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Enquiries re articles can be sent to saffronwaldenhistory@gmail.com

The Windmills of Walden

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The post mill at Swards End was probably built in the late 18th century. By 1803 it was in the hands of Edward Mynott, miller and farmer but by 1839 John Mynott was the miller. It is thought that this mill was demolished around 1908 having previously passed into the hands of several other named millers.¹

Windmilling has a long history in Essex and began probably in the 12th century. The earliest recorded windmill was at Henham in 1202. The industry reached its peak during the years 1825-35 after which a slow decline set in as competition from large steam-powered roller mills made windmilling less viable.²

Three types of mills were constructed, the earliest being the post mill in which the whole body or buck was pivoted on a massive oak post. (In the mid 19th century there were 185 in operation). The oak post rested on a cross tree but the weight of the mill was transferred to the quarter bars or struts. In later mills the cross tree rested on brick piers so that no timber components were in contact with the ground. A long tail pole was used in the earlier mills to turn the mill into the wind. Later on a fan-tail was fitted which kept the mill facing into the wind. A roundhouse was probably added after the mill was built to protect the timbers and provide a little storage. The throughput of wheat was a maximum 2 cwts (100 kg) per hour from one pair of stones. The large mills sometimes had two pairs.

Two other types were built. The tower mill usually brick built, and the smock mill which had a timber frame protected by weather boarding. The latter was a variation of the tower design. As in both these types only the cap with the sails incorporated could be turned into the wind, a fan-tail was fitted. These differences make the three types very distinctive and easily recognised.

The history of windmills in and around Walden can conveniently be divided into two periods, the first from 1200 to 1700 and 1700 to the final end of windmilling in the early 20th century. The earliest recorded mill in Walden was on Windmill Hill. Around 1400 the road northwards out of the town was simply known as the 'Highway to Cambridge'.³ Millhill (later Mill Field) lay to the west of the road and now forming part of the Audley Estate today used as a golf course.⁴ The windmill is mentioned indirectly in the court rolls for 1383 when 'the land was said to lie in "Wyndemelle valley".⁵ A second reference is dated 1585 when the mill was leased to Josiah Bird by the 'Tresorer, Chamberlaines and Communalitie' of Saffron Walden for 20 years. Many strictures were placed upon him regarding maintenance of the mill and 'that it should be occupied weekly.' He was also warned against profiteering! This mill would have been a simple post mill without a round house and may have been built on an earth mound common at the time. By 1750 it had been removed.⁶ The 1666 map of Audley End Park does not show the mill although windmill Hill is shown, as is the Windmill Hill gate north of Duck Street.⁷

Farries lists three other pre-1700 windmills connected with Saffron Walden with map references for two as follows:

560380 which is between Turnip Hall farm and Pounce Hall, approximately 300 yards south of the Radwinter Road.

549412 south east of Little Walden next to Bridleway No 49.

Finally a windmill next to the town granted to the guild of the Holy Trinity on its foundation in 1514 and still there in 1549'. No location is given.

We move on now to the windmills built after 1700 where there is more certainty about the locations.⁸ Four are listed for Saffron Walden. Ruse's smock mill at the junction of South Road and Mount Pleasant. It appears on the 1758 map and later on Chapman & Andre 1777. The Ruse family held this mill for many years. Farries gives a very full history of this mill and the families who occupied it. It was not demolished until 1955. The mill house is at 21 Peaslands Road a short distance away.

Middleditch's smock mill was close by but to the south of Mount Pleasant at the end of Old Mill Road. It was built in 1799, milling ceased in 1896. Like Ruse's mill there is considerable detail given by Farries. It was demolished soon after 1896 due to its unsafe condition following gale damage.

Copthall Mill was located at the top end of Mill Lane. It seems it was originally a tower mill but from 1856 a smock mill is recorded on this site. Occupied by John Searle from 1849, farmer and miller', and Edward Brook in 1894. The mill house still stands nearby. Demolition took place about 1896.

Thaxted Road post mill was located close to what is now Stanley's Farm Road. It was in existence from 1799 to 1830 and was a freehold property with half an acre of land. William Camp occupied it in 1819 as proprietor, but later it belonged to James Nicholls. The Ruse family ran the mill until 1830.

For those readers who wish to know more details on these windmills the works referred to in the references are all available for study in the Town Library. The lending library also has a good selection of books on the subject.

Notes

1. Farries, K.G., *Essex Windmills, Millers and Millwrights*, vol 5, pp77-80 (1981).
2. Barry, K.R. & Pargeter, V.G., *Discover Essex Windmills* (1990), p.1.
3. Cromarty, D., 'Chepyng Walden 1381-1400: a study from the Court Rolls', *Essex Journal* II (1967), p.106.
4. Cromarty, D., *The Fields of Saffron Walden in 1400*, maps 4 & 5, ERO Publication No 43 (1966).
5. Monteith, D., *Saffron Walden and its Environs* (1958), p. 126 (MA thesis unpub.).
6. Farries, K.G.. *Op.cit.*, vol 1, p.98, Saffron Walden.
7. National Archives ref MPE 1/366.
8. Farries, K.G. *op.cit.* Vol 5, pp77-80.