



The Village Windmill

These days we are always being exhorted to look for innovative methods of harnessing the power of the wind in order to "save the planet", yet centuries ago most villages were already using windmills to grind their flour. The very first reference to an English windmill occurs in the last quarter of the twelfth century, so it is quite possible that there was a windmill here in Chaddesden long before our church was built.

Mills, whether water- or wind-driven, were once crucial to the economy of a village, as they were used to grind the locally-grown corn into flour. The capital cost of building a windmill was, of course, far more than the average man could afford, and it can therefore be no coincidence that in 1575, when it is mentioned for the first time, Chaddesden's windmill belonged to Robert Newton, then the head of the wealthiest family in the village.

The basic requirements of a windmill were twofold: first it had to be conveniently situated in relation to the community it served, and secondly it needed to be sited in an exposed situation to catch the prevailing winds. In our case, the mill stood on the appropriately named "Windmill Hill", which is now to be found at the north end of Oregon Way, behind Washington Avenue. At around 250 feet above sea-level, Windmill Hill occupies the western extremity of a conspicuous ridge (now cut into two by Acorn Way) running west to east between Chaddesden and Spondon. The summit of Windmill Hill was once thickly wooded, but only a handful of mature trees (mainly ashes) now remain, although some new lime trees were planted about 20 years ago. The hill is a good vantage point, and if you visit it on a clear day you will be able to see a panoramic view looking out over the north of Chaddesden.

Although there is no known description of the Chaddesden windmill, its basic construction would have been that of a wooden "post-mill", that is a mill capable of being rotated around a central, vertical post in order to face into the wind. This main post would have been fastened to massive supporting cross-timbers buried in an earth mound. In its early days, the mill's sails would simply have been sheets of canvas stretched over wooden frames.

Other documents of 1613 and 1720 also refer to Windmill Hill, but unfortunately do not give any details of the actual mill itself. Rather intriguingly, the seventeenth-century manuscript also mentions another site evidently somewhere close by called Old Windmill Hill, and this may well have been the hill 500 yards to the south (known to later generations as Half-Moon Plantation), which is now the wooded area bounded by Chesapeake Road. In the second volume of his book "A General View of the Agriculture & Minerals of Derbyshire" (published in 1813), James Farey notes the presence of 45 Derbyshire windmills but does not include the one at Chaddesden, so our windmill probably came to the end of its working life at some time in the eighteenth century.

© Peter Cholerton, 2007

