

Painting a picture of the history of Ifield Mill



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Ifield Water Mill is a familiar sight to those who have spent time walking around Ifield millpond in this ancient parish of Crawley.

Today the scene is one of reconstruction, with this historic water mill standing stark against the concrete lines and bare banks of a Sussex millpond that has been completely re-profiled in the name of flood defence.



However, the scene was once more idyllic, and a step back in time reveals some fascinating and little known facts about what was once one of the most important working mills in the county.

The site where the mill now stands was originally an iron forge dating back to the 1600s. Ifield millpond was originally constructed to provide power to process the iron that was brought from the iron furnace at Bewbush.

This furnace was also powered by a millpond and the remains of it containing dam and sluice-gate can be still seen at the eastern edge of the Bewbush Water Garden estate to the south of the railway line.

Bewbush furnace closed in 1642 because the surrounding area had been completely deforested and there was no more wood for fuel.



A year later, during the English Civil War, the iron forge at Ifield was destroyed by Parliamentarians to prevent the construction of arms for the Royalists, and a new phase in the history of this site began.

A corn mill was built on the site and was fully operational by the 1660s. The mill, which was then rebuilt in 1683 by the Middleton family, had now become the largest in the area and capable of producing up to 16 sacks of flour a day.

After falling into disuse and disrepair, it was bought for the sum of £1,200 by Thomas Durrant in 1817 and again completely rebuilt and is the structure that can be seen today. The stone tablet dated 1683 from the Middleton Mill was respectfully built into the external wall at the front of the mill, where it can still be admired.

However, with declining water power - even a steam engine installed to drive the water wheel could not reverse its fortunes - the mill could not remain profitable and once again fell into a state of dereliction.



In 1974 a group of enthusiasts began the long process of restoring Ifield Water Mill. This was no mean task, since the mill had been badly damaged by trees which had invaded the building and caused serious structural damage, and much of the wooden building had rotted away.

To complete this restoration was an extraordinary achievement, not least because at one point, the entire building had to be lifted on hydraulic jacks to install new sections of timber. The end result, after many years of hard work, is the fully restored building that we see today, which is now a museum providing a complete history of the mill from its days as an iron forge onwards, as well as many other aspects of Ifield, Crawley and Sussex life.

Dr Peter Sutton is currently writing an autobiographical work about his childhood in Crawley, and has many fond memories of the hours that he spent searching for wildlife in the millpond and fishing in the weir pool next to the miller's old mussel beds.

He said: "The book is basically a natural history of Crawley from the 1970s to the 1990s, and I have been lucky enough to get two of Britain's foremost wildlife artists to provide paintings for the book, both of which concern Ifield Millpond.



“The first painting, by Michael J Loates, is of a Bullhead, also appropriately known as the Miller’s Thumb.

“This painting commemorates one of those memorable boyhood discoveries. When I attended Gossops Green Junior School, I learnt that this fish could be found in the weir pool next to the mill, and after several determined journeys with a margarine tub, I eventually managed to extract one from under a large stone in its sun dappled waters.

“The second illustration, by Denys Ovenden, provided a fascinating journey that could hardly have been envisaged when we first began our research, and we must thank Nick and Angela Sexton, and the Crawley Museum Society, for their considerable help and generosity, which led to the successful completion of this painting.

“It was a complete revelation to me that a wooden viaduct carrying colourful steam trains once traversed the millpond that separates Ifield from Gossops Green. The scene that has been painted by Denys dates back to the late 1840s/early 1850s before the wooden viaduct was replaced by the earth embankment that we see today.

“It shows the miller collecting his fishing nets on the punt that was kept in the old boat house in the distance, and a ‘Jenny Lind’ steam train and carriages trundling along the viaduct towards Horsham as a storm blows in from the west.”

There is no doubt that the current concrete-lined ‘moonscape’ will soon, once again, succumb to nature, providing a more natural setting for this historic Sussex mill and its colourful history.



Prints of Denys Ovenden's painting will soon be available from the artist (www.denysovenden.co.uk) with 20 per cent of the proceeds going to the Ifield Mill restoration fund.



Read more: <http://www.crawleyobserver.co.uk/news/nostalgia/painting-a-picture-of-the-history-of-ifield-mill-1-7185210#ixzz3yZtVm6ky>