

formed in this way.

The square sandstone plateaux, pillars and pinnacles are caused by dislocation followed by erosion over millions of years. It is a fascinating and beautiful place to visit if you are ever in the area.

The geology is taken from "The Saxon Switzerland NP", by R Dobermann, Schoningh Verlag

PURBECK STONE

John Parkins

The Isle of Purbeck was, during the late forties, a good place to be young. Coming from a blitzed house in London there was a degree of freedom denied to most young people today. Having dug my first fossil from out of a Wareham garden when nine, I was able to cycle all over the island, from the chalk of Ballard to the limestones and greensands of Lulworth; an area that was later to become the eastern part of the Jurassic Coast. That first fossil remains a tantalising mystery for although Wareham is situated on the Eocene, the fossil is Lower Jurassic. The house was once a small coaching inn and I have visions of a child losing a treasured find on the way home, or a parent surreptitiously dumping it.

The heart of Purbeck is the land between the high coastal ridge and the chalk Purbeck Hills inland that run from sea to sea, breached only at Corfe where Crow Castle stands sentinel. Between these, the softer Lower Jurassic beds line a rich green valley that narrows westwards. Moving upwards from this lower land, seawards, the hedgerows give way to dry stone walls that in those days enclosed a private feeling place, a place distinct in

character from the rest of Purbeck, where the air influenced by the proximity of the sea is thinner, fresher. From the time of the Romans whose Kimmeridge shale jewellery, tesserae and furniture is found widely, until comparatively recently, this was a place of small quarries worked by one man or a family, cutting and working the slabs of Purbeck Stone or the decorative 'marble', densely packed with the freshwater shells of *viviparus* and glowing in deep rich greens and reds. At least one local church there is richly decorated with it as a catalogue of what can be offered. It can also be found in Salisbury Cathedral. Much of Purbeck stone is a soft golden coloured rock full of shell that weathers far more readily than that from Portland to the west. As a consequence whilst Portland graces such places as St. Pauls and The British Museum, much from this island is confined to a more local use adding distinctive touch to the vernacular architecture.



With a growing fashion for more distant and exotic materials many of the Purbeck quarries amalgamated. There were a few, however, that continued to work in a smaller scale quite late. One of these was Thomas Hancock whose yard was next to Swanage railway station and with whose children I went to school. In these days of steam nostalgia many ride the preserved rump of the Swanage line, often pulled by a West of England steam loco

that with the King Arthurs, Nelsons and Battle of Britains also filled a large part of my time then. The journey from Wareham to Swanage in the two carriage train was an everyday event. The nearby stone yard was too much of a temptation to pass for beside the headstones, bird baths and statues were the most fabulous things I had ever seen. Leaning against the wall of his workshop were ammonites half as tall as me, a few even taller. As if that was not enough there were



taller slabs with prints as if some giant bird had walked across them. I often hung over the wall gazing at those magical seeming three toed marks. If the cycling cemented my lifelong hobby then it was Hancock's yard that created my sense of wonder at what was possible, for I had cycled where dinosaurs had walked.

In the seventies I needed a headstone for my mother who was to be interred at Wareham. The cemetery looks past the Saxon East Wall to where the low river edging land, then heavily reeded and prone to flood, passes Arne, Shipstall and touches the shore of Poole Harbour; a less well known Purbeck landscape but one now appreciated by the RSPB. Purbeck stone was the obvious choice of material. By this time this was not easy to find, incoming types prevailed. I went back to that small yard in Swanage. It was now very rundown and there was no work on show in

the fore yard. A general air of tiredness hung over the place. Mr. Hancock was delighted that I remembered him from thirty years before and we talked for quite a while about that time. Eventually I told him the purpose of my visit and he led me through his wooden workshop to the yard at the rear and to a very different scene. Stacked in rows against the wall were slabs of yellow Purbeck Stone cut by him out of his quarry. Showing his understanding of his material, he eased each one forward in turn telling me it's history, it's qualities and exactly where it had been quarried, much as someone might describe a fine wine. He understood the properties of his stone as woodcarvers understand the flow of grain. Finally he selected one and struck it with a mallet, "See, it rings true", he said. He again hit the slab and it was possible to hear a true note ringing through the stone.

Once approved, the stone was set aside to be prepared; shaped bearing just a name and date, thus respecting the essential qualities of the rock and the association of place and the person beneath. Unlike many formal monuments, Thomas Hancock did not put his name on the back of the stone. When we spoke of the simple shape and textured finish he empathised with why I had chosen that. He was content to let the stone speak, which it does.

The man, like the stone, rang true.

Postscript

Both the garden where I dug my first fossil and Hancock's Yard are now beneath the tarmac of car parks.