

EVOLVING APPROACHES FOR RECORDING THE TEXTILE MILL

MICHAEL NEVELL

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The study of the mill (essentially a building housing machines for processing raw materials but especially grain and textiles) in all its various forms has for many years been one of the themes that has driven the development and practice of industrial archaeology. *Industrial Archaeology Review* has played a significant part in promoting the archaeological study of the mill type (see the 2010 mill special in Volume 31.2) but especially the textile variety. Two special issues have been devoted to textile mill buildings and construction techniques, in 1988 (Volume 10.2) and 1993 (Volume 16.1), but there have also been over 35 individual articles scattered throughout the pages of the journal, from volume 2.3 onwards, concerning British, European and north American textile mill sites. Two recent major studies, on the textile mills of South West England¹ and on Ditherington Flax Mill² are reminders of the importance of understanding this industry's role in industrialisation from an archaeological point of view.

This themed issue of the Review brings together four articles concerned with different ways of recording the textile mill; as an example of engineering technology, as a standing building type, as a housing for textile machinery, and as an archaeological object to be excavated. Ditherington Flax Mill, the world's first iron-framed building, was the subject of 2016's Rolt Memorial Lecture by John Yates, who has studied the building's engineering context in terms of changing conservation values. Roger Holden provides an archaeological overview of the buildings and machines of the fustian and velvet cutting industry in Lancashire and the north-west midlands, highlighting yet another textile mill type in need of recording. Mike William's study of the surviving mill machinery and buildings at the Tone Works, a cloth finishing site in Somerset, provides a detailed case study of one of the very few historic mills in Britain to retain its original manufacturing machinery in the original buildings. Finally, Ian Miller and John Glithero provide an analysis of the completely excavated remains of Manchester's first cotton mill, Arkwright's Mill, which was built in the early 1780s and which saw experimentation in power system technology.

What these articles demonstrate is the variety of approaches possible to textile mill archaeology. By combining these approaches, and techniques such as oral history and access and activity analysis, it is possible to build an extremely detailed picture of the impact of the textile mill as a structure, manufacturing centre, controller of peoples' working lives and changer of landscapes.

There is, though, one trend apparent in all four articles which is steadily changing our approach as archaeologists to this iconic industrial building type; namely its continual erosion. The threat to the remaining standing textiles mills of Britain is ever present,

particularly from neglect, redevelopment and on occasion arson.³ This is why the three classic archaeological studies of textile mills undertaken in the 1980s by English Heritage and the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, in Cheshire, Greater Manchester and Yorkshire, deliberately focussed upon the mill structures, their development and their landscape impact.⁴ The recent volume on the South West textile mills uses the same methodology, as has the Lancashire Textile Mill Survey which began in 2008.⁵ The story of the building type is told through its form, function and fabric. This focus on upstanding remains is understandable as in Greater Manchester alone in 1989 there were still 1112 textile mills standing in the county, though down from a peak of c. 2900 sites in 1926. Yet the level of survival of this iconic monument type has changed radically and nowhere more so than in Greater Manchester. The recent first stage of the resurvey of the county's mills, undertaken this year by the University of Salford and funded by Historic England, has shown that of the 1112 textile mill buildings standing in 1989, just 560 survived in 2016. This is a lost rate of nearly 50% in 27 years and several mill buildings were burnt down or demolished whilst the survey was underway.

As the upstanding remains of the textile industry disappear the importance of the below-ground evidence increases. Thus, in Greater Manchester between 1999 and 2016 at least 45 textile mill sites were excavated in county.⁶ Almost all of this activity was undertaken through the planning process, though excavation in this way brings its own biases. Thus, those areas where redevelopment has been highest and mill building historically densest have received the most intensive study, meaning that the majority of rural mills have not been looked at through developer-funded excavations. The highest concentration of developer-funded excavated sites was in the city centre of Manchester, with over 14 mills investigated, reflecting both the focus of redevelopment work in the region during the economic boom of the period 1992 to 2008, and the manufacturing focus of the cotton industry from the 18th to the early 20th centuries. Other redevelopment hot spots have included the former textile manufacturing towns of Bury and Stockport.

With the guidance of the local planning archaeologists such developer-funded excavations have been focussed upon the mill power systems: wheel pits, steam engine houses and boiler houses.⁷ These were the main technological areas that could be recovered archaeologically, and which saw rapid phases of development during the late 18th to early 20th centuries. Thus, they help to reveal the biography of the building under investigation. The wider mapping of technological and spatial changes across Greater Manchester has focused attention upon issues such as when the local of 18th century mill sites, the introduction of the first steam powered textile mills, the fate of water-powered mills, and the social control of the workforce on these sites.⁸ Such targeted excavation, as well as standing building recording, through the planning process has also encompassed all the major branches of the textile industry in the region; cotton, silk and wool spinning, weaving and finishing mills. The latter, as an industrial building-type was poorly understood before 1999 and so needed its own targeted research strategy that included the production floors and overall complex layout as well as the power systems.⁹ In this way excavation provides its own unique form of evidence in the story of the rise and fall of the textile mill.

The four articles presented in this volume of the Review have drawn upon just such developer-funded experiences in investigating textile mills since 1990. The evolving methodological and fieldwork approaches apparent in these studies now includes not only the landscape and engineering aspects of the textile mill, in its layout and construction, but also the social side of the mill such as the evidence for social control within and without the mill

buildings. As the dwindling number of textile mills surviving in the landscape become, perforce, increasingly exceptional examples of that industry, archaeological excavation takes centre stage in understanding the monument type. Increasingly, this is the case for other classic British manufacturing industries of the 18th and 19th centuries such as coal mining and iron making. This might have seemed extraordinary to some of the founders of Industrial Archaeology but it represents another step into the mainstream for the discipline.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. Giles C. & Williams M., (eds), 2015, *Ditherington Mill and the Industrial Revolution*. Swindon: Historic England.
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5. Ibid Ref. 2.
6. Nevell M., 2010d, 'Excavating the Cotton Mill. Towards a Research Framework for the Below-Ground Remains of the Textile Industry', in Belford P., Palmer M. & White R., *Footprints of Industry. Papers from the 300th anniversary conference at Coalbrookdale, 3-7 June 2009*. BAR British Series 523, 153-68.
7. Norman Redhead, formerly of the Greater Manchester Archaeology Unit and county archaeologist, now chief planning archaeologist with the Greater Manchester Archaeological Advisory Service deserves much of the credit for developing this approach in the late 1990s with the support of his colleagues Robina McNeil, John Walker and Michael Nevell.
8. Palmer M., Nevell M. & Sissons M., 2012, *Industrial Archaeology: A Handbook*. Council for British Archaeology.
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