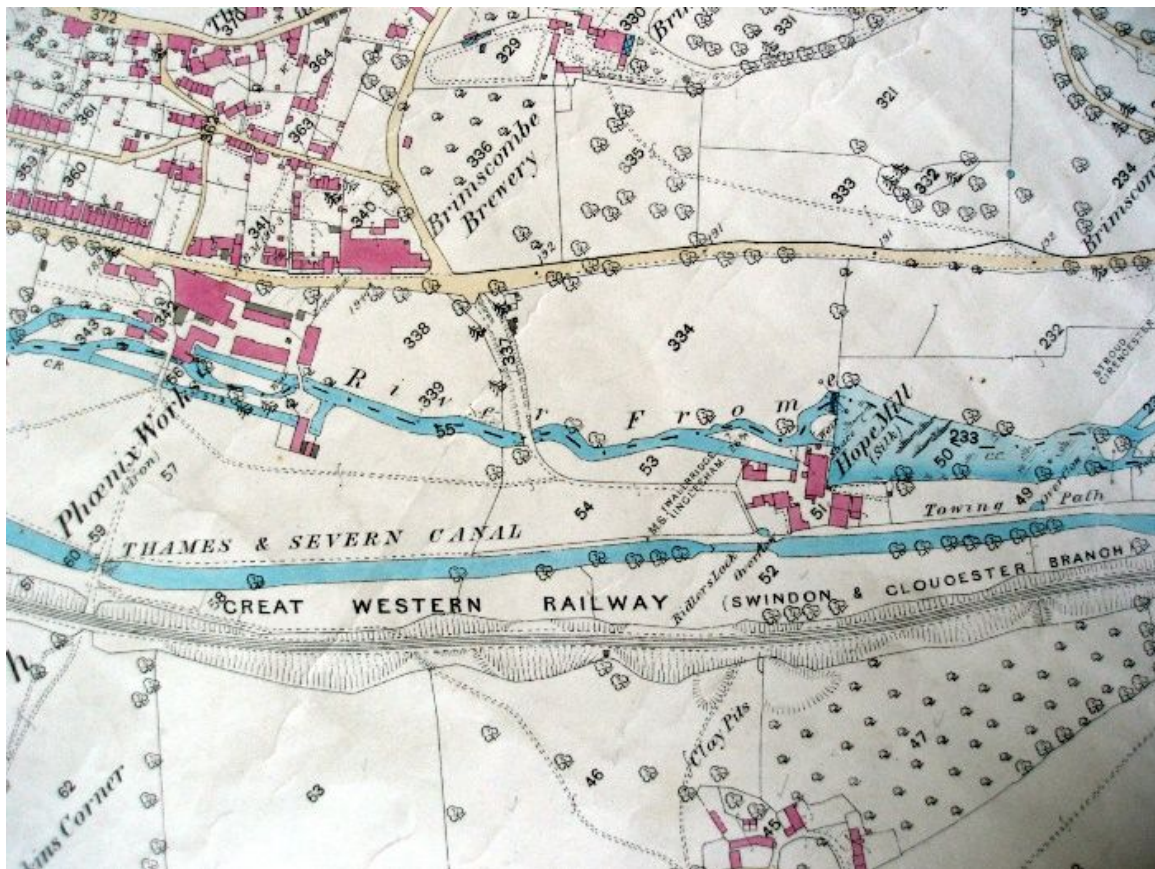


The mystery of the cast iron wheels found at Thrupp – solved!

Stephen Mills

Earlier this year, a pair of interesting cast iron wheels were literally unearthed on part of the site that was once the location of the well-known Phoenix Iron Works just outside Stroud (Map), more recently used as a storage depot by Stroud District Council. They were discovered during work to enlarge the car park for the 'new' Stroud Brewery (at GL5 2BY). The site was occupied from the 1870s by George Waller and Co, who established their engineering business there, continuing to use the foundry to produce castings for their main factory in London. In 1887, the company moved its entire operation to the Phoenix works. It continued to make a range of specialised equipment aimed at, for example, gas and sewage handling, until the 1970s, after which the company was taken over and the Waller name finally disappeared.



The site of the Phoenix Iron works and the surrounding area in 1885 (courtesy Ordnance Survey)

The function of the two wheels was a bit of a mystery. Initial suggestions included the possibility that they might have been part of a water wheel, although they were relatively small and their configuration did not suggest this type of application. There was also the possibility that they may have come from the nearby Hope Mill site, once used for woollen cloth production, and latterly as a silk mill. However, each wheel had three protuberances on both sides of the rim, raising the possibility that they could have been part of some form of tilt hammer associated with the iron works. Finally, a former Waller employee thought the wheels formed part of a coke grading machine, although extensive on-line searching failed to confirm this. Further investigation and detective work came to involve individuals and organisations that included GSIA, Cotswold Canals Trust, and Stroud Textile Trust.

Throughout this process, several GSIA members had a strong suspicion that the wheels were in fact tappet wheels that formed part of a set of fulling stocks used in the process of woollen cloth manufacture (Figure 1).

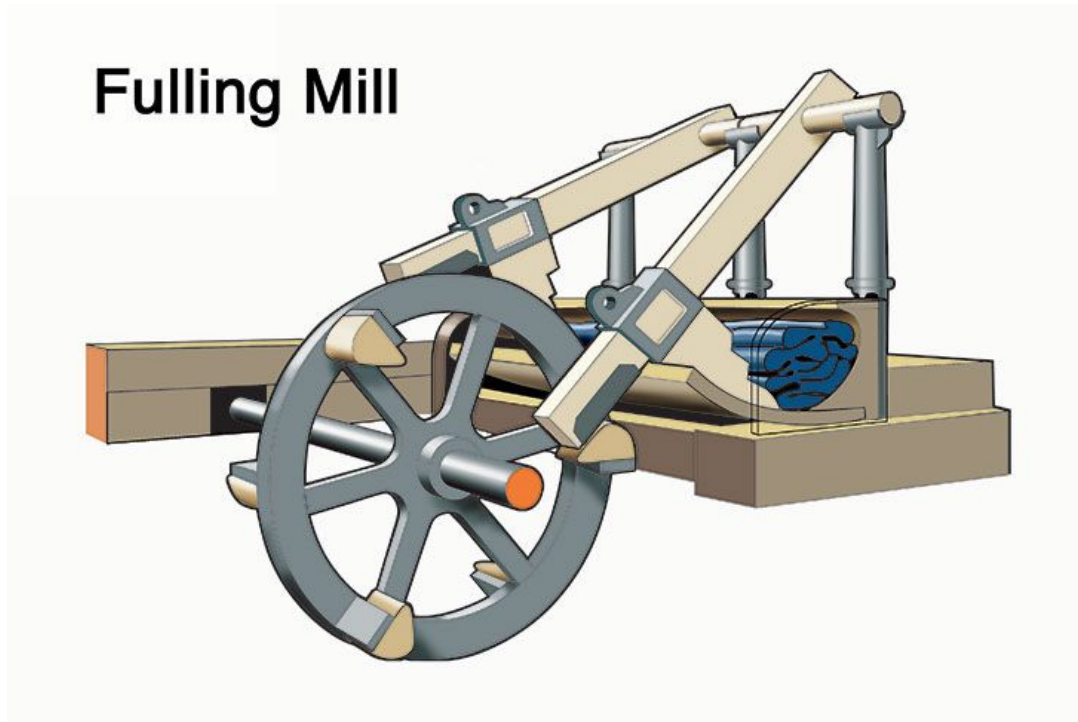


Figure 1 (Barré Funnell courtesy <http://www.norfolkmills.co.uk/>)

The function and background of the wheels was finally confirmed by the discovery of several photographs taken between 1970 and 1974 by the late Lionel Walrond, former curator of Stroud Museum and long-time GSIA member. Lionel's extensive (but largely unseen) photographic collection played a vital role in identifying the wheels and would not have become available without the stalwart efforts of our Honorary Secretary, Ray Wilson. Ray has been sorting, digitising, and gradually putting on line the collection of more than 13,000 black and white negatives – these are becoming available at <https://glosdocs.org.uk/walrondn>. John Ditchfield actually spotted the photos in the collection.

It turns out that the wheels were originally donated to Stroud Museum by Cam Mills (Figure 2), stored at the former Stroud workhouse, before ending up at the Council waste and storage depository close to the new Stroud Brewery. They originally formed part of two sets of fulling stocks from Cam; one set is now on display at Dunkirk Mill Museum, and the second set is in St Marys Mill.



Figure 2. Moving the wheels in the early 1970s by Lionel Walrond, digitised by Dr Ray Wilson, licenced under CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0

And where are the wheels now? The team from the Cotswold Canals Trust painstakingly removed decades of rust and corrosion before carefully manoeuvring the wheels (each weighing about 1 ton!) across the canal (Figure 3), before erecting them either side of the new winding hole they are developing (Figure 4). They now form an interesting relic, one that will hopefully spark interest and help keep alive memories of several important industrial sectors that the area was once famous for.



Figure 3. The CCT team's tricky task of transferring the wheels across the T&S Canal (courtesy Cotswold Canals Trust)



Figure 4. The wheels' new location, on the far side of the T&S Canal, opposite Stroud Brewery. A display panel will explain their background and function (courtesy Nick Brojer)