

Fishbourne – Mills

Sources –

Fishbourne: A Village History by Rita Blakeney

The Mills at Fishbourne by Rita Blakeney

The Fishbourne Book edited by Mary Hand

There have been mills at Fishbourne for at least a thousand years. There were two mentioned in the Domesday Book. Mills were a very important part of life. People could not go down to the local shop to buy all their food already prepared. They had to grow their own crops, raise their own animals or buy from the local market. The only way to get flour for baking bread and other cooking was to grow or buy wheat and take it to the miller to have it ground into flour. Bread was the most important food, especially for the poor people. Millers were important people in the community as everybody depended on them and they were often wealthy.

Fishbourne provided a good site for a mill because it had freshwater streams to provide water to turn the wheels and its position at the head of the creek meant boats had access to it.

The earliest mill (14th century) was called the Fresh Myll and was in use until the middle of the 16th century. It was probably on the banks of the northern end of the mill pond, further north than the later mills.

In the early 16th century, the Saltmill was built in the tidal channel. It used the tide to operate the wheels. A low wall was built with a sluice gate in it. The gates were opened at high tide and the pond behind the wall filled up. The gates were then shut and later the water was allowed to flow out making the wheels turn. It could be used for 10 hours a day. There were two mills under one roof and they ground both wheat and barley. The remains of the building can still be seen at low tide and the walls of the pond form a causeway that can be walked along with care. The millers lived in Saltmill House next to Mill House by the pond. In 1790 John Pannel owned the mill and the pond was called Pannels Pond. The salt mill was still in use at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the 18th century there was a great increase in the amount of shipping that used Chichester Harbour. Boats of up to 100 tons could sail up to Dell Quay and those up to 30 to 40 tons could sail up to the Saltmill. There were two wharves where boats could tie up. One of them was the embankment that is still visible. It was connected to a timber yard and there were 3 coal yards in use as well. The owner of the timber yard built a water cornmill at the end of the embankment, opposite the tidal Saltmill. However he ran out of money: the mill was taken over by George Farhill and became known as Farhill's Mill. It was later replaced by a smock windmill which burnt down about 1866.

The mill house for this mill was situated to the east of Saltmill House and was finally demolished in 1953 when it became unsafe. In the 1930s it was frequently flooded when a spring tide coincided with a strong south-westerly

wind and the family that lived there sometimes saw their supper float away on the tide!

Fishbourne mill at head of creek was probably built at the beginning of the 17th century but there is no record of it. A mill pond was dug and the springs diverted to fill it up to provide water to turn the wheel. The mill could only be worked when the sluice gates of the Saltmill were open or the whole area would flood. In the mid 19th century the miller of the Saltmill was a very bad tempered man. He also worked as a blacksmith and the sluice gates would often remain closed. So the people of Fishbourne decided to set up a post windmill next to the water mill so they could still grind their flour. In 1857 they moved a windmill 12 miles all the way from Rustington on a cart pulled by horses! Laid on its side it was as tall as some of the houses.

In 1874 a waterworks was built next to the springs that supplied the mill pond. The waterworks was needed to provide a source of clean drinking water for the city of Chichester and the surrounding area as drinking dirty water from the streams and rivers was causing people to become ill and sometimes die. However, taking water from the springs for drinking water meant that there wasn't enough water left in the mill pond to turn the wheel. They changed the course of the stream flowing through the meadows so it flowed into the pond instead of out of it. This helped to fill the pond but it still did not have enough water. In 1883 an engine was installed to work the watermill. The windmill was no longer needed and as it wasn't used, it started to fall apart and ended up as firewood in 1898.

During the latter half of the 19th century grain imports from such places as America increased and the wheat came to Fishbourne mills. The grain ships docked at Southampton, smaller boats brought the grain to Bosham and then it came by road from there.

In 1917 the mill caught fire and burned fiercely, possibly because there was smuggled brandy stored in the building! The mill pond was frozen at the time so there was no water to put the fire out. It was rebuilt the next year and electrically operated machinery was put in. It was used for about 10 years to make pig food. In 1944 it was turned into a factory for making macaroni for the next 10 years. In 1958 it was converted into flats.