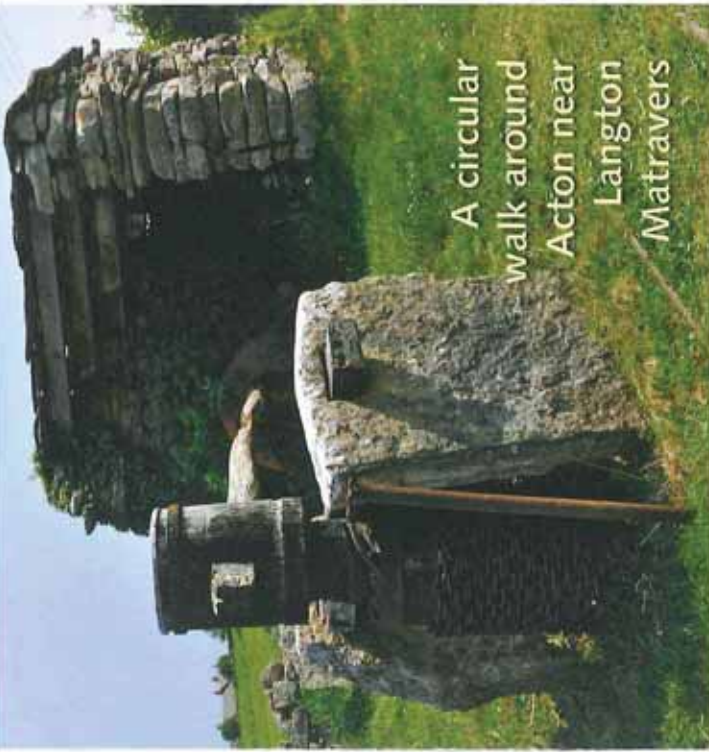


Quarrymans' Ways



A circular walk around Acton near Langton Matravers

Approx. distance 3km (1.5 miles)

'When you dig a block of stone you're the first man to handle it - when you stop and look behind there's a new bit of the world that's never been seen before...'

from
'Purbeck Shop'
by Eric Bentfield



Purbeck
Keystone
Project

Hello to you. My name is Tom and I worked in the stone quarries here nearly a hundred years ago. Most of the scrubby patches of trees you can see in the fields mark the top of an old quarry. They're all blocked off now so cows don't fall down them.

Hard work it was down them quarries with a single candle stuck on the wall with a wedge of clay. The funny thing was the temperatures always stayed the same – a bit like an October day. Bats liked it down there – used to hang upside down just above our heads but I'll tell you about them later. They opened up the underground quarries after the English Civil War and the fire of London. There was so much damage, they needed stone for all the re-building that needed to be done. Good times they must have been for quarrymen. Just a thought – they say so much stone was quarried where we are

standing that there's only fifteen feet of stone under us.

Below that is a great big gap with just an occasional pile of stone called a 'leg' supporting the roof.

On the right was Lander's Quarry, right in the middle of the field where those bushes are. They say the name came from a shipwrecked sailor who landed here, so they called him 'Lander'.

Park in the small car park. Walk down the lane toward the village – it's very narrow so watch for traffic.



Only quarrymen lived in Acton when I was a boy. There's not a lot of soil here because the stone is so close to the surface. Couldn't grow your own vegetables so you bought them from Langton just down the road – couldn't dig holes for toilet waste either – most of it was just poured away to drip down through the limestone – guess where it finished up? Yes, dripping onto the quarrymen's heads as they worked!

Oh, these modern quarries, we had no machines to do the work for us. A hammer, punch and a shovel to get the stone out and a wagon to take it to the surface was all we had. The hardest bit was putting up the legs to support the roof. One day, father and son was working in a quarry

on the right. Just over there, putting up the last stone to jam the leg under the ceiling when old William yelled. He'd got his beard

trapped – ginger colour it was. He hollered and shouted –

eventually one of his sons struck a match and freed his father by burning

his beard right through!

Cor, the fuss he made about that beard!



Father's beard jammed by stone

Continue through the village passing the modern quarry on your right until you reach the end of the village – when you reach the 'T' junction turn left, this is the Priest's Way. Walk about 200 metres to the interpretation board, you may like to stop and read it.



The track you are walking along is one of the oldest roads in Purbeck. It's called the Priest's Way and for many a year the priest rode his pony or walked between the churches of Swanage, Langton Matravers and Worth Matravers to take the service.

The dry stone walls mark some of the old Saxon boundaries and have been repaired and re-built for a thousand years.

Stone is scattered over the fields very close to the surface so it's easy to pick up and use it for the dry stone walls. It's a good way to clear a field of stone that might break a plough.

About ten years ago a farmer repairing a dry stone wall found an old bottle wedged at the bottom. Had some funny things in it - salt water, animal fat and a dress making pin - the experts had a look and said it may have been put there to protect cows from catching a disease from the next farm.



It wasn't long ago that the old men still walked to work in top hats and tailcoats – grand figures they were. Coat was changed when they got to the quarry and hat hung on a wooden peg. When they got home at night they would sit upright in their chairs and let their wives wash the stone dust from their faces and necks. If they had no wife, a daughter or neighbour would take on the duty every night. These were the last generation of men to be washed by their womenfolk. Some of the boys working in the quarries used to nail the top hats to the wooden peg – rotten trick to play on such proud and respected men of Purbeck!

Only light in the quarry was a candle that you stuck on the wall with a wedge of clay – no watch to look at so had no idea of time.

My dad would go down in the dark and come up in the dark – had beautiful hands too. The clay between the beds of limestone made them so soft.



Follow the track for about another two hundred metres – on the left there are stone steps up one side on the wall and down the other (this is an old stone stile). Go over the stile or through the gate and remember to make sure the stone wall behind you. Follow the dry stone wall through two fields to the cottages.



Go past the cottages until you get to the road. Cross carefully to the pavement on the other side and turn left. About 100 metres along the pavement turn right and follow the track down the slope past Court Pound Cottage.



This is Court Pound Cottage – bet you don't know what a 'pound' is – well I'll tell you. We had lots of donkeys working at the quarries. At the end of the day they were put in a field at night to eat the grass, but oh boy were they good at getting out! Some kind man passing would put them in the pound (a walled area) so we'd know where to find them in the morning. They say we had the biggest pound in Dorset, it took up most of the garden behind the cottage.



I started work here when I was still at school – used to come up here whenever I could and mind the donkey. Important job that. The donkey takes the 'spack' (the long pole) round the capstan to winch the stone up the steep slide from the quarry. The little huts at each end of the quarry are 'quarr' houses where the stone was worked. Always had two facing different ways so you could get out of the rain.

As you leave Norman's Quarry, continue along the path, bearing left and walk towards the 'Nissen Hut' This is Albie's Barn. It's been here since 1942 – now used to store bits and pieces. About fifty metres before the shed, turn left along a grassy path with a bank of stone (it looks like a large mound) on your right. Bower's Quarry is straight ahead.



The Greater Horseshoe Bats live in some of these quarries now, great big things they are. They like it here because the temperature stays the same – about twelve degrees centigrade (54°F) all year round they say. Just right for their winter sleep (hibernation). In the summer they fly out in the evening to feed on insects like moths.

There's said to be an old man's head beneath a stone in one of the quarries. Old Bert was digging out a big stone, had taken out all the clay and small blocks from underneath so he got right under it and into the gap he had made to knock out the main supports.

There was only room to kneel with his head held sideways under the big stone. Each time he hammered, the gap got smaller, one last blow and the stone dropped on his head.

The big stone was a worthwhile piece of material and an old man's crushed head wouldn't have been allowed to hold up industry for long! It was hard work down those underground quarries. Today the quarries are worked above ground and you can feel the wind and rain in your face. It will be a poorer place when no stone is quarried in Purbeck...



Follow the footpath to the left of the quarry, over a stile and across the field to the right of a 'quarr' house. Go through the gate and continue diagonally up the slope of the next field. Climb the last stile where you can see a red telephone box and cross the road to the car park.



BURNGATE STONE CENTRE

As you cross the field there are some new and renovated buildings on your right. This is the new Burngate Stone Centre,

part of the Purbeck Keystone Project. It is a new facility for stoneworking that runs courses in masonry, carving and letter cutting delivered at levels to suit everyone from complete novices to more experienced stone workers. The centre makes use of renovated and extended nineteenth century buildings and bankers sheds and uses only traditional hand tools for its courses. It also rents out workshop space to local masons and carvers. For more information check out the website

www.burrgatestonecentre.co.uk



Purbeck Keystone Project This guide is part of a series of circular walks designed for families to enjoy the beautiful landscape of Purbeck and at the same time help them understand a little of the history that has shaped the area.

Please let us know if you have enjoyed this walk:
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