

Long grind

Note from the May issue of the *Countryman* that the National Mills Weekend, held this year on 10 and 11 May, has been an annual event for nearly 20 years and that some 300 windmills and watermills are now welcoming visitors.

Mills powered by wind, water, steam, electricity or animal power have for generations been used to grind corn, animal feed, bone manure and other products or to provide a source of energy for other operations. Indeed, the occurrence frequently of places called Mill Lane, Mill Cottage or Mill View offers an indication of where long-disappeared mills once stood in the countryside. I admit I have never yet discovered

Ye Olde Mill Pharmacy, but I should not be surprised to discover that one such exists.

There is a host of literary and folklore allusions to mills, from Shakespeare with his "More water glideth by the mill / Than wots the miller of" and Milton's Samson Agonistes "Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves" to Blake's "dark Satanic mills" and Isaac Bickerstaffe's jolly miller who lived by the river Dee, who "worked and sang from morn till night / No lark more blithe than he". And Gulliver in Lilliput (1726) reported on a watch which, placed near his ear, "made an incessant noise like that of a water-mill."

Then we have a plethora of phrases such as "run of the mill" to describe a usual sequence of events, "go through the mill" to undergo hardship or strict discipline, "grist to the mill" to denote anything useful or profitable. It is proverbial that "though the mills of God grind slowly / Yet they grind exceeding small", a saying translated by Longfellow from the 1624 original of Friedrich von Logau. That anyone surnamed Miller should inevitably become known as Dusty at school and at work is not surprising considering the environment of the grinding mill.

Millers long enjoyed a sinister reputation. In the days of manorial lordship, the local peasant farmers were obliged, under dire penalty, to take their harvest corn to the local miller, who enjoyed the usual perquisites of the monopolist. There was a 16th century saying that "every honest miller has a golden thumb". Yet there were honourable exceptions. A story in Percy's *Reliques* (1765) describes Henry II becoming lost in the woods and meeting a miller who took him to his cottage and entertained him. Henry was so impressed that he knighted the miller and appointed him overseer of Sherwood Forest.

Mills, whether of water or wind, were obvious meeting-places where locals could

gather and pass on news of the day. At the same time they served as focuses where sedition, smuggling and all manner of crime could be planned and carried out. The fact that large sacks were humped out of mills made it possible to dispose of more incriminating evidence from the same place.



There were some therapeutic aspects of mills. In Ireland a child with whooping cough might be dipped three times in the hopper of a mill while it was turning, and if the miller was of the third generation in practice the effect was much enhanced.

I find watermills far more fascinating than windmills, for they have a sinister aspect, whether overshot or undershot. If you neglect precautions they can drown or crush, or both. And they have a background music of their own, far superior to that of a wind-mill. Incidentally, I have learnt that a mill enthusiast is termed a molinerd, and that the study of mills is molinology. Perhaps a degree course in molinology might not be ruled out in the near future.

Arresting decay

Preserving ancient stonework against the forces of decay poses tricky problems for those interested in guarding historically important monuments. The reduction of porosity is essential to reduce weathering, but at the same time decay is accelerated if moisture cannot escape from the surface of a building.

Mineralogical experts from the University of Granada have reported in the April issue of *Applied and Environmental Microbiology* their experiments with an abundant soil bacterium, *Myxococcus xanthus*, to preserve the structure of the ninth century Alhambra palace in Spain. Attempts have previously been made to coat delicate stonework with a calcium carbonate layer by applying carbonate-producing organisms. Unfortunately the deposited mineral clogs the pores of the stone and accelerates decay by preventing the escape of moisture. Experiments with samples of limestone derived from historically

important Spanish buildings have shown that *M. xanthus* will produce carbonate crystals which bind to existing grains of calcite without totally blocking the natural pores. The newly deposited calcite orientates with the existing crystals and organic molecules present to make a hard surface tougher than the original. It is, however, very shallow, and attempts are being made to see whether the bacterium can produce the same surface effect at a deeper level.

Passing the buck

The phrase "pass the buck", meaning to evade blame or personal responsibility or shift it on to other shoulders, reputedly originated in America. Mark Twain is credited with first using it in 1872. It refers to the game of poker and to the buckhorn-handled knife placed before a player to designate him as the next dealer. After each deal the knife was shifted to the next player in line.

In our own day, buck-passing is a procedure taken for granted as an essential part of the political, business and bureaucratic way of life. We vilify anyone who seeks to combat it as "a whistleblower" and beneath contempt. Accordingly, organisations of many kinds build themselves a protective barrier of buck-passing maintained by fear. This state of affairs is truly deplorable and discounts the concept of personal responsibility. Moreover, it affects the professions, including our own, which should pride themselves on their ethical behaviour and high moral tone in the attitude they adopt towards the individuals who come seeking guidance and expert assistance.

It is difficult to determine where the inculcation of personal responsibility begins, but I suspect that it is in childhood and within the influence of a stable family life. When parents are too busy with their other concerns to show children the necessity for responsible actions, or do not themselves accept any responsibility, we are in a bad way.

There is a modern tendency to hold schoolteachers responsible for making children socially acceptable, but this is asking far too much to expect of them. The philosopher Herbert Spencer remarked in 1850, "Education has for its object the formation of character", but teachers who have accepted the call to educate cannot be expected to do so without solid support from parents who in many instances resent attempts to restore their little treasures to the primrose path of social responsibility. Nevertheless, to quote Dean Inge (1917): "The aim of education is the knowledge not of facts but of values." Our politicians who direct the educational bureaucrats prefer to insist that teaching is training youngsters to become cogs in the machine that provides goods and services of a mundane nature. They, too, have passed the buck.