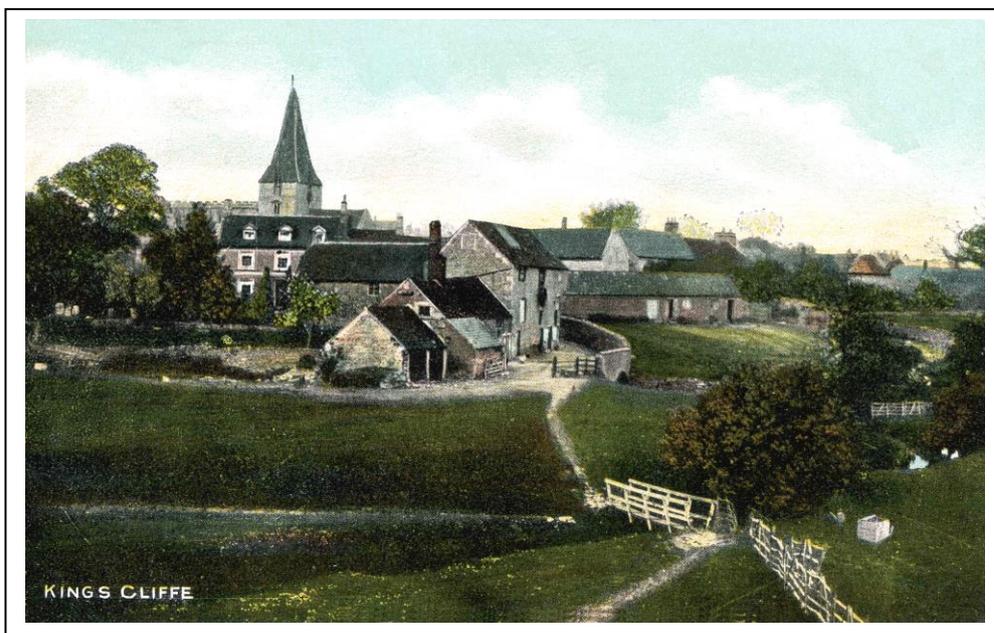


Mills of the past in King's Cliffe

(Based on extracts from 'The Mills of Old King's Cliffe – Watermill and Windmills', which you can read in full under the Historical Essays by Canon John Bryan on the Features page)

The Domesday Book of 1086 tells us there was a mill in the village which yielded 12 pence annually to the Lord who owned it. The topography of the Willowbrook valley provides an obvious natural site for a "drop" to accommodate a waterwheel. The former mill buildings, now a house, stand on that site, though they date back to only 1813. The Saxons must have built a bank to contain a reservoir of water for the mill – a tremendous labour! This mill was owned by the Crown and let to tenant-millers (or other lessors) until the House of Burghley purchased the Manor of King's Cliffe outright from the Crown in 1812.

We know very little about the history of the mill down the centuries, but the Burghley Archives tell us that the mill was leased to Thomas Jelley in 1813 on condition that he spent £600 in rebuilding it! His son, Henry Jelley, was born there in 1819 and subsequently held the mill from 1847 to 1857, before moving to nearby Yarwell Mill. After him the succession of millers appears to have been Thomas Clarke, Obediah Clarke, Lucas Wade, George Smith and Thomas Wadd. Thomas Wadd left the mill in 1909.



This postcard view from c1906 shows the bakery and tall chimney; the original granary at right angles to the mill itself; a walled garden behind Mill House, now the Rectory. The bank to the left, built in Saxon times, creates the head to the mill.

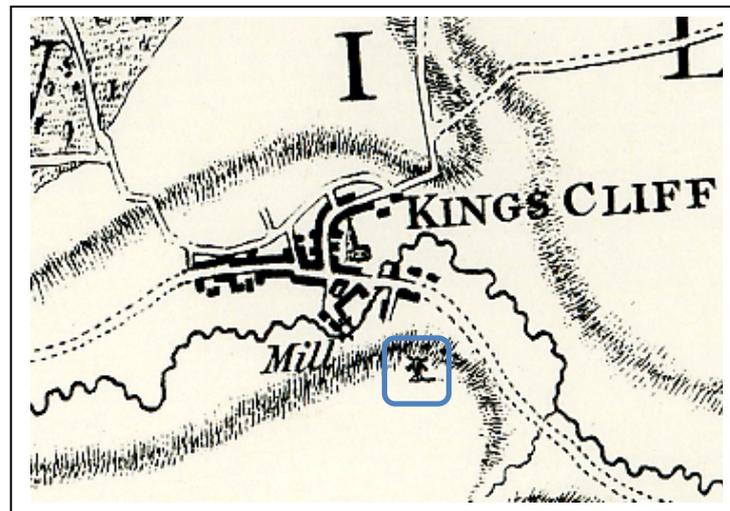
The property was put up for sale by the Marquis of Exeter in 1909. The Sale Notice described the mill as follows:

“Stone-built and Slated WATER CORN MILL fitted with water wheel, gearing and shafting and 3 pairs of stones (2 pairs French, 1 pair grey), smutter, and silk flour dresser, and has three floors, fitted with corn bins, &c a Bakehouse adjoining and Stabling for 4 horses, in addition to large Granary and Corn Stores.”

The mill, bakehouse and other outbuildings, the house, an adjoining cottage, and two paddocks were bought by James Kingston, formerly a baker in the village who had turned to farming. He was the last miller to work the watermill, using it in 1921 to grind the flour used

to bake his own daughter's wedding cake. Later his son, Eric Kingston, succeeded him at Mill House and, when he sold it and the old mill buildings in 1958, it was bought for the Church and subsequently became the Rectory. The old watermill buildings were converted for use as the Church Rooms. The Rectory remains, but the Church Rooms which had been the watermill were sold in 2000. The new owner has subsequently carried out very considerable work to restore the mill-race and recreate the waterwheel. (*Pictures of the restoration work can be found on our searchable archive.*)

There were also two corn windmills in King's Cliffe, both long since gone. The first of them can be seen – as well as the watermill - on this map drawn by Thomas Eyre and published in 1779:



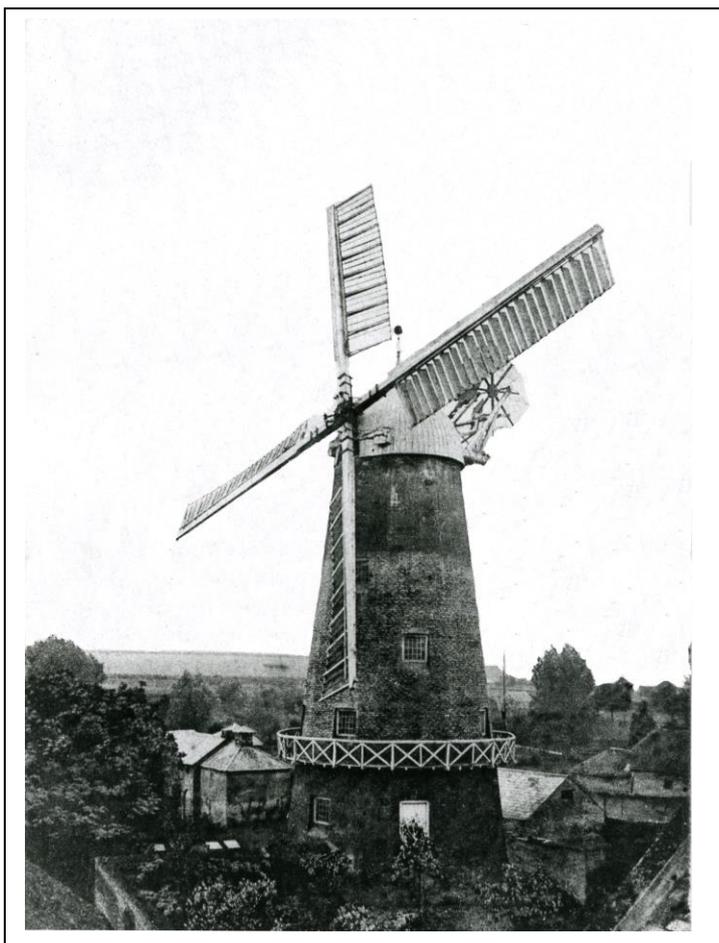
In the late 1700s this windmill was in the possession of members of the Boughton family, a notable family long established in old Cliffe. The mill was built of wood, either a post-mill or a smock mill. In 1813 it was owned by Thomas Gamble, miller and farmer.

When Thomas Gamble died in February 1840 his large estate came up for sale. The sale notice of 21st February 1840 included "an excellent Wind Corn Mill in full trade", standing in the field "Mill Close" next to Apethorpe Road. The tenant of the field was Mr. Thomas Howes; the tenant of the windmill was Mr. Benjamin Howes, his brother. By 1854, Benjamin's son, George Howes, owned the mill. He was a successful miller and farmer, known by his nickname of "Hoddy Doddy" Howes. His windmill was seriously damaged in violent storms which hit the village on 27th and 28th February 1860. The sails, top and stock were lost in the storms as well as part of the structure. With so much damage, the mill had to be demolished.

There was already another windmill in the village: a substantial tower windmill with maltings and brewhouse built in 1818 to the south of West Street. The mill was built for William Cunnington (1756-1850), a prosperous farmer, maltster and brewer. Details of its construction were given in an advertisement in June 1818:

"THE MILLWRIGHT'S WORK in the Building of a new TOWER WINDMILL in the parish of King's Cliffe, Northamptonshire; sails to be made upon Cubitt's plan and to carry about 8 yards length of cloth; a Vane to set the Mill to the wind, Break-wheel about 9 feet, Crown-wheel, Spur-wheel, and Nuts; 2 pair French Stones, about 4 feet 2 inches, 2 Machines complete; Sack-tackle, &c. &c. &c. , and to find all materials for and belonging to the same,

and complete ready for going; Carpenter's and Mason's work not included, and, excepting the wood belonging to the sails, the timber will be found by the advertiser."



The tower mill was completed in 1819, built entirely of dressed stone, with massive internal timbers to support the great sails and wheels, 80 feet high and approximately 26 feet in external diameter. Its fan-tail automatically kept the 4 huge sails facing the wind. As finally built the four sails were Cubitt's patent-shuttered; these drove the iron wind-shaft and 9 foot crown wheel, drove also three sets of stones, 2 French burrs and a Peak Grit set. There were five floors in all, and an external gallery-platform accessed from the second floor.

When William Cunnington died, his son also William (1801-1885) inherited his properties. On his death in 1885, it appears the windmill was acquired by Joseph Slingsby, who had a bakery in Park Street. He was followed by John Thomas Featherstone about 1905, who first had a bakery in Hog Lane [Forest Approach] and afterwards in West

Street. He was the last miller to work the mill which he did until the beginning of the First World War.

The tower windmill remained a landmark which could be seen from every corner of the village until 27th October 1925, when it was expertly demolished. The Peterborough Advertiser of Friday, 30th October, 1925 described how this was done:

"KING'S CLIFFE'S MILL CAPSIZED!

A Familiar Landmark Passes with a Thunderous Crash

TUESDAY AFTERNOON (27th October) saw the demolition, 'mid flames and smoke, of the old Mill off West. Street, King's Cliffe, the fall of the veteran being witnessed by a large crowd from various vantage points. For the past three weeks work has been proceeding in preparation for the mill's razing. Mr. J. E. Elsam (millwright) and his men have been underpinning the massive structure. Practically three-quarters of the base, which is about 20 feet in its interior diameter, had been knocked out and timber props inserted - a dozen each side of the doorway. On Tuesday morning the interstices were packed with oil-soaked brushwood and laths, making a pyre well over six feet high around the base. By 2.20 p.m. everything was ready and, just before the torch was applied, further gaps were knocked in the base at each end of the line of props to give the necessary cant to the tower, so that it should fall into the paddock, and not, by any mischance, on the West Street houses behind it.

At 2.27 p. m. Mr. Elsam walked round with a lighted torch, which he thrust into the straw at several points. There was a strong wind blowing right on to the mill, and the flames were very soon licking the walls. The empty tower, devoid of roofing, served as a shaft and, with the wind a tremendous draught was created, causing the flames to swirl practically to the top of the tower - a height of nearly

seventy feet. Within a very few minutes the upper floor and timbers, which had been left in the tower, were ablaze, and a wonderful scene was presented, a veritable inferno being visible through the doors and window-frames. There was very little smoke, the draught was so fierce that the flames roared their way through the dry old timbers. Barely seven minutes had elapsed from the pyre being fired before a crack was noticed in the masonry over the door, and almost immediately the props were noticed to bulge outwards. One hardly had time to hear them crack before a rumbling crack heralded the collapse of the tower, and then the structure fell - practically on its own base. After the dust had cleared, nothing remained of the imposing old landmark but a heap of stones, from which protruded, here and there, smoking beams. Thus was 600 tons of solid masonry brought down within a few minutes.

The event was witnessed by a large crowd who stood at the bottom, close to the site of the maltings and brewery, which have already been demolished. The work had been carried out by Mr. J. E. Elsam, on behalf of the Looms Salvage Company, Leicester, who bought the buildings for demolition from Col. Hodgkin. Pictorial record of the final scenes will be very complete, as, in addition to the Advertiser's cameraman, cinema photographers were in attendance from the British Gaumont Company. "

Regrettably, the cinema photography by the British Gaumont Company has not, so far, come to light.

Compiled by Sue Trow-Smith, August 2020