

II: Book Reviews*

1: The Windmills and Watermills of Wirral: A Historical Survey
by Rowan Patel. Pbk. 263 pages. Countywise 2016.
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by Roy Coppack†

As Conservation Officer for Cheshire County Council our late member Oliver Bott assembled a team of young historians under a Manpower Services Commission Training Programme to record some five thousand archaeological and historical sites for the county planning database. On this basis between 1982 and 1986 he published a series of seven articles on Cheshire corn milling sites in *Cheshire History*. These give Ordnance Survey grid references for seven hundred corn milling sites in the historical county, assembled from maps and documentary sources. However, his analysis focused on the overall results rather than individual mills and his identifications were not confirmed in the field.

Rowan Patel has responded to Oliver Bott's challenge for someone to extend this research, albeit just for the historical hundred of Wirral. His fieldwork has confirmed the location of each mill and recorded the above-ground remains, and these results are united with much new documentary evidence. His publication covers and reviews all the available sources, including the *Cheshire Sheaf* and some more recent works, covering some seventy-two mills. Peter Burdett's *A survey of the county palatine of Chester*, published in 1777, is used to underline the divide between medieval sites and those associated with the agrarian revolution. This thoroughness is a *desideratum* in mill surveys, which often tend to ignore documentary sources before the nineteenth century.

The information is presented in four parts. The first deals with the process of milling and the types of mill buildings: post mills, tower mills and watermills. Part two deals with the historical detail and gives illustrations and maps of mills operating at the time of Burdett's survey. Part three covers mills that had ceased working before Burdett's survey and only exist in the documentary record and field names. Part four is a series of appendices containing a table listing the mills in terms of type and position in the historical record. The book reflects the changes that have taken place in the approach to industrial archaeology

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over the last sixty years, in that the former concentration on processes and machinery has been supplemented by the study of historical documents. In many cases the buildings have disappeared under the massive urbanisation of the Wirral, changing a predominantly rural environment easily explored by bicycle using a one-inch Ordnance Survey map to one for which the A–Z Wirral Street Map is more useful.

The mills are presented in gazetteer format, with a full history going back into the Middle Ages where appropriate. They are located using high-quality extracts from the maps presented in survey, estate and tithe commission documents. Visits to the sites are encouraged by the provision of modern street names. The author has discovered a very wide range of modern and historical photographs going back to the 1880s. The Williamson Art Gallery in Birkenhead also has a remarkable collection of windmill paintings in its permanent collection and some of them are used to illustrate this book: Tranmere 1841 by W F Crook, Irby 1897, Thingwall 1906, Willaston 1903 and Burton 1880? by Harold Hopps. In all the gallery has thirty-two paintings of Wirral mills, eighteen of them by Hopps.

The majority of the mills recorded are windmills. Forty-six post mills are recorded, of which in most cases only the foundations survive. Wirral had eleven tower mills, which were very popular with painters and photographers and are presented with a wealth of historical information, although only one, at Bidston, now has its machinery. Four have been converted into houses and six demolished. Fourteen watermills are recorded as originating in the Middle Ages. Their footprint on the landscape tends to survive because they needed dams and complex watercourses. Bromborough watermill, although demolished in 1949, has a very full description. I visited it in 1949 with my school friend Graham Connah (now Emeritus Professor of Archaeology at the Australian National University), who made a survey now preserved in the local records and used in this book.

Rowan Patel has produced an outstanding study, which brings together information from a very wide range of scholars that permits the analysis of the role of corn mills in the history of the hundred of Wirral. The method of presentation encourages one to go out and look at these sites, and the quality of the helpful illustrations and maps is unusual in such a reasonably priced publication.