

# SOME GLIMPSES INTO THE LIFE OF THE MILLER



## A VISION OF RURAL ENGLAND

The miller stands at the door of his mill engaged in conversation with a ruddy faced farmer who has just brought a cart load of feed to be ground for his pigs. The white sails of the windmill whirl above in the sunshine whilst inside the mill shafts of light illuminate the dust in the air and the steady rumble of the stones proclaims the mill to be at work. All is industry and contentment; a vision of rural England. But is this really what it was like? Did every mill have a jolly miller? Was trade always good? A glance through the archives reveals disasters, storms, theft, bankruptcy, riots, explosions, suicide.

## FOOLISH YOUTH

'A fatal accident happened on Thursday the 1st., to a youth named James Crampton, in the employ of Mr Oldham, miller, Newark. He was told by his master to go down into the roundhouse, but instead of descending the stairs he walked upon the platform erected for adjusting the sails and proceeded to jump down, when one of the sails struck him upon the head. He died shortly afterwards.'

(Stamford Mercury 9.6.1854)

## THE GREAT STORM?

*Sir,*

*In answer to the letter you sent me, relating to the Great Wind, the Calamity was Universal about us, great numbers of vast tall trees were blown down, and some broken quite asunder in the middle, tho' of a very considerable bigness. Two windmills were blown down, and in one there happened a remarkable Providence, and a story thereof may, perhaps, be worth your observation, which is: That the miller of Charlwood Mill, not far from Reigate, hearing in the night the wind blew very hard, arose from his bed and went to his mill, resolving to turn it toward the wind and set it to work, as the only means to preserve its standing; but on the way feeling for the key to the mill he found he had left it at his dwelling house, and therefor returned thither to fetch it, and on coming back to the mill, found it blown quite down, and by his lucky forgetfulness probably saved his life'. (18<sup>th</sup> February 1661)*

## THUNDERSTRUCK

When the miller of Burton, John Haggassman, was killed by a thunderbolt in 1579, there were many, no doubt, who regarded the incident as an act of divine retribution.

## OUT OF THE ORDINARY

*An unknown clerk, writing in 1797, was so overcome by the novelty of recording the burial of an honest miller, William Lightbound, in Neston Parish Register, that he departed from the normal practice of recording the bare details of name, date, cause of death and occupation to add: "For once an honest miller - and not only an honest miller but allowed (i.e. generally acknowledged) to be so."*

## IT'S ALL GRIST TO THE MILL

The stone towers of old windmills are still dotted across Europe. Although they are a reminder of a simpler age, windmills were complex machines that required a great deal of skill. The miller was consequently an important and respected member of the community. Farmers who had spent much of a year growing and harvesting their crop relied on the miller to turn their efforts into flour so that they could feed their families.

The miller's task was to make sure the stones turned at a steady speed. Too slowly and the grain would pile up, too quickly and it would overheat and spoil. It was most important to ensure that the hopper remained topped up with grain, for if there was no grist on the mill, the stones would spark and the whole mill could catch light.

The **grist** is the blend of different wheats a miller selects to make flour. Most flours are made from a mixture of wheats.

## FANCY A JOB?

### VACANCY AT KIRTON MILL!

We are looking for a **General Assistant** to help Mervin in all aspects of milling and baking. Must be **keen** to learn all aspects of working in a traditional windmill. Must be **fit**. Will be trained in the workings of the windmill and will assist the miller/baker – this will include lifting wheat bags weighing up to 50kg, milling, cleaning, bagging the flour. Will also be expected to help in the bakery as well as general site maintenance and other duties as required.

National Minimum Wage during training period - no previous experience necessary - full training will be given - permanent job.

40 hours a week – 9.00 am 5.30 pm – Tuesday to Saturday –

Must be **flexible** regarding working hours as milling takes place when the wind is blowing hard – difficult to plan in advance!

[[www.trueloafbakery.co.uk](http://www.trueloafbakery.co.uk)]

## PERKS OF THE JOB

*It is a curious fact that today, when no-one in this country depends on wind or water-driven mills for his or her daily bread, everyone loves a mill; in the days when all grain was ground in the local mills they were for long regarded as symbols of exploitation and theft.*

*Exploitation because the mills were usually owned by the Lords of the Manor who exercised a monopoly over the grinding of corn, and it was serious offence for any unauthorised person to grind his own.*

*Theft, because millers were notorious for their dishonesty. It was the custom for millers to take their payment in kind from the grain they were grinding and, as Chaucer observed in the fourteenth century*

A rumbustious cheat of sixteen stone  
Big in brawn, and big in bone,  
He was a master hand at stealing grain  
And often took three times his due  
Because by feeling with his thumb,  
He knew its quality.  
By God! To think it went by rote,  
A golden thumb to judge an oat!  
(Chaucer)

## WORKING FROM HOME

Just across a small garden is the miller's cottage, built low so that the wind is not prevented from

reaching the mill sails. After long periods of calm weather, with grain waiting to be ground, the miller has had to work non-stop several nights and days. This made it necessary for his home to be near his work, meals often being consumed in the mill.

The miller had to swing several tons (tonne's) of building and its machinery around the centre pole to face the sails to the wind, this was quite hard work even for the best built miller, some millers of a slighter build used to keep a donkey to help with this task others even went a stage further and fitted up a form of winching mechanism while others would enlist the help of other family members.

## **A NOVEL IDEA**

*In the 1870s and 1880s Juliana Horatia Ewing was among Britain's most popular children's writers. Although she died when she was just forty-three, Mrs Ewing produced a diverse range of charming and intriguing juvenile literature. Her poems, fairytales, stories, novellas and three-deckers appealed to boys, girls and adults..... projects on the army base at Aldershot, where the Major was posted in 1869, wrote three longer works that follow protagonists from childhood to adulthood – A Flat-Iron for a Farthing (1872), Six to Sixteen (1875), Jan of the Windmill (1876).*