

BIAS EXCAVATION at KINGS MILL

by Owen Ward & John Cornwell

King's Mill used to stand at the end of the lower of the two weirs which lie across the Frome on the edge of Oldbury Court. The ruins are visible, though not really noticeable, from the popular footpath which runs alongside the river from Frenchay to Stapleton. Access to the mill was by a steep cart-track, including a hairpin bend, up the side of the gorge away from the park. This was long ago closed off, and the site now has to be approached by footpaths which struggle along the steep slope of the bank. Nevertheless the area is nominally "public open space", and not too far from home for week-end and evening work.

We had two purposes in mind when this site was chosen for excavation: although the recent history of the mill is fairly well known it would be nice to find out just how old the site is, and at the same time we are gaining experience in working on a recently collapsed structure, and the peculiar problems of stratification that arise in a pile still in process of settlement. Seeing the amount of masonry that was going to have to be shifted from inside the mill, we began by hunting around the walls for a doorway.

We discovered the bottoms of several window embrasures before we finally uncovered a doorway, which, we then found, did not give access to the main body of the mill at all, but only to a small walled-off section of it. Quite probably the main door was at first-floor level, for convenience of loading and unloading directly across from carts, and we shall only find the remains of a flight of wooden steps, if anything.

As we dug along the inside of the SW wall a rough stratigraphy became apparent. On top were loose stones and a great deal of mortar, presumably cleared from other stone taken for later building nearby. This was a very difficult layer to work through - it was impossible to dig out the mortar because of the masonry amongst it, and the masonry was heavily bedded in mortar. Lower down the stones were separated by a lighter wash of silt, and below this again were the roof tiles, again in silt, resting on the flagged floor. Ash and other rubbish occurred amongst the stones between the mortar layer and the silt layer.

1. The Water-course

This is being dug out, and in one corner one wall of the wheel pit has at last been reached, down through over a metre of rubble and damp mortar and earth. The going becomes wetter and wetter, and the atmosphere in the valley is in any case so damp that a sheet of note paper left on a wall quickly moulds itself limply over the stones unless it is clipped to a board. How the miller kept his powder dry I do not know.

2. The Archway

This lies across the water course, and has been dug out almost to the level of the wheel pit; outside it is a crude but solid arched bridge over the tail race, apparently earlier than anything else we have so far found.

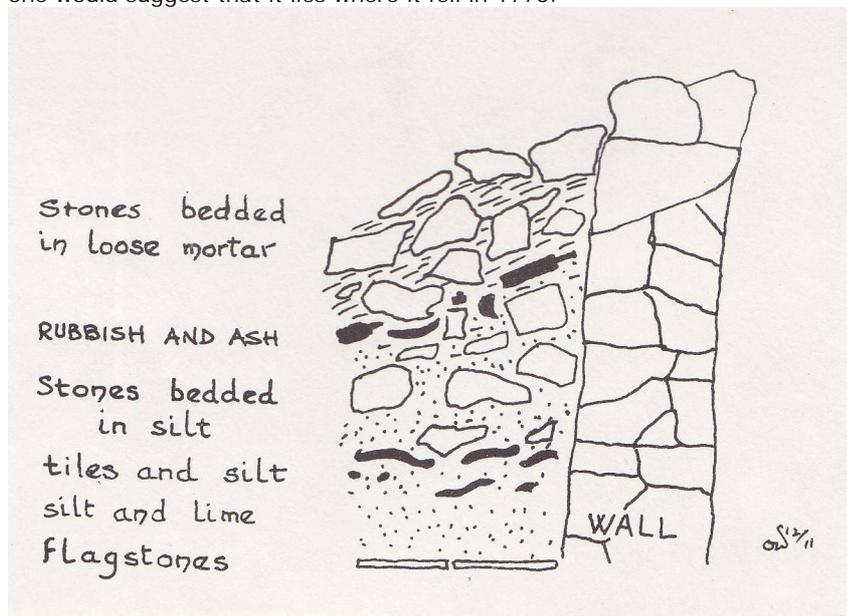
3. The Rubbish Tip

Potsherds of blue Victorian ware have been turned up all over the site, but this particular corner was evidently used as a dump by the inhabitants of the cottage above before it was burnt down in 1914, and has yielded a number of mineral water and other bottles, confirming an early twentieth century date. Other rubbish ranges from brooches to scraps of chamber pot.

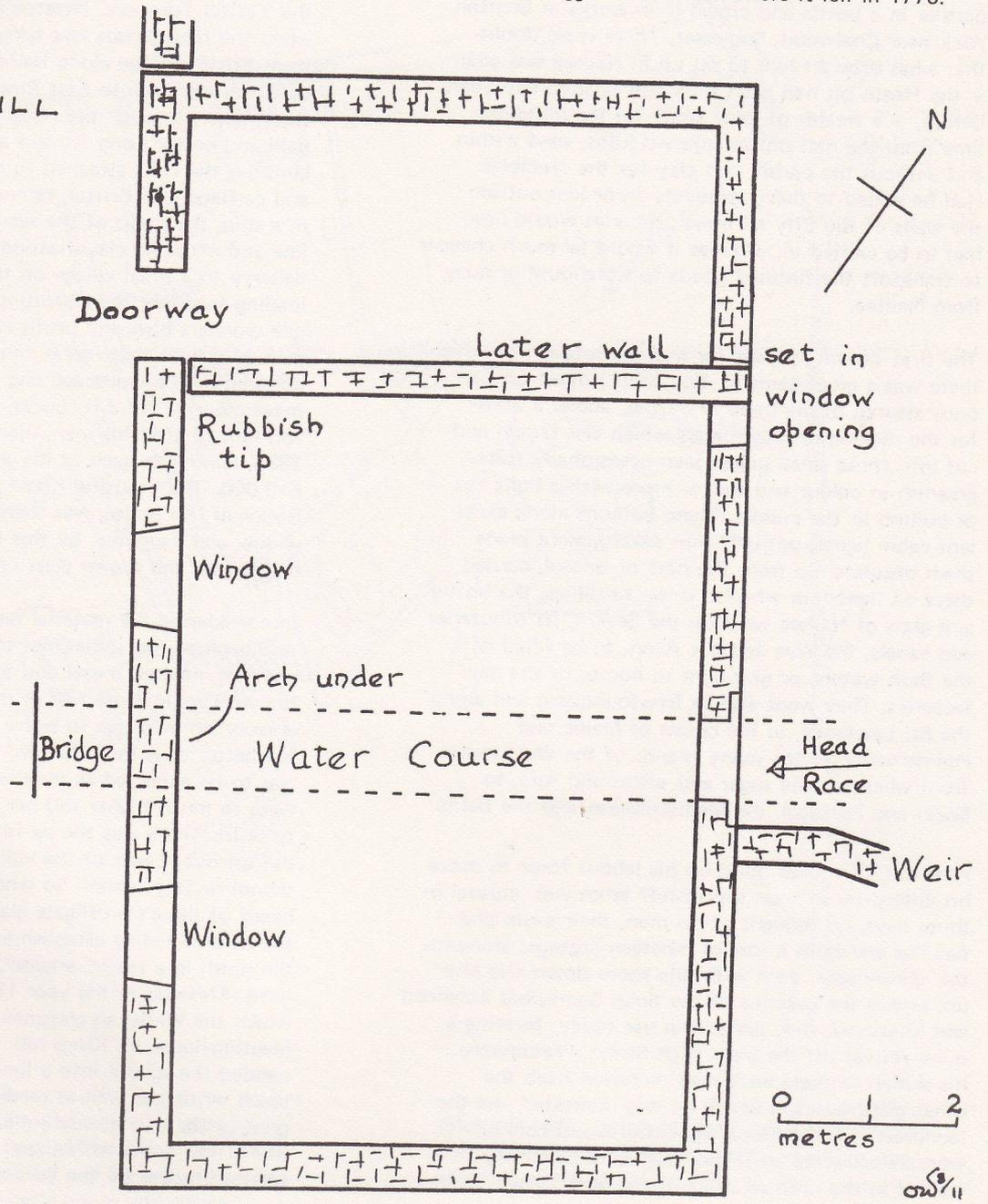
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KING'S MILL The archway seen from inside the mill during the current excavations, with the bridge visible through it. The scale is a metre ruler.
(Photo: John Cornwell)