



Clive Fewins discovers how to earn a crust working in Wilton's windmill

Wilton Windmill Society is a flourishing organisation. It was formed

in the Seventies, shortly after the mill was restored to working order after being derelict for 60 years.

Most of the population of the small village in the Wiltshire Downs from which it takes its name either belong to the society or eat the bread baked from the wholemeal flour it produces.

For 34 years it has been a voluntary-run scheme. But there has been a problem: until recently, there were only three fully-trained millers among the 75 members, and the production of flour has been entirely dependent on these three men.

A recruiting drive was the answer: and now, several times a year, senior members run hands-on training sessions for would-be millers. I decided to be a miller for a day and joined the four-strong team at the hilltop site on a breezy day.

At the helm was retired farm manager Mike Clark, 69. His number two was Steve Chidgey, an electronics engineer. The two trainees on the day were Tom Beese, 52, a technology consultant and retired engineer Tom Dobson, 77.

First I was given a tour of the mill and its four working floors: the meal floor, the stone floor, the bin floor and – high up beneath the cap – the dust floor, which houses the main machinery that transfers the power from the sails to the huge central vertical shaft.

"The brakewheel is the real monster. If you get entangled with that, then it isn't going to stop for anyone," quipped Steve. After that warning I was briefed on safety, and shown how to climb up one of the 30ft sails to unfurl the canvas.

A few more checks and we were ready to go. Steve stood by my side as I released the brakewheel. To do this you simply pull a rope. Nothing as complicated as pulling a switch. You then wait for a steady rumbling sound to start, watch the sails flying past the window at an ever-increasing pace and listen for instructions to be boomed up from below through the small openings in the floors.

I was told that when this 188-year-old goliath was built it was considered the very latest in milling technology. This was because the ropes and levers used to control it were designed to be controlled by one person.

"After six months as a trainee miller, I am still pretty amazed that this huge structure – its sails each weighing as much as an



JOHN LAWRENCE

THE MILLER'S TALE



Flour power: clockwise from top, Clive Fewins sifts the mill's wholemeal flour through his fingers; pouring the grain; bags of farmer Peter Lemon's wheat; Steve Chidgey shows Clive the millstone; hauling the ingredients up to the first floor by rope; and Wilton Windmill

average family saloon car – can be operated by one man," said Tom Beese.

Nowadays local farmer and windmill society chairman Peter Lemon, who grows the wheat milled at the mill, prefers to have two in control. Mike and Steve both have 20 years experience and Steve was for a number of years a part-time wheelwright. He is also the man who recuts the two

three-quarter ton millstones when necessary.

"It's rather like being at the helm of a giant sailing ship," says Mike. "You have to try and control the speed of the sails and keep the mill running at a steady pace. And you have to ensure that the grain is not running short, because that would result in damage to the stones."

The grain (technically grist) supply is regulated by means

of a simple device that is operated by a twist peg and a cord. It operates a bell if the supply is running low, and the miller rushes up two floors to fill the hopper.

The quality of the flour is controlled by a device known as a tentering screw, situated just beneath the millstones.

From time to time the miller also dips his hand into the flour as it pours out and rubs a few grains between his

finger and thumb. This is checking by "rule of thumb" – one of many commonly used phrases that corn milling has given to our language.

When I was not filling the hopper or bagging the flour, I stood beside Mike, occasionally taking the controls.

I was amazed at the calm that prevailed among the team as they all carried out their allotted tasks and

managed to communicate against the background of constant noise.

"It is all pretty much common sense really," says Steve, "but on a windy day it can still be pretty hair-raising being in charge of a giant piece of equipment that harnesses such tremendous natural power. I call it 'mangle engineering' and I find it wonderful therapy after the world of computing."

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