Once a pioneer among the early flour mills of New Zealand, Harrison’s Flour Mill, located along the banks of the Waihi stream at Winchester, now stands idle. In a humble way this mill began in 1872, when Daniel Inwood sold his flour mill on the Avon River, Christchurch and moved south. At Waihi Crossing, now known as Winchester, ten kilometres south of Geraldine, he purchased a block of land from the Wood Brothers. Engaging Walter Rutland, a builder from Temuka, he erected the first timber section of his new flour mill. This measured approximately fifteen metres by nine metres and was almost ten metres high.
A native of Winchester, England, Daniel wished to maintain some ties with his homeland, therefore some say he named his business, Winchester Mill. Records are sketchy, yet there is speculation the settlement once known as Waihi Crossing, gradually adopted the name Winchester. This is thought to have been influenced by Daniel Inwood’s flour and its prominence in the market place.

In order to operate his mill, Daniel constructed by hand a water race more than a kilometre long which brought water to a large overshot water wheel. When commissioned on June 30th 1873, this giant water wheel rotated several massive grinding stones within the building, thus crushing wheat grain into flour.

Daniel’s two sons, Fredrick and Daniel, continued to manage the Winchester Mill after his retirement until 1885, when they leased it to the Murray Brothers. The Murray’s didn’t last long, relinquishing their lease to William Harrison in 1887.

As a night miller for many years, William Harrison was not new to the flour mill industry. His lease of the mill however, ensured the continued association between the Harrison’s and the Winchester Flour Mill would reach well into the following century.

William, around the turn of the century, went on to purchase the mill from Inwood’s. He made a few modifications and additions in an endeavour to streamline and increase the mills production capacity to two and a half sack of flour per hour.

With this increase in production, there came a fear of future possible drought conditions. In an effort to counter this threat, Harrison formed a mill storage pond, giving the mill a constant supply for water. This pond is said to have covered three hectares.

Later, a water turbine replaced the old water wheel again increasing the mills efficiency. Then in 1908, the installation of blending bins allowed the mixing of several varieties of wheat grain.

In 1939 an electric motor, drawing power from the South Canterbury Electric Power Authority, was added to assist the water turbine during dry periods.
During 1958 however, due to the mill pond needing extensive repairs, Harrison’s Mill decided to change completely over to electricity and by 1970, the mill was producing around one ton of flour every hour.

Winchester, a name firmly established in South Canterbury, became synonymous with flour milling. The Winchester Flour Mill and Harrison’s became a household name not only in prominent stores and bakeries around South and Mid Canterbury but in later years throughout New Zealand. It is interesting to note that after World War One Harrison’s donated the first set of grinding wheels used in the original old mill for incorporation in the Winchester War Memorial.

Sadly, after one hundred years service to the industry, Harrison’s finally closed in 1974.

One elderly chap I met and who worked in many of those early flour mills, told me of the process during those early days leading up to our daily bread being baked.

First of all he said, the following is the process we stuck to:-

1. To guard against smut and rust, we would pickle wheat grain in a solution of bluestone before sowing.
2. Sow the grain by hand or mechanical means.
3. Harvest the wheat with a reaper and bind into sheaves.
4. Sheaves were stooked by hand.
5. Stooked wheat, forked onto a horse drawn wagon, prior to forking into a stack by hand.
6. Thresh stacked wheat by means of a threshing mill, driven by a traction engine.
7. Threshed grain delivered in sacks direct to a flour mill for milling into flour.
Technology has progressed since those days and I for one, admit it has made things a little less labour intensive. However, one looks back in awe at the physical work required one hundred years ago, to produce one sack of flour and the number of times it was handled by human hand.
I read recently some of the health regulations and all the do’s and don’ts, according to a health guru’s Bible.
If we compare health regulations of today, to those of yesteryear, it beggars belief that those of us over the age of seventy are still alive to tell the tale!

*Courtesy of Noel Guthrie, April 2015. The date below the heading denotes the year in which Noel visited the site and made the sketch.*
http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nzlscant/