
Charnwood's quarries

One of the earliest printed references to significant quarrying was by the topographer William Burton in 1622, when he described Bardon as having '*great quarries of hard stone.*' Stone from Charnwood Forest has actually been quarried for over 6000 years (see Page 42) and naturally, over such a long period, its uses have changed; from the crafting of hand tools, to the construction of buildings.

Finally, with the advent of large-scale quarrying operations in the nineteenth century, stone in its crushed form became the commodity known as 'hard- rock aggregate'. This latest development was linked to the passing of a Local Government Act in 1888 making local authorities responsible for the maintenance of their own roads. The increased demand for better highways meant that crushed stone was constantly required for road building, repair and improvement, and Charnwood Forest became the natural source for this material.

Much impetus to this industry was provided by developments in bulk transportation routes – the networks of roads, canals and eventually railways.

During the nineteenth century not only did existing workings have to be expanded, but many new ones were opened: at Groby in 1832, Mountsorrel in 1842, Markfield in 1852, and Bardon Hill in 1857. A second wave of activity occurred at Enderby (south of Charnwood Forest) and Morley Quarry in the 1870s, followed by Cliffe Hill in 1891, Shepshed (the 'Charnwood Quarries' of Newhurst and Longcliffe) in 1892 and Whitwick in 1893. Quarrymen refer to the stone of Charnwood Forest as 'granite', because of its hardness, but in reality it is composed of many different rocks, such as andesite, diorite and volcanoclastic sedimentary rock.

Today, Bardon Hill, Cliffe Hill and Mountsorrel quarries are working, whilst the other quarries are either undergoing restoration or have been 'mothballed'. At Cliffe Hill, the 'old' quarry has recently been re-opened and will be expanded; it is linked to the 'new' quarry (now not working) by a tunnel that allows the easy movement of the stone to the crushing plant.

The hard-rock quarrying industry is now one of the mainstays of Leicestershire's economy and the county is the largest producer in the UK. In 2003 a total of just over 14 million tonnes was extracted from the four main quarries at Croft (just south of Charnwood Forest), Bardon Hill, Cliffe Hill and Mountsorrel, the latter being the largest single producer of 'granite' aggregate in Europe.

We must not forget the quarrying of other rocks — the red clays of the Mercia Mudstone Group have long been extracted for brick-making (see Walk 5), and as recently as 2006 about 700000 bricks from near Shepshed were ordered for the restoration of the victorian frontage at St Pancras railway station.

The unique uses for Swithland Slate are described in the next section.

Figures

(Figure 77) Railway transporting aggregate from Mountsorrel Quarry, circa 1900.

(Figure 78) Tunnel linking the two Cliffe Hill quarries.



Railway transporting aggregate from Mountsorrel Quarry, circa 1900.



Tunnel linking the two Cliffe Hill quarries.