

Mills and Milling

Introduction

There were two water-powered grist (corn) mills at Weycroft (in Axminster parish, a mile or so north of the town) when the Domesday Book was compiled in 1086. So when Weycroft Mill was taken out of commission in 1977 it had been in existence for about 900 years, possibly longer.

The Domesday Book also records grist mills at Smallridge and Undercleave (in Axminster parish), and others in Membury and Kilmington.

Over time the mill at Weycroft became the main local mill, serving farms from all over the adjoining area. Even today it is possible to see how roads, lanes and tracks converge on the mill from all directions.

Subsequently further water-powered mills were established at Millbrook and in Axminster itself, close to the foot of Castle Hill.

An article in 'Devon & Cornwall Notes & Queries' (Summer 1974, Vol XXXIII Part II pages 51 to 52) about water mills in East Devon gives some information from the 16th to 18th centuries, including the following:

- In 1533 there was a lease between Richard Gylle, Abbot of Newenham, and James Nott and R and T Wyvell for two water grist mills.
- In 1537 Richard Gylle leased the mills to William Ackyn.
- Late in the 16th century an unauthorised tenant was expelled from a corn mill.
- Leases from 1637 and 1659 (before and after the Civil War) show W Clarke and W Aninge in possession of the grist mills.
- In 1663 Sir W Petre purchased a grist mill and fulling mill from John Venning for £5,000 (an immense sum in those days).
- In 1676 Samuel Clock was the miller at Lord Petre's mill.
- In 1765 and 1770 J Anning paid rent to Lord Petre for use of the Town Mill.
- In 1780 H Scott was Lord Petre's tenant.

Weycroft Mill after 1838

In 1838 William Adams was the miller at Weycroft, and he also farmed some of the adjacent land. Then in the late 1860s Henry Morrish, a master miller, bought the mill, and lived there with his growing family. His son George Henry Morrish, who later took over the business, was born there in 1868.

In 1885 the water wheel and the old flat, circular grindstones were taken out, and replaced by two turbines and more modern roller mills. At the same time additional equipment was installed in a new brick-built extension. In 1911 wheat cleaning machinery and storage silos were added.

By the 1920s the mill employed about 20 men, raw materials were brought in via Axminster Station, and deliveries of flour and animal feed were made over a 10-mile radius, using horse power. The mill used to run 24 hours a day, 6 days a week, and on Sundays the by-

pass sluice was fitted with an eel trap. In 1925 George Henry Morrish invested in a steam-powered lorry, which significantly expanded the radius over which deliveries could be made. Then during the 1930s a petrol-powered lorry was brought in, and most of the horses were laid off. In the Axminster Heritage Centre there are two detailed models which show the mill at this time, with the steam lorry in the yard. The smaller of the two models (1:100 scale) shows the whole mill complex, while the main model (at 1:12 scale) concentrates on the main mill building.

In 1941 a 60HP diesel engine was installed at Weycroft, reportedly the largest such piece of equipment yet in Axminster.

George Henry Morrish died in 1951, and the business was bought by Bakers of Colyton. The Morrish family continued to run the mill, but in the face of stiff competition from much larger mills, the throughput declined. After some further technical changes production ceased altogether in 1977. The buildings were converted for residential use in the 1990s.

There is a lot more very detailed information on both the mill itself and the model, in a booklet written by David Rowe, who also made the main (1:12 scale) model. The booklet provides a very detailed account of the layout and operation of the mill.

The mill and weir at Weycroft in the 1950s

We are indebted to local author and poet D J Sturch for permission to reproduce here his poem recalling the mill and its leat in the 1950s.

*H. Morrish & Son
(Weycroft Roller Mill, Axminster, Devon)*

*At Weycroft bridge there's a walk to the weir
Where the Axe trips over stone built tiers
To feed a leat that crossed the field
Providing the power for an undershot wheel
That disappeared through the iron grill
To the very heart of Morrish's mill.*

*The constant rotation of wooden paddles
Slapped the water as they travelled,
Driving stones that milled the grain
Turned the gears of flights and chains.
Powering fly-wheels, belts and augers,
Blending feeds to farmers' orders.
And clouds of dust from windows billowed
Where wheat and barley grains were winnowed.*

*Grumbling mill stones, turned and rumbled,
Crushed and ground the grains that tumbled.
Some for feeds and some to be stacked
In giant 'West of England' sacks
To load a lorry parked below
In livery of red and a name that glowed.
Gold printed words I remember still.
H. Morrish & Son, of Weycroft Mill.*

Millbrook

Millbrook started life as a grist mill, but was later converted to operate as a water-powered sawmill. In 1844 the miller was Edward Bussell, and he remained until at least 1866. Later the mill was taken over by the Heal family (who were probably the ones to convert it to a sawmill). They remained at Millbrook until at least the late 1890s.

Town Mill

The Town Mill (which, as noted above, operated as a fulling mill as well as a grist mill) was operated by Mr Dean in 1844. By then the Town Weir had been built, improving the control of the flow of water through the mill.

It is likely that the mill then referred to as Castle Mill in 1866 (when Mr Phillips was the occupant) is in fact the same mill. By 1878 the reference was again to the Town Mill (then occupied by James Boon, who had moved his business to Axminster from a textile mill in Uplyme), as it was from 1890 to 1906 when it was occupied by William Smyth, who also had a retail shop business in the town.