GSIA visit to Gunns Mill on 18 August

John Beard

The visit was fascinating and enjoyable. Some 20 members were hosted by leaders of the Forest of Dean Buildings Preservation Trust – Sinclair Johnston, Bill Parker and Laura Stevens. It was Bill who had bought the ruinous building some 20 years ago thereby saving it from being converted to a house, and who gave it to the trust, which has been steadily stabilising and restoring the building.

The furnace had been built originally in 1625; it was damaged in the civil war, and restored and improved in 1682 and 1683 as attested by the dates cast on the iron lintels. In the mid-eighteenth century the building was converted to a paper mill, and subsequently it was used for farm animals. It is the oldest and best-preserved blast furnace surviving from the charcoal era in Britain and perhaps Europe. For full information see https://www.fodbpt.org/gunns-mill

Sinclair Johnston and Laura Stevens, two of our guides

We were kitted with hard hats and hi-viz vests, and we split into two groups, led by Bill for the nimble and Laura for the less agile. We had privileged access to explore the whole building. Inside the furnace we saw the remains of slag remaining on the walls, and the traces of the staircase that been installed after the furnace ceased production.

In the waterwheel chamber there is still a smaller wheel that was installed in later years.

On the upper floor there is a forest of oak beams, old and new, with the new ones meticulously scarfed into the salvageable parts of the old ones. The upper floor had originally been smaller and stored the ingredients for the furnace; after the conversion to a paper mill an extension was added over the disused furnace and the upper floor was used for drying the paper; and the agile group were able to limbo into the extension.

The visit followed on from GSIA making a grant to Gunns Mill, which had enabled them to obtain substantial funding from Historic England for the current stage of restoration. There is more work to be done as further funding becomes available.