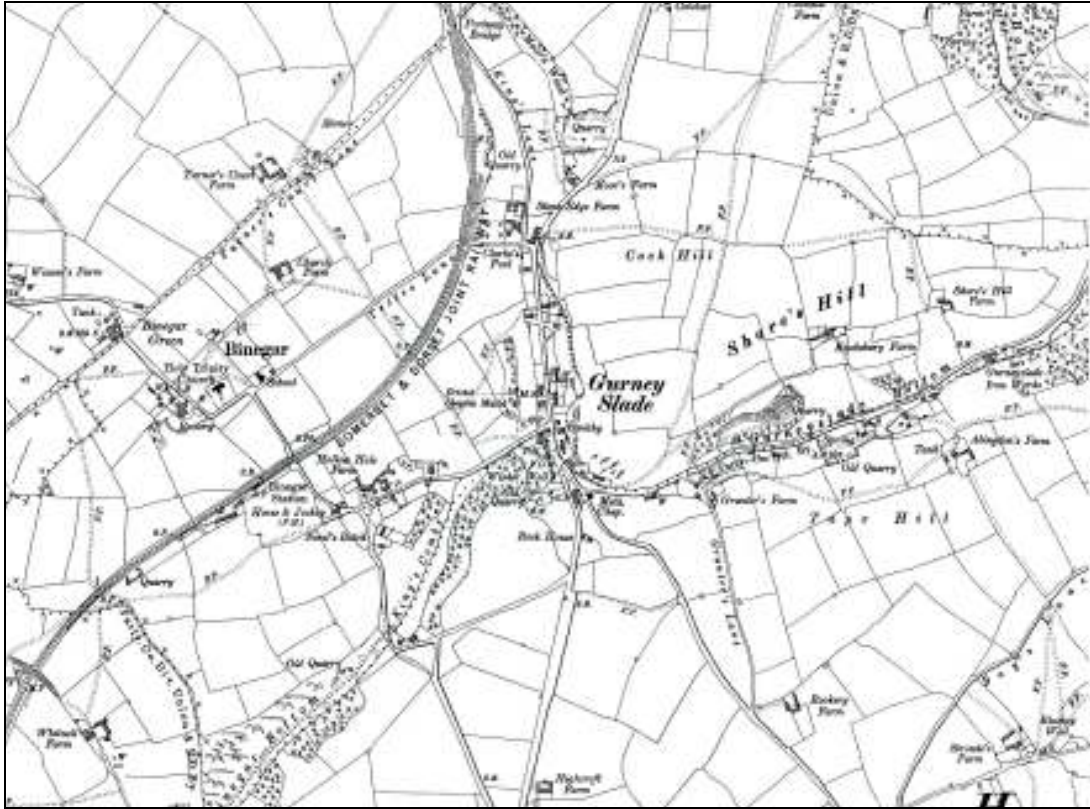


MINES & QUARRIES – GURNEY SLADE



2004 & 1904





An early photograph of the main road through Gurney Slade, looking towards Bristol.

The same scene 2008.

The cottage on the left has been modernised and a bungalow built in the garden, on the corner of the turning to Binegar. Otherwise, apart from the electricity wires and the obviously upgraded road, the scene has changed very little.



A QUARRYMAN'S LIFE ON MENDIP.

The natural mineral resources deposited in the Mendip Hills has always been a reason for settlement in this area and there is evidence that from Roman times and earlier right up until the 19th century, lead and other minerals were mined and stone was hewn from the limestone quarries. However, since about 1880 there have been great changes, principally with the closure of the mines. The 1881 Census shows a small number of miners still working in some of the villages, but from this date onwards miners were principally travelling to work in the coal-mines of the Radstock area rather than working lead mines in their local villages. The story of quarrying however, still continues, although the numerous small quarries which used to be worked all over the Mendip villages are mainly closed, with only a few large sites still in production.

The increase in road building during the first part of the 20th century meant there was obviously a huge demand for stone and, amongst others, several quarries opened at

Binegar and Gurney Slade. The first, Read and Sons operating from 1900 to 1951, had a crusher and sidings near Binegar Station, from whence stone was carried to many destinations in southern England. Dalley's Quarry at Cockhill, also producing roadstone between 1908 and 1932, first transported their stone to the station by steam-carts and later by an aerial ropeway from the quarry to sidings near Moorwood Signal Box.



Gurney Slade quarrymen c.1920

H. Matthews and Son opened another quarry in 1923, adjoining Binegar Bottom, which first produced stone and later asphalt, until its closure at the end of the 20th Century.

Gurney Slade Quarry was opened by Francis Flowers in the 1920s, with the purpose of producing stone for lime-burning. This quarry is still in operation, although it was purchased by Morris and Perry in 1962 and has expanded hugely in area.

In the past whole families would frequently be employed together, a man and his three sons featuring in the above photograph.

During the 1930s these houses had very basic accommodation, with no mains electricity, no bathroom and an outside bucket toilet. Baths were taken in front of the fire. Except for the main living area, the houses were very cold in winter, with of course, no central heating. As there was no electricity at that time, cooking was done by an open fire and preparing the meal sometimes involved the wives plucking their own chicken. Incomes being low, the men would often supplement the diet by catching rabbits.

Life was harder then than it is now, women spending all day Monday doing the family washing, all day Tuesday ironing, with the other housework in between for often a large family with several children.

But what was the life of a quarryman and his family like during the first half of the 20th century? Many of the quarrymen at Gurney Slade lived in houses provided for them near the quarry, which are still occupied, but with improvements to meet modern requirements.



Quarrymen's cottages as they are now.

There used to be several shops in the village, supplying everyday needs, but the only one now remaining is the Post Office. The Post Office used to be kept by the Richmonds.



Richmond's Post Office 1910



The Post Office 2008

Obviously houses had no private telephones in those days, so there was (and still is) a public phone box by the shop or alternatively people could send telegrams from the Post Office.

The Co-op, a red tin hut, was at the top of the village, on a bend, going towards Bristol. It was an old type shop, not like a modern self-service store. The women would get most of their weekly shopping there and children bought sweets on the way to school. There is a story of one old villager who went into the shop for his tobacco & took a farmer's bull on a staff in with him! Can you imagine someone taking a bull into Tesco in Shepton Mallett? The Butcher was Mr. Thorner, who had his own slaughterhouse, behind his shop, which has now been converted into a dwelling. Ernie Colburn, the wheelwright, made the bonds for the wheels for the carts, all by hand. He was quite a craftsman. His shop is still there, opposite where the Co-op was. He used to make coffins too and was the village undertaker. He made all the funeral arrangements and hired the hearse and the bearers.

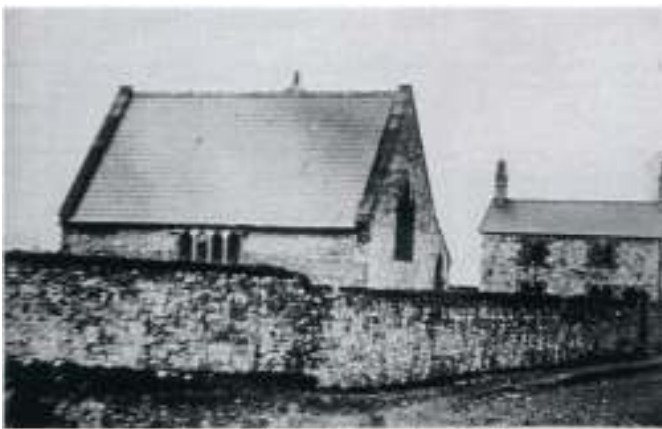


The wheelwright's shop c.1912 ...

... and in 2008 – in a sad state of disrepair.

The packman came to the village from Chilcompton every Friday. He was a sort of travelling 'mail-order catalogue' and would bring all sorts of items with him to sell and would order almost anything he did not have in stock. He could be paid in full or more often five or ten shillings a week until the debt was paid off. Money was tight, so younger members of the family rarely got new clothes and new hob-nailed boots from the packman would have been a real luxury for the boys and well worth the frequent long wait over several Fridays for items such as this to be acquired.

There was a school at Binegar for the children from both Binegar and Gurney Slade, which is still there today, (see the school website), although like many very small village schools, threatened with closure. Originally an all-age elementary school, it later took children only up to the age of eleven, when the children transferred to Shepton Mallett.



Binegar School founded 1862



2008

There were little or no organised activities for the youngsters, such as a cricket team. Children made their own fun. They used to play soldiers out in one of the disused quarries, build camps and light fires, but there was never any trouble or vandalism. There was a Special Constable in the village then, who actually came from Oakhill, but he rarely had any serious crime to deal with.

As most everyday needs were available within the village, most people did not travel far, except for perhaps a visit to the funfairs at Midsomer Norton. There are stories of young boys returning from the fair, jumping off the train as it was slowing down for the station and running off, because they hadn't bought a ticket! There might be an occasional special

excursion by train to Bath or other places up the line to visit friends and relatives, but the closure of the railway in the 1960s would have been felt more by the quarries of Binegar, Gurney Slade and Emborough than by the villagers, except for, of course, the nine men employed at the station.



The staff (and dog!) on Binegar Station.



An old photo of the Horse and Jockey Inn near Binegar Station
and a wooden trolley in use at Binegar Quarry

Quarrying itself was hard manual work. Old quarries, where work ceased before the introduction of modern methods, show what resembles a huge flight of stairs in the rock face. Then the safest and most efficient way of extracting the stone was by blasting one 'step' at a time by inserting gunpowder or gelignite into holes drilled several feet into the step just behind the edge, taking care not to encroach on the area of the step below. Fines were rammed in on top of the explosive to contain the blast before detonating it. The men would then peck out the stone with hand tools. Originally all this work was done by hand, work which most people would not be prepared to do today, but during the first half of the 20th Century more mechanical means were gradually introduced.

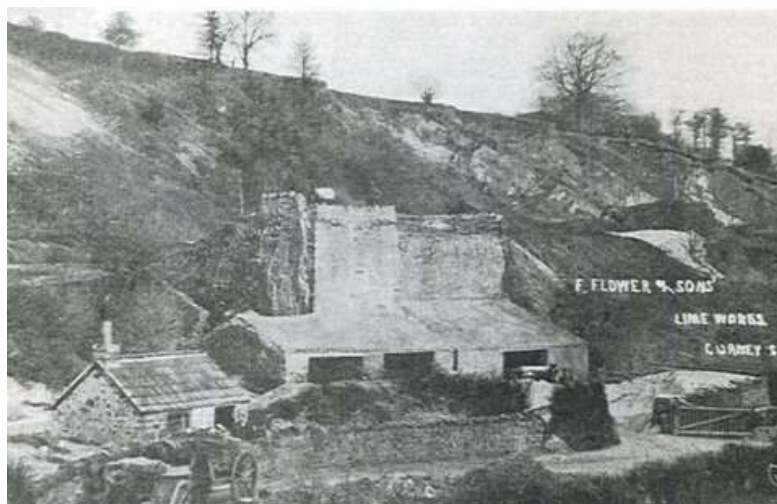
Another job would be to fill up the drams with stone. A dram was a sort of tub on four wheels which would tip in two directions for loading and unloading. They each held about a ton and were originally made of wood.

At the quarry there was a crushing house to crush the stone for use in road building

before it was transported away by rail in trucks. Filler dust for tarmac is now also produced.

There used to be a number of quarries in the area, but only Morris and Perry's, the very large one which belongs to Francis Flowers, now remains and this has grown tremendously in size. After selling the quarry, Francis Flowers took over the adjacent Lime Works, which they operated for fifteen years before its closure.

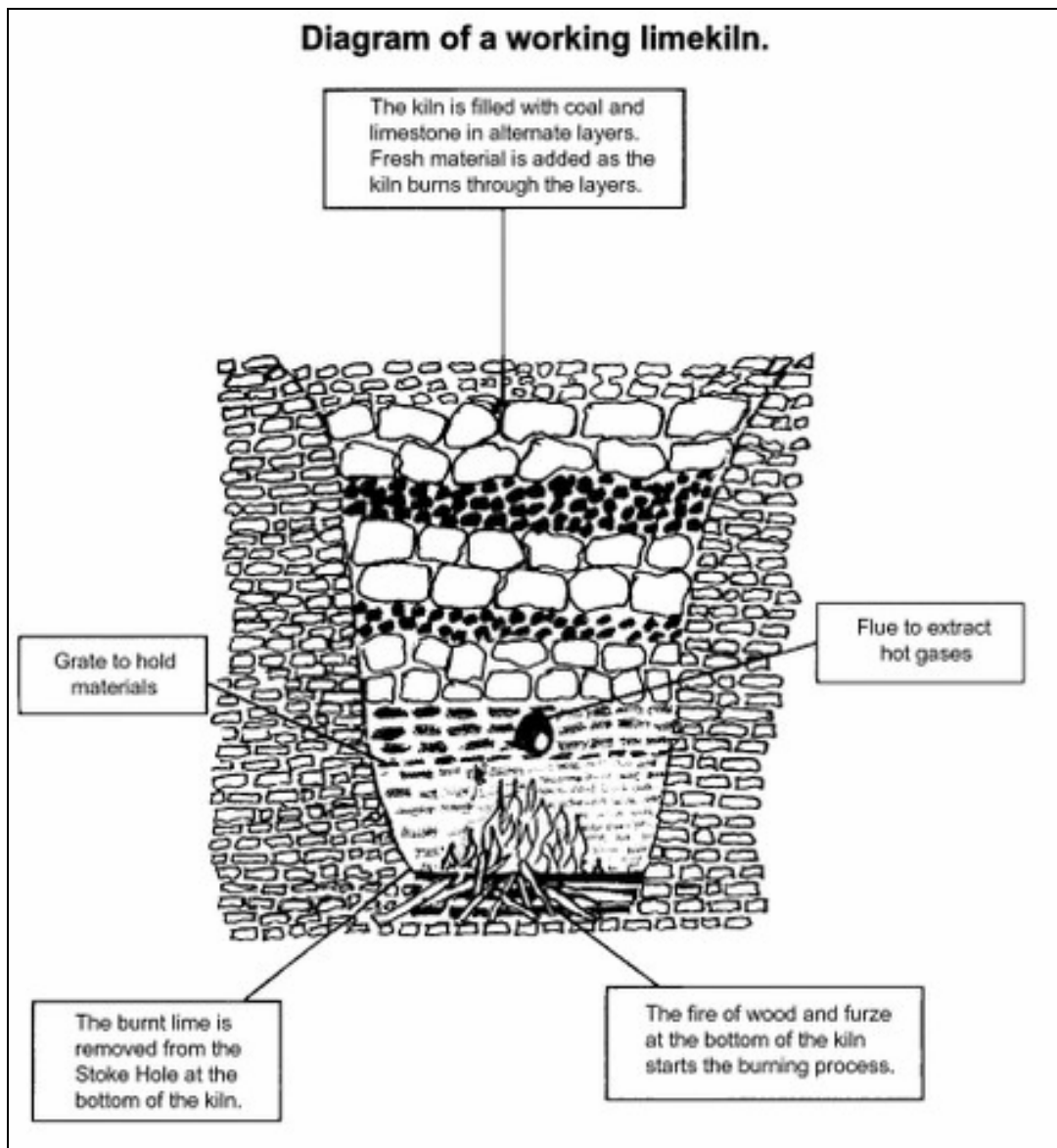
The lime-works in Gurney Slade Bottom were provided with stone from the next-door quarry. There were a number of lime kilns of various sizes, including some newer ones, producing large quantities of lime. The business increased sufficiently for a canteen to be built for the employees, which is still there today.



Gurney Slade Lime Works showing the canteen building to the left.

In the words of Graham Burr, a retired lime-worker and the son of a quarryman, 'To make lime, you burn stone. First of all you fill the kiln up with stone and wood etc. to start it off, but not every day. Once you get it going it may last for a year or more. You keep burning the anthracite and as it burns down, it gets to the bowl, by which time it should be cooled off. Then the lime is shovelled out of the bottom of the kiln. So it goes in at the top as stone and comes out as lumps of white burnt lime. The lime was then use for putty-making, whitewash or by the waterworks as a water-softener. Some might also be used in agriculture. Years ago the stone was brought from the quarry by horse and cart, but later, with more modern methods drams, tubs on wheels, were used. The lime was thrown into these and then wheeled down to a gantry at the bottom, from where it was tipped into the waiting lorries, to be delivered to places such as Bath and Bristol, for making putty, while all the smaller stuff went for making mortar.

Bagged lime was delivered to many South Wales coal-pits by lorries, which then transported coal back for the kilns. Anthracite was best, as it produced less smoke, burnt slowly and produced the required heat without a great deal of flame, although the fumes produced were not good to breathe in. Anthracite was always used at one time, but as it became more expensive, coke replaced it. This was acquired from New Rock Pit, Chilcompton in four or five-ton lorries, until it closed, being one of the last Somerset pits to close.



The lime kilns have virtually disappeared now, the site having been taken over by C.R.W.Transport, owned by Francis Flowers but run by Adrian Wareham, who lives locally and is so successful he travels around in his own private helicopter. His father, Cyril, and grandfather worked the business up from nothing, all three being well respected by their employees. Cyril did charity work for the people of Albania, often taking his lorries to be used there, but he sadly died young of cancer.

After a day's work the quarrymen would often work on an allotment or go hay-making in season for a few extra shillings, because they didn't earn a lot. In those days there weren't any elevators for hay-making, just pitchforks to fork it up. It was cut by horse-drawn mowing machines before they got tractors. The hay would then be dried and then a horse and sweep would collect it and bring it in. The pronged sweep would be operated by a man behind it holding the horse's reins. It would be driven into the hay and when it was full the hay would be taken back and thrown up to make the hayrick. There was quite a knack to doing it, because it had to be tilted a certain way. You had to be strong to do it, because you had to tip it and once you'd got the teeth at the right angle it would go right over and then you'd return to get some more.

When the rick was built, it would be thatched, not necessarily by thatchers, but by the farmers or farm workers themselves. The straw had to be drawn. It was delivered by lorry and each bundle would then be raked through to get any grass and weeds out of it to produce what was called drawn straw. To thatch a rick, bundles of straw were needed, good oat straw, four or five feet in length. You would go up the ladder, taking your bundle of straw with you and start from the bottom, layer by layer, having the end of the straw upwards, not the heads, until you reached the top, when you'd have the ends downwards. Then you'd get some straw and twist it up like a rope and then push your spar in, always at an angle, to prevent the wet getting in. Each layer had to be tucked well in and sparred in with wooden spars.

Occasionally some thatchers would decorate the ridges, but on the whole this was reserved for houses, not just ricks, which were frequently thatched by farm workers, rather than skilled thatchers. To economise, farmers often took the straw off the rick carefully and bundled it during the winter months, as the hay was cut for fodder, and re-used the same straw several years running.'



Haymaking on a Somerset farm
Early 20th century.

Acknowledgements:
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