

MILLS OF THE MONNOW AND TRODDI BASINS

Stan Coates and Gordon Tucker

Introduction

The Monnow and the Troddi are both relatively small rivers which flow into the River Wye just below Monmouth. Between them they drain a region roughly 40km long by 15km wide, sloping generally to the south-east from an altitude of well over 400m in the Black Mountains to about 16m at Monmouth. Historically the region comprised Ewias and Archenfield, which around the time of the Norman Conquest were a de facto part of Wales, very unsettled, and almost certainly devoid of mills except in the vicinity of Monmouth. However, from the 14th century references to mills begin to appear, in the 16th and 17th centuries they were numerous, and by the end of the 19th there were over 60 sites in the region, mostly still occupied by working mills. We think it must have been a remarkably interesting group of mills, for those which retain their equipment at the present day show some most unusual features.

Kinds of Mill

The majority of the mills in these two river basins were concerned with the grinding of corn and, even when over certain periods some of the mills engaged in other activities, we find that at earlier and/or later periods, and occasionally at the same time, most of them dealt with corn as well. All of the mills which still have their equipment were corn mills, and even when all other equipment has disappeared, we still find evidence of their work in the form of abandoned millstones, either of the conglomerate or fabricated French burr types.

At least five of the mills were concerned at some time with the textile industry as fulling, tuck or walk mills (the three terms are synonymous):- Nos 4, 37, 39;5 and 36, the last two probably for only a short time, being mainly corn mills.

At least one mill (No 31) was used in part as a saw-mill. Two of the mills were at one time paper mills:- No 7 for over a century (c1729- after 1840), and No 5 for a short period around 1700, which makes it probably the first paper mill in Wales. Both were corn mills at other periods. Two of the mills were iron forges, and functioned as such for a long period. There is much documentation on Monmouth Forge (No 3) which was certainly active in 1754 and did not close until 1886. Less is known of Llancillo Forge (No 27).

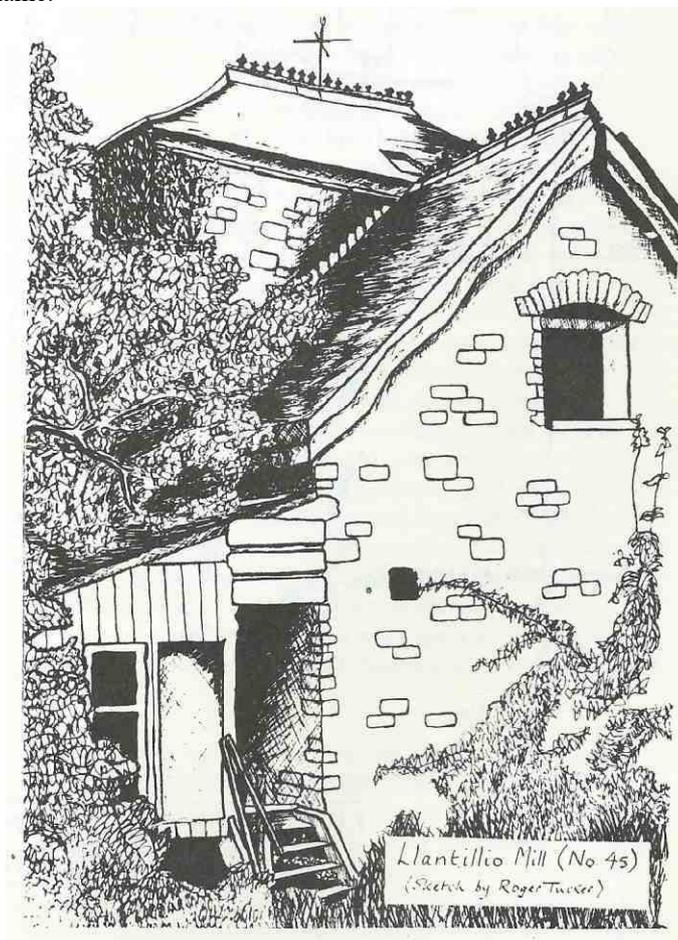
Monmouth's electricity supply was provided by water power for roughly the first half of the 20th century by a generating station on the site of, the Forge. At least two of the corn mills (Nos 32 and 40) had associated small hydro-electric plants.

Sources of information

Very little has been published about these mills with the

exception of Monmouth Forge, Monmouth hydro-electric station (both No. 3 on the map), and Perthir Mill. We have visited all the located sites and searched for the others, so that our descriptions are based on field work. We have also searched the records at the County Record Offices of Gwent and Herefordshire and in the Simmons Papers at the Science Library, London. Documentary references abound; well over 100 in the Gwent CRO, well-indexed, and about the same number (mainly 19th century directory references) in the Simmons Papers. However, although these documents tell us about the ownership and tenancies of the mills, and whether they were corn, fulling or paper mills, they rarely tell us anything about the structure, equipment, and watercourse arrangements.

Probably the most valuable sources are the old Ordnance Survey maps, the first edition 1-inch series being useful because of its availability in reprint form, and the first and second edition 25-inch series being indispensable; they are available for inspection at the National Library of Wales and at the British Library. The Tithe Maps and the accompanying Apportionments, dating from around 1840, are often also very useful as mills are frequently indicated explicitly or by adjacent fields being called "Mill Meadow" or some such name.



Note on the map

Attention is drawn to the key which gives the symbols by which the present status of each site is indicated. The map is to scale, so that the position of each site can be found by reference to the grid lines, and the names of villages and parishes from the OS maps. Names are shown against the sites only where specific local mill names are known. Mill sites known for certain are numbered 1 to 49. Probable mill sites are numbered P1 to P11.

Notes on mills of special interest

a) those with equipment still in situ

Skenfrith Mill (No 9) This is the only site in our region still functioning as a mill and using its water wheel regularly. Unfortunately the wheel drives only the hoist, electric power being used for milling. Composition stones are used, by Barron of Gloucester. A very short leat takes water from the river above the weir to a low breast wheel about 13ft by 3ft 6in with radial wooden paddles, the rest of the wheel being of iron. There has probably been a mill on this site for three centuries at least, but the present building is comparatively modern.

Home Farm Mill, Dulac (No 14) This small mill, dating from the second half of the 19th century, is brick-built and forms a small wing of a large barn. A wooden barrage, or set of sluices in the stream, could raise the water level, when required, by about three feet, so that water would flow into a culvert under the farmyard to the internal undershot wheel. This was 14ft by 3ft 6in, had iron rod spokes, and a makers' plate reading T. Bray, Hereford. It drove a single pair of French burr stones and some other equipment. This is the tiniest mill we have seen. Apart from the barrage, everything seems in very good order.

Dore Mill (No 18) The mill and mill house form one long range near Dore Abbey, and no doubt there was a mill here in early times belonging to the abbey. There is only a small amount of auxiliary equipment now to be seen, but the owner, Mr Soulsby, who is a professional repairer of old musical instruments, working on the premises, states that there is a horizontal turbine buried deep in the mud under the floor. As Armfields of Ringwood made the equipment still present, and were well-known as makers of small turbines, they were probably the makers of the buried turbine. Judging by the size of an arch, there was probably an internal undershot wheel of about 20ft diameter at some earlier time. Although the leat is a mile long, the head appeared to be only a few feet.

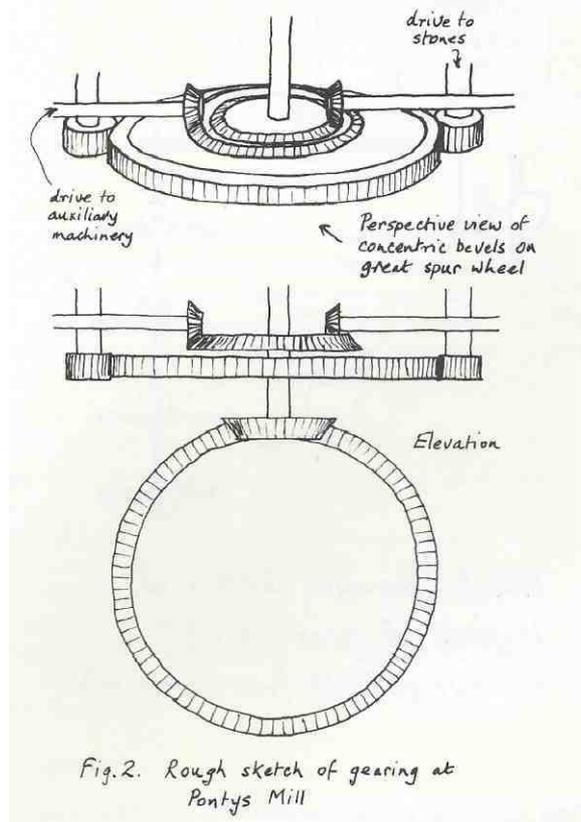
Poston Mill (No 21) This mill was working until 1947, using an Armfield turbine of 44hp to drive not only one pair of stones but also modern steel rollers for fine flour for the associated commercial bakery, which still operates. A long leat provided a head of over 20ft, and although the turbine was in place before 1913, there was almost certainly an overshot water wheel preceding it.

Rowlestone Upper Mill (No 26) This mill still has a working water wheel, although it is now used only for driving a circular saw, the milling equipment having been removed. The wheel is overshot, about 13ft by 2ft 6in, fed by a leat from above a rather picturesque waterfall on the little Cwm

brook. There was a bakehouse associated with the site. It is probably a very old mill, but it was known to be working as late as 1941.

Clodock Mill (No 32) This very attractive mill is joined to the mill house and dates back at least to the middle of last century. There is a short leat from the river, no pond, and a low-breast wheel about 18ft by 5ft 6in made by R R & W Miles in 1868. (The miller was R Miles in 1856 and 1863). There are two pairs of stones, one possibly from Derbyshire, the other French burr. The equipment is in very good order and could probably be worked. The owner, Mr Gwillim, is a retired mill engineer.

Pontys Mill (No 33) The name is confusingly similar to that of the nearby Pontynys Mill, but Pontys is very much smaller, attached to the mill house, with only two pairs of stones - one probably Derbyshire, the other French burr. A long leat with a stone-lined terminal basin feeds an overshot wheel about 15ft by 3ft 6in. A point of special interest is that the great spur wheel carries two concentric bevel wheels driving auxiliary equipment as shown in Figure 2. The mill is in rather poor condition although the house is occupied by the Moses family whose forebears worked the mill until about 1917.



Michaelchurch Mill (No 34) This is a large building with no adjacent mill house. There is a leat with a large stone-lined terminal basin, leading to an internal wheel about 14ft by 3ft 6in, with rod spokes, overshot. We could not obtain entry, but we believe there is no machinery still there except the wheel, which was probably made by T Bray of Hereford, as, apart from the buckets, it was identical with that at Home Farm, Dulac, which has its makers' plate.

Pontynys Mill (No 35) The origins of this mill have not been found, but throughout most of the second half of the 19th century it was in the hands of the Miles family, and thence until 1939 of the Bridgewater family. Since then it has been unused, but was rescued from dereliction by the present owners, Mr and Mrs Robertson, in 1956. It is a large mill, with four pairs of French burr stones, a high breast wheel 18ft x 4ft 6in, the gear layout shown in the rough diagram in Figure 3, the usual processing machines, and an associated bakery, not to mention a two-seat lavatory over the tail race! The mill house is separate.

The large number of stones and the bakery suggest a very extensive scale of business. Although the village of Longtown nearby is quite a large one, it is nevertheless surprising that there should have been three other mills within a mile or two operating at the same time.

There was a long leat terminating in a small pond above the wheel, now no longer carrying water.

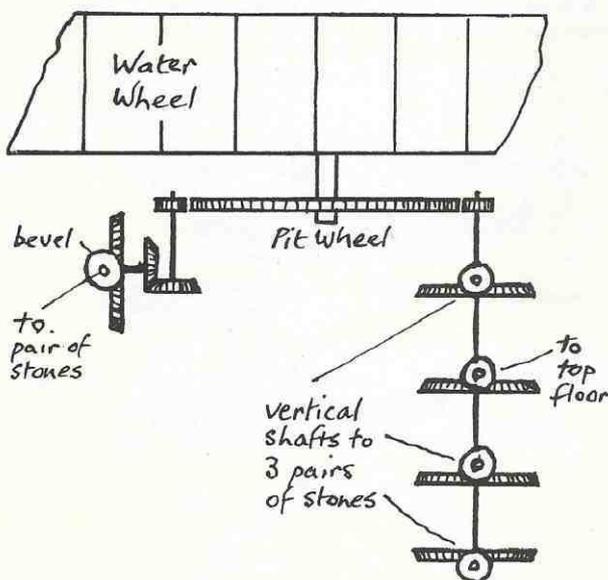


Fig.3. Rough sketch of layout of gearing at Pontynys Mill (not to scale)

Little Mill, Llandewi Skirrid (No 49) This small mill stands, rather derelict but complete, in an isolated position, having probably always been operated as an adjunct of Mill Farm. The leat and pond have been entirely filled in, but the wheel was overshot, about 18ft by 2ft 6in, and drove two pairs of French burrs. The arrangements seem quite conventional.

b) those with an especially interesting history

Monmouth Forge and hydro-electric station (No 3) The Forge was well-established on this site when in 1754 the

Swedish traveller Angerstein reported that there was one forge with three finery hearths and one hammer, and another with two chafery hearths and a hammer; 13 men were employed at the hearths and presumably many more in general duties. The large firm of Harford, Partridge and Co of Bristol owned the works for a long period around 1800. In 1869 the works went over to tinplate making under H T Griffiths & Co, but were dismantled in 1886.

The site was later used for the electricity works of the Monmouth Borough Council. The story of how these works came into being is a long and sad one, showing how badly local affairs can be mismanaged. The decision to have an electricity undertaking was made in 1890 and all along it was to be water-powered. Originally it was to use the water of the River Wye, but in 1895 it was decided to use the very much smaller Monnow instead, taking advantage of the already existing weir and water channels previously used by the ironworks, and of the site which could be readily cleared. Progress was very slow, there were financial troubles - financial control was later shown to be quite scandalously negligent - and it was mid-1899 before electricity was generated. The head of water was only about 6ft; three Gilkes turbines were provided, each of about 40hp. The generating capacity was later enlarged, the standby steam (and later diesel) engines were regularly used, and the station finally closed in 1948. The buildings are still in use for other purposes.

Perthir Mill (No 5) The Welsh name is Perth-hir (long hedge) and has been applied to the nearby house site, but we have no documentary evidence of its use for the mill. It is an old mill site; our references go back to 1597. Its main claim to fame is that it may well have been the first paper mill in Wales. Although containing a corn mill all through its long history, it also attempted other industrial activities "under the same roof", and in 1700 it was making paper. This was not a very long-lived enterprise, as by 1717 it had gone over to fulling. It was destroyed by fire in 1890.

Ruthlin Mill (No 7) This mill too had a possible Welsh name, and numerous versions of its English name. Our references go back to 1591, when it was a corn mill. It continued so until about 1720; in 1729 it was "lately converted to a paper mill". It continued in this function at least until the mid-19th century, and local tradition extends its operational life to about 1890. It probably antedated the considerable development of paper making in other parts of Monmouthshire, certainly that of the Whitebrook valley. The present house called Ruthlin Mill was part of the mill complex, the rest of which has completely disappeared.

Acknowledgements

Our main thanks are due to the many owners and occupiers of the mills or sites who have received us with consistent courtesy and cooperation. We are grateful also to the staff of the several record offices and libraries we have used, and to many other people for items of information.

References

As these are numerous we cannot list them in a short article like this, but the authors will be pleased to answer any questions relating to sources of information.