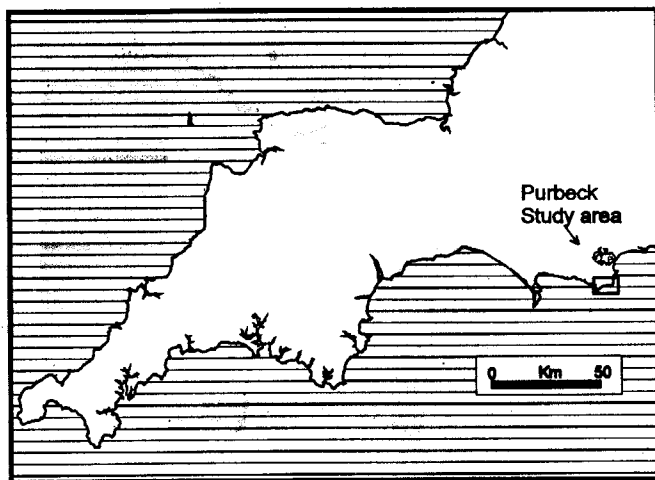


# Quarr Houses on the Isle of Purbeck, Dorset

*Jill Phillips*

## **Abstract**

*Aspects of the Purbeck limestone industry are discussed in the light of the results from a field survey, in particular the underground extraction sites or 'quarrs' and the structures associated with them, known as 'quarr sheds'. Consideration is given to geological and historical aspects of the Purbeck stone industry and also of the trade in stone, including the fall in demand leading to the industry's demise. Fieldworking methodology is outlined and detailed descriptions of thirteen sites where quarr sheds survive are presented, together with survey drawings.*



**Fig. 1.** *The Isle of Purbeck. Location.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper is based on fieldwork and investigation carried out during the summer and autumn of 1994 into the rapidly disappearing evidence of the stone extraction industry on the Isle of Purbeck.

From the 17th century until 1963, when the government closed them down on safety grounds, quarrying of limestone on the Isle of Purbeck was mainly done from underground workings known as 'Quarrs'. Although much has been written about the Purbeck marble industry, which was operational in Roman and medieval time, there is very little evidence regarding the more humble stone mining industry. With the ever-present threats of erosion, encroachment by development and open-cast quarrying, the primary aim of the research has been to investigate all types of evidence relating to the Purbeck stone quarrs, and to survey and make detailed records of all surviving quarr sheds and other ancillary buildings that were still extant. The results of the investigations have enabled an assessment to be made of the Purbeck limestone industry's significance in a social and technological context.

## **UNDERGROUND STONE EXTRACTION**

Throughout the history of stone extraction the most popular method has been by open-cast quarrying. However, there have been a few areas where English stone has been wholly or partly mined. Bath stone, from Monk's Park and Boxground, is one example of stone which, even today, is largely mined and not quarried. Totternhoe in the Chilterns and Beer in Devon both mined hard, shelly chalk-stone, although Totternhoe ceased mining in the first half of the 19th century,

and Beer, with easy access to the sea, moved to open-cast quarrying. Mining, for limestone roof tiles in the Cotswolds, came to an end at Stonesfield in 1909 but continued at Collyweston, Northamptonshire with 20 men still working in 1961. (Clifton-Taylor 1965, 117-118). Further evidence of the mining of stone is found at Duston, Northampton where sandstone roofing slates were produced although these mines have not been worked now for several decades. Gradually these mining areas are becoming increasingly difficult to identify as vegetation covers the scars of the stone industry. The only ancillary buildings that were associated with the mining at these sites were the wicker shelters that were used by the slatemakers to give some kind of temporary shelter as they 'made' the slates (Aston 1974, 51) and these leave very ephemeral archaeological evidence.

On the Isle of Purbeck, the reason for mining this stone rather than extracting it by open-cast quarrying was that the layers of useful, marketable stone lay so deep under the ground that it would have been uneconomic to remove the overburden to get at the stone using opencast techniques. Underground stone extraction in Purbeck, began around 1650 (Cockburn 1971, 15) and by the late 19th century there were about 100 quarrs in operation (Fig. 2). The first mines were sunk above Swanage moving westwards towards Langton as the stone layers were fully exploited. As the seams were worked out the quarrymen would move on to the next site, taking with them all the equipment needed. Around many of the quarr shafts were left the ancillary buildings that are the only surviving monuments of this industry and the subject of this report.

## **GEOLOGY: THE STRUCTURE OF PURBECK**

The best type of building stone needs to be strong enough to carry weight, but soft enough to work, and be resistant to atmospheric erosion. This type of stone usually comes from the Jurassic and Carboniferous series of rocks, with 'freestone' being superior. The strata of rock need to be sufficiently thick and of uniform quality to enable the stone to be extracted in relatively large blocks which can then be worked 'freely' in any direction. The Purbeck strata are made up of a variety of limestones - Upper, Middle and Lower Purbeck being the broad traditional divisions. The Upper division was laid down under fresh-water conditions with the Middle and some of the Lower limestones being laid in marine conditions. The Jurassic limestone has a high content of calcium carbonate which comes from shells and spheroidal structures known as oolite. 'Oolith' means stone egg, and because the millions of tightly cemented pellets which make up the stone resemble

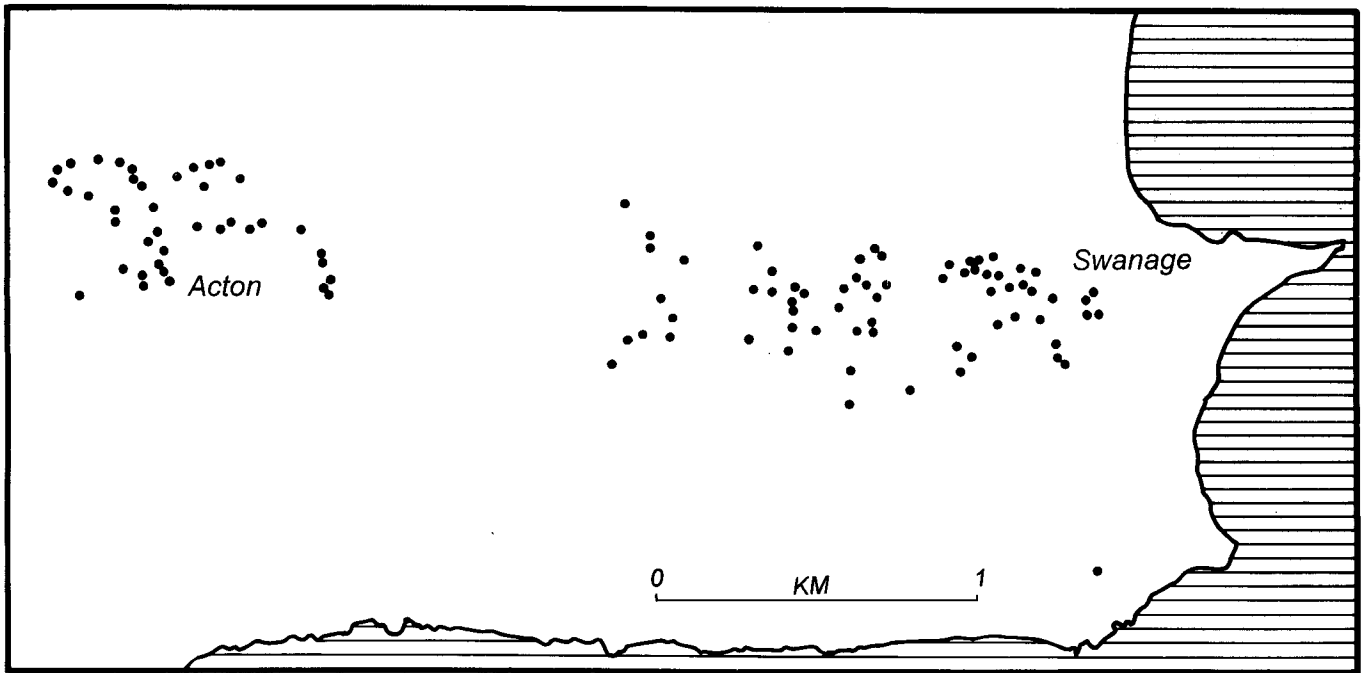


Fig. 2. Distribution of quarrs on the Isle of Purbeck in 1887.

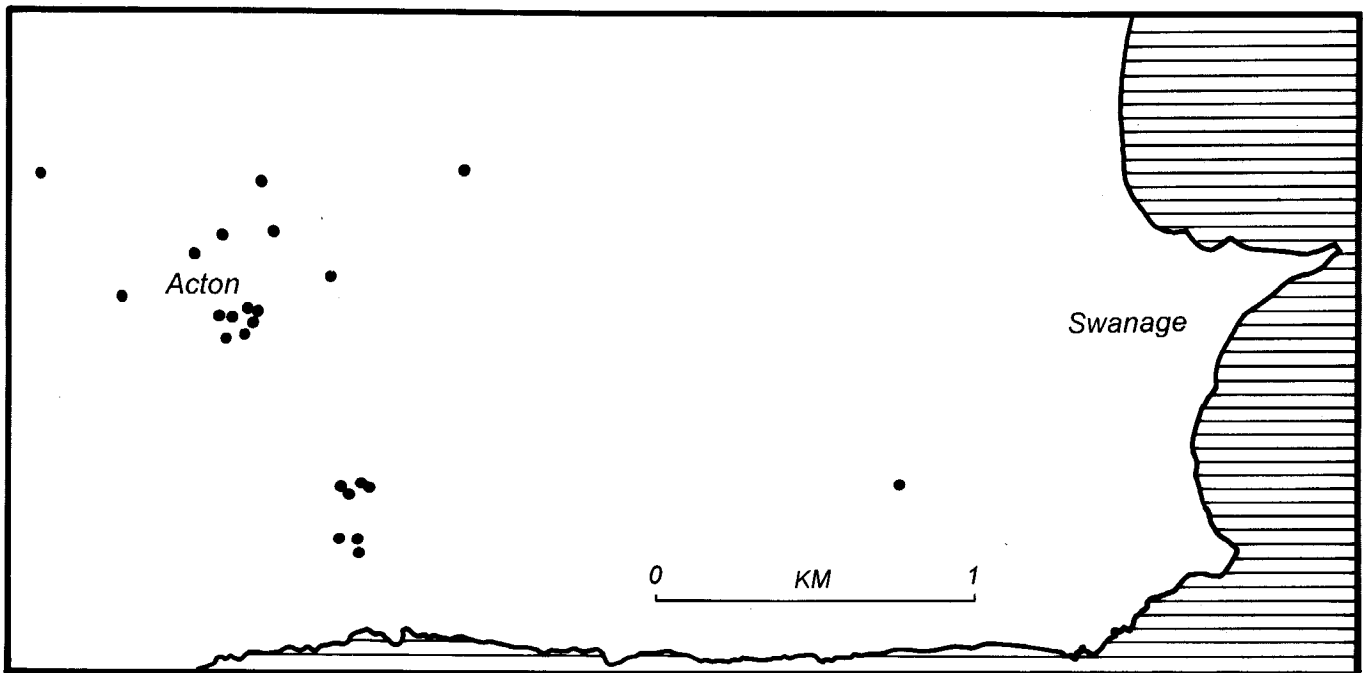


Fig. 3 Distribution of quarrs on the Isle of Purbeck in 1954.

fish roe it is called oolite. This stone, when freshly quarried, is soft to work but once exposed to the weather hardens into a very durable building material. Good quality freestone can be used as ashlar - squared and assembled in level, carefully jointed courses to produce walls of superior quality (House 1989).

In the Upper Purbeck, the limestone known as Purbeck Marble, is not a true marble but a strong freshwater limestone containing millions of fossilised freshwater shells of the *Viviparous* snail, and is capable of taking a polish. Only about 50cm wide, the narrow vein of 'marble' stretches from Peveril Point to Worbarrow Tout and when oiled and polished the impurities cause many colour variations - grey, blue, green and red - red being the only one that weathers well. Resembling metamorphic marble, this polished Purbeck stone has been used for pillars, fonts and monuments and extensively in the interior decoration of almost every abbey and cathedral in England built during the 13th century. Today

the marble is only quarried if it is needed for restoration work. Because of the Purbeck monocline, the strata were tilted downwards and it was in the areas where it was nearest the surface that it was quarried. Eastwards from Kingston evidence of the earlier open-cast workings can be found at Downshay, Wilkswood, Lynch, Scoles, Coombe and Quarr. Hollow ways can be followed which eventually lead to Corfe where some of the marble may have been worked before passing on. The tangible remains of the marble quarrying at Purbeck are limited to the overgrown bowl-pits, waste dumps and hollow ways.

On the coast the Purbeck-Portland stone lies in the Portland beds and is overlaid by the less fossiliferous Purbeck limestone. Purbeck-Portland limestone, or cliffstone as it is also called was quarried from the cliffs of Purbeck as well as from the Isle of Portland: a grey-white fine-textured non-shelly oolite, it is a superb building stone and was transported mainly by sea to be used in the rebuilding of London after the Great Fire of

1666. It was also used for facades of many public buildings, and Labeyle, the designer and builder of Westminster Bridge in 1747, used both Purbeck and Purbeck-Portland stone for the construction of some of the arches (Cockburn 1971, 16). Much of the Purbeck-Portland stone has been removed from the cliff face between St. Aldhelm's Head and Durlston Head. Hewn out of the cliff in great quantities and forming deep galleries; the stone was transported by boat to Swanage from where it was sent to various ports in Britain. Purbeck stone, an oolite limestone 140,000,000 years old, is a very fine creamish-yellow stone when it is first quarried and weathers to the soft grey colour for which Purbeck is famous. It was used as the main building material for the traditionally built cottages and the Purbeck dry-stone walls, for kerbstones and headstones, and was crushed to be used for road building. Langton Matravers, Acton and Worth Matravers are now the main areas of quarrying with several open-cast quarries still operational, although remains of the earlier industry can still be found. Scattered along the hillside of southern Swanage are mounds and craters that are the only indication of the important stone trade that once was carried out here. Further to the west at Langton Matravers and Acton, additional evidence can be found - here the ubiquitous mounds and craters are accompanied in some cases by the rapidly deteriorating buildings that were used for the working of the stone. The great industry that once existed here is reduced to abandoned workings, shafts filled with debris and a few neglected buildings. Many of the old quarry men have kept photographs of their quarrs and soon all that will remain of a very important industry are memories, photographs and a few rubble-filled shafts.

#### **SITE FORMATION - CONSTRUCTION OF A QUARR SITE AND ANCILLARY BUILDINGS**

Before a record of the remaining quarr sheds could be undertaken, the whole operation of stone extraction on the Isle of Purbeck needed to be examined. By looking at the procedures and methods of the construction and subsequent workings of the stone quarries, an appraisal could be made of the part played by the quarr shed and also an indication of what should be visible for the archaeological record.

Examination of a broad variety of literary evidence shows a similarity in the process of underground stone extraction for the whole of the Isle of Purbeck. From the time the decision was made to take stone from a particular place to the moment when the stone became a marketable commodity the same actions were generally followed.

The method of construction was first to build a stone wall to enclose the working area. A sloping shaft, or 'slide', would then be driven into the ground from which a tunnel or 'lane', would be bored into the seam of marketable stone. No blasting was allowed underground, all stone being extracted manually. The spoil would then be used to raise the height of the enclosure to enable stone to be loaded from the top of the wall rather than being lifted, these loading walls being known as 'bankers'. The site of Belle Vue provides a good example of a typical quarr with easily defined bankers.

The underground stone would then be manually removed and placed on a low truck or 'quarr cart' which was hauled up the stone-paved slide by means of chains and a winch, steps being built at the side of the shaft for the quarriers use. In the centre of the enclosure would be a capstan flanked by two crabstones braced by a buttress stone. The capstan was usually made of elm, traditionally part of an old ship's mast

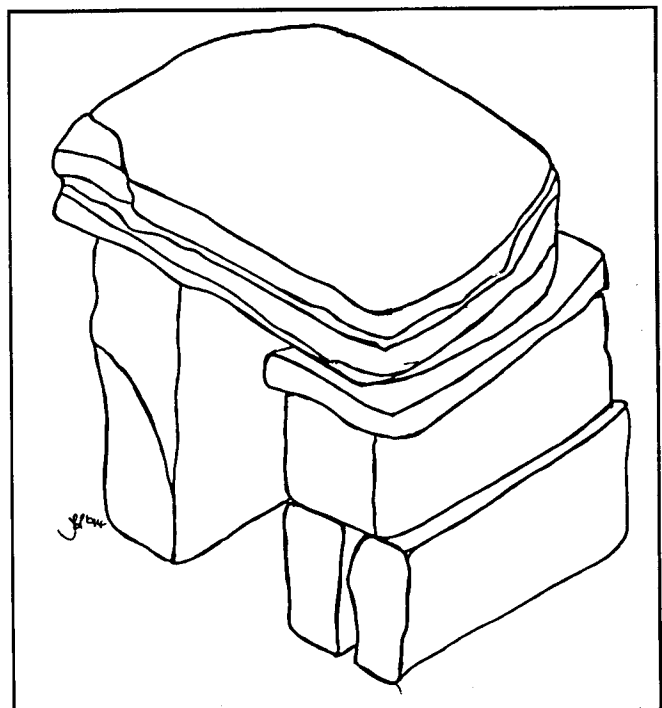
(Robinson 1882,82), and was held in place by an oak collar surmounted by an ash 'spack'. The spack was the long pole to which a pony or donkey was attached to winch up the stone. Oak was used for the collar as it is a strong rigid wood, whilst ash, as well as being strong, has a certain amount of elasticity to give it flexibility of movement. In the quarries close to Swanage, it is likely that ponies were used as draught animals as the stone seams were up to 30 metres underground. However, at Acton and Langton Matravers, donkeys were probably sufficiently powerful to haul up the stone from the lesser depths of 12 to 15 metres. The angle of the slides varied, often being very gentle, in which case, the stone might be hauled manually. With the introduction of chains and cables to replace ropes, towards the end of the 19th century, the slides could be made much steeper and a roller with a moveable axle was used at the top of the shaft to allow the chain to move freely.

Before the introduction of iron rails the quarr carts were pulled up to the surface on small wheels. Evidence for this survives at one early quarr site (SY 98857895) where all that remains is several pieces of stone which show where the roller and axle acted as a pivot at the top of a slide. Three grooves are evident on these stones: a central groove, which shows where the chain attached to the cart passed over the roller to the capstan, and the two outer grooves which indicate wear caused by the effect of the weight of stone on the cart wheels.

#### **WORKING CONDITIONS**

Working conditions below ground were dangerous and uncomfortable. The lanes that were cut into the stone stretched hundreds of feet underground and the height of the ceiling varied from three to eight feet with the quarryman cutting out blocks of stone using wedges, chisels and mallets by candlelight. Wedge marks can be seen on one of the stones used to construct the shed at Site 10 (Fig. 8b). As the seam of stone was cut away, walls of inferior stone were erected in parallel to the worked seam to support the quarry roof and then back-filled with any unwanted spoil.

Within the perimeter of the working area, sheds were built



*Fig. 4. 'Banker'. Stone bench used for working the stone.*

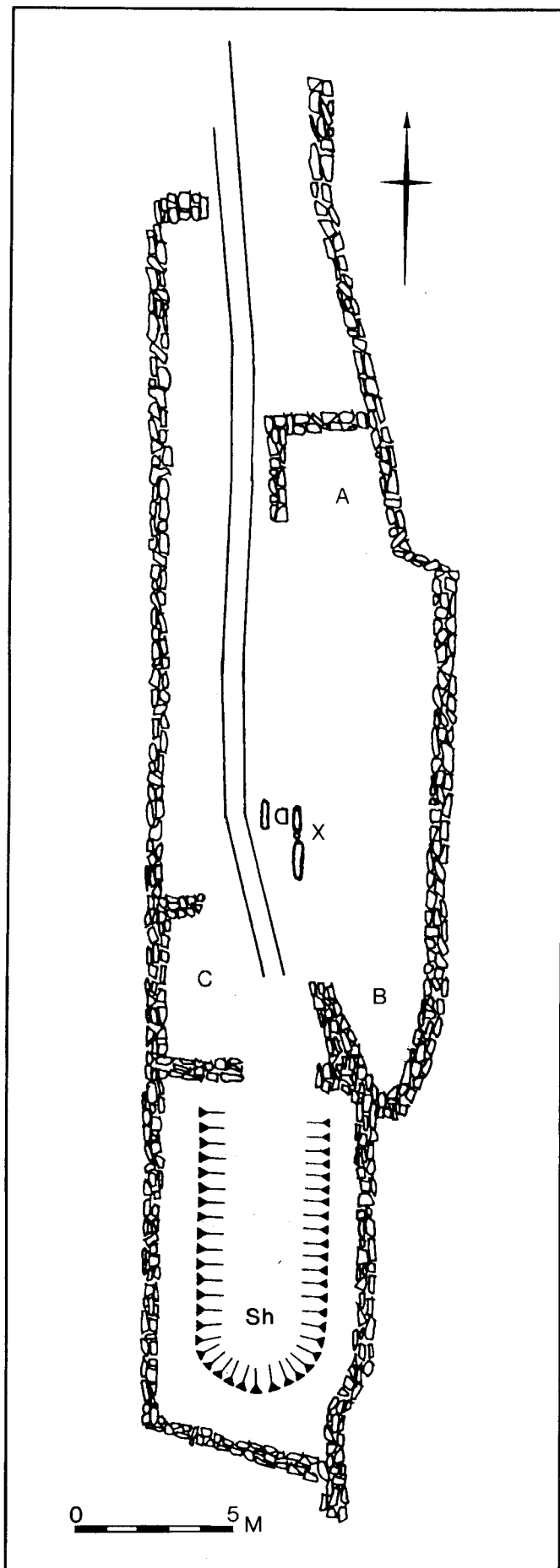


Fig. 5. Court Pound site. Schematic plan showing Quarr Houses A, B & C, the capstan - X and the shaft - Sh.

up against the inside of the wall. It was here that the blocks of stone were roughly trimmed and shaped using a stone bench known as a 'banker' (Fig. 4). There would be at least two sheds, facing in different direction so that whichever way the

wind was blowing there was shelter. These 'quarr sheds' sometimes had doors and could be used for locking away the tools or indeed stabling the pony or donkey. Constructed of broken or inferior stone, the roof timbers were usually of small trees to support the weight of the stone roof which again were made up of broken and misshapen pieces of stone.

#### LAND ACQUISITION

The majority of the Isle of Purbeck was under the ownership of large landowners and there is little evidence of quarrymen owning the land they quarried. In most cases, leases were negotiated for the right to mine the stone (DRO D/Fil F29). Once the lease was agreed, the quarryman would only have a limited amount of time in which he could support himself and his family before he needed a return for his investment. As soon as stone was being extracted the landlord was entitled to a percentage of the takings as a form of ground rent (Claridge 1793).

In 1793 each county of England carried out a survey for the Board of Agriculture looking at 'the present state of husbandry and the means of its improvement' and in which it is recorded that of the total population in Swanage of 1200, upwards of 400 people were employed in the stone industry (Claridge 1794). It was also recorded that the amount of ground rent related to the type and use of stone that was being sold, which averaged out at about six pence per ton with stone selling from five shillings to twenty-four shillings a ton depending on the quality. Examples of ground rent due in 1794 were also given, these were: '6d per ton for front walling, 2d per ton for rough back, 2s per hundred feet of ashlar. 1s for a set of rick staddles', at the time the cost of feet and caps for rick staddles was 3s 6d or 'a set of nine delivered at Sandwich (Swanage) of the best sort 36s per set' (Claridge, 1794).

The Ancient Order of Purbeck Marblers and Stonecutters was the trade guild for the Isle of Purbeck and all quarrymen appear to have been members. The guild had a series of articles which laid down certain rules for the 'good and well-ordering of the company' (Saville 1973,3). These rules stated that no one could work in another person's quarry without their permission, that no one except for the Freemen might enter into a partnership, that only one apprentice, of good parentage, might be taken on by a quarryman at any one time and that the quarryman was responsible for him for the full seven years of his apprenticeship, all sales must be done in the quarryman's name, there was to be no undercutting of fellow tradesmen, nor unruly behaviour, and once a quarryman was married then a sum of money was to be paid to the company at the following Shrove Tuesday meeting.

The Ancient Order of Purbeck Marblers and Stone Cutters have their headquarters at Corfe Castle, where during the 16th century a new charter was drawn up to replace the ancient records that were lost in a fire earlier that century. By 1937 all that remained of the existing documents of the guild were The Articles of Agreement dated March 3rd 1551; a copy of the Articles dated March 3rd, 1651; an enlarged version of the Articles with the Seal of the Company of Marblers; an objection to payment for the examination of stone in 1687; a copy of the Charter granted by King Charles II to the borough of Corfe ratifying one granted by Queen Elizabeth I (Saville, 1973). There are 160 names appended to the Articles of Agreement of which 138 are legible. This list of names would give a good basis for further research.

#### FIELDWORK METHODOLOGY

Potential sites were located firstly by the re-examination of any available known material, then systematically searching for any new evidence. This included looking at maps from many sources; searching literary evidence both ancient and modern;

looking at photographic evidence; talking to people who had a connection with the quarrying industry; a field investigation of the area, conducted to search for any tangible evidence of the stone industry.

The prime source of information was the 1st Edition 25" Ordnance Survey(OS) maps of 1886, with subsequent editions of 1901, 1928 and 1954, enabling an account to be made of the expansion and contraction of the stone industry (Figs 2 and 3), and in some cases enabling dates to be established for the existence of sites. Contemporary photographs were used to confirm the archaeological evidence and to show the construction of buildings, the use of draught animals, tools and equipment. Interviews produced several pieces of 'contradictory' oral evidence which further investigation was able to clarify.

The stone quarries on Purbeck are concentrated around, Swanage, Langton Matravers and Acton, and it was in this area that the fieldwork was focused. Location of specific sites was dependent on the correlation of various map evidence and the verbal information of local people. Some sites proved more difficult to find than others and much time was spent in the physical exploration of the landscape. Thirteen sites in total were located, containing evidence of 20 quarr sheds (Fig. 6). Many of the sites were in a state of total disrepair and several sheds had been adapted for modern use. There were two complete complexes, one of which has recently been reconstructed by the National Trust.

Examination of each site was carried out to determine the location of the shafts, many of which had been filled in for safety reasons, although identification was possible for the majority of the sites. Search on foot was also carried out to investigate any further remains relevant to the stone industry, which were recorded photographically.

Because there was no official record of any of the remaining quarr sites in Purbeck each site investigated was meticulously recorded. National grid references were noted, the quarr shed was accurately measured and photographs taken from every aspect. Subsequently a detailed drawing was made of each quarr shed. A scale survey plan was made of the two sites that were still complete - Site 1 - Court Pound (as restored by the National Trust - Fig. 5) and Site 12 - Belle Vue (Fig. 7). The compiling of this record has established a totally new class of monument in the Dorset County Sites and Monuments Register.

## FIELD EVIDENCE

[All sites for which no name is recorded have had names designated by the author, based on either the location of the site or the name of the site's present owner. Approximate site dating is based on OS 25" 1st(1887) and subsequent (1901 & 1928) editions.]

### Site 1 - Court Pound SY 9918 7890(Fig. 5)

The site at Court Pound is a relatively modern site, dated between 1901 and 1928. It has been recently restored by the National Trust to produce a valuable example of what is likely to have been a typical quarr site. There does, however, appear to be some local uncertainty over the construction of the roof of Shed A (Fig. 8d). The site measures approximately 40m by 9m with the shaft to the south and is surrounded by a stone wall which is raised up from the lane running alongside, thus forming a loading banker. There are three sheds within the site, two of which have been completely rebuilt, Shed A facing south, Shed B facing north and Shed C west. A capstan complete with collar and spack has been replaced in its original position.

### Site 2 - Acton Field SY 9923 7869(Fig. 8c)

The Acton Field site is marked on the 1st edition OS map as a shaft, with three associated buildings. By 1901(OS 2nd edition) several more sheds are indicated including the one that remains today which would have lain to the south of the shaft. Relatively small in size, 3m by 3.5m, the quarr house faces south. It has the traditional stone roof, sloping from front to back, with the addition of a modern door and window. The dressed curved stones that have been used on the south-west corner to a height of approximately 1m could be an indication of a well-used pathway taking stone to the banker.

### Site 3- Blacklands SY 9903 7821(Fig. 8a)

Dated between 1887 and 1901 only one quarr house remains of the original four buildings. Facing east it originally measured 3m by 3.5m but the north wall has been extended by approximately 1m. Both the north and east walls show the original building was built of small irregular shaped pieces of stone, whereas the newer section was constructed of larger

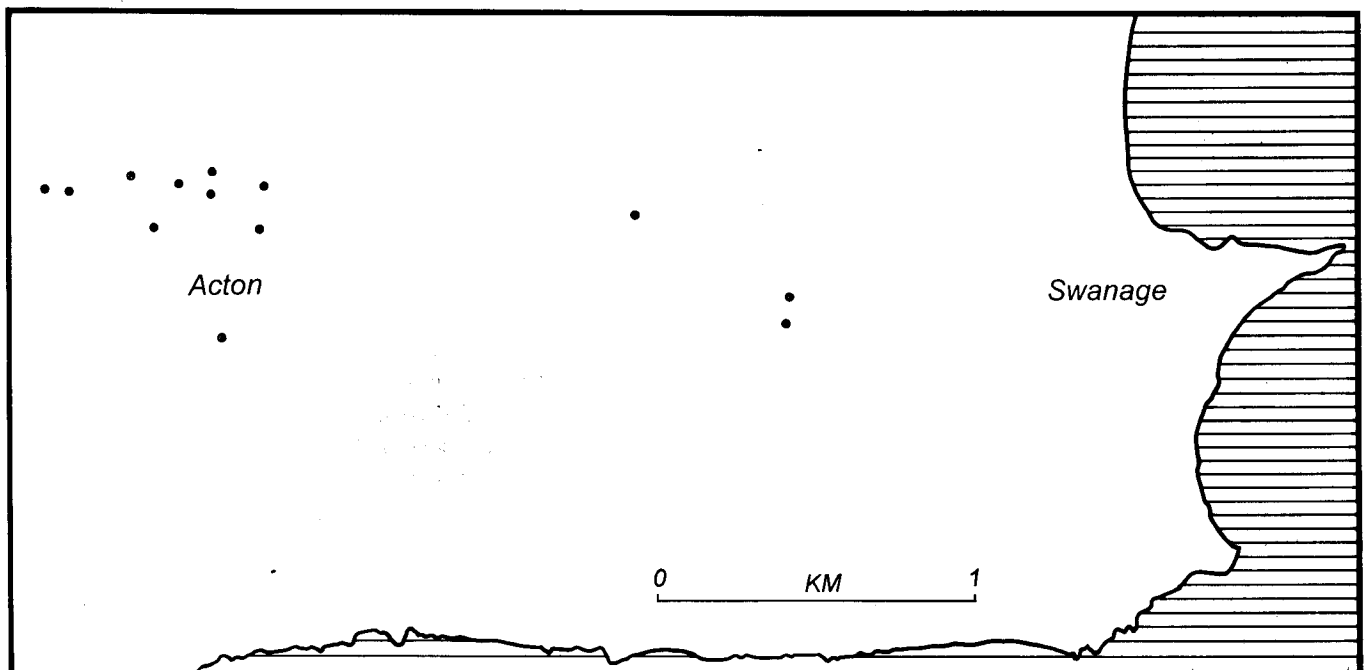


Fig. 6 Distribution of extant quarr sites on the Isle of Purbeck, 1994.

and more regular pieces. This could indicate that it was the small, broken and irregular pieces of stone that were not saleable at that time, which were normally used to build the quarr houses, whereas when economy was less crucial large pieces of more uniform stone have been used.

**Site 4 - Mrs Landers SY 9898 7885**

The original site had three buildings with the extant building being extended prior to 1901. The surviving structure faces north and is divided into two sections, each measuring 3m by 3.5m although two of the original walls have now been extended.

**Site 5 - Stable Site SY 9902 7895**

This site is rather unusual because there are two separate areas of mining each with its own shaft, which then join together at a single slide for bringing the stone to the surface. Of the several buildings evident in 1887, only one quarr shed remains which has been extended and is now used as a stable. Originally measuring 5.5m by 6m, it sloped from a height of 3.5m at the front to just 1m at the back.

**Site 6 - Cattle Corral SY 9892 7894**

Dated to pre-1887, the remains of the original buildings show that one faced south and measured 3.5m by 5m. The other measured 3.5m by 3m and faced north. Photographic evidence in the Dorset County Museum dating from around 1920 show these two sheds in their original positions before they were modified into one compound.

**Site 7 - Mummy's Shed SY 9874 7875**

Dated pre-1887 this shed measured 5m by 4m and faced south-east. It was one of three quarr sheds at this site.

**Site 8 - Isolated Site SY 9865 7893**

Originally one pre-1887 shaft, but by 1901 a second shaft had been sunk and the whole area of about half an acre was enclosed by a stone wall. The quarr shed, which was part of the original complex, is now in a state of dereliction. It is divided into two sections, one of which faced north-east (7.5m by 6m) and the other north-west (4.5m by 4m). There is some evidence surviving of tree branches being used to support the stone roof.

**Site 9 - Bonfield Yard SZ 0083 7878**

The only site where the sheds are still being used for their original purpose. The site was in existence by 1887 and the fact that in 1954 the shaft was referred to as 'old shaft' shows that the sheds could still been in use even when stone was no longer being extracted on site. The shed measure 5.5m by 8m and faces north-east.

**Site 10 - Mr. Meets SY 9839 7888(Fig. 8b)**

The complex consists of two facing buildings with a shaft to the north-west, dated between 1887 and 1901, although probably not used for stone extraction after 1928. The southern building has many special features which are worthy of note. The roof, which consists totally of stone slabs, is a particularly good example of how the roofs were built. In the eastern part of this quarr sheds, tree trunks are used in the traditional manner to support the roof. The west wall contains a large block of stone which bears evidence of wedge marks - an indication of the method that was used for its extraction.

**Site 11 - Mrs Sweets SY 9832 7893**

To the south of the sheds are 'ridden' holes, evidence of open cast mining and that the workable seams were very close to the surface. Dated pre-1887, there is also evidence on the 1772 Donne map (Dorset Record Office D/RWR:E16) that this area had several 'Paviour' quarries. Two sheds, one facing west and the other east flank the shaft, the shed to the west shows clearly a modern roof extension. The second quarr shed houses a small brick-built forge with its own mechanical bellows, used for sharpening the stoneworkers' tools, and would also have provided a cosy environment on cold mornings. The presence of two stone bankers indicates that this shed was used for the working or dressing of the stone.

**Site 12 - Belle Vue SZ 0156 7823 (Fig. 8)**

This relatively large complex of quarr sheds is noted on the 1st edition OS map of 1887 in much the same layout that is found today. The underground workings of this site stretched over an area of 8.5 acres. The site is 18m by 20m and there are six sheds in total, varying in size from 2.5m by 4m to 5m by 4m. Four of the sheds contain stone working bankers and the whole site is raised on a loading banker - Belle Vue being situated on the Priest Way which led directly into Swanage.

**Site 13 - Donkey Path SZ 0157 7831**

A small site adjacent to Belle Vue, a shaft and single building dated pre-1887. The shed faces east and measures approximately 2m by 3m.

**FIELD EVIDENCE: GENERAL**

Of the 13 sites that were identified only two were considered complete (ie, that they both contain evidence of the necessary features for a traditional quarr site), at Belle Vue and Court Pound. Of additional benefit is that one is situated in Swanage and the other in Langton Matravers which means that they can be examined with relation to the geography of each area and comparisons may be made.

Belle Vue was operational before 1887 whereas Court Pound has only been worked since 1928. Each site is different in shape and size, Belle Vue having a more trapezium shape, whilst Court Pound is long and narrow. They have certain common features: the shaft is situated to the south of the site and both have a roadway running along the length of the west wall of the enclosure; this seems to be coincidental rather than planned. Where it was possible to identify the shaft in relation to the quarr sheds at other sites, no such pattern emerged.

**DISCUSSION**

Until the turn of the century the stone quarries on the Isle of Purbeck provided employment for many people. Claridge (1793) reports that over 400 people were employed in the stone industry at the end of the 18th century whilst The Victoria County History of Dorset (Page 1900) tells of 92 stone mines being worked in 1877, which is confirmed by the number of sites found on the 1st Edition 25" OS map. However, by 1928 there has been a reduction in the number of sites in Swanage although numbers were maintained in Langton Matravers and Acton. Did the national economic depression in the mid 1920s affect the stone industry of Purbeck and cause the reduction in quarr sites? Without a doubt the decline in building work must have had some bearing on the diminishing number of quarr sites in Swanage as the introduction of a co-operative at this time indicates. However, as the stone area of Swanage had been worked since the 17th century with a

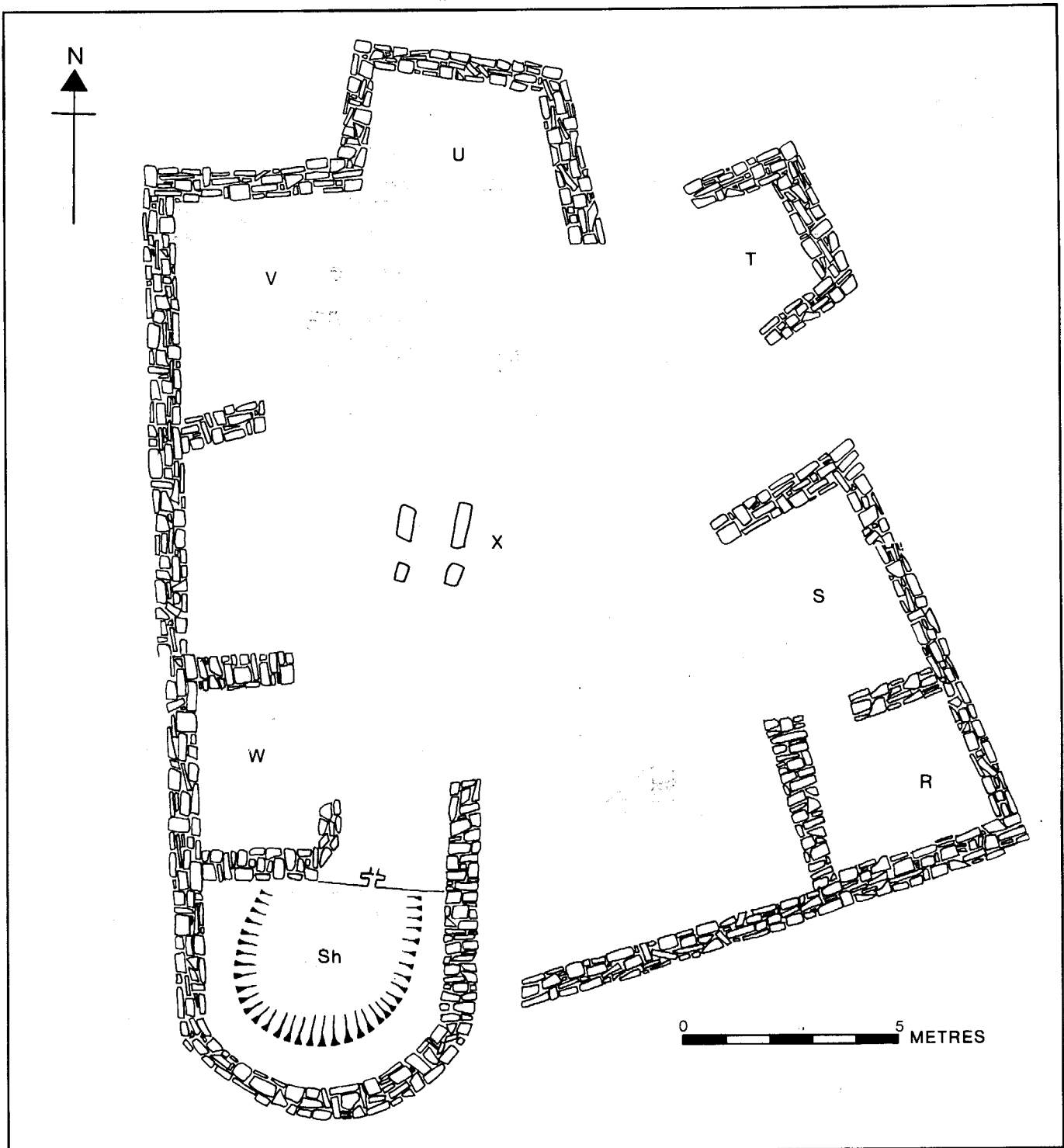


Fig. 7. Belle-Vue site. Schematic plan showing quarr houses R, S, T, U, V and capstan -X, the shaft - Sh.

gradual movement of sites to the west, another possibility could be that the marketable stone at Swanage had been worked out and Langton Matravers and Acton provided an alternative and more accessible supply. With a reduction in demand the few layers that were mined at Langton could have been sufficient to meet requirements.

Langton Matravers has remained a relatively small village, unspoilt by development, and the areas that contain the extant quarr sheds are used for low impact agriculture such as sheep grazing, thus ensuring that at the moment the remaining buildings are not in immediate danger of being destroyed. The quarrs of Purbeck were an integral part of a unique stone industry that dominated the area for over 300 years. The quarr sheds are part of the remaining evidence of this industry and need to be recognised as such. The location and recording of details of the 13 quarr sites and the 20 extant quarr sheds

which has resulted from this survey, and their subsequent inclusion in the Dorset County Sites and Monuments Register has provided an opportunity for this part of the industrial landscape to be properly recognised.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my gratitude to the following for their assistance and time. Mr R J Saville - Curator of the Coach House Museum Langton Matravers; Dr Peter Stanier; Claire Pinder - Sites and Monuments Record Officer, Dorset County Council; Nigel Watkins - Assistant Mapping Officer, National Monuments Record Centre, Swindon; Staff at the Dorset County Reference Library; Mr David Hinton, Southampton University. Finally I would like to thank my husband Roy for all his help and support with the fieldwork.

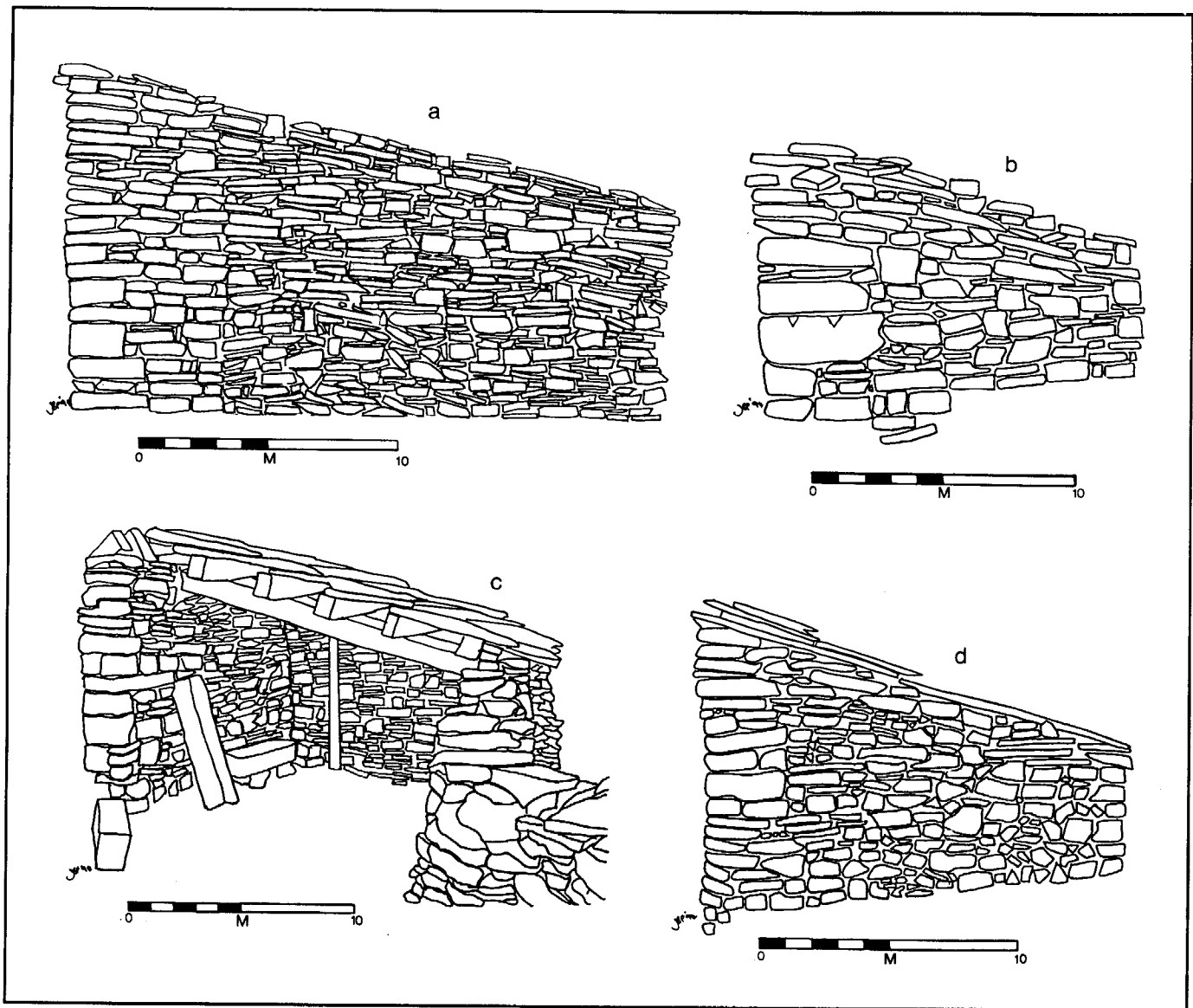


Fig. 8(a). Blacklands. Elevation of north wall showing different size stone used in modern addition. (b) Mr Meets's. Elevation of west wall of quarr house, showing wedge marks. (c) Acton Field. Elevation of quarr house south wall. Note the shaped stones used on the front corner. (d) Court Pound. south side of quarr house A, showing the controversial roof.

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Jill Phillips