

Modbury's watermills

Walk the streets of Modbury today and you'd little appreciate that this small Devon parish, fed by the Erme's tributaries Aylestone Brook and Shilston Brook, for well over a century hosted six watermills. Their machinery has fallen into disuse and their buildings have become derelict or been converted into business premises or private accommodation. If you look closely enough, the sites of all six mills are visible, even if only as water channels or mill ponds.

Most likely, Modbury's mills originated as corn mills, grinding corn to produce cattle feed. Commonly, they also milled wheat or other grain to create flour for bread and other bakery products. It is possible, at certain times, that a mill might be converted for tucking or fulling – driving hammers which beat water-soaked cloth to clean and thicken the weave.

The six mills were distributed among the town's two brooks. Running from east to west, Shilston Brook hosted Spriddlescombe, Sheephams and New Mills, the latter being fed by the discharge from Sheephams Mill. Sheephams was probably the last Modbury mill to cease production, in 1954.

Aylestone Brook hosted Swanbridge, Cotlass and Orcheton Mills. Swanbridge Mill, close to the town centre, was probably Modbury's first mill, being recorded in the 13th-century Charters of Modbury Priory.

Limited water flows meant that the mills could not run continuously. They tended to operate for four to six hours each day, each fed by a mill pond which filled with water during the 'down time'.

Working for a miller was a hazardous occupation. Machinery was relatively unprotected and inhaled flour dust caused 'miller's lung'. The dust-laden air created a risk of fire, which could be started by the sparks from millstones.

Modbury's millers were tenants, paying a 'tithe' to the Lord of the Manor. Competition between the six mills must have been intense. This would help ensure that locals could buy high-quality milled products at keen prices.

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