

HERITAGE CIRCLE

David Eddershaw, Pakenham Water Mill

David Eddershaw gave a fascinating, authoritative account of the history of Pakenham Water Mill when he spoke to the May meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall. He described the mill as 'special' because of its age, its beauty and the fact that it is still working.

There has been a mill on the Pakenham site for over 1,000 years. The Domesday Book states that there was a mill there at the time of King Edward (1042-1066) but there was likely to have been a mill on the site before this. The attraction of this location was a good, reliable water supply provided by springs in Pakenham Fen.

The current mill buildings were erected in the 1780s or 1790s by the Leheups family. It is a typical Georgian building with an attractive design consisting of four storeys, including one floor in the roof. By this time, there had been a change in the way mills operated. During the Middle Ages, farmers had taken their crops to a miller who took a share of the flour as payment. Later, millers bought wheat at a corn exchange and stored it in the upper floors of the mill. They produced flour for sale when the price was high. The late 18th and early 19th Centuries were a particularly profitable period for millers as the French and Napoleonic Wars created a shortage of flour for bread.

In 1813 the Leheups family leased the mill to Charles Lowe for 21 years. His annual rent of £130 was a lot of money at the time but it did include a house and farm. In addition, he had to spend £400 on improvements to the mill. Lowe was a very good miller. Consequently, he introduced the latest technology when he put in a breast shot waterwheel inside the mill. This was used until 1898 when it was replaced by the current waterwheel. Lowe also raised the walls of the mill pond to ensure sufficient water to power the four millstones.

Traditional mills produced wholemeal flour as the wheat grains were just ground between two stones. This had to undergo a further sieving to remove the husks to make white flour. In 1881 Henry Simon invented an automatic roller mill which made white flour cheaply available. Consequently, there was a slow decline in mills like Pakenham. By the late 1930s most traditional mills had closed. Pakenham Water Mill did remain working commercially until 1974 but by then it was producing animal feeds which only required a more crude milling process as it had lacked investment for many years. The mill was put up for sale for conversion into a house but the Suffolk Building Preservation Trust managed to raise the funds to buy it in 1978 and then undertook its restoration so that it could continue milling. The mill is now run by volunteers and produces 8-10 tons of flour each year from locally sourced wheat. The Trust bought the adjacent miller's house in 2000 and subsequently renovated it. The house now has two kitchens reflecting life in the 1730s and the 1910s, along with a tea room for visitors. Pakenham Water Mill is a popular tourist attraction but regards the continuation of being a working mill as its priority.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 24 June at The Village Hall, Rickinghall IP221HD when Roger Kennell will give a talk about Pretty Corsets in Suffolk – a family and corset manufacturer. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy