

Nene valley quarry conveyor loading ramp, Wollaston parish, Northamptonshire, and its re-use for wildlife

by

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Location and context

A former sand and gravel quarry conveyor loading ramp or dock is located in Wollaston parish approximately 1km south of the village of Great Doddington, Northamptonshire (NGR: SP88678 64065). Though of recent origin, this structure is of some industrial archaeological interest. It sits by a permissive footpath which runs alongside the northern edge of Summer Leys Local Nature Reserve, between Hardwater and Doddington Crossings.

The path utilises the now disused quarry haul-road which has served Hanson UK operated aggregate quarries in this part of the Nene Valley until relatively recently. This haul-road in turn re-used the former track-bed of the Blisworth (Northampton) to Peterborough, London and North Western Railway (HER 6294/1), opened in 1845 and closed to passengers along this part of the Nene Valley in May 1964.

Acknowledgements

Figures 2, 3 and 4 are courtesy of S Brayshaw, 26 March 2014. The others are by G Cadman, 27 April 2014.

Description

The structure comprises a concrete-walled platform or dock with an associated vehicle ramp to the east and a concrete screen wall extending to the west (Fig 1). Together, these exceed 40m in length. The dock and ramp are approximately 23.5m long by 4.75m wide. The dock's concrete retaining walls are up to 3m high and are 200mm wide at their top, up to 460mm elsewhere (S Brayshaw *pers comm*). Compact sand and gravel forms the infill of the dock and of its accompanying vehicle ramp. A series of 60mm diameter drainage (weep) holes were built into the concrete retaining walls. Rusting, tubular iron railings and a gate survive atop the dock and ramp.

The low concrete wall extending west from the tipping dock is a maximum of 1.0m high and 340mm wide. Its function was to partly enclose or screen the terminus of a conveyor belt which ran from the tipping dock face to the quarry company processing site located off Station Road (at SP8609 6193), Earls Barton, approximately 3.2km distant.

Vehicles skipped in the aggregates quarried from nearby sites, using the former railway as a haul-road, and then tipped sand gravel, via the ramp and dock, on

to the continuous conveyor for onward transport to the quarry processing works. The ramp is believed to have been built in the late 1970s or early 1980s and ceased operation in 1997 (P Watson *pers comm*). An example of such a conveyor can still be seen to the west of Hardwater Crossing (see Fig 5).

Re-use for wildlife

This redundant quarry structure was given a new lease of life in March 2014 when, with the addition of 50 newly drilled holes along its southern face, it is planned that it will provide homes for sand martins, a few pairs of which have nested in the existing weep holes in recent years (Figs 2–4). In addition to the existing 60mm diameter weep holes, the majority of the new holes are 64mm in diameter (77mm cores lined with 64mm internal diameter pvc pipe). However, the central 11 holes on the top row are 62mm in diameter and are unlined. The 800mm long cores extend through the concrete walls into the packed gravel beyond. The voids in the gravel core and a short section of the core through the wall have been packed with clean sand. In order to minimise the disturbance to the nesting birds, gates and fencing are planned across the disused railway line to guide passers-by around the northern side of the ramp during the breeding season.

This re-use has been undertaken by Steve Brayshaw (R S Brayshaw Ecological Consultancy) for Summer Leys Local Nature Reserve and the local Wildlife Trust with support from Hanson UK and the Friends of Summer Leys (now defunct). I am grateful to the former for information about the project.

Significance

This sand and gravel quarry conveyor loading ramp or dock is of local industrial archaeological interest. It is one of the few surviving upstanding structural remains of an industry which has had an extensive impact on the landscape and character of large swathes of the Nene valley. Recreational and wildlife conservation re-use of former gravel pits is clearly evident along much of the valley. In contrast, the built extraction and processing plant and structures associated with the industry are normally much more transitory in nature. Nowadays, little if anything of such structures tends to survive the dismantlement, removal and re-use that routinely accompanies the planned restoration and associated landscaping phases of operation.

NOTES

The ramp, though part of an industry active in this part of the valley until very recently, is thus part of an increasingly rare survival of the structural infrastructure of this widespread and still widely familiar local industry. Its simple and entirely functional nature and recent origin

both contribute to its local industrial archaeological interest and historic landscape significance. The retention and innovative, yet sympathetic re-use of the structure for wildlife is to be greatly welcomed.



Fig 1 View of the west and south elevations with the three lines of sand martin holes just evident in the latter. The fenced-in ramp beyond and the drop to what would have been the conveyor to the fore, are also evident as is part of the conveyor screen wall extending westward



Fig 2 The south wall elevation before the new sand martin holes were installed



Fig 3 The south elevation wall after the new sand martin holes were installed



Fig 4 Detail of the newly drilled and lined nest holes



Fig 5 A quarry conveyor west of Hardwater Crossing (at SP 8804 6349), looking west