

Wellington Walking Festival 2015 Walk 24 Industrial Archaeology of Limekiln Wood and the Ercall

“**Limekiln Wood** was once part of the Royal Forest of Wrekin, and is one of the most botanically interesting woods in Telford, supporting a range of limestone flora. There are over 150 plant species. Look out for the flowering spikes of orchids. Ash trees form much of the tree canopy, along with oak and sycamore, with hazel and hawthorn providing the understory. As with much of this area, these woods have a long history of mining and quarrying, which reached its heyday during the 18th and 19th centuries. Today the remnants of old workings are all that remain, including the ruins of old limekilns; the lime was used in the iron ore smelting works in Coalbrookdale, and for improving agricultural land.” [1]

“Human activity at **The Ercall** is dramatically evident in the huge chunk blasted out of the hillside to provide road stone for the nearby A5. Destructive this certainly was, but it had the unexpectedly wonderful effect of laying bare the earth’s history; revealing rocks from the earliest beginnings of life on this planet. Ripples in the surface where waves lapped on an ancient shoreline some 500 million years ago are distinctly visible. Amazingly, this part of Britain used to be 60 degrees south of the equator – stand here on a wet, wintry day and imagine that!

It’s not just old rocks that make the Ercall interesting. In spring the woods are awash with bluebells and singing with birds just returned from Africa, and in summer plentiful bird’s-foot trefoil makes this a favoured stronghold of one of Telford’s speciality butterflies, the dingy skipper. A staggering 821 species of invertebrates (butterflies, beetles, spiders, bees, bugs, ants etc) were found here in a single survey.”[2]

We start our walk by passing the **Mounds At Dairy Pit** “Earthwork remains of a water filled mine shaft, surrounded by spoil heaps of post medieval date at Dairy Pit. Dairy Pit has the appearance of being an old mine shaft, now flooded. Ranged round it are four steep sided conical spoil heaps, 15m to 25m long x 12m to 15m wide and 4m to 5m high. One heap has been dug into, showing it to be built of broken shale without stratification.”[3]

The Ercall quarry (see [6]) is well known and what makes the Ercall so notable among geologists, it was abandoned in the 1980s. [6] tells us that there was a coal pit and a coal yard at the Buckatree which was abandoned in 1902.

Industrial remains can be seen as we ascend the Ercall. From the viewpoint over the Wrekin Golf Course you can see the site of **Newhouse Farm** on what is now Wrekin Golf and also (possibly) the **Old Quarry, Newhouse Farm** which is still there. Both of these are clearly shown on [5]. We cross the golf course passing the old reservoirs (shown as belonging to Wellington U.D.C.W.W. (Urban District Council Water Works?)) on [5]. We then take to one of the tramways passing the top of a lime kiln belonging to the Steeraway Lime Kilns.

So what is a Lime Kiln? “A **lime kiln** is used to produce quicklime through the calcination of limestone (calcium carbonate.) **Early lime use.** Because it is so readily made by heating limestone, lime must have been known from the earliest times, and all the early civilizations used it in building mortars and as a stabilizer in mud renders and floors. Knowledge of its value in agriculture is also ancient, but agricultural use only became widely possible when the use of coal made it cheap in the coalfields in the late 13th century, and an account of agricultural use was given in 1523. The earliest descriptions of lime kilns differ little from those used for small-scale manufacture a century ago.” [4]

Limekilns C.105m W Of Steeraway Farm “These are the structural remains of a battery of three limekilns of post-medieval date (i.e. after 1485) associated with the Steeraway Lime Works complex (PRN 03981). In the later C17 the Steeraway kilns, all on the Forester estate, were coal fired. In 1716 output was 121 hundreds. The kilns were marked on 1st ed. 1:10,560 and 2nd ed. 1:2,500 OS maps, they are not on the current ones. See the side by side mapping . Fieldwork, in conjunction with the Ercall County Junior School, included recording the presence of limekiln shafts and the recovery of part of a plateway waggon

Steeraway Limeworks The Steeraway Limeworks comprises several shafts, levels and kilns of probable post medieval date. In 1240 lime was received from a kiln under Mont Gilbert (Wrekin) and in 1255 the King had two oak-fired kilns in Wellington Hay “. [3](This seems to be the area around Watling St, the manor house being the old

Old Hall school). “ A railway linked Steeraway to the Watling Street in the late 1730s. Limestone extraction was stimulated by local iron making. In the 1800s there was at least one deep shaft. In 1842 a 45ft seam was being worked. Fluxing limestone was probably exhausted by the mid C19. In 1882 when mining resumed at Steeraway, there were several shafts, levels and kilns. In 1900 mining ceased, and the kilns closed c 1918 “[3]

The tramway from here to the Hatch was evident on the OS six inch maps from 1880 to 1913 [5] but not the part from here to the Watling Street. [6] tells us that there was mining here and has an extensive report of a strike and riot here involving miners (and minors) in 1831.

Having gone to Steeraway and then detoured to the bottom of the kilns we retrace our steps, on the second tramway uphill, then turn towards Short Woods passing another ex- Wellington U.D.C.W.W. reservoir. We just look at the start of Shortwoods observing the iron that is evident in the water (see [6] p 19 for details of the mine here which was constructed in 1953, employed 25 men (in ?) and closed in 1969.) Also from [6], There is evidence of iron working in the general area from the 12th century .

We return and ascend towards the Hatch. On the way we observe the re-instatement of the 21st century open cast coal mining. Eventually we reach the Hatch. I can remember there being a building here about 30 years ago.

Site Of The Hatch Farmstead “Hatch Cottage is believed to have been constructed in the early 19th century when limestone was still being worked at The Hatch However there is no evidence to suggest that the building was used as anything other than a farmhouse during its occupation. The farm is understood to have concentrated on dairy farming in the 20th century. The house was abandoned in the 1960s and fell into disrepair. It was visited and recorded as in a dilapidated condition, and further building survey was recommended. The mineral wealth of the Little Wenlock Parish was only exploited on a significant scale from the seventeenth century onwards, and continued until the 20th century. The Foresters, local landowners are recorded as owning The Hatch as a commercial limeworks in the early 18th century. It sent lime as far north as Market Drayton and west as far as Atcham and Haughmond. Documentary records attest to the operation of the limeworks in the 19th century, although it is assumed that there was a period of disuse at the site. It was reopened again in 1874 and was in use until 1882. The kilns at The Hatch were finally closed in 1901.” [3] . Also “ there are a series of related features here which can be grouped together: Old Quarry at SJ 6434 0815; Level at SJ 6448 0831; Limekilns SJ 6456 0850; Old Shaft SJ 6490 0859 and the tramway which ran from the quarry and past the level, lime kilns and shaft to the limestone mine/quarry . The tramway also passes another group of shafts.”[3] [5] shows a old (in 1880-1901) clay pit.

Our final relic is the Post 1901 Quarry, Maddox Hill, Nr. The Wrekin, which was also still working upto the 1980s.

References/Bibliography

1. Natural England http://www.lnr.naturalengland.org.uk/Special/lnr/lnr_details.asp?C=0&N=&ID=581 (as of 19/08/2015)

2. <http://www.shropshirewildlifetrust.org.uk/reserves/the-ercall> (as of 19/08/2015)

3. <http://search.shropshirehistory.org.uk/collections/>

4. Wikipedia

5. Side by side mapping from the national library of Scotland e.g.

<http://maps.nls.uk/geo/explore/sidebyside.cfm#zoom=15&lat=52.6816&lon=-2.5155&layers=171&right=BingHyb>

6. The industrial heritage of the rural parishes around the Wrekin; Part I. (Industrial heritage: an overview; Coal mining, stone quarrying, iron making, industrial unrest) Clarke, Neil et al . Industrial Heritage Research Group, 2008