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MILLSTONES

Considering that the majority of mills were built to drive millstones, it is curious that the stones themselves have received so much less attention from mill historians and enthusiasts than the other parts of the mill. Admittedly the existence of the millstones, even a statement of the type of stone, is often recorded in the description of a mill; but hardly ever is the maker's name recorded even when it appears on the stone, and the sources of supply and manufacture of millstones have only rarely been discussed. I have been trying to spread some interest in the subject for the last ten years, and, of course, our Chairman, Kenneth Major, is working on it.

During the 19th century the most important millstones, used in flour mills, were those known as French burrs, fabricated in factories by cementing together small pieces of the very hard burr imported from quarries at La Ferté-sous-Jouarre near Paris. I have been able to list some 60 such millstone factories in Britain and know where examples of the products of some of them are to be found. Unfortunately it seems that only a minority of such fabricated millstones actually carried the maker's name, but when it is on the stone, it is important to record it. French burr-stone is usually easily recognised by its colour and texture, although these are variable, and I have seen no fabricated millstone the major part of which was not French burr. Nevertheless there are records of millstones of similar construction being made from British stone (e.g. Scottish basalt), and it would be interesting to know if any survive.

In earlier centuries, and in the 19th century for coarser grinding, monolithic stones were used, and of these the best-known are the Peak stones, quarried in the hills of the Derbyshire-Yorkshire border. These were made of a grit-stone, recognisable by the texture which is that of a fine gravel. Also well-known were the Welsh stones, quarried mainly near Monmouth and in Anglesey; these had a different texture, comprising quartz pebbles embedded in a hard sandstone, the pebbles ranging in size generally from about 1 to 3 cm. Many other kinds of stone were used locally, and I have a list for Britain of about 30 different quarry areas where millstones are known to have been made. Much more information is needed, however, to complete the picture. The cutting and shaping of the millstones was always done at the quarry, as far as I can ascertain, and the means of transport used were various.

On the continent, other materials and other methods were used, and members will know that Kenneth Major has been researching the millstone quarrying and mining in the Eifel region of West Germany. He has also drawn to my attention a description of millstone-making in 19th century U.S.A., where stone like the Welsh stone was used.

It is perhaps worth pointing out that millstones were widely used in applications other than corn-milling. Edge-runners with serrated edges were used for bark-grinding, and with smooth edges for cider-milling and mineral-crushing, etc. Even French-burr face-grinders were used for grinding minerals such as barytes, and can often be found at old lead mines, copper smelters, etc. And grindstones were used by the thousand in the edge-tool-making industries.

So, please remember the millstones, and record what kind they were, what size, who made them or supplied them, and when; where the quarries were and when they were worked, what techniques were used — indeed, anything you can find out to help complete the story of millstones.

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