

THE BUILDING OF DURSTON WINDMILL

The building account of a windmill at Durston has been found in a collection of accounts and court rolls for the manor and hundred of North Petherton, held at the Somerset Record Office.¹ It permits an interesting comparison with an account for the building of a windmill at Walton in 1342,² and adds to our limited knowledge of early windmill construction. The earliest documentary reference to a windmill in England is dated 1185,³ and the earliest reference for Somerset is to a windmill at Seavington, c. 1212.⁴ Drawings of postmills occur frequently in medieval manuscripts from the 13th century onwards, and other early depictions include a good 15th century bench end at Bishops Lydeard, which shows a mill, miller, mule and birds.⁵

The hundred of North Petherton included the manor of Durston. The manor was held by the D'Erleigh family, founders in the parish of Minching Buckland priory, and income from the mill would have formed a valuable part of their lordship. The reference to the construction of the mill occurs in the manorial accounts for 1324–5, and follows here in translation:

Cost of the Mill

100 boards bought for the windmill of Durston by view of William Carpenter and John Folmet, 11s 8d.

1000 [rest of figure missing] boards bought for the same by the said Walter, 10s 2d.

30 boards bought for the same, 3s 9d, per board 1½d.

2 grindstones for the same at Bridgwater ('Brugs'), 24s 8d.

Charging the said grindstones, 8d.

43 lengths of canvas ('carentivilla') bought for the same, 12s 6½d, 3½d per length. (?)'Plb' in total, 3d.

To Benedict the smith for his work, by view of Nicholas Gayllard, 15s.

'John Folmet' may in fact be an error for John Jolivet, who is mentioned several times in the accounts as bailiff of Durston. The boards were either for vertical or horizontal shiplap boarding for walls and roof. (It is believed that horizontal boarding was favoured in Britain.)⁶ 'Charging' the stones refers to their dressing, a highly skilled job requiring great accuracy. The canvas would have been spread over the light wooden frames to make the sails. The nature of the item costing 3d is not certain, but it may have been lead to balance the sails.

The location of the windmill site can be placed with relative certainty at ST 29752782, where a mound survived until 1971–2 when it was destroyed by ploughing. Coulthard and Watts mention it as a possible sunk post mill site,⁷ and

the Ordnance Survey marked the site as 'Mill Mound'. The field was named 'Touts' on the tithe map of 1838, and was again so called in a Women's Institute field name survey in 1970. It is distinctly visible on aerial photographs taken in 1947 and 1971. Scattered pottery has been collected from the field, though none was earlier than the 15th century. A small millstone survives in the fireplace of a mid 16th century farmhouse below the hill, but its provenance is unknown. The windmill site is ideally positioned on a south-facing slope looking out over the moor to Knapp and North Curry, and is only a short distance away from the site of a second known post mill which belonged to the priory of Minching Buckland. This second site is at ST 294280, and was damaged in 1962 when a reservoir was built into it. However, cross walling was noted.⁸ There is no documentary evidence for a windmill on the site, and it may well have been in use at a different date.

A comparison with the Walton windmill building account reveals many points of difference. Both windmills were built by the lord of the manor; but while Durston was in secular hands, the lordship of Walton belonged to Glastonbury Abbey. The costs varied considerably, the total at Durston being £3 18s 8½d, and at Walton £11 12s 11d. Much of the difference is attributable to the carpenter's wages. At Walton, these amounted to £5 6s 11d, and appear to have included payment for the main timbers ready trimmed. Wall beams costing 11s are noted separately. There is no mention of either the main timbers or the wall beams at Durston. This cannot be explained by supposing that a burnt mill was being refurbished, since a new main post would certainly have been needed. The conclusion must be that necessary additional timber was found on the D'Erleigh estate, and thus was not specifically accounted for. The lack of specific reference to carpenter's wages at Durston can probably be explained in a similar way. No iron work is mentioned for Durston, though at Walton it cost a total of 9s 11d, with the smith's wages amounting to 19s 8d. As the smith's wages at Durston were 15s, it seems unlikely that iron was included. One item at Durston which cost twice as much as at Walton was the canvas. At Walton, 30 ells of canvas at 2½d per ell cost a total of 6s 3d. The sails at Durston must have been larger.

The Durston stones both came from Bridgwater, whereas those used at Walton were purchased individually: one came from Bridgwater at 10s, and one from 'La Penne' (?in Yeovil) for 17s. The millstones were the single most expensive item on the Durston list. Dressing them cost only 8d, however, whereas at Walton 'wages of a man for dressing, drilling a hole and setting the stones in place by task work' cost 2s 6d. Perhaps the Durston stones already had their holes drilled, and the labour was provided by the estate. Mr Rex Wailes's suggestion that the Walton millstone from Bridgwater may have come from the Old Red Sandstone conglomerate on the Quantocks applies equally to the Durston stones. There were other sources in Britain, however, such as Derbyshire, the West Midlands, Wales and Dartmoor. Neither account mentions carriage costs, administrative costs, or any payments in kind for labouring services. Nor is the total size of the labour force apparent at Durston or Walton, though the building of both the windmills may well have required the co-operative efforts of a considerable number of craftsmen and labourers.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Dr Robert Dunning for his kindness in drawing my attention to the original documents, and to David Bromwich of the Local History Library, Taunton, for obtaining printed sources. Sue Berry of the Somerset Record Office gave valued help and advice with the reading and translation of the Latin text.

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