



Press Information

A Brief History of the Mill

Fountains Mill is both the estate's oldest building (its earliest parts are older than any visible part of the abbey) and yet the newest to be opened to the public; officially opened by the Duke of Kent in June 2001, after years of restoration work.

Nestling in the Skell Valley by the ancient abbey ruins, the mill is an historic and archaeological treasure; perhaps the best preserved watermill in England it is the only 12th century Cistercian cornmill in Britain and one of only a few surviving in Europe.

The Cistercian monks made excellent use of water power to drive the machinery of their daily lives and the mill was built originally as a huge monastic watermill and granary, to grind wheat, oats and barley to feed the whole abbey community - the Abbot, monks, lay-brothers, servants, visitors and the needy. The monks' diet was simple but wholesome with bread being the basis of every meal; therefore the mill played a vital part in their community.

A working mill was too valuable to demolish at the Dissolution in 1539 and it was spared because it was able to generate an income for the estate of £3 a year. Subsequent owners maintained it, updated it, and gave it new roles.

In its time the mill has also been a sawmill, a dairy operation, a stone masons' workshop, a generating station for electricity and during the Second World War it housed refugees.

A major conservation project, jointly funded by the National Trust and English Heritage, began in 1993. The National Trust owns and manages the Mill whilst English Heritage, as guardian on behalf of the government, repairs and maintains the fabric of the building. The work included; repointing of the walls, replacement of the decaying wooden lintels and insertion of steel ties to stabilise the leaning wall at the north end. The water wheel which was added in the 1840s to drive a sawmill, was restored on site and the millpond was cleared out. A new generator was installed and the old turbine from 1928 was also restored, so electricity can be generated once again and this helps power the display lighting in the mill today.

Visit the mill today and see how it was used throughout its 850 year history. Have a go at grinding corn, see how the monks used to eat, watch an animation about a novice monk, follow Roger Rat on his trail through the Mill, see the Mill wheel in action and have a look at artefacts from monastic times.

The second storey is also often home to art and educational exhibitions.