

Hampshire Mills Group Trip to Devon 9th to 11th May 2014

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The long awaited (three day) mills and industrial archaeology trip to greater Devon arranged through our chairman Andy Fish, started early morning from John Silman's home in Chandlers Ford.

Andy was also our driver and creator of the illustrated twenty two page programme. There may have been only nine of us senior citizens on board but we have known each other for many years and with Mick Edgeworth as navigator, time passed very quickly on the first leg to Lyme Regis.

This was Town Mill, hidden away on very narrow streets up from the Cobb. The modern history of this mill is one of successful and sustained development with added brewery, bakery and art studio using adjacent old buildings.

This is an operational watermill, open to the public, producing wholemeal by an overshot fed waterwheel and electrical power from the modern water turbine. Outside, the sheltered courtyard with tables and chairs to relax in and a drink of your choice.



Town Mill, Lyme Regis

So, westwards on to Otterton Mill. Still part of the Clinton Devon Estate which has been restored to working order from 1977. Now owned by the Spiller family from 2008 and stated to be the most productive watermill in Devon, and surprisingly, open to visitors free of charge throughout the year.

Travelling further north next into Somerset, we came to Coldharbour Textile Mill of a size and mass to equal many in the Midlands.

Built by Thomas Fox in 1799, it became renowned for its high quality worsted yarn and cloth which was exported globally. Though closed to production in 1981, it reopened as Coldharbour Mill Trust as a textile museum in 1982.



Coldharbour Textile Mill

It has the largest waterwheel in the south west, dating from 1821, an 1867 beam engine and a rare 1910, 300hp steam engine with Lancashire boiler. A fascinating range of machinery in working order and museum display items including production equipment to make 'puttey's for our army in former times. It was not far to find our accommodation for the next two nights as the modernised Tiverton Travelodge, not far off the M5.

Our evening dining and socialising was about half a mile down the road at the Waterloo Inn, which suited us all well. After a good nights rest, most of us opted for a drive out for an old fashion breakfast about two miles away. Excellent in all respects, so we promised to return for more on the Sunday morning.

We were soon loaded up and heading towards the north coast at Dunster Mill, within the Dunster Castle grounds.

This Mill is owned by the National Trust and was officially closed at this time for urgent conservation works but HMG have a knack of getting into mills where others are turned away. The NT Administrator was especially interested in our group and the expertise which we could provide for this mill.

Our programme provided nearly four pages of information on this mill and local history which is very informative. One of the two overshot waterwheels is in use and trial milling has commenced.

A very interesting collection of farm and mill related machinery and equipment is displayed as is also a Howes, Eureka grain cleaner with extended aspirator, as machine No. 19195.



Dunster Mill entrance and wheel

On next, to the Simonsbath Sawmill, part of a large former estate, now in the hands of the Exmore Park Authority since 1991.

This water powered mill was restored to working condition between 2002-03 with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund. Unfortunately sawing production ceased in 2010 and it is now operated and maintained by a volunteer group.

Formerly powered by one or more waterwheels, it was adapted when a powerful Garnish and Lemon turbine was installed in 1899. It has today two large sawing racks and ancillary machinery plus a back-up oil engine for driving power. We saw one saw bench in operation which was quite impressive. Refreshments out of the rain were welcome less than 100 yards up the hill from the sawmill.



Simonsbath Saw Mill entrance

So to the west, near Watermouth and Hele Corn Mill, almost hidden in a little valley behind domestic housing.



Hele Mill main gearing

This old watermill dates back to the 16th century and incorporates later millers house and stores. It underwent major restoration in 1973 and was producing flour for twenty years by water power, before deteriorating.

The Jones family took over the premises in 2011 and have quickly built up a business incorporating milling, bakery and tea shop. Water power is aided by a 1920's National oil engine and flour with a Blackstone Dreadnought Mill

This mill had a piece of old Hampshire in the form of a 'Horizontal Grain Scourer with Separator and double Aspirator' by Armfields of Ringwood. A rather rare survivor.

For some, the highlight of the day was the cream teas. Delicious fresh warm scones or cake with choice of cream and jam. Before we had left, they had sold out.

Our minibus pointed back over Exmore to Tiverton and our hotel once more. Our evening dinner at the same eatery as before – such good service.



Finch Foundry water wheel

Sunday morning dawned which saw us driven to our special breakfast stop to charge up for the day ahead. After loading our baggage back on the bus we were off to the village of Sticklepath, on the edge of Dartmoor.

The Finch Foundry has a long mixed history, from woollen mill to grist mill, tool factory, sawmill, carpenters and wheelwrights shop.

It is best known as a forge for the making of agricultural edge tool implements. At the rear of the building range are three overshot waterwheels fed by timber launders.

Surviving machinery includes tilt hammers, shear and drop hammers. Five hearth forges, polishing wheel, band saw and grinding house, all in working order.

Under National Trust management, there is at the rear a small tea shop (used for lunch snacks) and gardens leading to Quaker Cemetery.

The last Devon visit was to the disused metalliferous, Kelly Mine, near Lustleigh. It worked rather intermittently from the late 18th century until 1951. It produced micaceous iron oxide (shiny ore) or haematite, used largely in the production of anti-corrosion paint.



It is sited within a steeply sloping hillside with rather dense tree growth. The site is leased from a local farmer by the volunteer led, Kelly Mine Preservation Society. The site is virtually as it was left in 1951 with various leats, waterwheels, tramways, dressing shed, stamps, washery and drying shed. Pit shaft and underground access is not open to visitors.

It has a fine Blackstone oil engine, Turgo water turbine, compressor and winch for tramway incline. Very much an IA site with many aspects of water power use and broad interest to many of us. This was surprisingly my favourite site of the three days.

Kelly Mine Pit Head



Kelly Mine Stamps

It was now time to head for home via the outskirts of Exeter and A30 to Dorset. We made a detour to view the old mass concrete viaduct that took the old branch rail line to Lyme Regis, otherwise we made for West Bay for a meal stop and stretch our legs. So on eastwards back to Hampshire in the fading light to our respective abodes. I must express, on behalf of my fellow travellers, the great thanks to Andy for organising and all the driving necessary to make this trip such a success and my fellow members for such good company. Looking forward to 2015 and another HMG trip.