
A TRIP TO LATTON WITH THE MILTON KEYNES GROUP

Alan Saxon

The 'phone rang on a Thursday evening in May; it was Dave, the field trip coordinator, confirming that the trip to Latton was on but also that only two had committed to go... for various reasons everyone else was crying off at the eleventh hour.

"I'll definitely go", I said. "It's only 25 miles up the road".

"Right-oh", said Dave. "Ray and Kerry will be there for a 9.30 start at the quarry office. Good luck". And with that, he put down the 'phone. I paused briefly, still holding the receiver close to my ear with its familiar tone buzzing away. Was that 'Good luck you'll probably need it' or just his usual parting words? Why were so few attending? This group is usually as keen as mustard, I pondered, and yet a good few have been drawing their pensions for some years and might reasonably be expected to pursue a less strenuous pastime. Would I be scratching around in the mud all day to no avail? I hung up and quickly banished such negative thoughts from my head.

I got up on Saturday at 7a.m., yawned, tumbled out of bed and poked my head through the curtains, as you do, blinking at the brightness of a new day, I could see ripple clouds high overhead. It was the sort of sky my grandfather used to call a mackerel sky and I've always thought it a very apt description. Looks like a fine day to me, I thought inwardly. What was that on TV? The outlook is unsettled, sunny intervals and showers? I got packed up with a flask made and sat down to bacon butties and a mug of tea served by my better-half, Diana. I departed with a wave but no toot on the horn; it was too early in the day for that.

Latton was found without much difficulty and I pulled in at the visitor's car park. Nearby, I could see the site office; this consisted of several Porta-cabins with a weighbridge alongside. I was not in the quarry proper but a large yard where the trucks loaded up with aggregates. I could see two large structures like dockside cranes, their jibs angled skyward and beneath one a neat pile of gravel and, beneath the other, rubble. A long conveyor belt stretched across a field and out of sight. Large, steep-sided piles of gravel were dotted around like miniature volcanic cones. No sign of Ray and Kerry as yet. On past field trips with this group, I'd turned up in good time to find everyone else just about to head off so was surprised to find myself alone. I turned on the radio and skipped from channel to channel trying to find something worth listening to and eventually gave up in disgust. I passed the time as best I could watching a convoy of lorries queue up and take their turn on the weighbridge then drive off with clouds of dust kicked up in their wake. Such are the simple pleasures of the bored man. When nothing is happening, you'll watch anything that causes the eye to move.

Glancing down at my watch, I saw that it was 9.20. The quarry man had just finished dealing with his last customer, so while it was quiet I wandered over for a chat.

"Good morning", I said, in my cheeriest voice. "Are you expecting a fossiling party from the Milton Keynes group today?"

"Don't know", he replied with a wry grin.

"This is the only quarry at Latton isn't it?" I enquired.

"Yes I hope so. I've been here 26 years and I've not found another". Smart Alec, I thought, inwardly. Then, trying not to acknowledge this thought moved the conversation swiftly on.

"Good. Then I'm in the right place". He nodded reassuringly, his earlier amused expression slowly subsiding. I studied his face for a moment. He was probably 60-ish and had what we call in the West Country a cider drinker's nose - you know, like a road map covered in little veins. He seemed friendly enough. I hesitated for a moment and drew in a breath

"In the event that no one else turns up can I still go in?"

"Yes of course you can" he replied. This was at least a crumb of comfort, I thought inwardly. However fossil collecting in unfamiliar surroundings can be extremely unrewarding without a friendly guide.

"If you've been here all this time I expect you've got some good fossils at home," I said, trying to find out what I could.

"No, not really" he replied. Then he paused, grinned again. "But I've given some to the local school. It's a famous quarry this is you know, we get em all in 'ere. Yes, we've had BBC2, Channel Four, Time Team. I've got all the videos".

"So you must be a bit of a TV celebrity then", I replied, trying to appeal to his vanity and curious to see his reaction. He looked back at me with a straight face shaking his head from side to side, "No, the only one I've been on is Play School". I thought for a moment; no I'm not going to ask about that, he's probably winding me up.

"I see" was my best reply. At that moment his 'phone rang and after a short conversation the 'phone went back on the hook and he rose from his chair. "Come with me a minute. I've got to throw some switches in the plant room and I'll show you where you can get some fossils".

So, not wishing to look a gift horse in the mouth, I followed him gleefully across the yard. “See that pile of stones, that’s all the rubbish from the sorting machine. I’ve had a flint axe head out of there; you can find some pretty good fossils too if you scratch around a bit”. I began to head in that direction then he said, “Not now, you can have a look over there later. Come with me. I’ve usually got a few bits and pieces in here.” He opened the door to the plant room and we both stepped inside. It was a little gloomy but well maintained; the banks of switches neatly labelled and clean. Reaching on top of a panel he pulled something down. “Oh, I thought I had a few more bits hereabouts”, he said in a slightly disappointed voice, handing me a piece of fossilised wood from the Kellaways Clay. I received it graciously and tried hard not to give off any negative signals although secretly I had hoped for something better. As we walked back across the yard, Ray and Kerry turned up in their white van. I greeted them enthusiastically greatly relieved they were here.

Next, we were invited inside to sign the book and then he said “Come through ‘ere a minute and I’ll show you what you can find”. We followed him into the next room and found ourselves standing by a glass display cabinet. “Well, what do you reckon then?” he asked, proudly. We gazed into the display case and were indeed mightily impressed. There were flint implements, bits of woolly mammoth tusks and teeth and some lovely ammonites and bits of marine reptiles too.

Soon after, we said our goodbyes and started to get our clobber on. This consisted of hard hats, high visibility vests and boots. We were just about to head across to the rubble pile when the cabin door swung open again and the quarry man came across to Kerry and handed her something “Just in case you don’t find one, you better have this” and gave her a beautiful ammonite *Cadoceras sublaeve*, (illustration 1) about 2 inches (5cm) across. I don’t mind admitting I was green with envy but did my best not to show it.



Illustration 1: *Cadoceras sublaeve*

“Let’s have a look then” I said. It was indeed lovely and from the Kellaways Rock, completely free of matrix. It tapered rapidly into a deep recessed centre and it was all there. Soon after we walked across to the pile of stones that he had pointed out earlier and spent a few minutes hunting. I was delighted to find a *Cadoceras* almost as good, and Ray picked up what he thought to be a tooth of an early horse.

Then it was back to the vehicles; we drove up the road some way then took a right up a quiet lane and stopped pulling on to a wide grass verge by a gate. Now on foot, we proceeded through the gate, turning right, and could hear the hum of machinery running nearby. It was the main conveyor belt and had a small up-and-over foot-bridge. We crossed over it and glanced right to see the conveyor disappear into a short tunnel under the road. Soon after, we found ourselves above a low section of cliff where we paused a moment to survey the surroundings.

“Have you been to Latton before, Alan?”, Ray asked.

“No, it’s my first time” I replied.

“Right, I’ll explain what to look for. Can you see the various boulders strewn about down there? Most have been dragged up out of that trench or levered out of the ground. All that area in the foreground to middle distance is in the Callovian”. We surveyed a boulder strewn landscape with small puddles and pools scattered around and with a deep trench cut down into the clay below running away into the distance.

“Now, look further on, to that large expanse of clay with that mound in the far distance. That’s the lower Oxford Clay; the Jason zone to be precise. The mound will eventually become an island when extraction is complete and the area flooded. Look across to your far left and there are the Thames valley gravels. The deep trenches dug down into the clay are designed to lower the water table and dry out the gravels because they are loosely cemented when wet. I see you’ve brought your sledge hammer. Good move, you’ll need it today to crack open the big boulders. Okay, I’m off now. See you later”. He strode off with Kerry close on his heels.

I paused a while, transfixed by the gravel beds; they really were impressive, stretching from just below the top soil down some 6 metres or more. Some layers were coarse and others fine, almost sand and various grades in between representing bed-load from ancient rivers, sometimes vigorous and fast-flowing and sometimes slow and meandering. The gravel terraces are between 300,000 and 10,000 years old and represent seasonal run-off from melting glaciers some way further north. With a climate considerably colder than today, sea water levels were lower and a land bridge connected Britain to mainland Europe. My mind began to wander back to the Pleistocene, (illustration 2) to early man wandering across vast unspoilt tracts of tundra, to woolly mammoths, bears and the like

and to a landscape not unlike parts of northern Canada today; small groups of hunters, like insignificant ants, moving purposely across an untamed wilderness endlessly searching for their next meal, living on their wits.



Illustration 2: Pleistocene scene?

These river systems represented today by the terraced gravel beds would, I am sure, be packed full of salmon and sea-trout racing up stream in vast numbers to their spawning grounds. Early man would be ready for this annual migration, but so too would bears and other predators and conflict would inevitably arise over the best fishing spots. When the wind swung round from the north it would blow a chilled wind from the vast ice sheet covering most of Britain and bring sleet and snow. It must have been a tough existence. I stopped dreaming of hunter-gatherers and decided it was about time I started hunting myself; fossil hunting, that is, before my compatriots got all the best ones. I looked down from my elevated position and studied Ray's technique a few moments longer before moving off. I had a steep learning curve, and, as anyone who collects fossils will tell you, success only comes with focus and perseverance.

As I traversed across the top of the low cliff, I could hear the skylarks high above; a beautiful soothing sound that is always music to the ears. I can listen to it endlessly. I soon became aware of another; a short urgent chirp and, looking down, could see little birds darting in and out of burrows in the sandy part of the cliff. They were Sand martins frantically feeding their young. In a few short months the new arrivals would be undertaking an epic journey back to their winter feeding grounds in Africa. These birds are on the R.S.P.B. amber list. This means the population has crashed but is in recovery. I later discovered that the quarry owners always set aside a section of exposed sandy cliff to expand potential nesting sites for them. I soon rounded the end of the cliff and descended to the quarry floor. Here, the trench disappeared into a deep pool and a pump was installed on a makeshift raft, the frame made up from pieces of angle iron with 50-gallon oil drums serving as floats. This was emptying the sump, although I never did see where the water was pumped to.

I was suddenly aware of dropping light levels and, casting my eyes skyward, could see some rather ominous clouds

had bubbled up and obscured the sun. One or two spits and spats of rain arrived and a faint rumble of thunder but nothing much. I pressed on, determined to leave my waterproofs inside the rucksack if at all possible. It looked as though the weatherman was to be proved right on this occasion. I soon set to and began the serious business of hunting down those fossils. Soon the sun re-appeared and lifted my spirits. It was not long before I could hear Ray's hammer raining blows down on the nodules. Soon after, my own sledge joined in and was being put to good use instead of gathering cob-webs and rust in the garden shed. I whacked a rock here and another there but they yielded no pleasant surprises, just more rock but smaller than before.

Presently I came across Kerry. She had found a large clay encrusted limestone nodule with the keels of two rather nice looking Callovian ammonites just emerging from the edge, their white aragonite shells silhouetted against the grey surroundings. But the rock was large and well buried so she had set about clearing away the loose clay from around it. I was cracking nodules all over the place but not having too much luck, lots of veins of calcite, but no sign of those elusive ammonites. Still it was early days, I told myself. I'll get there, providing I can stay focused and keep my morale up. Apathy is your worst enemy; you must believe in yourself and the task you've set. I have spoken to many people who profess to an inability to find good fossils, but, in my experience, hard work and perseverance will nearly always pay off in the end. After a while I was rewarded with a fairly reasonable *Sigaloceras calloviense*, (illustration 3) in a grey limestone nodule and I happily packed it away.

*Illustration 3:
Sigaloceras
calloviense*



Ray was ahead, working along one side of the trench, his eyes everywhere. I was watching a very experienced collector in action. I followed at a respectful distance on the opposite side. As I scanned the bottom of the trench, I could see crystal-clear water flowing along it and here and there clumps of bulrushes flourished with their immaculate brown velvet heads standing proud. Now and again, I'd hear the beating wings of the giant dragonfly and look up to catch a fleeting glimpse of this beautiful insect, its long slender tail glinting metallic blue in the sunshine. The trench was now intersected by another running left to right

and a decision was required on which way to go next. Ray took a few paces back, then ran and leaped across the watery gap, continuing in a similar direction into the area he had described as the Lower Oxford Clay. I, the novice, decided to follow him into this new area. Entering this large expanse of Clay, we now had plenty of room to fan out in different directions. I was glad of this and I expect he was too. I can well remember as a child fishing off the harbour wall with my school mates. If someone reeled in a nice fish, everyone else tried to dunk their lines in as close as possible to that special spot and squabbles could arise over fishing rights. I was still cracking nodules but still not having much success. The weather threatened to close in again accompanied by a few more rumbles of thunder, louder than before. Soon light rain began falling all around. I cursed inwardly. I had dumped my rucksack further back along the trench. "I must get back to my waterproofs before the rain sets in", I thought. It was not long before I arrived at my rucksack and began frantically digging for the waterproofs. Ray stopped for a quick chat before joining Kerry and they swiftly headed out to the van for shelter and a bite to eat.

I put my waterproofs on just as the rain slowed and, soon after, it stopped. I decided it was time for a coffee and a bite to eat myself. Unless it got bad I would be staying but it's a waste of precious fossiling time to go back to the car. Just as the proverbial pig is happy to wallow in the mud, so I will endure my immediate surroundings whatever they are and make myself as comfortable as possible. After a Cornish Pasty, some coffee and a swig or two of water I was off again. I spied a large nodule on the far side of the trench and I could see a bit of an ammonite sticking out. Making my way across, I hit the rock hard hoping to break off a fragment with the fossil in it. Alas, it wasn't to be. However, another ammonite emerged from the freshly broken face. Again I took careful aim but it broke up yet again. It really was bad luck, but on closer examination the rock was heavily veined with white calcite crystals that criss-crossed these little ammonites. So, unless I could muster up a petrol-driven Stihl saw, it was nigh well inevitable.

I was soon on the move again, making my way over the intersecting trench and once more towards the large open spaces beyond. I found some more *Kosmoceras*, this time in a much smaller block and less heavily veined with crystal than before. I got my small hammer out and was surprised at how easily this rock fell apart and soon discovered the reason. These ammonites were clustered together, some directly on top of each other and so parted easily. I got one or two good ones out. The state of preservation was stunning. As I looked up I saw a small area was taped off and had some warning notice attached. As I got closer, I read the sign 'Ringed Plovers nesting. Please keep out'. Later investigation revealed this bird also to be on the amber list.

Soon after, I made my way back over the deep trench to catch sight of Ray pulling a little truck behind him. Kerry's

large limestone nodule was inside. Were they packing up for the day? I'd better check it out. I quickened my pace and caught up just as they reached the vehicles. I gave Ray a hand to lift this block into the back of his van which sank noticeably on receiving its new load.

"Are you planning to pack up now, Ray?", I enquired.

"Oh, not yet! Kerry's had enough. She'll stop in the van but I'm going back in. I thought I'd have a look across the far side below the steep gravel bank"

"Then I'll have one last look too," I said. We scouted around that spot and had to wade through shallow water in a few places but never turned up much. Then we went back on to the large expanse of clay that we had scoured earlier. We both had a few more finds, but by 4.30 p.m. I was definitely running out of steam and said my goodbyes to Ray. I got back to the car, had a quick chat to Kerry who looked very comfortable reading a book and set off for home like the cat that got the cream. I had had an excellent day out, thanks to the Milton Keynes Group and was already looking forward to my next trip.

The story I have just revealed happened last May and I have just re-visited, almost a year on to the day. The Oxford Clay in the far distance referred to by Ray as the Jason zone is now a lake with an island, and secure nesting sites for the Ringed Plover. The boulder strewn foreground is slowly flooding and just a scattering of rocks peep out. The banks have been graded and seeded with grass and are coming on nicely. Last year's brood of Sand martins have returned again from Africa. So the cycle of life goes round and if you're asking yourself, "is the author a little disappointed that the fossils have been submerged?". Well, perhaps just a tad, but across the far side of the A419 a new Latton quarry is emerging and when they've dug a bit deeper, I hope to return.

ILCHESTER-BARRINGTON GAS PIPELINE 2006 *Hugh Prudden*

Logged by kind permission and support of Laing-O'Rourke and NatGrid.

Hugh's observations on his day in the field:-

Conditions difficult at times: heatwave, distances to be plodded (no longer young), trench spoil at side of trench very difficult at times to clamber over, trench steep and some 3m deep, machinery, welding, radioactivity, dressed in heavy orange overalls (cp Iraq hostages), hard hat, dark goggles provided by the firm who insisted on 7 hour H&S initiation. Environmental Manager provided plans thank Goodness. But superb workmen all very friendly and helpful from all parts of UK! Fossils conspicuous by absence.