

Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker continues his series of occupational histories with Joseph Taylor, a lime worker at Barrow upon Soar

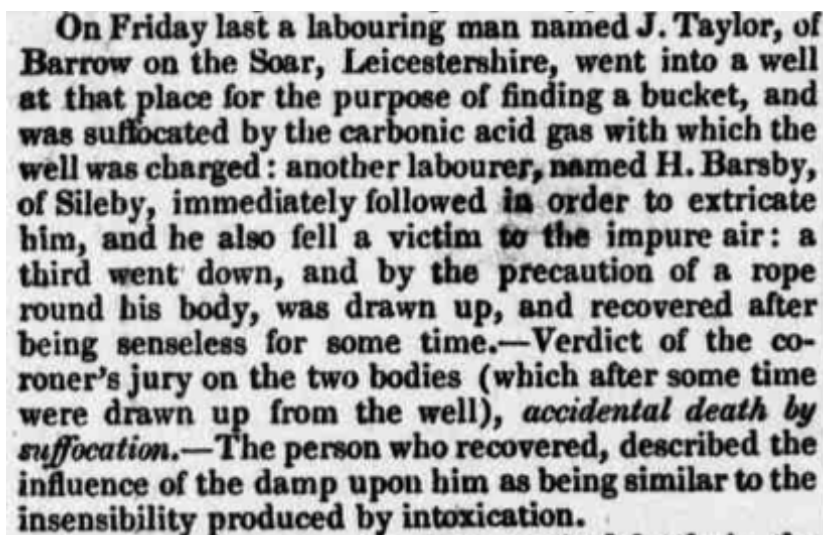
Many of us have labourers amongst our ancestors – men who grafted in the fields or on the roads. Despite long years of toil, labourers generally leave a sparse paper trail; theirs were not jobs that brought about apprenticeship records, trade directory listings or wills. It can be tricky to get more than a general sense of their working lives.

It was in pursuit of some of my labouring ancestors – the Taylors of Barrow upon Soar – that I found myself exploring Holy Trinity churchyard. I wasn't hopeful of finding even a hint of them in the village. It was a long shot. So I was surprised to spot a gravestone by the Church Lane corner, inscribed with the epitaph:

“Two fellow workmen in this grave do lie
Both in a well at Barley Hill did die
The unwholesome damp the fatal stroke did give”

Here was a gravestone with a story: my relative Joseph Taylor and his workmate Henry Barsby had been buried together after perishing in a well on 11th June 1824, both aged 25 years. Joseph was single, the unmarried son of William and Elizabeth Taylor. Henry – the son of Francis and Elizabeth Barsby – left a widow and three children. Intrigued, I was keen to find out more.

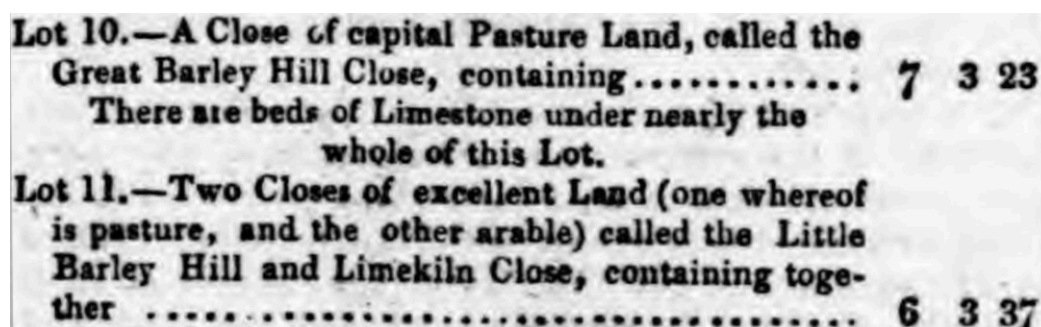
Maybe the incident merited a mention in the local newspaper? Sure enough, the coroner's verdict appears in the British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) – in the Leicester Chronicle, as might be expected, but also in the Northampton Mercury and the Stamford Mercury. Tracking down old newspaper snippets used to be a needle-in-a-haystack experience but these days the searchable BNA database makes it remarkably straightforward.



On Friday last a labouring man named J. Taylor, of Barrow on the Soar, Leicestershire, went into a well at that place for the purpose of finding a bucket, and was suffocated by the carbonic acid gas with which the well was charged: another labourer, named H. Barsby, of Sileby, immediately followed in order to extricate him, and he also fell a victim to the impure air: a third went down, and by the precaution of a rope round his body, was drawn up, and recovered after being senseless for some time.—Verdict of the coroner's jury on the two bodies (which after some time were drawn up from the well), *accidental death by suffocation*.—The person who recovered, described the influence of the damp upon him as being similar to the insensibility produced by intoxication.

The Chronicle – which described it as “A most melancholy occurrence” – added that Joseph Taylor was “employed at Mr Webb’s lime pits” and the third man lowered on the rope was named as a Mr Walpole.

Sticking with the BNA online, I seek out further references to Mr Webb’s lime pits at Barley Hill. Mr Webb himself proves elusive, but Barley Hill crops up repeatedly in auction announcements. Firstly, in September 1814, Barley Hill Close was listed with 7 acres, 1 rood and 19 perches of land “in the upper part of which are strata of excellent lime stone”. It pops up again for auction in October 1830 – then occupied by Thomas Stone. Yet another advert indicates Barley Hill “lying between the road leading to Walton and the Shanccliffe [otherwise Stranccliffe] Lane”. I get my maps out, the search narrows.



**Lot 10.—A Close of capital Pasture Land, called the
Great Barley Hill Close, containing 7 3 23**
There are beds of Limestone under nearly the
whole of this Lot.

**Lot 11.—Two Closes of excellent Land (one whereof
is pasture, and the other arable) called the Little
Barley Hill and Limekiln Close, containing toge-
ther 6 3 37**

Trade directories can be another excellent resource for helping put your ancestors in their place. The 1820s directories barely give Barrow upon Soar a mention, but by 1846 White’s directory really helps set the scene:

“Barrow-Upon-Soar... has for ages been celebrated for its excellent limestone... The limestone, which is extensively got and burnt here, is found in great abundance. The upper stratum has a yellow tinge, and below this are several others of a blueish colour, which are in general six inches thick, and two feet asunder;... It is probably owing to some portion of manganese being combined with it, that the Barrow Lime possesses that valuable property of becoming hardened under water. As a cement for building docks, piers, bridges, &c, it is in high repute in all parts of the kingdom, and great quantities of it have been exported to Holland, for these purposes.”

Being situated relatively close to the surface – some 2 to 12 feet down – Barrow limestone was extracted from shallow pits or delphs. “A limestone delph,” wrote John Nichols in ‘The History and Antiquities of the County of Leicester’ (1811) “is usually four yards wide; and that width, and nine yards in length, is termed a hade.” He provides further insights into the working of lime pits:

“Sometimes the upper-floor, then called rummell, is worth nothing but to build bad walls. Seven floors of stone have been found. There may be more, but, on account of the depth, seldom more than five are got up... Between the floors sometimes is found a kind of slaty clay, called

slaven; in other places a fine pure clay, which might perhaps be useful for pot-ware.”

Delphs, hades, rummells and slaven – this is an industry with a language of its own. It’s terminology that Joseph Taylor and his fellow workmen might have used as they laboured with pick axes, shovels and hand-barrows – with aching backs and roughened hands too, no doubt – removing the limestone and clay. As they progressed, they could have uncovered marine shells and fossil fish. William Lee (1795 - 1867) – a Barrow contemporary of Joseph Taylor – is recorded on his gravestone as a “farmer and lime-burner”. However, he’s more notable as a collector and dealer in local Jurassic fossils. His collection “affords much gratification to visitors” and contained some stunning examples, including the ‘Barrow Kipper’, which is now displayed at the New Walk Museum and on the village sign.

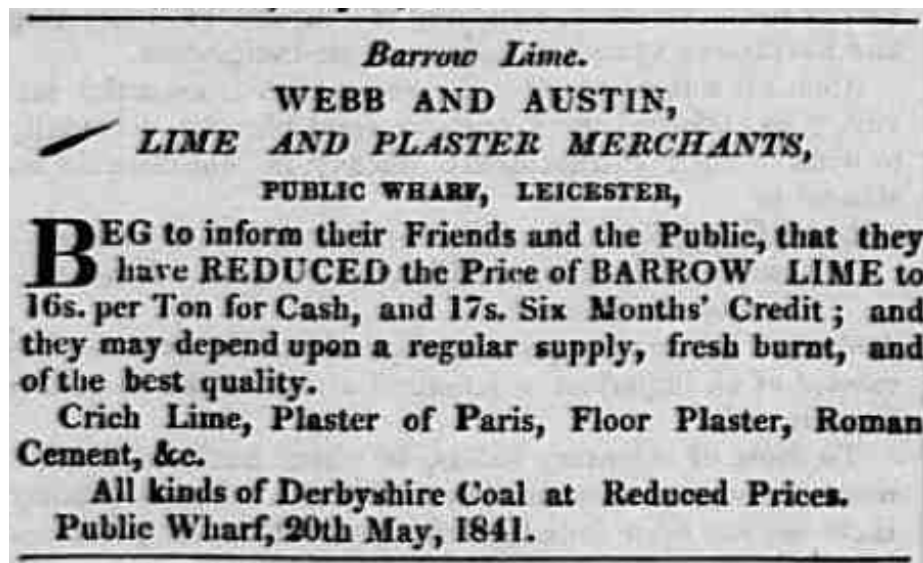
Once extracted, limestone was burnt to make it suitable for building and agricultural purposes. Nichols writes “The lime-stone, when dug up, is piled in form of a cone, and burnt. The burning of one of these heaps takes up to two days and three nights.” Later, bottle-shaped, coal-fired limekilns became the norm. Such lime burning gave off a pungent aroma – a white haze of sulphurous fumes wafted around the village. Those suffering with tuberculosis believed that the fumes helped eased their condition and, for a time in the mid 19th century, London doctors would send patients for ‘the Barrow Cure’.



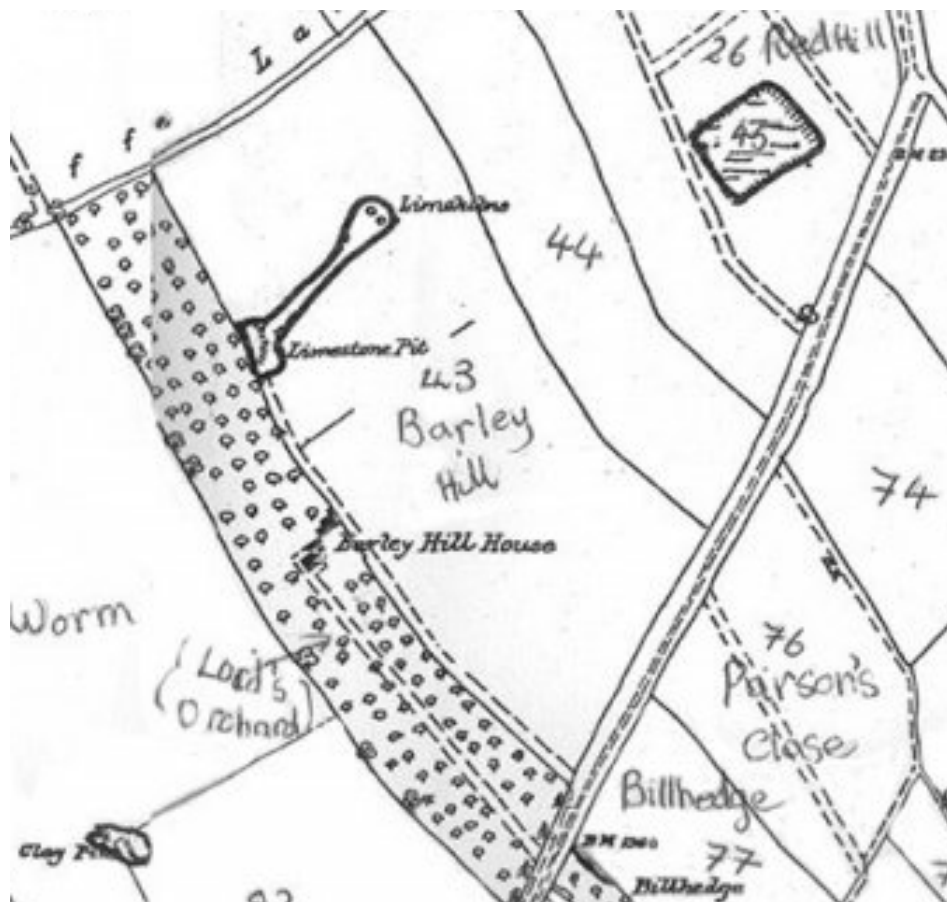
It was the opening of the Leicester Navigation in 1794 – creating a canal between Loughborough and Leicester – that transformed the industry, providing a means of transporting limestone further afield. By 1797, some 1421 tons of limestone and 782 tons of agricultural lime were shipped by canal from Barrow Wharf. The railway arrived in Barrow in 1840, bringing with it further links for transporting limestone. By 1845 there were eleven lime delphs in the parish, including Barley Hill.

Amongst the shipments were batches to Webb & Austin, operating from the Public Wharf in Leicester. There’s a reasonable likelihood that this Mr Webb

was the erstwhile employer of Joseph Taylor and Henry Barsby:



The Barrow upon Soar Heritage Group website shares many useful materials about the village history. One invaluable resource is a WI field name survey created in 1967-71. There – in amongst Big Worm, Parson's Close and over 110 other field names – I spot Barley Hill, marked with limestone pit and kilns.



Barley Hill Quarry was certainly still active until 1845, when it fielded a cricket XI against a team from Brook Quarry. Amongst the Barley Hill players was stonemason John Walpole – possibly the same ‘Mr Walpole’ who twenty years earlier had been lowered on a rope into the well, in the hope of saving his two fellow workmen.

Leicestershire’s geology has helped determine many of our ancestors’ livelihoods: over the centuries, thousands have worked with Mountsorrel granite, Swithland slate, and Barrow limestone. Some of our labouring forefathers might not have left behind an extensive trail of family history documents, but their legacy has been to help shape the landscape we see today.