

ASHTON WINDMILL

Welcome to Ashton Windmill, Chapel Allerton. The stone tower is over 200 years old. The site belongs to and is maintained by Sedgemoor District Council, with help from a Management Committee with representatives of the Council, Parish Council and local volunteer custodians. It is no longer a working mill, but still contains all its operating machinery.

When the weather permits, from here you can see Cheddar Gorge, Brent Knoll, the Polden Hills and Hinkley Point Power Station. This open site is ideal for a windmill; from whichever direction the wind is blowing, there is enough of it to turn the sails.

EARLY WINDMILLS

Windmills first appeared in north-western Europe towards the end of the twelfth century. Before then, mills were powered by men, animals or water. These early mills were POST MILLS. The machinery was housed in a wooden cabin which pivoted on a centre post fixed to a frame on the ground. The whole mill was turned for the sails to face the wind. From the later Middle Ages, more stable mills were built in which just the sail mechanism needed turning. The earliest Somerset references to tower mills date from the early eighteenth century.

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The earliest known reference to a windmill at Chapel Allerton is in 1317. The high ground here, known as the “Isle of Wedmore”, is an ideal place for a windmill as it catches the wind from many different directions. By 1549 we know that the windmill was in a bad way, for an agreement was made with John Mawdeley, a wealthy clothier of Wells, to rebuild the mill and lease it for 50 years. In 1650 the windmill was still working, and held by Edward Bower of Wells. In 1705, John Paine junior, a notary of Wells, took the manor and the windmill on a lease that lasted until 1765. It was probably the Paine family who made the investment of building the present mill.

The windmill tower you see now was built sometime between 1760 and 1774. It is said to have been built on a former post mill mound, and to have used timbers from an earlier structure. Re-use of timbers was certainly common, and many of the Ashton beams show signs of previous use.

The tower is more than 7.5 metres (25 feet) high and has an external diameter of over 3.5 metres (12 feet). The stone walls are 60 centimetres (2 feet) thick. The sails are 13 metres (44 feet) across, and until 1900 were of plain canvas (what you see now are the bare sail frames to which the canvas was fixed at milling times). For the last 30 years of the Mill’s active life, two sails were replaced with spring sails for smoother operation. The cap was thatched until 1900. The mill was painted white at least in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and the weathercock was a prominent feature, as in many Somerset tower mills. The last millstones used here were 1.2 metres (4 feet) in diameter, and made of a cement composition, although French Burr millstones were more commonly used. You can see earlier millstones set into the ground on each side of the mill.

The millstones ground corn for flour and beans for cattle food. The Mill served a local and very limited market. Corn and beans were delivered in sacks on horseback. Once at the mill, sacks were brought to the steps on the left of the mill mound, taken to the hoist, lifted through the sack flaps in each floor and emptied into the hopper above the stones. It took an hour to grind four sacks of corn, each of 244 pounds. For most of the nineteenth century, milling at Ashton was carried out by three generations of the Wilkins family. In about 1900 the miller, John Stevens, made extensive changes, bringing machinery from the recently demolished mill at Moorlinch. The thatched cap was reframed and clad with corrugated iron, two spring sails were fitted, the corn-dressing machinery replaced and the three iron hoops were added around the tower. Steam power, in the form of a portable engine, reached Ashton in 1894, and drove the stones by a belt drive to an external pulley. However, Mr Stevens' efforts at modernisation were not enough to ensure the survival of the windmill. **The mill stopped working in 1927.**

For the next thirty years, Ashton Windmill stood idle with only a brief period of use as a Home Guard post during the Second World War.

RECENT HISTORY

Ashton Windmill was renovated in 1958, when the stonework was restored, a new boat-shaped roof, new doors and new sails were fitted. For the first time, the windmill was visited by the public. After the death of the owner in 1966 the mill was cared for by Bristol City Museum. In the early 1970's the wooden stocks which held the sails were badly rotted, and the sails were taken down for safety reasons. The sight of the mill without sails spurred local people into action. Negotiations between Chapel Allerton Parish Council, Sedgemoor District Council and Bristol City Council resulted in more restoration. The District Council, the Area Museum Council for the South West, and Bristol City Council contributed to the cost of the work. In July 1979, new steel stocks were fitted, and Ashton Mill looked very much as it had done in the nineteenth century. The sails were renewed in 2009 by Sedgemoor District Council. However, the winding gear, for turning the sails and cap to face the wind, is now very difficult to work.

Ashton Windmill is now open regularly throughout the summer, thanks to a dedicated team of local volunteers.