

More Stories in Stone

From time to time, in this history series we have pointed out the distinctive stone used in Bickton Church and its boundary wall (built by William Lewis of Old School House). It also appears in the school boundary wall, the 'Yews' at Montford Bridge and a cottage at Preston Montford. To the geologist it is 'Alberbury Breccia' and to the Mason 'Cardiston Stone', consisting of angular white limestone fragments set in a brown sandy matrix. The mixture has a decorative effect, but this makes it difficult to work into regular shapes. At first sight, the fragments may appear a jumbled mass, but closer inspection can reveal how many large pieces have been laid flat by the flow of water which had transported them. Some are even limestone fossils, while other darker pieces represent quite different rocks. Their angular nature suggests that they had travelled only a short distance from their source, not enough to turn them into rounded pebbles.

All these characteristics provide the clues to the rocks geological history, while more human history explains why some appeared in local buildings.

The first story started some 350 million years ago, when a clear, warm, tropical sea covered much of Central England and Wales, as our drifting continents lay near the equator. It was the ideal environment for varied marine life such as corals and crinoids (sea lillies) to build up deposits of lime-rich mud, which consolidated into limestone. The original Welsh Mountains and Shropshire Hills had by this time been so worn down that they were either covered up or could contribute little sediment to spoil the scene. Things change, however, when pressures from the south disturbed our local crust, allowing parts to rise up and others to sink along fault lines. Now, material washed off the hills began filling the new basins causing them to sink even lower, while the hills, relieved of weight, continued to rise, as if on a see-saw.

By coincidence, our drifting coastal plate had by now moved from the wet to the dry tropics, as if moving from Lagos to Timbuktu. One result was the formation of the Alberbury Breccia as a fan of gravel spreading out from 'wadis' in the hills, completely removing their cover of limestone layers south

of Llanymynech. In this sort of climate, the infrequent rains usually came as short, but powerful, storms.

Further sinking in the basin, bury this fan under layers of windblown sand and also tilted it away from the hills. Now, fast forward many millions of years of yet more burial and final erosion, it outcrops as a ridge from Alberbury to Cardeston rising out from those softer sands on either side.

At the Alberbury and it provided rough ground for a mediaeval deer park, as well as stone for local castle buildings. There are several references to it being dug during the Middle Ages, but it always faced competition from better sandstones nearby. For this reason, agricultural reporters at the beginning of the 19th century did not include it in their list of Shropshire building stones, but did record it being burned for lime at Cardeston. However, during the rest of that century attitudes changed thanks to several interrelated factors.

Firstly, by this time the Loton estate was already setting a good example of providing better housing for its workers and tenants, replacing old timber and mud cottages with something better. (Sir Baldwyn Leighton's role in the improvement of poor law and mental care has already been discussed).

As all this was expensive, using materials from within the estate, including the stone, was an advantage. Moreover, bricks were now subject to tax and could thus be used only where it really necessary in chimneys and window and door jambs, difficult to cut from the rough breccia. For the same reason, stone was also used in low value farm outbuildings.

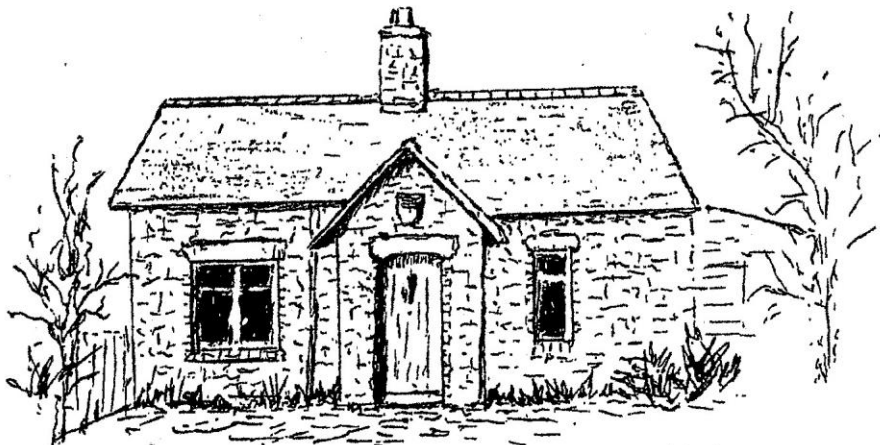
Another factor, continuing from the 18th century, was the desire of many land owners to decorate the estates with 'picturesque' structures. Some even built useless follies, but most blended function with appearance in such buildings as gate lodges in which romantic versions of antique styles were popular. Onslow, for instance, once had 'classical' lodges, while later in the century, mock Tudor or 'black and white' styles appeared, as with the Quarry Lodge in Shrewsbury. The breccia fitted well into these romantic ideas as the rough surface appeared 'old' even when newly built and proved to be a favourite with the restorers of local churches and the castle at Rowton. Thus it was an obvious choice for new churches at Oxon and Bicton.

At the domestic level, the Wingfield estate joined in this trend by using the stone for cottages on its land at Preston Montford about 1840.



Alberbury Breccia/Cardeston Stone

By the end of the century, this fashion was over, but structures still remain. Now conservationists and local communities are sensitive to the appearance of our local landscape and therefore the need to appreciate our truly 'local' stone is as important as ever. Do take a closer look at it when passing! (Or visit Alberbury Village Hall)



*Stone and brick cottage c.1840
Wingfield Estate, Preston Montford*