

## COUNTRY CONTENTMENTS

Margaret Westerling

Cotswolds stone and slate in 1939

There are other craftsmen still at work around me, belonging to one of Cotswold's oldest trades — the stone-workers. At Coscombe, at Temple Guiting and along Buckle Street, in Kineton Thorns, at Huntsman's Quarries and Eyford, stone is still very largely worked by hand. Moreover, a fair proportion of the labour there comes from the immediate neighbourhood. Here was the very thing I had been looking for, and so close at hand that I had not at first realized its value and interest for me.

The Coscombe and Guiting quarries are worked by two brothers, Groves by name. Like so many families, though they know that a trade has descended from father to son for many generations, there is no written record. The Groves were quarrymen and stone-workers as far back as any tradition has been handed down, but not until three generations ago did they come to Coscombe. Before that they were at Milton-under-Wychwood. Their main quarry is at Coscombe; a smaller one, now becoming more largely worked, lies next to the old Guiting quarry, where the main road turns east to Stow, with a right-hand fork to Temple Guiting, by Fiddler's Green.

The name of the old quarry would seem to imply that this was the parish quarry, where the parishioners might come for the stone they needed, and whence the stone for parish road repairs was taken. Formerly there was one for each parish, but these, like so much else, have for the most part vanished—absorbed by the encroaching landowners. The quarries for Willersey and Weston-sub-edge lie on either side of the steep hill descending from the Edge to Saintbury, and here, I believe, parish rights still exist. Only one—that of Willersey—is still worked. The other lies deserted, full of ancient beech trees and the deep mould of their generations of leaves. Old Guiting Quarry is in the same condition, a quiet and secret place, holding treasures. The new quarry is separated from it by a field-track, and it is a sudden contrast to pass, as I did to-day, from the dark quietude of the damp autumn woods into its bright chaos of tumbled stone, echoing with the clear ring of metal striking on it.

There were more men working there than usual. One that has recently been re-opened, stood on a ledge almost at the original surface level, clearing soil and stone rubble off the underlying mass of rock. Two were busy with the hoisting-tackle—crab is its local name—ready to haul away the great block of stone that a third was at work upon, as soon as he had finished separating it with wedges. Near me a fifth stood chipping another block into shape, and as he worked we talked in snatches.

He told me how the iron wedges had each a clet or scab on either side, between which they were driven. As I watched, the three wedges gradually drove down into the stone, and a split appeared down the side, until it was cracked through and ready for removal. It took no little manoeuvring to get the cable into position, the dogs fast on the stone, the ground below prepared for the drop, so that the great mass would not fall heavily and break, for the Inferior Oolite of this quarry is soft when freshly quarried and may easily be shattered. The young fellow who had knocked in the wedges sprang up and down wielding his crowbar, balancing with one foot on the stone, ready to spring away if it fell, warned by the two men at the crab, until at last the stone moved and fell with a muffled thud into place on the spot prepared for it. But that was not enough. More preparations, blocks of stone pushed underneath, fresh adjustments of the dogs, and another turn of the crab, were needed to pull the stone right over into position, before the young fellow — my neighbour's son he happened to be — gave the call, "That'll do nicely."

All this time the block by which I stood had been growing more square, as the workman plied his scabbing-axe, standing alongside the stone, and working with glancing blows along towards his knee. Formerly, he told me, the men used to stand on the block to square it off, and possibly this is still done in some places. These very large stones which he was squaring so carefully to size were destined for Tewkesbury Abbey—for the tower, he thought—and when squared would go straight to the mason's yard there, to be cut into shape. As he talked I was looking at stone newly hewn from the rock, destined to outlast my tiny span by many hundreds of years, and there can have been no great difference in its cutting from the way in which its much older fellows on that tower were cut, so many hundreds of years earlier.

Stone freshly quarried and hewn is a warm orange for the most part, on this side of the Cotswolds, which belongs to the Inferior Oolite, very different in colour from the much whiter and harder stone from quarries such as that at Farmington. "Summer-dug" stone, before it has the frost on it, is still "green

", and will flake in winter when the frost is severe, as I find to my cost in the garden here, where plants at the base of high walls are completely buried under the small chippings, and stone-flagged paths become covered with loose shale. It is a hint to remember, never to take unseasoned stone for building, or you will rue it as I do, though in this case the fault is not my own.

I stood there while the men worked, thinking it a wasteful trade when so much of the material falls away in chippings. I was learning the terms used, too—words which might have been in use, with little alteration, when the first stones were cut for Tewkesbury. "There's a spare jad up there," someone called, and I learnt that "jad" was the term used for one type of adze. The sparking-hammer was the name for a hammer-headed adze, but the old man called it a spalt.

After the fogs that filled the early days of November had cleared, I went farther afield, in sunshine along Buckle Street—the road that is, perhaps, nearer my heart than any of the Cotswold ways — to Huntsman's Quarries, where slates have been dug for so long that excavators have reached the water-bearing strata, the dark bluish clay-beds. Here, for the last ten years or so, slate-quarrying has given place to digging road-material chippings and gravel, for which this harder stone is well suited, while some is burnt for lime. It is an extensive quarry, with great mounds of ancient debris, good and bad material piled together, with enough of the good to make it worth while resorting at the present time.

Here are none of the hoisting cranes and tackle of Coscombe, the roofed sheds whence came the leisurely sounds of metal ringing on stone to shape it, but instead clusters of primitive-looking machinery, little engines chuffing up and down as they hoist the cable to which the trolleys full of stone are hitched. Light trolley-rails run down the slopes here and there, with a simple form of turn-table below, to set them on to cross-lines when they are sent down empty.

With the machinery comes a different atmosphere. There is no longer the sense of an ancient handcraft, of the unbroken traditions of methods used without great change for generations beyond memory. The men are different too. I do not find here the older type of country craftsman, glad to talk of his job and his tools, their names and their methods of use, as I had done at Coscombe. It is very clear that mechanical means bring a mechanical attitude of mind, with less interest in the work and a more restricted sense of its meaning.

It was almost with a sense of relief that I turned back from Huntsman's Quarry, to find in Kineton Thorns the men who were digging pendle there, in old quarries which have recently been reopened. Pendle is the name given to the unseasoned stone, that is spread upon the turf in autumn, for the frosts of winter to season and split into thin slates for tiling. Pendle is still found at Huntsman's Quarry, but the blasting destroys much of it. Besides the pendle there is the surface stone, already split and seasoned, some thin enough for slates, some thick and large enough to be used for paving.

Some men were at work down in the quarry as I crossed the close green turf where a large flock of fieldfares, or, as one of the men called them, felts, were busy feeding; but I heard the cheerful sound of stone being tapped from a nearby shed, and there, I felt sure, was the man I wanted. So, indeed, it proved to be.

He sat facing the light in the little shed, on a low stool, with the sharp metal edge of his slating-iron upright in front of him, stone slate in his left hand, hammer in his right, tapping the edge of the stone as it lay along the metal, chipping it accurately into an oblong, then with the small sharp-pointed pick carefully boring the nail-hole by which it would be fixed to the roof-timbers. "You've got the best spot in here," I said to him, seeing the little stove whose warmth was acceptable to me too, after my walk across the open common. He agreed, but I do not think he cared whether he had the shelter or not. Then I asked him about his work. "Presents, these are, they're called presents. Not like the pendle that has to be put out for the frost to split. That may go on splitting, you see, even when its been in place for years. But the presents are the best stone — they'll never split, not after a hundred years." "I shall know what to ask for next time," I told him, with rueful memories of the little pile of stone chippings at the base of my walls after a frosty winter. Not the house-walls — those are solid enough, built of weathered stone in the seventeenth century, when men had leisure to wait till their material was seasoned. But from the new retaining-walls, built of summer-quarried stone, that crumbles and continues to crumble, until the word "seasoned" takes on a newer and more vivid meaning for me.

The quarries at Kineton Thorns are old ones, recently reopened, and the mounds of debris from old quarryings may be seen from Buckle Street—queer humps and dips, overgrown now with smooth turf,

gay with rock-roses in summer. Hughes spoke of finding old slates sometimes, diamond-shaped or triangular, in the debris on top of the deeper cuts : evidence of a probable quarry for the tiles of the Roman Villa in Spoonley Wood.

On a bright and frosty morning I went up Kineton Thorns again to find old Hughes' elder son, wheeling a barrow-load of slates, clad in a fine velveteen jacket, more like a gamekeeper's coat than a quarryman's, but " I haven't been cold since I put it on," he said. He was working a different kind of stone this time, greyer in colour, from the crop-bed, about 10 feet from the surface. This stone is found in horizontal strata, easy to quarry and easy to work, of fine quality. Pendle is the stone from the lowest bed, about 20 feet down, resting on the clay ; it is the stone which is exposed during the winter for the frost to split. Stone from the crop-bed does not need this, owing to the geological formation.

I went to look at the crop-bed down in the quarry, astonished at the comparative ease with which great flat slabs were loosened and lifted with the pick-axe, flaking almost of its own accord into layers of the requisite thickness, breaking into clean, nearly straight lines when tapped, so that the labour of working it must be considerably less than that of pendle and hardly more than that required by presents. Of such stone as this are the old walls along this part of Buckle Street composed— laminated stones, making close, fine walling which would seem to outlast the walls of larger, rougher stones. In this wise also, but of even smaller stones, was the walling at the horned west entrance to Belas Knap, Gloucestershire's biggest long barrow, standing so majestically on the hill-top above Humblebee Wood. This walling was restored when the barrow was excavated in 1926 by Sir James Berry, and it is pleasant to record that it was as finely executed by the present-day Cotswold stone-workers as by their long-dead forerunners.

A man used to walling will need no more than a string line pegged along the wall and a plumb-bob. When a considerable length has to be rebuilt, it is more usual to see a frame, or cradle, of two converging uprights 2 feet 3 inches apart at the base, and 1 foot 3 inches at the top, with cross-pieces at top and bottom, the framework strengthened by one or two diagonals, the height being 3 feet 10 inches to 4 feet. Neither Marshall nor Gobbet had much admiration for the Cotswold stone walls. The latter expressed his opinion of the " walls that serve as fences " with his usual vigour, saying: "Anything quite as cheerless as this I do not recollect to have seen." Since, however, they could then be raised at small expense, this alone, says he, "can apologize for their frequency". His opinion seems almost heresy today, when we look at the walls with satisfaction and regret their decay. It is good news that at the present time a considerable amount of repair and rebuilding is being carried on all over the hills.

Marshall gives the former charges for stone-walling, affording a striking comparison with to-day's prices: "The cost of a wall thus made ... is 8 to 10 pounds a furlong, or about tenpence a yard. A penny a yard is the common price for walling; the raising and wheeling, eightpence to tenpence a yard." Since his day the cost has increased enormously. In 1929 the price of stone at the Campden Quarry was four shillings a square yard, and four shillings delivery about a mile by road. A yard was a full load for horse and cart. Today the price of stone at Coscombe is still four shillings, the charge for delivery being about the same. The cost of labour for a 3-foot wall with 1-foot "combers " or "toppers", as the upright finishing stones are called, is about two pounds a chain, the traditional method of measuring.

In the north of England five or six centuries ago, and perhaps earlier, another method was employed to fix the slates. When the church of Newton Regney near Ullswater was being repaired, underneath the floor were found, amongst broken stone slates, quantities of small bones from the feet of sheep, but not until one was found in place in the hole of a slate could their use be guessed. This ingenious adaptation must have been more durable than wood, and when the hills of Cotswold were a vast sheep-walk, one that might well have been used here. There is no proof of any kind, traditional or otherwise, that any such use was made of bones.

For measuring the slates, a cubic wooden rule about 2 feet long is used, with a nail or screw at the head, corresponding to the nail-hole in the slate. The rule is cut with grooves for each inch, with a notch for each half-inch. That is the modern method of measuring, but the older men have a name for each size. I asked Hughes at Kineton Thorns if he could give the names.

"I can't read it," he said."I can't read the rule." "What about your father? Can he tell me?" "He might, but I doubt if he can read it either." I began to despair of getting the list, but in Cutsdean one evening as I sat talking of other things, I asked the man to whom I spoke — a worker on the Stanway estate — if he could tell me the names. " Yes, I know them. I'll see if I can find my rule, and then I'll read them off for you."

So one wet, stormy evening I went along the road to Cutsdean, where the tall hedges had been cut, and scattered branches lay on the field; down the lane to the water-cress-bed in the stream, and up the steep bank to the little circle of cottages. I had with me a well-made rule of my own, not very old, but a seasoned piece of oak, cut with the distinguishing notches that have been used for measuring slates from time immemorial. I had, too, a list from the same slater, for it was a matter of interest to verify whether each man gave an identical list. So it was to prove. Except that my rule was bigger and the scale of measurement slightly longer, both rules and names were the same. I give the list herewith, as drawn up for me, with the notches marked exactly as on the rule.

The most striking word on the list is the one spelt "movidis", which most of the men pronounce mover or motherdays, though none can give it any meaning or explanation. In a local and ancient craft there must of necessity be many words and terms which are not found elsewhere. The first slates to go on a roof, at the base, are called the "top-eaves" or "cussomes", usually long nines in size; the next ones are known as followers, for which a slightly larger size is used. All the slates come from the quarry, and are dumped higgledy-piggledy, regardless of size. The first job of the slater is to stack them as nearly upright as possible, for flat slates are liable to fracture, and to sort them into sizes according to the quantity he will require. It is customary to spring chalk lines across the laths [*mistake, she means rafters*] of the roof; when it is thus marked off into sizes the number of slates can be calculated, (1) with the help of the rule, allowing the customary 3 inches for the bond, or overlap of three slates, which prevents the rain from driving underneath. The slates used for the valleys, or angle at the junction of two sections of the roof, are triangular in shape, and are called "valley-stones", needing very careful adjustment and plenty of overlap, to ensure a good watershed.

I think my Cutsdean friend would have been well content to continue using pegs for his slates, for he told me with pride of the knack of making them, and how quickly they could be turned out by those used to the job. Both he and his wife are true Cotsallers, who know intimately the old country ways, and from whom I always learn something more of earlier village life and ways. As I went home, fumbling my way across the fields in the dark, with gusts of rain stinging my cheeks, I came through the turnstile with particular delight now that I had learned its local name—the "slip-slap gate".

Westerling M., 1939 *Country Contentments*, London, Constable, pp 181 – 196.

*(1) This is an interesting statement because it is not the way random roofs are normally set out although it is how it is sometimes done today. The traditional (correct) method is to sort the whole set of slates into individual lengths and then to measure the total width of all the slates in each length. The total width is then divided by the width of the roof and this gives the number of courses which can be laid for each length. Odd amounts over are added to the next shortest length. It is not until the slater has determined the number of courses for each length that he can strike out the coursing with the chalk line. Margaret Westerling's description suggests that the slater decided how many courses he wanted of each length and then set about obtaining enough slates of the right lengths to fit his coursing. It's conceivable that a slater might take this approach if he had a large stock of each size to choose from but really it's not very practical. Maybe Margaret just got it wrong.*

*Where it does happen today is if the delph owner is willing to supply a mix of slates to suit a given coursing pattern. This can be convenient for re-roofing but has several drawbacks.*