

YEARSLEY MILL RESEARCH PROJECT

Newsletter No 3

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The second year of excavations on the Yearsey watermill site has proved to be as equally rewarding as the first and we look forward to further exciting discoveries to come.

We had two intensive periods of excavation, one in May/ June and the other in Sept/ Oct, the weather was kind on both occasions and only two days were lost to rain. Our intrepid band of diggers excelled yet again and they were given invaluable assistance by Steve Young and the National Park apprentices.

The evaluation trench targeting the wheel pit and cog areas was the most productive as it gradually revealed the remains of the last mill wheel. It was buried there, we believe, as part of the landscaping process when Gilling Park was being developed during the first half of the 18th century (See Fig 1).

A piece of timber shown in the last newsletter, originally thought to be from the mill wheel was, in fact, part of the cog wheel or gearing mechanism used to drive the mill stones.



Fig 1. *Remains of the mill wheel within the wheel pit.*

Wood expert, Steve Allen, from York Archaeological Trust was surprised at the level of preservation. He thought this to be one of only six similar wheels left in the country from this period (16-17th century). Yearsey's being the only one of its type in the north.

The design of the wheel shows it to be 'overshot' or driven by water fed onto it from above. It was also very well constructed, with the original complete circle of water tight buckets fitted together without the

use of the nuts, bolts and metal brackets used on later millwheels.

Further excavation revealed a substantial wooden pillar base possibly used to support the launder or wooden trough directing the water onto the wheel.

A paved entrance, a pathway and the base of an exterior wall were also uncovered to the west of the mill building, buried under tons of stone rubble used to conceal the site after the demolition of the mill (See Fig 2).



Fig 2. Entrance, wall, pathway and stone rubble to the west of the mill.

Finds from the site were again many and various, mostly pottery but more mill related items started to appear, such as stone spindle bearings and the leaf shaped picks used to dress the millstones (See Fig 3). Perhaps the most unusual and intriguing items were a small lidded pewter tankard, some short brass

pins and half of a flat circular stone, some 9" in diameter, with a hole drilled through the middle, function as yet unknown.



Fig 3. Pick blades for dressing the mill stones.

A conscious effort has also been made during the year to publicise the project more widely. To this end an exhibition of finds was held in the National Park's conference room in Helmsley. The event was well attended, despite the weather and some 40 people were able to discuss the project and to view the finds accumulated at that time.

Other events included illustrated talks and guided walks given to various local history groups but perhaps the most memorable were the two activity days organised for local primary schools. Children from Ampleforth, Hovingham and St. Martins in Gilling visited the site. They were given the opportunity to

try some hands-on archaeology, including trowelling and pot washing and through this to experience the thrills of discovering the heritage on their doorstep.

On a more serious note, an interim report was written for the 'Ryedale Historian', the journal of the Helmsley Archaeological and Historical Society, whose members have been valued sponsors and supporters of the project.

The Forestry Commission have also been a mainstay of the venture, granting access permissions despite the difficulties with *phytophthora* infestations, assisting with funding for wood reports and even giving their own time and labour to dig on the site. Additional help has come from community archaeologist, Dr Jon Kenny and mill experts John Harrison, Peter Morgan and Graham Maynard for which we are truly grateful.

Looking to the future, enquiries are taking place as to the possibility of conserving and exhibiting the remains of the millwheel together with some of the other artefacts. The pottery presents another problem, partly due to the large number of sherds (>3,800 pieces so far), funding is being sought to have

the assemblage analysed professionally. Despite some brave field walking efforts in the spring the site of a kiln still evades us but the search will go on.

Excavations, recording and documentary research are still ongoing, as much remains to be done. We plan to dig again in the spring and autumn, including some weekend days this year. So if you would like to become more involved please contact Elizabeth or Geoff.

Best wishes to you all for the New Year.