

THE VIEW OF DULCOTE - A Changing Scene

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The Hamlet of Dulcote, situated about a mile to the south-east of the Cathedral City of Wells in Somerset, has a long history. It seems first to appear in the pages of record as a possession the Bishopric of Bath and Wells in the time of Bishop Robert (1136-1166).

It is set under the shoulder of Dulcote Hill in the valley of the River Sheppey. This stream, a tributary of the River Brue, rises close to the village of Doulting just east of Shepton Mallet. Indeed the name Dulcote evidently derives from 'Dultingcote' - the cottage, or shelter, by the Doulting river. To the north of the river the land rises to a peninsular ridge of the Mendip Hills crowned by the ancient earthworks of the 'Kings Castle'. Immediately westward the Sheppey vale debouches into the more open country forming the north-eastern march of the Glastonbury Levels.

Beside, and under, the roadway 150 yards south of the cross-roads in Dulcote there are natural water springs with a mean daily outflow of about 100,000 gallons. They have no proved feeders but they did dry up temporarily after blasting in a well in the local quarry about 1900. These springs were capped and used for the Hamlet's water supply, the overflow supplying the fountain and grotto at the cross-roads before entering another stream that runs westwards in a nearby private garden. As is normal with water derived from limestone aquifers, this supply contains high levels of dissolved calcium hydrogen carbonate it is 'hard' water. It is so highly charged with the substance that the springs are classed as 'petrifying springs'. Objects placed in the water near to the point of emergence become coated with layers of limestone as the water begins to evaporate and lose carbon dioxide gas. Porous materials such as those making up hats and gloves become literally petrified or turned to stone as the 'tufa' is deposited in the interstices between their fibres.

The Paper Mill

Apart from Agriculture, Dulcote's main industrial centre up to the 1900s was its paper mill. Most of the many paper mills which historically have used the power of the streams flowing from the Mendips have been sited very close to the heads of their valleys to secure a very clean process water supply. Dulcote Mill is one of the few to be located some distance from its source.

The earliest known reference to Dulcote Mill is from 1752. Paper was made there throughout the nineteenth century but, about 1898, production switched to 'leather board' - a form of fibre board used for stiffeners in the Boot and Shoe industry centred on Street. On 23 September 1904 the Mill was destroyed by fire and was never rebuilt. The ruined buildings and chimney still stand upstream of the main road, behind the red brick Georgian Mill house which is now a private residence, and they are clearly visible from the road. However the present industrial focus of Dulcote had already come into existence before the 1904 conflagration.

Quarrying

Dulcote Hill forms a prominent feature if one looks east from the Bishop's Palace in Wells. Geologically it is an 'inlier' - a mass of carboniferous limestone, with many large calcite veins, totally surrounded by younger Triassic rocks. The structure is complex, with the strata being folded to such a degree that in places they are upside-down; the area is extensively faulted and the rocks are often shattered.

A number of small caves have been found in this hill, and water worn 'pipes' in the limestone are frequently seen in quarrying. Many of the caves and fissures have been found to contain bones including those of mammoth, hyena, cave bear, bison and glutton. The hill is fringed to the north by a thin, bright red, Triassic conglomerate which has been used locally for building along with the limestone. Serious quarrying began in Dulcote Hill about 1890; however some thirty years passed before the first major expansion took place. After the First World War a rapid growth in the demand for road-stone was accompanied by the development of more modern quarrying methods. The limestone of Dulcote Hill proved to be an irresistible attraction to the industry.

In 1922 Foster Yeoman, the son of a West Hartlepool ship owner, came south and entered the quarrying business. He founded the company, which still bears his name, in 1923 with the intention of producing crushed macadam - small stones for road surfacing - for use in the south and east of England. It was initially centred on one quarry on the southern flanks of Dulcote Hill.

The quarry soon provided much needed work for some hundred men - mainly unemployed veterans of the Great War. This was quite a large labour force for a relatively small quarry in those days. Rock was blasted out of the hill and then broken by hand before being fed into a crushing plant. The output from this was put through another plant where it received a coating of asphalt to bind the stones together.

Up to the outbreak of World War II the quarry product was dispatched from Dulcote sidings in a company owned fleet of 150 railway wagons. After the War, road transport supplanted rail and by the late 1950s independent haulage contractors with a large fleet of lorries handled the output of Dulcote Quarry. The old East Somerset Extension railway line, opened by the GWR as a broad gauge track from Shepton Mallet to Wells on 1 March 1862, was finally closed down during the Beeching era in the early 1960s.

For a number of years the road-stone quarries of North Somerset expanded at a moderate rate such that the threat they posed to the environment was not generally recognised. Many very large unconditional planning consents were granted in the years immediately following the Second World War, including licence to remove more than half of Dulcote Hill. One must

charitably assume that the planning authorities did not fully appreciate the potential effect of their decisions on the landscape, given under the then pressure to overcome building material shortages in post-war rebuilding.

In some cases there was a reaction from the local populace, and protests by the citizens of Wells gave rise to a Public Inquiry in 1947. As a result of this Inquiry an Order was issued to preserve the overall appearance of the skyline at Dulcote. There were further campaigns against extensions of the quarries at Dulcote in the early 1950s. Another Public Inquiry took place in 1954, by which time Somerset County Council had taken over responsibility for Mineral Extraction planning decisions. Their first County Development Plan, formulated in 1953, defined the whole of Mendip as an Area of Special Landscape Value, but favoured the concentration of the quarrying industry in East Mendip.

Over the years, millions of tons of limestone have been removed from the heart of Dulcote Hill. The overall appearance of the skyline of Dulcote has changed, as can be seen by comparing the old postcard with the photograph taken from the same viewpoint in 1989. Considerable scrub growth has occurred on what are now the upper slopes, and a number of new dwellings have appeared in the village - but the most striking change is the disappearance of most of the top of the hill. Foster Yeoman's original quarry is now mainly used for training purposes, although twenty of the firm's older men work there, producing about a thousand tons of crushed rock each day, as well as retrieving some of the ornamental Agates. These are polished, and sold in the quarry's offices. This is one of the few quarries in this country to incorporate a gift shop!

The 1981 Minerals Act includes clauses insisting on disused workings being properly landscaped or at least camouflaged by trees and earthworks. A decision was taken to make a start

at restoring the profile of Dulcote Hill by filling in the now defunct eastern part of the quarry. This was turned into one of Somerset County Council's Civic Amenity Sites or waste tips. Domestic and garden rubbish are received into skips at a transfer station at the entrance to the site, before being tipped as landfill, while industrial material is disposed of under supervision. Tree planting has been started and the raw scar of the tip surface is beginning to mellow.

This brings our story of the changing scene at Dulcote up to date. Removal of stone from the hill is still going on, albeit at a reduced rate. The original skyline will never return but the scars are beginning to heal; Dulcote still occupies an attractive corner of pastoral Somerset.

Further Reading

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