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# Community Archaeology at Stanley Bank, Blackbrook, St Helens

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## Project Report 2006



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## Background to Community Archaeology at Stanley Bank

At the head of the Blackbrook Branch of the Sankey Canal, the Stanley Bank area of St Helens is rich in industrial heritage and has been identified by St Helens Council as an area for sustainable environmental improvement. Under the umbrella of the Stanley Bank Triangle Project, initiatives are being developed which will provide enhancement of biodiversity, heritage and access. Throughout the project, opportunities for involving the local community are identified.

The overall objective of the Community Archaeology Initiative is to provide opportunities for local people to investigate their local heritage and learn the basic principles of archaeological investigation both from a desktop perspective and fieldwork.

The results of the work inform the long-term development of the heritage interpretation of the area.

## Stanley Bank Heritage

The development of the heritage at Stanley Bank is guided by a partnership of organisations, which include:

St Helens Historical Society

Merseyside Industrial Heritage Society

Liverpool Museum Field Archaeology Unit

St Helens Council Planning Environment, Archives and Libraries, Ranger Service

Mersey Basin Campaign

Sankey Canal Restoration Society

## Previous Community Archaeology at Stanley Bank

The Stanley Bank area of the valley of the Black Brook has been the subject of two previous archaeological investigations. In 1982/3 what became known as the Slitting Mill site was cleared of an earth covering of nearly a metre in depth, revealing the ground plan of various buildings and two large rectangular pits, assumed to have housed water wheels. Unfortunately, apart from a personal diary and some photographs, no records have survived of that dig. Previous Community Archaeology days examined the site of Copper House Row and carried out further small-scale work at the Slitting Mill site, without uncovering major new data.

Following the success of the 2004 event it was decided to build upon the interest generated to promote further community involvement in archaeological working methods whilst at the same time gathering new information about the site.

### Aims

- (1) To provide opportunity for the local community to investigate its local heritage.
- (2) To provide opportunity for the community to appreciate archaeological techniques and principles.
- (3) To establish baseline information.
- (4) To promote the heritage of the area through a Visitor Centre display and the Council's community magazine and website.

# Community Archaeology 2006

## Archive research

Members of St. Helens Local History Research Group devoted 22 days to researching the historical records to provide a framework and historical context for the site, although coverage proved to be patchy. This work has greatly contributed to the knowledge of the industrial development of the area.

## Archaeology Weekends

The focus of the five archaeology weekends held in 2006, which were attended by 23 volunteers, was the Stanley Iron Slitting Mill site. The site is the most important feature of the Stanley Bank area and central understanding and enhancing the heritage of the area.

The weekends were originally to focus on a range of features in the area but the complexity of the Slitting Mill site and the information the excavations started to uncover mean that it was most effective to concentrate all the weekends on the site.

The weekends were successful in meeting the aims of the Community Archaeology Project in that the weekends were well attended and the results of the dig challenged previous thinking about the development of the site.

The work revealed some anomalies between the evidence shown on old maps and what actually survives on site. For example, a small canal connected the furnaces at Carr Mill with Stanley Mill, allowing the cheap carriage of iron ingots from the foundry to the slitters. The maps show a wide water-filled basin area where the canal meets Stanley Bank Dam but evidence for this has not been found. Instead of the expected silt deposits volunteers found a clay layer that lay on top of a surface, which resembled a base for a paved area, perhaps used for storage.

An examination of the historical record, the surviving building plans and the stratigraphy uncovered seems to indicate that the commonly held perception of the site needs to be revised.

Records indicate that a slitting mill normally requires a long single storey building with a power source at each end to supply the considerable amount of force needed to roll and slit the iron ingots into wire suitable for nail making. The building plans at Stanley Bank do not fit these requirements. Whilst a wheel pit has been revealed at the northern end of the site, there is no corresponding pit at the southern end. The buildings are also misaligned with the dam if they were to be used for this purpose.

- Apart from a very small number of iron traces within the in-fill materials, no major artefact associated with iron working has been found.
- Excavation has revealed that at some time in the past the whole site has been levelled off with a layer of clay (considered not to be a natural deposit since it contains building debris) to an approximate depth of 50 cms., and the current building remains constructed upon this surface.
- Below this clay, other walls have been revealed during excavation at completely different alignments to those on the surface.

When all these points are considered it seems a distinct probability that the present building remains are of the corn mill, which is shown on the later maps, before the site went out of use completely, and that the iron slitting mill lies below the clay layer, waiting to be discovered.

As this was one of the earliest locations of the iron industry in the old county of Lancashire, and was in production before St. Helens became a town, it represents a site of major heritage significance.

In order to test this theory a geophysical survey of the site was undertaken by Stratascan. Ground penetrating radar was tested but failed to produce any results. Magnetometry and resistivity surveys were undertaken and results appear to indicate below ground structures and a concentration of ferrous deposits, which could cautiously be interpreted as the site of the iron slitting mill shop floor.

Thanks to the following people for taking part in the archaeology weekends:

Henry Banks	Kathie Jason	Peter Lucas
Roy Forshaw	Paul Athenden	Elaine Bold
Rachael Bold	Barry Jackson	Graham Gladden
H Jordan	Lynn Kay	Stephen Kay
Ann Sheehan	Peter Sargeant	Caroline Carney
Michael Campion	Mark Campion	Ray Vaughton
Julie Lovell	Jennifer Lovell	Graham Rothwell
Susan Dunbar	Bill Highcock	

St Helens Council provided project management.

Liverpool Museum Field Archaeology Unit provided archaeological management.

The following volunteers assisted with archaeological supervision:

Roy Forshaw, Graham Gladden, Kathie Jason. Bill Highcock provided specialist "dowsing" services.

Thanks to St Helens Ranger Service for support and use of the Ranger Centre.



## Provisional Chronology of the Stanley Mill Site

Year	Event
1690	Carr Furnace recorded in Ashton Manor Court Records
1720	Lease of Carr Mill to Edward Hall
1738	Shipping of iron ore via the River Weaver ceases
1751	All Stafford iron ore ceases: Carr Mill furnace blown out
1759	New lease to Samuel Johnson and Partners
1764	Carr Mill Furnace blown out: bellows sold to Duddon Iron Works
1772	Thos Patten commences copper working at Stanley
1773	Thos Patten & John Rigby set iron-slitting mill adjacent to Copper Works
1775	Carr Mill Furnace and Stanley Slitting Mill regarded as one unit. Ores from Shropshire and Parr to Carr Mill By Canal
1781	First record of workers names at Stanley Slitting Mill
1784	Stanley and Carr Mills advertised for sale at auction
1786	Carr Mill and Copper Works shown on Yates' map 1786
1800	Indenture allowing disposal of all equipment from Carr Mill
1824	Iron Slitting ceased
C1830	Slitting Mill Site used as a Corn Mill
C1900	Closure of corm mill
1911	Buildings no longer shown on O.S. maps
1982/3	First archaeological dig on Slitting Mill Site
2003>	Stanley Bank Community Archaeology Project
2005	Site Surveyed , site plan of above-ground building
2006	Second dig on Slitting Mill site and geophysical survey carried out.

## Stanley Bank Community Archaeology Display

As the project progressed, a display was built up showing archive documents, and the known history of the Stanley Bank area.

The display was mainly situated in the nearby Sankey Valley Visitor Centre but was also put up in the main library in St Helens, St Mark's Church Haydock, and St. Mary's Church Blackbrook.