

NOTES ON THE SAND WORKINGS IN THE DONCASTER AREA

by

IVOR J. BROWN

The Permian Sandstone of the Doncaster area is poorly cemented and consequently is easily broken down to a sand. Its ease of working has led to the development of at least two underground mines, at Balby and at Barlborough. The Balby workings are by far the better known and indeed became quite famous as a 'show-cave' during the late 19th century.

Balby workings SK 574023

The working of sand appears to have commenced about 1830 when William 'Sandy' Senior purchased an area of land near Green Dyke Lane and the present-day cemetery. Senior set himself up as a sand merchant and according to contemporary reports excavated 'hundreds of thousands of tons' of sand. However, throughout the reports given in the press at that time there is an element of gross exaggeration and this figure should not be taken too seriously. Work almost certainly started in the form of a quarry but about 1850 underground working commenced. These workings are nearly all less than 30 ft deep, and it would not have been too difficult to have continued surface working thus avoiding costly underground passages but Senior was known as an eccentric with a passion for the unusual. At first the workings appear to have been of the conventional pillar and stall type with both pillars about 10 ft wide. The sand was sold as moulding sand.

At this time the area is shown in local maps as Sandpit Kay (Quay?) and in 1854 Senior, owner of Sandpit Lock was paid £50 by Doncaster Council for allowing sewers to go through his land, piped to the Carr. Local tradition has it that this sewer was tunnelled by Senior and that it is the tunnel which runs beneath the present day cemetery footpath. A manhole from the Green Dyke Lane into the tunnel gives further evidence of this. Senior had now caught the bug and with the help of his two sons tunnelled at least 400 ft of passage (press reports say 4000 yds), carved out of the sandstone a complete house of 10 rooms, having 9 ft thick exterior walls and a ballroom capable of holding 300 persons. Along the passages he formed odd shaped rooms, circular rooms of 10 and 12 ft diameter, rectangular rooms with interconnecting passages and most of these he adorned with grotesque sculptures, faces, busts and even an elephant.

The Victorian craze for the unusual was in full swing and for a charge of 6d visitors were shown through the workings. The tunnel was

claimed to be "one of the showpieces of the neighbourhood; indeed there is nothing to equal it in the whole of England". It had gas lighting, a sub-terranean crypt modelled on the catacombs of Rome, the figure of an Irishman 11 ft 6 in tall, the features of Henry VIII, Inigo Jones and Tom Bobbin. Amongst many other attractions there appeared in 1858 a 'mammoth fungus' 15 ft in diameter growing down from a piece of rotting timber. A picture of this appeared in the Doncaster Gazette on 10th August, 1933.

Visitors descended an incline until in the level of the quarry floor some 30 ft down; to one side was the Sand-house cut out of solid rock and beyond this the entrance to the mine. The tunnels were in places up to 20 ft high and windows were cut through which the sun could shine "and transform the place into a fairyland".

Even in later years 'Sandy' Senior was still making improvements and additions to the tunnel assisted by his son George and his son-in-law, Mr Hemingway. The mine and 'show-cave' were abandoned before 1900 and when, in that year, another son, Henry, died, the council took over the property and let it to the foreman of their Sanitary Department. Doncaster Council acquired the quarry nearby about 1930 and used the whole area as a refuse tip. The house too was demolished at this time.

In 1964 Geotechnical and Concrete Services Ltd. were employed to test the area in preparation for the building of council flats. About 1000 cubic yards of earth and rubbish was removed to reveal the entrance to the main tunnel. The company's employees then made an examination of the state of the mine and found up to 7 ft of debris covered the floor over much of the length of the tunnel. The original floor had been fairly level at about 25 ft AOD (about 30 ft below surface). The roof level varied considerably and apart from one major fall was in generally sound condition. It was estimated that about 5 ft of rock cover was left although this would vary considerably over the length of the tunnels. Apart from the sides of the galleries adjacent to the quarry and the end at the northern extremity all the walls were of solid sandstone.

In addition to the exploration a surface electrical resistivity survey was carried out and this revealed anomalies other than the main gallery. In fact, the anomalies indicated that as many as four other separate galleries may have existed. No other evidence has however been found of the existence of these.

The area was developed by the council during the period 1966-8 and now all surface evidence of the quarry has been obliterated. It is probable too that all tunnels to the north of Green Dyke Lane have been either crushed or back filled.

Barborough Mines SK 491 783

These mines are situated on land belonging to Barlborough Hall Estate now used for the breeding of game. Eden et al (1957) state "Old quarries and adits a mile and a quarter north-east of Barlborough Church, at Nitticar Hill; sand rock to about 20 ft. Quicksand was formerly encountered at outcrop in this area". Local informants stated that the workings were quite extensive and that entrances were "large enough to take a double-decker bus". On investigation during 1967 the entrances were found to have run-in although spaces still existed through which access could be obtained. While not entered, it could be seen that some of the tunnel intersections had run-in to surface and that the passages were very wet. The Estate Agent stated that the sand, which lay directly beneath limestone and above the Coal Measures, was worked for plastering. Very little remained in the way of debris on the surface. The mine appeared to be worthy of further investigation but, in order to satisfy the game-keepers, permission must first be obtained from the agent, Mr P. Hollingworth, Eckington, Sheffield.

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Ivor Brown,  
19 Gregory Close,  
Harlaxton,  
Grantham, Lincs.

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Further information may be obtainable from:

J.C. Hemingway - relative of the Seniors, last known address  
69 Victoria Street, Doncaster.

Doncaster Borough Museum, E.C. Senior, a descendant of 'Sandy' Senior,  
was curator here about 1912.

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