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HAM HILL STONE IN NORTH HAMPSHIRE: J.L. PEARSON'S CHURCH OF ST. MARY (1896), LAVERSTOKE

By J.R.L. Allen

The north Hampshire Parish of Laverstoke lies in the upper Test valley between Whitchurch and Basingstoke, and nearer the former than the latter. Here the eminent Victorian architect John Loughborough Pearson (Quiney 1979), based in London, designed (1893) and built (1893–5) on a sloping site (National Grid Reference SU 487489) a new parish church of St. Mary to replace the earlier church at another location. Consecration took place in 1896, the year before Pearson died at the age of 80 while still actively working.

Pearson's St. Mary is a simple building – Pevsner and Lloyd (2002, 336) dismiss it as "not a church to do him much credit" – composed of a nave and chancel under a single, double-

Fig. 1 St. Mary's, Lavertsoke, from the southeast

Fig. 2 Partly dressed blocks of Ham Hill stone in the flint facing at St. Mary's Laverstoke

pitched roof, a southwest porch, and a tower with a shingled broach spire placed centrally along the south wall (Fig.1). The fenestration comprises lancets, coupled lancets and plate tracery. The roof is of ceramic tiles.

The facing is entirely of broken flint nodules with patinated surfaces, such as could have been collected from local fields or dug from soliflucted concentrations in nearby 'dry' valleys, together with some split nodules with freshly broken surfaces. The building lies within the outcrop of the Upper Cretaceous Chalk Group, that is, within its 'geological zone'. What makes the church exceptional in north Hampshire (Allen 2009), however, and indeed in the county generally, is the use of a distinctive, brownish limestone for the dressings, quoins and, with flints, the buttresses. Partly dressed rectangular blocks of the same rock are dispersed unevenly in some abundance as a decorative feature among the flints of the facing (Fig. 2). For the most part, nineteenth-century churches in north Hampshire are dressed in either Bathstone, Chilmark-Tisbury stone or Caenstone (Allen 2009). Pevsner and Lloyd (2002) may have been unimpressed by the architectural quality of St. Mary's, but in terms of the dressing stone, the church is further and excellent example of the willingness of Pearson (or his son, see below) in particular, and Victorian church architects in general, to experiment with building materials that are not of local origin.

The dressing and decorative material seen at St. Mary's is a dull yellowish grey to mainly dull orange-brown, unevenly laminated, calcite-cemented, very coarse-grained shelly limestone with thin, laterally impersistent, earthy laminae and patches of clayey silt intermixed with very fine- to fine-grained quartz sand. Some dressing blocks display cross-bedding. The rock is clearly of marine origin, the earthy laminae and patches suggesting a tidal environment where currents varied regularly from strong to negligible, when suspended 'mud' could settle out at high-water slack. A variable response to

weathering is evident. In a few places grooves have begun to form in the cut faces of the stone where there are earthy laminae.

When the church was first examined, the provenance of the dressing material was left unresolved (Allen 2009, 99). The rock was considered to share many properties with sandy limestones in the Jurassic Corallian sequence, especially in the outer Vale of Wardour (Wright, 1981, Bristow *et al.* 1999), but it was also allowed that the Lower Jurassic Ham Hill stone of the Yeovil area of east Somerset (Wilson *et al.* 1958, Stanier 2000) could not be excluded. A subsequent examination of buildings known to have used Ham Hill stone, such as Elizabethan Montacute House (Durman 2006) and in modern Salisbury, for example, the former Lloyds Bank (Durman 2001), as well as of the quarries and dumps on Ham Hill itself (Durman 2006, 47–58), left no doubt that Ham Hill was the true source. As well as features evident on hand-lens inspection, St. Mary's shares with some of the more recent buildings in the stone the distinctive 'grooving' when weathered.

What factors prompted the choice of Ham Hill stone for St. Mary's, rather than the more usual Bathstone, Chilmark-Tisbury stone or Caenstone dressings to be found in the region? One was clearly geographical. Lavertsoke lies on the Southern Railway's London –Exeter railway that had reached Yeovil by 1859 (Dendy Marshall 1963); in 1882, a decade before St. Mary's was conceived, a branch of the Great Western Railway connected the quarries at Ham Hill to Yeovil (MacDermot 1964, Durman, 2006, 55), a link that greatly facilitated the eastward spread of the stone. Other possible influences are less tangible. Although Pearson was based in London, he had a number of links with Wessex. One was with his great friend Dr. Thomas Spyers (Quiney 1979, 84–6), who lived at Wallop Lodge in Nether Wallop close to the western Hampshire border and *c.* 15km from Salisbury, where buildings in Ham Hill stone were being erected in the late nineteenth century. Pearson's son Frank (b. 1864), who eventually qualified as an architect and became his increasingly indispensible assistant, was educated at Winchester College (Quiney 1979, 86), and it is also possible while there that Ham Hill stone came to the attention of one or both, perhaps through visiting Salisbury 30km or so to the west. John Pearson himself may otherwise have had little experience of the stone. Although he executed some 15 commissions of one kind or another in Wiltshire, he built only two churches (Oakhill, Woodlands) in Somerset (Quiney 1979), the source of Ham Hill stone. None of the other few Hampshire churches that Pearson erected have Ham Hill stone (Quiney 1979, Pevsner & Lloyd 2002, Allen 2009). The town church of St. Stephen (1883–5, 1897–8, 1907–8) in Bournemouth is faced with imported Swanage stone outside and Bathstone inside. At Over Wallop (St. Peter, chancel, 1865–7) the building is of flint and brick. The new church of All Saints (1889–91, 1896–7), Winchester, is faced in flint with brick.

Ham Hill stone is an attractive material that has drawn builders since Roman times (Durman 2006). It is found in a variety of buildings within a substantial part of Somerset, Dorset and Wiltshire based on Ham Hill (Durman 2001, 2006, maps 5&7; Prudden 2001) and, with the coming of railways in the nineteenth century, reached even further afield, southwestwards into Devon and eastward to London. Whether it was John or Frank Pearson who settled on the use of Ham Hill stone for St. Mary', this building further exemplifies the willingness of Victorian church architects to look outward for unusual building materials.

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