



COBHAM MILL PRESERVATION TRUST

NEWSLETTER ~ SPRING 2017

Open Days during 2016

Once again, our Open Days proved popular, although overall, donations and takings from the sales table were slightly down in comparison to 2015. We were of course competing with the celebration of the Queen's birthday in June and with the rain on Heritage Day. However, we were particularly pleased to see so many families, some recently moved to the area, bringing their children and showing much interest. There were also some keen bakers, many of whom stocked up with Mill flour.

We continued to have support from the AGA shop on the Portsmouth Road, with Natalie, one of the sales advisors, regularly baking a loaf for Open Days. She uses half ordinary brown flour and half Mill flour and the resultant bread, served with butter and jam, has proved popular with our visitors.

Mill flour.

A small infestation of our flour was detected mid-season, but, as luck would have it, on a day when one of our visitors was a specialist working with Rentokil. She took away a sample and identified that in some of the flour there was a harmless type of moth. Since then, three full sample bags of flour from our last milling in October have been checked and pronounced to be quite clear of any further infestation.

School parties.

We were very pleased to welcome two groups of children from Cobham Free School, two large parties from St Andrew's School in Cobham and a small group of older pupils from a school in Wimbledon. We were impressed with the interest shown by the younger children in particular. One very young pupil said he now wanted to become a miller when he had completed his education.

Welcome to Maggie Bowen as a Director of the Mill.

Maggie has been a staunch supporter of the Mill for many years. As a guide, she has been much appreciated for her ability to relate to the younger children who visit the mill, ensuring that they benefit from their time spent there. Since Maggie has now retired from teaching, she has agreed to join the Board. We hope to continue to benefit from her energy and experience.

In Memorium

John Ball. John died in February. He was instrumental in the founding of the Cobham Mill Preservation Trust and had a substantial role in the tricky work of restoring the mill as a working watermill open to the public. As a civil engineer, he brought to the project his knowledge and experience and used his many contacts for the benefit of the Trust. His enthusiasm continued long after the Trust was up and running. He was a member of the Board from its inception, with many years spent as Chairman, and retiring as a Director only in July 2014. He will be remembered not only for his prodigious knowledge of Cobham Mill, but also for his wisdom, charm, and modesty.

Frank Haines. For many years Frank and Margaret Haines have been stalwart volunteers at the Mill. They were not only regular volunteers for open days, but could always be relied on to help with group visits at other times. Frank was invariably cheerful and engaged our young visitors such that they always wanted to know more. However, he had mentioned at the close of the 2015 season that he was tiring much more readily and in 2016, he withdrew from being a guide as a result of failing health. He died last July. Frank will be much missed but we hope that Margaret will be able to continue to help running the sales table.

Important Development

In our Spring 2016 newsletter we reported that current owners of the mill (the Environment Agency) from whom Cobham Mill Preservation Trust (CMPT) lease the mill, wished to reduce its portfolio of properties. A letter from the EA's Estates Officer, South East, advised us that it was currently reviewing its ownership of the mill, and that it was likely that it will look to selling the building and its adjoining land. We were further advised that, as part of the process, a valuation of the property, including the mill buildings, was probable and that such valuation would take into account the Trust's on-going tenancy and the condition of the building.

During the course of last year, discussions were held with the EA representatives and letters exchanged. The current position can be summarised as follows :-

The CMPT has been offered the Mill, the land on which it stands, the weirs and a portion of the land beyond the weirs (referred to as 'the landscaped area') that is currently owned by the Environment Agency, at nil cost. However, this comes along with a requirement that the CMPT shall undertake full ownership and responsibility for both the land and the 24/7 maintenance and operation of the weirs.

Our basic response has been that the Trust could possibly take on the ownership of the mill and the land on which it stands, but it is not in a position to take over the 24/7 responsibility of the ownership, maintenance and operation of the weirs. We have heard nothing further since last summer, despite seeking periodic updates.

The Landscaped Area

Following the floods of 2013/14, the Environment Agency undertook the restoration of the spillway to its original condition and the re-landscaping and re-seeding of the adjacent area. This was partially completed during 2015. Notably, the re-landscaping included the parcel of land outside the area owned by the EA. We were advised that, to enable the re-seeded area to become properly established, it would be best to keep the access gate locked for the time being.

Since then the EA has introduced a new set of steps into the river, with adjacent new and padlocked gate, close by the entrance to the fish ladder. The fish ladder has also been modified to better control the flow, though further fine-tuning will probably be necessary. Also, a new (and in our view, unnecessary) gate was installed at the far end of the furthest bridge. Additionally, the EA has advised us that it plans to amend and improve the steps to the footway over the main weirs, but in the light of its current financial situation it seems unlikely that this will happen in the near future.

Structural Repairs

As was reported in the Spring 2016 newsletter, a specialist company, on behalf of the Environment Agency, carried out a full and structural survey of the mill. Its report, which was extraordinarily thorough and detailed, ran to more than 20 pages. Apart from minor defects, which to a great extent might reasonably be expected in a building nearly 200 years old, there were some structural actions that the survey strongly recommended should be carried out in the short term.

This work commenced last March. It required the installation of scaffolding around three sides of the building to enable the repointing of some areas of brickwork, more readily to enable the replacement of broken, cracked or missing roof tiles, and to repair the guttering.

Unfortunately, the contractors were not aware that a lime mortar containing a proportion of grit should be used for the repointing work and instead a modern mortar mix was used at the outset. Luckily we were able to have the work stopped before too much damage had been done and the incorrect mortar was ultimately removed.

Work was also held up for a time following the discovery of what was believed by the workmen to be a wasp or hornets nest in the roof. A specialist was called in who quickly confirmed that there was no nest, and that the insects concerned were a type of small and harmless bee enjoying the warm roof tiles.

Thankfully, the remainder of the repointing work was completed without too much disturbance, though it is currently more visible than desired. We are hopeful that, given time, this will become less noticeable. Overall and primarily from a visual point of view, we were grateful that the old original cast iron guttering could be re-used and that the intended fitting of new and extra (probably plastic), guttering along both sides of the entrance passageway seems quietly to have been forgotten. The replacement roof tiles are generally considered to be a good match with the originals.

Mill maintenance.

At the time of going to press we should be well on the way with the reassembly of the milling machinery following our usual winter maintenance programme. There will of course be the necessity to replace some of the waterwheel paddles and to ensure that the flow through the leat is not impaired by the usual root growth from the adjacent willow tree. Also there will be plenty of local tidying up to do around the and about the mill before our first open day on Sunday 9th April. (Any assistance will be gratefully received!)

Sack hoist drive belt and ropes

Having survived for well over 20 years, including being partially submerged in floodwater on numerous occasions during winter periods, the drive belt finally gave up the ghost in the middle of last summer. A very helpful supplier of suitable replacement belts was located in Buxton, Derbyshire, and a discount for being a charity was applied. Despite this we found it surprisingly expensive at around £600.

At the same time as the belt drive was replaced, new control ropes were fitted to replace the old ones; also over two decades old and well passed their prime. By comparison, this was a cheap and simple task.

Improved Lighting

Already installed before the April open day last year were new and more up-to-date double-sealed pit area strip lights. These were introduced following the mill survey on 'health and safety' grounds and enabled some of the older strip lights to be reused in the entrance passageway, giving much improved lighting in this area.

Our Volunteers.

Our team of volunteers has continued to organise and run the open days and weekday visits of other interested groups. However, as previously mentioned, we lost Frank Haines in July and several other volunteers have told us that, for various reasons, they now feel unable to participate as much as they would like. If you feel that you may be able to help on these occasions, please get in touch.

And finally

My thanks go to all our hard working volunteers and also to all Cobham Millers for their continued support. If you know of anyone who would like to join our volunteers in maintaining the Mill, or who might be able to assist in any way, please do ask them to get in touch. Our contact details are shown below.

Richard Ward,
Chairman

Board members: Maggie Bowen; Ray Brodrick; Bob Cummings;
Noel Ingram; Nita Rodd; David Taylor;
Patricia Ward; Richard Ward.

Telephone: 01932 867387 (please leave a message).

Postal address: Cobham Mill, Mill Road, Cobham, KT11 3A

Email address: info@cobhammill.org.uk

Website: www.cobhammill.org.uk