932 his father was forced to sell, obtaining employment at Wharf Mill until 1933 when that too had to be sold because of ever-keener competition. John was also employed at Wharf Mill and was sent back to Abbey Mill on a number of occasions "to grind a bit of animal feed". Thus he was the last miller to work that historic mill, and was on the pay roll of the last working mill in Winchester.

So it was in 1932 that his parents bought the house in Edgar Road, where he lived until his death in March this year, interrupted only by the war years when he served in the RNVR (42-46). He was a kind-hearted if reclusive neighbour, entirely self-sufficient and unwilling to involve others in his life unless essential. This included both housekeeping and building work; when we first knew him it worried us, which amused him, that he would lower himself by a rope fastened to a chimney stack to replace slates on the roof of his 3 storey house – such is the resourcefulness of millers! His workshop was a treasury of traditional tools mostly inherited from his father and there was nothing he could not make.

He became an employee of Ranks, the big commercial millers and flour merchants in Southampton, but when we first knew him in 1967 he was in charge of the stores for Curry's when their warehouse was Worthy Park House (now Princes Mead School). We would hear him leave each morning on his venerable Royal Enfield, making that friendly accelerating putter of English motorbikes. Wearing his leather flying helmet he looked very distinctive and was affectionately known to our children as 'Evil Keevil'.



John Keevil taken in 1946 when he was 31, well medalled from his wartime experience.
Photo supplied by Michael Carden

As those who live alone so often are, he was a target for burglars so his house became more and more like a fortress. Burglary was one thing that made him seek help and I remember, early in

our friendship, when he appeared at the door late one evening. Asking to use the phone and wielding a long 19th century French bayonet in case he met the burglars on the way!

Although his experiences had left him somewhat bitter about milling (the reason I was unable to persuade him to join HMG) John had an abiding and extremely knowledgeable interest in mills and milling, and he would send me notes and talk eagerly on the subject as we jointly explored the possibilities of a mill at St Cross prior to the William of Wykeham mill downstream (see article in the Newsletter of 2007). Apart from milling he maintained a great interest in history, particularly in Winchester, and corresponded over the years with the City's curators and other experts about the many mysteries connected with buildings in the City and, whenever he found interesting stones following some demolition, he would bring them back to his garden.

His other great interest was this garden where, until the very last months of his life, he cultivated and took pride in his extensive vegetable crop, assisted by his black and white cat. His house has been bought by a family of 6 and I am sure this would give him pleasure because he told us, when we first moved in to the other half of the semi-detached pair, that it had been his hope to see a family established there again after many years of fleeting tenancies.

In his memory and on John Keevil's behalf I am donating to HMG his mill bill and a book called *Flower Milling*, by Peter A. Kozmin of the Polytechnic Institute in Petrograd (editor of *The Russian Miller*), translated from the Russian by M. Falkner and Theodor Fjelstrup, 1917. The preface opens with this explanatory sentence: *It is a singular fact that there is no serious modern work on flour milling in English.*

Here is a typical example of one of his notes. often accompanied by freehand diagrams, which I would receive from John, in answer to some query of mine.

Looking at it from head to tail, when the water wheel is shut down or under repair the waste hatches are opened to an alternative route to the lower level. The mill hatches shut the water out of the mill. Looking at it from across the stream I have tried to show by bevel gears how power reaches the mill stones. This of course varies according to the water power available – the size of the stream. These stones were dressed. In a mill with four stones, one was always being dressed by a man using a mill bill (I still have one).

If there is very limited water power available the river is impounded in a mill pond or pound. This may have been the case at St Cross where an early mediaeval mill could have produced flour during the day and a head of water to flush the toilets during the night. From late Victorian times the stone mills were slowly giving way to roller mills. The roller mill consists of a steel frame carrying four rolls of about 7 inches diameter, 40 feet long and four small feed rolls. The break rolls were fluted so that the lower, running slightly slower, held the grain while the upper cut it like a scissor. This then led to small smooth rolls, the grist having been sifted first by machines covered in different grades of steel mesh and eventually as it got finer to grades of silk mesh.

In 1935 Ranks were building a huge mill in Southampton docks where I got work in shifts (6-2, 2-10, 10-6). The only way to get there for the 6-2 was by push-bike, and the 2-10 and 10-6 by train from Winchester to the Dock Station until I was able to get a little BSA motor-bike in 1936 for £30. Then came the war: at 6am one Monday morning two high explosive bombs came down through the warehouse, and the mill was a fire bomb wreck! I had taken correspondence courses and passed my intermediate and final exams at Southampton University.

A few further explanations: as mills grew bigger and had more floors carrying the different types of machines it required a number of bucket elevators to take the grist from the bottom to the top for the next process: silks floor; purifier floor, roller floor, and as the flour passed through it was bleached in chlorine gas. In my time the flour was sacked up in 10 stone sacks, the bran and wheatings in 8 stone bags and a small amount of wheat germ, about 8 stone per shift (I do not know what it was used for). The whole process is now bulk handled right up to the bakehouse door.

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A great grandfather was William Lawes who sailed round the world twice (1835 & 1845). The Lawes came from Argyleshire.

John Keevil October 2009

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