

CONSERVING RURAL CHARACTER, NOT COMMERCE, AT WHAT COST?

Iain Wakeford 2018



This week, as promised, I am turning my attention to Newark Mill which was destroyed by fire in the early hours of Saturday 3rd December 1966, despite the best efforts of crews of the Surrey Fire Brigade from both Woking and Guildford.

The mill, which dated back to the 17th century, was undoubtedly one of the most recognisable

features of this area, and although I am too young to remember it standing, the numerous pictures that were taken of this picturesque local landmark somehow make its loss even more tragic. You can easily see what we have

lost and imagine how much of a tourist attraction it could have been, if only...

You could hardly say the fire was unexpected. As far back as 1951 Jack Hillier wrote in his classic book on Surrey Watermills 'surveying the vast interior, every inch of timber, dusty and dry, it is not difficult to understand why so very few buildings of its period and its construction have been preserved – sooner or later they must inevitably be destroyed by fire'.

He went on to note that 'after three hundred years, the ordinary process of decay must threaten Newark, and unless it receives the expert care demanded by a timber building of its age, there may come a time when restoration will be too late'.

The owners recognised that fact and in the early 1960's sought permission from the local authorities to restore the mill by incorporating a pub/restaurant into the building with a nearby marina to help pay for the restoration of the building and apparatus (which would be open to the public as a museum/tourist attraction). In February 1966 the proposal was to go to a public inquiry, but the application was withdrawn, probably due to the objections of Guildford Rural District Council, who thought the access to the site, on a narrow section of road by the bridge over the Wey Navigation, would have been a hazard.

The mill in its heyday, when it was seen as an asset to the area.



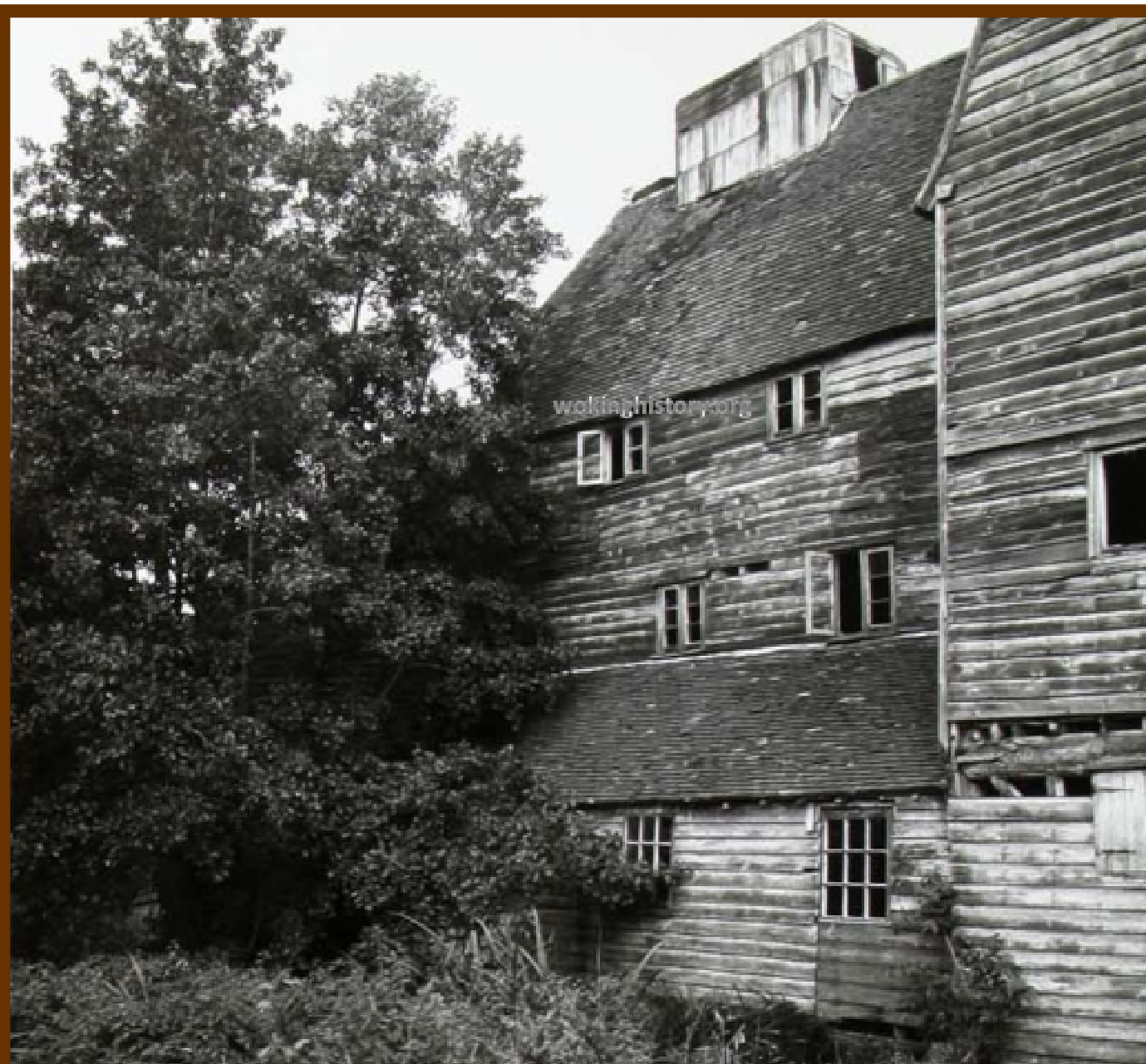


By the second half of the 20th century the Mill was sadly showing its age, but all attempts to give it a lifeline to the 21st century were rebuked by the local council.

The council were not keen either on the proposed marina on the Abbey Field to the north of the Navigation. That appears to have been where the proposed parking for the site would have been, with a boat storage, repair area, and petrol pump for the use of the boats (and possibly the car park users), being viewed as 'highly commercial', which would be 'completely alien to the area and would tend to destroy the character of the mill and be prejudicial to the natural beauty and rural characteristics of this area'.

In its heyday, of course, the massive mill would have been 'highly commercial' with horses and carts bringing grain to the mill and barges no doubt being used to carry the resultant flour off to market.

Sadly the National Trust and other conservation bodies also blindly objected to the restoration plan, with the result that they and the council finally got the preservation of the 'natural beauty and rural character' of the area they craved - at the expense of losing what was undoubtedly one of the county's most historic, if not iconic buildings.





The cause of the blaze was never discovered - the destruction being so quick and complete. Detective Inspector Edmund Cunningham of

Woking C.I.D., later reported 'there is no evidence of arson - there is no evidence of anything'.

From this...

To this in a matter of minutes - a mass of mangled metal and charred wood, was all that remained after the devastating fire.





The first report of the fire was at 1.10 am, and in less than an hour an area of 100 square feet was devastated with just the twisted remains of some of the old machinery and the grinding stones all that was recognisable amongst the

smouldering debris.

Fortunately the Mill House was saved (at one time the brigade thought it was in danger from the intense heat), although I suppose from the

local authorities point of view it might have been better if the 18th century house would have gone too - to further increase the 'rural character' of the area!



CHOBHAM. THE TOWN MILLS.



Chobham's Mill was also destroyed by fire in the late 1960's and replaced instead with a bungalow.

Of course Newark Mill was not the only such building to be destroyed by fire. About the same time Chobham's old mill (above) had been lost to the flames, and later Thorpe Mill - which in the 1960's had been converted into a restaurant - was also destroyed, although in

that case it was the proposed building of the M3 that caused its untimely demise (needlessly, as the route of the motorway was subsequently altered).

Sometimes preserving a building (or even the countryside) is not good enough. Conservation requires keeping something with a purpose, and if the price to pay for keeping Newark Mill really had been turning it into a restaurant (with

all the other features that would have entailed), I believe that would probably have been a price worth paying.

Thorpe Mill had actually been converted into a restaurant and survived quite happily until the planners decided it had to be destroyed to make way for the M3.

Sadly, after it was demolished in the early 1970's the route of the motorway was altered, so that the mill could have stayed after all.

