

Rispana Valley Historical Area

By William Stichter*

Through the centuries, the Doon Valley has collected a variety of structures, including temples, traditional water harvesting structures and grain mills, scattered among its gentle hills and picturesque streams. Along the eastern edge of Rajpur village, the land drops into a ravine through which the Rispana River flows. Fed by hill springs and seasonal torrents, the river flows alongside Rajpur Road and through Dehradun to the south, eventually meeting the Suswa, the Song, and then the Ganga between Rishikesh and Haridwar. The Rajpur Canal, built more than 300 years ago for irrigation and drinking water, begins in this area and, though mostly covered now, ends in the heart of Dehradun at the temple tanks of Guru Ram Rai. They hint at the area's history. Along with Rajpur village above, the Rispana valley was a node in the stream of traffic which travelled up the river from Dehradun, restocked and rested here before ascending the cart road to Mussoorie and the mountains beyond. Preserving these structures and this type of everyday history would provide a valuable link to the past and a pleasant recreation area for tourists and locals alike.



The Rispana Valley and some of its structures, with Rajpur above, looking northwest.

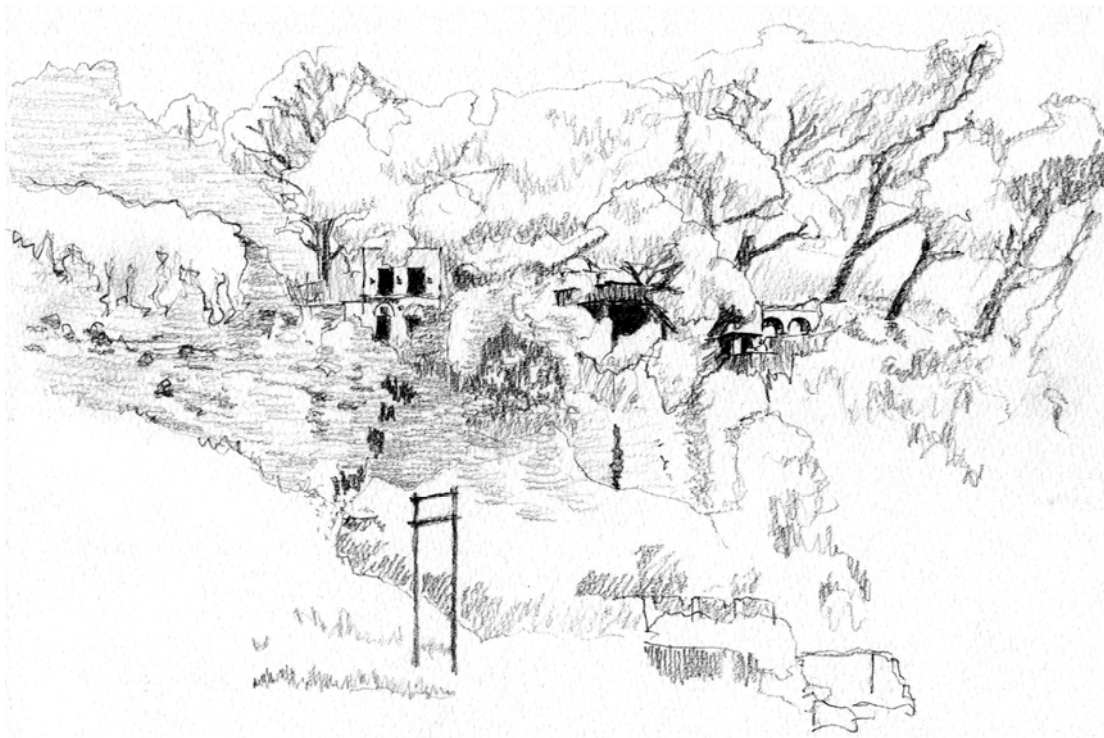
* U.S.-based architect volunteering with People's Science Institute, Dehradun.

Structures and their Histories

Flour Mill Site (1)[†]: At the northern end of the Rispana Valley, just southeast of the beginning of the old cart road to Mussoorie, two torrents join and turn south. Here, on the west bank of the Rispana, lies an old grain mill and some associated structures.

Adjacent to the river bed are the foundations and some crumbling walls that formed the mill buildings. Above these ruins, a two story building clings to the steep hillside, along with a temple and two traditional water harvesting structures, shaded by several large, ancient trees. According to the current landowner,

this site was a flour mill, and the two story building was used for storage and living quarters. While much of the site is dilapidated ruins, there has been some effort at preservation and restoration, although these repairs do not appear to take historical and aesthetic considerations into account. The temple is completely renovated; perhaps even a completely new building replacing an older structure on a sacred site. It has a flat concrete area in front of it, supported by concrete pillars. The smaller of the two water harvesting structures has a new roof, and apparently clean water fed by underground seepage; locals who have a domestic water source still collect drinking water from this site, saying it is more pure because it comes from within the mountain. The larger structure, which is a stepped well with a double arched front and formerly a roof, is disused and nearly dry.



*The Flour Mill Site
clings to the hillside
above the river,
shaded by ancient
trees.*

[†] See Appendix B for a map with keyed locations.



The Flour Mill Site's Water Harvesting Structures.

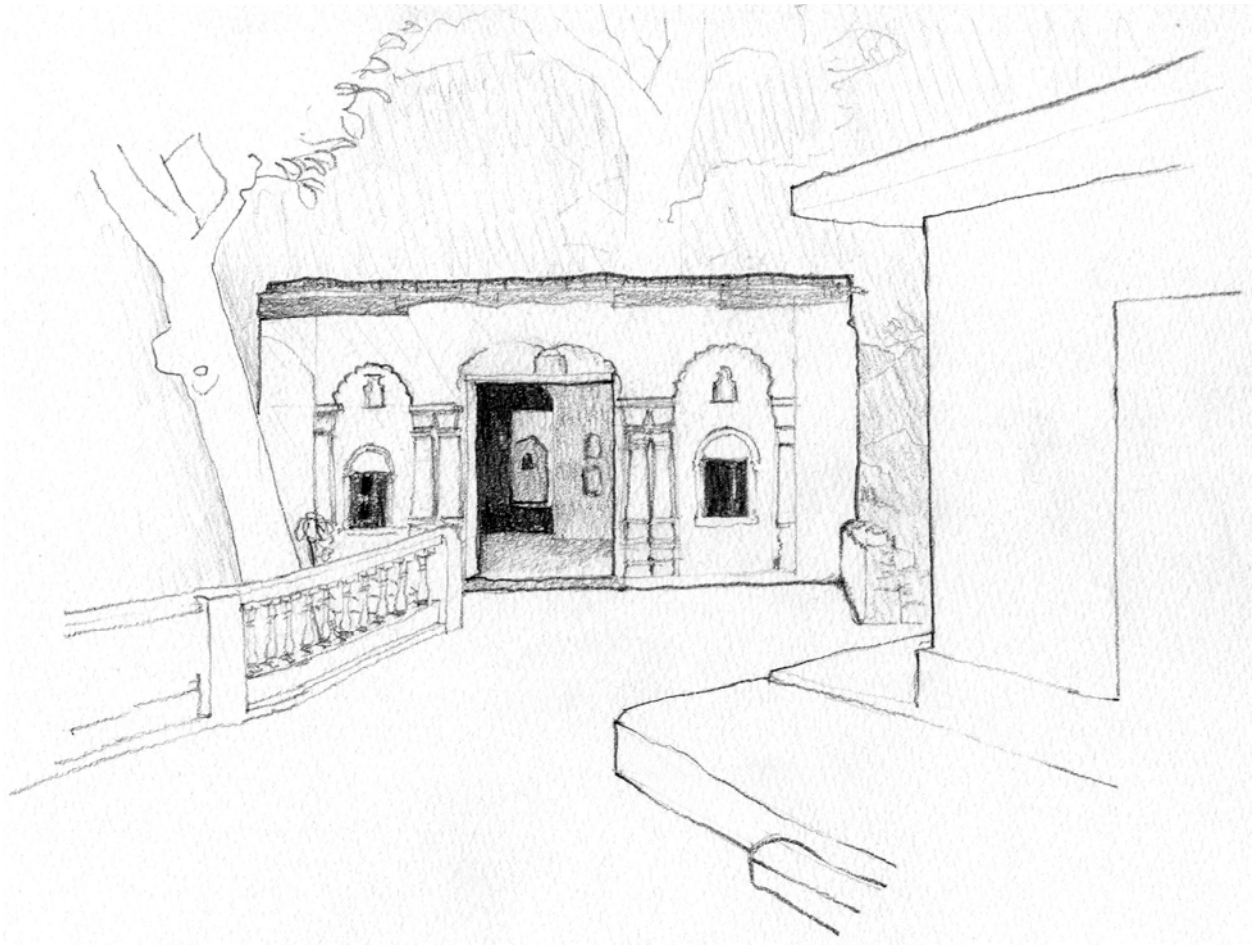
The two story living and storage building is the most unique and interesting, with a new, flat, reinforced concrete roof being the main alteration. Ground level is on the upper floor, and the lower level is nestled into the hillside. Inside, there is a front room, with a doorway to what was originally a second room, but the floor beyond, likely originally supported by wood joists, is long gone. There is a small stairway that descends to the lower level, where there are two small rooms and one larger room with a fireplace and windows overlooking the valley below. In one of the smaller rooms, there is a small well in the floor, likely fed by a spring in the hillside. On the back of the building at ground level are the remains of another upper floor room. The two story wall facing the valley bows out considerably and a careful effort to stop any more movement by tying the wall back into the interior structure will extend the life of the building.



The Flour Mill Site Interiors.

The rest of the structures have obviously been cared for to a certain extent – to maintain the water source and provide a place for worship – and appear structurally stable. An ambitious restoration might involve a careful reconstruction of parts of these structures, especially the roofs, with historically accurate detail. At a minimum, they can easily be maintained as heritage structures and preserved as part of the working-class history of the

area. Being private property, however, the future of this site lies in the owner's hands; while a brief conversation suggested a desire to maintain these as heritage structures, a larger movement towards preserving this valley may go far to ensure their continued survival.



The façade of the upper floor of the living and storage building, with the temple in the foreground.

Head Works of the Rajpur Canal (2): Continuing down the valley a couple hundred meters, the next structure encountered is the head works of the Rajpur Canal. There is a bridge with two hand cranked pulleys which were attached to wooden panels, one of which would obstruct the river to divert water into the canal, while the other limited flow into the canal. This was likely originally built when the British repaired and expanded the canal in the 1840s. ^(Williams, 1874) There are also two small twentieth century buildings, along with other obvious recent additions such as painted steel handrails. The stone structure of the canal, along with a motorable path, continues south from this point.

The original construction of the canal is usually attributed to Rajput princess Rani Karnavati and her consort, Kunwar Ajab Singh[‡], who administered the district on behalf of the rajas of Garhwal in the mid-17th century. According to some historians, she was known to chop off the nose of those who disobeyed her orders, thereby earning the nickname “Naak Cutty,” or “Nose Chopper.” (Lal, 1993) She is also credited with the establishment of Karanpur, now part of central Dehradun. Later, the work of maintaining and repairing the canal was entrusted to the Mahants of Guru Ram Rai’s Gurdwara. Beginning in the 1820s, the British began to take an interest in the area’s canals and began plans to renovate and expand the network; the Rajpur Canal work occurred from 1841-1844. Many additional details of the canals and their history can be found in Prem Hari Har Lal’s *“The Doon Valley Down the Ages.”* The canal is now under the jurisdiction of the Uttarakhand Irrigation Department, and recognition of this area’s tourism value, representing the last remaining uncovered sections of the canal, can be found on the department’s website.[§]



The Litchi Grove and Temple at Kelaghat (3): Adjacent to the diversion structure, on the west side of the river, sits a lush and well-maintained litchi grove. Just above these trees, a picturesque crumbling temple can be found at the top of a steep stone staircase. Although suffering from the effects of a subsiding hillside and possible earthquake damage, and with many plants growing from the resulting cracks, the temple features beautiful, but deteriorating, examples of interior and exterior wall paintings as well as methods and details of traditional Indian architecture. The temple is sited on a small level area, and its design features two domed rooms – a porch, or front room, open on three sides to the exterior, with the fourth opening to the inner room, where worship rites are performed. The building is part stone and part brick masonry, possibly completed over a long period or repaired and expanded over time, utilizing construction methods of different times or skill sets. The surface is plastered and intricately painted inside and out, but only up to the eave on the exterior, suggesting that the plaster and paint as seen now was a later renovation to the original structure. Stabilization of the temple structure, through tension members to hold the arches together and support the weight of the domes, may be crucial to this building’s future. The

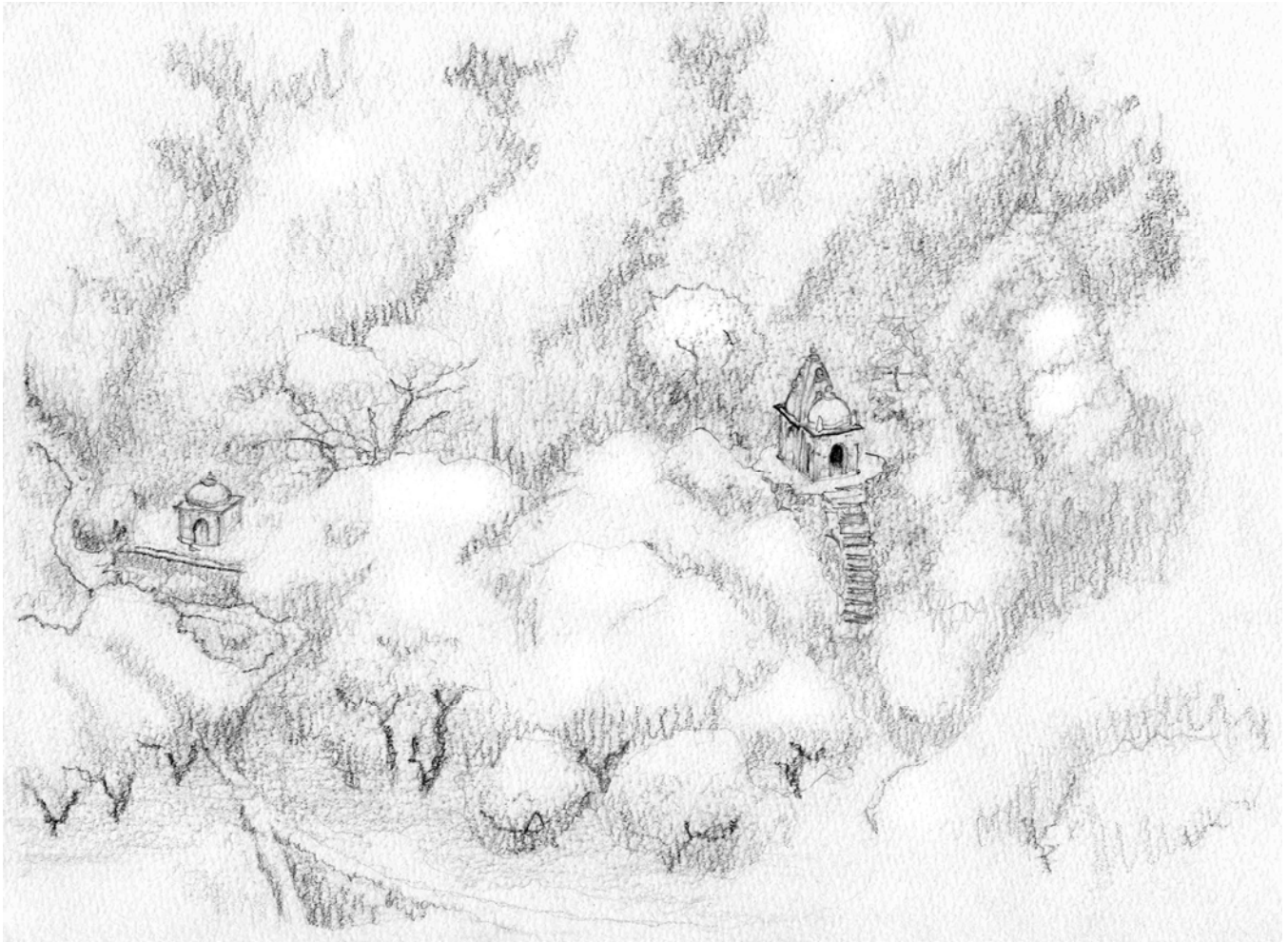


[‡] Also known as Ajbu Kunwar and Ajbu Kaur.

[§] Uttarakhand Irrigation Department website at <http://www.uttaranchalirrigation.com/canals/rajpur.htm>

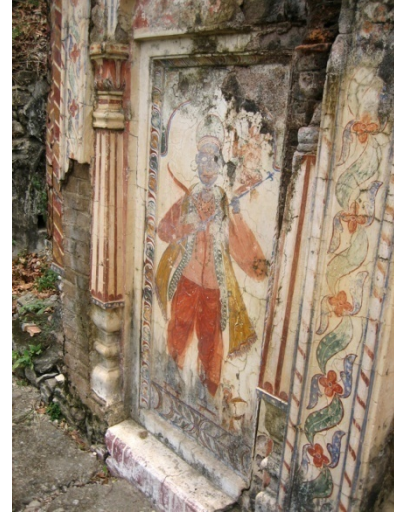
fact that substandard repairs have not been attempted, despite occasional continued use as a place of worship, confers additional value to its features, and expert advice should be sought before beginning any work.

Deep in the dense foliage to the north, there is a seasonal waterfall. The location of the temple, perched up on the hillside, along with its air of ancient ruin, lends a special atmosphere to this site. Preserving the sense of peace and wonder felt here should be a focus of any work in this valley.

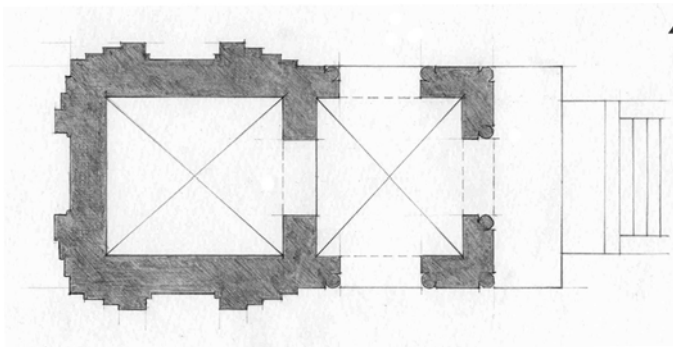


The Kelaghat temple buildings among the litchi trees. A view from the top of the east bank of the Rispana.

Next to the temple, an ancient stepped pool can be found amidst more recent water tanks and pipes, which are regularly used for drinking, bathing and washing by people living on the hillside above. Nearby these structures is another building; a small, one-room domed building with construction and paintings to match the temple. It is locked and apparently currently used as storage space or living quarters for a local villager. Below these buildings, in the cool shade of the tree canopy, this site has great potential for a pleasant walk and a picnic spot.



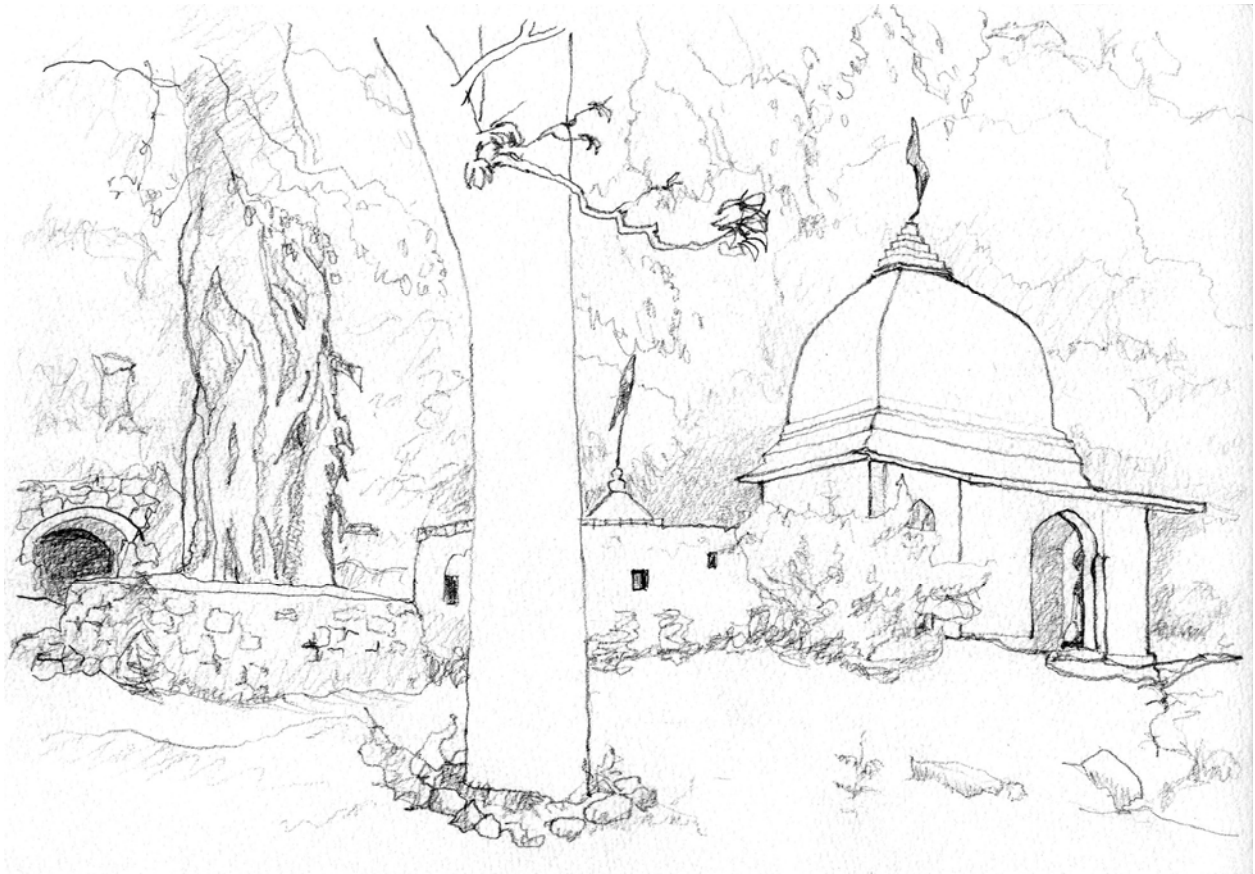
The temple at Kelaghat, and some examples of its paintings. The condition of the masonry can also be seen.



Plan of the temple at Kelaghat. The overall dimensions are approximately 9'-6" x 18'-6".

Tuitulya Temple Area (4): A little further down the valley, on the same side, there is another temple with its associated structures, a large banyan tree and a *baori*** nestled into the steep hillside behind it. This complex has been renovated relatively recently. It is a bright, clean and well maintained, yet still a site with a rural feel. According to some locals, prior to its renovation, this temple featured surface paintings and large cracks similar to the temple in the Kelaghat area just upstream. It has several paths leading to it, and is clearly a regularly used place of worship.

** A type of traditional water harvesting structure.

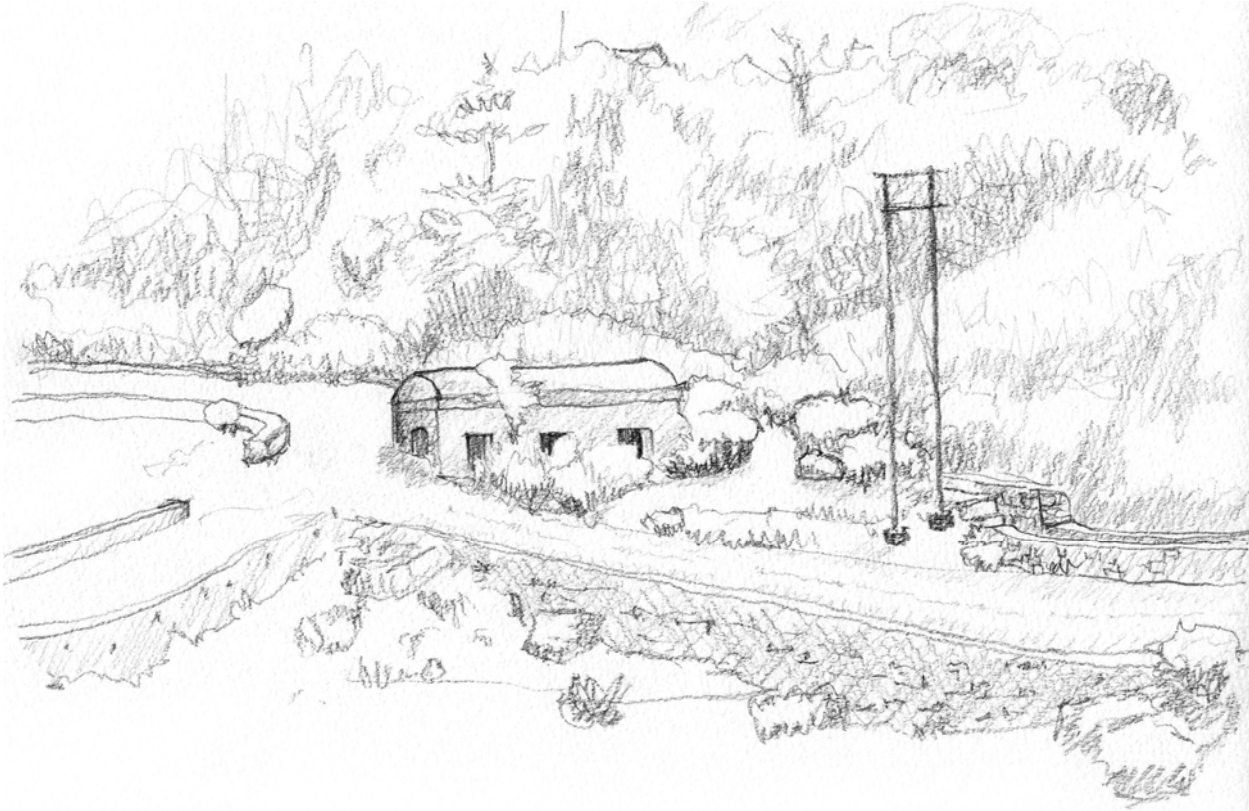


The temple site at Tuitulya.

Mills along the Rajpur Canal (5): On the east side of the Rispana, the Rajpur canal continues from its start at the bridge and diversion structure towards the iron toll bridge on Nagal Road – connecting Rajpur Road and Sahastradhara Road – where it crosses the river and heads along the west bank towards Dehradun, mostly underground from this point. Evidence of one of the early uses of hydropower – to turn millstones for grinding grain – can be found in this stretch of the canal, where the remains of three mills still stand. Two of these are similar, vault-roofed buildings, about 100 meters apart. Locals say that at least one mill was still in operation 10-15 years ago, but fell into disrepair when the last operator died. The third mill appears to be the remains of two



buildings, one with grand arches, and the other shoddily repaired and occupied by a local family. At least five millstones sit at the entrance. It is situated where the valley becomes quite wide, adjacent to a renovated temple site and a bridge over the river. The upper two are both solid structures, obviously quite old and abandoned for some time, but with some cleaning and repairs, they could give an indication of traditional milling techniques. At a minimum, with the overgrown vegetation cleared from each site, they are all picturesque buildings along a historic canal.



One of the mills along the Rajpur Canal. The foreground wall edges the Rispana River.

Concept of Historical Area

A vision for this area is a historical district with walking paths and buildings preserved to allow a glimpse into the past, and to maintain a landscape that honors everyday life as much as the legacy of rulers. In the recent explosion of growth in Dehradun, planning has had difficulty keeping pace and preservation has regularly fallen by the wayside in favor of “progress.” When pieces of history are not specifically recognized and preserved, they are all too often lost – demolished, paved over and forgotten. This valley, with several facets of its history still intact, offers an opportunity to preserve some of these layers and the attractive natural setting where they are sited.

Due to the valley’s pleasant atmosphere and proximity to rapidly growing areas, several plans for its development are already in motion. Locals and landowners talk of at least two different resorts in this section of the valley and the government has already recognized the potential for tourism in its plans for the old cart road to Mussoorie and its mention of the possibilities for the head works of the Rajpur Canal. While these projects may seek to capitalize on the natural beauty and historical structures found here, cooperation between all interested parties and the general public is crucial to preserving the elements that make this area a valuable resource. As this is a well-used, living valley, change is inevitable; indeed, the diversity of historical layers coexisting here suggests a deep well of stories waiting to be discovered. New work woven into the fabric of the landscape should strive to extend this history, and be the type of structures loved and maintained hundreds of years into the future.

An additional aspect of these sites that is endangered by development is the safe water sources that are used daily by residents of the hill above. All too often, building projects allow a water harvesting structure to remain while inadvertently contaminating or interrupting the source through careless work. Not only are the structures in this valley historically valuable, they still provide water in a location where the condition of municipal supplies is often inadequate. Careful development of this valley can both enhance the quality of life for local residents by continuing to provide for daily needs and stimulate the local economy through tourism based on the historical and natural beauty to be found here.



Acknowledgement

Special thanks to Swati for pointing out these structures and initiating this effort.

Appendix A: A Note on Preservation and Restoration of Historic Structures

Generally, preservation and restoration from an archeological or art historical point of view places the highest value on the authenticity of ancient construction and artworks for aesthetic and historical qualities. In the case of “living buildings” – those still in use for some purpose – the regular use of a structure invites routine maintenance and occasionally, wholesale renovation. This is especially true in the case of Indian religious structures and artworks, as sacred texts indicate worship in a dilapidated building or of a disfigured image is less than ideal. Therefore, communities of devotees often consider it a duty to maintain or renovate a structure to the best of their ability, in a vernacular manner with which they are familiar. In recent years, these efforts result in smooth-walled, neatly-painted cement construction to match the standard of various types of urban structures, often at the expense of preserving historic, though somewhat damaged, masonry and artwork.

Much of the value of the Rispana valley as an aesthetically charming historical area is attributable to the age and authenticity of the structures found therein, along with the ravine’s natural beauty. Several of these structures have retained their broad appeal precisely through their neglect; it is recommended that any restoration work

of these buildings be aimed at preserving their historical character and qualities. In the case of the mills and the canal for example, simply clearing the vegetation lodged in the masonry may be the only necessary action. The temple in the litchi grove at Kelaghat may or may not need immediate structural repairs – though it certainly needs maintenance such as vegetation removal – and its paintings might be best served simply by a careful cleaning. For each of the sites an archeological study should be undertaken to determine structural stability requirements, along with historical and aesthetic aspects, and a program of preservation initiated with the goal of maintaining the layers of history in this area – a history less about rulers and power and more about the everyday life of this valley’s people.

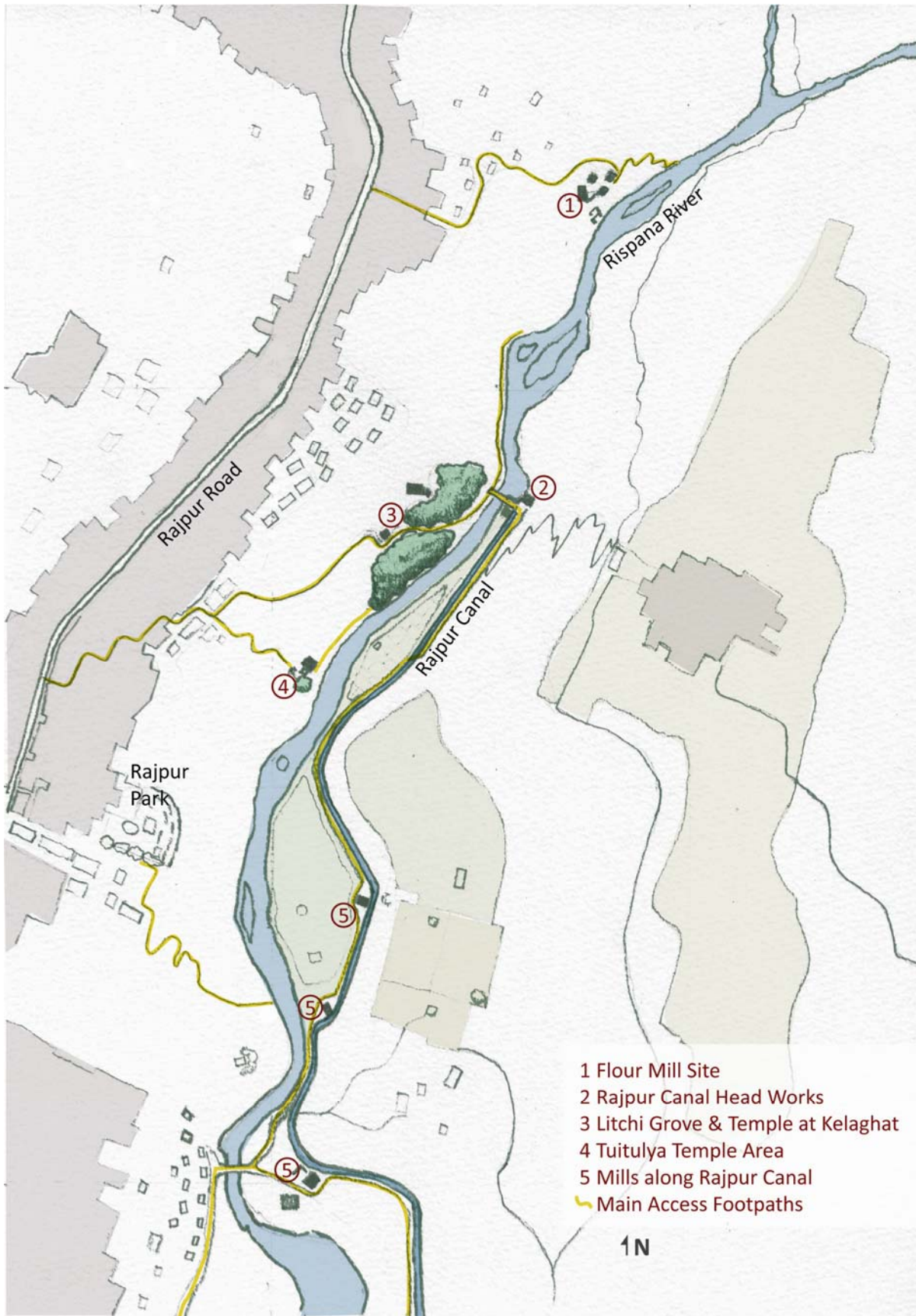
Appendix B: Locations and Directions for Visiting the Site

As there is currently no signage indicating the existence and location of the canal, temples, mills and other structures, a description of a few possible routes of access follows, with the goal that a visitor with little local knowledge might find each structure. A labeled map follows these descriptions for overall orientation.

From the toll bridge on Nagal Road, adjacent to Sai Baba Temple on Rajpur Road, towards Sahastradhara Rd. The Rajpur Canal crosses from the east to the west side of the river near this point. An access road follows the canal north to the Head Works, past the three mills. A bridge across the river is located at the head works, and one can easily cross here into the litchi grove at Kelaghat. A clear path leads south from the bridge along the west bank of the river to the temple at Tuitulya. From the bridge, one can also head north to the Flour Mill Site, although this path quickly becomes overgrown, and it’s easiest to walk along the riverbed after the first 100 meters. Just to the north of the Flour Mill Site, a steep path leads up to the main complex of buildings.

From the market area of Rajpur Village. At the point where the Old Mussoorie Road diverges from Rajpur Road, there is a market with a post office and a variety of grocers, eateries and general stores. From here, Rajpur Road continues north at a much steeper incline. A few steps up this incline, after passing Lhasa Restaurant on the left side, there is an alley on the right, paved with concrete. It is the second alley on the right after the incline begins. Follow this winding concrete path through the village until it becomes a dirt path. Continue on the steep dirt path down the hill to the litchi grove. The temple is to the left, the bridge and canal head works are straight through the grove, and a path leads to the lower temple at Tuitulya to the south. Each site is accessible along the river to the north and south.

From northern concrete-paved path to the Flour Mill Site. Approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ of the distance up the steep incline of Rajpur Road, the road curves to the left. Soon after this turn, there is a concrete paved path to the right. While quite steep in some places, this path is paved all the way to the Flour Mill Site. From the upper complex of buildings here, a dirt path leads down to the river, and all of the sites are accessible to the south from this point (though the path is overgrown for the first 200 meters).



- 1 Flour Mill Site
- 2 Rajpur Canal Head Works
- 3 Litchi Grove & Temple at Kelaghat
- 4 Tuitulya Temple Area
- 5 Mills along Rajpur Canal
- Main Access Footpaths

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