Underwater dig comes up trumps

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Records maintained by the monks at Newminster Abbey in Morpeth showed they had built a mill along this stretch of river; last summer masonry blocks were found in the bank, along with some timber remains. Carbon 14 dating on these showed that they were about 800 years old.

Funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and English Heritage, with grants from the Council for British Archaeology, the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne, the Ministry of Defence and the National Park, the dig attracted lots of local interest. Over 100 visitors stopped by to see what the group was doing and hear about how the mill worked. There were visits from professional archaeologists too, with one coming from as far afield as Yorkshire.

Working in difficult conditions in the water and on the bank, over 30 people exposed more high quality masonry, revealing the carefully crafted wheel pit – the channel in which the mill wheel rotated. Curved abrasions on the sides of the pit helped calculate that the wheel was about 11 feet across.

60 yards upstream, other members discovered a large wooden structure on the riverbed which is probably the remains of a system of sluices that directed water to the mill.

From the scale of the finds, it is now clear that cloth production must have been a major part of the Cheviot economy in the 13th century, with large numbers of spinners and weavers supplying the raw material for the mill to process.

“The project has been a great success”, commented Chris Butterworth, chair of Coquetdale Community Archaeology. “Our members carried out valuable research and we’ve adopted new approaches, with help from a professional diver and experiments with aerial photography from a kite-mounted camera. We owe thanks to members of the community too: the local farmers - especially Ian and Eunice Tait at Barrowburn Farm Tea Room who stored our gear and provided lunches - and Tom Mason of Rothbury who filled in the trenches with a JCB”.

“It’s been an extraordinary two weeks”, said Richard Carlton, the project director. “At the start we didn’t dream that we would find as much as we have. Once we’ve had time to think and analysed all our data we will have important insights into the way the mill was built and operated. The project has been a real testament to what a community-based group can achieve”.

Notes to editors

Using money raised through the National Lottery, the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) sustains and transforms a wide range of heritage for present and future generations to take part in, learn from and enjoy. From museums, parks and historic places to archaeology, natural environment and cultural traditions, we invest in every part of our diverse heritage. HLF has supported more than 30,000 projects allocating £4.6billion across the UK including £214million in the North East.

Further information

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