



Sara Grisewood's Wenban Smith's Lewes Woodyard series project

today East Sussex 35 relatively large mills alone. At present the same area contains about seven mills. Whatever the statistics, when one speaks to local millers they can usually reel off half a dozen or so local mills that have ceased to operate in their working lives.

During the 1980s and 90s, the rejuvenation of the traditional timber framing industry appeared to offer new opportunities in demand for homegrown timber – particularly for oak. Timber framing uses large section green oak beams but these need not be of the highest quality. This meant that mills were able to sell relatively low grade oak in large volumes for relatively modest amounts of sawing time. Millers were understandably delighted. Indeed the returns were so enticing that quite a number of 'new faces' invested in small scale mobile mills such as Wood-Misers and Trekker Saws, with the aim of making use of timber from the much under-exploited small woods that predominate in the south east of England.

In recent years this revival in milling local timber has not been sustained, but has actually declined.⁸ Sadly even some sawmills in the south east which had

always bought the majority of their timber from surrounding estates, have switched to imported timber from France, Germany and some eastern European countries. Some mills may still re-saw the imported timber, diversify or specialise in certified timber, but many mills have simply mothballed or sold off their machinery.⁹ There are a few mills bucking the trend but these are a very small minority. Also mobile micro-saw mills may have a future, at least in the long term, although at present this again is very small scale.

Meanwhile timber framing as a construction technique has become increasingly popular with regular features appearing on TV programmes like 'Grand Designs'. The numbers of companies and people employed in the industry has also steadily grown. Unfortunately the benefits of this expanding industry on the indigenous timber trade are probably actually diminishing.¹⁰

The main driving force for this decline is of course economic. The costs of extracting small parcels of low quality UK timber and milling it with British labour are too great. At present many mills simply cannot