THE OLD FLOUR MILLS OF WIRRAL

By E. Mitford Abraham

Read 3rd December 1903

IT may be of some interest to mention and describe, as far as possible, the old mills of Wirral, chiefly because they represent an industry which has quite changed in character, and for which they are no longer wanted.

Many have been entirely destroyed, and their sites are unknown; most are in a ruinous condition, and will soon disappear altogether; some ceased working a few years ago, and only four are now working at all, that is, as grist mills.

There were two chief kinds of windmills: the early peg or post mill, a wooden structure elevated on a central peg or post; and the later tower mill, a stone or brick building. In both kinds the arms, or sails as they are called, nearly reached the ground, but on the later high tower mills a gallery or stage running round the mill 10 to 15 feet above the ground necessarily raised the arms in proportion.

The wooden peg mill was turned round by the miller on its central pivot or post, according to the direction of the wind. In the case of the tower mill only the upper portion, to which the arms were attached, was turned round.

Watermills sometimes had overshot wheels, that is, where the stream falls on the upper part of the revolving wheel; and sometimes undershot wheels,

that is, where the stream strikes the lower part of the wheel.

Mrs. Gamlin, in her book, "'Twixt Mersey and Dee," mentions a gorse mill as having once stood on Bidston Hill. The site of this structure is not known, and it seems to have been destroyed at least a century ago.

The late Mr. E. W. Cox, in a communication to this society's *Transactions* for the year 1896, describes and illustrates two ancient grain crushers or mortars. The first, he says, is prehistoric, and is hollowed with a cavity in the centre, and a shallower one at each end for holding the grain to be pounded. It is made of a hard whinstone boulder, and was found by himself in Wirral. The second was taken out of the walls of the crypt at Birkenhead Priory. It is made out of a rough block of red gritstone, and is deeply hollowed with use. The two examples are interesting, as showing to how late a date prehistoric methods survived in milling, as this form is found to date back to a prehistoric era. The Birkenhead example is no doubt monastic, more than one having been found in the ruins.

We will commence our survey with Bidston, because there are traces of an earlier foundation for a mill here than anywhere else in Wirral. Bidston Mill has quite the finest and most prominent position of all the Wirral windmills. Situated on the brow of the hill, it commands a magnificent position for any wind. Although its position is absolutely unrivalled for wind, it was a very awkward place to get at from the farmer's standpoint, the village of Bidston standing 150 feet below, half a mile away to the north, whilst the only means of approach were by rocky ascending paths or lanes. The first Bidston Mill, which was standing

at least as early as the sixteenth century, stood about 40 yards to the north of the present structure. This old mill was, of course, a peg mill, and was destroyed by fire in 1791. The site of this earlier mill can easily be made out, and consists of two trenches about 15 feet long by 3 feet wide, dug out of the solid rock, and shaped like a Greek cross. These trenches, which were about 2 feet deep, cross each other at right angles, and are now nearly filled up with earth, &c.

In these trenches there were laid four large beams, which must have fitted closely into the trenches. At the intersecting point there was fixed the great post or peg upon which the mill rested. This post, about 6 feet high, was supported at the top by four beams, which rested at their lower ends upon the trench beams. Upon this foundation the wooden mill rested.

During one heavy gale in 1791 the arms of this old mill broke loose, and as a consequence friction caused a fire, and it was totally destroyed. It was not rebuilt, but an entirely different kind of mill was erected close by. This was a brick tower building, and is the one still standing, although the arms and machinery have been destroyed by fire twice during the last century, in 1821 and 1839.

It seems strange that this mill should have stopped working so many years before the majority of the others, but it has not worked since 1875. Nothing was done to keep it in repair for some time, and after losing three of its arms and most of the roof, it was completely restored in 1894 by Mr. R. S. Hudson, who in return took away the old arm left on the mill and the one just blown down, to have chairs made out of them.

Wallasey Mill was situated on the top of the hill just south of the church, and was a great

landmark to mariners. Built of stone, and very antique looking, it was a picturesque little building, and was pulled down about twenty-five years ago, to be replaced by a large modern brick mansion with a small central tower, which is exactly over the site of the old mill. The wooden gates to this house are built out of the old arms of the mill.

A watermill used to stand on the marsh between Poulton and Bidston, and the small whitewashed cottage still standing there was most probably the mill house. The site of the mill can still be seen, and a few large stones lying about are all that remains of the building, which was pulled down nearly a century ago.

It is not known whether this mill was a corn mill or not. An old Wallasey resident said that, although she had never seen the mill herself, she had heard people talk about it as a slitting mill, and what this means she did not know.

Situated, as it was, by the tidal creek of Wallasey Pool, it is quite possible this was a tidal mill, only a few examples of which now remain in this country. The idea of the tidal mill was that on the rising tide the mill pool was flooded, and then the water was run out over the mill wheel during the ebb. Unless the mill was worked in this way, it would have been on the same plan as that at Bromborough.

Tranmere Mill, a large brick tower building with a stage, was situated near the workhouse at the top of Mill Street. It was pulled down about thirty years ago, and was built about the same time as the present Bebington Mill.

Bebington Mill is a brick tower building, situated near the top of Storeton Hill, in Higher Bebington, and is a prominent landmark, particularly from Liverpool and the Mersey.

The life of this mill is now ended, having ceased

working during January 1901, owing principally to the fact that the miller had some steam flour mills built in Birkenhead, and not being able to let it even for £5 a year, the only use it was put to was as a storehouse. The machinery is complete, but the roof and stage are in a very ruinous state; part of the stage has entirely disappeared. The mill itself is about a century old, and is very stoutly built on a sandstone foundation.

Bromborough Water Mill, the only one left working in this part of Wirral, stands at the head of a tidal creek running up under red sandstone cliffs from the Mersey, by which barges used to come right up to the mill at high water.

There has been a water mill here for many centuries, and it is believed that it stands on the site of the mill mentioned in Domesday Book as belonging to the Manor of Eastham. The present building of red sandstone appears to be a rebuilt structure of the eighteenth century, and is a fairly large mill, containing four pairs of stones. The wheel is worked by an undershot current, but owing to the tide backing up against it, the mill is stopped working for about four hours every tide.

About forty years ago steam power was provided so as to make it an up-to-date flour mill, but as there is no flour made here now, steam is never used.

Right above the water mill, on the top of the pool bank, was a tower windmill, not a very old one, but said to have been the most shapely tower mill in Wirral. It was blown up with gunpowder about twenty-five years ago, as it was not considered safe. The man who was entrusted with its demolition has several times explained to me how the whole mill was blown into the air several feet, and then, falling to the ground, fell to pieces.

The two mills were both worked by the same

people, by name Ellis, and who still have the water-mill; save for a break of a few years, many years ago, the ancestors of the present man have worked Bromborough Mills since the latter part of the eighteenth century.

Rabymere Water Mill, on the same stream, about two miles higher up, has ceased working for many years, and it is a pity to see such a picturesque little object falling into ruin so quickly as it is. It is situated in a little dell, down which flows the stream from the mere, and as it is beneath the level of the road, and is so small, few people even notice it.

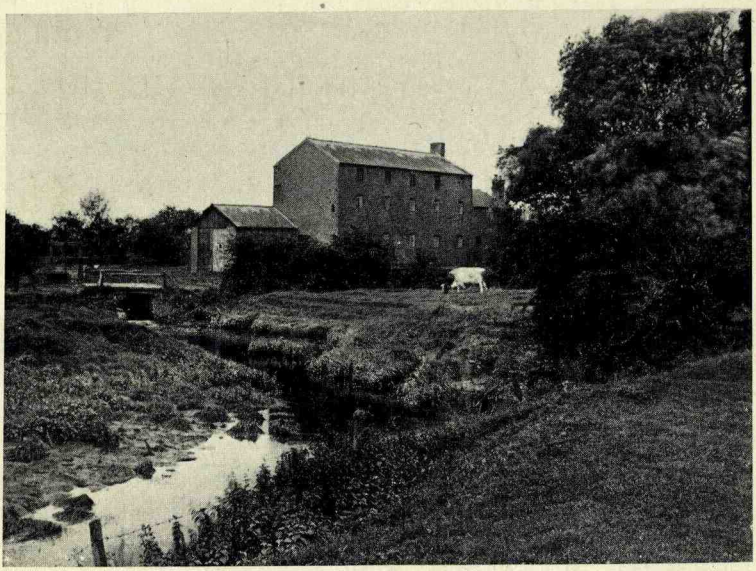
Over the massive doorway there is a stone slab which used to bear the date 1601, together with some initials—I ^{D} A. The roof is in a very dilapidated condition, and in many places water comes through, whilst inside not much of the machinery, except the two pairs of stones and the "overshot" wheel, now remain.

Although it has not worked for about twenty years, and what woodwork remains is always in a sodden state, it is said that the Earl of Shrewsbury and Talbot still insists upon the ruin being insured against fire.

The mill house, situated just above, on the bank of the stream, is a pretty little thatched cottage, and is still occupied by the old miller, who, forced to give up his business, makes his living out of letting boats and providing teas for the numerous Saturday and Sunday visitors to this delightful spot.

Eastham Mill, a small eighteenth-century tower windmill, is situated outside the village to the south. It worked up till about 1895, and the arms were removed shortly afterwards, although the works are still quite complete.

A rather noticeable feature of this mill is the raised sort of mound round the base. This mound is about a foot high and nine inches wide. Built



STANNEY WATER MILL

GREAT SAUGHALL MILL AND MILL HOUSE

To face p. 139.

against the brickwork of the mill, and securely flagged at its side by stone slabs, it forms a sort of raised pathway round the building.

Of all the Wirral Mills, Willaston, about a mile to the west of Eastham, was quite the most important as a flour mill, and of the two windmills still left working, this is one of them. This large tower mill was built early in the last century, and succeeded a peg mill situated thirty yards to the west. About thirty years ago a great effort was made by a local corn merchant to work this mill as a profitable flour business; a steam engine and much new machinery was added, together with several more pairs of stones, making nine in all, but after working a few years the new machinery had to be given up, but is still there, never to be used again. It is said that this new machinery and additional buildings cost about £30,000.

This mill discontinued making flour many years ago, its only business now being to crush oats, &c., and grind maize for the neighbouring farmers.

On a piece of wood on the second floor inside the mill, the following inscription is roughly cut:

> "God's providence hath been my inheritance;
> God bless the good old mill."

Also, near by, is a quaint painting of the mill.

Stanney Water Mill, situated just inside the boundary of Wirral, about two miles south-west of Ellesmere Port, is worked by an offshoot of the river Gowey. This mill was one of the most important in Wirral, and turned out flour until about fifteen years ago. It is still provided with the silk dresser for sifting the flour after it had gone through the stones. This is a good instance of a country mill, combining the use of stones with the silk dresser, endeavouring to compete with the modern roller mill. It is now only used as a grist mill—

that is, for grinding foodstuffs, such as maize, beans, oats, &c., for the local farmers. The water wheel, which is turned by an undershot current similar to that of Bromborough, used to work four pairs of stones.

The present building, which consists of three storeys, is of brick, and does not appear to be much more than one hundred years old. The base and foundations are of stone, and as in one or two places alterations appear to have taken place, it is most likely that the present building succeeded a much older one.

Saughall Mill, situated on the Parkgate Road, three miles from Chester, is a small brick tower windmill of the eighteenth century, and is without a stage, the arms nearly reaching the ground. The name of this mill is marked on the maps as "Gibbet Mill," and the story about the two men gibbeted here nearly two centuries ago is interesting. Three Irish harvestmen, whilst returning home, began to quarrel over their summer earnings. The quarrel ended by the one who had the largest share being slain and robbed by the other two, who hid his body at this spot. The murderers would in all likelihood have got away to Ireland had they not stopped at the Greyhound Inn, Shotwick. Here they attempted to steal the landlady's savings, which had been hidden upstairs; but an alarm was raised, the men tried to escape by the way of Puddington, were overtaken, conveyed to Chester, tried, and found guilty. They were then taken back to the scene of their murder by Saughall Mill, and were gibbeted under the old ash tree, which still stands at the beginning of the lane leading up to the mill.

The mill house is a low, whitewashed building, and is of the same age as the mill. There is a nice old-fashioned garden in front of the house, also an

extremely interesting old sundial, on which the times at all the principal towns in the world can be reckoned.

The mill is still worked, and has lately been considerably modernised, including a new pair of arms and an automatic arm setter. This new pair of arms does not require sail cloths, but have pieces of wood arranged in the louvre fashion, the same in principle as a venetian blind. When the mill is working these louvres are closed, so as to present a flat surface against the wind. It is rather strange to see this pair of arms working along with the old pair requiring sails.

About half a mile from Saughall Mill, on the Parkgate Road, is an inn called "The Yacht," round which is a collection of small houses abutting on the road, the whole going under the name of "Two Mills." Formerly there stood nearly opposite the inn two windmills, both of which were destroyed sixty to seventy years ago. The sign on the inn used to be a painting of these two mills, and some residents in the neighbourhood still remember this old signboard. An old man who died some years back said that he remembered one of the mills, and also a man being gibbeted there. It is said that this last mill went by the name of "Gibbet Mill," and that really Saughall Mill is not the "Gibbet Mill." According to the natives of the district, Saughall Mill is not known as the "Gibbet Mill," and the present miller does not think the name is rightly applied to his mill.

The ruined Burton Mill is situated on the top of the hill through the woods to the north of the village. The base of this old peg mill and some woodwork are all that remains of this once picturesque landmark. This base, upon which the wooden mill was turned round, is about 8 feet in height, and on the side away from the Dee, that is, the sheltered side,

is covered with ivy. The mill was partially destroyed during a gale about twenty-five years ago, and since then neglect has completed the ruin.

There are two doorways into the basement, one at the north side, and the other at the south side; near the latter, low down by the ground, is a stone with $\frac{R\ O}{1771}$ inscribed on it. The main shaft, 7 or 8 feet high, with a piece of wood crossing at the top, is all that remains of the upper portion of the mill, and has some resemblance to an ancient gallows. Several dates are carved on this shaft, one 1731.

Mrs. Gamlin, describing Burton Mill in her book, "'Twixt Mersey and Dee," says—

"This ancient mill was a peg mill, and was of great interest before it was destroyed. It was a square, box-like structure, with cottage roof, poised on the top of a dome-shaped red sandstone basement by means of a stout oak trunk running vertically through it, round which it was turned to the wind by means of the leverage of a long projecting beam in front of its very wide flight of wooden steps. Here, over 200 years ago, a boy constantly took his father's wheat to be ground. This boy was Thomas Wilson, who became Bishop of Sodor and Man, and whose pretty little thatched cottage below in the village is so well known."

All that remains of Neston Mill is the white-washed brick tower of the eighteenth century. This small mill worked till about 1885, although for the last few years it had only two arms. These arms and all the works were removed shortly afterwards, and the building is now used as a joiner's shop. Owing to its proximity to the roadway the arms, when revolving on a sunny day, reflected on to the road. It was a peculiar sight, and many a horse would refuse to go by till the mill was stopped.

Gayton Mill is the oldest tower windmill in Wirral, and is built of red sandstone rock. It has

not worked for about twenty-five years, and no arms are now left, although the works are absolutely complete. This small mill has three pairs of stones. In the small and antiquated cottage near by the last miller here brought up the large family of sixteen children.

Thingwall Mill, the last Wirral mill to be destroyed, was particularly well known for its oatmeal, a considerable amount of which was regularly sent across to Liverpool. A well-known milling family of Wirral, by name Capper, worked this mill for nearly two centuries. It was a large brick edifice, with a stage, and succeeded an earlier one, without a stage, in 1866. The arms of the old mill came to within a few inches of the ground, and several pigs and other animals are known to have been killed by the revolving arms striking them.

On New Year's Day, 1897, one of the arms of the last mill was blown down, and shortly afterwards Robert Capper died. Since then it has not worked. On Mrs. Capper's death, in 1900, the mill was bought for £50 by a local farmer, who resold it to a Liverpool timber merchant for twice the sum, and it was then demolished. The foundations of the mill were not on rock but on sand, into which the base was built for nearly 6 feet.

The site of the mill and the ground around has now been levelled and made into a garden, surrounded by a wall, into which several bits of millstones are built, as well as two date stones, one bearing "Robert Capper, Thingwell Mill, 1880," which came from the old kiln, and the other "re-erected by Robert Capper, 1866," the date of the erection of the last mill.

The small public-house at Thingwall used to be the mill house, and up till a few years ago had an old signboard with a painting of the mill.

Irby Mill was the last remaining peg mill in

Wirral. The situation of the mill was not so favourable for wind as it might have been, as it was considerably sheltered from the southerly winds. The present site of this mill is not the ancient one, for an earlier mill stood well up on the hill to the south of the now ruined one, about 100 yards away. The ancient position seems to have been a better one for wind, but this older mill appears to have been destroyed during the eighteenth century, and nothing now remains of it. Amongst the confused heap of ruins on the later site are several pieces of timber, one between 2 and 3 feet square, formerly the shaft, bears the date 1773 and initials $_{R}^{M}{}_{H.}$ You cannot infer from this that the mill was then built, as many a miller has scratched his initials and date on the shaft of his mill long after the actual structure was built. However, it is just possible that this was the date of the destruction of the older mill and the alteration of site, upon which a new one was to be built, and destroyed in 1898. The reason for its being pulled down, after it had stopped working ten to twelve years, was this: The mill was rapidly falling into ruin, and during several gales large pieces of wood were blown away some distance, and the miller, who still lives in the cottage close by, was much afraid of its being blown down upon his house, and in order to avoid this possible catastrophe decided to have the old thing pulled down at once. Three men undertook the job, and they set to work by pulling out some of the bricks at the base. They did not even temporarily support the mill, but actually went on pulling the bricks out until they heard the woodwork creaking above, and in a second or two this once picturesque little landmark was in a ruined mass on the ground. The miller described the escape of the three venturesome mill wreckers as absolutely marvellous, adding that not many men would undertake such a job. At the time of its

destruction the mill had three arms, losing the top one some years before.

The old Saughal Massie peg mill was destroyed about thirty years ago, and was situated near where the Saughal Massie road joins the main Hoylake Road about half a mile to the west of Moreton village. The site can still be seen near the south corner of the field attached to Mr. Griffiths' house. The mill house is still standing, and an old lane, partly lined with packhorse stones, but which is about to be macadamised and named "Griffiths' Road," connected the house with the mill. This house was the scene of a robbery and attempted murder about fifty years ago.

Richard Hale, the last Saughal Massie miller, was a member of a well-known old milling family of Wirral; several of them are now in the bakery business, whilst one still works Willaston Mill. At one time Grange, Irby, and Saughal Massie Mills were all in the possession of this family.

The old Saughal Massie mill was rented for the last few years by a man named Massey. His wife, who still lives in the village, said in a pathetic way that the mill was the ruin of her husband, and was not pulled down, but actually fell to pieces. The ruins were sold, and a portion of the works, with one pair of stones, were taken to Bidston Hall and worked as a steam mill in an outbuilding there for about twenty years. This pair of stones is still to be seen lying outside.

Another pair lies in front of the doorway to Mr. Maxwell's farmhouse along Parkfields Lane.

Grange Mill, situated on the top of Grange Hill, above West Kirby, was a very prominent landmark for sailors, as were also Bidston and Wallasey. This old peg mill was wrecked by the great gale of 6th January 1839, which is still looked upon by old people as the most violent storm which has ever

blown over this district. The mill was never rebuilt, but a few years later the present imposing beacon was erected on its site, and, as the inscription tells us, was placed there so as to form a landmark for the mariners frequenting the estuaries of the rivers Dee and Mersey.

The Mill Inn, Darmonds Green, West Kirby, is named after this mill, as some of the beams of the roof were made from the old arms.

One of the millstones was rolled down the hillside into a ditch, where it remained in view until lately, when the ditch was filled up and the stone covered.

The late Mr. E. W. Cox, in his paper on the antiquities of Storeton, published in this Society's *Transactions* for the year 1897, says: "On the south end of the quarry hill formerly stood the manor mill, now destroyed and almost forgotten. Some of the inhabitants have heard of it as a wooden mill built of oak timber, whose precise site there is now nothing to indicate."

A peg mill stood at New Brighton, at the top of Mount Pleasant Road, where Mr. T. R. Bulley's house now stands. This mill was pulled down about seventy years ago, but is still remembered as an extremely antiquated concern by a few old Wallasey residents. A millstone lay near the site until a few years since.

Another old peg mill stood at the top of Mill Hill, Oxton, but was destroyed fifty to sixty years ago. Whilst excavating below the roadway here a few years ago a large block of timber was found, which was believed to have formed part of the mill. The discoverers took it away, and it has since been made into two or three chairs.

Several more sites of old windmills are known, as at Noctorum, Liscard, and Poulton, but of some the only record exists in such names as mill field, mill hey, mill stream, &c.

Only four watermills have yet been mentioned, and, as far as we know, only three more ever existed in Wirral; these were at Prenton, Barnston, and Shotwick Castle. The watermill at Prenton, the exact site of which is described in "The Domesday Survey of Wirral,"[1] though mentioned in Domesday Book, has been disused for many centuries. The mill at Barnston stood close to the main road where it dips sharply into Barnston Dale. That at Shotwick lay just north of the Castle.

The first change in the flour-milling industry was caused by the introduction of steam as the means of propulsion in place of wind and water. This change was followed thirty to forty years ago by the much greater change of the substitution of metal rollers for the old stones. This has revolunised the flour-milling industry, and there are now only a few mills in remote country places where flour is ground in the old-fashioned way.

I will conclude with an extract from Messrs. Bennett and Elton's work, "History of Corn Milling" (pp. 312–314):—

"Time, which perfects all things, had thus no opportunity of perfecting the windmill ere the advent of steam converted the mighty wind-driven motor, the pride of its age, into quite a minor machine in the corn-milling world. As a picturesque object in the landscape, the windmill is still characteristic of rural England; its massy tower reared on prominent site, its sails exposed to 'all the airts the wind can blaw,' and busily revolving to them all; its cheerful aspect of life and motion on the quiet country side, impart animation and charm to many a pleasant spot in the shires; but otherwise the mill attracts little interest, frequently being devoted merely to the grinding of stuffs for cattle food, and rarely

[1] *Chester Arch. Soc. Proceedings*, vol. v. part i.

indeed endeavouring to compete with the giant roller-mills that enjoy every facility of transport and intercommunication. Very commonly such windmills are sold by auction at marvellously low prices: one recently, standing in a good corn-growing district in Suffolk, close to two well-populated towns, and comprising a six-floor tower mill, with patent sails and auxiliary steam power, with residence and gardens free of land tax and tithe, being sold for no more than £250. The interiors of the structures, which well repay a visit by the curious in such matters, has been pleasantly sketched recently by a rambler through the shires, who says: 'The interiors of these old mills are very dark, very puzzling, and extremely interesting; and it is always worth while, supposing you not to be already acquainted with the art and mystery of milling, to seek permission to inspect one. The miller, who is a contemplative man generally, may often be seen on the little platform at the head of the stairs which leads into the first floor of his windy place of business, gazing, with mildly speculative glance, upon the country spread out like a map beneath him. He is surprised that any one should wish to see the details of a business which is to him, through long acquaintance, so commonplace; but, politely enough, he does the honours of his dusty workshop. You must not mind your clothes becoming whitened with the flour which has settled thickly over floor and rafters and ledges—in every conceivable and inconceivable nook and cranny in fact. As for the miller, his face, his beard, his clothes, are all grey with thin deposits of it, while the creases of his waistcoat and the rim of his hat hold drifts of the powdered grain. There are generally three floors to windmills. The top one is a veritable cave of the winds; it rocks and echoes much more than any other part of the building with the whirl

of the great sails outside and the grinding of the machinery below. In the next storey the grain is tipped into the insatiable maws of revolving cog-wheels and rapidly circulating millstones, to come lower still, in the shape of flour, into great bins and other sacks. The miller, perhaps, opens the "bolter" for you, and, amid a cloud of fine flour-dust, you perceive the chief constituent of the future half-quartern loaf descending in a continuous stream. The smell encountered within a windmill is a peculiarly wholesome and appetising one, and everything recalls the leisured ways of old England before the fever of modern times seized upon the land.'"

We may take this as a picture of the work carried on in the few windmills still working, and of the many more demolished mills of Wirral.