THE MOOR POND WOODS PROJECT, PAPPLEWICK: A PROGRESS REPORT

by

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The Moor Pond Woods Project is a Local Heritage Initiative (LHI) grant-aided scheme, set up as a millennium project by Papplewick Parish Council in 1999. Its aim has been to enhance the largely wooded area between the west side of the village and the River Leen for local recreational use, for nature conservation, and as an educational resource. This area contains relict features dating from the Industrial Revolution including earthworks of leats and silted-up former millponds and sluices, parts of a complex water management system designed to power a series of cotton mills built by George Robinson alongside the Leen (Fig 1). Although detailed articles about Robinson’s enterprise have been published (Greatrex 1986; 1987) a brief for further research was prepared with County Archaeologist Mike Bishop. Trent & Peak Archaeological Unit (TPAU) was commissioned to produce a desk-based report, followed by field survey and assistance in organizing local volunteers (Friends of Moor Pond Woods) to carry out investigative excavations. Since then the Friends have carried out further fieldwork under their own auspices. Clearance work has also been carried out by Leen Valley Conservation Volunteers and stonework has been restored by Phil Turton Building and Consulting Services Ltd. This brief report provides a summary of work to date.

The project area covers the site of three of Robinson’s mills. Papplewick is recorded as having two water mills and a mill dam in 1540 (Walker 1970, 231) and a good case can be made for the latter having been above Walk Mill, part of which still remains today to the north of Papplewick Lane (SK 547 505). The area of the former Walk Mill Pond still shows in the fields to the north. In 1778 a new lease allowed Robinson ‘to make a Cut or Canal from the said Dam or River Leen to and for the use of a large building then erecting ... intended to be used or employed as a Mill for spinning of Cotton, Silk, Flax or Wool’. The mill was described in local newspapers as being 100 feet long, 30 feet wide and 5 storeys high. Situated close to present-day Grange Farm, it was later referred to as Old Mill, after another mill (New Mill), was built alongside several years later. Later collectively known as Grange Mill, the site is now grassland and gardens. Whilst Old Mill could be powered through a connection to an existing mill pond, Robinson’s second mill, Top Mill, was built, along with new ponds (Top Upper Dam and Upper Dam), close to the border with Linby (SK 545 510).
FIGURE 1: Plan showing three of Robinson's former mills and associated dams, leats and water-control features near the village of Papplewick.
This building was Robinson’s smallest mill and its roadside elevation was embellished with Gothic detailing and castellations, thus its other name of Castle Mill. Once derelict and threatened with demolition, its eventual renovation in 1962 received a Civic Trust Award. It remains the only intact survivor.

The current project has concentrated on investigating the water supply system and gaining understanding about how it operated. In brief, the north part of the system (the area covered by the project) includes the following components. From Top Upper Dam (SK 545 513) a leat ran southwards alongside Upper Dam and then parallel to the river to a triangular-shaped holding pond (SK 547 508). From here sluices allowed water to be funneled into Moor Pond (SK 548 507), the largest embanked reservoir of the entire system, or into a smaller irregular pond to the east (SK 548 508). An outlet at the south-west corner of Moor Pond fed water into the canal mentioned above and perhaps back to the river when its volume was low. In addition, another leat skirted the western side of Moor Pond, terminating near a curious oval-shaped brick-lined shaft of unknown function (SK 548 504). Water was somehow transferred across Papplewick Lane to another wide leat or linear reservoir. From here water descended about 2m to enter a straight channel running behind Grange Cottages (SK 549 503) towards Grange Mill, and onwards as a tailrace to the next mill in sequence. Natural run-off and spring water may also have fed into the system from the east.

The Stage 2 field survey by TPAU (Sheppard 2003) included the detailed mapping of those parts of the system not already covered, and the taking of levels at selected points. Along a distance of 1.2km, from Upper Dam in the north to near Grange Farm to the south, the River Leen today has a fall of about 8m, utilized along the way at Top Mill and Walk Mill. In contrast, the level of the leats to the east is fairly consistent for most of this distance, averaging a height of 72.5m, but dropping 1m into the leat / reservoir south of Papplewick Lane and another 3m between there and Grange Farm. The latter would have provided a powerful flow towards the large mill. With the exception of this southernmost leat, most of the system was designed for both conduit and containment, as allowance appears to have been made for overflow, perhaps at times of heavy rainfall, into lower ditches and into subsidiary ponds. The four largest mills were all situated south of Moor Pond and other ponds created close to the river below Grange Farm.

Since 2002 fieldwork has been carried out around Moor Pond by volunteers from the Friends of Moor Pond Woods, Scouts, Air Cadets and the Leen Valley Conservation Group. A sluice at the south end of the triangular holding pond has been uncovered and since restored as a feature with a planned explanatory information board on a nearby bridge. Two phases of stonework were revealed here; the second, a rougher drystone walling, was in part aligned on a former timber-lined trough that had transferred water from a possible overflow pond, across the sluice to the leat that followed the west side of Moor Pond, suggesting that this particular leat was a later addition. Remaining iron fixtures showed that the trough had been 2ft wide, 4ft high and 36ft long (0.6 x 1.2m x 11m). Another sluice in the east side of the holding pond was uncovered and recorded this last summer by project volunteers working with the Sherwood Archaeology Team (Plate 1).

Other wall restoration has taken place at the south-west corner of Moor Pond. A brick-arched drain situated in the middle of a 15m long curving stone wall had let water feed away towards the former canal mentioned above (now a long linear depression defined by field boundaries), or to the river beyond. The drain is also aligned on a brick-lined shaft of unknown purpose showing above Paddlewick Lane, whose further investigation now requires safety measures (Plate 2). According to anecdotal sources, a number of drains have been exposed under the Lane in the past and this area, between Moor Pond, Walk Mill and the river, requires further investigation to find out where the Pond’s water went.

In 2002 an initial resistivity survey in the area of Grange Farm, the site of Old Mill and New Mill, was carried out by amateur archaeologists Alan and Celia Morris, at the behest of the author. As this showed up anomalies east of cottages on the lane leading to the farm, some trial-excavations were subsequently carried out by the Friends to investigate their cause.
PLATE 1: One of the Friends of Moor Pond Woods (Papplewick) exposing walling around a former sluice-gate in summer 2005. Photo by Stephen Walker.

PLATE 2: Top part of the oval-shaped brick-lined shaft situated above the south-west corner of Moor Pond Wood, Papplewick. Photo by Stephen Walker.
In one trench rubble infill was found to a depth of at least 1.8m, a depth indicative of either cellaring or a mill wheel-pit. Another trench uncovered part of a plaster floor and a robbed-out east-west wall trench about 3ft (0.9m) wide, and with fragments of ceramic flue-tiles used in the mill’s internal heating. A trench across the nearby leat revealed only a re-cut for a modern drain and no evidence for original ditch-lining. More recent geophysical investigation to the west of the cottages by TPAU has revealed linear anomalies on a different alignment to those to the east, suggesting perhaps that the two mills that had stood in this location may not necessarily have been co-existent in position or time.

Field investigations so far carried out on Robinson’s water-supply system north of Grange Farm and on the latter site have pointed to further complexities. With the continued support and enthusiasm of the Friends and associated volunteers, much more information awaits discovery over the coming years to elucidate how the system developed and how it was able to provide sufficient water power to turn the spindles in those ‘dark satanic mills’ that once graced the Papplewick skyline.

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REFERENCES


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