

Quarries of Oxfordshire

The county of Oxford is peculiarly rich in stone-quarries, and materials for building abound in all districts. Quarries of freestone are very numerous; limestone is plentiful, and slate is found in several places. The antiquity of these quarries is well established, and their importance has been recognized from very early times. It is extremely probable that the remnants of Anglo-Saxon buildings that still exist are composed of stone that came from the neighbouring quarries. In fact the stone used in the tower of St. Michael's, and in the early portions of St. Peter's in the East, together with the Norman foundations of Carfax Church, came from a very ancient quarry at Chilswell. (fn. 548) In 1303 there was a quarry of some repute near Wheatley, known as 'Cherlegrave,' (fn. 549) and here quarrying was carried on for some considerable time. But this quarry was quite overshadowed by the far more important quarries of Headington near Oxford and Taynton near Buford. These two quarries have continued up to the present time as valuable depositories of stone. That Taynton stone was used very early in Oxford itself has been proved by the library building account of Exeter College, in which it is recorded that 'William the mason' was paid 'for stone from Teynton 12 marks 7 sh.' There is, too, another reference showing a large purchase of stone—'carriage of stone from Taynton £7 0s. 10d.' (fn. 550)

During the fifteenth century the quarry-owners of Oxfordshire were particularly busy, as, during this period, there was a great demand for stone, both for the building of the colleges, and also for the erection or restoration of certain churches in the county. Between the years 1437 and 1442 (fn. 551) the college of All Souls was built from the two chief quarries of Headington and Taynton. On 26 October, 1438, Edmund Rede sold to John Dinell, master of the works of All Souls College, part of his quarry at Hedendon.' (fn. 552) In 1442 Thame Church building account affords an excellent insight into the current prices for stone, and also shows from what parts the stone came. Headington stone was used chiefly, but for carvings and ornaments the church builders fell back upon the less perishable stone of Taynton. From the following selections some idea of the prices may be obtained: (fn. 553) —

S.D.1442 1

1. 1 'Rychard lavender for a lode of stone from hedendon
2. 'Ffor caryage of 3 cartful stone from hedyndon, exspenys mete and dryin
3. 'John King a lode from hedyndon
4. 'ffor stone y bowte at teynton
5. 'ffor caryage of ye same stone and stone for ye boteras from teynton to oxsynforde 8 lods, from oxsynforde totame 6 lods 17/4
6. 'To the wyndow John beckely of hedyndon stone 15/6
7. 'To a man of yekeford for a lode
8. 'ffor 2 lods of stone from hedyndon to Jon mechel of resborow
9. 'ffor 2 lods of stone from hedyndon to Jon borne of Yekford

The steady demand for Headington and Taynton stone continued. Merton College purchased in 1449 a very large quantity from both quarries. Taynton supplied 1,200 square feet, and 159 loads were ordered from Headington. The Taynton stone cost £10 10s. 6d. the carriage being 2s. a load; the carriage from Headington was naturally much less, varying from 5d. to 5½d. a load. The wages for the quarrymen were from 4d. to 4½d. per day, and the total wage bill was £12 13s. 2d. (fn. 554) The Manorial Records of Bicester in the reign of Henry VI also show the price of stone during that period, for the following entry occurs: 'To William Skerne and his fellows hired to dig stones for the walls at the quarry beyond Crockewell 23s. 4d. (fn. 555) Magdalen College was the next great purchaser from the Headington quarries. In 1467 the outer walls of the college were built from material that came from the quarry. (fn. 556) Six years later stone for the college itself was obtained from the same spot. There seem to have been three quarries then in use. One of these was royal property and rented by the college from the king; a second was rented from Sir Edmund Rede; a third was owned by the college itself. These three, however, were not sufficient, and stone was also brought from Wheatley, Thame, and Milton, the last of which is well known at the present time. (fn. 557) In 1495 Magdalen College had still the ownership of the quarry at Headington, and an agreement was drawn up on that subject between the president and scholars of the college and the prior and convent of St. Frideswide. (fn. 558)

The early part of the sixteenth century still witnessed a considerable demand for stone for college buildings, and the ownership of Headington quarries remained in several hands. Among the muniments of Magdalen College there is a quaintly worded document of 1513 that illustrates this fact. Several men from Oxford walked out to 'Headington Quarry, and called all the said men working in diverse men's quarries together, and they all sat down upon a green bank and did drink a pennyworth of ale.' (fn. 559) These 'diverse men's quarries' at Headington supplied stone to Cardinal Wolsey when he began to build Cardinal College, and the stone used for Christ Church came not only from Headington but also from Burford, Taynton, and Holton, near Wheatley. The lime that was also necessary was brought into Oxford from the neighbouring villages of Beckley and Stanton St. John. (fn. 560) About the same time a quarry was also worked in North Hincksey. (fn. 561) Two or three decades later Leland refers most probably to the quarry at Taynton or at Upton when he remarks, 'There is a notable quarry of fine stone about Burford. (fn. 562)

Although there were so many quarries in Oxfordshire, yet the Headington quarries held their own against the many competitors, partly because of their proximity to Oxford, and partly owing to the ease with which the stone was worked. Thus, early in the seventeenth century, Merton College purchased stone from Headington for the Fellows' quadrangle, which was built between 1608 and 1610; (fn. 563) and in 1613 Wadham College was erected, and is regarded as one of the best examples of a building made from Headington stone. (fn. 564) Stonesfield was at this time the district from which slates were procured, though University College in 1635 employed Robert Perry, of Burford, as their 'latter,' paying him for the slates and the labour 16s. a hundred. (fn. 565) A new quarry had by this time come into existence at Hanborough, where stone is still obtained. As early as 1619 stone from this

quarry had been brought into Woodstock, at 2s. a load. (fn. 566) The Burford and Taynton quarries during the latter part of the seventeenth century were probably more famous than at any other period either before or since. Wood speaks of the Taynton quarry as the 'Leper's Quarry, 'and the quarries half a mile south-west of Burford were called Christopher's or Kitt's quarries. It was from these quarries that Sir Christopher Wren is said to have obtained much of the stone for the re-building of St. Paul's Cathedral after its destruction in the Great Fire in 1666. It was here, too, that one of the master quarrymen, named Kempster, having made sufficient money in his transactions with Wren, built a large stone house in 1698. (fn. 567)

Dr. Plot, in his Natural History of Oxfordshire, published in 1677, supplies more information than any other historian on the subject of Oxfordshire quarries. Writing of Headington quarry, he says:

Of the stone afore-mentioned consists the gross of our buildings; but for Columns, Capitals, Bases, window-lights, door-cases, cornishing, mouldings, etc., in the chiefest work they use Burford stone, which is whiter and harder and carrying by much a finer arris than that at Heddington: but yet it is not so hard as that at Teynton, nor will it like that endure the fire of which they make mault kills and hearths for Ovens; but then they take care to 'surbed' the stone, i.e., set it edg-ways contrary to the posture it had in the bed, for otherwise there will be some danger of its flying.

Besides the fire it endureth the weather, for of this mixed with another sort dug near Whately on the Worcester Road side as it passes betwixt Holton and Sir Timothy Tyrrils, are all the oldest colleges in Oxford built, as Baliol, Merton, Exeter, Queen's, Canterbury (now part of Ch. Ch.) College, Durham(now Trinity) College, New College, Lincoln, All Souls, Magdalen, Brazen-nose, and the outermost quadrangle of St. John Bapt. Coll. Yet it endures not the weather so well as Heddington, by reason, I suppose, of a salt it has in it which the weather in time plainly dissolves, as may be seen by the Pinnacles of New College Chapel made of this stone and thus melted away. . . . Other quarries there are also of considerable use, as Bladon, Little Milton, Barford, and Hornton, whereof the last has the best firestone of any in the county. . . . At Cornbury Park there was a sort of stone, the quarry whereof is now quite exhausted, that never would sweat in the moistest weather, of which the pavement of the Hall in the house there still remains as sufficient testimony. (fn. 568)

Dr. Plot speaks of the well-known slates of Stonesfield, an industry which at that time was far greater than it is now. There are still pits in the neighbourhood, and slates are still obtained in much the same way as that described by Plot, but it is only on a small scale. One of the best-known buildings roofed by these slates is a portion of Balliol College, which work was carried out in 1856. (fn. 569) Writing of the method of obtaining the slates, Plot says that the stone is dug first in thick cakes about Michaelmas time or before, to lye all the winter and receive the frosts, which make it cleave in the spring following into thinner plates, which otherwise it would not do so kindly. But at Bradwell they dig a sort of flat stone, naturally such, without the help of winter, and so strangely great that sometimes they have them of 7 ft. long and 5 ft. over. (fn. 570)

During this time limestone was quarried at Charlton, Langley, Little Milton and Shotover. At Bletchingdon a grey marble was obtained which was used for the making of chimneypieces, and 'the pillars of the portico at St. John's College.' (fn. 571) At Clifden Hampden a peculiar stone of the 'pyrites aureus' character was also found. This struck fire very plentifully, and was sought after for 'carbines and pistols, whilst wheel-locks were in fashion.' (fn. 572) Another and very peculiar form of quarrying is recorded by Dr. Plot at Kidlington. He gives the following account, and says that

the scarcity of firing has induced some people to burn a sort of black substance. . . . called Lignum fossile. . . . it consumes but slowly, and sends forth very unpleasant fumes: it is found in a pit or quarry called Langford Pitts, in the parish of Kidlington, not far from Thrup, about 18 ft. deep under the rock, where it lies in a bed about 4 in. thick. (fn. 573)

The Taynton quarry was used very extensively for the building of Blenheim Palace between 1710 and 1722, (fn. 574) but the great buildings of Oxfordshire were now almost complete, and there is little further mention of that quarry. During the eighteenth century a stone pit was opened at Hardwick and worked by the parish. It was, however, used up by the year 1855. (fn. 575) In 1748 there is evidence of a quarry at Breck, near Banbury, but no returns are available. (fn. 576) Throughout this period the old quarries continued to be worked, and at the beginning of the nineteenth century Headington was used for both freestone and ragstone. It cut 'soft and easy' when in the quarry, but hardened on exposure to the weather. In 1813 the vein was from 12 to 14 ft. deep, but at the bottom the stone was found to be too soft and sandy for use. This stone then, as now, was too coarse and porous for ornamental work; it varied much in quality, both soft and hard stone lying indiscriminately mixed in the quarry. (fn. 577) In 1852 the Headington quarries were worked by Mr. Thomas Snow, (fn. 578) but at the present time they are but little used. This is not the case in other parts. From Banbury there still comes the famous limestone locally known as 'Banbury marble,' and a somewhat similar coarse marble is found in the Forest of Wychwood. (fn. 579) The Milton quarries mentioned by Plot in 1677 are still worked, and it is from these that Portland stone (fn. 580) is obtained, and has been used to reface parts of the colleges where the Headington stone has been weather-worn. Great as was the work in the Oxfordshire quarries during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, yet now the business is a declining one. At the present time there are thirty-nine quarries in Oxfordshire, but only 127 quarrymen in the whole county to carry on what was formerly a celebrated and important industry. (fn. 581)

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