

# WYMONDLEY MILLS and MILLERS

*by Noel Farris*

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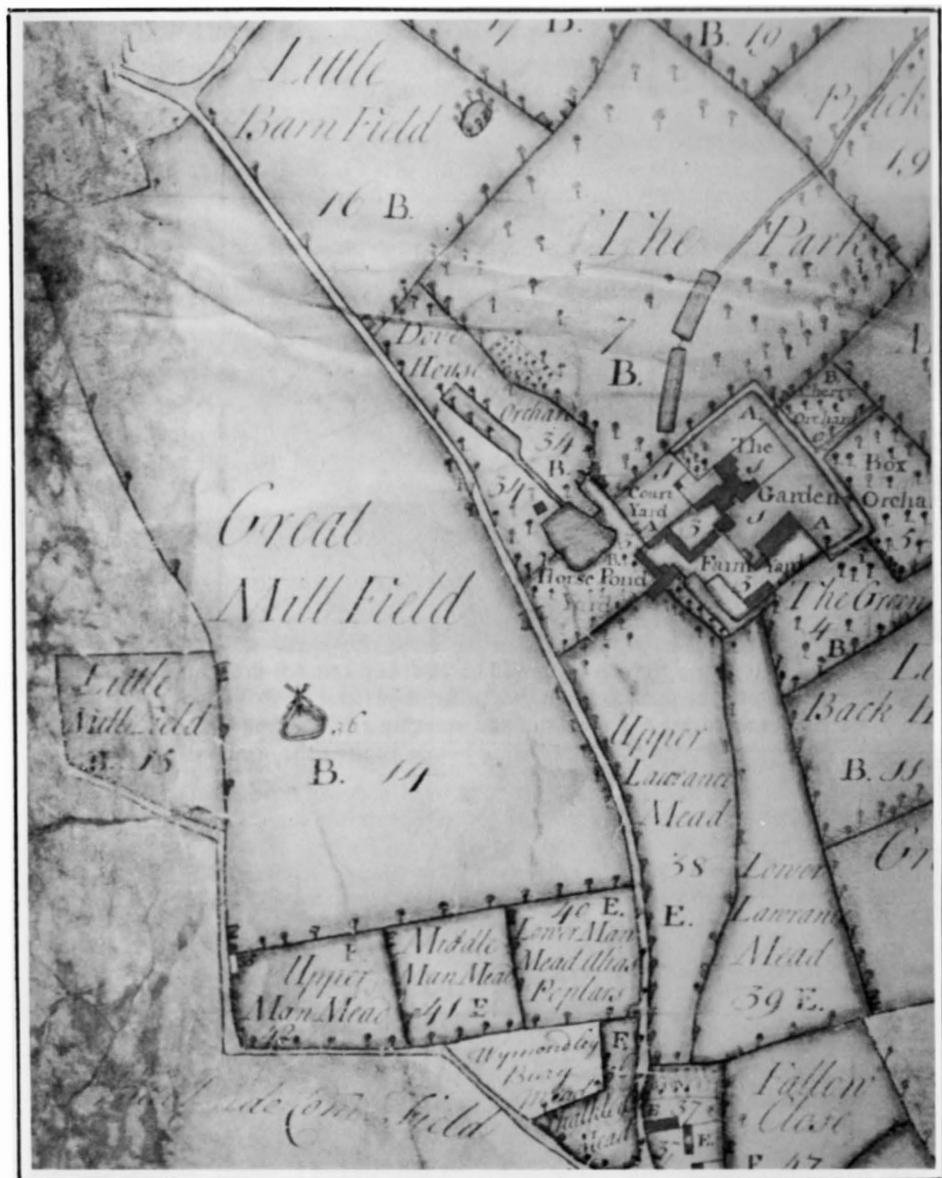
The first mention of a mill in Wymondley occurs in the Domesday Book in 1086 – there is one mill worth 20s – and this had probably been there before the Norman Conquest. It was of course a watermill as windmills did not occur in England until about a century later. The site of this mill is generally accepted as being on the river at Purwell as this is the place where the greatest amount of water is available within the boundaries of the manor of Wymondley. The remains of a 19th century successor to the early mill can still be seen at Purwell.

Sites of medieval windmills are not always so easy to determine. In the case of a watermill it was often necessary to build earthworks by a river to create a reservoir of water to drive the wheel and sometimes the course of the river was diverted. Such laborious and expensive processes resulted in the position of the mill being fixed in the same place, sometimes for many centuries. But early windmills were small and not great heavy structures and if circumstances required could be moved from one place to another.

The first mention of a windmill which has been found for Wymondley relates to one belonging to the Priory in the 13th century. A charter<sup>1</sup> of Richard de Argentine the lord of the manor, states “that he has granted to the bretheren of the Hospital of Wymondley (the Priory) a licence to build a mill for the use of their house, and this they have done. But he requires that if his men and their horses stay there for a day and a night and cannot use the mill, then no claim shall be made on him and free milling shall be allowed”. Richard died in 1246 and he had founded the Priory shortly before 1207, so that the Priory windmill must have been erected between those dates, and probably nearer to the earlier one.

The site of this windmill is not known certainly but can probably be inferred. Immediately to the west of the Priory is a large field called Millfield from the 13th century and it is still known by that name today. It formed part of the Priory lands and an estate map<sup>2</sup> of 1731 shows a drawing of a post mill on the western side of the field. The old lane, now partly a field path, passed by the side of the mill and was called “Cross the Mill Way”. The location of this mill, known precisely in 1731, is most likely the same as or very near to that of the Prior’s medieval mill. The position had a number of natural advantages – it was on high open ground on the edge of the Priory lands, on a road between the two villages of Great and Little Wymondley and nearly midway between them, and it was only a short distance from the Priory.

References to a windmill in the manor records do not make it clear whether they



*Part of the Little Wymondley Estate Map of 1731, showing windmill and priory. GR 216279. (By courtesy of Hertfordshire C.R.O.)*

relate to the Prior's mill or an entirely different one. The account roll of 1355<sup>3</sup> contains a reference to "our two mills at Wymondley" and a mill tithe of 1s 6d yearly had been paid since at least 1292' although no further details are given. Also there are payments from time to time, the earliest found is in 1322<sup>4</sup>, of a rent of 1s 6d paid to the Prior, but again without details. The reason why these payments were made is more confused because the tithes in Little Wymondley parish had been granted to the Priory at its foundation, but it appears to be possible that the mill tithe and the rent of 1s 6d may refer to the same payment as they have not both been found together in any one document. If this is the case, it seems to be likely that although the windmill at first belonged to the Prior, it was not long before it was transferred to the lord of the manor for an annual payment (rent or tithe) of 1s 6d, and became one of the two Wymondley mills of the manor records. This hypothesis may be supported by the fact that the terrier<sup>5</sup> of Priory property made at the suppression in 1537 does not mention a mill.

To return to the watermill at Purwell. We find that the manor paid an annual rent of 6d to the lord of Hitchin, presumably because parts of the river formed the boundary between the two manors. The account rolls<sup>6</sup> of the 13th and 14th centuries contain many references to cost of repairs to this mill and also the windmill, e.g.:

1280 Cost of piece of iron for a spindle for the watermill, 3d.

Work on the wheel of the watermill, 3s.

One old millstone for the same, 5s, and expenses of carting it from Biggleswade, 12d.

1282 Repairing the wheel at Purwell and the 'floodgates' there, 8d.

One old millstone for the watermill 6s 10d, and one for the windmill 7s 5d.

1317 Expenses of four men to fetch two millstones from Bedford 2s 2d.

Carpenter repairing the windmill and erecting a sailyard 6s 8d.

[a sailyard is one of the radiating beams bearing the windmill sails].

The impression given by these entries is that in doing repair work the bailiff of the manor tried to save on the cost of replacements by sometimes buying second-hand millstones, although these did not last long. Perhaps it was these false economies which resulted in the mill often being out of order as evidenced by a touch of exasperation in a case recorded in the manor court rolls:<sup>7</sup>

1303 Osbert the miller in mercy 3d, because he defamed the lord's mill, and Roger le Qyte 3d, for the same offence.

A change in the policy of buying second-hand millstones was operated by a later bailiff Thomas le Knyght, although the price of new ones was about three times as much:

1352 A millstone for the watermill 20s 11d.

1372 One millstone bought at Bedford 17s, and expense of three men, one cart and five horses taking the miller to Bedford 23d.

The expenses of transporting the heavy millstones over indifferent roads would have been the same whether the stones were new or old — about 2s from Bedford some twenty miles away, and 1s from Biggleswade, twelve miles. These towns would have been convenient places where imported stones could be brought by water along the Great Ouse and the River Ivel.

Repair work on the mills gives us some impression of their appearance in the 14th century:



*PURWELL MILL in about 1880, and in 1980. GR 204295. (Earlier photograph by courtesy of Hitchin museum.)*



1366 One thatcher to repair the watermill, 41d.

One carpenter repairing and erecting the windmill, 11s 4d,  
the ground round the post sunk as far as the bottom of the post, and the soil  
replaced and raised.

The watermill was apparently housed in a wooden building with a thatched roof. As to the windmill, the description of its erection after repair is of considerable interest. It shows that it was an early type of post mill, the base of the heavy upright mainpost was sunk deep into the ground and no doubt for greater stability was also supported by timber struts. The roof was thatched and the whole structure stood on an artificial mound. At this early date the mill probably had a fixed framework and could be used only when the wind was blowing in the right direction.

The tenants of the manor owed suit of mill, the obligation to have their corn ground at the lord's mill and give a part of it as payment to the lord. In addition, they had to give another part of it to the miller for doing the work, usually called *tolcorn* in this manor. If they took their corn elsewhere they were liable to a fine, but they could pay for a licence to allow them to use another mill as appears in the court rolls:

1303 William le Man paid 3d for a licence to be relieved of suit of mill .

1359 William le Carter has not ground his corn at the lord's mill as he should have done – in mercy 2d .

Millers were generally unpopular as a class, being frequently accused of sharp practice. There were many disputes about the amount of grain or flour taken as payment for milling and no doubt the millers would have been watched carefully for any infringements or other wrongdoing and reported to the manor court:<sup>10</sup>

1291 Walter Dinsley complains against William Tox the miller of the windmill, and his wife, that they took excessive *tolcorn* at the lord's mill – in mercy, 6d

Also the same William for wrongly taking corn from the field – 3d

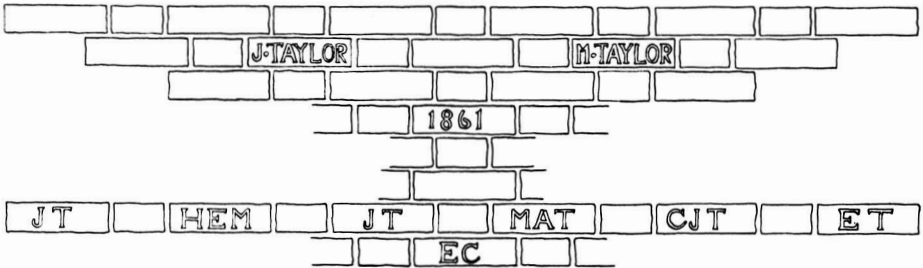
The cost of repairing the watermill and of trying to ensure that it was run for a profit, must have been a constant problem for the bailiff of the manor. In 1360/61 only three quarters of corn were ground at the mill and it was unused for most of the year owing to the death of the miller and deficiency of water – records show that it was a drought year. Expenses during the next few years were heavy, and evasions of the suit of mill system were probably increasing. In 1410 the demesne farm of the manor was leased to a tenant and at this time there was growing emphasis on a change to money rents in place of the system of services and payments in kind.

The account rolls for the first half of the 15th century have not survived, but an unusual case in the court rolls<sup>11</sup> in that period may indicate that the manor had not yet given up direct control of the watermill:

1430 The "lord's melleere" at Purwell Mill stole a sheep valued at 2s from an unknown man and ate it.

The next available account roll<sup>12</sup> is dated 1470 and shows that the bailiff had been relieved of one of his problems as the watermill was leased out to a tenant. John Millere of Hitchin was now paying the lord 40s for the farm of the mill. The rentals from 1576 to 1727 show the wealthy Pulter and Forester families as copyholders and paying a quit rent of £2 yearly for the mill. In 1728 William Malein, a miller who also owned a windmill at nearby Walsworth, bought the mill and in his will<sup>13</sup> dated 1775 he devised "my messuage and the watermill adjoining, called

Purwell Mill, which I now occupy, to my son John". The Malein family continued to own the mill until 1804 when it was sold to a miller with the imposing name of James Dupin Nash. He was followed by William Nash his son in 1841 and in about the year 1853 by John Taylor who was described as a farmer and miller. A few years later Taylor suffered a misfortune when a disastrous fire burnt down the old wooden mill premises although the miller's house survived. Rebuilding took place soon



afterwards and the initials, said to be of six members of the Taylor family, with the date 1861, may be seen inscribed on bricks at the back of the mill. Some 20 years later James Womwell was the miller and he was succeeded in about 1894 by Albert Flitton and then by the last of the Purwell millers Reginald Flint in 1919.

History repeated itself in the drought year of 1921, when as in 1361 there was insufficient water to drive the mill. But this time a steam engine was available to keep the millstones turning. In 1924 the mill finally ceased to operate and the great iron wheel, which was said to be ten feet in diameter and to weigh ten tons, had turned for the last time. During the next 50 years the building was used for storage of corn and general purposes until the time it was converted into a private residence.

Much of the miller's house which adjoins the mill, was rebuilt with additions probably in the early years of the 19th century. In the various parts of the house there are floors at fourteen different levels, some apparently due to the incorporation into the present house of parts of earlier buildings. Some old brickwork may still be seen together with the remains of a large central chimney thought to be of the 16th century.

There remains the question as to how long the windmill near the Priory survived. As we have seen, it appears on the Priory estate map of 1731 and after that there is a reference to the Mill House in the baptism register of Little Wymondley church in 1754. But the windmill is not shown on the Dury and Andrews maps of Hertfordshire in 1766 or 1782 and in the absence of further evidence it seems likely that it disappeared about 1760.

### References

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|------------------|-------------|-------------------|-----------|
| 1. B.M. Add.M.S. | 43972       | 7.8. Herts C.R.O. | 57845     |
| 2. Herts C.R.O.  | 44215       | 9. Herts C.R.O.   | 57492     |
| 3. Herts C.R.O.  | 57530       | 10. Herts C.R.O.  | 57845     |
| 4. Herts C.R.O.  | 57543       | 11. Herts C.R.O.  | 57499     |
| 5. B.M. Add.M.S. | 44867       | 12. Herts C.R.O.  | 57537     |
| 6. Herts C.R.O.  | 57520-57538 | 13. Herts C.R.O.  | D/EBL T20 |