MILLS IN ECCLESALL WOODS

1. RYCROFT MILL (LIMB AND RYCROFT BROOKS) (Map Ref 317819)

Edward Pegge rented the Limes (or Lim) lead-smelting mill to Edward Ash between 1671 and 1674. The names of the neighbouring fields, Upper and Lower Belland, relate to the pollution caused by the on-site smelting. It is not known for how long smelting continued at this location and Burdett, in his map of Derbyshire mills dated 1762-67 uses the word ‘Boycroft’ for this site, but does not explain what the use of this word means.

The next available records are the Chatsworth surveys of 1800 and 1820, which show that the site was the property of the Duke of Devonshire, and that John Unwin was the tenant, paying an annual rent of £12. This corresponds with the survey of 1827, which refers to a corn mill and John Unwin, miller, as tenant of the Duke. This also agrees with the 1830 Land Tax return. In the 1851 Census John Unwin is listed as retired, and his son Robert as Miller. In 1849 a newspaper report on the bursting of the Whirlow Bridge dam had shown that it supplied Unwin’s Mill.

By 1871 Robert Unwin Robert Unwin was no longer milling, being described as a farmer in the Census of that year, and in 1884 a sketch of the mill shows it to be in a ruinous condition.

The Rycroft mill dam has been drained, but dried-up head-goits show that water was taken from both the Limb and Rycroft Brooks. The Limb Brook weir has been washed away, but some surviving stretches of the goit, which follows the contour of the valley side, enable its position to be determined. Fragments of the weir on the Rycroft Brook can be seen, and the goit earthworks are prominent.

The bank of the dam contains lead slag, and is particularly clear on the eastern leg, towards Limb Brook.

At the mill the stonework on the downstream side of the dam is collapsing due to tree root action, but the back of the wheel-pit is clear, as are the outlines of the mill building to the east. The tail-goiy runs beneath the adjacent track in a culvert, and scatters of lead slag can be found to the east of the wheel-pit.

1. WHIRLOW WHEEL (LIMB BROOK) (Map Ref 312826)

The first mention of a mill being on this site was in 1586 when John Bright was described as being the freeholder of a wheel on Lymbrooke three miles above Ecclesall Mill. The marriage settlement of Henry Bright of Whirlow in 1655 included a corn mill in Dore which probably relates to the mill that stood on this site. In 1718 Bright sold the Whirlow estate to Sir John Statham of Tideswell, who in turn sold it to Thomas Hollis, a cutler of Sheffield in 1726.

From then until 1935 the property was administered by the trustees of Hollis’ Hospital. The Hollis trustees rebuilt the mill in 1734 and and let it to Joseph Dawes, who made over his tenancy to a Mr Nicols before 1748. John Marsden rented the mill from 1757 to 1778, but a dispute about re-possession lasted until1783. The mid 18th century correspondence contains useful information about repairs to the mill. Further tenants ran thye mill until 1803, when a grinding wheel was built, and was let in 1804 to Goodwin and Barker.

Fairbank surveyed the new dam in 1806, and over the next decade a new water-wheel was installed and other improvements made, marked by an increase in rent from £40 to £50. In the 1827 enclosure Award, Fairbank listed a saw-wheel and dam, owned by Hollis Hospital. Alex Barker was tenant. In 1831 it was let to William Tyzack, who left for the Whitley Wood works on the River Porter in 1847.

An upper reservoir was built in the 1840’s and burst in 1849; although estimates for repair were sought in 1850, the wheel was untenanted until 1853 when Willian Furness took over with a rent of only £30. One dam was enlarged in 1861 and the rent increased in 1864 and 1865.

Over the next decade repairs were made to the wheel, but operation, of what was confusingly described both as wheel and mill, was unsatisfactory, in part through water shortage, allegedly due to mining, and the dilapidated state of the building, pentrough and shuttle. Repairs were carried out in 1880, but 20 years later complaints were made, notably that the water wheel axle had broken. In 1901 a turbine was installed, although the tenant, still William Furness, complained that it used more water than the wheel. Only in 1923 is there a further record, when Mr Benton Jones of Whirlow Brook Hall took the tenancy.

In 1933 the building was said to be so dilapidated that no manufacturing tenant could be found, and in 1935 the wheel and surrounding ground were sold to Sheffield Corporation.

The upper dam (the dam that burst in 1849) is to the west of the old Ecclesall Road South but the lower dam has disappeared beneath the re-alignment of that road. The upstream wall of the wheel-pit is vertical, but the east end has a shaped breast suggesting an overshot wheel and a central outlet. The turbine of 1901 was reported to be in a position in the choked base of the pit. The turbine was fed by a surviving iron oipe fron a small penstock. Part of the original penstock can be seen, collapsing into the wheel-pit. The tail-goit probably ran through a culvert, but the outfall is lost in hill-wash in the steep sided valley.

Submitted by Howard Stendall