

THE MILLS OF CROSCOMBE

The small village of Croscombe is situated on the A371 in the valley of the River Sheppey, two miles from Shepton Mallet and four miles from Wells. The river has had a great influence on the village over the years and in the first half of the 19th century there were seven mills powered by the river. These comprised two Grist Mills (the top mill, and one opposite the market cross), one Hosiery Mill (in the centre of the village), three Clothing Mills (one at the Wells end of the village and two at the far end) and one Silk Mill.

The Top Mill

The top mill on Shepton Street was built towards the end of the 18th century and early 19th century. It stands on a site of industrial antiquity by the Skew Bridge which dates back to mediaeval times. The Gould family owned the mill at the turn of the 19th century and then the Croscombe and Radstock Milling Company took over with Mr Maloney in charge. The mill was powered by a massive iron breast wheel which was fed from the pond stretching back upstream. Mr Bert White worked for the company for 33 years, the last 17 of which he was the manager. Work at the mill was somewhat irregular but during busy times two extra men were needed. Eventually the huge wheel was removed and a water turbine was put in its place. This worked more effectively but used up more water in the process. It took two hours for the mill pond to refill and then for an hour the millstones could be powered to grind imported barley, wheat, oats and rye into cattle feed. The cereals were winched up to the top floor, ground on the middle floor and bagged down below. The mill race outlet poured into the stream opposite Millstream Cottage. The lower of the split levels of the river gave a greater head of water at the mill itself. Trade declined rapidly in the post war years and in 1951 Mr Bert White gave in his notice and one year later the mill closed down. It reopened several years later as a Clothing Mill employing a number of workers. It then operated as an Antique Shop and subsequently it specialised in producing hand made paper like the mill at Wookey Hole. It is now unoccupied and stands derelict.



The Top Mill

The Middle Mill

The middle mill was built in the middle of the 18th century and it protruded half way across the present road towards the Market Cross. There appears to have been an undershot wheel and the mill pond bordered the narrow road, right up to the weir by the school. In 1871 the owner of the Middle Mill constructed a new building equipped with a steam engine so that he could be independent of the waterflow from the next mill upstream. During any dry weather the steam engine drove the two mill stones - the smoke belching out of the tall chimney. The miller and the baker at the time was Solomon Childs. In the 1930s the old water driven mill was demolished and the steam engine dismantled during the 1940s but the tall brick chimney stack still stands by the side of the main road.



The Middle Mill

The Lower Mill

The exact history of the lower mill is not known. It is said to have been a clothing mill at a very early stage but records show that it was recorded as a corn mill in Victorian times. The mill pond stretched right back to Cliff View House, and when full, cascaded over a weir by the mill house. The water drove a breast wheel at the road side of the mill house. It is believed that an underground mill race ran straight below the river rejoining it further down stream, allowing a greater head of water for the mill wheel. In the 1830s a malthouse and other buildings adjoined the mill, but these have long since gone. Later in the 19th century a brush manufacturer was known to have been there. For most of the 20th century the mill has been a private residence.



The Lower Mill

The Silk Mill

The silk mill was destroyed by fire in about 1843 and was never rebuilt but there were two silk mills at Darshill (the next village) which were still in operation at the beginning of the 20th century. The Croscombe Mill was built on part of the site of the present Shepton Sewage Works and it employed silk throwsters, silk weavers and many children who helped with the weaving and winding as well as a number of unskilled labourers. The children worked 12-14 hours per day but this was restricted to 10 hours per day by the 1850 Factory Act. The manager of the silk mill lived in a large house, called The White House, by the gates at the entrance to the Sewage Works.

By the end of the 19th century many of the mills in the village had closed but the two Grist Mills were still operational and they provided local employment and a plentiful supply of milled or kibbled cereals. Croscombe Old Mill (now a garage) used to be a Hosiery Mill and at the beginning of the 19th century John Gerrard who lived in the house adjoining the mill employed 12 men in the hosiery business making stockings. In the 20th

century this mill became a timber yard, the water power being used to saw the logs. After the end of WWII the millpond, saw yard and wheel disappeared and Croscombe Garage appeared in its place. Today there are no working mills in Croscombe but you can still see where many of them used to be.

Sources of Information

- 1 The Story of Croscombe by Keith Armstrong
- 2 Mendip - A New Study by Robin Atthill
- 3 Fifteen Mendip Villages by Roy Mackenzie
- 4 The Somerset Village Book by Somerset Federation of Women's Institutes
- 5 Photos - the top mill and the middle mill are my own
- 6 Photos - the lower mill is from Images of England

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