



MILL BITS

The Newsletter of the CRANBROOK WINDMILL ASSOCIATION

October 2021

Chairman: Nick Vinall, Secretary: Hazel Jobson, Treasurer: Peter Bourne

AGM Sunday 28 November, 3pm, Russell Building.

This will be a “live” meeting with members, not just images on a screen. Hazel will be stepping down as the Association Secretary at the AGM and we have lost Denis from the Committee since the last time we met in real life. We therefore need 2/3 members to stand for election so please consider whether you would like to join the committee. Please do attend the AGM but let Hazel know so that we have an indication of the numbers and can ensure that we have the necessary Covid protection measures in place. Ring her on 01580-712246 or email hazel.jobson@btinternet.com



Tea & cakes will be served as usual >>

Bugle Call – Friday 13th August

A crowd of about 60 members, friends, and neighbours gathered on a cool afternoon and at 3pm were greeted by our chairman, speaking very clearly through a megaphone. Nick gave the assembled company a brief description of the early history of the Union Mill and related the story of how, when the construction of the mill was completed in 1814 by the millwright, James Humphrey, his nephew stood on top of the cap and played a trumpet. Max Chesters (picture right), who lives on the Hill, opposite the mill, then gave us a very competent short fanfare by the French baroque composer Charpentier and was warmly applauded.



<<Nick Vinall (right) with megaphone; Max Chesters (centre) with trumpet; watched over by Redec site manager, Les Roberts (left)

After an encore from Max on his trumpet, the onlookers were offered drinks and about 45 glasses were consumed, including six bottles of bubbly.

The proceedings were recorded for posterity by an overhead drone, courtesy of Darryl Ratchford of HawkEye Aerial Media of Maidstone, although his brother was standing in for him on this occasion. For those who like to know the technical details, the drone was a DJI Mavic 2, retailing at around £765 (see below). Christmas present, perhaps?



Progress to date

During the following week in August, the scaffolding around the smock was removed, giving access to the staging. Redec, the company responsible for painting and repairs to the smock, decided to add a wedge-shaped top to the windows (photo below left) so that rain ran off the top, not back towards the weather-boarding as before. Rotten window sills and all the slats on the staging have been replaced with oak, which had to be imported from south west France, which caused a delay. The staging metalwork was cleaned and repainted and the chicken wire replaced and then the lower scaffolding was finally removed. The brick base had to be repaired in several places and then repainted with special paint from Spain – another cause of delay. It remains for the sweeps, fantail, etc, to be re-fitted by the Suffolk millwrights. The whole renovation of the mill was scheduled to be completed by mid-October - alas, too late to open to the public - but, we are hopeful that the mill will be restored to full working order 'in the coming weeks'.



Finished Window



Fantail staging



Staging completed

Tim Whiting and his Suffolk Millwrights



A recent major project taken on by Tim's team of millwrights was the restoration of Saxtead Green Mill (above right, minus shutters) near Framlingham in East Suffolk. The mill is owned by English Heritage and you can read more about Tim and his team on his website: <https://suffolkmillwright.co.uk/>

Tim's workshop in Woodbridge, Suffolk

Here are a couple of photos of parts of our sweeps being prepared earlier this year.



<< Stocks

Whips being painted >>



Meanwhile Inside the mill at Cranbrook :

The ghosts of the Russell millers are sleeping, waiting to be awakened when the sweeps and fantail are installed.



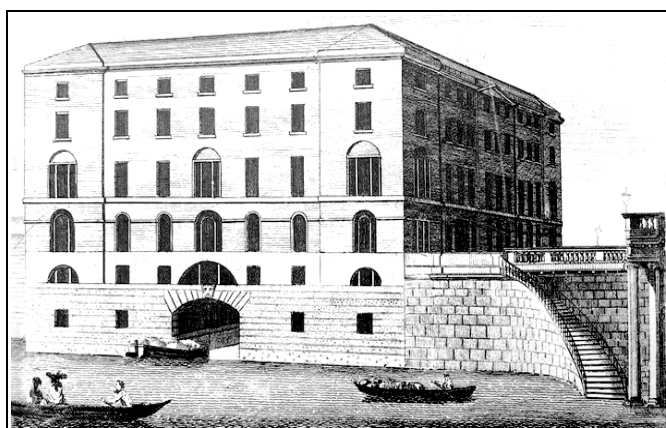
UNION MILL, A BLACK AND WHITE ELEPHANT?

by Peter Bourne

Regarded by many as the finest surviving windmill in the Country, was the construction of Union Windmill, in 1814, all a big mistake?

By the early part of the C19th the Industrial Revolution was in full swing. Not only was wind and water power being superseded by the use of steam engines, but also production of all forms was moving from rural workshops to purpose-built city “factories”.

At the forefront of the revolution were Steam Mills, with the pioneering partnership of Boulton & Watt already having built 396 steam engines by 1800, 308 of these were powering milling machinery! Included in the total were three 50hp engines for “Albion Flour Mills” Southwark, which were used to power 20 pairs on millstones, the winnowers and flour dressers! Opened in 1786, it is said that at its peak it was producing profitably enough flour to feed 150,000 people!



Albion Flour Mills, Southwark, 1786



Sadly, on 1st April 1791, disaster occurred!

In Cranbrook, Mary Dobell, may have been unfortunate in the timing of her milling enterprise, coinciding with the ending of the Napoleonic Wars and the resulting national economic recession, which led to her bankruptcy in 1819. However, there is little evidence that the continuing use of wind power produced a profit for any of the subsequent owners of Union Mill. In fact, it became the proverbial “millstone around the neck” for most of them.

The first reference to the use of steam power at Union Mill was in the 1860's, when John Russell (1797-1875) raised concerns that despite the ‘modernising’ carried out in the 1840's (Cubitts Patent Sweeps replacing the Common Sails and the addition of a Fantail) the business was not proving a financial success. John considered that he needed auxiliary power to enable him to continue working when the wind had dropped and so, in 1863, he installed a 10hp Beam steam engine to drive three pairs of stones on the first floor of the mill.

From that point on, the business relied upon auxiliary power to maintain production, not only on windless days, but also on a day-to-day basis. Despite this, **the commercial grinding of flour was still proving unprofitable**, due in part to the competition from more efficient roller mills and, increasingly stringent health regulations. Compliance with these entailed expensive alterations to the mill. Flour production, therefore, ceased completely in 1871 and the business survived on grist milling, producing animal feeds for the outlying farms.

This situation continued until 1918 when John Russell (1888-1958) became involved in the family business, and found the windmill was in a parlous state. He devoted the next 40 years working to restore and maintain it in good condition. In 1935 he was nationally recognised when he was awarded the first **Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings' Certificate** "*as a record of their appreciation of his zeal in the maintenance of this beautiful structure.*" This was little consolation for the Russell family, who blamed the fact that there were never any dividends paid by the Company from the profitable (auxiliary powered) animal feed side of the business. This was because all the money was used to repair the windmill !



Due to ill health in the last few years of his life, John was no longer able to maintain the Mill, and once again it was in need of major attention. Fortunately, by now the Mill had been identified as a building of exceptional historic interest



and National importance, being the first Windmill to receive Grade 1 listed status. As we know it subsequently passed into the hands of the Kent County Council, who with support from our local Community, have maintained the Windmill and welcomed over 138,000 Visitors, including generations of School Children.

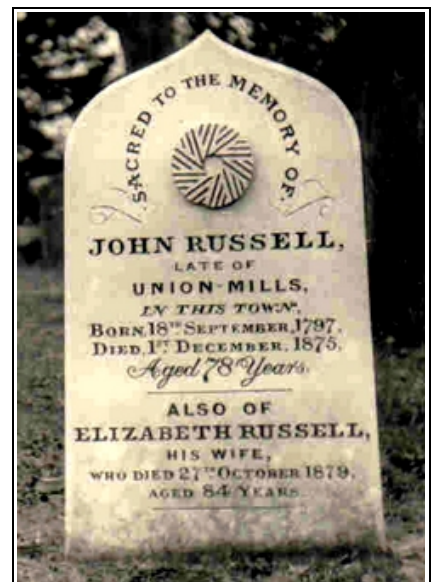
At last, we can say that Union Mill is no longer a White Elephant, it is an asset of the Community and of the Nation, from which we all profit.

What the Papers Said

Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald, 18 Dec 1875

CRANBROOK - DEATH of an OLD INHABITANT - We regret to announce the death of Mr. John Russell, miller of this town, which took place on Wednesday, December 1st in the 78th year of his age. Deceased held formerly the Dicker Mill, Chiddingly, Sussex. In 1832 he took the Union Mills in this town in partnership with his brother, Mr. George Russell, and they carried on the business together for 29 years**. Since then, deceased and his only son, Mr. Ebenezer Russell, have held the concern. The late Mr. Russell gained the esteem of all who knew him.

*** The partnership between the brothers was officially dissolved in February 1861, although George moved to Furnace Mill in Hawkhurst in 1850.*



Final Bits

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