

GREAT BOWDEN HERITAGE & ARCHAEOLOGY

Give us today our Daily Bread

It all started with the axe. Stone axes, similar to this one found in the village, were used by Neolithic farmers from about 6000 years ago. After they had felled the forests and planted grain in newly created fields they needed the means to grind the ripe kernels into flour. Rotate a flat stone on top of another and you have a simple quern.



It was the Corieltauvi in the Iron Age, living here over 2000 years ago just before the Romans arrived, who perfected the quern method of milling. They used the hard, coarse, sandstone called Millstone Grit from the Peak District for their beehive querns. These are found throughout the tribal lands, including this area, but they do not seem to have traded them to other tribes to any extent. We borrowed this one from Leicestershire County Council for our display.



The Romans were very knowledgeable about harnessing water power for mills on the Continent but there seem to be very few examples in this country. Watermills from the Roman period have been found on Hadrian's Wall and a tidal mill was excavated on the River Fleet in London, later converted into a mill fed through a dammed channel when the tidal conditions on the Thames changed. It was probably only large communities like Londinium or large army bases that demanded the amount of flour needed to warrant a watermill. For the rest the quern sufficed.

It was really the Anglo-Saxons who introduced watermills to many communities and harnessed the power of water to grind their corn. They picked up the knowledge of this technology from the Continent either before or after their occupation of England in the late 5th century. Later the Lord of the Manor had rights over when a mill operated and who could make use of it. It is therefore almost inconceivable that the Royal Manor here did not have a watermill whose operation was governed by the King's Reeve. We have no idea where this was situated and hope that the following notes may give you some clues to its whereabouts.

Watermills require a continuous flow of water to turn a large waterwheel. The power from the wheel is transferred into the mill by means of a shaft and then through a series of gears to turn the millstones which would be fed with grain. The flour would drop through and be sacked below.

Building a watermill on the main course of a river can present problems. The Welland, for example, becomes a raging torrent of a river after heavy rain because of the large area it drains. At other times it can be little more than a stream. It seems unlikely that a mill could be powered by the river alone without man's intervention.

Improvements in the flow of water can be achieved by constructing a mill leat or race, a narrow cut through from the river, or maybe by the construction of a weir or narrowing of the main course of the river. Alternatively, a stream feeding the main river or the mill leat can be dammed and a mill pond created. Water could then be released through a sluice to turn the waterwheel when required. Were these methods used at Great Bowden? Flood prevention work on the Welland may have damaged archaeological evidence of the mill race and the mill pond but we hope traces can be found. The mill pond would have been very deep and therefore difficult to erase completely.

By the time of the Domesday Survey in 1086 there were over 5,600 mills recorded, though not one in Great Bowden. This does not mean there was no mill as omissions were made and also, as it was the King's Manor, perhaps details of value and tax due were already known. The other event that may have had an influence on the situation of a mill on the Welland was the creation in 918 of the two counties of Leicestershire and Northamptonshire with the Welland as a boundary between them. The possibility of territorial dispute has to be considered.

King Offa of Mercia had a watermill close to his palace at Tamworth in the 8th century and there have been a few examples discovered of 7th century mills elsewhere in the country. Possibly these mills operated seasonally with the main milling taking place after the grain harvest. But there is some evidence that wheat was stored on the ear as it kept longer than milled flour. So maybe they milled in batches. Mills even as early as these would have needed an access road to the village and the fields.

The next big change in milling came as a result of the Crusades. Simple windmills had been in operation in the Middle East for hundreds of years and the crusaders brought the technology back to England replacing mills driven by animals and offering an alternative to water power.

The first windmills were simple Post Mills. The main body of the mill and the sails were attached to the central post and this whole structure was rotated to face the wind. This structure was rather unstable and its stability was improved when Smock Mills were introduced. Here the body of the mill remained still and just the roof and sails rotated to the optimal direction.

The mills were still mainly constructed of wood until Tower Mills were introduced and the mill body was a brick or stone built tower. We know of several sites of windmills in Great Bowden and Market Harborough although you need to go as far as Kibworth to see a complete windmill.

The following information was extracted from the Sites and Monuments Record held at County Hall. All these mills, with the exception of the one at Little Bowden which would have been in Northamptonshire at that time, would have been in the area of the Bowden Open Fields.

A watermill in Little Bowden (Northamptonshire, Stotfold Hundred) mentioned in the Domesday Book (1086) and worth 16D.

A mill in Great Bowden which was mentioned as part of the endowment for the chantry in 1473. This was an early mill and its location is not known. It was blown down in 1548 and sold in 1574 (presumably rebuilt).

SP741882. A windmill in the South Field of Great Bowden is mentioned in 1543. It was there in 1623 and in 1690 and on Prior's map of 1779 but not on subsequent maps. It is thought that this may be the mill north of White Lodge as you leave Great Bowden on Station Road. A possible mill mound is still visible.

SP732887. There is documentary evidence for a post medieval windmill, south of Great Bowden Hall. It is on several old maps and the fact that the road nearby was renamed Burnmill Road from Russell's Lane after 1776, rather suggests the fate of this mill.

Leaving Market Harborough to the north on the old A6 you pass an earthwork on your right which was the flat topped mill mound of a post medieval windmill on this site. It appeared on several 19th century maps and the 1st edition OS map but had gone by the time of the 1931 OS map. The original mill mound was damaged when the A6 was re-aligned.

SP736875. There is documentary evidence for a windmill close to Mill Hill in Market Harborough. It was post medieval although at the southern extremity of the open field system. It is shown on 19th century maps but not on earlier ones. The Northampton Herald in 1839 had an article reporting "it was struck by lightening, lost a sail and part of the round house fell in". The son of the last miller said it was a post mill.

Victoria County History - now on British History online has more mill information:

The mill mentioned above, as part of the chantry, belonged to John Kelyng. Granted by the King to Robert and Frideswide Strelley in 1548, before it blew down. It was then sold to Edward Griffin in 1574 by William Saville, Robert Strelley's nephew and heir. A horse-mill was granted to Strelley at the same time. This may be the mill mentioned above.

In 1543 the mill in the South Field (also mentioned above) was leased by Francis Entwysell to William Beyerley for 21 years. In 1623 John Fish died in possession of a windmill in Great Bowden leased from Lord John Stanhope. And there is documentation of a windmill being conveyed from Jeremiah Sprigg to Edward Sprigg in 1690.

And the following information from the same source, under Market Harborough:

A mill, owned by the King, is mentioned in 1176-7 when it was farmed for 5s. a year. Land in Great Bowden and Harborough, including the mill, was given to William de Filgeris in 1190. A mill attached to the manor, possibly the same one, was mentioned in 1351. (Because of the early date this could have been a watermill)

Document produced by Great Bowden Heritage in 2008, amended 2020.