

**THE WELSH MILLS SOCIETY: LOOKING BACK
OVER THE LAST (OR FIRST) 30 YEARS – A
PERSONAL VIEW**

Gerallt D. Nash

The story of the Welsh Mills Society began back in about 1981. I had been appointed to the staff of the National History Museum (or the Welsh Folk Museum as it was then known) at St Fagans in 1980, to work on the Museum's collection of rescued and re-erected buildings. This also gave me the opportunity to study historical and vernacular buildings in Wales as well as traditional building techniques. As part of my work I decided to carry out some research into Welsh mills, and more specifically windmills. But why, you might ask, and why mills?

Well, my great grandfather, David Evans, owned and operated St Davids windmill from 1861 until it was severely damaged in a storm in 1904. Also, my grandfather on my mother's side, John Ogwen Rees, farmed at nearby Carnwchwrn, St Davids, which also included the small water mill at Caerbwddi. Neither of these mills was operational when I was a boy – St Davids windmill having been converted to a hotel by David Evans' son, Evan, in 1908 and the cornmill at Caerbwddi had ceased working by the 1930s and was stripped of its timbers and rendered roofless during World War 2 by members of a searchlight battery that was located nearby. However, there was one mill still working in the area, namely Felin Isaf located about half a mile downstream from the Cathedral. I spent

many a happy hour (or two or three) watching David Lewis ('Dai'r felin' or 'Dai the mill') working the mill or making woven willow lobster pots. I guess that these all combined to 'inspire' me to delve deeper into the subject of mills and milling.

My brother and I would go off on our bicycles (and dad's car once we were old enough to drive) and seek out mills in the area, plot them on a map and photograph them using a small Kodak Retinette camera. Later, when I went to university to study architecture, I chose the water mill at Llanrhian, Pembrokeshire, as the subject for my measured drawing project. But back to St Fagans.

I soon discovered that very little work had been done on Welsh mills; there was very little published material and there was no single body coordinating research in the country. The Wind and Watermill Section (now the Mills Section) of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) did exist, but, being London-based, information about Welsh mills was limited.

It was about this time that I came across a few like-minded individuals who were also interested in Welsh mills; people like Tony Parkinson - who had examined numerous mills as part of his work as an Investigator with the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Wales (RCAHMW); Elwyn Bowen who was then studying the rural industries of Brecknockshire - which of course included corn and woollen mills, and Jane Roberts from Newport, who was also interested in windmills. These initial discussions led to the formation of a Steering Group which was charged with drawing up a set of

objectives and drafting a constitution for a proposed Mills Group in Wales.

The basic aims of the Group would be to draw attention to Wales' molinological heritage and hopefully save and preserve traditional mills for the future. The Group would also encourage the recording of mills, their histories and the roles that they played within their communities.

The inaugural meeting of the Welsh Mills Group was held in Newtown, Powys on 20 October 1984. The event had been advertised in the press beforehand and letters and invitations had been sent to mills and to individuals who were known to have an interest in Welsh mills. Over 70 people attended the meeting, which included talks on mill-related subjects and visits to two mills - a corn mill and a timber sawmill - at nearby Pontdolgoch. At the meeting, the constitution was discussed and adopted and the Group was formally launched.

This first meeting also established a pattern for future meetings, with coffee/tea on arrival, a slot for business, talks by guest speakers, members' contributions, and a break for lunch, followed by visits to 2 or 3 mills in the area, returning in time for tea at end of day.

Within three months of the launch, 82 people had joined the Group, and in January 1985, Melin Felindre (St Nicholas, Pembrokeshire), became the first mill to be re-started following the launch of the Group. This mill had been restored single-handedly by local farmer and mill enthusiast Stephen Harries, and he and his wife Olwen were featured on several television programmes during the following months - Stephen

demonstrating the how the mill worked and Olwen showing how the resulting flour was used in traditional cooking.

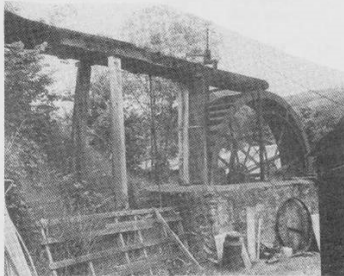

<p>STEERING COMMITTEE</p> <p>ELWYN BOWEN, O.B.E., M.Ed., M.A. Retired Headmaster, Merthyr Tydfil, Mid Glamorgan</p> <p>IAN H. GOUGH Planning Officer, Clwyd County Council</p> <p>A. GEORGE LEES Retired customs officer, Trearddur Bay, Anglesey</p> <p>GERALLT D. NASH, B.Sc., B.Arch. Research Assistant, Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagans</p> <p>ANTHONY J. PARKINSON, M.A., F.S.A. Investigator, Royal Commission on Ancient and Historical Monuments (Wales), Aberystwyth</p> <p>Miss JANE F. ROBERTS Teacher, Newport, Gwent</p> <p>L. D. L. ROBERTS Retired company director, Newport, Gwent</p> <p>EURWYN WILIAM, M.A., Ph.D. Keeper, Department of Buildings, Welsh Folk Museum, St. Fagans</p> 	<p>INAUGURAL MEETING OF THE</p> <p>WELSH MILLS GROUP</p> <p>NEWTOWN 20 OCTOBER 1984</p>  <p>CYFARFOD SEFYDLU CYMDEITHAS MELINAU CYMRU Y DRENEWYDD 20 HYDREF 1984</p>
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PLATE 1 Leaflet for Inaugural Meeting 1984

It was suggested that the Group should have a logo, and so I set-to to come up with a design that would be both simple and yet convey what the Group was about. The result was a circular pattern that could be interpreted either as a millstone or a ball of wool onto which was inset an outline map of Wales.



PLATE 2 Original Logo

From the outset, the Group has produced a quarterly *Newsletter*, containing mill-related information and news, details of meetings and mills for sale, as well as occasional short articles. By October 2014, 117 issues had been produced.

In 1989, the decision was taken to change the Group's name to Welsh Mills Society, as it was felt that this better reflected

its growing role within Wales and also served to highlight its status, especially with local authorities and government. The Welsh name, Cymdeithas Melinau Cymru, did not need changing, as 'Cymdeithas' already stood for 'Society'.



PLATE 3 Early Newsletter

Another development was the publication of a Journal entitled *Melin*. Although intended as an ‘occasional’ publication, the WMS has in fact produced one almost every year and we have now reached Volume 29. As with the *Newsletter* and, as we shall see, the website, none of this would have been possible without the hard work and commitment of their respective editors - all volunteers - who have ensured that the Society has a voice and that that voice is heard. Our thanks are due to them all.

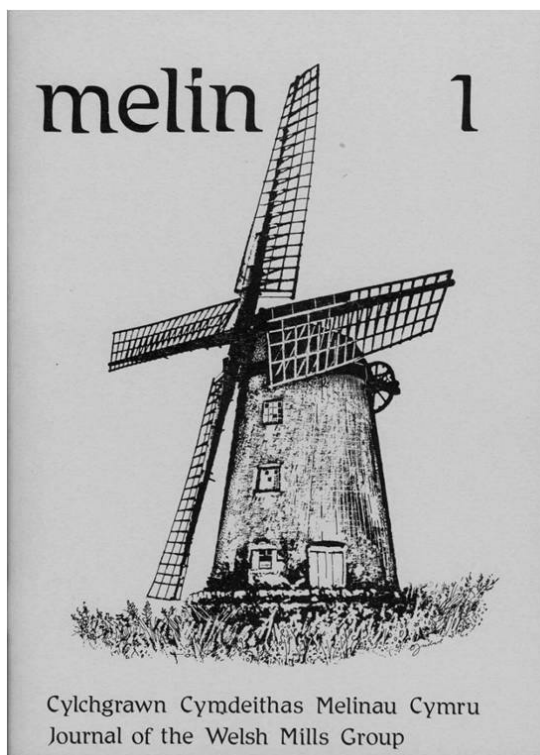


PLATE 4 First Melin Journal

Just two years after establishing the Group/Society, and in line with one of its stated objectives, namely to publicise and support working mills, we launched our first publicity leaflet. This was supported by a grant from the Wales Tourist Board and resulted in the printing of 14,000 leaflets. The following year (this time without grant aid) we printed 30,000 leaflets. This rose to 40,000 by 1991, 60,000 by (1996), and 70,000 three years later (1999).

By this time, it was becoming clear that people were increasingly making use of new media for accessing information, and mills were no exception. 1998 saw the appearance of the Society's first website, being hosted by RCAHMW. The website has evolved considerably over the past 15 years, and now includes sections on Mills Open to the Public; WMS news; a Bibliography of publications and articles relating to Welsh mills and a Glossary of Welsh and English mill terms. In 2014, a new website was launched at www.welshmills.org.

Since the Society's launch, 60 meetings have been held, with a different venue being chosen each time, so that by today meetings have been held in virtually every part of Wales. Meetings are held twice a year – in April and October - the latter incorporating the Society's AGM. Only one meeting has been cancelled, namely that scheduled for Spring 2001, due to a nation-wide outbreak of Bovine Foot and Mouth Disease.

A total of 166 mills have been visited; some still working, many complete but redundant and others now ruined but still retaining features of interest. A few have been revisited on more than one occasion, with Melin Llynon (windmill) in

Anglesey and Pontdolgoch sawmill in Powys being visited three times during the last 30 years.



PLATES 5 a and b Visits to Pontdolgoch Sawmill in 1984 and 2013

These meetings have enabled members not only to get to know one another, but also to visit parts of the country that they might not otherwise have seen. We have been to some outstanding mills often set in very picturesque locations and seen some beautiful and spectacular scenery. We have met some really interesting and memorable characters and have had some excellent talks and presentations, some of which later appeared as articles in *Melin*. And of course, being Wales, we have had weather! Everything from glorious sunshine to torrential downpours and (at Blaenau Ffestiniog in April 1995) a blizzard!!

In 1993, the WMS hosted the 8th Symposium of the International Molinological Society (TIMS). The conference was based at the University campus in Aberystwyth and 73 delegates attended from a total of 13 countries. During two and a half days of excursions 11 mills were visited in mid & west Wales

Seven years later, in 2000, the Society played host to the SPAB Mills Section's millennium weekend meeting and tour [MOLICON 2000] which was based at the University of Wales Trinity St David in Carmarthen. A total of 12 mills were visited in different parts of Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion.

2006 saw the Society becoming more adventurous, with an excursion being organised to Ireland. This was arranged in collaboration with colleagues in Ireland (Mills and Millers of Ireland) and included visits to wind and watermills in the south east of the country.

Two years later, in 2008, we had another trip, this time to the Isle of Man. Organised by Committee member Andrew Findon, the visit included talks and visits to mills and sites of industrial archaeological interest (including, of course, the amazing 22.1m diameter Great Laxey water wheel). Since then we have had visits to Somerset (2010) and Dorset (2012).



PLATE 6 Visit to Dorset in 2012

In 1999, the WMS decided to acknowledge certain individuals who had made a special contribution to mill research or restoration in Wales, by awarding Certificates of Commendation. The first such Certificate was awarded in

Spring 2002 to Mike and Jane Hall, the citation reading: *In recognition of their contribution to traditional corn-milling and the sensitive restoration of 'Y Felin', St Dogmaels, Pembrokeshire*. Since then, a further seven more Certificates have been presented by the Society, namely:

(2002) Margaret Bide - *In recognition of her contribution to our understanding of the traditional woollen industry, and for the restoration and preservation of the building and machinery at Melin Glanffrwd, Cellan, Ceredigion.*

(2002) Donald Morgan - *For maintaining the tradition of using water power at the Rock Woollen Mill in Capel Dewi, Ceredigion.*

(2002) Emyr, Richard and Tegwen Owen - *For maintaining and operating the traditional water-powered sawmill at Pontdolgoch in Ponys.*

(2003) Stephen Harries - *In recognition of the careful restoration of Melin Felindre, St. Nicholas, Pembrokeshire.*

(2009) Andrew and Anne Parry - *In recognition of their contribution to traditional corn-milling and the sensitive restoration of 'Felin Ganol', Llanrhystud, Ceredigion.*

(2014) Eifion and Amanda Griffiths - *In recognition of their contribution to the maintenance and development of the traditional woollen industry in west Wales, at the Tregwynt Woollen Mill, Pembrokeshire.*

(2014) Tom and Anna Grimes - *In recognition of their contribution to the maintenance and development of the traditional woollen industry in west Wales, at the Solva Woollen Mill, Middle Mill, Pembrokeshire.*

Now, 30 years on, we can look back with pride at what we have achieved. Many of those who helped establish the Society and who supported us over the years are no longer with us, but we remember and acknowledge their contribution with gratitude.

Many mills have now been saved from almost certain dereliction. Some have been successfully restored and returned to working order; others have been converted whilst keeping most if not all of their machinery intact. However, when such mills come on the market, there is no guarantee that their new owners will be as sympathetic; indeed, some have been altered to such a degree that they can barely be recognised as mills today. Mills are attractive subjects for conversion, and running a mill as a commercial enterprise is not something to be undertaken lightly.

These have been the challenges facing us over the last 30 years and these will undoubtedly be the challenges that will face mill owners and the Society in the future. But we have seen that mills CAN be saved, and often brought back into use; and this is what we must strive to encourage, wherever possible, in the future.

WMS Newsletter Editors

Eight different people have served as Editors of the Society's Newsletter over the years, namely:

No. 1 (Jan 85) – 15 (Jan 89) Gerallt Nash

No. 16 (Apr 89) – 20 (Apr 90) Ian Gough

No. 21 (July 90) – 36 (Apr 94) Gerallt Nash

No. 37 (Jul 94) – 50 (Sept 97) Jon Kissock

No. 51 (Jan 97) – 52 (Apr 98) Gerallt Nash

No. 53 (Aug 98) – 71 (Apr 03) Peter & Helen Muckle

No. 71 (July 03) – 97 (Oct 08) Chris & Rosie Plummer

No. 98 (Jan 10) – (to-date – Apr 15) John Crompton



Cymdeithas Melinau Cymru
NEWSLETTER
Welsh Mills Society

RHIF/NO 116

GORFFENNAF/JULY 2014



Croes Onnen Mill, Holywell, Flintshire (John Crompton)

PLATE 7 Recent Newsletter

WMS Journal Editors

Four people have served as Editor of the Society's Journal, *Melin*, namely:

Vol. 1 (1985) – 9 (1993) Anthony Parkinson

Vol. 10 (1994) – 25 (2009) Brian Malaws

Vol. 26 (2010) Andrew Davidson

Vol. 27 (2011) – (to–date) Melanie Walters

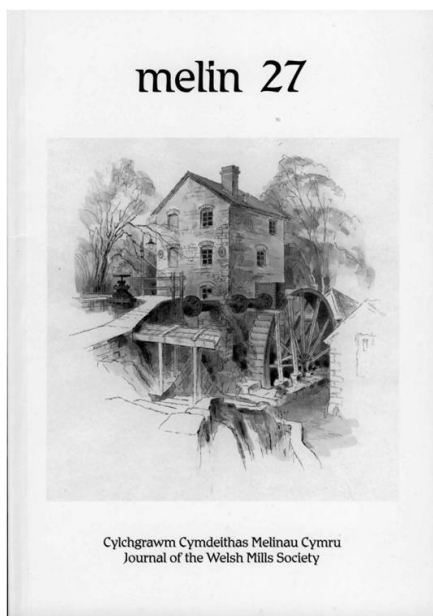


PLATE 8 Recent *Melin* Journal