

A short history of Bridge Windmill: 1596-1954

There is no windmill in Bridge. A brief exploration of the village will however reveal the existence of Mill Lane, running up from the ford by Little Bridge Place to a row of eight postwar houses alongside an old bridleway at the top, named Mill Terrace, and a 1960's development in the centre of the village off Western Avenue called Windmill Close. These names are virtually all that remain to remind us of a once familiar landmark, whose site now lies beneath one of the fuel storage tanks on the corner of Mill lane and Union Road. The only building remaining associated with it is Mill Cottage in Union Road, built (it is said, about 1730, but in fact more probably 1830) sideways on to the road to give the miller a clear view of his workplace.

The first evidence for a corn mill at Bridge appears on the first detailed map of Kent issued by Philip Symondson in 1596, but it may have been in existence of course long before that. Windmills have been recorded in this country since the twelfth century. What is perhaps remarkable about Symondson's mill is that it is plainly not visible from Mill Cottage, for it is placed near the top of Side Hill, a quarter of a mile from the church, on the NE side of Bridge Hill. On a later map, in John Harris's *History of Kent* of 1719, it is similarly positioned, and represented clearly as a post mill (like Chillenden Mill), which is the oldest type of mill. It is not represented on the large-scale map (2 inches to the mile) by Andrews, Dury and Herbert of 1769, but then, nor are any other mills in Kent existing at that time. It reappears however on a map dating probably from 1825/6 in the 18th edition of *Paterson's Roads*. Here it is again placed at the top of Side Hill, on the western side of the ancient track from near Higham, which cut through the woodland and ran down into Patricxbourne, very close, indeed, to the viewpoint chosen by Jan Siberechts for his panorama of Bifrons House and Patricxbourne of 1705-10, (a viewpoint now obliterated by the by-pass). It is reasonable to suppose too that it was also adjacent to the ancient track that ran from the top of Keepers Hill in Patricxbourne all along behind the woodland above Side Hill to Bridge Hill, a track that still exists on the Patricxbourne side of the Bridge by-pass, but which was on the Bridge side stopped up in 1830. Thus it would not be wholly fanciful to imagine the painter seated within a convenient distance of the mill, and the resulting view confirms one's sense that this is indeed a better site for a windmill than that down in the valley, albeit on a small eminence, and closer to the village. The Black Mill at Barham was after all quite some distance from that village.

The position of Bridge Mill prior to about 1820 is confirmed by the documentary evidence, which also introduces us to some of the millers. The *Kentish Gazette* of 26-30 May 1786 reported that

On Saturday last was committed to St Dunstan's gaol. . . John Kent, of this city, miller, charged on the oath of John Pilcher, of Bridge, miller and baker, with having stolen out of his mill in the Parish of Patricxbourne, a bag, containing upwards of one hundred weight of wheaten flour. . . *the property (1)*

Our first known miller is revealed. Mr Pilcher was not a young man in 1786, and could well have begun his work forty or more years before that, for the *Gazette* shortly afterwards (13-17 April 1787) carried a small advertisement:

Wanted, a man who understands the business of a MILLER and BAKER. . . He may have constant work and good wages by applying to John Pilcher, at Bridge. (2)

Eighteen months later Mr Pilcher was dead.

Wednesday last died in Bridger's Alms Houses, in this city, Mrs Pilcher, aged 94, mother of the late Mr Pilcher, miller, of Bridge. (*Gazette*, 2-5 September 1788)

On 10-14 October of the same year an advertisement was placed, offering for sale furniture 'of the late Mr John Pilcher, Baker, at Bridge.' Does this suggest he had already given up as miller? And perhaps the *Gazette* gives a clue as to the identity of the man who applied for work in 1786:

Tuesday was married at Boxley . . . Mr George Cleggett, miller and baker at Bridge, to Miss Frances Parks, at Boxley (8 July 1791).

Mr Cleggett's business was evidently prosperous:

WANTED. An apprentice to a miller and Baker - a stout healthy lad, of a creditable family. Apply to George Cleggett, Bridge (12 August 1791).

With more hands available, Mr Cleggett was able to expand:

Cleggett, miller and baker, Bridge, takes this opportunity of returning his most grateful acknowledgements to the neighbouring gentry and inhabitants of Bridge for the many past favours received in the above branches: at the same time begs leave to inform them, he has just opened a corn-chandler's shop, and hopes by the strictest attention to every article of his business, he shall be able to merit their future as well as past favours. Beans, Peas and Barley, to be sold ready-ground. N.B. Gentlemen who keep dogs may be supplied with oatmeal, in any quantity, on the most reasonable terms.

(8 October 1791)

Shortly after this (26 October 1791) we find a further advertisement for 'a sober miller', presumably because of the expansion of business, rather than because his apprentice had been too stout or healthy in his indulgence.

By the early years of the following century the mill had been taken over by John Fagg, who in the *Gazette* of 18 July 1808 was in his turn advertising for 'a journeyman wind-miller'. Later that same year we find explicit reference to the location of the mill:

MILL ROBBED, Whereas in the night of Wednesday last, the 30th November, the Mill belonging to John Fagg, on Bridge Hill, was broke open by forcing the hinges of the door, apparently with an iron crow or chisel, and a Quantity of flour with TWO SACKS marked 'J.Fagg, Bridge Mill' were stolen thereout and traced for about half a mile across the fields, leading towards Canterbury by Patricxbourne. Whoever can give information so that the offender or offenders may be convicted, shall receive a reward of TWENTY POUNDS from the aforesaid John Fagg (2 December 1808).

Such a substantial reward underlines both the value of flour, and the vulnerability of mills.

The final chapter in the history of this mill is tantalisingly recorded by the *Gazette* of 7 July 1818:

To be sold. . . a CORN WINDMILL, driving two pair of stones, and machinery complete and a storehouse near. . . both in good repair, as the same are standing . . . on a piece of land at Bridge Hill . . . now in the occupation of Mr John Fagg, miller. The said corn windmill and storehouse must be taken down and removed by the purchaser, on or before the sixth April next . . .

The reason for the strict deadline is unclear, and as has been mentioned above, the 1826 map still marks the old location, so the mill may not have been removed so swiftly; alternatively, the change may not yet have been picked up. The sequence of events in the 1820's remains mysterious. The period around 1820-1830 was however one of great alteration in the village as a whole. The great houses round about were changing hands. The Taylors who had owned Bifrons (and much else besides) sold the house to Lord Conyngham in January 1830. Edward Taylor the younger had married the heiress of Bourne, Louisa Beckingham, in 1802, and after her father's death sold that property too to Lord Conyngham. Charles de Secondat, Baron Montesquieu, who had been living at Oswalds in Bishopsbourne since his escape from the French Revolution and who had bought Bridge Hill House (originally owned by the Rev. John Beckingham) for £1500 in 1793, died there in 1824. The property was then taken by the Rev. Edward Gregory, who immediately entered upon major improvements, including the stopping-up of the road mentioned earlier. This most conveniently coincided with the realignment of Bridge Hill north-eastwards and the grading of its slope under the Turnpike Acts, which was taking place in 1829-30, along with a similar treatment of Town Hill on the Canterbury side of the village (hence the very steep slope at the entrance to Dering Road). A few years earlier, in 1816/17, the principal road from Bridge to Patricxbourne, which ran right past the front of Bifrons, was stopped up part way along (Laundry Lane, now Conyngham Lane), and a new road built (Bekesbourne Road) around the perimeter of Edward Taylor's land. Pressure of traffic was being noticed even at this early date.

In the midst of this, on 19-20 January 1830, at the same time as Bifrons was sold, an agreement was drawn up between Edward Lord Skelmersdale, Sir Herbert Taylor (by now Lieutenant General) and Edward Taylor, late of Bifrons on one side, and James Ashenden, farmer and William Sankey, surgeon of Bridge on the other, for the sale to Ashenden for £200 of

All that piece of land called or known by the name of the Three Corner Meadow containing 2 acres, 2 roods 7 perches formerly in tenure of Henry Cosoer, afterwards of Charles Howard, late of said James Ashenden and then of Joseph Gardener and William Fagg the younger . . . abutting to a bridle way leading from the village of Bridge to a place called Linsey Bottom towards the north, to the highway or road leading from the village of Bridge to a place called Street End towards the west or south-west, and to lands formerly of the heirs of Mr Forde and then belonging to the Rev Barham [RH Barham, *alias* Thomas Ingoldsby, 1788-1845, who at the time owned Bridge Farm in the High Street, demolished in 1962] towards the south-east, which said piece was theretofore used with and formed part of a farm called the Upper Pett Farm late in occupation of Richard Garner deceased, and was theretofore described as all that . . . in occupation of Henry Crosoer . . . And also all that corn windmill and other the buildings then lately erected and built on said land by and at the whole costs and expense of said James Ashenden [though in a later document, of 21 August 1878, Thomas Ashenden is said to have been the builder]. (East Kent Archive Centre ref. U438 T27)

By 1830 therefore a mill existed, though it had only lately been built, on the site in the village. Was this the same mill that had been demolished elsewhere a few years earlier? Both had two pairs of stones, but this was a smock mill, albeit quite a small one. The mill on Bridge Hill was, by the time of its demolition, unlikely still to have been the post-mill of the 17th century. Nor was wholesale removal of a mill impossible, although the terrain between Bridge Hill and Three Corner Meadow was difficult:

Many . . . Kentish mills were moved . . . from one part of a village to another or into an adjoining parish, often to take advantage of the prevailing south-westerly winds from a more exposed position. . . . Often, to remove a mill, the octagonal body was divided up into eight sections by sawing down the eight cant (corner) posts; then, in re-erection, these sections would be bolted together again. One of the original cant posts bolted together in this way can still be seen in Ripple Mill. . . . Frequently, however, the body of the mill was conveyed intact, and one can imagine that difficulties sometimes arose in the conveyance of such a huge structure. . . . (W.Coles Finch, p.63)

The day after James Ashenden bought the site from the Taylors, he turned a tidy profit by leasing the mill and land to Ann and Sarah Garner for 500 years at a price of £400 (plus ten shillings to Dr Sankey). Ann Garner died on 8 March 1831 however, and the land was passed to Charles Edward Howard, a veterinary surgeon. Ashenden died in September 1832, and the following year Sarah Garner sold out to Thomas Sladden, who, having bought out Ashenden's children in turn sold the mill to Thomas and Benjamin Johnson (2 March 1832) for £650 - a profit of £250 therefore. Curiously, according to the 1841 census, Thomas Johnson is recorded as residing at 45 Union Street (in Bridge? - the Old Mill House today is number 41, but that includes many modern houses). Thomas ran the mill until his death in 1856. His long tenure, of some 24 years evidently left a mark on the village, for he was still remembered nearly a century later:

Local history has it that the figure of the dusty miller was a familiar sight in the village, for his practice was to deliver flour to his customers personally, his method of transport being the back of a donkey. One presumes, of course, that he loaded the donkey with his sacks of flour and he himself led the animal through the village. (*Folkestone Herald*, 25 March 1933)

When Johnson died the mill seems to have been worked for a while by Gilbert Huxster, but in 1859 the miller was George Fryer, who was Benjamin Johnson's executor and brother-in-law. Fryer kept the mill running for a further twenty years or so, while Benjamin seems to have been in charge of Barton Mill in Canterbury.

In 1865 Benjamin Johnson died (11 March), and a couple of years later his widow, Mary Ann, took out a mortgage from one George Adams (?a cooper) for £500, presumably to buy back Fryer's interest, yet in 1874 Fryer also paid Adams £500 to recover ownership. After Mary Ann's death in 1875 (15 March) however ownership of the whole property was conveyed (January 1877) to the Johnson children Susanna, Martha Francis, Ellen Eliza, Emily and John Gilbert, with Fryer remaining as tenant, In the following year (21 August 1878) the Johnsons sold the whole property to the Rt. Hon Arthur Baron Wrottesley (Baron Wrottesley, Lord Lieutenant of Staffordshire) and Theodore Henry Brinckman, Bart. for the princely sum of £1000. The property had once more reverted to aristocratic ownership!

At this point the 24 year old John Gilbert Johnson was prospering, for he was the employer of four men at Barton Mill, and of a maid at home, where his eldest sister Susanna now ran the household (Wrottesley and Brinckman on the other hand employed 32 servants between them).

On 10 April 1879 the 65 year old Fryer gave up his tenancy of the mill, which was valued then at just £98 10s 10d - notably including a sack chain 50 feet long and two iron pinions to the stones - and retired with his wife Mary Ann (a daughter of Thomas Johnson) a few yards down the hill to number 5 Union Road. Some months later (October 1880) John Johnson transferred the tenancy to William White, who in his turn moved into the Mill House with his wife Rebecca and thirteen year old daughter Emily. William had been born in 1829, and was therefore by now well into middle age. The fact that his daughter was born in Bridge suggests that Mr White had already been working at Bridge Mill for some years. At this point the mill was judged to be worth no more than £65 9s 6d, including the 'lifts etc. for sweeps . . .and three old sails'. The reference to (canvas) sails suggests that the mill at this time was fitted with 'common sweeps'. Later photographs suggest that these were subsequently modernised as 'patent sweeps', with automatic adjustment of the shutters, depending on wind speed.

By the last decade of the century industrial milling was offering stiff competition to the old trade, and Mr White endeavoured to upgrade the mill with the addition of a steam-engine to assist the wind. This was however no more than a short-term solution, and when the mill was taken over by William Manwaring in 1900 he endeavoured to improve productivity further by installing a Blackstone oil engine in an outside store to run an additional pair of stones. The inevitable could not be put off for much longer though, and in 1907 wind-power was abandoned. A long period of slow decay set in as first the sweeps were removed and then the body of the mill demoted to serve merely as a general storehouse. The mill probably ceased work grinding corn by whatever means sometime during or just after the first world war. Mr Manwaring moved on to become the owner of one of the last remaining working windmills in the country (before their recent revival as a 'heritage' industry) at Willesborough. The last journeyman ever to have worked at Bridge Mill was remembered (in 1954) as one A. Pegden.

By 1933 when the Lemar family replaced Mr and Mrs Charlie Hollands in the Mill House the mill site was being used as a coal yard, an outlying depot of HE Burniston, a Canterbury coal merchant, and Mr GF Lemar was employed to expand the local coal trade. His daughter Gladys still (2000) resides at 41 Union Road, the Mill House, though the coal yard in its turn has been replaced by the storage tanks of Messrs Corralls liquid fuel depot. The one remaining relic of the mill itself is a millstone in the front porch of the Mill House.

Early in 1933 the remains of the mill were described by the correspondent of *The Folkestone Herald*:

The tower of Bridge Mill is covered with tarred sheeting. It therefore has a sombre aspect and is not as picturesque as some of our old derelicts. It is, in fact, rather a sorry spectacle, with two sweeps missing and only the midlings remaining of the other two. The stage. . . has vanished entirely, and the fantail has also disappeared. The body of the mill, however, is fairly sound, and there are two floors of brickwork beneath the weather-boarded structure. (25 March 1933)

Mr J Holman, reporting the state of affairs in June of the same year, relates:

The midling has been cut off at the end of the cheek pieces, the cap reboarded and creosoted. The back of the cap has been cut off short and boarded up, while the tower has also been repaired. Although the cap looks a bit strange, I am glad that repairs have been carried out since the mill was getting into a bad state. I believe it is now used as a store. (W Coles Finch, p. 313)

The mill survived, decaying gradually, through the second world war and beyond, until at last the end came, witnessed by the late Mr CP Davies. On Friday 15 October 1954 four men arrived to commence demolition. By midday on Wednesday 20th they had, with the aid of a crane, reduced the mill to its unusually tall, two-storey tapering brick base - tall perhaps to compensate for its relatively low-lying position.

There remained on the site at the time of my visit the cast iron windshaft 11'4" long, canisters 9" by 1'2½", tapering from top to centre thus >. Brake wheel wooden, clasp armed, wood geared, cant 1'2" deep, cogs 3" pitch, 3 5/8" face. Brake - wood; curb - wood; iron truck wheels. Upright shaft - in two parts; upper part iron, carrying iron wallower, with wood ring to drive sack hoist. Wallower had four arms, cogs 3" pitch, 4" face. Lower part, upright shaft wooden, octagonal in section, spur wheel wooden, clasp armed, 1½" pitch, 3" face. (CP Davies, MS notes)

The major part of the mill gear was thus still in place and well-preserved. Even the body might have been saved if it had survived another 15 years or so. But an age which allowed the destruction of Bridge Farm had no time for an old windmill.

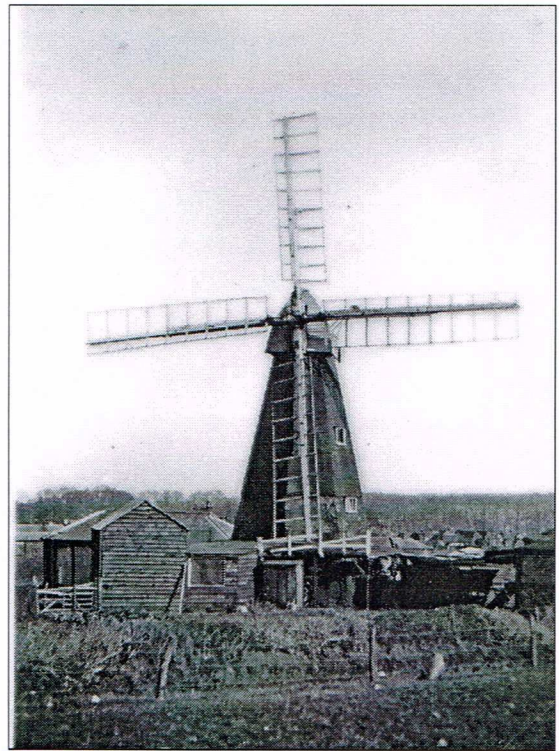
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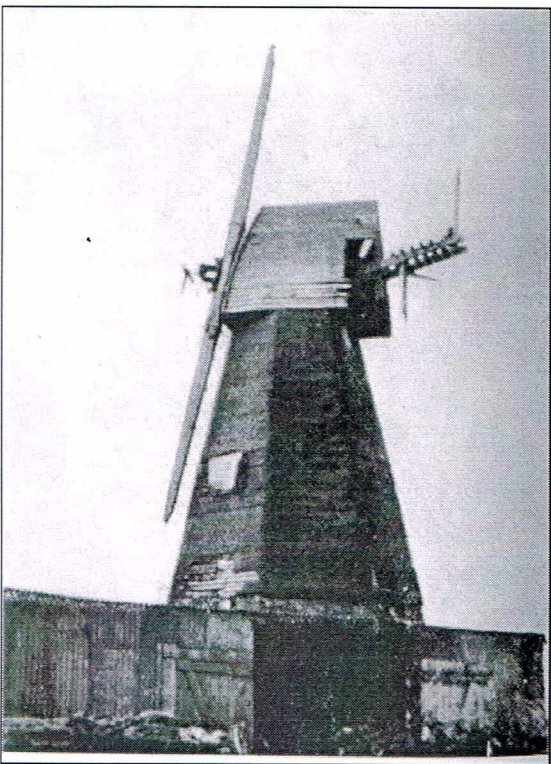
The mill in working condition before 1910 © Crown Copyright. NMR



W Coles Finch



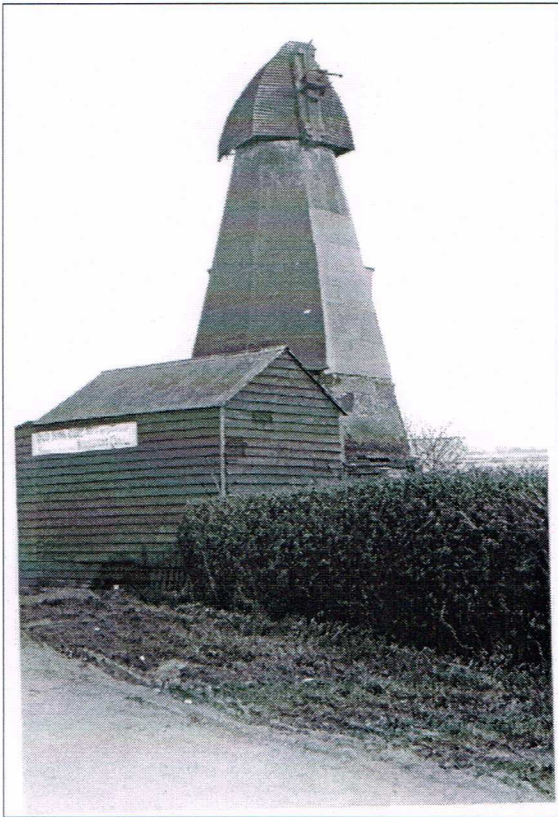
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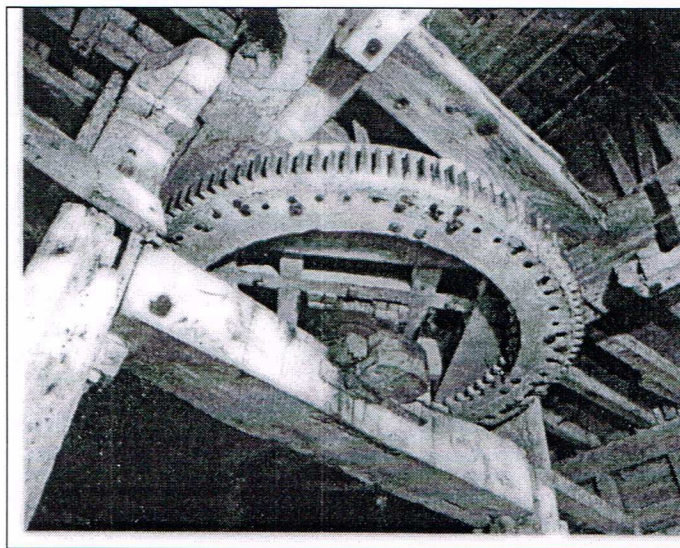
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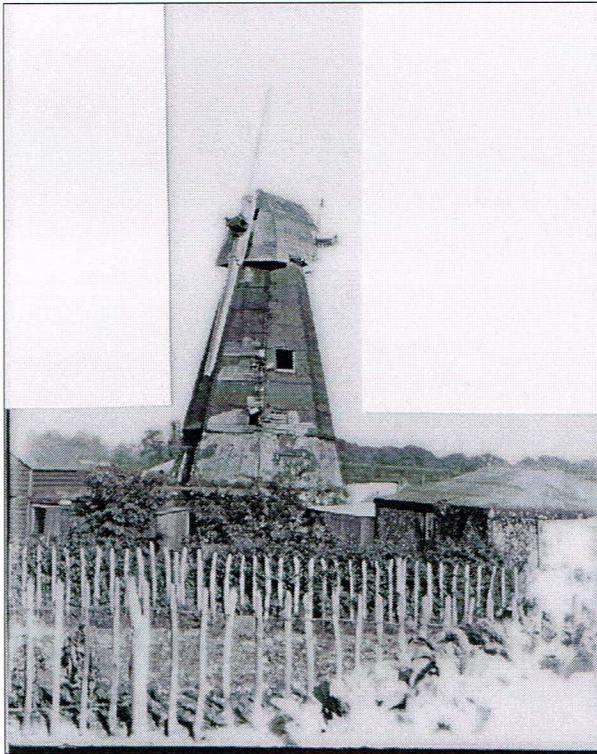
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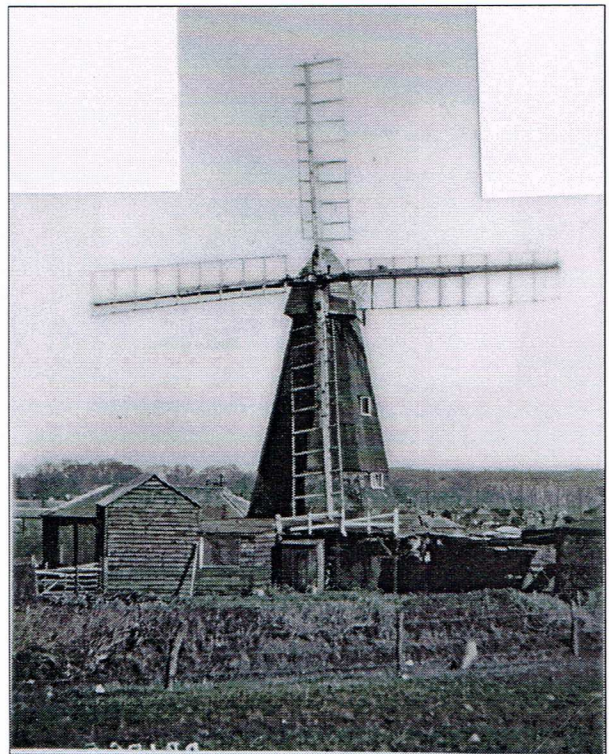
DW Muggeridge



Bridge Mill, Kent. Great spur wheel and wedge
Adjustment of upright shaft footstep bearing.
Muggeridge Collection, University of Kent



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Sources: W Coles Finch: *Watermills and Windmills*, CW Daniel, 1933, reprinted 1976
East Kent Archive Centre, ref. U438/T27
The Folkestone Herald, Saturday March 25th 1933
CP Davies Collection of Mill Memorabilia, UKC Library
Mill photographs by DW Muggeridge, UKC Library
MS notes by Mrs G Herbert, October 1998, in BDHS Archive