



Box Quarrymen (date unknown)

Owen Bishop Quarryman - 1873 - 1965

When the name of Owen Bishop is mentioned, one half expects to be told of some further enterprise, which he undertook at some time or other, for indeed he was a man of some business acumen. Owen Bishop seems to have been able to triumph over his environment. Many others born in similar humble circumstances did not even reach the position of ganger, passed their days without making any great mark, and died forgotten. This is not to be the case with Owen Bishop who stood head and shoulders above most of his contemporaries.

Owen was a Box Hill man, born in 1873 in one of the houses near the Post Office. His parents were William & Charlotte Bishop. His father was a quarryman who, amongst other jobs, used to lay trolley roads, and worked in the mines from the age of 21 to 70 years. He started with Pictor and Son's, but at the 1887 amalgamation was transferred to the Bros, section. Owen himself did not start in quarrying as his first job, He said that at the age of 12 he was Shepard to 250 sheep at Hazelbury or 3/6d, per week (this seems a rather heavy responsibility for a boy of 12 years).

Perhaps he was not alone, but an assistance. However, it would be in keeping with the legend, which has grown around his name, if he were single-handed at the Job).

In 1887 at the age of 14, he started in the quarries as a stone chopper.

When he was 18, Mr. George Hancock, manager and a director of the Bath Stone Firms Ltd., saw him chopping stone and said he would make a good quarryman. This was a very true prophecy, for Owen Bishop became one of the most successful Bath Stone quarrymen of all time, and was with the firm until he retired in 1949, a period of 62 years.

When he started quarrying in Clift Quarry, he dug stone at 3d, per foot.

He also worked in Copenacre Quarry, but chiefly in spring quarry.

His Brother, Fred Bishop, was also a quarryman who is remembered for his skill in sharpening saws, His sister married Ted Smith, who for some years was the chief ganger at Clift. Owen Bishop did a lot of work around No. 6 Spring Shaft. He has become a ganger and, at the peak of his career, had eight cranes and over forty men working for him. It was at this time, he said, that he used to send out a total of about 7 to 8,000 cubic feet of stone per fortnight.

One man who worked for sixteen years was Henry Witchard (1883 – 1965), who survived his former employer by less than a month. Owens's cranes were not far from Bert Hiscock's cranes and Bert recalls that they had many an argument.

Owen said that he made a comfortable living, which indeed he should have managed considering the scale of his stones enterprise.

He confessed to undertaking private contracts outside the firm, but say whether any of these were in connection with the stone industry. Certainly he had undertakings outside the industry; and seems to have been able to make a success of them. They included being the licensee of the 'Hare and Hounds' at Pickwick, a hire foreman for coaches and horses farming at Gorse Farm in partnership with one of his sons Wilfred (who died in 1967) (His other son Reginald worked in the County Office at Trowbridge and became Chief Clerk), and general contracting works. Someone spoke with some envy of the occasion on which Owen had contracted to remove some mixed rubble from near the Pickwick Road - Bradford Road junction, and had made a profit against all odds

Owen Bishop may also be fairly described as a 'quarry architect' in as much as he is credited with major construction works in several quarries. It was he who put down the vertical shaft of Brown's No 4 Quarry (possibly by enlarging an earlier airshaft), near where Hawthorn Post Office is now.

The owner hoped to find the good stone which Yockney's had but degree of realisation of this hope can be seen in the title given to this quarry, 'Brown's Folly', a title probably borrowed from the construction of that name on the hill near Kingsdown. Following the common practise of linking headings to trial shafts in order to use the latter as airshafts, Owen Bishop had this to do at Elm Park Quarry. He pulled out the long headings, which is one of the right-hand branches at the bottom of the slope shaft. He did not reach the shaft at the first attempt; on re-surveying they found he had missed by a small margin of one foot. The heading was widened, and the shaft was found on the right hand side of the track. During the Second World War, Owen Bishop put down a vertical shaft, in the fields towards Stafford's Farm, to Pickwick Quarry to enable ammunition to be brought up and down more easily.

When he retired, he had no pension, but said that those who had little were given a small pension. He had his reputation and a wealth of memories, which led him to say, "If I could have my time again, I would still chose to be a quarryman." But he regretted the fact that the industry was declining, something which he blamed on the lack of men to take a real interest in the stone, as he and some of his contemporaries had done. He considered that his greatest honour was to have shown Queen Mary round Spring Quarry.

The late Frank Davis put Owen Bishop and Bert Hiscocks together as two gangers who had a nose for stone and could be guaranteed to find good stone. Owen was also considered expert at shoring ceilings, something in which he took pride.

At over 90, much more frail, he still stood upright and could get about on his own. So he retired after a long and active career, widely respected. It is almost inevitable with a man of success that he makes some enemies. One or two described Owen Bishop as a 'slave driver' and disparaged what he did. How true these accusations were, we cannot now tellquot hominess tot sententiae.... It is all some time ago; motives are hard to detect. Frank Knott (1877 -), who remained his friend until his death, said that Owen Bishop could never settle down - he had to be trying some new scheme or other. It was Frank Knott who happened to call round on the day when Owen Bishop was taken ill and had been taken to Devizes Hospital (an unpleasant shock for the visitor) from Tuddenham House, Paul Street, Corsham, where he had lived for some years. His wife Emma had died about four years previously at the same age that he himself reached, after they had been married for over sixty years.

Owen and Sarah Bishop had two sons Reginald Owen who was born on the 17th February 1895 and Wilfred Ernest who was born on the 14th June 1897.

Owen Bishop, Freemason and man of talent and achievement died in hospital on the 17th of July 1965, and was buried a few days later next to his wife on the hill in Box Cemetery, which lies alongside the main A4 road.

Extract from Some Notable Wiltshire Quarrymen by Roger Tucker, 1979