

Redlynch & District Local History Society

Downton Water Mills

by Dr George Purcell

The subject of the talk was the three mills on Tannery Bridge; which were owned by the Bishop of Winchester: they existed in Downton at the time of the Domesday Book (1086) and an insight into millers, rents, repairs etc during the 13th to 15th centuries can be found in the Winchester Pipe Rolls. While the early information is in Latin, leases in English have been seen from 1586 onwards. At that time there were two corn mills and a fulling mill but during the 17th century the latter became a paper mill. For over 175 years papermaking was carried out by the Snelgar, Jellyman and Stradling families. There was also an edge-tool making business.

Several well-known families held the main lease at various times, notably the Eyres. Giles Eyre first had the lease in 1622 but it was forfeited when William Eyre was declared a 'lunatic' (financially unsound) in 1707. In 1821, a descendant, Daniel Eyre lent money to Joseph Jellyman but the latter became bankrupt in 1826. He and his family were shipped to Canada along with 200 other Downton paupers in 1836.

Eyre died in 1836 but his sons persevered until finally, in 1881, the Church sold the mills to Rev. Daniel Eyre, but he died shortly afterwards.

The paper mill was bought by Wiggins Teape and in 1899 sold to Mark Palmer & Sons. That business closed immediately after WW1 but some of the equipment was shipped to America by Dard Hunter who made use of it for a short while. It now resides at a museum in Atlanta, Georgia.

It is not clear when corn milling actually ceased but there are no millers named in trade directories after 1895. However, it is probable that by that time only animal feed was being produced rather than flour.

After the paper mill closed, all the mill buildings were purchased by the tannery opposite with a view to generating electricity, at first just for the tannery but a more ambitious scheme to provide Downton and Redlynch with lighting was proposed in 1928. Armfield water turbines were installed, augmented in 1933 by the very first Brush diesel generator.

The electricity station was run by one man, Steve Horner, for nearly 40 years. It closed in 1974 and only the distribution panel survives, in The Museum of Internal Fire in West Wales. The buildings, which date mainly from the 18th century, were sold in 1978 and have been converted to residential properties.



Our next talk is "From the Pitt-Rivers Collection" by Adrian Green of Salisbury Museum, at 7.30pm on Tuesday February 7th at Morgan's Vale & Woodfalls Village Hall