Sherborne Mill, Sherborne St John

Ruth Andrews

Pictures by Keith and Ruth Andrews and Harry Clarke

In 2013 when several members of HMG were visiting mill sites for book 3 of *Mills and Millers of Hampshire*, we visited this site but were unable to contact anyone, so the entry in the book was based on our observations. Two months ago we were delighted to be contacted by Harry Clarke who purchased the property in 2015. He and his partner Devika are installing a new 3.8m overshot waterwheel to generate electricity to harness the water power of this long neglected site.

Note the reed bed in the silted mill pond and a woody bole – the remains of a large willow tree that had cracked open the masonry leat

When Keith and I visited the site in October work had started on a new building and wheelpit on the site of the mill. The concrete currently visible will soon be disguised with the original bricks. This photo was taken from the mill dam, with the mill pond off to the right.

Several millstones, part of the original wheel, and a lot of pieces of timber were found on the site

Harry writes:

Three mills are mentioned in Domesday in Sherborne St John so we believe this to be one of them and hence an old site. We moved here in 2015 having bought the house and surrounding land from Charles Horton. His father Percy bought it as part of a larger parcel of land from the elderly Sir Leonard Chute, owner of the Vyne Estate in 1954 four years

before the last of the Chutes died in 1958 leaving the rump of his estate to the National Trust. Prior to that we believe it had for centuries been part of the Vyne Estate.

Sherborne St John does as the name suggests have many streams of clear water. It sits on a spring line that runs right through the village and is essentially where the permeable Hampshire chalk encounters the Reading and Lambeth clay beds of the impermeable London clay basin. The three feeder stream for our site all rise within half a mile of the mill site itself either to the west or north.

On our arrival the site was as described in the HMG book. As we drove back the vegetation we firstly exposed the 'waterfall' and the vestigial walls. We also rediscovered the masonry leat, control sluice for the bypass tunnel, 200 foot masonry bypass tunnel, and the ram pump drive pipe entry pit. The masonry leat was badly cracked and one flank wall had clearly collapsed at one time allowing the water in the mill pond to escape around the side, carving a channel that can be seen in the photograph in the book.

The silted-up mill pond – you could easily walk on the reed bed which had grown up

The mill pond after 4500 tonnes of silt had been excavated

Harry in the head race

Many of the bricks being used to clad the concrete come from the site, the remnants of the 1797 mill and even older buildings

Having measured the flow (80 litres/sec rising to 200 in winter) and realising the head was about 4.5 metres it was clear that electrical power could be produced here, despite the fact that the feeder streams were probably diminished in flow when compared to historical times.

The building we are putting back is going to contain an epicyclic gearbox and generator attached axially to the wheel but is largely going to be used for vehicle and tractor garaging with storage in the eaves.

The wheelpit under construction

The new 3.8m steel waterwheel being constructed at the factory of Smith Engineering in Maryport, Cumbria, with Rod, the founder and managing director

The construction is scheduled to take place over two years. Due to the dampness of the site we are only constructing from April to end of October in 2018 and 2019. The first phase of foundations and concrete and major landscaping and installation of the wheel is nearing completion pretty much on schedule. Next year is brick skins, first floor (block and beam), roof framing (green oak), roofing in hand-made clay tiles with obviously first and second fits, windows, doors, final finishes, and detailed landscaping.

The tin shed which was appended to the mill and from 1891 to the 1920s powered the mill equipment via a steam engine and pulleys (due to the silting of the mill pond) before the mill finally fell into complete disuse in the late 1920s. This has since been relocated to elsewhere on the site. The weather-boarded building behind dates from 1837, and is a brick and timber oak frame barn for animals and feedstuff.

The C
survived

Keith and I have now visited the site 3 times, and Peter Mobbs has been twice. Other members of HMG are welcome to go and look at the work.

By the time of our third visit, the wheel was installed and turning, although the electrical work and the construction of the launder was still to be completed.. The wheel is designed to generate 4Kw when turning at 6rpm.

This picture was taken during the process of bolting together the two halves of the wheel; which had to be split to be transported from Cumbria.

The wheel is now in its final position. A garden shed forms a temporary cover for the electrical kit, although when work is completed next year it will be inside the new building. The curved brickwork in the foreground is going to form an ornamental pond in front of the overspill waterfall. The tail race flows away underground in a tunnel, as it always did.

The heavy rain at the start of November may have hampered the building work, but it has certainly filled up the mill pond spectacularly.

Many thanks to Harry and Devika for inviting us to examine and report on their exciting and brave project.