

Milford Church - The Norman Arches and Tower Arch

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The purpose of this note is to correct a mistake about the origin of the perishable stone used inside Milford Church in the Norman arches, the Tower arch, and elsewhere.

It has always been understood that the stone used for the work on these arches was Binstead Stone, a well-known building stone freely quarried in the Isle of Wight in the Middle Ages, and used extensively in many Sussex churches; in the interior of Winchester Cathedral; and at Quarr Abbey. It is a building stone with a first class reputation, and is a part of the Bembridge Limestone.

For many years the Church Authorities had endless trouble with much of the internal stonework in Milford Church. There was continual flaking, dust, and loss of surface. Various expedients were tried - patent stone dressings, brushing with water, and so on. But they only made matters worse. The stone was analysed by the Building Research Institute and was found to be full of sodium salts. The experts at the Institute suggested that the salts could have been sucked up from the soil owing to the lack of a damp-proof course. Two architects from the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings expressed amazement that a stone, with a reputation such as Binstead Stone had, should decay as it had done. Gas fumes and the heating of the Church were thought to be possible reasons, but in the end they were obliged to fall back on the explanation that the stone must have come from poor seams in this usually admirable rock.

Eventually the state of the stonework became so bad that, under the auspices of Mr. R. A. P. Pinckney, stones from the Tower Arch were taken down and

replaced by a Northampton stone. The heaps of broken stone, which had been taken down from the Arch, lay for weeks in the road outside Milford House, and I used to pick them over looking for fossils, but with an ever increasing doubt as to what this stone might be.

Subsequently, an outing to collect fossil plants at Colwell Bay re-introduced me to the Howe Ledge Limestone - an older rock than the Bembridge Binstead stone. It is well exposed on the shore at Colwell, and in that stone I saw the Milford Church stone to the last detail. It is a soft creamy limestone, full (when freshly fractured) of the actual shells of freshwater snails, with the shell substance reduced to a thin paper texture, but still retaining the surface gloss.

I next examined the geological survey memoirs and found that Clement Reid had observed that the Bembridge Limestone may be distinguished from other Isle of Wight Limestones by its greater whiteness and by the fossils which are either hollow casts, or have their shells replaced by calcite. The Headon or Howe Ledge Limestone on the contrary is darker and more creamy in colour; more earthy and soft; and has the real shells of the fossils preserved.

I sent samples of the Milford Church and Howe Lodge Limestone to one who probably has greater knowledge of all Isle of Wight Limestone than any one else - James F. Jackson, a former Secretary of the Isle of Wight Natural History Society. He replied:-

"I think the Milford Church stone is almost certainly the Howe Ledge stone, and if it was supplied as Binstead stone I fear that the Church Authorities (in Norman

and later times) were badly taken in; but they may have accepted an inferior stone thinking that it would be all right for interior use. I do not think it can possibly be Bembridge (Binstead) Limestone as it is quite unlike . . .”

He adds that Howe Ledge Limestone if used would be saturated with sea water, and liable, therefore to flake and crumble to a dusty surface on drying out. But the position in Colwell Bay is very suitable for easy loading of barges, and the voyage to Lymington considerably shorter than from Binstead.

It may well be asked - “What really happened?” Did the Church Authorities try to do the job cheaply and close with the Contractor who said, “I can supply you with the same article at a cheaper rate because it will not have to come so far”; or was it just ignorance on the part of the old quarry owners who regarded all the Isle of

Wight Limestone as equally good? - or perhaps they thought the handy supply at Colwell as good for Milford as the stone supplied from famous quarries to Winchester? Or did the quarry owners blatantly cheat the Church? We shall never know the true story.

It is quite easy, however, to understand why architects and geologists thought that Milford stone came from Binstead. The appearance on an old surface can be very similar. They saw only the ancient surface of the dressed stone in the building, showing holes where the shells had been, but no actual shell substance, for the shells always crumble when exposed to air. They could not know, until the Tower Arch was taken down, what the stone looked like inside, with its shells preserved; and naturally, they could have had no experience of the Howe Ledge Limestone in use as a building stone, because it wasn't one!