WESTON MUSEUM

Quarrying and Mining in Weston

Worlebury, the hill between Weston and Worle, is made of limestone formed 300 million years ago when Britain was covered by warm, shallow seas. Earth movements then folded and tilted the rock layers to form the hill. Volcanic activity around 175 million years ago created mineral-rich deposits within cracks and seams in the limestone.

An old mineshaft on Worlebury © Weston Library

Limestone was quarried on Worlebury from the early 1800s until the1980s. Local mining began hundreds of years ago, and lasted until after the First World War. Mineshafts and galleries lie beneath Weston Woods, Worlebury Golf Course and Milton Road Cemetery, even below our streets and houses!

"A Limestone Town"

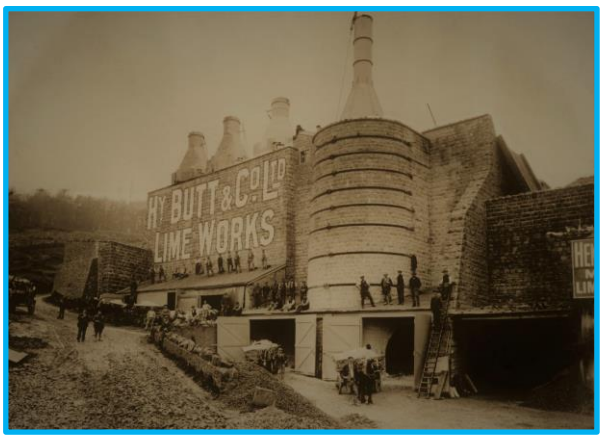
Uphill Quarry, south of Weston, was an important source of limestone from the 1820s until the Second World War. As Weston grew, however, the demand for stone was so great that intensive quarrying also took place along Worlebury.

Worle Quarry, at the east end of the hill, is the oldest of Weston's quarries. It began in 1802 as a "parish quarry", supplying stone to build houses and repair local roads. Mortar was produced at the quarry until 1965. Concrete blocks were made from 1965 until about 1990, when quarrying stopped.

The Town Quarry sits above the centre of Weston, below Weston Woods, and was originally the village gravel pit. It became a parish quarry in 1815, and was then bought by the local council in the 1870s. Much of old Weston was built with stone from this quarry, which was described as "the mother of the town".

Tarmacadam or "tarmac", used to surface roads, was made at the Town Quarry. Liquid tar and crushed limestone were mixed together, by hand at first and then later using machinery. Concrete was produced from 1936, providing building materials for the new housing estates. Quarrying ended in the early 1950s.

Milton Quarry, above what is now Ashbury Drive, opened in the 1850s. It was later renamed Butt's Quarry after Henry Butt, the owner from the mid-1880s. Quicklime, produced by burning limestone in special ovens called kilns, was the main product. Bottle-shaped kilns 60 feet high were built in the early 1900s.



The lime kilns at Butt's Quarry © Weston Library

Each kiln produced around 15 tonnes of lime per day, for use in cement and whitewash. Butt's Quarry was the largest producer of lime in the West of England before the Second World War. By the 1930s the quarry face covered a large part of central Worlebury. The lime kilns were demolished in 1973, shortly after the quarry closed, and the site was developed for housing.

Many smaller quarries also operated along the hillside. Some of these now form the gardens of large houses built from the stone quarried on the site.

The Windsor Castle pub in Milton was originally called The Mason's Arms because most of its trade came from local quarrymen.

Inside the Milton Ochre Mine © Weston Library

Mining – Calamine, Lead & Yellow Ochre

Mining was already in operation by the time quarrying had begun on Worlebury. The mineral deposits – called veins or lodes – created millions of years earlier meant the hill was a rich source of zinc, lead and iron.

In the 1500s, both Henry VIII and Elizabeth I were keen to develop a brass-making industry in England. Brass, made by mixing copper with a zinc ore called calamine, was used in weapons production including cannon at this time. Copper was already mined in England and Wales, but it was necessary to find a calamine source.

Calamine was discovered on Worlebury in 1566, although mining probably began earlier in the century. It was shipped to brass-foundries some distance away, first to Tintern on the River Wye and later to Middlesex. The brass was of such high quality that it gave England the edge during our war with Spain from the 1580s. Calamine mining lasted on Worlebury until the late 1820s.

Mining lead ore, or galena, on Worlebury may date back to the Iron Age and Roman periods. The western end of the hill was mined until the 1820s, when the land was planted to create Weston Woods. A mineshaft was discovered in 1950 near The Old King's Head pub in the centre of old Worle. Mining waste, or "spoil", was dumped on fields known as "Minehills" in Hawthorn Coombe. Spoil was also found in The Maltings area of Worle during building work in the 1970s.

Lead mining on Worlebury resumed from the 1840s until the 1850s. Mines were dug underneath what is now Milton Road Cemetery, and further west around Christ Church on Montpelier. Gravediggers at the cemetery have occasionally broken into chambers in the rock that could be underground mine workings.

Galena, or lead ore © Rob Lavinsky

In 1847 a carthorse fell into a mineshaft that suddenly appeared on farmland east of the cemetery.

The final period of mining took place in the Hazeldene Road area from the First World War until the 1920s. The Milton Ochre Mine produced yellow ochre, an earthy form of iron ore, which was dug out using pick-axes. It was then processed to make paint. The mine is actually a natural limestone cave system and still exists, although it is now covered by roads.

The Landscape Reclaimed

Most of the land on Worlebury that was quarried or mined has been built over. Some places survive, however, although their appearance or use has changed.

Worle Quarry is now a business park. The Town Quarry has been leased by Weston's Civic Society since the 1980s and is managed as a nature reserve. Birds, including kestrels, nest on the quarry face. The vegetation attracts many butterflies, and provides shelter for animals such as badgers and foxes. The remaining quarry buildings house artist studios, a blacksmith and a cafe.

The distinctive landscape created by intensive mining can still be found on the hillside, especially above Milton and in Weston Woods. Lines of pits and humps of spoil mark the location of mine workings. This uneven open land is known locally as "gruffy ground". It is rich in flowers which thrive on limestone grassland, including wild thyme, birds-foot trefoil and yellow rock-rose.

HERITAGE FUND | Weston-super-Mare Town Council