
Stone in Charnwood Forest's buildings

Charnwood stone has been in demand since at least Neolithic times, around 4500 BC, when local rocks were incorporated into pottery or fashioned into axe-heads and querns (simple mills for hand-grinding flour), the latter found at Quorn (Quorndon), just north of Mountsorrel. The Romans used stone from the Charnwood area, and we know that rocks from around Whitwick went into the building of Grace Dieu Priory in AD 1235 (Walk 3), as well as Ulverscroft Priory and more recently at Mount St Bernard Abbey (Walk 9) and the dam wall of Blackbrook Reservoir (twentieth century).

Before there were any major roads or railways, the use of Charnwood stone was strictly local because the cost and difficulties of overland transport were prohibitive. The Swithland quarries though, were able to make use of water transport to convey slate along the River Soar and beyond to the Trent. The construction of the Grand Union Canal in the early nineteenth century opened up further markets and consequently these slates are found as far afield as Lincolnshire, Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and Derbyshire. Ironically, the transport revolution eventually destroyed the Swithland slate industry, because from the mid nineteenth century onwards railways brought in the cheaper Welsh slates and by about 1888 the last local slate quarry had closed.

The Charnian rock successions are among the most diverse and distinctive in the East Midlands area, exhibiting a wide variety of colours and textures. Characteristically these hard rocks are used as rubble stone and are rarely shaped or sawn into blocks. They are, however, well displayed in many of the more modern buildings in the area and few villages lie far from a source of good building stone. Consequently, a variety of rugged and distinctively local building styles have developed that perfectly complement the Charnwood landscape.

Swithland slate rocks have had a number of specialised uses, for roofing, wall stone and, most famously, for headstones. They are characteristically purple, dark grey or green-grey in colour and are well displayed in houses in Woodhouse Eaves, Newtown Linford and in surrounding villages. Swithland roofing slates have been found at Roman sites in Leicester and at East Bridgford, Nottinghamshire (*Margidunum*). Their poorly developed cleavage made them difficult to split and dress and they are, therefore, thicker and rougher than Welsh slates. Traditionally on roofs they are laid in reducing sizes, from eaves to ridge, thus enabling even small slate pieces to be used. Intricately lettered and carved Swithland headstones survive in many local church graveyards and can be distinguished from later Welsh slate imports, some of which can be similar in colour, by the presence of characteristic natural undulations on the unpolished back surface of the roughly cleaved slabs. The principal slate quarries were at The Brand, Groby, Swithland Wood (Walk 5) and Woodhouse Eaves, all long since abandoned and flooded. The Swithland 'Great Pit' (page 29) was worked to a depth of 180 ft (55m) and the stone blocks had to be raised to ground level before being split, sawed and polished.

The Precambrian and Ordovician igneous intrusions, concentrated around Groby, Markfield and Mountsorrel, can all be readily identified in local buildings, commonly occurring as footings or walling stones, and often mixed in with other Charnian rocks. The distinctive green, mottled, coarse-grained diorite (walks 5 and 10) of the Markfield and Groby quarries was, like the pink granodiorite of Mountsorrel (Walk 6), principally used in the nineteenth century for the production of kerbstones and setts for export to cities and towns across the country. Before this, they provided stone for many buildings in the area.

Carboniferous Limestone in the north-western corner of Charnwood Forest as been quarried at Grace Dieu (Walk 3) for lime making, and had a limited local use for building stone you will see a lot of other stones that had to be brought in from outside Charnwood Forest. For example, the fine-grained, greenish-grey sandstones of the Triassic Bromsgrove Sandstone were an important source of building stone, used principally for window and door mouldings in Grace Dieu Priory and Bradgate House, and in many local farm buildings. Other imported stones have always featured in the local buildings, due mainly to the lack of high quality freestones that could be easily sawn, dressed and carved. In the nineteenth century at Mount St Bernard Abbey (Walk 9) the white, ooidal limestones used for the carved and dressed stonework of the windows, doors and quoins came from the Middle Jurassic, Lincolnshire Limestone quarries at Ketton, Lincolnshire. At the same time, the rapid growth of aggregate quarries in the area, and the transport network on which that industry depended, brought its own contribution to the local architecture, with fine brick viaducts and bridges along

the new mineral railways commonly faced with Carboniferous Millstone Grit sandstone.

Today there are no quarries actively producing building or roofing stone in Charnwood Forest although some materials — Swithland slates in particular — are still much in demand. The legacy of the industry, however, can still be seen in the buildings of the area, as a short walk around almost any hamlet or village soon reveals.

Figures

(Figure 79) Aerial view of Buddon Wood Quarry, Mountsorrel.

(Figure 80) Grace Dieu Priory with freestone arch made out of Triassic sandstone.

(Figure 81) House built of Charnian stone.

(Figure 82) You can see the difference between Swithland and Welsh slate headstones in many Charnwood church yards.

(Figure 83) Groby Church with its Swithland Slate roof and local Charnian rocks in the walls.



Aerial view of Buddon Wood Quarry, Mountsorrel.



Grace Dieu Priory with freestone arch made out of Triassic sandstone.



House built of Charnian stone.



You can see the difference between Swithland and Welsh slate headstones in many Charnwood church yards.



Groby Church with its Swithland Slate roof and local Charnian rocks in the walls.