

PITA Meet South 2019 Report

The British Association of Paper Historians (BAPH) was formed in 1989, and every year since has held a conference involving visits, meetings, lectures, and social events. For at least the last two decades, it has been traditional to commence the conference with a mill visit and tour, and over the last decade PITA members have been invited to participate in this visit.

So it was that our 30th Annual Conference was held at the beginning of October, when PITA members joined BAPH regulars in a trip to the historic heart of the modern paper industry: Frogmore Mill, run by the Apsley Paper Trail, near King's Langley in Hertfordshire. It was at this mill that the first (Fourdrinier) papermaking machine was operated commercially, in 1803. A handful of years later and a competing design (the cylinder mould) was launched by its inventor, John Dickinson, just down the road at Apsley Mill. So, hard as it is to envisage nowadays, but this relatively unassuming town is the cradle from which the massive 400Mt+ industry we know and love today, was born and nurtured.

Our visit commenced with a short history of The Paper Trail, and how it has evolved since its foundation in 2000. This included all of the varied areas in which the Trust has become involved, from education to environmentalism; hosting local theatre and training courses; and operating the paper machine as a going concern. So successful have they been, that in recent months they were awarded an Engineering Heritage Award by IMechE. After this introduction our tour commenced.



For those that have not visited in recent times, it is well worth coming and seeing how the place has changed. Go back just over a decade and the mill ran a moderate-sized Victorian paper machine (PM2), complete with deckle straps and a working steam engine. At this time some of the buildings were noticeable by their dilapidation. (I well remember a leaking corrugated roof causing damage to some finished paper.) Fast-forward to 2019 and the old machine has been mothballed; their current machine is also historic – and is claimed to be the World's first purpose-built machine for research purposes; and the leaking roofs have gone and the buildings have been very much improved!



Before you get to the two machine 'halls' you have to pass through a number of exhibitions. These include a demonstration area for hand papermaking (always a favourite with children), various items of test equipment and models of machinery (including the Robert machine – see left), a host of typewriters, and some printing presses and related apparatus. Then you arrive at the PM4 room, which is the main demonstration area as well as manufacturing site.



PM4 has a deckle of 24 inches, and output is nominally 40tpy. It was made in 1902, and was originally housed in the Manchester School of Technology (which became UMIST before being subsumed into the University of Manchester). At the end, at right-angles to the reel-up, is a Hemmer sheeter, only one year younger than the paper machine. At the other end of the hall is a vat for hand papermaking, and on one long wall a range of test equipment.

We then went through a door at the end to enter a passage that would ultimately lead to the old paper machine and stock preparation area. The first dark and rather damp (and mouldy) room is where the waterwheel is situated; go up some stairs and you reach the stock preparation area, with the old Watford pulper and Hollander beater. Then we made our way to the old machine, now sadly stationary, and rusting. However, nothing lasts forever, and this machine was just uneconomic for the grades being made, whereas the newer machine 'washes its face'.



So to the papers – this is where the smaller machine comes into its own. A 'stock' grade is the blue jean 'denim' paper sold in Oxfam. They gained notoriety a few years ago by making 'elephant poo' paper; this has since spawned a whole load of similar grades, and the shop now stocks 'Koala Poo', 'Reindeer Poo' and 'Sheep Poo' in addition to the ground breaking 'Ellie Poo'. In addition they do straw, banana stem, wasp nest, bamboo, 'coffee chaff' and a host of other papers using different fibres, and varied inclusions (including seeds you can plant).



After a most enjoyable visit it was back to the canteen for coffee and cakes, before we wended our way onward – either home in the case of PITA members, or to a nearby hotel for the BAPH group to commence their AGM and conference.

Thanks as always to all who attended – we hope you enjoyed the visit and seeing a very different aspect of the paper industry to that which we usually visit. Also thanks to everyone who made the visit possible at the

Paper Trail – your care and hospitality was very much appreciated!

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