

## Walter Stone, Llanblethian Mill

I was born in 1916; my father bought Llanblethian mill in 1920. We came from Trerhyngyll; my father had a house there with a bit of land, and the mill went up for sale and he bought the mill. He ran it until 1948, when it was closed.

We were the last of the six mills which worked on the Thaw. Town Mill had gone by the time we came here, by 1918. By all accounts, Llewellyn Spencer was running the two mills, Town Mill and Llanblethian, and was renting Town Mill from the Williams family. He wanted a rent reduction but the Williams family wouldn't give it so he chucked it in and it went completely derelict. Only Llanblethian mill was being worked by Llewellyn when he finished. Of the other mills, the farmer who had Gigman worked it a bit, but not on a commercial basis. When Tudor Llewellyn was in Howe, there was no mill working. The old building was there. I don't remember the water wheel working – I don't even remember a water wheel there.

Ours was a breastshot mill – in fact all the mills on the Thaw were breastshot mills. There wasn't enough fall in the water for overshot mills, and the undershot were very inefficient. With the breastshot, the water came in half-way up the wheel into buckets on the wheel, and the weight of the water helped the wheel to turn.

Of course, the wheel wasn't working all the time. When the gate was down at the back of the mill, the water would pond back in the river as far as Town Mill, and then we'd let the water through to drive the wheel. In dry summers we'd have to wait for considerable periods until the water built up; that water we could use for an hour or so, but then it would go down, and we'd have to stop the mill. We would then drop the gate down, and the river would eventually fill up to the top of the banks again. In summer dry weather we could not get the amount of milling done, but on the whole we were not short of water. In fact, higher up, in the meadow, there was an overspill and when the water rose so high it would go over there around into the Piccadilly brook – it was a relief in wet conditions.

There were two sets or pairs of stones – bigger mills had four or six sets. The bottom stone was stationary and the top stone revolved on top. The grain was fed through the centre of the stone. The stone was dressed, with veins in it which got thinner and thinner towards the end, and as the grain went in it got up these channels grinding all the time. As it came to the end it went into a wooden casing and the wind and the force of the stone spinning worked the grain down to the chute which took the grain to the bottom storey of the mill. The stones were French burr, and they were set; some millstones were of solid stone, but others had the French burr set into plaster of Paris with a ring of steel on the outside; to turn one over to dress them you'd have to have a real good pulley, they were so heavy.

We dressed them with mill picks, made by a real good blacksmith from very hard steel. When they wore down the smith pulled them out a bit further, he set them and ground them a bit and then he'd plunge them – but he had to know his colours because if you had a soft pick, it wouldn't last ten minutes. My father did most of the dressing himself. When we came here, I was a very small child, but there was an old millright, Old John we called him, he was a lovely chap. He taught my father – he said “Harry I'm not going to last, am I?” – he was an old man then – he said, “Harry, come and watch me do these stones”; and after a bit my father could dress the stones all right. Old John spent a lot of time here, part time, not working eight hours a day; doing all sorts of things in the mill - such as fitting the wooden cogs. The drive to the mill was all of wood; in the big cast wheel there was a series of slots, and wooden cogs would be put in, shaped and pegged at the back. Old Gilead Spencer would make them for my father, and when they went in they'd drive in the edge they wanted to engage, and drive wedges down the back. I've fitted a good many of these cogs – sometimes you'd have a bit of a mishap and something would jam a bit and you'd strip a few cogs off. If you did this the stone wouldn't work, and then you'd have to go to old Gilead. My father always said that applewood was the best, but good old tough oak we used to get with Gilead, a knotted oak which had strength in it. Gilead was living next door but worked in the Bear Lane in Cowbridge. He and Harry Webb were the wheelright and blacksmith there; they banded wheels together. Sometimes Harry Webb worked for my father as well if we had some metal break, he'd measure up and make the part. We all had to be prepared to repair things – I used to have to repair the buckets in the water

wheel. Sometimes you'd lose a couple of them, perhaps the pegs that held them in would rot, and then you'd have a big area where the water would go straight through and you wouldn't have any strength there. If you lost two or three you'd be in trouble. It was hard work, and there was a lot of it.

In the mill we ground up all sorts of grain – Plate maize or Indian Corn (from the River Plate in South America), Canadian wheat, and local wheat, barley and oats. All the oats and corn were for chicken or cattle feed. You could adjust the stones of the mill and sometimes my father would do kibbling – splitting the corn in half for chicken feed. Sometimes he'd grind it completely and it was like gold; the maize meal was beautiful, gold in colour – it fascinated me, like small gold floating down the chute. With oats the meal was a dull whiteish brown.

We could buy the foreign grain from Ranks in Barry, Pugsley and Wakelin on Cardiff docks, or Spiller and Baker (later Spillers) and my father had travellers from all those calling, and he gave big orders for wheat or corn. Sometimes he bought white flour from them as well. He bought grain in quantity, and he was pretty shrewd in his buying most of the time, though now and again he dropped a clanger - he bought high thinking the price would go higher, and it fell.

The grain would come in by wagon, in bags; there was a hoist in the mill, chain operated, and you could fix the bags on and as the mill was working then, you'd push the chain against the wooden wheel and the chain would bite and up she'd go. It was using the power of the water, simple but very effective.

What we did as a rule was to take the grain in its raw state right up to the top floor, and it was laid out on the floors. They used to spread it into different areas and in the floors there were chutes, and you could feed that grain down into the hoppers to start the milling. They were canvas chutes – tied with a slip knot, so it could easily be directed into the hopper and down to the stones for grinding. We finished off at ground level – the meal or flour came down a fixed chute into a bin to be scooped out. though it was possible to fill the bags straightaway., my father always ran it down into the built-in container areas. There was a wonderful machine for refining flour which had been built on the second floor, removing the bran with a series of sieves and brushes to make the pure white flour. Our bread made with that pure flour had a golden look on it.

Another thing my father did was to get the bakehouse going again. This was in the building over the river, where the bungalow *Afon Ladrud* is today. There was an oven there – it had gone into disuse and I don't think Llewellyn Spencer, our predecessor at the Mill, had ever used it– it was a proper brick-built oven, which would take 80 to 100 loaves at a time.

We had a van going round; my father had started with a horse and cart, but when he got going he bought a van. There were daily deliveries – this village, Cowbridge, Aberthin, Maendy, Trehingyll, Penllyn, City, Sigginstone, Llandough, St Marychurch... six days a week. I took over the deliveries afterwards, and my father stayed here seeing to most of the bread making, though I was often up at 4 o' clock in the morning. We eked out a living, all of us – old Johnny Thomas near us was baking but he was only selling a small quantity, though he was going when we came to Llanblethian. There were five bakers coming round the villages – there was Gibbs in Cowbridge, Johnny Thomas and us, Tudor Liscombe from Llancarfan and then his chap started a round – he had the sack from Tudor and started a round. Today you can't get anybody to deliver.

We didn't bake for the village. Because the mill couldn't produce the quantity of flour we needed, we had to buy in flour as well but we made quite a bit of wholemeal flour, and made it into bread and sold it on the round.

I'll tell you a little story about that. We regularly supplied the Grammar School, which had quite a lot of boarders, and Dick Williams the headmaster once sent a boy over saying "Tell Mr Stone to send some more bread". Well, father said we'd have to get it done, but we were short of ordinary flour, Spillers or Ranks, so he used his own. He made big square 4lb loaves and sent them in. Mr Williams saw my father a few days later and played war with him. "Mr Stone" he said, "don't you ever send us that bread again. I know what you've done". "I'm sorry, I was waiting for Ranks to deliver and so I had to use my own flour". "Well, don't you send it in here; those boys ate so much they will ruin us!" It showed the quality of our own flour; in commercial flour there's whitening stuff, but there were no additives in our flour made from Manitoba wheat, beautiful hard and dry wheat that the millers love.

We also supplied the High School, which also had some boarders, but only intermittently – it seems that the Co-op often managed to find out how much we had tendered for the contract and so often undercut us.

We closed the mill in 1948 after a visit from the River Board engineer and some local councillors. They explained that closing the mill gates was contributing to the problems of flooding upstream in Cowbridge, so we agreed to give up the water rights. By then we'd stopped making flour, and our main product was crushed maize and oats for cattle feed. But as more and more farmers were getting tractors, they could fix 'kibblers' to the tractors to crush the grain themselves, so it was about time to stop.

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In Piccadilly, on the Llanblethian Hill side, there were in those days five cottages. After the Baptist Sunday School, the first two (today's Rose Cottage) were occupied by Darky Summers and the Chisells. Darky Summers was a Cornish bloke, he was a hell of a man. They reckon he used to get in trouble, he'd get boozed, and the cops couldn't hold him: he'd dart in between their legs. He moved over to the Bakehouse after a bit; in fact that first house changed hands a few times. Wyndham Williams went there. The next two, now Half Moon Cottage, were where old Lil Jones and Mrs Boobyer lived, and then the last one (now Hill Drop) had a tin roof held on with wire and old Miss Williams lived there. There was one cottage on the other side where Roberts who did the murder on Llanblethian Hill in 1885 used to live; old Mrs Ridge lived here. She used to come home on Saturday nights with flagons in the pram, from Cowbridge. Old George Williams lived next door, in Brooklyn; he had a couple of fields and six or seven cows.

The kids used to play in the river – putting the worms with a hook on, under the walls, and pulling the eels out, sniggling they used to call it – you don't see any of it today. The sergeant was always asking "Where's these boys of yours, Harry? I've had complaints." "Well, catch them" – "But I can't catch them", he'd say to my father. Old Sgt Burston was always here about the boys, because we'd been putting taps on the windows and things like that. He was good old sort. He'd have given us a row if he'd caught us, but he never caught us. We knew he was after us, and when we saw him we were gone.

There was no destruction, but the boys were up to everything. Girls - girls weren't safe – I'm talking about willing girls, there was no rape or anything like that, but I can think of some who were beggars for the girls. Others, the younger ones, used to put taps on windows, long ball of wool with a little washer on it, and they'd tap tap tap – and when someone came out they'd drop it, and of course in the dark no-one could see the wool or the washer. That's the sort of thing we'd get complaints about. The Girls Friendly Society used to meet in the Church Hall, and what we'd do was bunk somebody up on the roof with a big clod of earth and a handful of grass, He would drop the grass down the chimney onto the fire, then stick the clod to block the chimney and smoke them out. Another thing we used to do – they used to make the tea outside and we'd go up and talk to old Baker or whoever was on there and we'd stick a couple of pounds of Epsom salts which we'd got from Williams the chemist into the tea water. It was harmless – no wilful destruction, but we used to play hell with the Girls Friendly Society. It is a wonder that no-one was killed because we'd be up on the roof there – when you look at it today you'd wonder "How the hell did we get up there?" We climbed everywhere, and almost lived on the castle walls – we'd be walking on the top of the castle walls and if any of us kids had gone over the top, that would have been it.

There were a couple of little shops in the village in the '20s – there was one up on Broadway, and my mother had one in the mill, selling bread and everything like that, and sweets. The only pub that was open was the Picton; I can remember old Tom Harkett coming up the Church Hill with a team of three horses for Herbert Thomas's father, from Penyrheol, Llysworney, and old Miss Llewellyn waiting for him at the top with a pint in her hand. That was service, that was.

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