

Report on Excavations for the Dulverton Weir Project 2021

by Chris Preece



DULVERTON
WEIR & LEAT
CONSERVATION
TRUST

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Registered Charity No. 1167729
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(cover: NDAS member Lance Hosegood planning Trench 1)

Introduction

In March 2020 several members of the North Devon Archaeological Society (NDAS) were invited to Dulverton by members of the Dulverton Weir & Leat Conservation Society with a view to a joint project. NDAS members were shown the weir and also the industrial sites that had sprung up thanks to the water management system that derived from it. Derry Bryant wrote an article about the day and the site, which is worth revisiting for background information ([NDAS Spring newsletter 2020.pdf](#)). Subsequently, it was agreed with Philip Hull and Peter Romain (two of the Dulverton Weir and Leat Conservation Trust trustees) that NDAS would carry out the four trial trenches which had been proposed in the Project Design for a Community Archaeology Project (2020). The research aims are covered in detail there but basically the primary rationale for these trenches was to confirm potential features within the landscape. Covid however struck soon afterwards and the excavations had to be twice postponed.

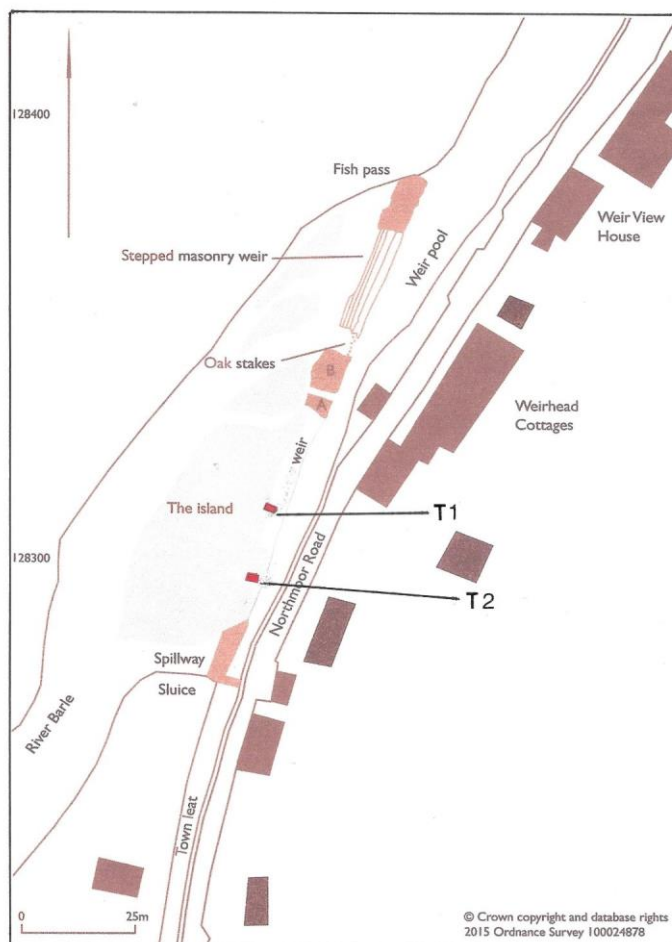
However, at last, on September 24th 2021, pandemic restrictions were relaxed enough for excavation to take place. That morning several NDAS diggers reconvened in Dulverton. We met up with Philip Hull and due to the small number of volunteers (including two from the community) we decided that pragmatism would necessitate a slight revision of objectives. We therefore agreed two trenches rather than the three originally planned for the 'island' (see plan, Fig. 1). In addition, the length of trenches was reduced from 4 x 1m (as postulated in the Project Design) to 2 x 1m, mainly due to practical considerations regarding the density of tree growth as can be seen from the cover photo. This proved to be a wise decision as the depth of the trenches allied to heavy root entanglement and very stony ground meant excavation was hard work. We finished recording and then backfilling towards the end of the third day, with the small trench to be dug in the leat postponed for early 2022. The weather however was kind to us and we had no rain interruptions.

Excavation

(For detailed site location maps, tithe map, early OS maps, desktop research etc., refer to Riley 2015 – see bibliography below)

The rationale for Trenches 1 and 2 (Fig. 1) was to locate the rest of the historic weir to the south (which it was presumed had been covered by the gradual accumulation of silt, water-borne stones and detritus – now called 'the island'). It soon became evident that a lot of rubbish had been deposited there in the Victorian era and the finds would have delighted the bottle collecting fraternity (except that almost all were broken). Several bottles however could be identified and broadly dated and some are detailed below (cf. *Finds*)

Fig. 1. Trench location plan (based on plan of Dulverton weir by Riley 2016, 12).



Trench 1 (1.8 x 1m)

This effectively extended the test pit dug by Weir Project personnel which had previously located part of the weir. Due to the overhang of the east edge of the test pit the length of Trench 1 at the base was reduced from 2m to 1.8m. The uppermost layer (100) comprised a light brown crumbly soil thick with roots and bramble and containing angular and water-worn pebbles. Finds included Victorian pottery (Blue and White – henceforth ‘B&W’, ‘china’ etc), grey slate roof tiles, fragments of factory made brick, terracotta waste pipe and glass fragments (bottle, window and lampshade). Beneath this was (101), a layer of mid-brown gravelly soil, which contained a mixture of small and medium sized stones, some water-worn. Finds were plentiful and similar to (100) above (B and W, china, brick etc) but a number were distinctive, including a Codd bottle, a Hancock bottle from Wiveliscombe and a slate pencil. These provided a broad date range of late C19/early C20. This deposit sealed (102), a layer of damper gravelly soil with small compact pebbles. The pottery here again featured B and W and ‘china’ as well as teacup and teapot sherds and a small stoneglaze jar (Late Victorian). A Keiller marmalade jar (see ‘Finds’ below) provided another Late Victorian date. The lowest layer excavated (103) was a loose, damp, mid-brown silty clay which abutted the base of the weir (104). This layer (103) still contained finds similar to those above (B&W, ‘china’, brick etc.). At this point, the trench was bottomed out at one metre depth although natural had not been reached. The lowest stone on the assumed weir structure (104), the ‘toe stone’, was considerably larger than those upslope. This presumably was to prevent slippage and retain the smaller stones above (Fig. 3).



Fig. 2. North facing section of Trench 1 (scale 2m). ‘Toe’ stone is east end of trench.

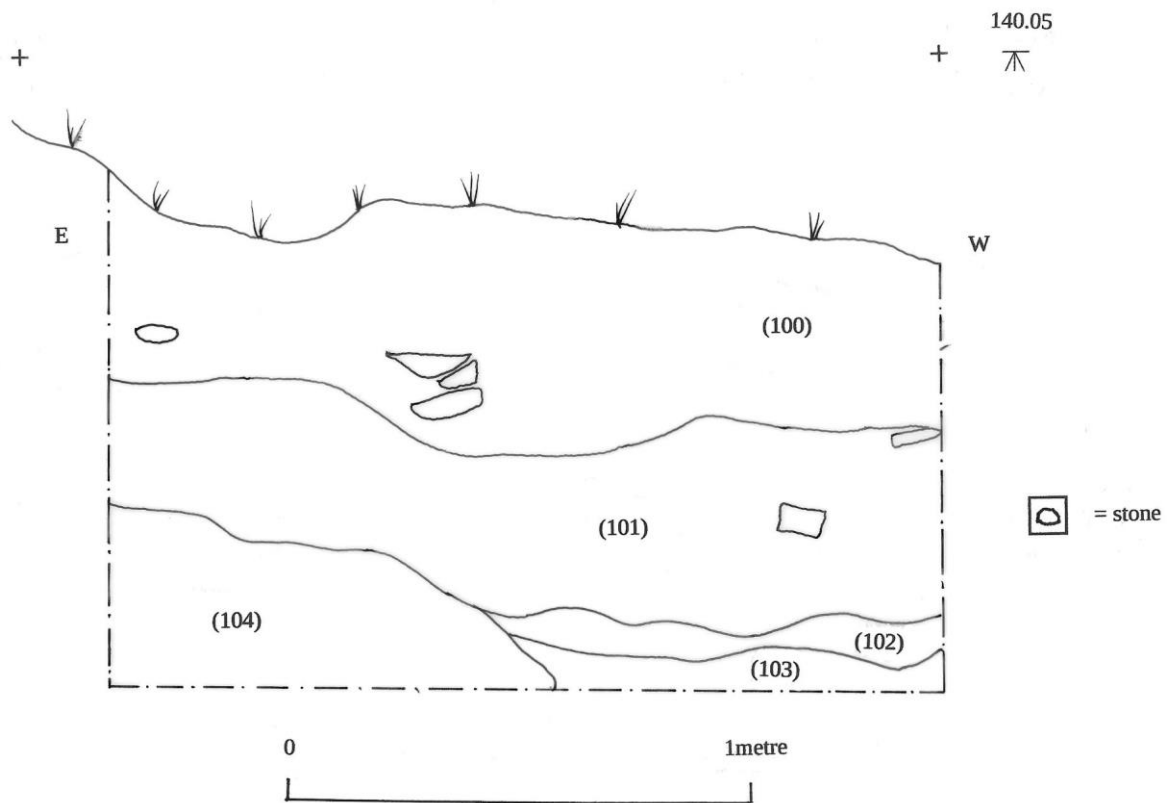


Fig. 3 North facing section of Trench 1. Rectangular shape in (101) is brick.

Trench 2 (2x1m)

This was located further to the south, and was sited to further confirm continuation of the weir but from the start (apart from stones and roots!) the layers were different from Trench 1, being much drier for a start. Topsoil (200) contained finds similar to those evidenced in Trench 1 (B&W, 'china', slate tile fragments and bottle glass) but a Penguin biscuit wrapper with barcode (therefore post 1979), unless intrusive, suggested this may have been a later episode of deposition of Victorian rubbish. The layer below topsoil (201) was a reddish brown sandy clay. Contained within this was B&W, fragments of hand-made brick, bottle glass and a kick-up bottle base, possibly earlier in date. This sealed a more compact light grey silty clay (202), more suggestive of alluvial action. In this layer were incomplete Codd bottles from Wiveliscombe and Tiverton and fragments of a light green Hancocks bottle, again from Wiveliscombe. A Victorian fluted china teacup sherd and a black glazed tile fragment (Bridport?) were other finds of interest. Beneath this was (203), a stony damp clay similar to that evidenced in Trench 1 and due to the depth of the trench, excavation ceased at this level. In (203) though, large amounts of Victorian artefacts were still being found (B&W, factory-made brick, 'china', bottle glass, lampshade fragment etc.) but there was no evidence of the weir structure. Discussions aplenty arose as to why this was and are detailed below.



Figs. 4 & 5 (below). South facing section of Trench 2.

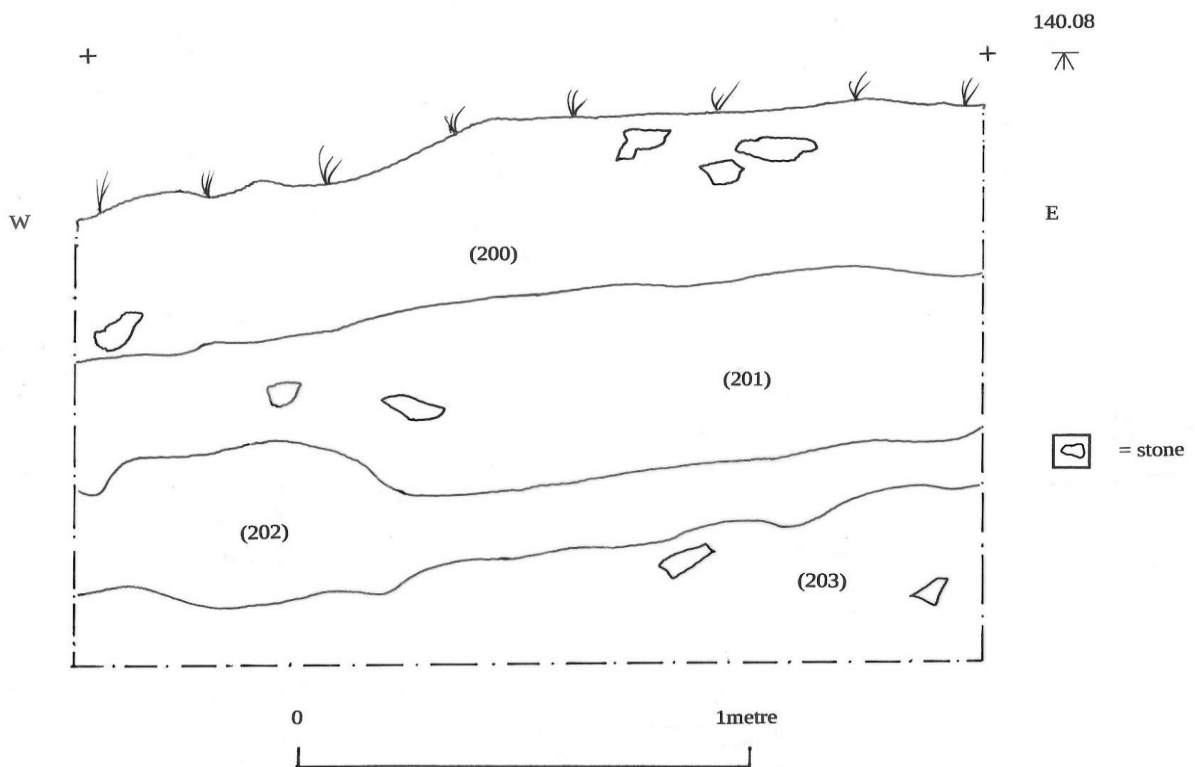




Fig. 6. NDAS members recording the section of Trench 2

Conclusions

Although it has been suggested that the weir may be at least late medieval in origin (Riley 2015, 3) we were unable to find any evidence of the date of construction – a long shot to be honest, as only a sherd of pot sealed beneath the lowest stone of the weir would provide this. The fact that Victorian pottery was found in all four layers of Trench 1, right down to the base of the weir, (see Fig. 3) suggests that the formation of this upper part of what is now called the ‘island’ began late in this era and that until then this segment of the weir had probably been maintained and kept fairly clear of detritus. This would tie in with the decline in use of the mills. On the 1902 OS map, the ‘island’ is still composed of islands 4 and 5 and the deposition of Victorian rubbish probably aided the eventual amalgamation of the two. The deposition of layers of Victorian discards in Trench 2 adds to this theory but the dissimilar nature of the strata in the two trenches is worth analysing. Initially, post-excavation discussion regarding the lack of evidence for weir structure in Trench 2 centred around whether we had just missed the weir. However, according to the implied alignment, we should have found it. Did the extant part of the weir extend to Trench 1 but not as far as Trench 2 then? Examination of the early OS maps suggests this is a possibility albeit with a caveat. On the 1889 OS map edition (see Riley 2016, 8) the weir is depicted extending to the 4th ‘island’ to the south. However, on the later 1902 edition of the map, the weir extends to the 5th ‘island’, suggesting that in 1889 the southern part of the weir was silted over. If the 1902 map is accurate, this would explain the lack of weir structure in Trench 2 as it would not extend this far. The much drier strata within Trench 2 give further strength to this hypothesis. However, this does assume that the 5th island was not silting part of the weir in 1902 and hiding structure from the OS surveyors. In summary, Trench 2 left us with as many questions as answers.

The predominantly late Victorian date of most contexts and the similarity of artefacts within each strata suggest several episodes of deposition of the ‘rubbish’, probably within a fairly narrow time span. These late Victorian artefacts of course only provide a *terminus post quem* for deposition and the tipping of this ‘rubbish’ could have taken place much later, presumably from cottages and houses on the other side of the road.

NDAS are still planning to excavate a further trial trench in town near the bridge by Leat House in order to confirm the original bedding of the leat which is thought to be cobbled. This may have to wait until Spring 2022, however.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the NDAS volunteers who gave their time and travelled some distance into Somerset: Nigel and Rosemary Dymond, Derry Bryant, Lance Hosegood, Brian Fox, Bob Shrigley and Ruth Downie. Trustee Philip Hull not only worked hard on the dig but provided coffee and various snacks for us. Our sincere gratitude. Thanks also to Peter Romain for his assistance, particularly with early maps and documentation.

Finds

APPENDIX 1: GLASS

Quantities of glass were found including window glass, lampshade glass, bottle glass and the base of a wineglass. Selected examples of dateable bottles are detailed below.

1. Codd bottle made by Alfred Alexander & Co. (London) for Thomas Ford and Son Brewery (Tiverton). Codd bottles were patented in 1872 and widely used until the 1930s. Thomas Ford and Son was founded in 1852 but acquired by Starkey Knight & Co. in 1895 with a corresponding change of name. In 1884 Alfred Alexander announced in the London Post that his eldest son William had become a partner in the firm and that it would be known henceforth as Alexander and Co. This bottle therefore must date to between 1884 and 1895.

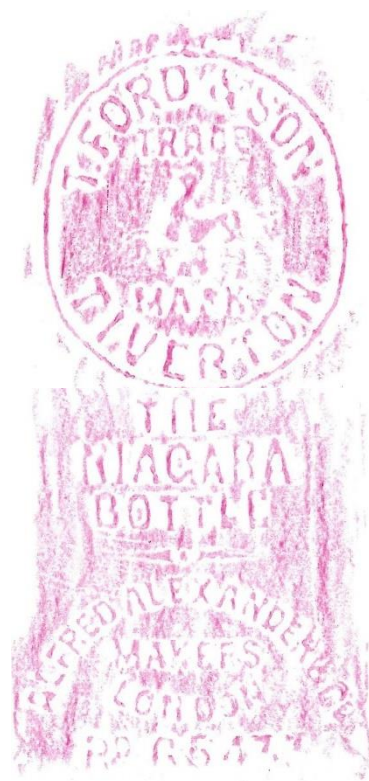


Fig. 7. (left) Photo of T. Ford and Son Codd bottle by Nigel Dymond. Fig. 8. (right) Rubbings showing lettering on both sides of bottle.

2. Bottle from Hancock's Brewery at Wiveliscombe. Brewery founded in 1807 in Wiveliscombe. Registered in 1887. Merged with Arnold & Sons in 1927 to form Arnold and Hancock.

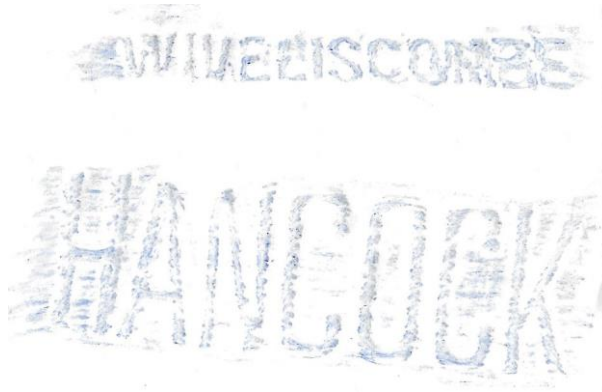


Fig. 9. Rubbing of letters on Codd bottle from (202).

3. Barrett and Elers (London) bottle. Beer bottle. Patent in 1868, became Barret and Elers soon afterwards. This bottle probably dates from 1870 onwards.



Fig. 10. Rubbing of letters on Barrett and Elers bottle (202)

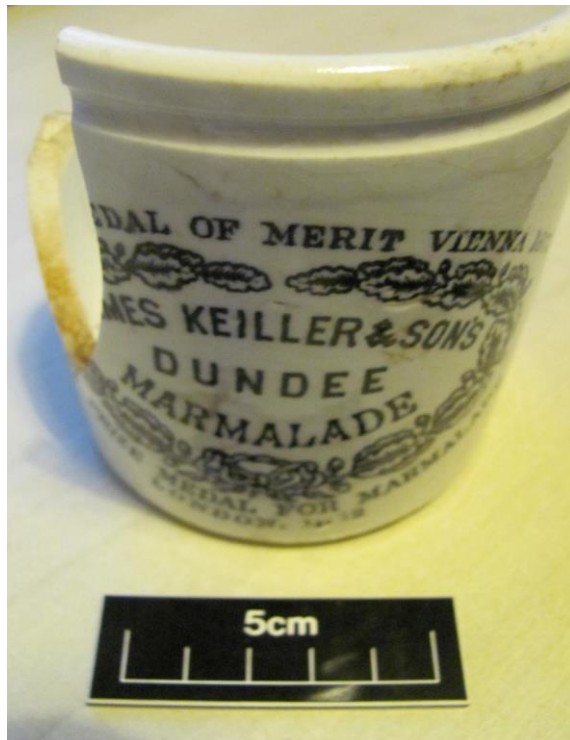
4. Base of Hamilton 'Torpedo' or pontilled bottle. Came into general use in 1840s and were popular for several decades. Superseded in 1870s by Codd bottle. This e.g. has a seam which dates it post 1850.

Fig. 11. Base of Hamilton 'Torpedo' Bottle (102).



APPENDIX 2: CERAMICS

Large amounts of Victorian pottery were found. This included Blue and White wares, plain and patterned 'china', white glaze and stoneware storage jars, North Devon style glazed earthenware, grey stoneware and brown glazed sherds (C19 Donyatt?). Forms evidenced by sherds included tea pots, teacups, saucers, plates, bowls, storage jars, lampshades and a probable chamber pot.



1. Keiller's marmalade pot. Two medal dates (Vienna 1873, London 1862) so dates after 1873. By end of C19 these marmalade jars were shipped worldwide thus explaining their common occurrence.

Fig. 12. Keiller Marmalade jar (102)

2. Gray and Sons white stoneware jar (*not illustrated*). Similar size to the Keiller jar above and probably a marmalade jar too. Company established 1858; still listed as stoneware manufacturers in 1914 (Graces Guide online). This example broadly dated (on stylistic grounds) from 1875 -1920s.

Fig. 13. Stoneware pot (102)



3. Small stoneware jar with recesses on rim. ‘Bristol glaze’, therefore probably mid C19 onwards in date. ‘XL’ incised into shoulder and on base, an incised triangle divided into three sections with a letter in each: A, C and C. No parallels for this form could be found although a possible interpretation is a freestanding inkwell with grooves on rim for resting pens (possible ink stain just inside rim).

APPENDIX 3: SLATE

A slate pencil fragment was found in context [101]. A number of these were found in the excavations at Crediton Church (Allan et al. 2010, 133) and were thought to be associated with the 19th century Infant School or possibly its predecessor. Research by Davies (2005) suggests the main period of production of slate writing instruments was between 1770 and 1900 although they were still being used in some parts of the UK up until the mid 20th century.



Fig. 14. Slate pencil (101)

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The site archive (context sheets, drawings, finds catalogue etc. and possibly selected finds, will be deposited with Somerset Museum Service; Accession number: TTNCM18/2020).