

Section A: Project Background

By Eleanor Conlin Casella

A.1: Introduction

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The Alderley Sandhills Project represents a set of unique collaborative relationships between the Manchester Museum and School of Art History & Archaeology in the University of Manchester, English Heritage, and the National Trust. Previous work within the region included the Alderley Edge Landscape Project (AELP), begun in December 1996 as a multidisciplinary programme to survey the wider landscape for traces of human activity above and below ground at a site which combined such mineralogical variety that it has been classified as both SSSI and RIGGS with archaeological importance - apparently the earliest metal mine in England - and a fascinating social history, all this set in a "honeypot" that regularly attracted large numbers of visitors from the Manchester conurbation and beyond. Indeed, this very popularity was causing great concern to the National Trust as the principal landowner. In 2001 parts of the site were scheduled as ancient monuments. Funded by the Leverhulme Trust with support from Cheshire County Council and others, the AELP aimed to learn the Edge's story so as to compile a management plan for the site, to raise public awareness through exhibitions, teaching and publication, and to identify avenues of further research.

Over two years the AELP surveyed and mapped the confusing topography of the Edge as well as the mines beneath (in collaboration with the Derbyshire Caving Club), providing a jumping-off point for further archaeological research. Two small test excavations threw light on the industrial mining processes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as confirming the Bronze Age date of the earliest mines and revealing the first Roman mine shaft in England: where the Bronze Age miners were looking for copper, the Romans probably came for the lead, while the later miners added a quest for cobalt. Study of the "villas" built after the coming of the railway in 1842, linked to research into the place names, the history and the vernacular architecture and above all to an ever-growing series of recorded interviews with members of the local community greatly extended our knowledge of "them and us" in a village that combined an artisan and mining community with one of the earliest wealthy commuter dormitories. The mines finally closed by 1920, but the rest of the picture remains true, and the way in which the community came together in support of our research was moving and exciting, giving us information and providing photographs and documents for the resulting research archive.

At the same time a thorough study of the underlying geology and the geomorphology helped to put the anthropogenic part of the story into its proper place. Despite such a rich mineral history, the flora and fauna of the Edge itself are surprisingly "ordinary" - although research has identified two hitherto unknown bramble hybrids and the presence of a Copperwort otherwise virtually unknown outside Cornwall which must have come here on a miner's boot. With 4,000 years of lead, copper and cobalt mining history the site has great potential as an open-air laboratory for the study of soil pollution. Behind all this lies the legend of the sleeping king and his knights, watched over by a wizard and waiting to save England in her hour of need: the Edge is still a special place, and study of the way the legend lives on takes one to the edge of fantasy, and sometimes beyond.

This first stage of the AELP created a momentum which carried it well beyond the two years originally envisaged, and sparked numerous ideas for research, site management and teaching, quite apart from a series of lectures, an exhibition, research papers and books. By combining those resources with *The Stone Book Quartet* by the internationally renowned local author Alan Garner, our landscape research is intended to guide children into an understanding of the history and geography of their own village or town – to give them a sense of place and of their own place in it.

However, the terms of the Leverhulme Trust's finding only permitted small research excavations, which also conformed with the policy of the National Trust. Just outside the Trust's boundaries in the part of the Edge known as the Hagg lay the "Sandhills", an area where huge quantities of highly polluted sand deriving from the acid-leaching process used to process the copper ores during the 19th century had been dumped. The sand had been largely removed and reused as aggregate, particularly between the 1930s and 1960s, but the area had remained all but sterile. Still lacking was a detailed study of a domestic site that could – probably for the first time – bring together these several different approaches and techniques and use them to answer a group of linked and focused questions. The Alderley Sandhills Project gave an opportunity for a research excavation of a small domestic site of the historical period as it moved from the agricultural into the industrial era. In the lee of the Sandhills had stood two pairs of cottages known variously as the Miners' Cottages or the Hagg Cottages. Records suggested that they had been built in the 1740s, and they had been demolished by the Neild Family of Whitebarn Farm in the 1950s. Aside from census records and other documentary evidence, photographs of the cottages survived, and importantly so did three people who had lived in them as young children. Two, who still lived in Alderley, had already contributed to the oral archive their memories of life in the Hagg before the Second World War. With the availability of funds from the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund came a special, possibly unique opportunity for a collaboration between English Heritage, the Manchester Museum and the School of Art History & Archaeology to compare the 'myth' of remembered history with the photographic evidence and the results of a research excavation, carried out according to methods developed in the New World where investigation of such domestic sites of the historical period is much more common than in Britain. Not a rescue project, but a proper research excavation. The Alderley Sandhills Project combined these archaeological perspectives with a detailed environmental survey of the site, while also drawing the local community fully into the project, both as providers of information and as participants in the excavation.

A.2: Area Description

A.2.1: Regional Description

Located approximately 25 km (15 miles) south of Manchester, Alderley Edge is a natural rocky outcrop with views across both Greater Manchester and the Cheshire plain (Map Grid General Reference: SJ 385 377). According to legend a king and his knights sleep beneath the Edge. Archaeological evidence demonstrates the region was mined for copper deposits during both the Bronze and Romano-British periods. During the 1850s, a series of Italianate "Villas" were constructed at Alderley Edge, and sold to the newly-wealthy mill barons desperate to escape the dank urban grime of industrial Manchester. At the same time, an early rail line was established to link central Manchester to the growing service town, thereby making the village of Alderley Edge the first commuter suburb of Great Britain, and indeed the world. From the late eighteenth century through to the early twentieth century the Edge was

extensively mined for copper, lead and cobalt deposits. Thus, from the 18th century, the region supported a complex mix of agricultural, industrial and service based economic activities.

The exceptional geology of the Edge has led to parts of the area being classified as a SSSI because of the unusual flora and fauna. The area has also been declared a RIGS because of the copper, lead and cobalt which has been extracted from c.1750 BC to AD 1920. From the 1930s to the 1960s waste sand from the disused mines was extracted as aggregate for road and runway building in the north-west region. In 2001 parts of the site were given Scheduled Ancient Monument status.

A.2.2: Relationship to Aggregates Extraction (ALSF Eligibility).

In the 1850s the Alderley Edge Mining Company developed an acid-leaching process in order to extract the copper from the ore. The waste sand from this process was thus steeped in hydrochloric acid and was dumped north of the entrance to West Mine (outside the National Trust's land) in such quantity that the area became known locally as the Sandhills. The sand was re-used in the 1930s by Thomas Nield & Co as an aggregate for road-building in Manchester (Kingsway), and again in the 1960s for building the first section of the M6 and the runway at Manchester Airport.

A. 3: Previous Work.

A.3.1: Alderley Edge Landscape Project (AELP).

This research project benefits from extensive previous historical research within the region. Since 1996, Alderley Edge was the subject of a joint multidisciplinary research programme of the National Trust and the Manchester Museum to study all aspects of the region's natural and human history (the Alderley Edge Landscape Project [AELP]). This initial research was funded principally by the Leverhulme Trust, and is now being prepared for publication. A substantial archive of photographic, oral history, cartographic and documentary materials on Alderley Edge was compiled by the AELP. In addition, surveys of birds and vegetation were carried out during October - December of 1996 as part of the AELP fieldwork. Curated through The Manchester Museum, this unique interdisciplinary archive has been extensively consulted during all stages of this project.

A.3.2: AELP - Heritage and Education Resource (AELPHER).

The AELP programme has in turn spawned a number of further schemes, among them Alderley Edge Landscape Project - Heritage and Education Resources (AELPHER), an innovative education project involving local schools and funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund with additional moneys from the Carnegie UK Trust, Macclesfield Borough Council and others, also drawing on the archive built up by AELP. Extensive local community networks fostered through AELPHER provided a good basis for the community outreach schemes completed by this project.

A.3.3: AELP - Test Excavations on Mine Workings.

Recent archaeological test excavations, commissioned by the National Trust and Manchester Museum, confirmed Bronze Age and Roman mining at Engine Vein Mine, and also investigated parts of the 19th century ore processing at Wood Mine. Undertaken as part of AELP, these preliminary excavations naturally concentrated on the adjoining parts of the Edge owned by the National Trust. They revealed structural details of the tramway and water management system related to transportation and industrial processing of extracted ore. Copies of the resulting reports are held in the AELP archive.