

## NOTES ON A CONVERSATION WITH CECIL AND MARY CLARK OF LIMEKILN COTTAGE, STOKE ST MARY, RELATING TO THOMAS BURT, LIME BURNER, MRS CLARK'S FATHER, 13 JULY 1982

The double kilns beside Lime Kiln Cottage, Stoke Hill, bear a stone with the date 1906 and the initials "G.S." those of George Small, builder and Limeburner of Furze Cottage, Stoke St Mary. Thomas Burt, born at Rook's Well Cottage, Thornfalcon, in about 1890 (he died in 1963, aged about 73), was subsequently employed by Small's to run the kilns, moving to Lime Kiln Cottage when his daughter, Mrs Mary Clarke, was six years old. He continued to operate the kilns until 1939, and apparently gave them up when the quarry in the field behind, Rooks Well Mead, was worked out.

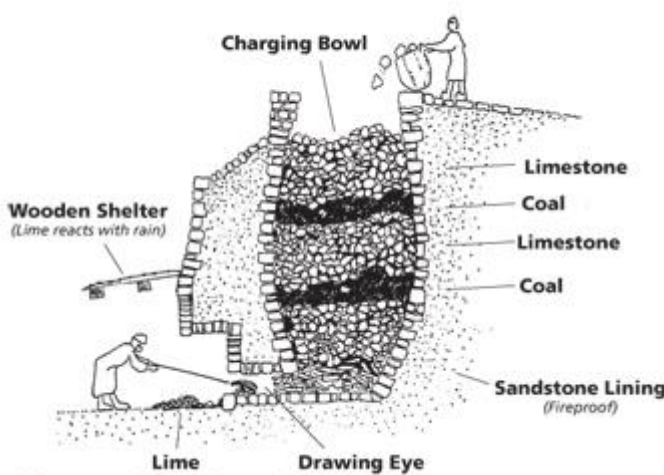
The lias strata around Stoke, West Hatch and Thurlbear runs diagonally downwards in three layers composed of blue lias, "rubbish" stone and "white rock", the last being the most durable and the preferred building material. Both blue lias and white rock were used for burning into lime.

In the old days small kilns might be built wherever there was a lias outcrop and operated until the strata went down too deep to be easily worked. Stoke, West Hatch and Thurlbear were much associated with the trade though Curry Mallet had its own kilns. The kilns of 1906 were of a larger scale the most others locally and survived the longest.

The working day at the kilns was from 7 am to 5 pm and payment was made by the yard (presumably of stone quarried). Five or six men regularly worked under Tom Burt notably the members of the Morse, Wadham and Hector families. Frankie Wadham would walk to the kilns from his home near Winterwell, Thurlbear and is remembered arriving with his bread and cheese tied up in a red handkerchief carried over his shoulder at the end of the stick. They would cook bloaters by the heat of the kiln and bake potatoes as a treat for the children. There was always tea to be drunk, though cider was what they liked best. The kilns were a favourite stopping place for tramps who would spend the night by their warmth.

The stone having been quarried, it was brought up in wheelbarrows along a network of planks and piled near the top the kilns on the eastern side of Rooks Well Mead, there it would be broken into pieces ready for burning. The burning process itself took place in a shaft lined with fire bricks which was built into the back of the kiln structure and occupied its full height. Alternate layers of small coal called Culm (pronounced "culum" by the Clarkes), stone, dirt and culm, each about five or six inches

in depth, was shovelled into the shaft and once the burning had begun regular replenishing meant that the fire never entirely went out. The culm was wetted with well-water before use, as was the small coal used in a Smithy. While the fire continued burning on top the shaft itself filled with the burnt lime which could be removed as necessary from an opening near the base of the shaft. Only as much lime could be taken during the day as was sufficiently far from the seat of the fire to be cool.



By 6.30 in the morning the farmers would already have their carts lined up in the road outside Limekiln cottage anxious to take a load of lime while the day's supply lasted. They used it mostly on the land as a fertiliser and as a means of keeping the fields clean but it was also used for making mortar and for whitewashing. They came from all the villages around and from as far afield as Iminster and Bridgwater and one farmer from North Petherton is specially remembered for his horses splendidly turned out with horse brasses. The carts would be backed up to a platform near the mouth of the kilns and loaded with lime from barrows. A heaped barrow was reckoned as a hogshead, the measure by which the lime was sold though if a farmer was so thoughtful as to bring some cider he could expect to be given a little more lime for his money. Built into the wall in the mouth of each limekiln was a safe where Tom Burt kept his ledgers and the money was taken.

When the day's work was over, the fire would be damped down by placing a wooden flap over the opening at the base of the shaft and making it air-tight with a sealing of cow dung. The fire glowed on in the night and sometimes in the early hours Mrs Clark remembers her father would hurry out with a hurricane lamp when a change of winds threatened to make the fire burn up. The disaster the fire going out was to be avoided at all costs. Tom Burt was the last lime burner in a district where the trade was known at least from mediaeval times and probably among the last of the traditional burners in the whole of England.

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The pub which operated from the house now called Barrowgill was known as "Rising Sun" and was still in business during Tom Burt's youth. The custom of burning the ashen faggot continued locally well into his lifetime.

Tom Burt's mother would take her children "leasing" after harvest and having threshed the grain they collected, took it to Peppers Mill at Ash, Thornfalcon to be ground. The millpond there was filled by the stream which forms the eastern boundary of Stoke but once it was empty and there was could a considerable debt before it filled again in the mill wheel could turn.

The stream now has no name (though the Saxon charter of 854 called it "Beading Brook") and apparently begins at a spring a few feet south of Limekiln cottage. In front of the house the stream converges with another small flow of water brought in a pipe from the direction of the adjoining kilns. The spring is never dry and is probably the "Rooks Well" (called the "holy spring" in the charter of 854).

In the 1930s Mr Clarke recalls the road from Chard to Taunton swarmed with tramps all roadsters as they were called. Gypsy caravans often stopped for the night outside Limekiln cottage, though the gypsies would always asked whether other gypsies had stopped there in the last day. If they were told yes, then they moved on. The Clarkess did not know the explanation of this.

T Mayberry  
13 July 1982