

## Limestone mining in Shropshire

Ivor Brown<sup>1</sup>

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The account of a lecture describing limestone mining within Shropshire.

<sup>1</sup>*affiliation: Member of the Shropshire Geological Society*

Why was limestone exploited by underground methods when there was so much close to the surface? Greenwell & Elsdon in 1913 put forward three reasons. The cost of moving overburden is dead work and many small companies cannot afford to await financial returns. Underground work is independent of weather and climate. Underground working causes less disturbance to surface land. A further reason locally is that mining can be more selective, the limestone 'balls' and better beds can be removed without taking too much waste.

Limestone has been worked for use as a flux in iron smelting, for agricultural and building lime and for making cement. Mining statistics also include as limestone, calcite and calcspar - a coarse crystalline vein calcite - which is used for ornamental purposes.

The heyday of mining seems to have been the period of 1800-80, but new mines were still being opened in the 1900s and underground work continued until the First World War. Both the Silurian and Carboniferous Limestones have been worked with, in addition, some working of the Upper Coal Measures *Spirobis* limestones.

In 1878 two mines, the Hatch and Lilleshall, employed a total of 47 men and produced 12,316 tons.

In the Clee Hill area two adit mines, Knovers and Gorstly Rough, on opposite sides of the Studleigh [*sic. Studley is the usual spelling; Ed.*] Tunnel, were worked - the former between 1905 and 1912, employing a maximum of 6, and the latter from 1913 to 1916. Earlier, in 1839, Murchison said that limestone was worked near Knowlbury [*sic. Knowbury is the usual spelling; Ed.*] by 'various mines and quarries'.

Lincoln Hill had been very extensively mined, probably since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. There is a tunnel on site with '1800' inscribed on the capstone.

Prestwich gives a shaft section in the 1830s and Murchison illustrates the underground extraction of limestone balls. Shafts up to 60 m deep were used and some workings were between 7 and 10 m high.

In 1893 production was 3,740 tons from 3 men - the value was £268 - and the mines closed about 1907. The workings continue to collapse and contractors have been employed recently filling them in.

There are some doubtful references to underground workings at both Wenlock and Benthall Edges. The former location seems most likely, particularly where the railway tunnel has been constructed. Further evidence occurs in the Shipton area.

At Steeraways and The Hatch extensive underground workings by shaft and adits occurred from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century until 1918. In 1842 over 120 men and boys were employed in the former location. The limestone seam worked is said to have been 13 m thick and to have been taken by one face leaving pillars to support the roof at first, but even these were extracted on the retreat. In 1888, nineteen men produced 3,970 tons at a value of £800.

Steeraways Mines closed about 1900 to be replaced by the Hatch levels, or drift mines. These levels were worked by driving tunnels in from the outcrop, blasting down the face and loading the stone into wagons. At their peak in about 1908 they employed 8 men and produced about 2,000 tons per year. There may also have been further workings nearer Lawley.

At Lilleshall some very large mines were worked from the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to 1882. In 1877, thirty-six men produced 8,274 tons. There were some horrific accidents in these mines described vividly in local newspapers. These involved the crushing of men - three killed in 1856 and three

more in 1858 - and a major inundation in 1860. The mines were worked mainly from deep shafts using the pillar and stall method. There is some evidence of similar workings near Wrockwardine Wood and Trench.

It is obvious at Llanymynech that some of the stone from the Ogof has been taken from the site and presumably sold. There is also a major tunnel connecting the two more recent quarries and the remains of heading-type blastholes in the quarry faces.

Snailbeach is variously listed as a limestone, calcite and calc-spar producer from the 1890s to 1905. Much material has also been removed from the tips since this date. There is good evidence that the *Spirobis* limestones have been mined around Caughley and some evidence also of its working near Hanwood.

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