



# Between the Lines

Land of Oak & Iron Mapping Project Newsletter

July 2020

This month we give an update on the progress being made by the mapping teams and solo contributors, and invite your input to information about walking and cycling routes in our area. We are also starting a new series of occasional articles where we look in a little more detail at a village in our area and, using maps plus historical records, put the spotlight on some of the highlights to be found.

## Mapping meetings

Although not able to hold our regular meetings mapping activity has continued using video meetings. Whilst they do not permit the same level of interaction and information exchange as physical meetings they have allowed progress to continue.

The Mills Team have completed their study of mill locations and these have been digitised to a point that is suitable for them to be published. The accompanying narrative texts are well on the way to completion with just the Blaydon Burn area causing some difficulties. Meanwhile waggonway routes, largely based on documentation in "The Fighting Trade", have also been digitised and will be ready to publish once the narrative texts have been developed.

Plotting and digitisation of roads, as shown on Greenwood's early 19th century maps, is complete. The accompanying study of toll roads and toll bars is also progressing well and will be ready for narrative texts to be added in the near future.

The river features project is also progressing, as a solo project, and a plan to link the database for these with the mills' database and that for roads is being formulated.

We are hoping to be able to get the coal industry project team(s) constituted in the near future and for some work to re-start on this topic. If you have an interest in the coal industry, please get in touch and we will seek to include you in future discussions.

Also on the horizon is the topic of land utilisation, so watch this space for news.

As mentioned in last month's "Between the Lines" we are also looking at how we may best provide leisure and recreation information on the website, for visitors and local people. We already have several references to information covering the Derwent Walk, Waskerley Way, Thornley Woods, Red Kite Trail, Consett and Shotley Bridge Heritage walks and Chopwell Woods, and are keen to add similar routes for all parts of the Land of Oak & Iron. If you can help us with details of walking or cycling routes in our area, that are already well documented, we would be pleased to receive your contributions. Your personal observations and photographs of the routes which we may be able to use on the website would also be appreciated. Please forward them to the volunteer email address, shown at the foot of this page.

## Spotlight on Ebchester

In this first of a new series of articles which look in detail at a location in the Land of Oak & Iron, with a particular reference to features that may be found hiding in the lines on maps, we turn the spotlight on Ebchester.

The village of Ebchester is one of the oldest documented in the Derwent Valley. With its roots dating back around two thousand years there is quite a story to find amongst the lines on a map.

## Vindomora Roman Fort

The modern village of Ebchester is intersected by the Roman road Dere Street. Around AD50 a Roman auxiliary fort, Vindomora, was established adjacent to the road, which ran from York to Corbridge and then to Hadrian's Wall before continuing north through the borders to the Antonine Wall. The site of the fort has largely been obscured by more recent building works, however, some features may still be found in the area to the rear of the Village Shop and at Mains Farm. The outline and ramparts of the fort, although partly obscured, are clearly visible on the Ordnance Survey (OS) 25" map of [1890 \(surveyed in 1857\)](#). The site has been the subject of several archaeological studies and an approximation of its layout is depicted on [local signage](#). The entry for the site, which is a Scheduled Monument, in [Keys to the Past](#) indicates that there were at least seven phases to its building during a period of around 350 years. There would clearly have been a river crossing near Ebchester at this time. The route of Dere Street (confusingly marked with its earlier name of Watling Street on older maps) as it crosses the Derwent Valley is indicated on the OS [25" 1897 map](#) for the Northumberland part of the area. Other river crossings in the Ebchester village area are known to have existed. Archaeological evidence available may offer an opportunity to further investigate and understand their origins.

## Contact:

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Website: [www.loit.org.uk](http://www.loit.org.uk)

Portal: <http://www.landof oak and iron local history portal.org.uk/index.asp>

## The Saint Ebba connection

Dedicated to Saint Ebba, a daughter of King Aethelfrith of Northumbria, who was born in 614, the village church was founded in the late 12th century.

[Historical records](#) indicate that a nunnery was founded at Ebchester in, or before, 660 by Saint Ebba prior to her moving to become the abbess at Coldingham. The location of the monastery is described as “on the banks of the River Derwent” and it is recorded to be south-west of Ebchester (OS grid ref: NZ 0999355003). It is believed to have been completely destroyed at the time of the 9th century Danish Invasion. Field investigations in 1959 found no evidence of remains and the site is not shown on OS maps. Records also indicate that a hermitage or chapel was built on the site in the late 12th century.

The name, Ebchester, is widely associated with St. Ebba, however, other writers suggest that due to its elevated position above the River the name is a Saxon form of Upchester (with *Eb* meaning *Up*), or Camp on high ground. As ever the theories about the origins of the name are many and varied; readers will no doubt form their own opinions about which seems more feasible. Perhaps notable is the absence of both Vindomora and Ebchester from the Boldon Book, which would tend to suggest the settlement was of minor significance at the time that record was produced in 1183.

## Three mills on the Derwent

A substantial weir across the River Derwent and a mill race can easily be found alongside the road from Ebchester towards Whittonstall. The water from here powered three mills before it was returned to the river a little north of the village.

Mill Lane, which runs almost parallel to the mill race, leads to the corn mill which is now a private residential property. Using OS maps, this mill can be traced back to 1857, however, when it was originally built has not yet been determined. A mill is mentioned in connection with land at Ebchester given by Bishop Pudsey as a retreat for lepers in the 12th century, but its location is not known.

Mill Lane continues to the other two mills nearer to the river. Shortly before the next mill, shown on the map as Ebchester Low Mill (woollen), the mill race divides and a separate feed goes to the saw mill.

The woollen mill can be traced to before 1759, when an advertisement appeared in the Newcastle Courant offering the service of bleaching linen cloth. Local records show that the mill may date back to the early 1600s and it may have existed before this.

One of the main activities in the woollen mill would have been “fulling”, where wet woven fabric was pounded to increase the density of the material before being stretched and hooked onto frames to dry. These frames for drying, known as “tenters”, are shown as such on the [OS 6” map](#) for the area in the field on the opposite side of Mill Lane. However, on the 25” version of the map a line for the frames is shown but the notation is absent. The mill was in use when the 1857 map was surveyed and in 1858 it was taken over by John Moody. On the 1898 OS 25” map, which was surveyed in 1895, the mill is shown as disused, although the 6” map of the same period

carries no such comment. The mill appears on the 1923 OS 6” map (surveyed in 1913) and the outline of an un-named building is shown in the 1948 map, so it may be concluded it must have been demolished sometime later, as there are no visible remains today. The final mill, very close to the bank of the river, is shown on maps as a saw mill. In the Durham County Council, [Conservation Area Appraisal Report \(2009\)](#) for Ebchester, this mill is referred to as a “poss-stick” mill and shows a photograph dating from the early 20th century with the buildings and wheel intact. Poss-sticks, used for washing clothes in a poss-tub, were made, using a water powered lathe, from logs, harvested from nearby Broadoak Farm. The mill closed in the 1920s when demand for their product declined. An image of [a postcard \(with a 1905 postmark\)](#), from the [Mills Archive](#), shows the poss-stick mill, with the fulling mill buildings in the background. The date of the original image is not known. Stepping stones in the foreground of the image have been replaced by a footbridge. Today, stone foundations of the saw mill buildings are evident on the site.

## The Boat House

The growth of coal mining and iron-making in Consett saw Ebchester’s population increase from 168 in 1801, to 331 in 1841 and 830 by 1871. Around 1876 the Ebchester Amateur Rowing Club was formed. They used a 300 yard long stretch of water, upstream of the weir, and rowing became a popular pass-time.

The first boathouse, built near to the weir when the club was formed, was replaced in 1899. A changing room and veranda above the boathouse were added in 1906. By 1935 the club had 70 members and had earned a good reputation at regattas. This later wooden structure was replaced with a more substantial building in time for the 1960 season but the popularity of rowing declined and the club was dissolved in 1974. Four years later the Ebchester Village Trust saved the derelict boathouse from demolition. By 1981 Sea Scouts began to use the boathouse and, along with other organisations, continued the tradition of using the stretch of water for recreation. The Ebchester Boathouse Development Partnership was formed in 2011 to rebuild the boathouse and provide much-needed changing rooms. Ebchester Boat Club was formed in 2019 and competitive rowing returned. Planning Consent for the new boathouse has been obtained and fundraising continues.

The site of a Roman Fort, early nunnery, hermitage, an historic church, three water powered mills, a railway, a history of coal mining and water sports, as well as a name of uncertain etymology, certainly makes Ebchester worthy of being the first location to be featured in our “Spotlight” series.

Much more information may be found in the Village Trust Booklet - [“Ebchester - The story of a North Durham Village”](#) and on the [Ebchester.org](#) website.

If you would like our “Spotlight” to shine on one of your favourite villages please get in touch using the [volunteer@loit.org.uk](mailto:volunteer@loit.org.uk) address.



### Coming up:

**Physical meetings are suspended until further notice.**

To join the secure messaging service please send an e-mail to [volunteer@loit.org.uk](mailto:volunteer@loit.org.uk) requesting that we include you in the group.