

The Beckett Estate Lime Kiln

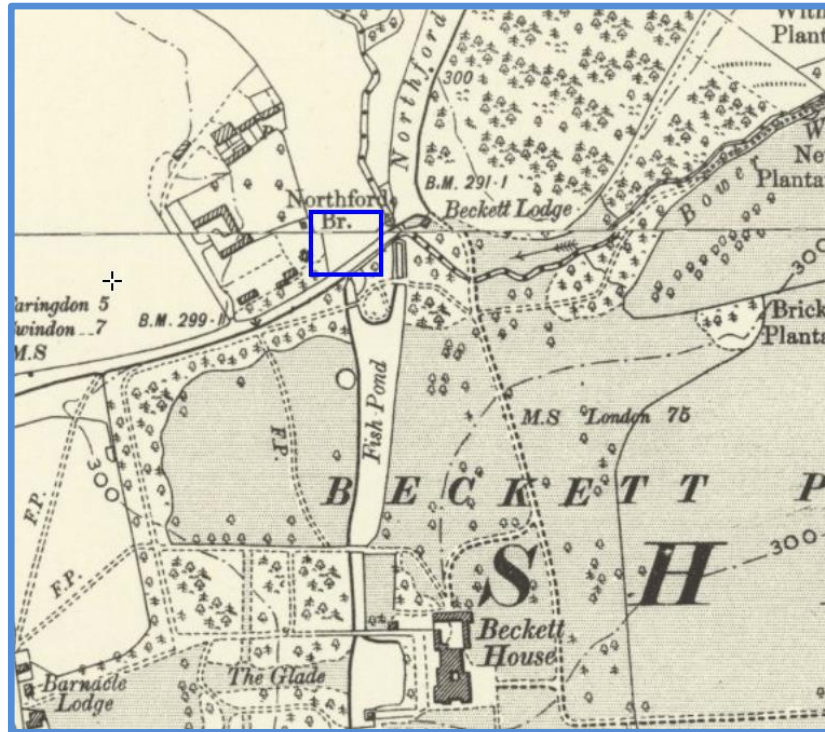
By Neil B. Maw

The 68 letters of George Merryweather, Steward of the Beckett Estate from 1815 - 1821, have produced an enormous amount of information about life on the estate, the village of Shrivenham and surrounding district. But for his writings, we would have known nothing of his commercial exploits and in particular for this article, the Lime Kiln. (*Br Lib ADD MS 73758).

For many centuries Lime was a necessity in the trades of building and agriculture. It was a basic constituent for mortar (cement), outside wall covering, plaster and soil improvement, and many other applications. When fresh out of the kiln it is known as 'Quick lime' which is very corrosive and was used to quickly dispose of diseased animal carcasses and other 'cleaning' applications. The process of producing it involves the heating up of Limestone which is made up of fossilised sea creatures from millions of years previous. The temperatures involved within the kiln can be in the region of 900 - 1100 °C. Once watered down, the powdered lime becomes known as 'Slaked Lime' and can be used for many applications.

As well as putting the Beckett Estate back into good, profitable order, George Merryweather was also to prepare the way for the building of a new Mansion House at Beckett. He understood that such a project would require a huge amount of mortar and bricks and was quick to notice that on the estate there were good natural resources of Limestone and Clay. However, what he didn't know until approximately 1817, was the new Mansion House would not be built until 1829. In a letter to Lord Barrington dated 21st November 1815, he described the location of his new Lime Kiln, "*On entering the gate out of the Faringdon road to the timber yard, the view is intercepted by the return of an high hedge beyond the new Stables. Not many yards beyond this hedge on the right of the road is a recessed place in an angle formed by the road and the breast of the stone quarry. In this recess the Lime Kiln is built and also a Lime House.*" We know from an Estate Map of 1865 that the Timber Yard/Saw-Mills were adjacent to the Stable Block which is located just outside the Park gates

by Northford Bridge. Today this gate is the lower entrance to the military academy. The map below shows the exact spot.



Map courtesy of the National Library of Scotland, online Geo-referenced Maps



Above. A somewhat crude attempt to show the layout of the Lime Kiln and the Quarry
Below. The construction of the Kiln as described by George Merryweather



George Merryweather described in a letter dated October 1815 to Lord Barrington, that the Lime Kiln works very well and he had been experimenting with it. He also provided the information about its size when he explained that the circumference of the roof was 54 feet (16 metres). He further explained how it produced 340 Bushels of Lime per week and 37 Bushells of Lime ashes. (A Bushell was a measurement of a receptacle that can hold 8 gallons of fluid). The normal cost in the area for Lime was 1 shilling per Bushell but he could sell it for 9 pence per Bushell. He stated that, *“Mr Whitworth the Engineer to the Berks & Wilts Canal assures me that it is by much the strongest and best Lime to be had on the whole line of the canal. We are now supplying the Canal Company an order of 2000 Bushels at 9 pence per Bushell.”*

Also, in his letter of 21st November 1815 Merryweather provided more interesting information, *“The next operation was to form habitations for the two Lime Burners and their families. The Dog Kennel, which was in a state of ruin, presented a facility for this purpose. It was adapted for two cottages, and these men reside in them.”* They are referred to in subsequent writings as ‘Dog Kennel Cottages.’ Previously to this, the location of these cottages was unknown.

It is not known at the moment for how long the Lime Kiln was used, but we know it was still in operation in 1830 when the new Beckett House was under construction. Discovered in miscellaneous papers within the Barrington Collection at the British Library, was an, '*Account of Hands employed at and for Beckett House, July 1830.*' (Br Lib ADD MS 73756). Here it is noted that the Lime Burners were Mr Ackrell and Hands – four. There were also seven men working at the quarry face next to the Lime Kiln.



An aerial view showing the location of the Lime Kiln and Quarry.
Photo by Neil B. Maw

It is likely that the exact spot where the kiln and store house stood is now the same spot that is occupied by the property known as Swiss Cottage. (See SHS N186 for more information).