

DUNKIRK MILLS, NAILSWORTH, A PROGRESS REPORT

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The conversion of Dunkirk Mills into residential accommodation has continued during the last year but not without its problems. These have arisen from both the difficult nature of the restoration and the present state of the property market.

Members have continued to research the history of this fascinating complex and to make preliminary plans for the displays at Dunkirk. The background to the development and the Society's role in it were described in an article in the previous Journal (1).

The important points are that the very fine buildings are being restored to essentially their former glory. All the water courses are being retained and the three water wheels put into working order. The areas around the wheels will contain the small museum in which GSIA will be actively involved.

The following account is a brief summary of the progress since April 1989.

Much of the major work this year has been concerned with making the building structurally sound. Not only had some parts become close to unsafe, but it has been necessary to construct fire proof concrete floors between the new flats. This has necessitated sinking reinforced concrete piles some 30 feet into the ground and constructing horizontal reinforced concrete beams to sit on the piles. These provide a solid base for the new steel pillars which support the new heavy floors.

Both the 1818 and the 1827 sections have been re-roofed using as far as possible the existing Cotswold stone 'tiles'. The disrepair of the buildings had become so advanced that some major timbers had to be repaired or replaced. It was really only after the repair had started that the full extent of the defects became apparent.

It has been possible to retain most of the original stonework but in one or two places it has been necessary to take out sections and rebuild them.

The 1798 section is currently being re-roofed. This contains the very interesting roof structure that was referred to last year and a model of it has been made by one of our members.

Major internal works are currently being undertaken inside the 1855 mill. Later, a proper matching pitched roof will be put on in place of the existing flat roof. The disastrous fire of 1923 destroyed the original pitched roof.

The redbricked building between the 1855 building and the railway was demolished during the year. The red brick chimney stack was retained and repaired. These structures only dated from about 1914. Another fire had completely gutted the stone building which they replaced. The new building here is also red-bricked but has a modern steel frame. It is very similar to the demolished red brick building which was far too weak structurally to be converted.

Most of the brick work and roof are now complete.

A good start has been made on restoring the three overshot water wheels. Specialists Carrom Watercrafts have nearly completed repairs to the two 10 feet diameter wheels in the 1818 building. The very big wheel dating from 1856 (13 feet in diameter) has been dismantled and will be tackled next.

In June 1989 the show flats and a sales office were opened in the 1827 building. Several apartments have been completed at that end of the buildings. The depressed state of all sections of the property market over the past year has made sales of the flats very slow. Since there is little prospect of a significant improvement in the next few months it is possible that work on the completion may be severely delayed. Happily the major structural work is nearly complete. The building has therefore been secured for the future despite the final completion date for the project being delayed.

Our research work has addressed all the main occupiers of Dunkirk (1) and considerable progress has been made.

There are some 30 deeds in the Gloucestershire Record Office covering the period 1785 to 1822. This is some indication of the number of changes of ownership, mortgages and bankruptcies in this period.!

By 1822, Dunkirk had become the property of Peter Playne of Box House. The mills remained in the possession of his family until about 1901 (although cloth production finished in 1889). Very little had been known about this branch of the Playne family but some family papers in private hands have been located and

are being examined. These give a clear indication of the various partnership that existed and some details of production figures can be obtained.

Restoration work in the 1827 building has revealed an inscription that "3 March 1834 the weaver's strike was settled". This is corroborated by a hand bill which has been located. This gives the new weaving rates for the district and is dated 4 March 1834.

We have been fortunate to locate four ladies who worked in the hosiery factory at Dunkirk at overlapping times between 1912 and 1937. From their very clear memories of their early working life we have been able to piece together a very good picture of the factory and its operations. The parent company (W. Walker and Sons Ltd) were in Nottinghamshire and we have obtained the help of the local IA group to obtain information on them.

The walking stick factory at Dunkirk (Walker's Sticks) continued until about 1962. The same processes are carried on today by the Chalford Stick Company which has recently moved to Lightpill, Stroud. We have arranged for a full photographic survey to be made of the manufacturing process.

The roadside mill was occupied between about 1940 and 1950 by Grant Barnett and Co Ltd from London. They moved some of their staff out of London to Nailsworth at the start of the War. Among these was Miss Cash who later married Mr Frank Walker the owner of Walker Sticks. Mrs Walker has been very helpful in telling us about the recent history of the mills.

Of all the companies that have used Dunkirk the only one still in existence seems to be Grant Barnett. Their business during the War included the manufacture of rainwear and other items but now it is just umbrellas. Through Grant Barnetts we have been able to trace the director who brought the firm to Gloucestershire and he has been able to fill in some details.

The only major firm for which we have not yet been able to obtain much information is the firm of Wright Brindley and Gell who made umbrella furniture and small castings in the 1827 building between about 1903 and 1960. We hope to make progress on this in the forthcoming months.

Additional information has been provided by local people who were brought up near the mills.

Slowly the pieces of mills history are fitting together. When the restoration work on the buildings is complete we hope the story will be ready to tell.

Reference:

(1) Wilson, R. Dunkirk Mills Nailsworth - A New Chapter, GSIA Journal for 1988, pages 30-31.