



STEEPLE ASTON VILLAGE ARCHIVE TRUST

SAVA is always keen to help people in the village unearth pieces of the jigsaw of village and local family history. One such example in the spring of this year was a phone call about the large stone object in the caller's mother's garden. It had been there for at least 30 years and there was another one in the next door garden. She had rung Woodstock Museum, who had helpfully suggested that she contact SAVA.



On inspection it was clear that this was some type of milling stone, but as it had no grooves in the main surface it is also clear that it was not a mill stone as used for flour etc. Its depth (around 450mm) is about twice the typical depth of such stones. Its diameter is around 1200mm and the square spindle hole about 300mm across. It was apparently cut from granite or another similar very hard stone, with flecks of mica visible.

The first question was why was it here? Its weight would be prodigious and it was unlikely to have been moved far; the existence of another one next door (which was not seen) suggests a very local source. The answer probably lies in the fact that Hill House, of whose previous estate this is part, used to have on (or on the edge of) its land, an iron-ore quarry in West Field- visible from Fenway on the left as you drive out of the village. SAVA's book on Business and Trade (p.40) records that an article in the Oxford Chronicle (dated 21st November 1868) made reference to ten men employed there. The Inclosure map suggests that this land was in the ownership of William Wing at that time, but its ownership in the late 1800s is not clear.

Research on the internet reveals that stones such as these- called “edge runners”, were indeed used to crush iron ore, amongst other things. A horse pulled one end of a massive spindle, fixed at the other end to a pivot in the centre of a circle. The runner then rolled along the track (see photograph below). Large pieces of lead ore were shovelled in front of the runner. As the ore was crushed, minerals tended to break at their boundaries. The crushed ore could then be "washed" - sorted by density in a flow of water so that the lead ore could be finally separated- and then carted off somewhere else and smelted to assist in the production of cast iron, which was widely used in this period, before steel production really got under way. The source of a spring is shown on OS maps as being adjacent to the quarry, which may well have enabled this washing process to be carried out on site too. The quarry was substantial enough to require a causeway across the excavations, but the present owner of West Field tells us that only part of this now remains.

As to further detail, we have so far drawn a blank. There is no reference in the Census returns for that period for anyone calling themselves “quarry worker” or suchlike, so we might guess that labour on the site was perhaps occasional, or seasonal and largely a winter occupation for local agricultural workers. We do not know how long this quarry was active, nor where the ore was taken for smelting. In fact, we can’t even be certain that this is what the stone objects in the gardens were really for, but it is our best guess. If it is correct, the one in the first photograph shows little or no signs of use, so could perhaps have been awaiting its turn (forgive the pun), which never came.

Can you throw any more light on this or on related subjects? If so please contact us, or write to SAL with your thoughts. *You can also contact us to buy a copy of SAVA’s book on Steeple Aston Business and Trade, priced £7.50*



Martin Lipson
SAVA
Phone: 347046