

## **THE IA OF WOODCHESTER PARK - AN INTERIM NOTE**

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### **Introduction**

Woodchester Park lies in an enchanting tree enclosed valley which runs from the picnic site at Coaley Peak, Nympsfield to Inchbrook, Woodchester. For many years access to the park was denied to all but a few. This was eased for the upper part of the park in 1987 when Stroud District Council purchased the remarkable unfinished country house that lies a mile down the valley from the Nympsfield entrance. Access to the lower reaches of the park with the series of five tranquil ponds has remained very limited. This is perhaps a blessing as it has meant that the valley has retained its air of a 'secret place'.

The long term future of the park was uncertain until 1994 when it was purchased by the National Trust. This was welcomed locally and a substantial contribution to the purchase money was made by Stroud District Council. The park will remain closed to the general public for the next two years while the Trust's officers carry out a detailed survey of the property and investigate its history. They also need to devise a suitable management plan which will deal with how the public can enjoy the property without destroying the thing that makes it so pleasant to visit. The park was once owned by the Earl of Ducie and at one time it was known as Spring Park. The property was sold to William Leigh in 1845. The old house was demolished and the present unfinished house was started about 1854 and abandoned at the end of the 1860s. (1)

Although not obvious at first sight, the park does have items of interest for the industrial archaeologist. The society has expressed a willingness to the National Trust to assist where we can in the recording and interpretation of these sites. A meeting was held in March 1995 when David Armstrong, the National Trust Project Officer dealing with the park, and GSIA members Ray Wilson and Jim Simmons visited some of the sites.

### **Industrial Archaeology in the Park**

The following is an initial list of sites with an industrial archaeological connection in the park. Some are very well known and others were new to the GSIA members.

#### **1) Woodchester Glasshouse (ST83380052)**

This is one of the most important industrial monuments in the county and has Scheduled Ancient Monument status. (2) Paradoxically only a few stones now remain of the structures

used c. 1590 - 1615 for the manufacture of drinking glasses and glass bottles. The site was 'excavated' by amateur archaeologists between 1890 and 1920 and a large number of fragments of glasses and bottles were found. A general view of the site about 1920 and illustrations of some of the artefacts were published in 1950 by J.S. Daniels who had taken part in some of the excavations.(3) More recently Penn has given a history of the site. (4)

## 2) Mills

Isaac Taylor's map of 1777 (5) does not suggest ponds in the lower part of the park but shows a wide stream in that region. However, the present ponds are shown on an estate map of 1782.(6) Both maps show a mill at a similar location which is today just below the dam for the bottom lake (ST83150083).

The dam is about 10m high and this suggests it would have been necessary to make extensive modifications to the earlier mill or to completely rebuild it nearby when the ponds were created. A mill is also shown at the same location on two later estate maps of c.1790 and c. 1800, respectively. (7,8)

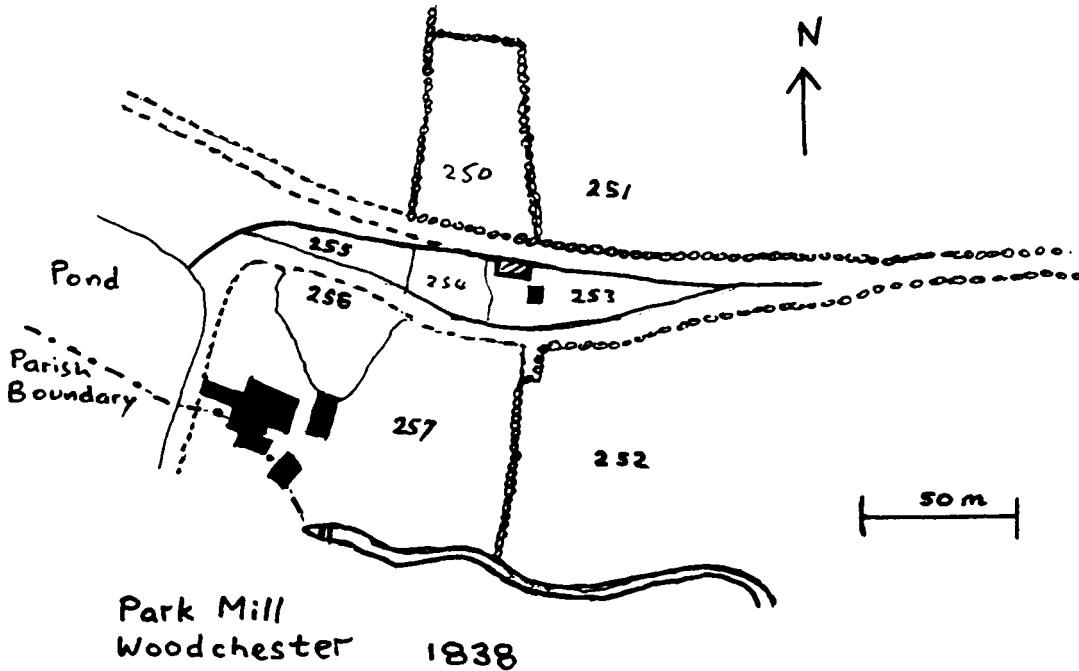
In January 1804 a corn mill described as being on the lower side of Woodchester Park was advertised to let.(9) It was said to contain three pairs of French stones and to have been lately improved and it was calculated that the mill could grind 50 wagon loads of wheat weekly. The most remarkable aspect of this notice that it gives the size of the waterwheel as 33 feet (10.1m) in diameter. The situation of the mill under the dam made it one of the few sites in the area where such a large wheel could be sensibly used.

Park Mill (as the mill became known) was also advertised to let in 1820. (10) Here it was claimed that the mill was capable of grinding 1000 bushels of wheat a week with three pairs of stones. The tithe map of 1838 (11) shows the mill occupying a very extensive site. (Figure 1) It would appear that there was direct access into the mill from the top of the dam. This would be very convenient as it would avoid having to hoist the grain up through the mill to the bin floor as was usual. The mill site is actually described as "croft" on the tithe map apportionment rather than mill.

Additional information on the history of Park Mill is given in the Victoria County History (12) and it is intended to examine the references cited. It is believed that the mill ceased working about 1870. (13) No buildings appear on the 25 inch Ordnance Survey map of 1884. (14)

The only possible remnant of Park Mill observed on the site visit was a small stone lined arched culvert which discharged into the stream just below the foot of the dam spillway. This

may have been the tailrace although it is rather small for this



From GRO/TI/201

purpose being only 0.8m wide and 1m high. There was a very slight flow of water from the culvert and it appeared to be free of any obvious blockage. It would therefore be a very useful exercise to attempt to trace the course of this culvert using the specialist equipment which exists for tracking pipelines. If the culvert leads to the area where the large wheel is thought to have been it is to be hoped that the National Trust might stage a small excavation here at some future date.

A second mill is shown on Taylor's map at location that is estimated to lie between Middle Pond and Kennel Pond (at ST823012 approx). It is not shown on any of the three estate maps and no remains of a mill were found in that area during the site visit.

### 3) Eel Traps

There are at least two eel traps in the park. Both are built of blocks of roughly dressed limestone to two different designs. The upper trap lies on the fast flowing stream between Middle Pond and Kennel Pond (at ST823012 approx.). It consists of two stone chambers, one in the stream and a smaller one alongside set into the north bank. It is not yet clear how the trap operated as there are known to be a number of variations in the design of eel traps. It is likely that the second chamber was used to keep the eels until they were needed for the table.

The lower trap is located at the bottom of the spillway (overflow) at the southern end of Park mill Pond dam (S083170080). This consists of a single chamber set in-line with the stream. It is about 6m long and 1m wide with massive stone walls also about 1m in width. A metal grille at the downstream end of the trap allowed the water to continue but not the eels.

It is suggested that these structures should be recorded and their method of operation researched.

#### **4) Icehouse**

In common with many country houses there is an ice house at Woodchester Park. It lies about 150m to the north the house (at approximate location ST809015). The icehouse has been disused for many years. This has yet to be investigated.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Woodchester Park is best known for the unfinished house and the high quality of the landscape. However, there are clearly items of interest in the park for the industrial archaeologist which require recording, documentary research and possibly excavation at some stage. Clearly all work on site must be carried out with the agreement and active involvement of the National Trust. A start has been made and it is to be hoped that a future Journal will contain a detailed report of such investigations.

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- (5) Gloucestershire Record Office (GRO) Taylor's Map 1777.
- (6) GRO D1011 P8
- (7) GRO D1011 P9
- (8) GRO D1011 P10
- (9) Gloucester Journal, 30 April 1804
- (10) Bath Chronicle, 6 January 1820
- (11) GRO GDR/TI/201
- (12) Victoria County History of Gloucestershire, 1976, Volume 11, p 234
- (13) Crawford D., 1995, Private Communication.
- (14) Ordnance Survey 25 Inch Gloucestershire sheet 49.15, 1884.