

Morning News Country



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Community bid to save one of best medieval water systems in UK

Dulverton's ancient weir and leat system has been proclaimed the best remaining in any UK town.

Martin Hesp learns how locals got together to save it

An ancient structure on Exmoor has been described by a leading academic as the most important example of its kind in the country.

And the reason Dulverton's medieval weir has been given such an accolade is because of a group of community minded citizens stepped forward to research the historic structure after it was breached by heave floods two years ago.

Dr Matt Edgeworth, a fellow of Leicester University who is recognised as one of the UK's top experts on weirs and leats, said: "The system at Dulverton is one of the best preserved in England located in a town. You could probably find others out in the countryside as good, but to find one in an urban situation in a medieval form is fantastic."

As reported in the WMN last year, the subject of the old water power system came to light after a group of townsfolk pooled resources in a self-funded archaeological drive to find out more about an ancient weir at the heart of their community.

Local enthusiast Philip Hull told the WMN: "The ancient history of Dulverton weir and leat can be traced back to 1331 and the system was in use right up to the 20th century. The research cost local residents £400 and we spent the money because the weir has been an asset for Dulverton which has never been recognised."

The group's interest in the weir occurred when temporary repair work after the 2012-13 floods uncovered a number of oak stakes which had been used in an earlier construction. Now a new report the group has put together states: "The ancient, original, structure of Dul-

verton weir appears to have been built in a style that is typical of the Norman period. At first sight, the weir might appear to be a simple structure. However, closer inspection reveals that the people that built this weir knew exactly what they were doing and clearly had experience.

"As more is discovered about the Dulverton urban watermill landscape it's becoming more obvious that the weir and leat is not the simplistic and charmingly haphazard structure that most have formerly believed.

"When it was built it was at the cutting edge of technology and was

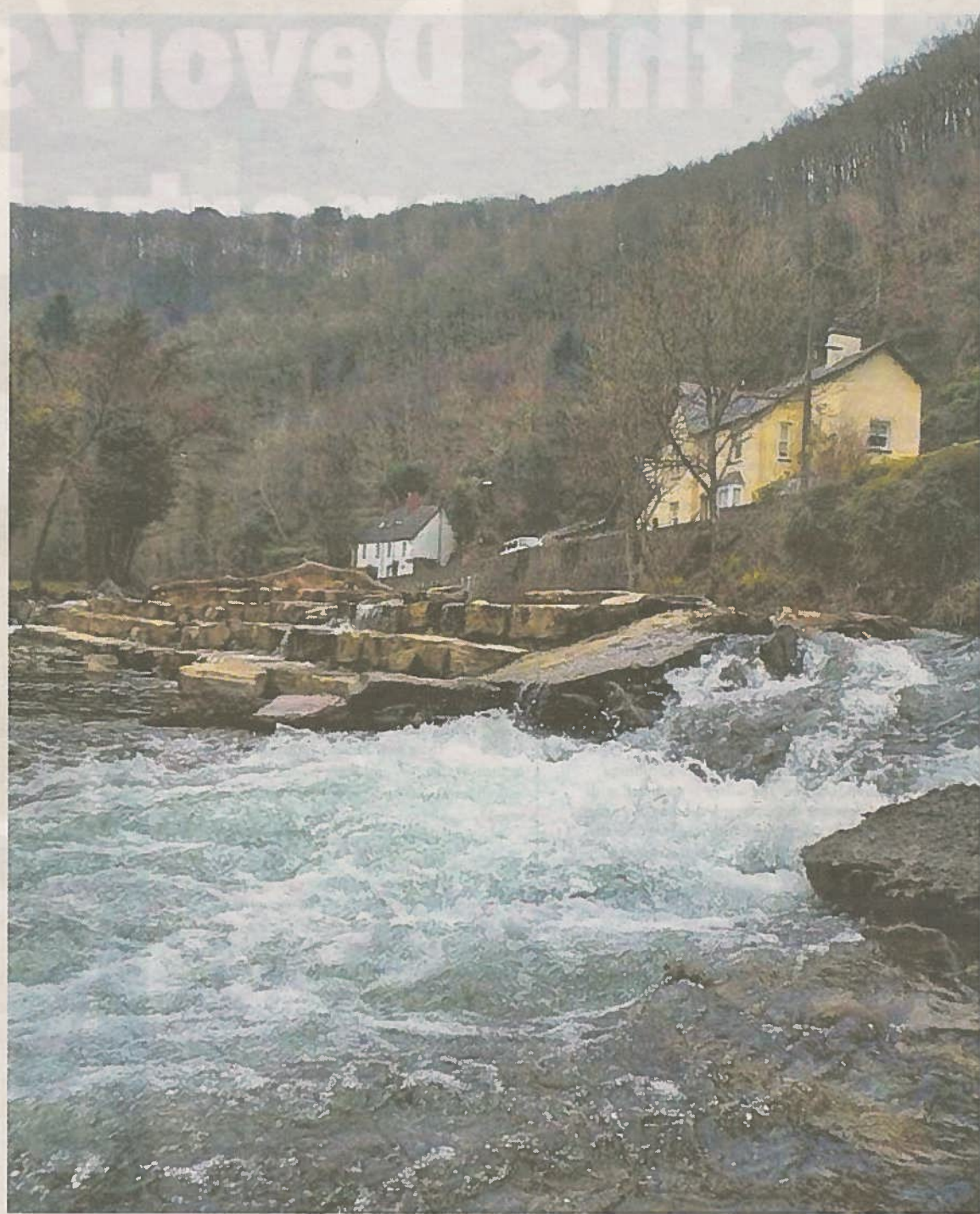
'This is an example of medieval structure that is still working – you don't have to dig to find it'

Dr Matt Edgeworth

built by skilled individuals. The more senior of these 'engineers' were often from mainland Europe, where the technology was more advanced."

The report comes after a visit Dr Edgeworth made to survey the weir. He said "There was clearly a big woollen industry on Exmoor in medieval times and Dulverton would have been at the centre of the processing of textiles.

"Most of those mills on the leat that still survives would have been fulling mills linked to the woollen trade, but there would have been others doing things like grinding corn and so on. I would say the weir system goes back



at least to Norman times, but it could be older than that.

"It is one of the best kind of medieval water management systems in a urban context that still survives. It is still in good condition and it still functions. In theory you could power mills from it today."

Dr Edgeworth added: "I am an archaeologist and I mostly deal with things that are buried in the ground. This is an example of medieval structure that is still working – you don't have to dig to find it.

"The amazing thing is that people

have been looking after it and kept it in use for 100s of years – and the best way of saving it is to keep the water flowing through it. Without the weir being kept in good repair the leat would stop working – so it is vital the weir is kept in good nick.

"The local group realised the importance of the weir and the leat system as well. They have the vision to see how the two work together. You can't really have one without the other – it is all part of one system."

Philip Hull, a spokesman for the group, said: "Dulverton Weir has

been overlooked for years. Not appreciated its beauty, history amenity value. I've lived here for years and I'm as guilty as anyone."

"We all just drive past it without looking; it's modern day life I pose. But the weir is an integral of Dulverton's history, it has been quietly doing its job keeping the leat topped up with water since medieval times.

"And now it needs our help," Mr Hull. "I urge anyone passing stop, get out of the car and look. You will be amazed at what you see."