THORPE HAMLET HISTORY GROUP

Article 24 : WINDMILLS IN THORPE HAMLET, A BRIEF OVERVIEW

By Steve Bloomfield

As you might expect the steep hill, which is a comparative rarity, in Norfolk between the Station and Mousehold was an ideal location for windmills and there are a number that have fairly good records available because of council permissions, sales, bankruptcies (sadly more common than you may expect) and local knowledge.

The end for most was an ignominious slide into dereliction at the end of a long life having their brick, stone and wood construction demolished piecemeal for local building projects.

Occasionally one would end spectacularly in an explosion or fire and be recorded in the local press, as in the case of the Sprowston postmill, on Mousehold (which may have been the windmill painted by Crome, now hanging in the Tate Gallery London), burned down in 1933 when surrounding gorse on the heath caught fire just before the mill was due to be handed over to the Norfolk Archaeological Society for preservation[1].

The very informative Norfolk Windmills site[2] lists seven windmills in Thorpe Hamlet although local people believe there were more.

In most cases they have completely disappeared, however traces of two remain on St Leonards Rd. On the green over the road from the Nansa charity offices and hairdressers at No 219, it is possible to see the remains of the circular base (right hand side with your back to the shops). It's not easy to find and easier to see in early spring. This was known as Jennings mill and ended it life at the end around the turn of the 19/20th century as a grain mill, but its namesake Jennings was a sawmiller in the 1850s & 60s. It appears on a map in 1794 but certainly existed before this.

Just down the road is the millers cottage (now called Windmill Cottage) for another mill, any remnants of which are now under the garages for the newer houses next door. This mill was a tower mill known by the name Gallant's Mill. The first record is the appearance again on a map of 1794, so it must have been older than this and having passed through many miller's hands (bankruptcy and death generally the reasons) it was demolished in 1906. Like most mills its function changed often. If poor harvest was the reason for a grain millers business failing conversion to a sawmill was often the next owner's option and vice versa. The Bakers Arms pub almost opposite (now converted to houses) was originally a bakery and ale house and almost certainly got its flour from this or Jennings mill. See the map at the end of the article.

The Victorian building boom in this area saw plenty of sawmill business towards the end of the windmill's life although flour milling was always the predominant business, and most mills converted to saw mills retained their grinding stones.

The Black Mill on Mousehold appears on maps for 1750 but again was probably older.

The original mill was dismantled and sold in 1841 then immediately replaced by a smockmill on the same site.

There was a mill close by the Mottram Memorial on St James' Hill and this was probably another post mill. It's possible that this mill may have been the same mill as depicted by a Crome in his 1810 picture mentioned above.

Unsurprisingly the Windmill Pub in Knox Road now converted to a house with more houses fronting Plumstead Rd on its old carpark, was on the site of an open trestle mill which was later replaced by a tower mill. It was working in 1757 when thieves (later caught) stole a sack of flour. Like many mills there is no recorded date for its original construction and in 1816 the last record of it was when miller William became bankrupt. Another mill was built on the same site or close by in about 1825 and continued in use until about 1906 when it was demolished although a mill house remained and was still there in 2004.

Local knowledge, although little archive information, indicates there was another mill on the Water tower site possibly between the Water tower on Telegraph Lane and the small waterworks carpark on Quebec Rd. However, the OS maps between 1840 & 1890 show the site of an old windmill much further back on the site now hidden under the reservoir. I have not been able to find any information about the construction of this old mill.

There appears to have been at least one and possibly more mills between Gas Hill and the Station on Thorpe road. There is a newspaper record[3] of one catching fire possibly following an explosion which was visible across the city (Grain mills are notorious for explosions caused by the flour exploding when its particles become suspended in the air in a dust cloud and are then ignited.).

The logic of putting mills on a slope to catch the wind is obvious but as much of the housing predates many detailed maps it's difficult to find much information and a more detailed search of local directories and other archive sources is needed to gain more useful information.

There were many more windmills (as well as watermills) in and around Norwich and the surrounding area, and of course the Dutch drainage engineers used them as wind pumps when reclaiming much of land across the Broadland region.

If you have any more information to share about a mill in Thorpe Hamlet or information about any mill not mentioned in the Norfolk Windmills website please let us know.

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[1] Colonel Unthanks Norwich https://colonelunthanksnorwich.com/tag/norwich-history/

[2] Norfolk Windmills website contains a wealth of information including details of construction and bankruptcy, deaths and sales to millers along with some maps and photos. https://www.norfolkmills.co.uk/windmills-norwich.html

[3] Newspaper clipping seen some time ago, needs further research confirmation.

Map of St Leonards Rd & Camp grove area between 1840 and 1890 showing windmills
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