

Update May 2020

The Meadows

We do not expect to be able to start work in the Meadows for perhaps another month or more. In addition, the field is very badly overgrown and we will not be able to access it with primary equipment unless either it can be mown or it dies down for the winter: delaying us even further.

Shaw's Quarry Limekilns.

In so far as we cannot undertake any of our planned fieldwork, this does not prevent us from doing research and, indeed, looking at things which we might not otherwise have time to do.

One of the many limestone quarrying operations around Wirksworth, Shaw's Quarry was begun by Alfred Shaw of West End. The Shaws were extensively involved in quarrying and this included producing burned lime from a number of kilns in the area including one at Stoneycroft and two at Colehills (Thomas, 2019), one of these smaller kilns survives nearer the main building of the National Stone Centre.

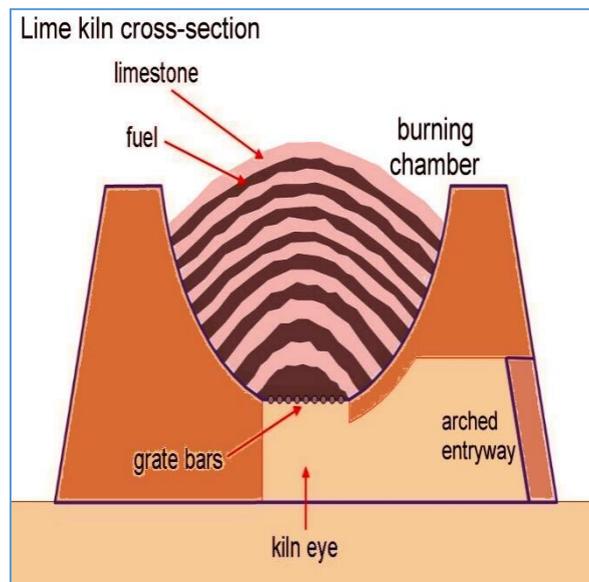
The three very large limekilns which stand in deep undergrowth at the edge of Shaw's Old Lane Quarry near Old Lane Bridge and Ravenstor Station also in the grounds of the National Stone Centre, are remarkably badly recorded. They appear on no Ordnance Survey maps of any date and documentary evidence for them does not appear to exist, only were it possible to discover the accounts of the quarry might there be some written information. Such accounts have not come to light. A little is known of the quarry itself and the two, the quarry and the kilns, are inextricably linked.



The large limekilns of Shaw's Quarry

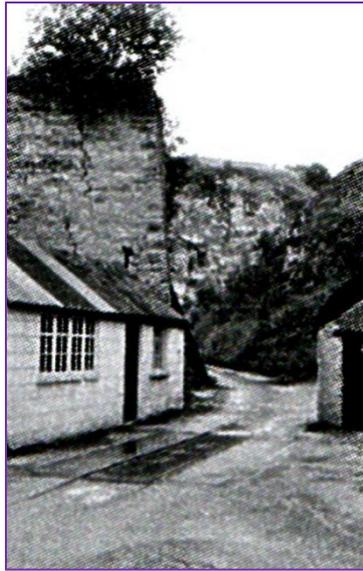
Shaw's Quarry, let us call it Shaw's Old Lane Quarry for certainty, lies on the north side of Old Lane just inside the boundary of the National Stone Centre. The Limekilns are on the west side of the path which leads across Old Lane from Ravenstor Station up into the former quarry itself. This quarry was begun by Alfred Shaw in an extremely small way in about 1900. By 1904 it was still extremely small and it had no railway siding connection noted to it in the Railway Clearing House Handbook of that year (Sprenger, 2004). The name of the quarry also causes confusion as it is often referred to as Colehill Quarry, which was the name of a second quarry to the east of it between Cromford Road and Ravenstor Road. Nevertheless the quarry continued to be worked and by 1912 it was operating in a "serious" way.

There are three limekilns, they are connected to the quarry by the remains of a loading ramp on their north side. They appear visually to have been built at slightly different times but perhaps in a sequence. The southernmost seems to be the largest with an elevation of almost 8 metres and is nearly 7 metres wide on the frontage which can be measured. This kiln has a central arched entryway of 2.36 metres high and this led into the kiln eye where the fire was lit and where the kiln was emptied after the firing.



Example of lime kiln (Adapted from Wikipedia)

In this cross-section we can see that the kiln had an egg-cup shaped burning chamber. This was filled in layers of fuel (wood or coal for example) and small limestone pieces (20-60mm). Kilns typically made 25–30 tonnes of lime in a batch. A kiln of this size would perhaps take a day to load, three days to fire, two days to cool and a day to unload, so a one-week turnaround was normal. In so far as there were three kilns here it can be seen that if the operation were going flat out, the three kilns could be kept in more or less continuous operation by a kiln gang working on loading and unloading over 6 days in a week, however, it is thought often in this kind of operation that there were two gangs, one to unload and one to load, so they would be occupied with quarrying in general at times they weren't keeping the kilns.



The Limekilns seen from Old Lane looking north
Left hand image Tony Holmes Collection (before 1966). Right hand image taken in May 2020

Lime had been used since Roman times for the making of mortar for buildings and by medieval times to spread on fields to improve the soil for farming, in the Victorian age lime was used to make lights for the theatre (“in the limelight”) before electricity was used. By 1900 lime kilns of this type for these uses were actually dying out, being replaced by more industrial facilities. However, Shaw’s Quarry is thought to have been closely associated with the sugar production industry and lime was used (and is still used) in the refining of sugar. The finished lime was then loaded into narrow gauge railway trucks and sent down the incline to the loading dock with the main line railway, at what is now Ravenstor Station, from where it could be transported to the sugar factories of East Anglia where the sugar beet industry was being established in the 1920s (Whetham, 1978) and where much of it still resides.

Shaw’s Quarry Limekilns operated perhaps for about 30 years, they are considered to have last been fired in the summer of 1939, regulations were brought in on the 2nd of September 1939 for the restriction of lighting (Blackout) during the second world war and this affected all open-air kilns throughout the country, as the firing could be seen in the night sky. There is no evidence that these kilns at Shaw’s Quarry were ever used after that date. Today, the kilns are covered in much greenery, the south and central kilns are still intact but the northernmost kiln has long ago partially collapsed so that its egg-cup shaped burning chamber can be seen through the undergrowth.

Supplementary note on Prathall Lane and Wirksworth Hay

In April 2019 we reported on a fieldwalking survey of Prathall Lane and concluded that it had the appearance of being a route of medieval origins for which we had, at that point, no known documentary evidence to support the view. This month in work to follow up on identifying a lost place-name “Longrenepeche” we found that this place name was now almost certainly identifiable with the field name “Langley Peaches” a field on the east side of Prathall Lane. This is referenced in a grant of 1379 by Nicholas, son of John del Hay of Wirksworth. The grant is interesting in three ways. First, it gives the Hay as containing a house and six acres of land; secondly, it says where the six acres are, together, 3 acres in Longrenepeche and 3 acres in le hay, the latter being around a field called Stony Butts adjacent to “Hay Bottom” on the Wirksworth side of the Hole House stream which is the parish boundary with Ashleyhay. Thirdly it calls the lane (Prathall Lane) which runs by Langley Peaches “le Kirke Way”, this tells us that it is the probable route or path from Ashleyhay to St Mary’s church in Wirksworth in medieval times and not a highway per se, confirming our impression of it. Hays were locations where a field or fields were bounded by a fence, hedge or ditch perhaps to keep stock in. Place names containing “Hay” are very common in the Peak District (Wiltshire and Woore, 2011) and have interesting histories and uses.

References

Sprenger H, (2004), The Wirksworth Branch, Usk, Oakwood Press, pp179-182

Thomas I et al, (2019), Delving along the Derwent - a history of 200 quarries and the people who worked them, Llandsul, Gomer Press, pp134-135; 174-175

Wiltshire M and Woore S, (2011), Hays, possible early enclosures in Derbyshire, Derbyshire Archaeological Journal, Vol 131, pp195-225

Whetham EH, (1978), The Agrarian History of England and Wales: Volume 8, 1914-1939, Cambridge, University Press, pp165-169