

SIDDINGTON ROUND TOWER - FUNCTION OR FOLLY?

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Introduction

Travellers along the old Swindon road (still the A419) just outside Cirencester have a clear view across the fields to a free-standing round tower at the top of a rise overlooking the river Churn, close to the parish boundary between Siddington and South Cerney¹. The building is even more apparent from the road between Preston toll-bar and South Cerney, opposite Worms Farm. Of all the interesting buildings in the Cirencester area, this one has probably attracted more questions of the "what was it for?" variety than any other.

Was the tower once a windmill, as seems likely from its situation, or was it perhaps something to do with the nearby Thames & Severn Canal, which had (and still has) its own well-known group of round houses, homes for the canal lengthmen or watchmen? Was it a canal watch-tower or signalling station, perhaps? Another possibility is as a folly, more artistic than functional in purpose, and a mirror image of the group of follies of earlier date, which includes one round house, in Cirencester Park (Verrey & Brooks 1999, 282). All these have been assumed to be possibilities by interested enquirers. Which one, if any, was its actual purpose?

Hugh Conway-Jones set out to answer this question as he too was intrigued. His preliminary enquiries were revealing and this present article acknowledges and draws heavily upon that research (Conway-Jones 2000). The present writer's general interest in round houses, and in particular those of contemporary construction on the nearby Thames & Severn Canal, led to further enquiries, resulting in a further piece of local publication (Viner 2000, see also Viner 2002). This present article is an attempt to draw these various strands together for the record, to show that the tower seems to have been built specifically as a windmill² for which purpose it functioned successfully for perhaps half a century from c.1790. Once out of use as a mill, the tower became a home, usually linked to the nearby Worms Farm, and continued in occupation, usually for farm workers, until 1958 when it was finally abandoned for more comfortable accommodation.

It is a Grade Two listed building, described as "reputed to have been a windmill or possibly a folly"³ although it has now been derelict for over forty years, and is little more than a shell. As a result, for some years it has also been on the Buildings at Risk register of the local authority (Cotswold District Council) whilst efforts have continued to find an acceptable new use. The latest of several applications made over the years for planning permission for alterations and repairs to make it habitable once again was granted in May 2000⁴ and the building is effectively on the market for conversion into a home once again.

The structure

The building itself is a robust structure, an entirely stone-built tower c.7.5m across at the base, standing c.10m in height (both measurements at ground floor level), with three-storeys above ground (with one storey below) and topped off with an overhanging and castellated parapet, which although obviously a later addition creates an impressive image when viewed from

close by or at a distance. Its battered rubble-stone walls are 0.76m thick at ground-floor level, resting on a 1.03m thick foundation wall as its base.

In its present state with very few internal timbers surviving and no roof, it is possible to examine the structure in some detail and a detailed measured survey would make an excellent group or student project. Pending that level of record, it can be noted that the tower stands on rising ground, free-standing in a field with panoramic views in an arc from north to west. It is said that seven churches could be seen from this spot; certainly the parish church in Cirencester, Holy Trinity in Watermoor (also Cirencester) and nearby Siddington are all very clear on the present-day skyline. Its setting on a slope allowed a below-ground basement to be constructed, upon which the three storeys of the tower are built. The doorway and only access into the basement is on the north side, whereas the two doorways on the ground floor are on the south and west sides (the latter is now blocked). There are window openings scattered at various positions around the circumference of the tower on each of the ground, first and second floors. Internally, the remains of the fireplace (with oven alongside) remain on the ground floor, together with fixings for the stairs which rose against the wall between ground, first and second floors.

The evidence of the roof is scanty, but in its latest use it appears to have had a shallow pitch, with a single external opening to an external downpipe as a means of catching rainwater. There is no surviving evidence of any form of inverted roof arrangement which is known to have been utilised on at least some of the Thames & Severn Canal roundhouses as a form of water catchment (see Powell 1974), and it should be remembered that much of the present evidence relates to the post-windmill conversion of the building for domestic use.

Evidence as a windmill

Map evidence shows a windmill marked at this location on two early maps, Bryant's map of 1824 and the O.S. map of 1830. There are no earlier known map references, Taylor's map of 1777 being inconclusive.

A key piece of evidence is a lease dated 29th September 1791⁵ which refers to a wind grist mill in Siddington lately erected by Earl Bathurst. From this it may be assumed that the building may be dated to *c.*1790, assuming this was the first lease for its use. The lessee was George Bramble who already worked the nearby Siddington watermill⁶. After Bramble died (or retired) both mills may have been leased by William Hoare and in the early 1830s both were certainly leased by Stephen Hoare. By 1837 the windmill was recorded as "void" or out of use, when Hoare gave up the windmill and continued only with the watermill. The former may or may not have been used again later as a mill before reverting to other uses. Evidence for this sequence can be gained from the Siddington Valuations and Poor Rates and other records in Gloucestershire Record Office (reproduced as Appendix One).

The 1791 lease provides useful data on the contents and workings of the mill. The lease was for 24 years at a yearly rent of £38-6s-6d plus an obligation on George Bramble to insure the mill and keep it in good repair, including the machinery listed in the schedule as:

- A fantail and shaft, with a cast iron worm and spindle and cast metal wheel that works into the said worm, and the face wheel and nut that work into it.

Within the mill:

- An upright spindle and nut that work into the curb wheel.
- The curb wheel (wood).
- Twenty metal friction wheels on which the roof turns.
- Four vanes thirty-three feet in length with cloth and appurtenances.

In the upper loft:

- One wind wheel and wind shaft with a cast metal head and neck, fifteen hundredweight, and two brasses on which the same works.
- One crown wheel that works into the wind wheel with a break wheel, rope, chain and appurtenances.

In the second loft or floor from the top:

- Two wheat garner.
- A step ladder
- Two spouts or trunks to convey the wheat down to the hoppers.

In the third loft or floor or what is called the mill hurst:

- Two pair of French stones, one pair four feet the other pair four feet six inches in diameter with wrought iron spindles and regulators.
- Two hoops for the stones.
- Two hoppers.
- One flour garner.
- One step ladder.
- An upright shaft and spur wheels and two small nuts that work into the spur wheel.
- One nut and one face wheel which work the dressing tackle,
- A machine for dressing flour with cylinder and two sheets of wire as dressers or boulders.
- Two trunks to convey the flour to the sacks on the ground floor.
- One step ladder.
- A shaft, wheel and rope for sack tackle.

There is no further supporting documentation as to how this particular tower mill operated although its products were no doubt essentially for local consumption, and the pattern of its being worked within the same ownership as the nearby Siddington water mill would make an interesting study, especially as there are in fact two nearby watermills on the river Churn, themselves only a few hundred yards apart, Siddington mill and Preston mill⁷. Much if not all of this story is intricately tied up with ownership by the Bathurst Estate at Cirencester Park for some if not all of the working lives of these buildings.

In structural terms there are few other surviving local examples of such stone-built tower mills in this part of the south Cotswolds. John Vince's summary study of windmills (Vince 1969) includes a photograph of the derelict tower on Milton Common in Oxfordshire which might well be of similar date as well as form, and local research in Kemble has unearthed a rare photograph of a stone tower mill which seems to have been demolished *c.*1900⁸. Taylor's map of 1777 shows other examples no longer extant and further research would no doubt reveal other examples.

Later occupants

In the 1871 census one Nevil Witts, aged 51, born in Cirencester and described as a shepherd, is the occupant of the windmill as it was still called. He was still there at the time of the 1881 census, with his wife Ann (aged 60 and born in Siddington) and their son Edward, an agricultural labourer aged 33, and a grandson Frederick Browning. Family history research by Michael Thomas of Ilkley has revealed that his great-great grandparents Nevil and Maryanne Witts in fact lived in the old mill for many years, possibly from the time of their marriage in 1839 until the time of their deaths in 1909 and 1908 respectively. Family recollections are that other members of the family continued living there after that time until the 1920s or 1930s, but this has not been verified⁹.

Other family records show that the Chandler family lived in the tower from 1929 to 1935, as evidenced by information from two of the four children of the family who grew up there, Mrs Cox and Mrs Keylock, both of Cirencester. Both the tower and nearby Worms Farm remained in Bathurst Estate ownership although both were tenanted by the Lock family, who also farmed at nearby Preston and are remembered as keeping their horses and old farm wagons until much later than other local farmers. Until a few years ago it was still possible to see the decaying remains of two of their fine old Gloucestershire wagons rotting away in the copse alongside the South Cerney road by the farm. The sideboard on one still read E.F.LOCK & SONS, PRESTON, CIRENCESTER. The E.F. stood for Ernest Fred; indeed this "old" Mr Lock, father of Arthur and Fred, was carried to his funeral at Preston church on one of his old wagons, following a long-standing rural tradition.

Gwen Keylock remembers that her family paid 4/- per week rent to the Locks and that her father was a groom for Mr Adamthwaite at Siddington Lodge. Their water supply came from a tank in the shed (to which it had no doubt been piped off the roof). In times of summer drought Mr Chandler had to fetch water from a well to be found just inside the nearby copse. Oil lamps and candles lit the building, although later occupants had electricity.

Worms Farm was purchased from the Bathurst Estate by the Franklin family *c.*1953 and with it came the tower. Another occupant (dates unverified) was the late Ernie Brewer of Sapperton, who was employed at Worms Farm as a tractor driver. The last occupants were Jim and Marion Puffett, who lived there until 1958. Jim and his sister had been brought up in the tower and he could still remember vividly the simple facilities the building offered, on three floors with the cellar below. "The view was fine", recalled Jim, but "it was a bit draughty and sometimes the wind would blow the lino up". However, there was mains water and electricity, although still an outside loo, plus a separate garden further down the slope. Access to the road was across the field (not the present access), itself bumpy and uneven, evidence perhaps of surface quarrying here for stone or sand.

Old photographs show the small shed, the garden fence and the building itself covered in ivy which effectively disguised its detailing¹⁰. There is an interesting story that the whole of the ivy covering the building fell off one day, effectively blocking the one doorway into and out of the house! A single tree now remains alongside. Once the Puffetts had left, the building was vandalised, the lead was stolen from the roof and deterioration set in. It has been empty ever since.

A Folly?

The castellation on the building - which largely stimulated this enquiry - remains something of a mystery. Examination of the structure reveals that this is indeed a later addition. Large blocks of dressed stone are used, so that each section fully utilises the *c.*0.5m thick wall forming the top of the tower, and on which the framework of the windmill structure had previously rested. These blocks look bulky (and no doubt are heavy) in comparison with the more slender detailing of the tower itself. They obviously came from elsewhere, perhaps as a job lot from a building demolition. Although the castellation remains undated, it seems logically to belong to the renovation of the building at some time after its demise as a mill, and possibly at the same time as its machinery and equipment was removed.

This can reasonably be placed to between 1837 and 1871, if not any closer, and the work was undertaken for no other purpose than to complete the "refurbishment" of the building as a domestic dwelling once the fan tail and shaft had been removed and the structure made safe. This is probably the building's only contribution as a folly, more in imagery than in substance, as it remained a functioning dwelling for around a hundred years or more thereafter.

The suggested link with the Thames & Severn Canal can also be resolved. There is no reference which this writer has yet located in the extensive records housed in the Gloucestershire Record Office to tie the Siddington round tower into the activities of those who constructed, owned and/or later administered the Canal, which at this point passes within half a mile of the tower. The suggestion that it might have been a signalling post is implausible and un-necessary, and studies to date of the construction period of the canal, and in particular of the five round-houses constructed in 1789-90, show no link with the Siddington building.

However, if its suggested date of *c.*1790 is to be relied upon, it was in fact being constructed at the much the same time as the Canal round-houses, and one wonders whether it was built either by the same team(s) of contractors and workmen or perhaps by others but in the image of what was also going up along the canal line east of the Sapperton tunnel at nearby Cerney Wick, and a little further east at Marston Meysey and at Inglesham. Indeed, round houses were perfectly respectable in form and function at that time and in the case of a windmill an essential design requisite. Although the construction details may be subtly different, perhaps the mirror image is more logical, with the Canal buildings paying passing homage to this particular functional round house and others like it, locally? The men who built the windmill had skills and practical application which may well have been of use to the canal company in its aspirations for round structures, with the Bathurst Estate as the influencing force for both (see Viner 2002).

Further research in the archives of the Thames & Severn Canal and elsewhere may yet provide additional local evidence of this intriguing construction period in the last decade or two of the 18th century.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Hugh Conway-Jones who readily made his own research available, and to a number of people who have responded to the writer's enquiries over the years, including Michael Thomas of Ilkley and Mrs Cox, Mrs Keylock and Jenny Lay of Cirencester. Jim Puffett kindly reminisced on site during the preparation of a local newspaper article (Viner 2000).

As owners of the round tower, David and Geoffrey Franklin provided every assistance, providing access to photographs and plans and on several occasions sharing their family knowledge of Worms Farm and of this building. In this connection, it should be noted that the tower is private property and must be regarded as in unsafe condition. Access to it is strictly with the permission of the owners, currently c/o Geoffrey Franklin, Springfield, South Cerney Road, South Cerney, Gloucestershire.

Bibliography

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- Viner, David 2002. *The Thames & Severn Canal: History & Guide*, Tempus Publishing, Stroud, 160pp.

Notes

- 1 OS Explorer 169 SU 043996 'The Round Tower'.
- 2 More confidently assigned as such by Verey & Brooks 1999, p.611 than in the first edition of 1970
- 3 Siddington 8/168, surveyed for listing in July 1985
- 4 Application CT/2607 : The Round House, Siddington
- 5 G.R.O. D182 111/207
- 6 G.R.O. TS 208/2, 3
- 7 OS Explorer 169 SP 039001 and 038004 respectively
- 8 Thanks to Lester Napper of Kemble for making available his own research on the history of Kemble
- 9 Thanks to Michael Thomas of Ilkley, Yorkshire for this information.
- 10 e.g. *Wilts & Glos Standard*, 26th January 1973

Appendix One

Surveys and Valuations for Water and Wind Mill in Siddington

Year	Description	Occupier	Measure	Value
1780s	Siddington Mill, garden, the Mill Hams etc	Tennant	A R P	
1819	George Bramble now Hoare	George Bramble	6-1-18	Annual Value 64-12-00
1830	Stephen Hoare For the Wind Mill			Rental 40-10-00 10-00-00
	John(?) Bramble			16-08-00
	Henry Bramble			2-10-00
1835a	Water mill, wind mill house, garden & lands	Occupier? Stephen Hoare	Quantity 5-3-23	Gross Annual Value 77-09-01
1835b	Water mill house, garden & buildings Land Windmill	Occupier/Tennant Stephen Hoare Stephen Hoare Stephen Hoare	Quantity 5-2-23	Annual Value 50-00-00 17-09-01 10-00-00
1835c	Wind mill, water mill, house garden & lands	Occupier Stephen Hoare		Reduced Annual Value 34-17-01
1837	Malthouse owned by John Bramble House, mill, stables, pigstys & garden House, garden etc incl. orchard, barn, stable, pigsty & brewhouse owned by J Bramble Wind Mill	S Hoare S Hoare J Bramble Now void S Hoare	Measure	Annual Value 6-10-00 36-00-00 7-05-00 8-00-00

Sources in Gloucestershire Record Office (compiled by Hugh Conway-Jones):

D2525 Box 39 Siddington Valuations and Poor Rates 1819-38

1819 Poor Rate

1830 Poor Rate

1835a Undated Valuation c1835

1835b Survey and Valuation of the Parish

1835c Poor Rate

D2525 Box 31 Siddington Surveys and Valuations 1801-1864

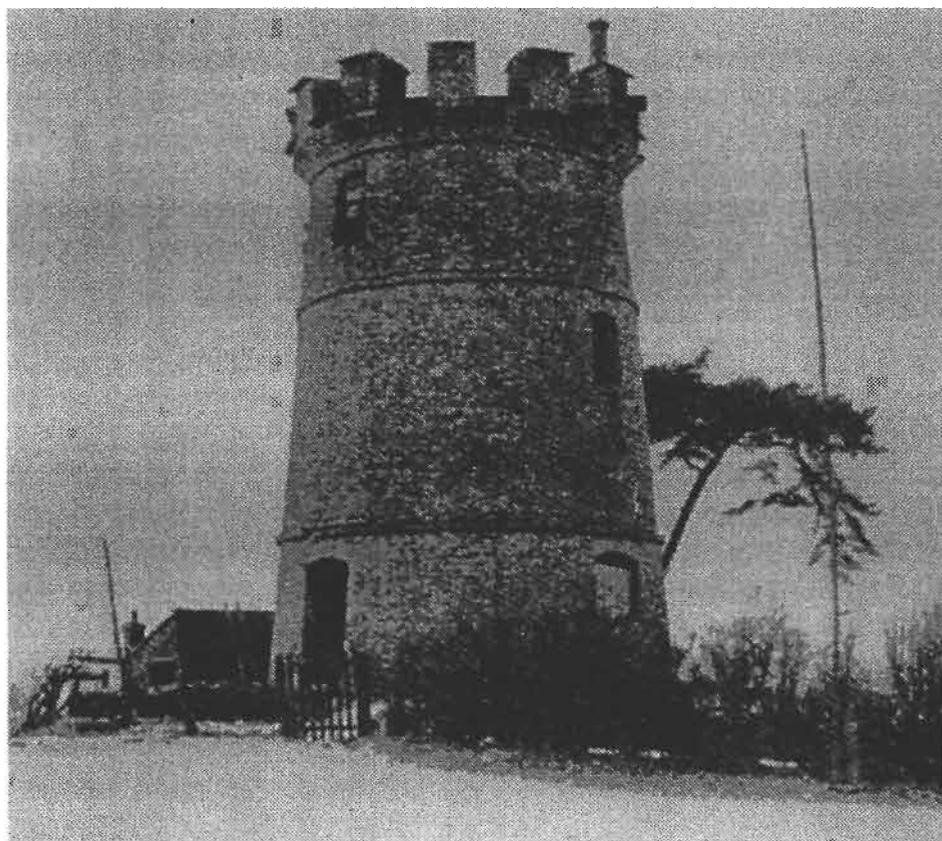
1780s Undated Survey soon after Inclosure

1837 Valuation of Parish



The Round Tower on 23rd May 2002

[photo author]



The round tower in use as a cottage, undated but late-1940s/early 1950s
[photo courtesy Geoffrey Franklin]