



Ancient dry stone wall

Some of these walls – patched and rebuilt repeatedly – are far more than a thousand years old. How many of the stones you pass were picked from the plough's wake by Saxon hands?

By the next gate there are steps up the wall and down into the track beyond. This is the Priest's Way. Turn right and see the open-cast quarries to the south and west.



Priest's Way

The Priest's Way is an ancient route. Parts of it are a secretive corridor between stone-hemmed fields and parts just a deeply-rutted mud track. Down it rode the priest from the mother church of St Nicholas in the important parish of Worth Matravers to take services in the little chapelry of Swanage.

Soon after an information board a right turn runs into Acton. You can continue past the 'CAUTION – Heavy Plant Crossing' sign to the quarry road, but come back and take that turning.



Quarry tracks

As you approach Acton, look east to Swanage Bay and the Isle of Wight. The village squats, huddled, in a wide-open space. The earliest house is late sixteenth-century, augmented in the nineteenth century when quarrymen crammed cottage against cottage. You couldn't waste stone by standing dwellings on it. Like Langton, Acton had no drainage. It had communal latrines. Waste water filtered through a thin skin of soil and rock into the mine

workings and fed the village well. Only cottages with gardens had privies and shallow wells.

Skirt Acton on the zigzag track that becomes a tarmac road.

Imagine the lanes in which men laboured, often not much more than a metre high, ceilings propped up by 'legs' of piled stones, the face lit by a candle stuck in a dob of clay slapped at the wall. There were sad accidents and lucky escapes. A woman returned home with provisions, opened her back door and nearly fell down a hole where the kitchen had dropped into her brother-in-law's working. A man found himself trapped by the beard which was his pride. His sons refused to lift the stone, but took the candle and burnt his beard through, the air full of stench and curses.

We tread lightly across the surface of a hidden history and a community life almost lost to us since, overnight, Westminster declared it illegal to employ men underground in Purbeck quarries. The last man to work underground, until 1982, was Harold Bonfield of Blacklands whose ancestor, Nicholas de Bonneville, worked on Corfe Castle in 1199.

Aim for the red phone box. The car park is just this side of it on the left.

Walk guide written by Paul Hyland

Photography by Paul Hyland, Angie Green and Delphine Jones. Design by Artcore Studio Ltd. © Artsreach 2009

Further information:
Eric Benfield *Purbeck Shop*
Cambridge University Press 1940

R.J. Saville (ed.) *A Langton Quarryman's Apprentice: James Corben's Autobiography*
Langton Matravers Local History & Preservation Society 1996

Ilay Cooper *Purbeck Revealed*
James Pembroke Publishing 2004

Paul Hyland *Purbeck: The Ingrained Island*
Gollancz 1978, Dovecote Press 1989

The Burngate Stone Centre:
www.burngatestonecentre.co.uk

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A short walk around Acton



Purbeck Footprints


A level 2 mile (max) walk, with a couple of stiles to cross

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A short walk around Acton

Just west of Langton Matravers, on the B3069 to Kingston, a red phone box and a bus-stop flank a stile on the road's north side. Opposite is a side road for Acton and, as soon as you turn into it, there's a place to park on the right (OS map reference: SY988786). Toilets and a wonderful pub, The Square and Compass, are at Worth Matravers.

This is a walk through the history of quarrying. There's a lot to see. There's also a world you can't see, beneath your feet. The rock you stand on, even under the road by the car park, is only fifteen feet thick where quarry 'lanes' run like burrows in a warren of stone. Look at the lumps and bumps in the fields. Tangles of thorn show where quarry 'slides' drop into the dark. Sadly for explorers, they are blocked to prevent cows or walkers making a swift exit.

 **Cross the main road to the stile beside the phone box.** To the left, just off our route, is the Burngate Stone Centre, part of the Purbeck Keystone Project. Old quarr hut have been renovated and augmented to provide facilities for courses in masonry, carving and


letter cutting using traditional hand tools. Masons and sculptors can rent workshop space at the centre.

 **Take the right-hand footpath diagonally across the field. Go through the gate to the left of a quarr hut built into the wall, beyond the dip of an underground quarry. Cross to the stile at the right of the next quarr hut, this side of a green 1942-vintage Nissen hut known as Albie's Shed. Over this stile, to the left, you will find a quarry.**




Quarry entrance

Although fenced off and overgrown, you can make out the paved 'slide' and rough steps beside it. In summer horseshoe bats fly out of the quarry and graze the evening air for insects. In winter they hibernate below where it remains about 12°C all year round.

 **Retrace your steps a few yards and take the grassy path beside a green mound, actually a stone-built banker for loading stone onto carts.**


A 'banker' is a stone bench where stone is worked; in Purbeck it is also a cart-high structure where stone is manhandled; and it was the name for stacks of stone awaiting shipment on the shore at Swanage. 'Quarr' is the dialect word for 'quarry'.

 **Make your way to the lane running beside houses with unfenced lawns and turn right.**


The area was known as Mount Misery, famous for its Downsvein quarries. Now it is Castle View. Imagine the castle in its prime, lime-washed white. In the woods at the bottom of the slope quarriers dug the upper Purbeck beds – Purbeck Marble for churches and cathedrals and Purbeck Burr for Corfe Castle and the foundations of the Tower of London.





The Capstan

 **Follow the lane to the right and immediately discover Norman's Quarry.**

Embedded in grass are rails which run past the capstan and down the slide. The shaft is walled off; you have to imagine the wall and overgrowth away. But see the capstan, standing between buttressed crab stones, and note how quarr huts open in two directions to afford shelter in any weather. A donkey, harnessed to the pole or 'spack', trod in circles winding the chain which drew the stone cart up the slide.

 **Walking further up the lane, on the left there's a wall, with a walled-up gate, around Court Pound Cottage's back garden.** This was the pound where stray donkeys were held until reclaimed by quarry boys.

 **At the main road turn left for a short distance, then cross over and, before the 30mph sign, turn right down the rough road.** On your right are views of Acton and the quarried ground on which it stands.

 **Soon after the cottages, cross a stile by the gate into a field and continue, keeping the stone wall on your right, through the next gate and a further field.** Watch how the dry stone wall changes on the way. Dry stone walls spread like a net over the limestone plateau. Many mark boundaries that have existed since at least Saxon times.

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