

13th December 2017

Mills, milling and bread making – Dave Harris-Jones

David Harris-Jones, head miller at Heatherslaw Mill, a self-confessed practical man, proved his ability when he effortlessly demonstrated traditional bread-making to an intrigued, receptive audience at December's meeting of Glendale Local History Society, Wooler. His ingredients: flour, yeast and water – no sugar, no salt, no additives – all pure and healthy! The dough rose, doubling its size, in no time!

While kneading his dough, Dave explained the difference between the ancient, traditional, stone-milling of grain and the modern machine *cutting* process. He also told of the ancient bread-making methods versus those of modern commercial products, and of the laws governing current manufacturing of bread – for example, if the bread is made on the retail premises, labels do not have to display the ingredients! And, legally, certain vitamins must be added to white flour but they exist naturally in traditionally milled wholemeal flour.

Rye or barley would once have been commonly milled for baking bread. However, bread is now mostly made from wheat. Currently spelt is increasingly popular and the consequent rise in demand for spelt products has increased its price considerably. The properties of grain vary greatly according to weather conditions, and latitude has an influence. Much of the 'strong', high protein flour used in UK and necessary for bread-making, has its origin in Canada. We heard that the original *Clipper* sailing ships, such as the Cutty Sark, were built for carrying grain from the USA, Canada and Australia – rather than tea as commonly thought.

Water-powered mills have existed since pre-Roman times and before then a gin driven by men or animals would have been used; the engineering features of mills were explained in detail. Mill-stones are generally of sandstone or Derbyshire gritstone. The space between the grinding mill-stones requires careful adjustment to create varying products such as rolled or pinhead oats. River levels also affect the milling process. Gears, from below, control the rotation of the top stone, which can turn at 60–80 times a minute on a static bed-stone which becomes worn away and polished. Dave showed a selection of hand-tools used to dress the stones and recreate the ridges and furrows necessary for grinding.

We heard that an original mill at Heatherslaw is likely to be over 1000 years old and probably one of the oldest mills to survive – one of 13 which once existed on the River Till. Extraordinary! A mill is certainly known to have existed in the Flodden era, when it was in Scottish hands and probably provided rations for soldiers on the battlefield. Dave has researched the diaries of the Black family (a prominent local land- and mill-owning family) which describe extensions at Heatherslaw from its once much smaller origins. The two outer mill wheels were under a lower floor to protect from the destructive drying elements of the sun.

For local use, at Heatherslaw Mill, Dave assesses his grain – a very exacting skill – and chooses it from local sources which he values discerningly. A successful end product – flour or bread – demands good grain and good millstones. The flour being milled can vary daily according to the miller's skills. As in Chaucer's day, a miller was an important person, a local master! He commanded finances and applied restrictive rules and regulations to the local populace who were bound to take their grain to the miller since their own private means of milling were confiscated. The miller had many tricks of the trade to bring handsome profits (a private banking system!).

The audience much enjoyed a live, enthusiastic, interesting, contemporary Miller's Tale with humorous anecdotes from a very well-informed speaker. Dave Harris Jones is Vice Chairman of the exclusive trade association, the Corn Millers' Guild. He recommended, for further interest, a visit to <https://millsarchive.org.uk> and, of course, Heatherslaw Mill, near Etal.