

WOOKEY HOLE PAPER MILL

Martin Watts

Wookey Hole has the longest history of paper-making of any site in Somerset and is probably one of the oldest sites in England, a paper mill being recorded there in a deed of sale dated 1610. The present buildings, however, appear to date mostly from the 1840's, with the newer facade block erected in 1899. Early in 1973 the mill was put up for sale by its last paper-making owners, the Inveresk Paper Co., and was bought by Madam Tussauds, the owners of the caves, with a view to developing the whole site as an exhibition/ recreation complex. Several BIAS members were invited at this time to advise the new owners on the history and value of the site and John Mosse, Architect, was commissioned in June 1973 to undertake a measured and structural survey of the mill buildings. Most of the paper-making plant had been removed and the empty buildings presented few problems, except their size, to my wife and myself who undertook the measuring. The complex, from the cave entrance to the road in front of the mill, was fully measured and a series of drawings produced which were presented with the detailed structural report by the end of July. The work of putting the buildings to their new use was then undertaken; the first phase was a permanent exhibition of wooden fairground machinery and equipment which was opened in May 1974.

The abundance of naturally pure water, a necessity for good quality paper, and of obvious value for driving machinery, has made this site an important one and the new owners are keen to keep a working display of hand-papermaking techniques on site and to demonstrate the use of waterpower. BIAS members were consulted to determine the probable location of a waterwheel or wheels, which predated the turbines and steam engines to provide motive power. An initial visit was made by a group on 28 October 1973 and the problems discussed. It was agreed to make some excavations on a site between the cave and the mill when the undergrowth was thinner. An interesting feature of this site was a small culvert carrying water from a now overgrown sink across the main watercourse in a neatly built stone aqueduct.

A second visit was made on 10 March 1974 and a trench with two shorter cross trenches was dug opposite the culvert, on an island between the main watercourse, which runs under the mill, and a higher level watercourse which runs to the west side of the buildings. The finds were few and the general opinion, after a 3 foot deep trench has been made, was that a much deeper cut would be needed to reach the level of the culvert. It appeared that much of the area to the rear of the mill had been developed recreationally in the 1920's for visitors to the caves and the level reached only managed to show up landscaping work done at that time.

Documentary information on the history of the site has not been forthcoming and it was generally concluded that the actual site of the earlier mill or mills was probably under or near the west wing of the present buildings, nearer to the road and bridge and in a position where the natural fall of the land could be used to give a head of water; the mills mentioned in a sale notice of 1728 were 'overshot mills'. It was thus decided to await on further documentary evidence being uncovered to give more substance to the fieldwork.

Wookey Hole Caves Ltd. have now rescued a derelict water-wheel from Milborne Wick, Dorset, and intend to rebuild this in a suitable position after the hand-made paper display is under way. The wheel is of iron and timber construction and bears the name of the millwright, J. Hawker of Chard.

It is encouraging to know that the mill buildings will retain much of their working form and character and that when an industrial building has outlived its intended function it is not necessary to demolish or deform it before the site can be of value.

GROUND PLAN as measured and drawn June 1973

The watercourse positions are indicated, although a full survey of them could not be made where they run under-ground and these are therefore somewhat conjectural.

The positions of three steam engines (S) are marked, taken from a plan made in 1876, and the two water turbines (T) are indicated, from evidence on site. The two main shaft runs are also shown and it was from these that belt drives were taken up to the rag engines on the floor above. Several of these engines, made by Thomas Marshall of London, are still in place. The plan is reproduced by kind permission of John Mosse and of Graham Jackson, of Wookey Hole Caves Ltd.

References:

OLD MENDIP, by Robin Atthill, 1964. Chapter 5 on Mendip Papermakers.

BIAS Journal 3, 1970. The BIAS Paper Mills Survey by Brian Attwood.

1. SMITHY
2. CARPENTERS SHOP
3. BOILER ROOM
4. RAG SHED
5. VAT HOUSES
6. DRYING ROOM
7. SIZE ROOM
8. YARD
9. OFFICES

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GROUND PLAN

