



Town bids to safeguard its ancient water power system

BY MARTIN HESP

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We've all heard of water-power, and also of people-power – but what happens when the two forces combine? That is exactly what has been occurring on Exmoor where a group of townfolk have pooled resources in a self-funded archaeological drive to find out more about an ancient weir at the heart of their community.

And the people-powered research has resulted in a call for Dulverton's badly damaged historic water-power system to be given official protection.

Why? Because, thanks to the specialist expert brought in to undertake research work, local residents have learned that their remote town was once a far more important and industrially busy place than previously believed.

"It is not commonly recognised today that in medieval times Dulverton was at the cutting edge of the technological revolution taking place at the time which was based around water-power," says one resident who helped pay for a specialist to research the weir which was damaged in the flood of 2013/14.

Philip Hull said: "The an-

cient 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.

"I've been here 30 years and the story of the weir and leat has been completely ignored. It's astonishing – you can't believe that Dulverton was once a major industrial centre – water-power was the oil of the Middle Ages. What happened



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was that when they discovered how to make coal work for them, it became the cheaper option so all the industry went to places where they had coal. Poor old Dulverton was suddenly outdated," said Mr Hull.

The group of residents took a renewed interest in the weir when temporary repair work uncovered a number of oak stakes which had been used in its earlier reconstruction. They managed to recover the stakes and then commissioned Dr Andrew Moir of Tree Ring Services to undertake tree



Residents of Dulverton have discovered the town's ancient weir and leat system is much older than previously thought. They believe it deserves protection



ring dating to determine their exact age.

Dr Moir established that the stakes date from the period 1784 to 1803. Residents were also grateful to receive advice from Dr Matt Edgeworth, an authority on industrial water-mill systems from Leicester University.

"In its heyday the weir and leat system must have been one of the largest in the South West," said Mr Hull. "Like most weirs and dams of its period it was built by ram-

ming hundreds of oak piles into the riverbed, logs were placed horizontally between the stakes with the gaps in between being filled in symmetrically with boulders.

"The leat was essentially the medieval equivalent of a modern power plant," said Mr Hull. "We know that over the years 1600 to 1820 there were at least six mills working. In 1791 Collins described the residents of Dulverton as being chiefly employed in the manufacture of coarse woollens

and blankets. As late as 1832 the Edinburgh Encyclopaedia still listed the three main blanket manufacturing locations in England as being Leeds, Witney and Dulverton."

Despite this previous importance, the weir – the central structure which allowed Dulverton to thrive – has no kind of official ancient monument status.

"If the Environment Agency had wanted to, it could have got rid of it, which is an horrific thought," said Mr Hull. "The people here who love it decided we must start the ball rolling."

The local residents have told Exmoor National Park Authority (ENPA) and English Heritage that they believe the weir and leat system should be recognised and that any further repairs or alterations should be planned and funded with this in mind. The ENPA has undertaken to commission an archaeological survey this year which will take place alongside a project to establish and document the leat's historical significance.