

City Mill, Winchester

Ruth Andrews

Pictures by Keith Andrews except as noted



On 30 May 2018 a group of HMG members were invited to Winchester City Mill by the manager Ric Weeks to witness the restoration work now in progress. He gave us an extremely interesting tour which clearly demonstrated his great enthusiasm for the building and its history.

First we gathered in the island garden where Ric explained that the building is much older and more complex than had been fully understood in the 1920s when it was acquired by the National Trust. Written references to a mill on this site go back to the 10th century: for instance, in 932 Eastgate Mill, as it was then called, received an order of timber for the bishop. By 989 Queen Elfrida had passed the mill to the Benedictine nuns of Wherwell Abbey. It is thought to be the oldest documented mill in the country, and there are suspicions that it is even older still, perhaps Roman.

Although the mill was rebuilt in the 1740s many of its timbers are a lot older. They have now been dendrochronologically dated to the 11th century, and many were recut in the 14th and 15th centuries, making them less stout but more refined; most Winchester roofs are much bulkier. It is also of course possible that beams from elsewhere were reused.



However, the 1744 rebuild appears to have retained a lot of the older structure. A small amount of wattle and daub remains but it was largely replaced with imported Flemish red bricks which now give the building the air of a status symbol rather than a mill. It seems likely that before the rebuild there were two thatched buildings separated by a gap, as evidenced by the different floorings in the basement. We also looked at the roof beams (with quite a good display of cobwebs) and the taking-in doors overlook the downstream river. The doors are shown open in the 1795 JMW Turner sketch of the mill, which was found by chance in 2013 by Ric when he was looking through the Tate Archives.

We then walked round the road to Water Lane where we split into 2 groups and donned hard hats (there were only 7 of them) before entering the basement. Here everything is still supported by the Acroprops which have been preventing the building from collapsing since it was damaged by the floods in 2014.



The workmen from Daedalus Conservation who are doing the restoration work (in conjunction with Donald Insall Associates, Historic Building Consultants, and SFK Consulting, Civil Structural and Environmental Engineers) allowed us to examine their work. All the internal walls and the unexpected asbestos panelling installed by the YHA, who occupied part of the building from 1931 to 2005, have been removed (at a cost of around £50000). The concrete floor has gone, revealing a brick floor in the Water Lane end of the building, compacted flints nearer the middle of the building, and an earthen floor between the two. When the work is finished this area will be used for offices and a conference room.

We then walked back round to the stones floor where the long-lost milling machinery was replaced in 2004. Here public access is currently limited to the area around the stones but

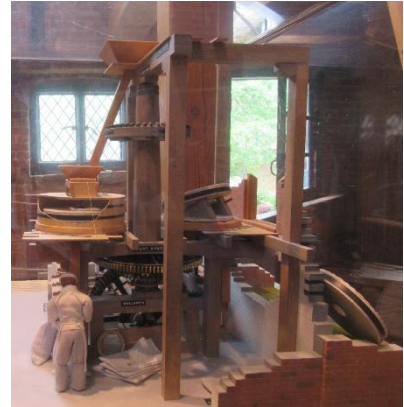


From City Mill website

there is a viewing window which allows visitors to see the ancient joists and the new additions. New joists have been inserted parallel to the ancient timbers and where necessary the rotten ends of the old joists have been supported on metal hangers, so the floor is once again self-supporting. To make this possible 3 layers of flooring had to be removed.

They dated from the mid-19th century, the late 18th century, and the 1740 rebuild. Soon modern floorboards will be installed and the whole of the stones floor will be accessible once more.

We were asked if anyone knew who had constructed the wooden model of the mill which is on display on this floor (*shown right*), but we were not able to supply a name. Can anyone reading this recall who made it?



Eleanor Yates

Finally we descended to view the current waterwheel and associated milling machinery. Some of the old timbers alongside the 21st century hurst frame have also now been dated to the 11th century.

My thanks to Ivor New for arranging this visit, to Ric Weeks for showing us round, and the National Trust for allowing us access to the work area. Ric is pictured here talking to one of our newer members, Robin Appel.



Eleanor Yates