

THE BRANSCOMBE PROJECT

Looking for History 2

John Torrance: The Old Lime 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. Wagonloads of lime were carted off from Branscombe 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 there’s also Hole Pits, the cratered, wooded landscape at the west end of Northern Lane, and Old Pits, the long-overgrown workings on the ridge above Blue Ball and Grapevine, and until recently we knew very little about them.

Now a document has appeared that proves that the Bartletts of Hole House were indeed quarrying and burning chalk, and that Old Pits — called ‘Collick Grounds’ — was an eastwards extension of the workings at Hole Pits.

In the manorial roll books, which record property transfers, there’s an entry in 1715. It tells us that Nicholas Braddick, tenant of Culverwell farm, has died, and his widow Elizabeth has applied to have the tenancy transferred to herself and her son William. This was done, but with a rider respecting the top of the ridge above Culverwell. ‘The lime kiln and quarry of limestone ... and any other place where there is limestone [*i.e.* chalk] upon the premises,’ 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 another tiny bit of the Branscombe jig-saw put in place - Nicholas Braddick had a lime quarry and kiln above Culverwell before 1710, and his widow and son were leasing it to their lime-burning neighbour. It seems possible that the Hole Pits chalk was becoming exhausted and that Ellis Bartlett thought it worth his while to open up further down the hillside in Collicks Ground.