

Suzanne Kelsey meets members of the Combe Mill Society, who have got an old beam engine working again

THE BEAM engine at Combe Mill near Woodstock has its 150th anniversary this year, and will be open to the public for two of its four annual open days on Sunday, August 18, and Sunday, October 20, from 10am to 5pm.

The machinery is part of a sawmill belonging to the Blenheim estates of the Duke of Marlborough. There has been a mill on the site, on the outskirts of the village of Combe, since Saxon times. The Domesday Book survey of 1086 refers to a mill at 'Cube' (now known to be Combe), and it is likely that it had existed for some time before that.

The village itself has 'moved' since then. It was originally in the valley of the River Evenlode, where the mill stands, but in the 14th century it became deserted, possibly as a result of the Black Death, and rebuilt a mile away on top of the hill, around the 14th-century church.

The present mill building dates from the mid-19th century, and the beam engine bears the date 1852. The water wheel is still to be seen, but once the machinery had been installed the mill was no longer dependent on the state of the river for its power, and more work could be taken on.

The fact that the beam engine is now working again is due to the efforts of members of the Combe Mill Society, which also has an anniversary this year. It is 30 years since it was founded.

In 1969 a working party from the Oxfordshire County Museum at Woodstock surveyed the site and began negotiations with the Duke of Marlborough, with a view to restoring both the engine and its boiler. Three years later, the efforts of volunteer mechanics were rewarded when the engine was successfully steamed for the first time in 60 years. As a result the society was formed, and went on to open the mill to the public for the first time in 1975.

The restoration work continues, with members having regular working sessions at the mill, and other aspects of its operation can now be viewed. There are also three smaller beam engines, a small corn mill, and several barn engines. But it is chiefly the beam engine which enthusiasts come to see.

Its technical description is 'double-acting, condensing, rotative beam engine with parallel motor'. The power of the engine is transmitted via a massive beam, which rocks to and fro – in this particular case, overhead.

Enthusiasts are also interested in the history of the boiler, a Cornish type, introduced at the beginning of the 19th century by Trevithick. Its position suggests that the building was constructed around the machinery, rather than the machinery put into an existing space.

The whole layout is unusual, with boiler and engine close together, although this is



Combe Mill Society secretary Mrs Peta Simmons takes a turn at stoking the boiler

Full steam ahead

practical, as both could be looked after by one man. The estate woodyard had its own railway sidings, and the boiler could have been delivered directly by rail, from the Oxford–Worcester line which at that time had just been completed. The smaller engines have come to the mill from a variety of sources.

One, built in the latter part of the 19th century by Thomas Bradford, is on loan from Trust House Forte. It had been used to provide power for a laundry at Haydock Manor, in Merseyside, and was removed when the manor was converted into a hotel.

The two vertical engines are more modern, and both have Oxford connections. One was built specifically for use in undergraduate teaching in the university's engineering department, and the other came from the Radcliffe Infirmary.

On loan from the nearby Great Tew estate, and restored by a late member of the society, is a small wooden corn mill.

On the first floor of the mill is a pattern-maker's workshop. Of the original machinery, only a woodturning lathe survives, but it is in full working order. Members of the Oxfordshire Woodturners Club provide the craftsmen to give demonstrations.

Among other items of historical interest are three church clocks, which represent three stages of development in clockmaking during successive centuries.

□ Open days are usually on the third Sundays of March, May, August and October each year. The Secretary is Mrs Peta Simmons who you can phone on (01608) 643377. □

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while watching a short video on the history and workings of the beam engines. The shop has maps for travellers, books, canal memorabilia, ice-creams and soft drinks, while outside is a picnic area with stunning views across the canal to Wilton Water, which can be reached by a flight of steps leading through a tunnel under the railway and out on to the tow-path.

There it is possible to walk either down the canal past three locks of the Crofton Flight towards the village of Great Bedwyn, or up the canal to the summit level and the Bruce

Tunnel. Walkers and bird watchers can take a stroll around the edge of Wilton Water, which is full of bird life, and into the village of Wilton.

You don't have to be an engineer to appreciate the skills of the craftsmen who made and worked the massive beam engines, and the expertise of the duty fireman shovelling coal into the jaws of the fire grate six feet deep. Just after the First World War, William Giles went to work as fireman at the pumping station, and lived in the cottage opposite. His daughter, Ethel, has written a

booklet of her childhood at Crofton, describing life and events in and around the pumping station the 1920s.

Visitors can see the great beam engines working this weekend (July 27 and 28), as well as on August 24, 25 and 26, and September 28 and 29.

□ For further information and enquiries contact The Warden, Reg Paynter, at Crofton Pumping Station, Crofton, Marlborough, Wiltshire SN8 3DW. Telephone (01672) 870300 or visit the Kennet & Avon Canal Trust's web site: www.katrust.org □