

DUNKIRK MILLS, NAILSWORTH: A NEW CHAPTER

Dunkirk Mills at Inchbrook Nailsworth are among the finest surviving textile mill buildings in the county. They lie close to the A46 main road and thus are visible to the many people who pass that way.

In recent years they have been empty and the Society had become very concerned at their rapidly deteriorating condition. Various schemes had been put forward to convert the buildings into dwellings but nothing ever came of them. However, late in 1987 the site was purchased by the Merchant Manufacturing Estate Company headed by Mr Paul de Savery. Rapid progress has been made since, with an ambitious plan to convert the buildings into nearly 70 apartments, but at the same time retain the main features of industrial archaeological importance. Indeed in the case of the three very fine waterwheels these are actually being restored to working order.

The Society has been very much involved in this side of the development and this short account gives the story so far.

In June 1987 a small group of Society members visited the site to update our record of the important industrial archaeology features. This was done so that we would be well prepared when the next set of plans for development came along. In the event all the major points in our report have been included in the development. The scheme does not include any new buildings and the terms of the listed building consent means that the outside of the buildings will be essentially unaltered.

A brief history of the site is as follows:

According to the Victoria County History there is no record of a mill at the site before 1741 when it was called New Mills. It was rebuilt as a large five story mill by John Cooper in 1798. This building still survives. John and his partner Joseph Cooper went bankrupt in 1815. The mill was then acquired and operated by members of the Playne family. They built a large extension soon after which bears the datestone PP 1818. This lies to the south of the 1798 block. It houses a pair of fine overshot waterwheels both 10 feet in diameter and 7 feet 6 inches wide.

A further extension to the south was completed a few years later. This is the cruciform part at the southern end of the range of buildings. The western arm of which contained a clock which has recently been restored under the auspices of Stroud Museum.

The next main building phase brought the 1855 block at the north end of the range. This contains a fine overshot wheel 13 feet in diameter at 12 feet wide. A single storey maintenance shop nearby bears the date 1870.

A boiler house attached to the 1818 block served two steam engines which at different times assisted the wheels to drive the power looms.

The Playnes continued to make cloth at Dunkirk until nearly the end of the 19th century. The mills were then occupied by W. Walker and Sons, hosiery manufacturers of Nottingham. In addition to hosiery the Walker family also manufactured walking sticks. The two businesses continued along with another firm Wright Brindly and Gell until just before the Second World War. The hosiery business was then transferred back to Nottingham while the walking stick manufacture continued until the 1950s.

In recent years the mills were used by a variety of small businesses, but became totally empty by the early 1980s.

MMEC plan that the restored waterwheels will be cared for by a Trust which will be financed by the groundrents from the properties. It is also intended that a small museum should be incorporated into the areas around the wheels and in other public areas. A small group from GSIA have joined with the developers in the task of collecting material and setting up the museum. These members are Neville Crawford, Jim Simmons, Lionel Waldron (Stroud Museum curator) and Ray Wilson.

In the past year a basic outline for the museum has been agreed and work is in hand collecting material to display. Extensive photography has been carried out both before and during the building work.

The 1798 building has a very interesting and unusual roof structure. A model of this has been constructed for the museum by member Bill Bazett. Work has commenced on studying the appropriate documents in the Gloucestershire Record Office. Contact has been made with Mrs Walker whose late husband was the last of the Walker family to own Dunkirk. We are recording her memories of nearly 50 years ago.

We were able to put MMEC in touch with specialist millwrights who have prepared a comprehensive report on the necessary repair of the waterwheels and associated machinery. At the time of writing, the contract has just been placed to carry out these repairs.

After many years of neglect it appears that the future of these fine buildings is now assured. It is particularly pleasing the society has been able to work in close co-operation with the developers. We hope that the associations will continue to our mutual benefit.

Ray Wilson