

PITA Summer Meet 2019 Report

The PITA Summer Meet took place in deepest rural Somerset, at a hidden gem of the UK paper industry, known to relatively few – the only truly commercial hand making paper mill operating in the UK – Pitt Mill, near Watchet, run by Two Rivers Paper.



Two Rivers, founded in 1976, was moved to Pitt Mill in 1988 by Jim Patterson, the Proprietor. The mill building itself is over 400 years old, and retains some original old wooden milling machinery. Over the past few years it has been lovingly restored, most notably by addition of a metal 10ft waterwheel from Wales, and an early Victorian Hollander rag beater. When the leat to the waterwheel is finally cleared, such that the 2½ ton wheel can be set in motion, Two Rivers will be the only mill in the UK using water power to pulp rags.



But don't get the idea this mill is a working museum! In 2011 a full array of solar panels were added to the mill roof, producing the power required to electrically dry the paper sheets slowly, before post-processing can take place. Although small, this is a commercial mill, making grades that have a well-regarded presence in their niche market of choice – Artists' Papers (predominantly, but not exclusively, for Watercolour).

Before viewing the process, the group met in Jim's lounge, and partook of a marvellous spread freshly-baked by Lynne, Jim's wife. Open-pies (lamb and courgette was a particular favourite), salad vegetables, cheese and biscuits, strawberries and cream, fresh tea and coffee – it is fair to say that no-one expected to be greeted with this amount of hospitality! So we duly tucked in.





Once satiated, we visited the mill next door, where Neil Hopkins and apprentice Zoe Collis were busy finishing off a batch of paper, with Zoe sheet-forming and Neil acting as coucher. The furnish was cotton fibre and linen rag, internally sized with AKD. The post of sheets was then placed in the press (left), which was set in operation while we were present. The rest of the process was then described as we ascended to levels one and two of the mill building:

1. After the initial pressing, the felts would be removed and the sheets given a second pressing;
2. The sheets would then be stripped apart while still wet, and placed in the home-made drier (designed by Sarah Ward – the final member of the team) where heated air is gently passed through the stack, while the sheets are held under restraint (below left);
3. When dried, the sheets are then immersed in a warm gelatine solution which strengthens the surface and gives a stiffer sheet;
4. They are then hung and air-dried under ambient conditions (below right);
5. Glazing, hot-pressing etc may then be performed, depending upon the requirements of the grade concerned.



After the visit, it was back next door to the house for more refreshments and a chat. This visit really did set a new standard for catering and hospitality! It also helped that the weather was fine, and indeed only a week later the country was sweltering under a new record temperature (though set in the south-east, not south-west).

Our thanks go to Jim, Lynne, Neil, Sarah and Zoe for allowing us to see how paper used to be made, which, for the very best niche grades, still is the preferred method.