

# Steam spirit

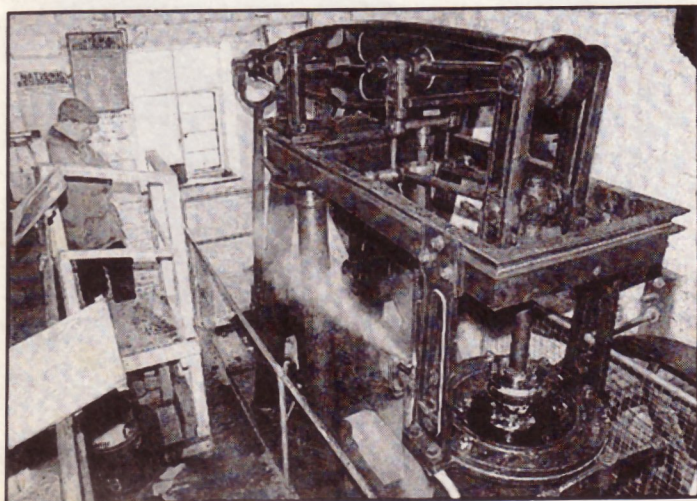
## Stuart Seager meets members of the Combe Mill Society



□ ABOVE. Peta Simmons feeds the boiler fire with scrap from the adjoining sawmill. The Cornish-type boiler of 1852 is one of the oldest in the country still steamable

□ LEFT. The original steam-engine chimney stands beside the bell-tower that once called the mill-hands to work

□ BELOW. Dr Gordon Lord supervises the warming-up of the massive beam engine before it starts its day's running



This is the best place to be on a cold day," said Peta Simmons, down in the stoke-hole, as she shovelled blocks of scrap timber into the flaming mouth of the boiler's fire-box. She took care not to disturb the foil-wrapped potatoes that were nestling in the hot ashes below. "They're for staff lunches later . . ."

From above came the rhythmical rumble and chuff of the great beam engine and the excited shouts of young visitors as Combe Mill Society swung into another public Steaming Day.

There has been a mill at Combe since before Domesday, tucked into a bend of the River Evenlode. By the early 19th century, a later sawmill here was busy with work for the Blenheim estate and more power for its machinery was needed. In 1852 a modern water-wheel was installed and also a wonderful new steam-engine to provide ample power whenever the river was low.

The sawmill and its steam-engine thrived until about 1912, when the engine ceased working and was never used again — no-one knows why. The water-wheel kept the mill going until electricity arrived in the 1950s.

In 1969 an industrial archaeology study group from the County Museum at Woodstock found that the old engine and its boiler, disused for so long, was in fact complete and might be resurrected. Three years later the Combe Mill beam engine ran under its own steam for the first time in 60 years.

The volunteer restorers became the Combe Mill Society and ever since then the engine has been on steaming show to the public several times a year, and the original mill building has been developed into a real working museum.

There are about a dozen active members of the society now. The chairman is Harold Warner, a former boilerman at one of the Witney blanket mills. There is Dr Gordon Lord, an engineering science don at Lady Margaret Hall; Arthur Keane, retired from estate management, is treasurer; Richard and Peta Simmonds are both keen members of the society. Peta is a local government food inspector: "Now, about these baked potatoes . . ."

□ Combe Mill beam engine will be 'in steam' again on Sunday May 15, from 10am to 5pm. Admission is £1 for adults, 50p for children and OAPs.

There are many other working exhibits and demonstrations to see. To reach Combe Mill: turn off the A4095 at the Witney end of Long Hanborough, then follow the signposts.