

Narborough Bone Mill - A Brief History



The story of the Narborough bone mill really begins with Revd. Henry Spelman, the last of the Narborough Spelmans, who were lords of the manor for over 300 years. When Revd. Henry died in 1810, the Revd. Robert Marriott, a Suffolk vicar who had married Henry's favourite niece, became the beneficiary of the River Nar navigation rights. He also inherited the extensive granaries and coal yards situated on the present Narborough

Maltings site. The difficulty of being an absentee landlord was compounded when he was transferred to a parish in Dorset, but his agent William Studd looked after his business affairs. He was back in Suffolk for his last few years, and by the time he died in 1819 he had started to build the Narborough Maltings.

Two of Revd. Marriott's sons, John and Robert, took over the business and conducted a profitable trade at the Maltings, They also controlled the river trade, a slow process that involved horses plodding along the towpath hauling heavily-laden barges and negotiating ten staunches (flashlocks) between King's Lynn and Narborough. The staunches regulated the depth of water, but in winter they often froze, and in a hot summer the water level took longer to build up. In about 1838, however, with business booming, the Marriott brothers decided to expand. On a carefully chosen site a mile down river from the Maltings, they built the first part of the bone mill, a long narrow building that after a few years would be more than doubled in size. With no near neighbours, the stench of rotting carcasses and boiling bones had to be endured only by the bargemen and mill workers, who probably got used to it.

Bones for grinding into fertiliser were brought to the mill by barge, or by farm wagons that trundled along the river bank. Farms and slaughterhouses provided the raw material and villagers would take down 'a penn'orth of bones to be ground'. However, these sources would not have been enough to sustain such a huge enterprise. In the mid 19th Century shiploads of bones from North Germany were arriving at the port of King's Lynn almost every week. Some of these were then loaded onto the Marriotts' barges and towed upstream to the mill. It is said that as well as supplies of animal bones, exhumations from graveyards were included in such cargoes, a view that has been given some credence after part of a human skull was recently unearthed at the mill site. What did people think of this practice at the time? The opinion of those in the trade was that 'a ton of German bone dust saves the importation of ten tons of German corn'.



Tradition has it that whalebone from the blubber house on the banks of the Nar at Lynn was also shipped to the mill, a view that is offered by a 1970s Norfolk Museums survey of Norfolk waterways. The fact that the King's Lynn whaling trade had finished some years before the bone mill was built does not necessarily mean that whalebone was not used there. We know that Fison's of Thetford imported whalebone for use as fertiliser; the Marriotts could well have done the same. Newspaper reports, too, show that occasionally whales were still being caught and brought into Lynn well after the trade finished.

A few miles away at West Dereham a seam of coprolites, that is fossilised animal dung, was discovered and mined in the 1870s. Coprolites were another valuable source of fertiliser, rich in phosphates, and several have been found on the bone mill site. In the early days bone meal was produced with no additives, but experimentation found that by mixing it with sulphuric acid, resulting in superphosphate, crop yields increased. Analysis of material found, along with the remains of large glass jars and stoppers, have shown that this process was indeed used at the mill.

The size of the bone mill has astonished those working on its preservation, yet no detailed plans, company accounts or reports of it being built have so far been found. Until recently a single photograph of the original building was thought to exist, but two more have come to light, including a 1920s picture showing the mill half demolished, with its tall chimney intact. A complex system of drains, channels and cisterns has been located and recorded, extensive floors of brick and asphalt uncovered, and a raised base for machinery exposed. Adjacent to the north wall is a platform thought to have been the base for a steam engine; because of the mill's size it is unlikely that the waterwheel could have provided enough power to drive all the machinery housed in the building. Countless nails, staples, hooks and assorted pieces of metal have been found, but the most solid artefacts are the four millstones and the base of an elevator that took the bone meal to the next level. When bagged up and loaded onto the barges it was transported to Lynn, or to the Narborough Maltings where local farmers could purchase the quantities they needed.



A potential conflict between the working of the mill and the passage of barges along the river was resolved by the construction of a lock chamber with a pair of mitre gates to control the water level. The mill-race was diverted from this chamber so that the wheel had a constant head of water.

The eventual downfall of the firm of J and R Marriott was due to a number of circumstances. John Lewis Marriott, at the age of twelve, was 'pitchforked into the business' when his father John died from head injuries sustained from being thrown from his dogcart. After his uncle Robert died in 1867 JL took responsibility for the business, but another partner, Herbert Marriott, accidentally killed himself with a pistol he purchased in King's Lynn. Bad debts among farmers didn't help, and eventually the railway proved to be quicker, cheaper and more efficient than transport by water. When the Nar Valley Drainage Board took over the navigation rights, the Nar Navigation era came to an end after 125 years.

Fertiliser production at the mill ceased before the turn of the century and the building was demolished a little at a time by the Maltings workforce; bricks and carrstone were recycled in the village, and the huge amount of machinery, if not already removed, may have been used towards the War Effort. By the 1920s, all that was left was the wheel, some crumbling brickwork and buried secrets.

Much has been achieved since the project was started in 2015. Our Visitor Centre, a beautifully restored railway wagon, stands proudly on site. For decades the 16 foot diameter waterwheel stood idle, a symbol of Victorian success and subsequent failure. Many of its buckets have been replaced, a new wall has been built around it, a replacement staunch gate frame has been fitted, and for the first time in more than 120 years the wheel has been briefly, but spectacularly, set in motion.



Investigative work has come up with more questions than answers, but gradually the complex workings of the mill are beginning to be understood. The project has attracted a great deal of interest, and it is particularly rewarding that local schoolchildren have been involved. The project team await the discovery of documentary evidence that will tie all the loose ends together. It must be out there somewhere.....

Article written by David Turner 05/2016



Thank you for visiting. For further information on the progress of the preservation project including a weekly blog and many photos - please visit our website.

bonemill.org.uk



Information Needed: If you have any information about the bone mill, family stories or photographs we would love to hear from you.

Would You Like to Get Involved? We are always looking for volunteers to help further explore and excavate the site as well as assisting with research. Our friendly group meets on site every Thursday. Refreshments (and shelter) are available in our visitor centre.

E-mail us: info@bonemill.org.uk

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