

Men in the mill Trials and Tribulations overcome by a Miller (part 1)

by Mildred Cookson, The Mills Archive, UK



Milling journals of the past at The Mills Archive

“When the history of an established and prosperous firm is looked into you often find it not only started small but overcame many obstacles along its way to prosperity.” This is the opening sentiment of a Christmas present I was given this year: a small booklet entitled RJ Read Ltd City Flour Mills Norwich, 1875-1949.

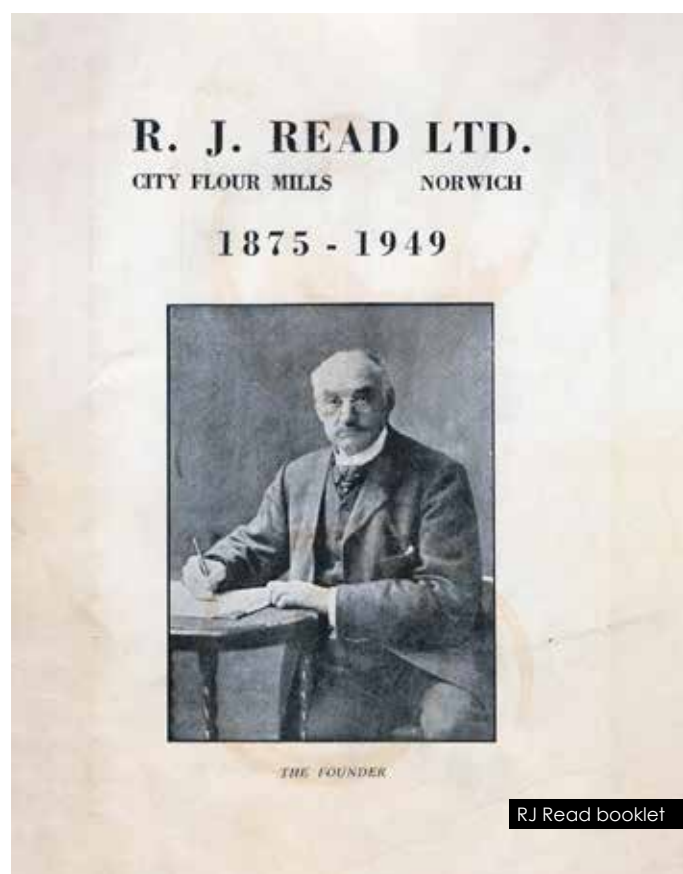
The booklet looked forward to the dawn of the second half of the 20th century, when private enterprise would be released from its war-time shackles. I thought the story of these early difficulties that led to a durable and steadily increasing business worth sharing, using highlights from our early milling journals.

I will cover the 20th century next month. In this article I will start at the beginning when Robert John Read was born at Wrentham in Suffolk on 5 November 1851. After his education at Halesworth Academy, he spent several years working in various flour mills. This experience was to stand him in good stead for the difficulties and disappointments he was yet to face.

Fire at the windmill in Beccles, Suffolk

Robert had his first set of problems when, in 1875, he bought his windmill in Beccles, Suffolk. The post mill, known as Ingate Mill was destroyed by fire in 1879 – as reported in *The Miller* (1 September 1879).

“The post mill in Ingate Street was wrenched in the storm



of Saturday 2nd August. Mr Finch, the occupier and his wife were standing at their chamber window, some 20ft. to the north-west of the mill, and saw the whole affair.

“The fly moved quite round and the mill was blown backwards: then a flash of lightning appeared to strike it, and the sails fell forward, followed quickly by the wind shaft, head and tail wheels, and the cap.

“The sails were completely splintered, and the pieces were blown about in all directions. The roof of the roundhouse was broken in by the falling timbers and several adjoining buildings were damaged.

“All the machinery that fell was more or less injured, while the head wheel was rendered quite useless. The mill indeed was a complete wreck.”

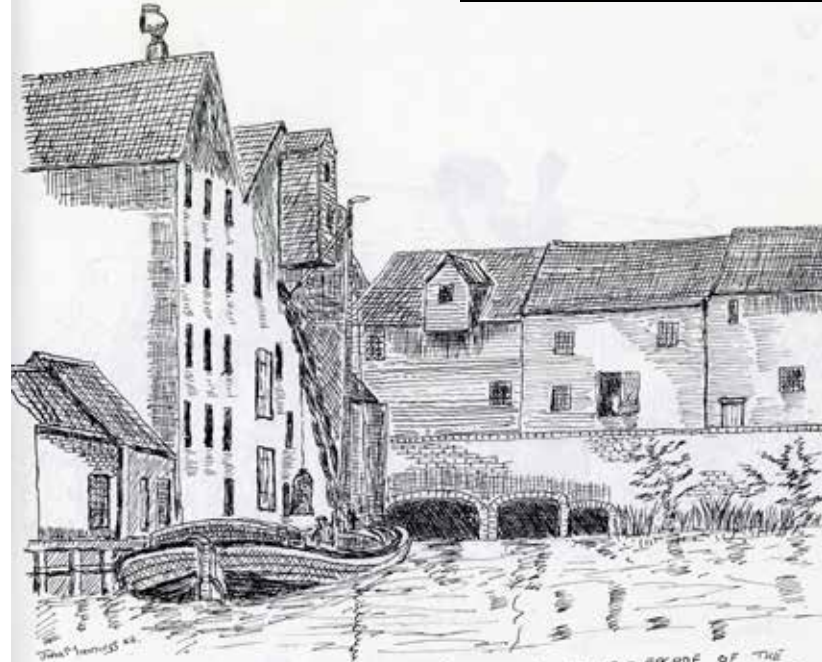
Undeterred by this and seeing the transition from millstone milling to roller milling taking place, after careful consideration, he decided to build a new mill, close to where the post mill stood.

He employed Whitmore and Binyon, millwrights from Wickham market, some 30 miles away, to erect his mill and install a four-sack roller plant. The new mill, a steam mill, was completed in 1884, with 5 stories and two 14hp and 8hp engines.

The mill was built adjacent to the roundhouse, which was all that survived after the fire of the post mill, and that was used as a granary and screening house for the steam mill.

By 1889, his business had increased so much that an extension to the mill became a necessity, but things did not go at all smoothly once again. During the great gale

St Swithins Mills early 20th century
(Mills Archive, MUNN-02-01-99)



THE OLD 'NEW MILLS' NORWICH, WITH THE PIKADE OF THE
ST SWITHINS MILL. LATER THE CITY FLOUR MILLS WITH STSWITHINS
WHARFE IN BETWEEN.

of March 1895 his mill chimney blew down and if that was not sufficient, the following year the mill was completely destroyed by fire, again reported in The Miller.

“On Sunday March 15th 1896 in the early morning Ingate Mills on the Ellough Road, about half a mile from Beccles, caught fire and were completely destroyed. The mill consisted of a main building of five stories, with a frontage of 50ft and depth of 35ft. Erected in 1884, an engine and boiler house, containing two boilers of recent construction and two engines, one of 14 and the other of 8 horse-power nominal. One of the engines was nearly new.

“Close by the mill stood a building known as the round house, consisting of the body of an old tower mill (MC note: this should be described as the brick building that enclosed the wooden trestle of the post mill). This was used as a granary and screening room. The top floor was used as a stive-room and was connected to the new mill by a shoot. A covered way allowed communication between the new mill and the roundhouse.

“About the premises were stables, piggeries and other outbuildings, including the house of the owner, Mr RJ Read. The fire was first noticed by a policeman at four in the morning. He at once went and alerted Mr Read, who in turn called the Fire Brigade. By the time the engines arrived, at 5:20am the fire had taken so firm a hold, that despite an adequate water supply from a pond, all the firemen could do was to hold off the fire from the house and outbuildings.

“The roundhouse top floor took fire and damage was done. The mill, boiler and engine house were completely destroyed, along with several tons of wheat, and 150 sacks of flour. The damage

is estimated at £7,000 to £8,000 (US\$7500 – US\$11,142), part of which would be covered by the Norwich Union and Westminster Fire Offices.

“The cause of the fire appeared to start in the stoke-hole. The mill had been shut down safely, only a fire, as usual, was left in the furnace, but the door had been properly closed and inspection of the ruins after the fire found the door still closed.”

Moving on to Norfolk

According to The Miller (6 April 1896) the Ingate site was sold to Elliott & Garrood, Ironworks, Beccles. Robert, however, was not to be put off by this setback. In 1896 he was offered St Swithins Flour Mills at Norwich, so he took up the challenge once again there.

The Mills Archive has two sketches of St Swithins Mills, one from much earlier in the 19th century. The artist, John Mullins (1916-1987) was the son of a miller and a nephew of his more famous uncle, the artist Sir Alfred Mullings (1978 – 1959).

When Read bought the mill it had a recently installed four-sack plant by Henry Simon of Manchester and later became known as The City Flour Mills. This story will be developed further in next month's edition of Milling & Grain magazine.



Mills
Archive

www.millsarchive.org

