

Eastington walk report

Sunday the 14th of May dawned sunny and warm and that's the way it stayed for the rest of the day. A good omen for the group that gathered for an elongated loop around the outskirts of Eastington.

We started by walking along the lower length of the Stroudwater Canal. This interesting section includes several locks, a lock keepers house, the site and remains of the company dry dock and maintenance yard, plus Westfield bridge and lock, currently the end of the canal leading to the 'missing mile' – this length of the canal was destroyed during the building of the nearby M5. At this point we stopped to explore Westfield lock, filled in as part of the motorway development. However, this has recently been largely cleared and extensive repairs are underway. This is where the new section of canal will eventually link up with the old. Ray Wilson led a group of us last year to explore where this new stretch of canal will be built, as well as new locks and other infrastructure, all aimed at reopening the canal to navigation.

Eastington has a long history of woollen cloth manufacture and we then visited the three mills that once formed the hub of the local industry. Only the main block of Meadow Mill survives, although the site is still the base for offices and a number of companies. We then visited Churchend Mill where only one building (probably a former dyehouse) is left standing, this once big jumbled site being largely demolished around 1910. Then came Millend Mill, now nicely converted to apartments and home to a new internal water wheel. The Mill won an award for adaptive re-use from the Association for Industrial Archaeology in 2015 for the quality and innovation of its conversion. Here, we heard about the Boulton & Watt steam engine and house that once supplemented the mill's three internal water wheels.



Meadow Mill in the 1980s, and Millend Mill during conversion in 2012

Our next port of call, the furthest part of the 'loop' took us to the hamlet of Cress Green where we looked at the remains of a Second World War searchlight and anti-aircraft gun battery. This was one of a number of such units dotted around the valley, providing cover for the Sperry Gyroscope works then housed in Bonds Mill outside Stonehouse, as well as the adjacent Hoffmans ball bearing factory and Admiralty stores in Stanley Mill. The searchlights also acted as homing beacons for returning bombers.



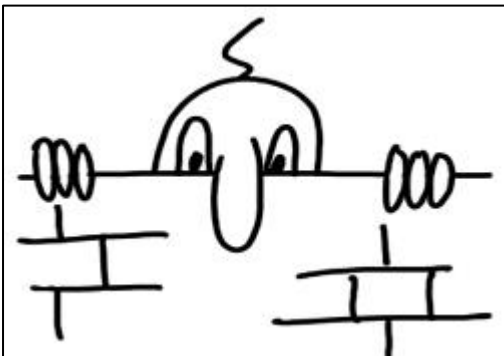
Remains of the Cress Green searchlight position



Millend Mill's award

We then made our way back to the Churchend part of the village where we heard about Henry Hicks, a major player in the development of the local cloth trade during the first part of the 19th century. He was responsible for the building of Eastington Park, later lived in by members of the Marling and Stanton families amongst others. He was also a great friend of Edward Jenner of smallpox fame. Jenner was a regular visitor at Eastington Park.

As we passed through the churchyard, we paused to hear about the late Eastington resident, George Chatterton. He had been a cartoonist at the Daily Mirror in the 1930s and was the originator of 'Chad', especially well-known during the Second World War, often bemoaning 'Wot, no petrol?' or 'Wot, no jam' etc. What a wonderful legacy!



We finally made our way back to our cars, where we said our goodbyes.

Look forward to seeing you some of the future walks we have planned for the coming months.

Steve Mills