

Extractive industries in and around Compton

For a small parish, Compton had a surprising number of pits, mines and quarries used to extract the various resources that the earth has to offer. The resulting diggings have all had an effect on the landscape of the parish.

Chalk was used for various purposes, mainly for building and for fertiliser. It was a very important resource that was quarried for hundreds of years.

There are a number chalk pits in the parish of Compton but by far the largest are those close to the crest of the Hog's Back at Monkshatch. They stretch along the southern slopes of the ridge for over ½ mile, straddling the parish boundary with Wanborough. The Surrey Sites and Monuments Record suggests that digging began in medieval times (up to 1530s) or soon after.



Extract from the 1871 OS map showing the Wanborough and Compton chalk pits, the sand pit at Whiteacre Copse and two lime kilns on Puttenham and Compton Heaths.

The chalk pits are shown on Senex's map of Surrey of 1729, on Rocque's map of Surrey (c.1760) and also in the Compton tithe survey of 1839-41 where they are recorded as being disused.

The 1871 OS map shows the Compton quarries were covered in trees by then, which indicates that they had been out of use for a considerable period.

The western end of the quarries, in Wanborough parish, are shown as more lightly wooded, suggesting that this area was in use more recently.

The north slope Hog's Back has many more pits than the southern side, notably a large one by the eponymous Chalkpit Farm between Flexford and Down Place.

Marl is a form of decayed chalk and clay that was used as a soil improver from Roman times. It was spread on arable land to improve sandy soils by reducing acidity and making them more water retentive.

It is found in the lowest stratum of the chalk beds and there are several examples of marl pits along the southern slope of the Hog's Back, just above the line where the chalk is underlain by an outcrop of gault clay. There is one in the fields just below Sunnydown that is now largely filled in but still identifiable and another near Conduit Farm.

There is a reference to the pits in the will of James Westbrooke of Westbury Farm who died in 1570 but, by the early eighteenth century, marl was gradually being superseded by lime, which is also a product of the chalk quarries.



A small quarry, probably a marl pit, near Conduit Farm.

Lime was made by burning lump chalk in kilns up to temperatures approaching 900 degrees celsius. The resulting quicklime was spread on arable land as a soil improver.

The kilns were small and scattered about the countryside in the places where the lime was to be used, typically in or near areas of sand and clay soils. In the early days of lime burning, the chalk was carted from the quarry to kilns, rather than being burnt at the quarry itself. This was because quicklime is a dangerous substance when it becomes wet and it was considered safer to transport chalk to be burned near where it was to be used.

These local kilns were set into sloping ground so that chalk could be fed into to them easily from above and the fire stoked from below.



The lime kiln on Shackleford Heath.

The 1871 OS map shows at least four kilns within easy reach of the Monkshatch quarries: one at the top of Ice House Hollow, in the significantly named Kiln Copse, another on Compton Heath, where chalk fragments can still be seen around the site, and another just to the north the cricket ground on Puttenham Heath. The fourth kiln was located next to the road that runs down the north slope of the downs towards Wanborough church and manor. None of them survive, although there is still a kiln to be seen a little further away on Shackleford Heath, next to Peper Harow Lane.

Lime was also used to manufacture building materials. The quicklime was slaked in water and the resulting product was mixed with sand to make mortar. It was also used for making plaster and lime wash.

Chalk can be used in its natural form as a building material. However, most chalk is too soft to be used for this purpose as it weathers badly but there is a harder form, called clunch, that is dense enough to be worked as a building stone.

The best clunch is from the Melbourne Rock, a hard, lumpy material that is found at the junction of the middle and lower chalk. It outcrops intermittently all along the range of the North Downs.

There are some buildings built of clunch in Seale, notably the church, but there are no examples in Compton, although it was used for internal work in St Nicholas's church.

Sandstone is the material used in many Compton buildings and the well-known Bargate stone outcrops in a band around the valley. It is a good, very hard-wearing building stone but it can't be worked into a smooth surface. Bargate survives the years well and it was used to construct the oldest structure in the parish, the 1000-year-old Saxon tower of St Nicholas's church.

Despite its widespread use in the parish, Bargate was not quarried extensively in Compton because the stone beds are narrow here, although there is a small pit on Budburrow Hill next to the cemetery. This was a comparatively late arrival having been dug between 1872 and 1895, the dates of the first and second editions of the Ordnance Survey map.

There was at least one other source of Bargate in the parish: a map of the glebe land dated 1837 shows Stone Pit Croft at the top of the scarp slope above Field Place and the Glebe Fields where the Bargate outcrops. The clue's in the name, as it so often is in local history research, and it is backed up by a Lidar¹ image of the scarp slope that shows an area of significant disruption of the hillside.

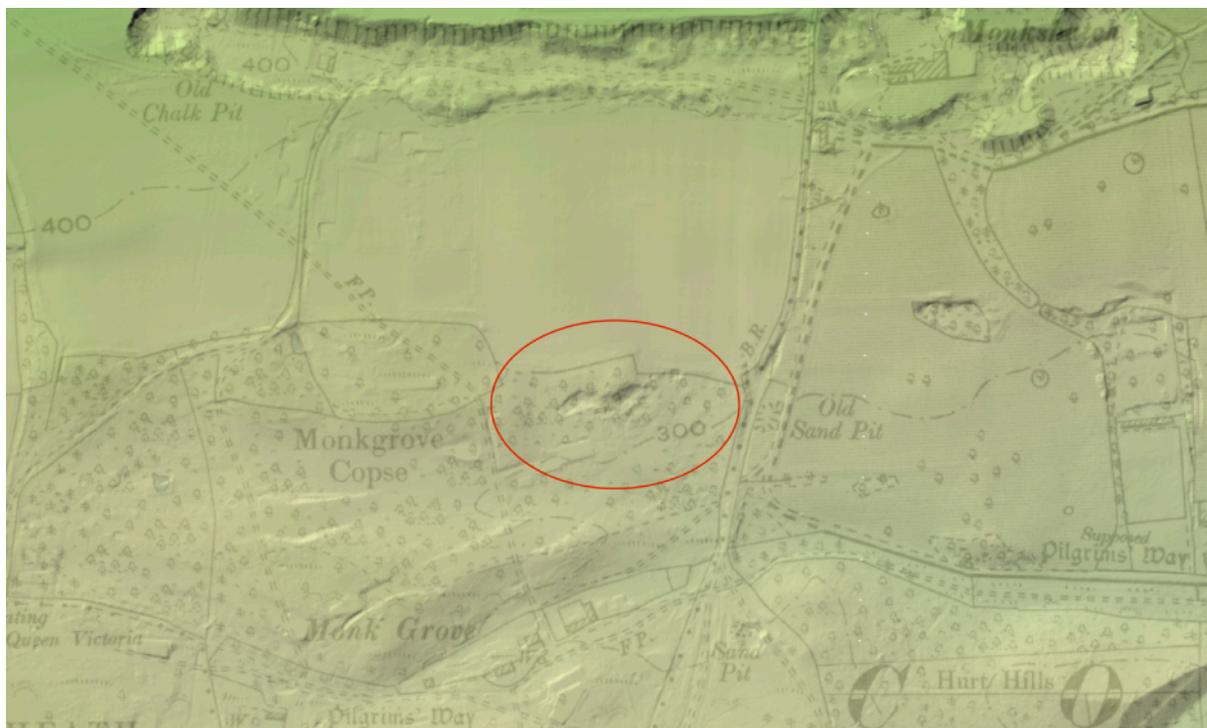
There were much larger quarries just a little further afield in Godalming and Hurtmore which probably provided most of the Bargate used in Compton's buildings and walls.

¹ Light Detection and Ranging, or 3D laser scanning, is used make three dimensional images of the earth's surface. The images are available on the website of the National Library of Scotland: www.lns.uk

Building sand was obtained from various small pits in the greensand beds and also from subterranean diggings that lay just over the western border of the parish, in Wanborough.

Compton Caves, as they were known, were sand mines that existed until the time of the Second World War when the entrance was filled in because they were considered to be dangerous.

As children in the 1960s my friends and I spent countless hours trying to find where they were but my mother (who was born in Compton) refused to say, sometimes claiming that they were just a legend. When I was older she did tell me that they were in a sandpit near the bottom of the western side of Gypsy Lane, the track up to Monkshatch, but despite this clue we never found them.



An image of a Lidar survey overlain onto the OS map of the 1890s shows the likely position of the Compton Caves, just over the parish boundary in Wanborough.

However, there is documentary evidence to confirm that they did exist. The Victoria County History of Surrey (pub. 1911) records that *“In the wood to the north-west of the village, at the foot of the Hog’s Back, are very extensive caves, excavated in the Green Sand. Within the memory of the last generation sand was brought from them for sale to builders in Guildford, and they were probably excavated for the sand.”*

No evidence of them can be found on tithe or Ordnance Survey maps but modern technology has at last provided an answer. A Lidar survey shows significant diggings in Monkgrove Copse. A visit to the site reveals a sandstone cliff face, about 25 feet high, cut into an eminence on the lower slope of the downs, although there are now heaps of sand piled up against it.

This appears to be the site of the caves as the other sand pits in the area are comparatively shallow and do not have the required depth to accommodate a tunnel entrance. Moreover, the position of the quarry fits the descriptions of their position given by my mother and by the Victoria County History.

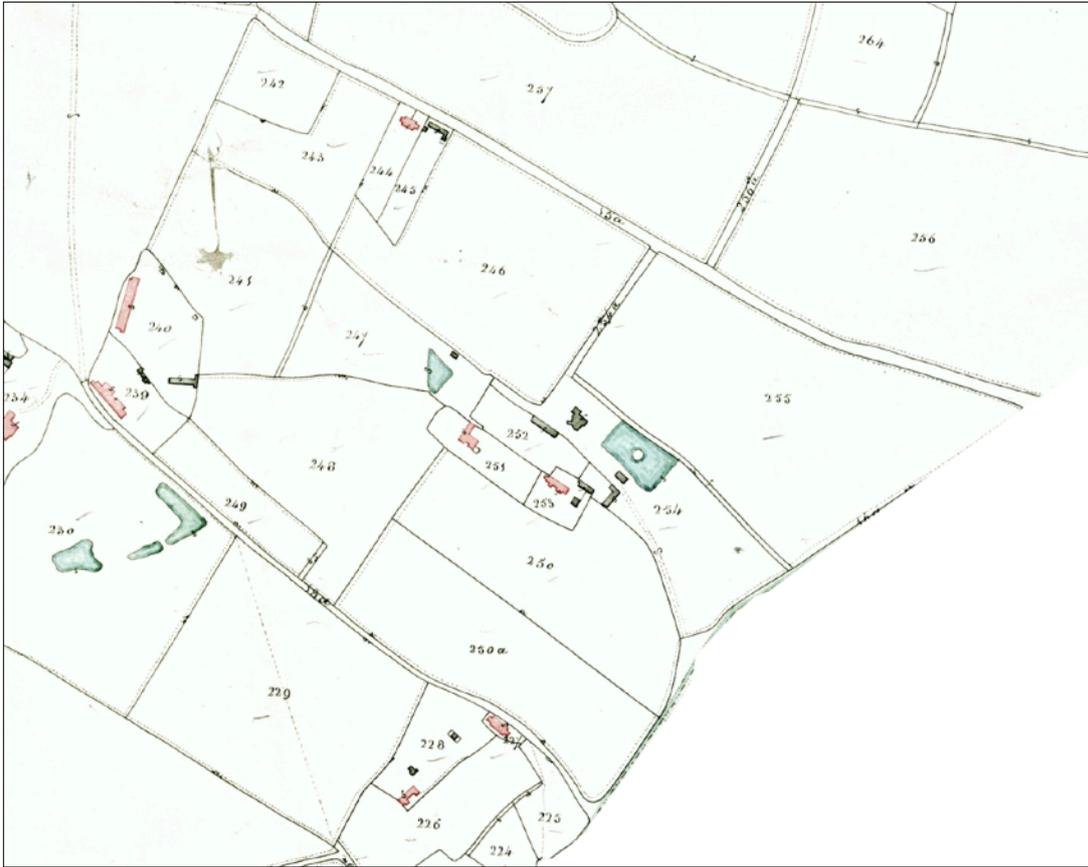
Although the caves survived well into the twentieth century, no image of them has been found.

Clay for brick making was also dug in the parish, near Binscombe. The brickfields are still named as such, although production ceased in 1906.

The kiln has long gone but evidence of the clay diggings in the Cellars field can still be seen, particularly when they have a light dusting of snow. The name of the field itself is probably a corruption of the word *selion*, which was the term to describe the ridge and furrow cultivation pattern of medieval open fields.



Clay digging created the corrugated pattern in the ground at Brickfields. Note that the house and its garden are raised several feet above the new level of the Cellars field.



An extract from the Compton tithe map of 1839 showing the brick fields. The Cellars field is on plots 250 and 250a.



The kilns at the Compton brick works are shown on the tithe map, just to the west of the pond.

Brick making on the Pease Marsh has a long history and there are many documents in the Loseley Manuscripts referring to the leasing of the works at Brickfields. The earliest deed is dated 1604 and refers explicitly to *a close of land called Sellers*, which suggests that the pattern created by the clay digging existed by that time.

The bottom of the Compton valley, between the Hog's Back to the north and the sandstone ridge to the south of the village, Binscombe and Farncombe, is a damp place made up of outcrops of Atherfield and gault clays. Before the 1810s, it was unenclosed common land in the control of the lords of various local manors, notably the More-Molyneux family of Loseley. It was they who granted leases from the late sixteenth century to create clay pits for the purpose of making bricks.

The Pease Marsh, as the common was known, had a number of brick works. As well as the Binscombe works in Compton parish, there was another near Littleton where the names Old Claypits Wood, by Stakescorner Road, and Brickfields Farm give the game away.



The Littleton Brickworks mapped in 1913 showing current and disused clay pits and the site of the 1950s oil well.

Oil was extracted in the valley, near Littleton, in the 1950s. The Suez crisis of 1956 stimulated the production of 'home grown' oil and one of the sites chosen for drilling was on the Loseley estate.

Lying just to the north of Old Claypits Wood, the site is still known as the Oil Field but had formerly been exploited as a clay pit for the nearby Littleton Brickworks.

In the 1950s, when Britain's oil was almost entirely imported, it was considered a newsworthy event and a 1958 report of the work can be seen on the Pathé News website:

<https://www.britishpathe.com/asset/187056>

Philip Gorton

June 2023