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community events and services

**Restoring
Harrington's
historic grist mill**



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Story and Photos by GEOFF DALE

An integral symbol of Harrington's proud past is back in the public eye thanks to the hard work, dedication and a love of history from a local community organization.

For the past several years the 20-member Harrington Community Preservation and Historical Club Inc. has been devoting its considerable time and efforts to preserve the Harrington Grist Mill as a functioning museum and a working educational site.

"The Upper Thames River Conservation Area acquired the mill in 1966 and since then, it has remained closed and unused," says restoration committee chair Tim Van de Kemp. "In April 1998, the UTRCA held a public meeting to discuss the future of the mill.

"The community was supportive of efforts to restore the mill at its current location so in February 1999, the UTRCA entered into a lease agreement with the club for the long-term restoration of the grist mill and the maintenance of Harrington Conservation Area."

While much of the efforts were concentrated on fundraising at events like the annual Highland Games in Embro, the club also received a \$70,800 grant from the Ontario Trillium Foundation. They quickly discovered the money was about half that was needed to replace the entire foundation.



By the side of the mill, from left, John Hiuser, Doug Diplock, Sam Coughlan and Tim Van de Kemp.



Committee chair Tim Van de Kemp is at the left of the turbine and John Hiuser holds a hardwood bearing that is more than 100 years old.

"Our engineer Ed Talsma of Burnside and Associates of Stratford said he would re-do the drawings, doing it for the money we had," Tim adds. "Since 2009 there has been a considerable amount of work done on re-installations, new foundation and re-alignments to loosen up the running gear.

"It was a lot of work on these Saturday mornings but it was fun with lots of fellowship. The bottom line is the grist mill is now open to the public for viewings. It's been a great project but of course the work is ongoing. Through our annual barbecues (300 attended the August 14 event this year) and other projects we've raised in the area of \$10,000."

The club's website paints an intriguing portrait of the mill's historical background:

"The grist mill at six-hectare Harrington Conservation Area was built by the town's founder – an Empire Loyalist named D.L. Demorest. Built with hand-hewn native pine timbers and topped with a split shingle roof, it was first powered by an overshot waterwheel which was later replaced by a more efficient water-driven turbine in the 1880's.

At that time the mill was still utilizing the Frenchburr stone system for the production

of flour. When the practice of grinding coarse grains for area farmers was introduced, it quickly deteriorated the stones and that method of milling ceased.

In the late 1890s, the introduction of modern milling equipment came to Harrington in the form of an oat roller and chopper. The oat roller at the mill dates back to 1899 and was manufactured locally by Whitelaw Machinery of Woodstock.

The Mill was in continuous operation from 1846 to 1966, except for a brief period of time in 1923 when it succumbed to fire and twice in 1903 and 1949 when the mill dam broke. In later years, a diesel engine was used to operate the Mill when the water supply was too low to operate the turbine.”

Committee member Doug Diplock says it was gratifying to see the “groundswell” of support from the general public to restore a structure that had been used largely in recent years as a storage facility for UTRCA.

“The other option was to sell the mill,” adds member Sam Coughlan. “If it got back into private hands, we weren’t sure whether it would be restored for its historic value. So this was the best route and the community really came through.

“For example, Whitelaw Machinery took out all the equipment, restored and re-installed all of it so it now looks brand new.”

Pointing to a wall covered with plaques highlighting the names of companies and organizations, Tim says the restoration project would not have as successful without the assistance of firms like: Pounder Timbermart, Whitelaw Machinery, VicWest, Kittmer Enterprises, Kirby Electric, R. J. Burnside, Wellington Construction Ltd. and the Township of Zorra (with annual donations of \$3,000).

“What this project has done is to provide upcoming generations with living history to show how rural communities operated and why they existed because of mills like this one,” adds Sam. “It helped pull our community together, enhancing those old times with a new sense of purpose.

“The Trillium Foundation award came at just the right time, helping to bolster the community support



The running gear that powered the Harrington Grist Mill has been painstakingly restored. Pictured, from left, committee chair Tim Van de Kemp and members Betty Van de Kemp, Sam Coughlan and Doug Diplock.

that was already growing. This all challenged our sense of community.

For Doug, it was a case of not walking away from such an important historic symbol, adding, “I just didn’t want to see us doing nothing with this. This is a central part of what Harrington is all about and who we were then and are today.”

“The mill shows today’s generations and those in the future the kind of industries that were prevalent throughout Canada during those times,” says Tim “Many grist mills from the period 1844-1923 no longer exist, some of them burned down.

“The Harrington Mill stopped for a while in 1923 because of the fire but it was restored. Now it stands as a reminder of our history. It’s been a great project to be involved in.”

Those interested in touring the mill and stepping back into the past can make arrangements by contacting Tim Van de Kemp at 519-475-4376.