

Halling View Autumn 2020 - Cementopolis

When I was on holiday in Canada years ago, the guide told us that an enormous quarry which had been converted into the beautiful Butchart Gardens was originally dug out to provide lime for making Portland Cement, *whatever that is*, he said. I laughed and told him that it was invented where I live. The exact location is disputed, but it was somewhere in the Thames and Medway valleys. We had the raw material, chalk, and the rivers to supply water and to transport the finished goods. The same could be said of the industrial production of paper from wood pulp. Before these industries commenced in the area, most of the work was on the farms, though there have been brickfields for centuries – areas of clay which could be cut and dried to make bricks. Many of the bricks which went into the British Museum were made at Cuxton.

For getting on for two hundred years, cement and paper-making were the major employers in the Medway Valley. Many men and their families came and settled in what had been quite small villages looking for work. The churches were enlarged to accommodate them. Schools were provided. Houses were built. The work came and went as the cement industry waxed and waned depending on demand. In the early days, the work was hard and there was little in the way of relief if men were laid off. At one time, the Vicar of Halling stopped taking a collection, saying that it wasn't fair to ask poor people to give to the Church. There were cement works on the site of the old Bishop's Palace and in many other places in proximity to housing. In those early days, cement making generated a great deal of dust and smoke. It was a very polluting industry. One of my Victorian predecessors at Cuxton, Canon Charles Colson who still has the largest monument in Cuxton churchyard, lamented the environmental damage, but celebrated the employment generated and the production of a useful commodity increasingly in demand as we transformed ourselves from an agricultural land into an industrial one. It was another Victorian clergyman who nicknamed the valley *Cementopolis* because there were just so many cement works.

In later years, the cement manufacturers merged (many of them into the so called combine), built much cleaner works with tall chimneys to take away the smoke and treated their workforce very much better. The fondly remembered Halling Institute (where the Community Centre is now) was provided by the cement works.

The last in Halling to close, which was still in operation when I first came here, was the Rugby works, where St Andrew's Park now is. They wanted to quarry in Dean Valley – a Site of Special Scientific Interest and Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The community was divided on the issue and I had a great deal of fellow-feeling with both sides. On the one hand, the works would close if they couldn't quarry in the valley. Rugby was still a major local employer at the time and there was already a lot of unemployment about from the closure of other works and Chatham Dockyard. I also felt that it was rather hypocritical to support the use of cement in building etc., but to try to insist that the chalk should be quarried from other people's backyards, not ours. On the other hand, I love the countryside and visit that valley probably more than anyone else in the village. I'd be quite happy if we stopped concreting over the countryside and therefore could do without making so much cement.

What happened was that they started quarrying at the southwest end of the valley. Apparently, the chalk proved unsuitable for cement making and the Rugby works closed. If you cross the valley on the North Downs Way, there is a hedge on one side of the path, dividing the quarried part from the rest.

A few years ago, there was talk of opening a brand new works at Holborough. This, I was told, wouldn't require hundreds of men slaving away in the heat and the dust shovelling raw materials and finished product. A handful of people would control robots which would do all the hard work. But what about jobs for the hundreds of men with shovels?

I mention all this because lockdown showed us how much nicer a place the world is when we stop polluting it with out industrial processes, traffic and air travel. There was a lot of talk about environmental lessons learned. As the weeks have gone by, however, we've seen the livelihoods of thousands put at risk. People are missing consumer goods, meeting up with one another and foreign holidays. So, how do we decide what is the right balance, between protecting our planet and our quality of natural life, on the one hand, and promoting a prosperous economy, which provides us both with jobs and the comforts we have become used to, on the other?

I'm afraid, because of COVID. I can't tell you about what we shall be doing in weeks to come. If you have internet access, please check my webpage cuxtonandhalling.org.uk. Otherwise, give me a call at the Rectory or ring 01634 717134. Roger Knight.