



A typical stone mine

Monkton Farleigh - Mining History and Wartime use of Mines

Stone mining in the Monkton Farleigh area has a long history, beginning originally with open quarry-working which might date back as far as the 13th Century and the building of the priory in Monkton Farleigh. Later, sixteenth century travellers recorded quarrying in the area, as well as at nearby Kingsdown and Box, but working had largely moved underground by the early 1880's in order to follow the strata of oolitic limestone. These underground workings gradually expanded to reach over 300 acres of tunnels. It is reported from various sources that the Monkton Farleigh stone was too soft for most building, but it was extensively used in interiors and sent to many places in England.

A Court of the King's Bench record from 1835 of the case of the King (William the 4th) versus William Dunsford of Monkton Farleigh throws an interesting light on quarrying and mining, the poor relief rate, and the law at the time. In the case, William Dunsford was described as being 'the occupier of a quarry in Monkton Farleigh from which freestone is obtained'. The case concerned the setting and payment of a rate for the relief of the poor of Monkton Farleigh, and it had been referred to the Court of the King's Bench by the sessions with a request that the Court decide whether or not William Dunsford's quarry was a quarry or actually a mine - a mine being exempt from the rate. After discussion of the methods used to obtain the stone in Monkton Farleigh and comparisons with other cases, the Court of the King's Bench ruled that it was not for them to decide, but that the sessions should decide, after having given thought as to how material was obtained, rather than their making their decision on the basis of the nature of the material being worked. The case was duly referred back to the sessions, and they decided that the excavation in Monkton Farleigh was in fact a mine and therefore exempt from the rate.

The mine at the time of the case was following a strata of freestone described as being about twenty four feet thick and lying beneath a ragstone strata which was immediately under the surface, with pillars of the freestone

left in place in the workings to support the ceiling. Miners at that time would have worked underground with only candles for light and with little ventilation, probably using only pickaxes, hammers, wedges and saws. They would follow the freestone layer until it was exhausted, and then start another tunnel to follow a new strata of freestone. Once cut the blocks of stone were squared with axes and then hauled to the surface and stacked outside to season before being sold and transported to their eventual destination.

Until the later 1870's most quarries and mines in the area were privately and independently owned, but at that time a number of the larger owners of sites in the Bath/Wiltshire border area amalgamated to form Bath Stone firms (later to become the Bath & Portland Stone Firms Ltd.)

An 1896 report on the mining of Bath Stone in Wiltshire lists four mines local to Monkton Farleigh: Dapstone (18 workers), Drum (35 workers), Farleigh Down (1st) (57 workers) and Farleigh Down (2nd) (48 workers). All four mines are shown as being owned and operated by The Bath Stone Firms Ltd, of Bath.

Mining for stone in Monkton Farleigh had ended by the 1930s.

The war department took over the mine workings in the later 1930's, prior to World War 2, and the workings came under the Corsham-based Central Ammunition Department, being the largest of its' four component sites. Over 2,000,000 square feet of old mine workings were converted by the Royal Engineers to store ammunition, and there was considerable construction of access ramps, slope shafts and air shafts, along with the removal of thousands of tons of old stone debris and the fitting of conveyor belts, lighting, communications equipment, air conditioning and necessary facilities for the workers who would be operating the site. Floors were concreted, and the stone pillars supporting the tunnel roofs were also bound in concrete to strengthen them.

Access to the site was normally via narrow country lanes, so a more practical solution for the expected volume of movements was sought. Initially an aerial ropeway from the sidings up to the depot was used as a temporary measure to allow the depot to begin operating as soon as possible. Eventually, a tunnel slightly over a mile long was constructed down through the hill to Farleigh Down sidings at Shockerwick, with the lower parts of the tunnel just barely under the surface, and underneath the sidings a sorting and loading/delivery yard was built. This access system was designed to handle over 1,000 tons of ammunition daily via a conveyor belt in the tunnel linking the mine and sidings, and provided secure and largely hidden working for the depot. Work on the conversion of the mines and the construction of the tunnel was completed, and the depot was fully functional, by the end of 1941. The underground storage had a constant temperature, but the humidity was an issue for the storage of ammunition, hence to provision of air-conditioning. Precautions taken inside the depot included the provision of a special anti-spark flooring material, the banning of smoking, and a ban on penknives and anything of a similar nature which might cause a spark.

At its peak, the facility held over 100,000 tons of ammunition, making it part of the largest underground ammunition store in Europe. The total capacity of the Central Ammunition Depot across all sites in the area reached 250,000 tons at peak.

The depot closed shortly after the end of World War 2, but was kept in a state of operational readiness until the 1950's, when it was declared surplus to requirements. The workings were gradually run down, and sold in 1975, at which point they were left unused for a considerable time, and many of the existing fittings were stolen, and there was extensive vandalism of the site.

The depot was sold again in 1984, and briefly opened as a museum - at that time I was living in Bathford and had the pleasure of visiting the museum. I remember going down the long access ramp into the workings and taking the tour, which covered both the parts which had been converted for ammunition storage and a small part of the remaining unconverted old stone workings. At the time of the visit a good number of fixtures and fittings were in place, including amongst other things central conveyor belts in the tunnels, original lighting in the tunnel roofs, a telephone exchange and an enormous electrically-operated fan covered with a metal grid, part of the air-conditioning system to move air around the tunnels. The tunnels and storage bays were white and stencilled location notices were visible on the walls, especially at passage junctions. The enormous size of the store was very evident. By contrast, the unconverted old stone workings were dark, dusty, and had not had all the loose stone debris removed from the floors. The supporting stone pillars were in place and the stone facings bore traces of the last cuts made in them.

The freehold to the workings was bought out in 1990 and the museum had to close, upon which the site again lay empty for some time and was further vandalised.

In 1996, most of the depot was bought for document storage by a security company, who remain the owners and occupiers of most of the site. Two areas of the depot not bought by the company were securely sealed off and are currently abandoned, as is the tunnel down to the sidings.