



# Going through the mill

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**Photographs:** Dorothy Burrows  
and Chris Webb

**W**ater mills have always held a fascination for enthusiasts and the general public alike. It is the combination of flowing water and the impassive beauty of these antiquated buildings that draws us to them. Alvingham Mill is no exception.

Gazing up at its whitewashed brick walls it is easy to forget that behind the simple, yet striking façade are quite literally the cogs and wheels of a traditional milling industry that up until the mid-1960s was an essential part of the rural community.

Of the thirteen mills that once provided a lively employment on the River Lud, only Alvingham, the most seaward and still workable, remains intact. Early records show that the mill had been busy and prosperous for many years.

Imagine, then, this historic water mill sadly falling into disrepair after the death of former miller, Tom Bett and subsequently being put up for auction by his wife. What was to be its fate?

It would be an exceptional couple with vision and determination who would take on the Herculean task of restoring the now semi-derelict building to its former working condition. That couple were Phil and Ann Davies.

I arranged to meet Ann Davies to record her account of the story and duly arrived in the middle of a snow storm, which made my first sighting of the mill, house and millpool even more dramatic. Ann hastened me inside to the inviting warmth of the house, a renovated Grade II listed building dating back to 1720.

Ann made me feel welcome and instantly at home. First impressions are of an immaculately restored cottage, the interior having been tastefully decorated and furnished; it is much more spacious than I had expected. From the large kitchen window there is a wonderful view of the

river, meandering its way through the meadow to the Louth Canal.

Here, indeed, is a place to stand and daydream. Not that Ann has had much time to do so since moving here in 1972. It is obvious that this charming lady is used to visitors and many hundreds have toured the mill on the many Bank Holiday open days since she and her husband, Phil, who sadly died last year, took on their mammoth task.

**Alvingham Mill near Louth was rescued from dereliction by its present owner to create a home and a living museum**

I began by asking Ann what prompted their decision to buy the property. She told me that they had always been interested in mills, both water and wind, as her husband was a construction engineer and she, herself, had worked in the same industry as a private secretary.

In the early 1970s the couple were living in a William and Mary house

in Goxhill and were just coming to the end of four years of intensive renovation work. It was then that they saw Alvingham Mill advertised for auction by Masons of Louth. "After an initial viewing, we just knew we had to have it," Ann says. The Water Mill had been sold at auction before, some ninety years previously when sales took place in a local hotel, the Golden Fleece. It is said these were usually advertised to commence one hour earlier to encourage prospective bidders to lubricate themselves at the bar and so raise the bidding. True or not, on 27th September, 1972, Phil successfully bid for the Water Mill, house and two acre paddock and changed their lives forever.

"He was so thrilled and excited," Ann recalls, "I thought he had bought a piece of paradise – not a semi-derelict old building."

So began what was to be many years of hard work and dedication. The previous occupants, Mr and Mrs Bett, and their fifteen children, including two sets of twins, had lived in the house for many years as the Bett family had owned the mill for three generations.

*Below: Ann Davies*

*Opposite: Alvingham Mill*





Both the mill and the adjoining house were badly in need of repair when Ann, Phil, and their three young children moved in. Every wall and ceiling had been boarded up for insulation and they were riddled with woodworm, recalls Ann. Removing the wooden panels in the sitting room revealed beams that had been hidden for a hundred years.

The plaster on the walls was badly cracked and the Welsh roof slates were in need of replacing. To retain authenticity, these were replaced by pantiles, both on the mill and the house. Repairing the roof first was essential, says Ann, a self-confessed eccentric. "We were so keen to get on with the job that we omitted to put the clocks back that autumn; it gave us an extra hour of daylight."

One of the five bedrooms upstairs was totally boarded up – window and all – and Ann was reliably told by the Betts that this was to keep out evil spirits. Undaunted, the newcomers decided that this room, too, should be stripped and a corridor was added to make accessibility to the bathroom easier.

In addition, the neighbouring mill and all its machinery had to be extensively repaired – not a job for the faint-hearted, which this doughty couple certainly were not.

Ann decided that once the mill had been renovated and the machinery was again fully operational, she would be its miller. This illustrates what a fearless character she is, bearing in mind that she had no previous experience and that milling is an arduous, solitary occupation.

Ann realised that in taking on this challenge, along with the full-time job of bringing up three children whilst contin-

uing with the renovations, it would be some time before she could lead a leisurely life. As the snow shower was abating, Ann led me next door to look round the mill and to explain how it worked.

As so often with many things that seem quintessentially English, it was the Romans who introduced this form of milling technology to the country; during the medieval period, the Cistercian Order built huge mill complexes all over Western Europe. There has been a water mill at Alvingham for at least 900 years and after the dissolution of the priory, on a site close to the mill, it passed into the hands of the Maddison family, who were wealthy landowners.

Originally the mill was two storeys in height and the wheelhouse was outside but, in 1782, John Maddison enclosed the latter to provide extra storage space. An upper storey was added in 1872. The breast wheel, one of three types of milling wheel, and other machinery were added some time later.

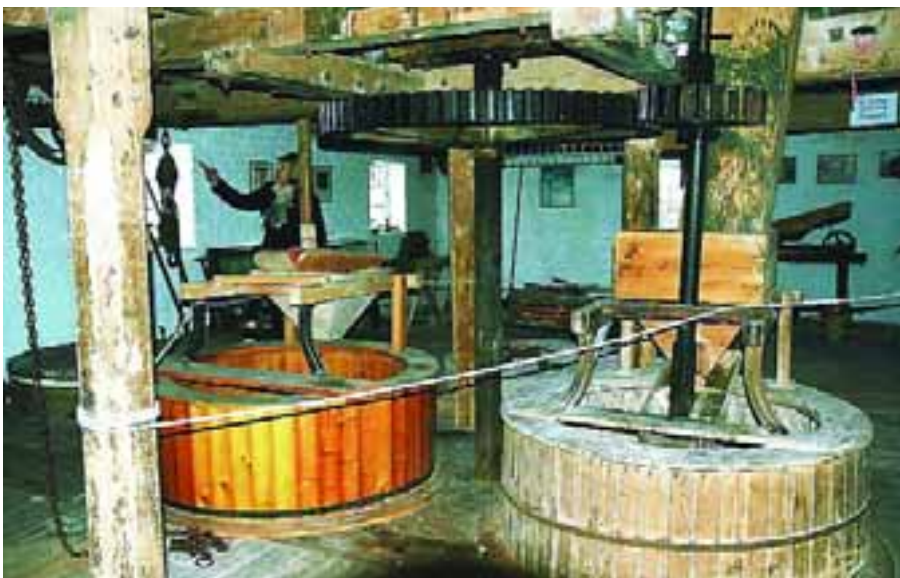
Upon entering the mill, there is a tangible atmosphere within its aged brick walls; a dusty, evocative smell of ground barley still hangs in the air six years after Ann milled her last hundredweight sack of grain.

The experience is heightened by the sound of rushing water as it tumbles through the tail race and out into the river. The wheel is accessed through a door to a low-ceilinged room with a suspended wooden floor over the water. Ann warns me to keep my head down. The gushing of the water is very loud here and to my surprise at the far end of the floor is an old privy which Phil had repaired and, according to Ann, had been used by several grateful visitors.

On my left the water surged in from the mill pond swirling round beneath the water wheel. This is huge, measuring eleven feet in diameter by eight feet wide. The axle spokes and cheek plates are of cast iron and the thirty-two buckets are fashioned from elm wood bound by cast iron. Ann told me that during restoration she had to crawl inside the wheel to remove the old buckets. It took a ton of metal and 1,000 bolts to repair it.

Ann explained that the power of the water entering the buckets through two side valves sets the wheel in motion; the wallower operates the main vertical cast iron shaft, which in turn drives the stones on the second floor – or stone floor. I climbed the steep wooden steps to this stone floor where the four feet, three inch diameter stones are driven by a great spur wheel on the shaft via a toothed gear wheel. Moving up to the bin floor at the top, the shaft drives a sack hoist through a friction pulley on the crown wheel.

*Below (top to bottom):  
The top floor; The two grindstones*





## HOMES & GARDENS

The pulley is brought into contact with the crown wheel by a double purchase lever system which can be operated by a rope from any of the mill floors. At full power the wheel runs at ten revolutions per minute and will drive two pairs of stones.

Ann's word-perfect description of the mill's workings is the result of her experience as a miller and many mill tours and lectures. Yet it is hard to imagine this feminine, diminutive lady hoisting huge sacks onto an enormous steel trolley.

However, Ann milled for twenty-five years, her husband and family giving up every Bank Holiday to host open days for hundreds of sightseers and educational school visits. In total, she says, she lectured to 25,000 school children. The many letters and drawings that adorn the mill wall are testament to this.

After only half an hour in the mill I was already chilled through, but humbled when Ann told me she would often spend up to three hours at a time milling and would return next door to the house, her joints stiff with cold.

This seemed a good time for a hot cup of tea back in the house and Ann, a considerate hostess, provided chocolate biscuits, too.

I had noticed a small window in the wall dividing the cottage and mill, and I asked Ann about this. Ann says she was told by a member of the Bett family that it originally housed Mr Bett's safe, containing all his gold sovereigns. Unfortunately, despite removing many skips of rubbish from the cottage, not a single gold coin was ever found.

Although milling may not be in the Davies' blood, engineering certainly is – and Simon, Ann's son has followed in his late father's footsteps and is a qualified engineer. It was this skill that enabled Phil to undertake the mill and cottage renovations, saving the former from conversion to a gallery or nightclub, instead of the authentic working museum that it is today.

Understandably, the Davies' received a warm welcome from the villagers. Thanks to them, the water mill has become a well sign-posted tourist destination. Its picturesque setting and simple but imposing exterior has been photographed countless times and appeared in many publications, including Lincolnshire Life's 2006 calendar.

Ann and Phil involved themselves in village life; Ann on the parish council and Phil in matters concerned with the village hall. Ann is justifiably proud of her husband's contribution to village affairs and the fact that he built the village stocks and stainless steel millennium bench. At

the end of March, she was to unveil a portrait of her husband at the village hall, a tribute to a clever visionary.

Since Ann's retirement, the mill has opened its doors only for a few local charity events. But, with the sad passing of her husband, Ann has decided that the mill will remain closed to the public. However, I am sure this will not deter sightseers, photographers and people picnicking on the front lawn.

As I said my goodbye to Ann Davies, it began to snow again. I leave with the memory of Lincolnshire's first, and probably only lady miller. Not the eccentric as she described herself at our meeting but, I would say, a 'dame extraordinaire'.

*Below (top to bottom): The renovated mill machinery; The pool behind the mill*

