

Oil Mill, Ebley (Ebley Corn Mill)

In 1994, a long-running business situated at Ebley finally closed its doors for the last time. The animal feed business belonging to the Smith family ceased operations and despite hopes that it would continue at the same location, the mill now stands empty. It seemed an appropriate time to review briefly its working life as the recent events may signal the end of industrial use of the site after nearly three centuries of continuous operation.

Oil and Cloth

Oil Mill was originally built in 1721 by a Stroud mercer, William Adderly, with the intention of producing rape and linseed oils. This would presumably have involved the use of an edge runner stone system (of the type more commonly associated with crushing apples for cider making or grinding bark, etc). In the event, production was not destined to last for long for in 1723, the mill was mortgaged to John Bond, a member of a local cloth making family. Bond was recorded as a "clothier of Stroud" and c1714, he leased what was then known as Kinns (fulling) Mill at Stonehouse. This then became known as Bonds Mill and still bears this name. The Bond family were resident in Stroud where they had prospered for several generations, owning land and buildings. They were also linked through marriage to the influential mill-owning Arundell family. At the time, Oil Mill was aptly described as "newly erected", a mill house also being mentioned.

Oil production was clearly short-lived and could not have amounted to any more than two years at most and when offered for sale, the mill was advertised "as adaptable for fulling". Soon after 1727, the conversion took place and Oil Mill joined most of its immediate neighbours in the cloth trade. The new owners were the Rimmington family who are likely to have carried out the actual conversion. In 1764, it was recorded as housing 4 stocks and 2 gig mills, not an uncommon combination for cloth mills operating around Stroud at the time. The Rimmingtons went into some form of business partnership with Richard Flight although they went bankrupt in 1786. Despite this setback, they retained ownership of the mill and later leased it to a partnership of three clothiers. Possibly, the members of the consortium each had his own spinners and weavers, the mill being used communally for fulling and raising the cloth. This type of agreement between minor clothiers was not unknown and a similar arrangement was entered into by four such clothiers at Bonds Mill. Eventually, the partners' business folded; doubtless they found it increasingly difficult to compete with the rapidly expanding and increasingly mechanised cloth mills in and around Stroud. Once again,



the Rimmingtons hung onto the mill however, at some point prior to 1820, they sold it to the clothier James Lewis. He died in 1826 although the business was carried on by his sons. One was J F Lewis and he was still there in 1833 at which time he complained that "My father made as much profit from one cloth as I do from twenty", a sure sign that times were getting increasingly difficult for the minor clothiers in the area. He was solely reliant on outdoor weavers, at a time when many of the major manufacturers were busily bringing their own weavers into their respective mills. In 1839, neither hand or power looms were recorded at the mill and c1840, cloth making ceased.

Corn

A new phase now opened up in Oil Mill's history and it was converted to a corn mill. For many years it was worked in conjunction with several other Stroud mills, under the control of one of the largest millers in the area, John Biddle. Such were the quantities of grain brought up the canal to Gloucester, that he had his own warehouse at the Docks. From here, corn was transported along the Stroudwater Canal to Stroud where it was distributed to his mills. Biddle's main base of operation was Stratford Mill although he also worked Cuttles Mill at Wallbridge for a time. At Oil Mill, traditional mill stones, as opposed to roller mills, continued to be used, driven by a pair of water wheels. By the 1880s, two steam engines of the horizontal variety had been added. This combination of power sources drove eight pairs of stones. In 1892, the mill was offered for sale. Precisely who the buyer was is not clear however by the early 1900s, a Mr Lane was running the mill. In 1908, he attempted to generate his own electricity, using a water turbine of unknown provenance. That the system failed to live up to his expectations is confirmed by the fact that it became known as "Lane's folly"! Shortly after, the mill was bought by the Smith family and it was to remain in their hands up to the present day.

Flour production remained the mainstay of the business, still produced with millstones; at least some of these consisted of emery composition stones as well as French burrs, both supplied by Barron & Sons of Gloucester. At some point, probably after World War II, the business switched from flour to the manufacture of animal feed, a trade that was carried on up to 1994.

In 1954, the mill was remodelled. Godfrey Terret, of the well-known Wotton-Under-Edge millwrighting firm was brought in to assess the new requirements. He measured the output from the two water wheels (one rated at 20hp and one at 25hp) and recommended the appropriate electric motors that would be required to run the various

machines. In addition, the mill stones were finally replaced with newer variants such as flail mills. In 1958, substantial two-gabled brick wing was demolished in order to provide sufficient turning room for grain lorries from Avonmouth. Their journey took 2 hours as opposed to the two days that the journey had originally taken by train! The mill's sidings (Lane's Sidings) were on a spur from the adjacent LMS line. The demolished section appears to have doubled as the engine house and although two



engines were recorded in the late 19th century, only a single stack was used. Evidence of power transmission from this wing remains in the form of cast iron bearing boxes set in the wall of the surviving main block.

Present Status

The narrow main block of the mill up to the first floor level is of stone, the upper floor and attic stories being of red brick. Throughout, the windows are very small. The two water wheel pits survive as do remnants of the 1908 hydro electric scheme. The output shaft/bevel gear of the water turbine is still visible as is the large concrete arch that formed part of the scheme.

Part of the mill's main block was to become the power house, housing switchgear, etc. Internally, the upper floors are of wood, supported where necessary by slender cast iron columns. Part of the ground floor is made up of five composition millstones, set flush with the concrete. There is little in the way of machinery left apart from a saw bench, a grindstone and a few sections of line shafting. Overall, the buildings appear to be in a sound condition and parts of the site are very attractive.



Turbine remains

From the mid 1950s, the mill was run by Mr J V Smith and in 1993, he sold the animal feed business to a competitor from Cirencester. The arrangement was that they would continue to operate this part of the business at Ebley, however, the new owners subsequently stripped out the machinery and moved it to their Cirencester site. The result is that the mill now stands empty. Earlier attempts to obtain permission for conversion to dwellings were rejected. It is difficult to envisage what use the buildings could now be put to and it seems likely that Oil Mill may have finally reached the end of the road in its present guise. It is hoped that a new use can be found before the inevitable decay sets in to what is yet another redundant industrial building of some local importance.

References

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- 7 Dallaway's Map. GCRO D1180 5/2. Shown as "Oyl Mill".

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