

# SILVERTON MILLS, HELE, EXETER, DEVON

(NGR SS 9777 0104)

## Results of Archaeological Monitoring and Recording

Mid Devon District Council Planning Reference  
14/00115/PNDEM. East Devon District Council Planning  
Reference: 14/0150/DEM

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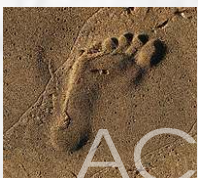
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On behalf of:  
John F Hunt Remediation Ltd

Report No: ACD1019/1/1

Date: July 2019



archaeology

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Client	John F Hunt Remediation Ltd.
Report Number	ACD1019/1/1
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Report Author	Simon Hughes
Contributions	Charlotte Coles
Checked by	Paul Rainbird
Approved by	Simon Hughes

### Acknowledgements

The monitoring and recording was commissioned by John F Hunt Remediation Ltd. The site works were carried out by Simon Hughes, Alex Farnell, Stella de-Villiers and Chris Caine. The illustrations for this report were prepared by Leon Cauchois. The advice and collaboration of Stephen Reed, Senior Historic Environment Officer, Devon County Council, is duly acknowledged.

The views and recommendations expressed in this report are those of AC archaeology and are presented in good faith on the basis of professional judgement and on information currently available.

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## **Summary**

*Archaeological monitoring and recording at Silverton Mills, Hele, Exeter, Devon (SS 9777 0104) was undertaken by AC archaeology between October 2014 and May 2016. The site spans the River Culm to the southwest of Hele and prior to commencement comprised an industrial mill complex with associated mill race channel. The work comprised the monitoring of groundworks associated with the demolition of the mill buildings and remediation of the land to open up the river embankment.*

*The groundworks exposed a series of structural remains associated with the former paper mill. These were generally consistent with its phased development depicted on a series of historic maps dating from the 18th to 20th centuries. Although historic records suggest that fulling and grist mills had been present on the site from the 16th century, no remains from this earlier activity were identified.*

*Recorded elements of the mill consisted of its main mill race, sluice channel and tailrace. The tailrace was perhaps the earliest of structures exposed, with this of probable 18th to early 19th date. It was shown to have been blocked off and infilled as part of late 19th century modifications to a sluice channel, probably when a vertical shaft turbine was installed. The mill race was stone lined and was shown to have been constructed on a foundation of timber piles driven into underlying alluvial deposits. It had been culverted in the late 19th century, with this modification perhaps necessitating its enhancement.*

*Elsewhere, a small number of fragmentary or partially exposed stone-built walls were recorded amongst extensive early to mid-20th century industrial structures. These remains related to former mill buildings of early and mid-19th century date, although preservation was too poor to provide any indication on their function.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1** Archaeological monitoring and recording at Silverton Mills, Hele, Exeter, Devon (SS 9777 0104) was undertaken by AC archaeology between October 2014 and May 2016. The work was required by Mid Devon District Council and East Devon District Council following consultation with the Devon County Council Historic Environment Team to be carried out in accordance with a method statement (Forum Heritage Services 2014) submitted as supporting information ahead of the granting of planning permission (reference 14/00115/PNDEM).
- 1.2** The site is located 1.5km to the southwest of Hele and 2km southeast of Silverton village, from which its name derives (Fig. 1). Located on the National Trust Killerton Estate and separated from the property by Bridge Lane, the site comprises an approximately 3.5 hectare plot bisected the River Culm, which prior to commencement, was occupied by a complex of industrial mill buildings extending over the culverted river and a parallel mill race. It lies at 33m aOD (above Ordnance Datum), with the underlying solid geology comprising sandstone and conglomerate Permian Rocks beneath alluvial clay, sand and gravels (British Geological Society 2019).

## **2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

- 2.1** Following the closure of the site as an operating paper mill in 1999 and as part of the 2014 application for its demolition and remediation, a preliminary assessment report (Watts and Watts 2000), historic building assessment and assessment of significance (Edwards 2013) and historic building assessment and recording (Edwards 2017) have been prepared. These set out the history of the site and compiled a photographic and descriptive record of the standing buildings prior to demolition.
- 2.2** The use of the River Culm to power water mills on the site is considered to have dated from at least the 16th century, initially for fulling and latterly as a grist mill (National Trust 2000). Some 180m to the east of the site is a weir which feeds into a mill race that was used to power the operations (Devon County Council Historic Environment Record reference MDV73374). This extended parallel to the River Culm and debouched back into the river adjacent to the Bridge Lane crossing spanned by the approximately 15th century Ellerhays Bridge (MDV50938).
- 2.3** The grist mill was rebuilt in 1760 following a fire in 1740 (National Trust 2000). A record of the sale by auction of the mill in 1783, which at the time was named 'Bridge of Killerton Mills', lists it as comprising of four pairs of stones, two double ring waterwheels and every article for flour dressing (Watts and Watts 2000). The sale marked its conversion to paper production, which continued until its closure in 1999.
- 2.4** A copy of an undated 18th century map shows the site as comprising of a mill building spanning the leat with probable yards and an L-shaped range to the south (Fig. 2a, Edwards 2017). To the east of this, two further buildings are shown either side of the leat and adjacent to a channel, probably comprising of a sluice and wheel pit linking via a tailrace to the River Culm to the west. Part of the L-shaped range is likely to correspond with the current 'Cottage Office Block' (MDV65051). This building consists of what was originally a three-cell cross passage house of 17th century origin (National Trust 2000). Following a series of 19th century alterations and partial demolition in the 1970s it was converted into mill offices.
- 2.5** Bridge House, which probably replaced the existing 'Cottage Office Block' as the main mill residence, was built in 1828 and marked the start of rapid growth of development to the operations. The 1842 Broadclyst parish tithe map shows Bridge House and the 'Cottage Office Block' as well as some additional buildings either side of the leat, possibly including those previously shown adjacent to the leat, although no building is depicted as spanning the leat channel (Fig. 2b).
- 2.6** By the late 19th century, the 1888 Ordnance Survey 25-inch First-Edition map shows that the tailrace channel to the southeast of the site and the River Culm channel had been spanned by buildings (the Angled Range, North Range and Pump House) and most of the site was covered with interconnecting buildings. An annotated 1885 sale catalogue plan includes an engine house, boilers and chimney stack demonstrating the conversion of operations to include steam power by this date (Fig. 2c). Towards the southeast end of the site the Clock Tower Building was constructed in 1897 to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. Culverting of the River Culm and mill race and continual modernisations to the mill complex were carried out throughout the 20th century especially following fires in 1934 and 1940 (Watts and Watts 2000).
- 2.7** Building recording carried out prior to demolition of the non-retained buildings identified that most of the structures were of early to mid-20th century date and no fabric dating to prior to 1850 was identified. Only three sections of later 19th century stone masonry

had been incorporated into later structures, with these present in the Angled Range, North Range and Pump House.

### **3. AIMS**

- 3.1** The aim of the monitoring and recording was to preserve by record any archaeological features and to recover artefacts present on the site, which would be destroyed or disturbed by the development. This was with particular reference for the potential for medieval and post-medieval mill remains to be exposed by the work.

### **4. METHODOLOGY**

- 4.1** The monitoring and recording was undertaken in accordance with a project design prepared by Forum Heritage (Edwards 2013) and with reference to the Chartered Institute for Archaeologists' *Standard and Guidance for an Archaeological Watching Brief* (2014). It comprised the monitoring of groundworks consisting of the excavation of a temporary river diversion channel, the grading of a new river channel embankment and landscaping of the site following demolition (Fig. 3).
- 4.2** All features and deposits revealed were recorded using the standard AC archaeology *pro forma* recording system, comprising written and photographic records, and in accordance with AC archaeology's *General Site Recording Manual, Version 2* (revised August 2012). Where possible, archaeological features were plotted using a Leica Net rover GPS.

### **5. RESULTS**

- 5.1 Introduction** (Plan Fig. 3; Plates 1-4)  
Monitoring and recording was undertaken following the demolition phase and subsequent to the commencement of groundworks. The excavation of the temporary river diversion channel exposed river gravels at a depth of approximately 3m below existing levels. These were overlain by bluish grey to grey alluvial clays beneath a maximum of 1.5m of made ground (Plate 4).
- 5.2** Archaeological features comprising structural remains were exposed within the temporary river diversion channel, the River Culm channel and during shallow landscaping works. Remains comprised structural elements of the mill leat with associated sluice arrangement, tailrace, phases of the River Culm revetment and building remains in the southeast portion of the site.
- 5.3 Mill race** (Plan Fig. 3; Plates 1 and 5-7)  
Most of the temporary river diversion channel was excavated along the route of the mill race but with a broader profile. The base of the channel contained a series of timber piles that were driven into the river gravels (Plate 5). These measured up to 2.3m long and 0.4m in square and were machine sawn (Plate 6). Although most of these had been removed prior to the commencement of monitoring, a surviving section showed that they were set throughout the channel and were likely to have supported an overlying stone base to the mill race (also removed). At the northwest extent of the temporary channel, the continuation of the mill race was partially exposed and comprised of stone walls and an arched span sealed by made ground (Plate 7).

#### **5.4 Sluice channel, tailrace and River Culm revetment (Plan Fig. 3; Plates 8-23)**

At the southeast end of the temporary river diversion channel were the remains of a 3.7m wide north to south aligned sluice channel that had fed into a wheel pit and later a turbine pit (Watts and Watts 2000), with the channel then debouching into the River Culm. This was principally comprised of two roughly faced 0.9m thick lime mortar bonded block walls (S104 and S113). Wall S104 terminated to the south with a curved terminal, a quoined southeast corner and a flat east face (Plates 8-9). This design suggests that it functioned as both the mouth of the sluice channel and perhaps either the transition from an unrevetted mill race channel extending from the head weir or a further sluice arrangement as the mill race entered the site. Adjacent to the curved terminal and on the west face was a sluice gate slot. On the southeast side of wall S104 was an integral semi-circular structure (Plate 10). Wall S104 was abutted by a circular stone rubble and concrete bonded wall (S103), while the channel was blocked by a brick wall to the northeast and a cast concrete wall to the southwest (Plate 11). These additional structures corresponded with the location of a late 19th and 20th century pump house with turbine pit and an associated water chamber for the pumps.

**5.5** The groundworks exposed most of the south wall to the tailrace exiting from the sluice channel in the southeast of the site (Plates 12-14). Tailrace wall S112 measured 0.6m thick, approximately 1.3m high and was constructed from roughly faced unbonded stone blocks measuring between 0.4m to 0.9m in length. It was constructed on the underlying river gravels and retained the overlying alluvial clays. It was abutted by a phase of the river revetment wall (S119) to the west, while to the southeast it curved south into an area undisturbed by deep groundworks. The north wall of the tailrace channel was not exposed during the monitoring, although a quoined terminal (S118) that was abutted by channel wall S113 may have formed part of this structure.

**5.6** The River Culm channel was bounded by revetment walls S114 and S115 that formed a 9.5m wide river channel to the east, while to the west it broadened to 15m (Plates 15-19). The curved alignment of wall S114 extended a maximum of 21m north of wall S112. Apart from some sections that had been replaced with cast concrete or modern blockwork, the walls were constructed from lime mortar bonded random roughly faced stone blocks with a rubble core. The southeast end of wall S114 abutted quoined terminal S118 (Plate 11). The east end of wall S114 was abutted by the further section of wall S119, which extended across what would have been the exit point of the mill race (Plate 20). A single slot representing part of a possible sluice arrangement was present in wall S114 close to its north extent and in the approximate position where the north range had extended (Plate 21). Within the east portion of wall S115 was a 5m wide break that was infilled with stone blockwork (Plate 22). The function of this was not clear and did not correspond with any features shown on the historic mapping.

**5.7** Approximately 18m to the east of the sluice channel formed by walls S104 and S113 was a short section of river revetment wall (S105). This measured 0.65m wide and was comprised of roughly faced stone blocks in a lime mortar bond (Plate 23).

#### **5.8 Other structures (Plan Fig.3; Plates 24-28)**

The groundworks exposed a small number of structural remains that were likely to have formed parts of mill structures. These consisted of three wall fragments (S106, S107 and S108) that were located to the north of the leat and a probable structure that abutted earlier river wall S112. This comprised of three wall fragments (S111, S116 and S117).

**5.9** Walls S106 and S107 measured approximately 0.5m wide and were constructed from roughly faced blocks and rubble (Plates 24 and 25). Wall S106 had been partially encased in a reinforced cast concrete wall. Wall S108 was northwest to southeast

aligned and had an angled buttress on its northeast side (Plate 26). It was set within a construction cut that had been excavated through the alluvial clays and backfilled with light reddish-brown silty-sand. A fragment of 18th to 19th century clay tobacco pipe was recovered from the construction cut backfill.

- 5.10** Partially exposed walls S111 and S116 abutted the northeast and southwest side of millrace wall S112 and broadly corresponded with the site of mid to late 19th century North Range (Plate 27). Comprised of roughly faced lime mortar bonded blocks the walls measured 1.15m wide, with wall S111 possibly returning into a square terminal to the southwest. Here a probable step threshold was present comprised of rendered stone (Plate 28). To the southeast, wall S117 was only partially exposed, with this likely to have formed part of the same overall structure.

## **6. FINDS by Charlotte Coles**

- 6.1** A single piece of clay tobacco pipe stem (2g) with broken spur was recovered from the construction cut backfill of wall S108. Spur forms (as opposed to heel forms) were less dominant in the UK before the late 17th century (Higgins 2017) therefore this pipe could possibly be of early 18th century to late 19th century date.

## **7. DISCUSSION**

- 7.1** Groundworks had started prior to the involvement in the project by AC archaeology, with these commencing with the excavation of the temporary river diversion channel broadly along the line of the existing mill race. Despite these excavations having already removed this part of the site ahead of site attendance, the surviving element of the mill race structure consisted of the abundant timber piles driven into the river valley alluvial deposits. As had been recorded within the Higher Leat at Cricklepit Mill, Exeter, timber piles had been used to support a post-medieval flagstone base (Passmore 2010). It was not possible to investigate the leat channel as it exited the site from the northeast end of the temporary river diversion channel to confirm this, but based on discussions with the site contractor, this construction methodology had also been evident in the Silverton Mills mill race. Historic mapping indicates that the leat was culverted in the period between the 1842 Broadclyst parish tithe map and the 1888 First-Edition Ordnance Survey map. It is likely that the culverting of the leat would have comprised the upgrading of its base and walls in order to support the arched span.
- 7.2** Although the mill race would have almost certainly have had earlier phases of revetment, perhaps dating from the 16th century, no evidence for these, nor remains of the probable mill building shown on the 18th century map that spanned the mill race were visible within the already excavated temporary river diversion channel.
- 7.3** Wall S112, which corresponded with the tailrace channel linking the leat with the river as shown on historic mapping, indicates that a channel was present from at least the 18th century (Fig. 2a). However, it is not clear whether it would have been revetted at this point. Nevertheless, as the 1842 Broadclyst parish tithe map shows an expansion of mill buildings in the area to the northeast of the leat, it is likely that revetments to both the tailrace and river would have been needed to protect the structures from erosion at least from the early 19th century (Fig. 2b).
- 7.4** The alignment and position of sluice channel walls S104 and S113 almost certainly blocked the entry into the tailrace bounded by wall S112. This modification would have formed a much shorter channel that fed almost directly into the River Culm. The



blocking of the tailrace would also have coincided with the construction of a section of river wall S119 to the west. Based on the historic mapping, this would have occurred at the end of the 19th century, a date that perhaps coincided with the installation of a vertical shaft water turbine around 1889 (Watts and Watts 2000); a development that would have replaced what would probably have been an earlier wheel pit.

- 7.5** While the limited building remains comprised of walls S111, S116 and S117 probably related to the mid to late-19th century North Range, the location of probable buildings remains as represented by wall fragments S106, S107 and S108 were perhaps slightly earlier. These corresponded with a location of a range shown on the 1842 tithe map as spanning the sluice channel and extending to the east (Fig. 2b). Indeed, the recovery of the 18th to 19th century tobacco pipe fragment from the backfill of wall S108 construction cut broadly corresponds with this date. Unfortunately, their limited exposure or survival meant that no further interpretation is possible.

## **8. CONCLUSIONS**

- 8.1** Groundworks undertaken during remediation works at Silverton Mills exposed a series of structural remains associated with the former paper mill. These were generally consistent with the phased development of the mill that are depicted on a series of historic maps dating from the 18th to 20th centuries. Although historic records suggest that fulling and grist mills had been present on the site from the 16th century, no remains from the earlier activity were identified.
- 8.2** Recorded elements of the mill consisted of its main mill race, a sluice channel and tailrace channel. The tailrace was perhaps the earliest of structures exposed, with this of probable 18th to early 19th date. It was shown to have been blocked off and infilled as part of late 19th century modifications to the sluice channel, probably when a vertical shaft turbine was installed. The main leat channel bisecting the site was stone lined and was shown to have been constructed on a foundation of timber piles driven into the underlying deposits. It had been culverted in the late 19th century, with this modification perhaps necessitating its enhancement.
- 8.3** Elsewhere, a small number of fragmentary or partially exposed stone-built walls were recorded amongst extensive early to mid-20th century industrial structures. These remains related to former mill buildings of early and mid-19th century date, although preservation was too poor to provide any indication on their function.

## **9. ARCHIVE AND OASIS**

- 9.1** The paper and digital archive is currently being held at the offices of AC Archaeology Ltd, at 4 Halthaies Workshops, Bradninch, near Exeter, Devon, EX5 4LQ, under the unique project code of ACD1019. This will ultimately be deposited with The National Trust.
- 9.2** An online OASIS entry has been completed, using the unique identifier **359006**, which includes a digital copy of this report.

## 10. REFERENCES

British Geological Survey ([www.bgs.ac.uk](http://www.bgs.ac.uk))

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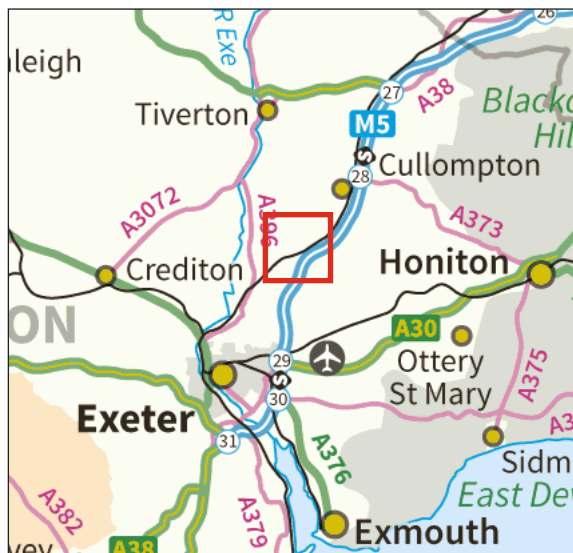
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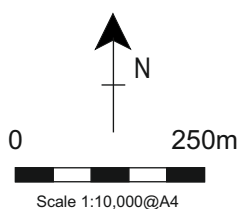
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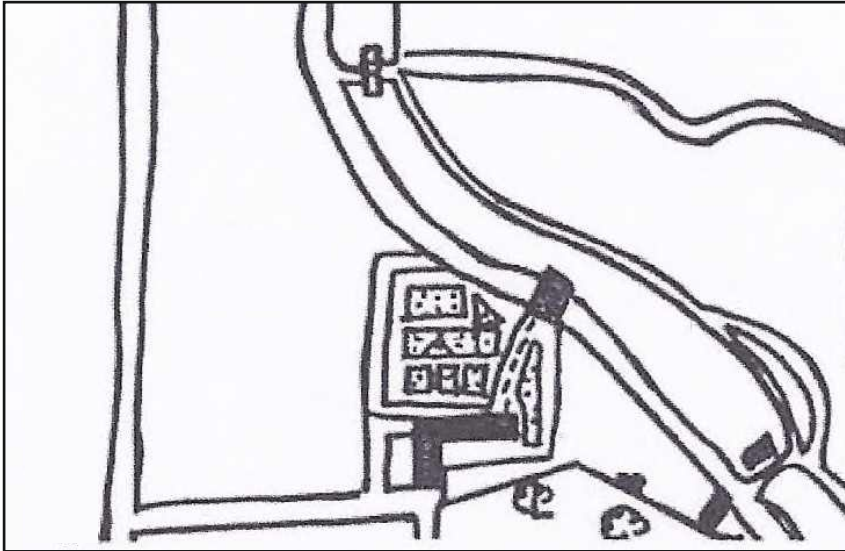
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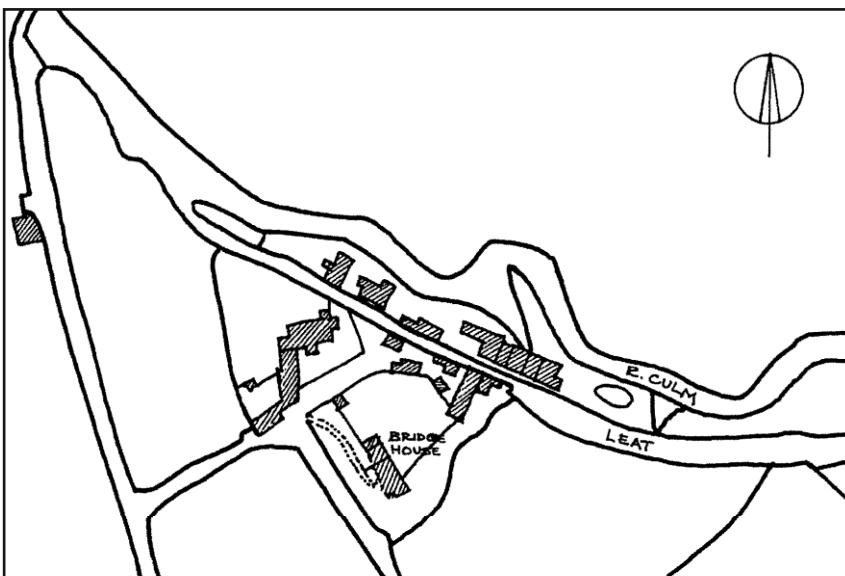
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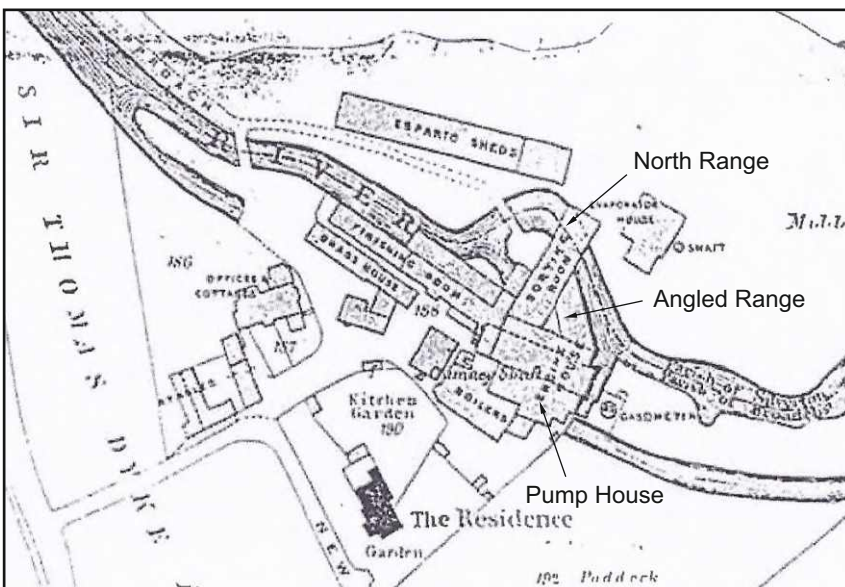
Fig. 1: Site location



a. Undated 18th century map  
(Source Edwards 2017)



b. Bridge Mill, Broadclyst: Taken from the Broadclyst Tithe Map of 1842  
(Source Watts & Watts, 2000)



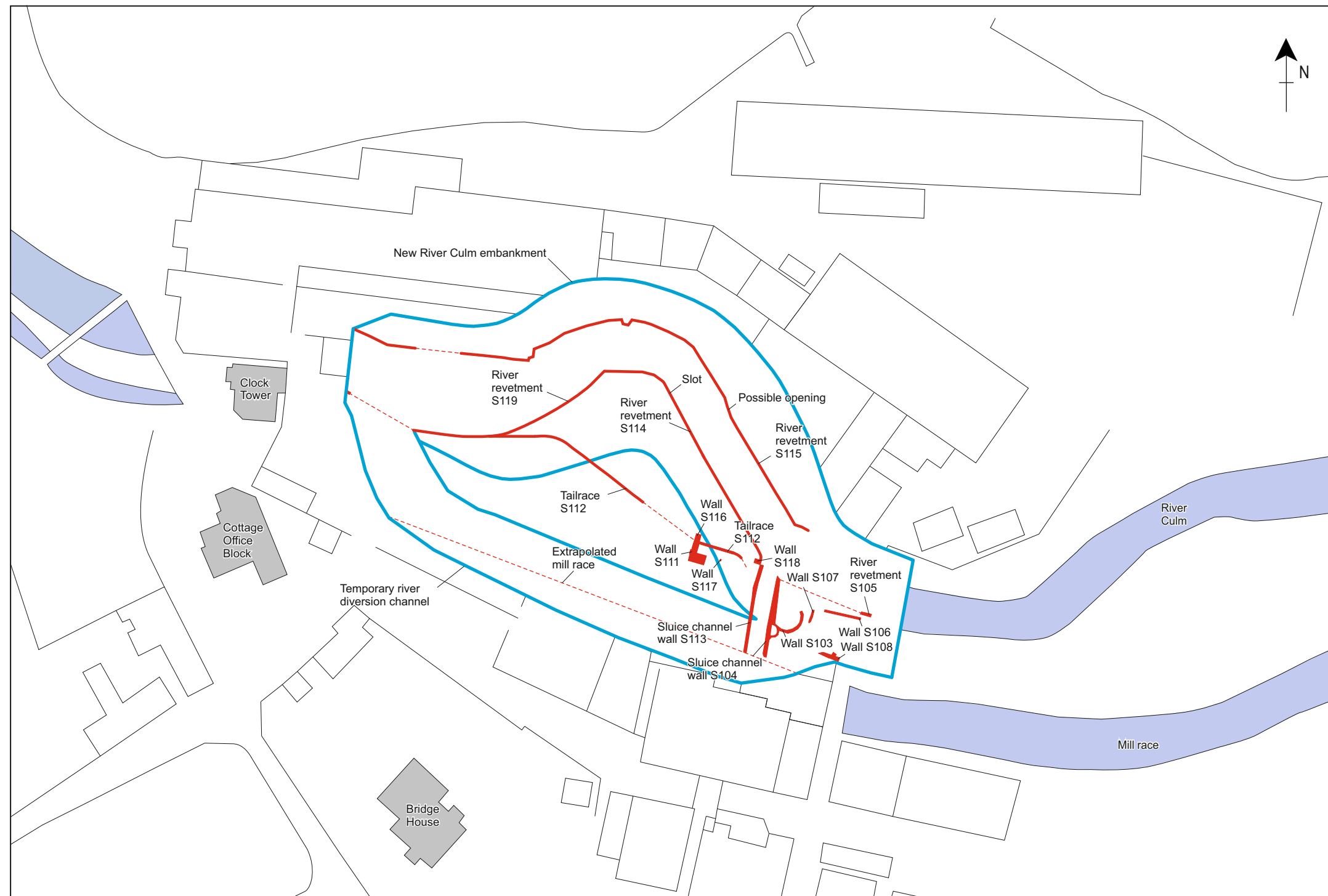
c. Plan of Silverton Mill associated with a sale catalogue, 1885  
(Source Edwards 2017)

PROJECT

Silverton Mills, Hele, Exeter, Devon

TITLE

Fig. 2: Historic maps



0 50m  
Scale 1:1000@A3

Area of temporary  
river diversion and river  
embankment

Historical structures

PROJECT  
Silverton Mills, Hele,  
Exeter, Devon

TITLE  
Fig. 3: Site plan showing  
location of groundworks and  
exposed structural remains







Plate 1: General view of site looking northwest along temporary river diversion channel towards Cottage Office Block and Clock Tower



Plate 2: General working view of site. Looking northwest from temporary river diversion channel



Plate 3: General view of site looking southeast along temporary river diversion channel





Plate 4: Showing river gravels, alluvial clays and overlying made ground exposed in temporary river diversion channel. View to northeast (scale 2m)



Plate 5: Timber piles in base of mill race channel. View to northeast



Plate 6: Showing example of displaced mill race timber piles (scale 2m)





Plate 7: Showing partially exposed mill race culvert. Looking southwest towards Cottage Office Block (scale 2m)



Plate 8: Sluice channel wall terminal S104. View to northeast (scale 1m)



Plate 9: Sluice channel wall terminal S104. View to southwest (scale 1m)





Plate 10: Sluice channel wall S104 and wall S103 with River Culm revetment S115 to the rear. View to northwest (scale 2m)



Plate 11: Sluice channel wall S113, wall S118 and river revetment S114. View to southwest (scale 2m)



Plate 12: Tailrace wall S112. View to southeast (scale 2m)





Plate 13: Detailed view of tailrace wall S112. View to southeast (scale 1m)



Plate 14: Showing tailrace wall S112 with river revetment S119 in section. View to west (scale 1m)



Plate 15: River Culm revetment walls S114 and S115. View to northwest (scale 2m)





Plate 16: River Culm revetment walls S114 and S115. View to southwest (scale 2m)



Plate 17: River Culm revetment walls S114 and S119. View to east (scale 2m)



Plate 18: River revetment wall S114. View to south (scale 2m)





Plate 19: River revetment wall S115. View to east (scale 2m)



Plate 20: Showing river revetment wall S119 between wall S114 to left and tailrace wall S112 to the right. View to south (scale 2m)



Plate 21: Showing slot in river revetment wall S114. View to southwest (scale 2m)





Plate 22: Showing possible blocked opening in river revetment wall S115. View to northeast (scale 2m)



Plate 23: River revetment wall S105. View to east (scale 0.3m)



Plate 24: Wall S106. View to west (scale 0.3m)





Plate 25: Wall S107. View to west (scale 1m)



Plate 26: Wall S108. View to east (scale 0.3m)



Plate 27: Tailrace wall S112 with walls S111 and S116. View to south (scale 1m)



Plate 28: Showing possible steps in wall S111. View to east (scale 1m)



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