

The Smock Windmill, Mill Hill, Swaffham Prior, Cambridgeshire, CB25 0JZ

HERITAGE STATEMENT

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Historical dates have been obtained from the Simmons Collection of notes held by the Science Museum Library and currently stored at Wroughton near Swindon. Several historic photographs appear in the online catalogue of the Mills Archive (www.millsarchive.org).

Early history of the mill

A post mill on the site of the smock mill is marked on Greenwood's map of 1832-3.

No mill is marked on the tower mill site at this date, though references to one begin to appear in 1839. The tower mill is known to have been erected by Robert Fyson of Soham in 1857-58, as it was working by 1859 (J. Cook pers. comm.).



Figure 1: Swaffham Prior windmills c1925, photographed looking up the track towards the north west. The tower mill is on the left and the smock is on the right. The smock has lost one pair of sails but is otherwise in working order and the fantails of both mills are working correctly as they are both facing the same direction. (Mills Archive Rex Wailes Collection)

There are conflicting dates for the construction of the smock mill. HES Simmons gives a construction date of 1860. Rex Wailes states that the smock mill was built by local millwrights Hunt's of Soham between 1875 and 1880.

Millers at the smock mill site (Simmons)

1839 Benjamin Stanton
1847 Benjamin Stanton
1853 William Parmenter
1858 John Danby
1869 Robert Jennings

1883 Thomas Foster (possibly as far back as 1870)
1888 Thomas Foster
1892 Fitz T. Foster (reputedly took over 1882)
1896 Fitz T. Foster

Swaffham Prior smock mill was similar in size and scale to the smock mill at Toyse Lane in neighbouring Burwell. Affectionately known as the Busy Bee, it disappeared in the 1930s. A contemporary section drawing (Figure 2) shows its interior layout.

Files held by the SPAB give a construction date of 1871 for the Toyse Lane Mill. Their similarities in scale and design suggest that Swaffham Prior smock mill may have been of similar vintage.

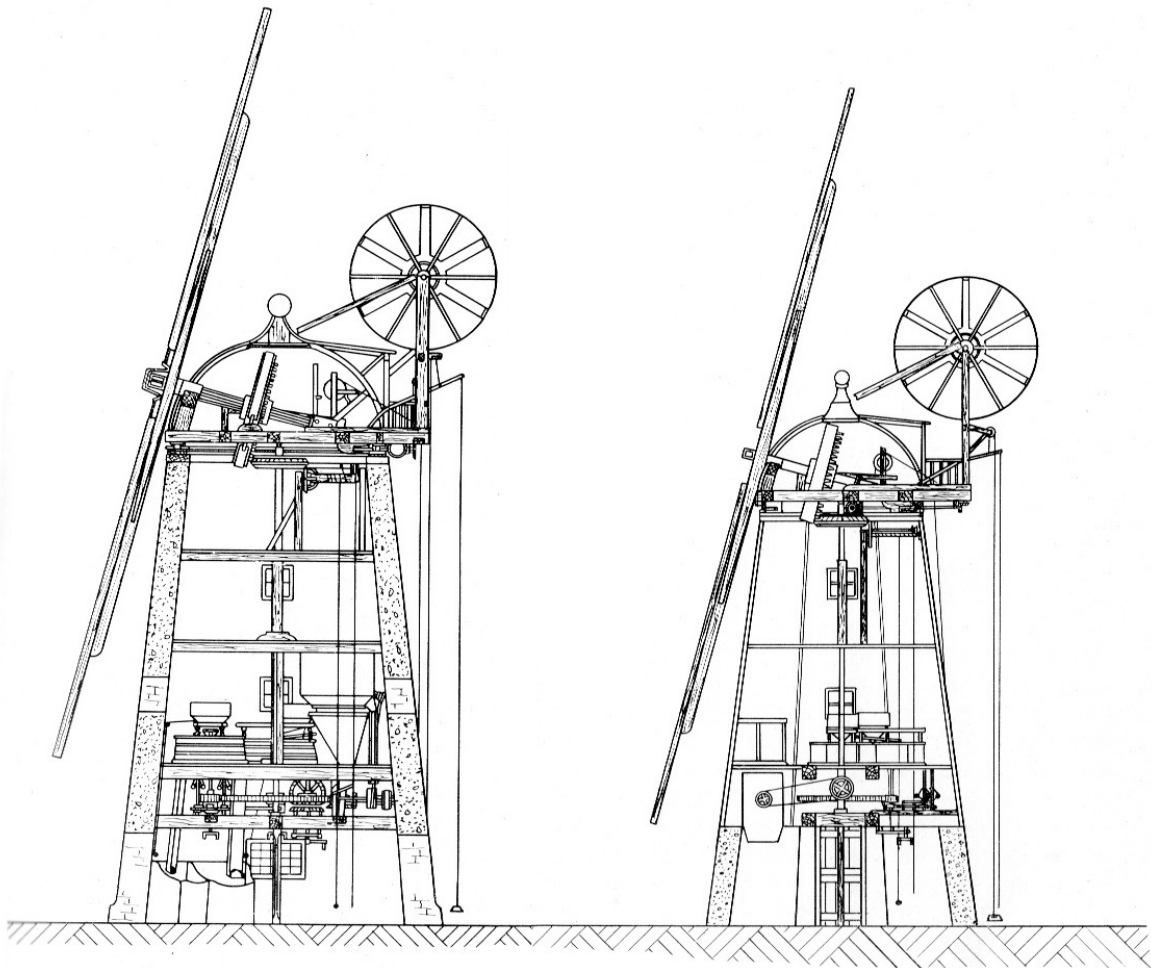


Figure 2: This drawing by R. O. Fyson featured in Rex Wailes' 1948 book 'Windmills in England'. It shows the Swaffham Prior tower mill and Toyse Lane smock mill, Burwell, in section.

The internal layout of Swaffham Prior smock mill is likely to have been similar to the Toyse Lane mill, although Swaffham Prior smock mill has an additional floor below the cap. There were two pairs of millstones on the first floor, the great spur wheel that drove them being positioned directly underneath, in the ceiling of the ground floor. All of the windmills in this area of the county followed this arrangement.

Structurally, both smock mills were similar with a single-storey brick base and a short timber-framed superstructure. The caps of both mills had rear dormers giving access to a platform below the fantail. Both of the windmills shown in Figure 2 have six-bladed fantails, whereas the smock mill at Swaffham Prior had an eight-bladed version, as can be seen today at Wicken and Soham (Northfield) smock mills.

Later years

By the turn of the 20th century both windmills at Swaffham Prior were in the possession of the Foster family.

The smock mill was offered for sale Aug 1927 with ¼ acre of ground (Simmons). Photographs of both mills taken in the early or mid-1920s show the smock mill had lost one pair of sails but its other pair remained complete, the mill appearing in good order overall (Figure 1).



Figure 3: Swaffham Prior smock mill following the removal of the sails, photographed by Harry Meyer in 1935 (Mills Archive).

According to Simmons, in February 1928 a gale from the west destroyed the fantails of both mills within three minutes of each other. This disaster no doubt ended the mill's working life. A photograph taken by Rex Wailes in August 1932 shows the smock mill with shutterless sails and a smashed fantail.

Later that year the sails and fantail spindle were removed, although its internal machinery was left in position. The mill remained in this condition throughout the 1930s.

At some time later – possibly during WW2 – the mill was stripped out completely leaving its tower without a roof and some of the upper framing exposed. In this condition the mill was photographed by intrepid mill surveyor Arthur C Smith in 1971.

Figure 4: The derelict and roofless remains of the smock mill in 1971 (Mills Archive Arthur C Smith Collection).



Reconstruction as a landmark

The remains of the mill would eventually have been lost had it not been for the intervention of Steven Bradley. In the process of converting the mill to a dwelling, Steven rebuilt the framing of the smock tower, re-using some of the original timbers where possible.

The inappropriate double garage doors that had been roughly inserted into the brick base c1950 were removed and a single door reinstated. Three new wings were built on the north west, north east and south west sides of the brick base with glazed link corridors connecting the windmill to the accommodation.

With new framing and floor beams in place, the smock tower was re-clad in black-painted vertical weatherboarding.

Lincolnshire millwrights R. Thompson & Son of Alford in Lincolnshire were then called upon to complete the windmill's appearance. They provided a new domed roof of sheet aluminium, a new cast iron windshaft to replace the scrapped original, an 8-bladed 'skeleton' fantail and four shutterless sails.

These elements completed the present appearance of the smock mill as a static landmark.

*Figure 4:
Reconstruction of the
cap and sails by R.
Thompson & Son in
progress, c1990 (UK
Mills website)*



*Figure 5: The
completed residential
conversion in 1999.*

