

CHINNOR'S SECRET PARK AKA THE QUARRIES

Up until around 20 years ago the land on which the Old Kiln Lakes estate stands was a medium sized cement and lime making plant. That has now gone and the area has been remediated and developed: the only remaining parts are the old quarries and a single preserved, brick built cement kiln dating back to the early 1900s.

It was only a couple of years or so back that my wife and I first took a walk around part of the landscaped area of the old quarries beyond the railway bridge. We weren't really sure whether we should be there or not, or whether we were trespassing. There are no signs advertising the area from the outside but when you do get there, a lot of signs make it clear that the public are expected and that it is well used. It has become very clear that, particularly during the "lockdown" months, the space became a haven for many people.

Those of us who remember the old quarries in their operational days, and in the sad years of decline that followed the closure of the cement plant, recall an area of almost lunar-style landscape; mainly white, hilly but very muddy, a lot of standing water of indeterminate depth and bits of old machinery scattered around. Back then, it was very difficult to visualise how it might all be recovered and made to look even reasonable.

The renovation has, however, been something of a revelation. A lot of landscaping work has been carried out and, even though parts are still clearly 'out of bounds' for safety reasons, much of the area has been transformed. There are now footpaths, fenced off from the deep water and the steep edges, areas of water enclosed and dedicated to anglers and wide areas of tree plantation in their early stages of growth. Parts have been left very much 'as was' and still retain the 'charm' (if you could ever call it that!) of the old quarry environment.

Old industrial landscapes present serious remediation challenges: they were never designed for public access and often presented serious safety hazards, even to those who understood them. Redevelopment of an area like these quarries meant either closing them off so securely as to prevent public access (almost an impossibility in real terms) or redesigning them to allow access but ensure public safety. Clearly the latter option has been chosen in Chinnor and, I think, those responsible for revamping the old quarry site have done a great job. It is now possible to envisage how the site will look in a few years' time.

Chinnor has never really been an industrial village in the accepted sense, although the cement works and the various village sawmills that developed over the years were, in their own way, quite heavy industry.

For me, as I suspect with a good few people in the village, there is a lot of personal history and nostalgia relating to the quarries and to the cement works. Although, technically, no-one who wasn't employed on the site should ever have accessed the quarries, even back in the 1950s and 1960s, many of us did. Security was simplistic and, as kids, we all knew how to gain access and, particularly in the summer months, spent a lot of time there.

My god-father was employed at the works and operated one of the several large diggers (locally known as 'Navvies') that scraped the chalk from the quarry faces and loaded it into dump trucks to

be taken for processing into cement. Totally illicitly, in my early years I used sometimes to be asked to take him his lunch and I remember the trek into the quarries from the works.

The 'Navvies' were big, crude machines designed for one purpose: to dig a ton or more of chalk in one go. They were powered by basic (pre-1950's!) diesel engines and operated via massive gear wheels, cables and sliding arms controlled from a cab that was, to all intents and purposes, open to the elements. The controls were heavyweight and the operator's job was physical. This was no job for a wimp and the Navvies often worked round-the-clock, on 8 hour rotating shifts to match the cement production process and, during the night-time hours, the machines operated by headlights.

I also remember the noise and sheer size (certainly to a 9-10 year old!) of the 'Navvies'. Health and safety hadn't been heard of then so there was minimal separation in the cab between the driver and the moving machinery. You had to rely on simple common sense to keep you safe when surrounded by lethal moving machinery but, as far as I can recall, there were never any serious accidents to Navy operators, certainly at the Chinnor plant. It's obviously good that no-one has to work like that anymore but it is worth remembering that that was how things were before H & S came along!

The quarries have now been converted into a major natural asset to the village. Although the land can never revert entirely to the state that it was in before chalk extraction started, as the years go on, it should now be able to become much more akin to its original condition.

The site can be accessed easily from near the heritage railway car park on Hill Road and from the footpath from Crowell up to the hills and presents pleasant and fairly easy walks. It's definitely a pleasant way to spend a sunny afternoon.

It must, however, be stressed that only the area north of the Icknield Way – Ridgeway - (the Chinnor side) is open to the public. The area with the water-filled quarry on the other side is closed to public access for a reason. It presents a series of major hazards such as steep sides and deep, cold, and slightly alkaline water that can wrinkle the skin. It can, however, be viewed from several points on the Icknield Way and from the nature reserve above in on the hillside.

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October 2021