

John Torrance: The Origin of Old Pits

Ever since coming to live here I have been amazed by the huge holes in the landscape left by lime quarrying. They came about because Branscombe has the westernmost deposits of chalk in England, and because lime, produced by burning chalk in kilns, was the ‘must-have’ soil improver for Devon farmers from 1650 to 1870, before guano and phosphate. Wagonloads of lime were carted off from here to farms all over East Devon.

The biggest chalk quarries— at Gays Farm, on Woodhouse Hill, and above Hazelwood — date between 1780 to 1860. The quarries along the ridge east from Kiln Lane, worked from Berry Barton, are older.

All these workings are documented. But what about Hole Pits, the cratered, wooded landscape at the west end of Northern Lane? Chalk can be seen on the roots of fallen trees, and it seemed likely that the pits were due to lime-burning by the Bartletts of Hole House, in the 1600s and 1700s. But documentation was lacking.

Old Pits, long-overgrown workings on the ridge above Blue Ball and Grapevine, was also a puzzle. Would chalk have been found that low? Chalk is a hilltop layer at Branscombe.

Now a document has appeared that proves that the Bartletts *were* quarrying and burning chalk, and indicates that Old Pits — called ‘Collick Grounds’ — was an eastwards extension of their workings at Hole Pits. It is an entry of 1715 in the manorial roll books, which record property transfers.

Nicholas Braddick, tenant of Culverwell farm, died in 1715, and his widow Elizabeth applied to have the tenancy transferred to herself and her son William. This was done, but with a condition respecting ‘the lime kiln and quarry of limestone ... and any other place where there is limestone [*i.e.* chalk] upon the premises’. This area (the top of the ridge above Culverwell), together with liberty to quarry and burn chalk there, was to be held by the Braddicks in trust for Ellis Bartlett of Hole House, for his ‘use and profit’. In return Ellis would pay damages for ‘eating of grass by horses coming to the said kiln or by making the said new quarry or quarries or by laying stones, head or rubbish there’.

So Nicholas Braddick had a lime quarry and kiln above Culverwell before 1710, which his widow and son leased to their lime-burning neighbour. It seems likely, too, that the chalk at Hole Pits was becoming exhausted, so Ellis Bartlett thought it worthwhile to dig further along the ridge as it descended, for what chalk might be there.

450 words

The manor roll was kept in Latin, which David Robinson has had translated, and he has kindly sent me the translation.