

About Horner Mill



The 18 ft (5.49 m) diam. x 6 ft (1.83 m) wide overshot Water Wheel, which has 8 oak spokes each side and 56 buckets. Power was taken from the wheel by rim drive, 8 sections of gear teeth being bolted to the inside frame and driving a small pinion.

Horner Mill is an attractive early Victorian three-storey water mill (listed Grade II), probably built in 1839, situated in one of the most beautiful valleys on the north side of the Exmoor National Park, West Somerset, and prominently set in the picturesque hamlet of Horner, well known for its walking and riding facilities. Close by is the large village of Porlock, with its infamous hill, and the coastal town of Minehead is about 7 miles away.

Horner is part of the Holnicote Estate, which was donated to the National Trust in 1944 by Sir Richard Dyke Acland, and because of this it has changed little over the years. The Mill had for many years been used as a barn by Horner Farm and was in very poor condition.

Modern agricultural practices meant that the Mill buildings were generally unsuitable for use by the farm and consequently, in May 1989, the Trust offered for sale by auction a 50 year lease on the Mill for conversion to a private house. At the auction the lease failed to sell, and it wasn't until October 1989 that the Trust's Agents were approached by Mr & Mrs Graham B Haw who wished to take on the lease. After 51 weeks of negotiations a 99 year lease was purchased by them on the 24th October 1990 and building work commenced at the beginning of November.

Prior to the auction the Trust had obtained planning permission and listed building consent for the conversion, but during the protracted lease negotiations a new set of plans were drawn up. A major consideration of the conversion was to maintain the Mill's appearance whilst allowing the interior to reflect the requirements of a modern life style and to conform to current Building Regulations. The Trust provided a copy of a plan showing how the Mill was, or how it was intended to be, when it was built in about 1839. Any alterations to the front of the Mill have taken it back to how it looked originally.



Horner Mill 1890

Extensive repairs to the existing mill leat, and the addition of a new 150 metre section of tail leat in 1994, (to bypass the original silted-up tunnel), allowed the water supply to be restored to the Mill enabling the mighty water wheel to turn once again. Unfortunately, due to the present poor state of the shaft bearings, the wheel can only be permitted to turn occasionally. Shortly after water was restored to the Mill, the Environment Agency (then the National Rivers Authority) rang to say that we were abstracting water without a license - this in spite of the fact that they had ruled, in writing, in January 1991 that no abstraction was taking place. This situation has remained unresolved, and in February 2000 a section of the leat wall adjacent to the river collapsed returning all water to the river. The Trust requested permission from the Environment Agency to repair the wall but were refused as the question of water abstraction has not been resolved. The Mill is, therefore, currently waterless, and likely to be so for some considerable time.

The Conversion

It is impossible to convey in a few photographs just how bad was the condition of the mill. The roof was no longer water tight, as someone stole the lead from the roof shortly before work commenced, and was on the point of collapse. The wall of the eastern most part of the building, what is now the kitchen, had been impacted by a vehicle and had partially knocked out the corner stones and fractured the remainder of the corner. None of the wooden floors were safe to walk on as the joists and floor boards were in a terrible state. No floors existed in what is now the kitchen block or the rear section. The last use of the kitchen was as a stable and a reinforced concrete structure, upon which corn silos had stood, occupied the rear section where the garage is now.

Work started on the mill on the 6th November 1990 and was almost complete when we moved here in August 1992. The first eight days of work were spent removing 4-5 ft (1.5 m) of the relatively soft rock underlying what is now the drive area. This brought the ground level down slightly below that of the main floor in the mill, and significantly improved vehicle access. The concrete for the corn silos was broken up, mostly by hand, and removed, along with about a 9 ft depth of rubble infill in what had been a room below the floor.



Horner Mill in May 1990



Excavating the drive area



The water wheel before restoration



Removing the corn silo base and the rubble infill

Once all the concrete and rubble had been removed from the rear section a 6" reinforced concrete floor was laid to what is now the garage, a room about 6 ft wide being retained underneath it. A staircase, and short access corridor, was provided to this room from the kitchen.

New floors were laid in the kitchen and the ground floor of the front part of the mill. Where the floors remained in the main part of the mill they were repaired and kept at their existing levels. For the upper floor, new structural timbers were placed between the old, unsound timbers, so that the original look of the place was retained. Fortunately the original oak framing for the corn stones floor had survived almost intact, new floor joists and floor boards being provided as necessary.

The building had no water, electricity or drains. Initially electricity was provided by a generator, and a new water main connection made to a stand pipe in the garden. Enough drains were laid to satisfy the needs of a small housing estate, the connection to the main sewer taking place in the garden next to the Tea Rooms, about 100 yards away. Whilst the conversion work was going on, the National Trust arranged for all electricity and telephone cables in the village to be put underground and all television aerials removed, an underground aerial system being used to replace them.



The finished ceiling retaining the old beam positions



Re-building the kitchen block

The problem of the damage to the corner of the wall of the kitchen block was resolved by stripping the tiles from half the roof and then removing and re-building a large section of the wall. The job was made more difficult as the wall, although 2 ft thick, was only held together by red mud and then pointed on the outside. Removing a small section to carry out a local repair was therefore impossible as the rest of the wall simply fell down! Fortunately the stonework comprising the chimney was held together with lime mortar. The new section of wall was provided with a metre wide concrete foundation, the rest of the kitchen walls and chimney being underpinned.



A view of the rear of the mill showing the garage entrance. The mark on the wall between the fire escape stairs and the garage door shows the ground level before the excavation of the drive area.

The areas of unpointed stonework show the extent of the alterations and re-building undertaken.