Community archaeology group find traces of medieval mill

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With awards from the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), English Heritage and others, in 2011 the group had uncovered a unique medieval wheel pit in the river, constructed from high quality masonry. Now the hunt was on to see what was left on the bank.

A large trench uncovered a cobbled area some way back from the river edge. At first it was thought that this might have been the remains of an old road, but careful work with trowels helped keen-eyed diggers find two 13th-century coins – one of which was a complete silver penny from the reign of Edward I, dated to around 1280. This indicates that the surfaces were contemporary with the mill, and may have formed some sort of yard on a terrace slightly higher than the mill building.

Pieces of medieval pottery were found throughout the trench and on a lower level, nearer the river, the soil became increasingly impregnated with charcoal. Eventually, the probable source of this charcoal was found – a very dense area about a metre down and near where calculations show the wheel shaft would have entered the building.

And on the last day of digging a concerted effort found more. Another 30cm below the charcoal a team identified what appear to be pieces of heavily corroded metal, a large, almost intact, nail and what seems to be badly decomposed wood. Working conditions were difficult; with the summer rain the soil was waterlogged and had to be constantly dried with a sponge, and so a decision was made to stop work, protect the area and develop a plan to return at a future date. In the meantime, experts will determine if the charcoal can be carbon-dated to see if it might be linked to the demise of the mill.

“This could be a highly significant find”, explained Richard Carlton of the Archaeological Practice, who was directing the dig. “No medieval mill of this sort has ever been excavated in the north of England, and evidence about how they were constructed would be very significant. This is an important addition to the ground-breaking work the group carried out last year.”

“We had nearly 40 people digging over the 10 days”, said Chris Butterworth, who chairs CCA, “and this project is a real demonstration of the contribution community archaeology groups can make. And after the first few days we lost count of the number of visitors who came to see us at work.”

Ivor Crowther, Head of the Heritage Lottery Fund North East, said: “The secrets that have been uncovered by this fantastic archaeology project let us see the way our ancestors lived and how the community around here developed into what it is today. By delving into this history, volunteers have expanded their knowledge and gained a range of new skills. Sharing the results of the dig means that this important part of North East heritage will not be forgotten and will inspire others to get involved.”

Further information

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