



Journey through the Valley of Stone

... a living history



You are here: The Journey > Men and machines

Men and machines

The enormous reserves of stone on Rossendale moorlands were dug out and processed by a huge amount of human endeavour and by adapting simple tools and machinery to create awe in spiring excavations.

You are here: The Journey > Men and machines > The rock-getters

The rock-getters

The first stage of making stone products is to separate blocks of stone from the rock bed where they have been for millions of years. This was the job of the rock-getters.

Once the overburden of clay and soft rock had been removed to expose the beds of Haslingden Flag, the rock-getters took over. Working on the flat top surface of the bed, they would first mark out the extent of the block to be broken free. Rows of tapered holes were then cut along the marks and wedges hammered into the holes to split the rock, allowing the block to be prised free with crowbars.

This was heavy, but skillful work: The Rochdale journalist H C Collins, writing in 1960, captures the terminology and skills of the rock-getter. "The rock-getter was a man of muscle like Top Moran, Butter Mick or Jimmy Cairns, who could wield a 90lb hammer for a long spell without resting. First the holes for the wedges were made every foot or fifteen inches with a two inch broad chisel. The rock-getter would spit in the deepening hole to make the fine rock particles cling together, then clean it up with a bottoming pick. The wedges were inserted, (slightly less than the hole), and the 90lb hammer carefully and continually used on about a dozen wedges until the rock split and the piece was ready for 'handy bob,' the large crowbar to move away. If a wedge hole split it was said to 'spalch'.

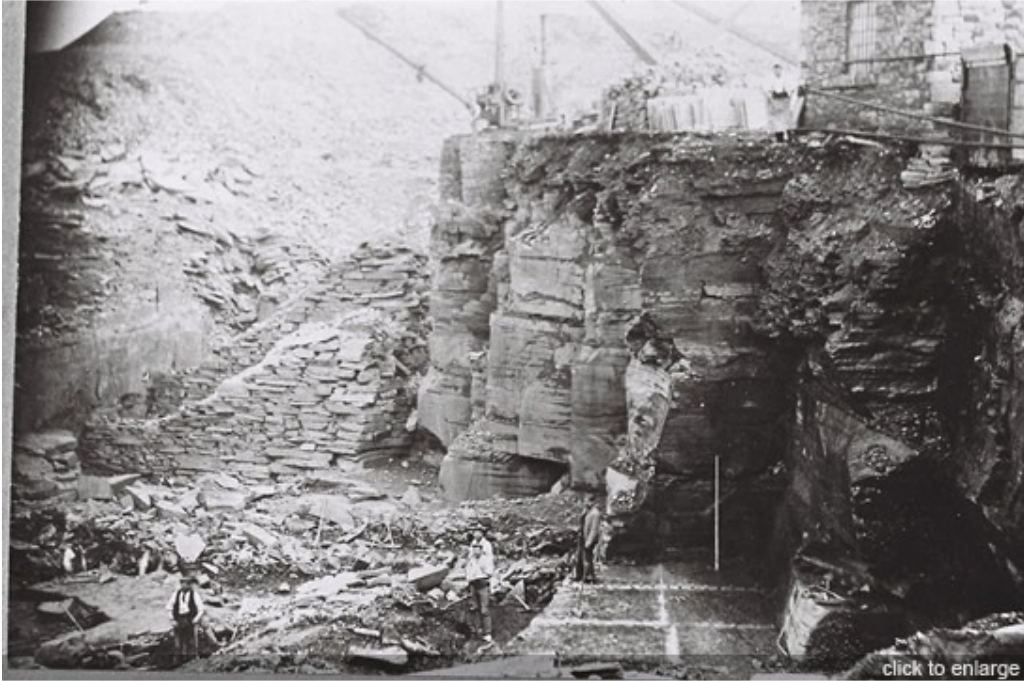
For those unfamiliar with pounds and ounces, 90lb (90 pounds) is about 40kg!

Detail from photo of rock getters This photograph shows a rock-getter at work. A row of wedges is in place and crowbars and hammers are ready for use.



Journey through the Valley of Stone

... a living history



Rock-getters using wedges to peg out the flags. The crane waits above ready to hoist the split flag.

You are here: The Journey > Men and machines > Stone mines

Stone mines

Visitors and residents seem surprised when mention is made of stone mines in Rossendale. People have heard of coal mines and lead mines but why stone mines?

An article about quarries in The Bacup Chronicle April 26 1902 is subtitled 'How the Miner Earns his Daily Bread' –

'It is not generally known that drifts are now made underground for the purpose of stone getting, but such is the fact, and this kind of work renders the life of the quarrymen doubly dangerous. This mode of mining, however, obviates the removing of considerable amount of "bearing," which would otherwise be very necessary. In times past, they thought little of bearing or cutting away earth to the depth of 20 or 30 feet, if thereby plenty of good stone could be afterwards procured; but the undermining system now adopted has rendered much excavation unnecessary.'

The layers of Haslingden Flags outcropping on the valley tops and sides were in great demand to pave the streets of Victorian towns and cities. In many places the flags outcrop on the moor top and moor edge close to surface, and large open excavations are obvious. Where the best layers of flag (often named 'lonkey') are deeper below surface or lower down the valley side then tunnels are driven and large scale 'pillar and stall' mining was carried out. Attempting to move thick overburden without mining would have been expensive and time consuming as modern earth moving machinery did not come into use until the early 1900s.

What remains in the hillsides are tunnel entrances to a grid –pattern complex of vast chambers separated by pillars of rock at frequent intervals to support the roof. To create the chambers, the



Journey through the Valley of Stone

... a living history



rock getters would pick out a weaker layer above the best stone. Often working on their sides with only shoulder height to move in, they would excavate a narrow ledge to create a working space, then work downwards on the strong rock with wedges and crowbars. Both the Lower and Upper Haslingden Flags were mined and so distribution is widespread.

Our earliest records of stone mines are from the 1820s at Tong End Pasture, Whitworth; but they probably reached their peak from the 1870s onwards. Many of the larger mines closed before the First World War, although other proprietors continued until the 1930s.

Stone mines at Crutchman Quarry, the obvious entrance is locally nicknamed Gamblers Caves

Large scale pillar and stall workings in the enormous complex of Facit Stone Mines. Picture courtesy of Whitworth Historical Society



[click to enlarge](#)



[click to enlarge](#)

It is important to emphasise the dangerous nature of the stone mine remains. The pillar and stall workings create a disorientating 'maze' on a grand scale and several incidents of lost groups and rescues are documented. The large roof falls bear testimony to the looseness and flakiness of the rock. On no account should workings be entered without expert guides.

In 1938 the mine galleries at the disused Scout Mine were prepared to serve as air raid shelters in case of Second World War air attack. It was reported that the lofty galleries widen at intervals into extensive chambers and are large enough to accommodate scores of people if necessary. The mine was made ready with electric lights and an air lock in case of a gas attack. The roof was supported by large wooden beams, quite a few of them from demolition of mills and other large buildings.