



Book Reviews

THE STORY OF ALDERLEY: LIVING WITH THE EDGE EDITED BY A J N PRAG

Manchester University Press, 2016. 984pp. 235 figures and 65 plates, 25 tables. ISBN: 978-0-7190-9171-1, hb, £75.00

(Now available as an [e-Book from the University of Manchester Press](#))

In his Preface, the retired director of Manchester Museum, Tristram Besterman, uses Christopher Logue's untitled poem (*'Apollinaire said'* 1969) to exhort the reader to 'Come the Edge!' I would like to use this review to encourage you to do the same.

Alderley Edge is a sandstone escarpment that overlooks the Cheshire Plain. The village below is an up-market suburban retreat, as indeed it was from the 19th century onwards: designed for the 'Cotton-tots' of Manchester's textile industry, so that they might avoid the over-crowding of its burgeoning working class. Yet the Edge was already an industrial site in its own right, having been mined for copper ore from the Bronze Age, with larger-scale production in the later medieval–early modern period. By the 18th century, the Stanleys had transformed the raw open-workings and sandstone scrub escarpment into a designed landscape of carriage-ways and walks, framing its extensive and far-reaching views with carefully-planted trees which are still enjoyed by thousands of visitors today, under the care and management of the National Trust. Under their feet, the Edge is riddled with mines from those earlier workings. The Alderley Edge Landscape Project (AELP) which ran from 1995–2005, finally published here, is indeed, more than a life's work, as the 34 different authors or contributors to this volume attest. Surprise discoveries – a collapsed shaft revealing a Roman coin hoard, the survey of Bronze Age barrows and the excavation and mapping of open-work and underground mineral shafts by the Derbyshire Caving Club – have greatly enriched our appreciation of this multi-period site, which now forms the centre-piece of the archaeology gallery at the Manchester Museum.

The monograph forms a companion piece to the archaeology volume published by Timberlake and Prag in 2005. At 984 pages long, richly illustrated with colour and black-and-white plates, this is a bold and impressive publishing achievement by the University of Manchester Press, with a digital e-Book version now available.

This book is unlike anything else in contemporary publishing: a rich, detailed, interdisciplinary natural and cultural history of the Edge, ranging in authorship from international experts in geology and soils, flora and fauna, to the traces of human inhabitation and extraction, above and below-ground. Alongside the maps and letters of archival research, the insights of oral historians, records of graffiti and street name analysis, sit the forward-looking plans of the National Trust's conservation managers and words of wisdom from the most famous son of the Edge: author Alan Garner. Never before has the natural, social and cultural history of a place been researched in such academic depth, drawn from such a breadth of authors: professional, amateur, incomer and local, scientist and poet.

In spirit then, it evokes the diligent vision of Gilbert White's *Selborne*: close-grained observation of a place and its inhabitants over many years, yet that famous work focused more closely upon the natural world than the human. In its grasp of the archaeology, it reminds me of the antiquarian texts of John Mortimer or Thomas Bateman: sensitive to the setting, character and significance of both impressive monuments and more ephemeral marks on the land, deeply knowledgeable and connected to place. Yet they had their obsession with prehistory, whereas the sweep of this volume is from the forming of the land itself, to the interleaved lives of people, animals and vegetation within this landscape, and from the earliest traces of Mesolithic inhabitation to the contemporary residents, site managers and visitors to the Edge.

From the chapter on geology and geomorphology, you can marvel at the faint trace of a reptilian footprint left in the mudstones at Engine Vein, echoed in the tracks of amphibians and invertebrates that have thrived in the marl-pits, tree-boles and mining ponds wrought by human alteration of the Edge. This is a visually sumptuous volume: we move from the peacock-coloured ore of crushed azurite from Engine Vein to the equally-splendid emerald carapace of the Green Tiger Beetle. The extraordinary mapping project undertaken by the Derbyshire Caving Club has not only made its underground history accessible but created one of the richest studies of different scales of copper ore extraction, from Bronze Age to Roman, medieval to historic mining. The marvellous experimental work of Simon Timberlake complements this survey by understanding how those earliest miners might have processed and worked that ore further. The other major source of wealth on the Edge was the stone, sands and marls that made up the Edge, and these are described from both archaeological survey and archival records, mapped against the wider infrastructure of hollow-ways, cart-tracks and sledge-runs, spoil heaps and in-filled pits.

The histories unfolded here are never simple grand narratives: large-scale changes such as industrialisation are set in the context of rural extraction, estate management and local take-up of technological innovations. Issues of status, power and wealth are played out not just through

the history of the Stanley estate and the de Traffords but the middling sort of the Alderley villas, and the domestic servants, craftsmen and tradesmen, who made those ways of life possible. Enclosure and improvement movements are examined through changes in field boundaries, road networks and planting regimes. Whilst evidence of resentment and resistance to such socio-political change is traced in a series of 'unfortunate' fires on the Edge (once common land), letters from the Stanleys also record their obligations to their estate workers in the traditions of harvest home suppers (known locally as 'shutting'), Easter 'chairing', and the provision of frumenty for the Wakes. Within the archives of these families, census records and maps, we see major historic events played out – famines and unemployment, the coming of the railways, changes in occupation, ownership of property and status, the Great Wars with their loss of local men, arrival of evacuees and influx of stationed troops. In the oral history chapter, we hear how funeral hearses arrived after the Manchester Blitz to deliver bombed-out families to a place of refuge for a few nights; children slept in a row on the tables of range-warmed kitchens, whilst the adults were supplied with endless cups of tea, the milk being close to hand from local farms. Education movements, inoculation initiatives, and local folk customs such as mumming are richly conveyed, whilst notable achievements, humorous anecdotes and unfortunate deaths emerge to populate the Edge with a cast of memorable characters. The graffiti chapter alone has a methodological range that sets a new standard: not just considering the carved stone doodlings of lovers, bored teenagers, New Age revellers and celebrants, but quarrymen's initials, parish boundary merestones, and the poignant trace of service-men and sailors home on leave; leaving their mark. Alongside this sit a range of Celtic-style heads (probably part of the 18th and 19th century romanticisation of the Edge) and the almost magical incantation to the thirsty at the 'Wizhard's Well' [sic]. The underground world of explorers and cavers is revealed in initials and dates, whilst aborglyphs (tree graffiti) are diligently recorded along the carved and pecked marks in the soft, easily eroded sandstone. The reinvention of traditions such as 'rag tree' offerings attest to neo-Pagan traditions now adding to what may be a much longer tradition of reverence and apotropaism in this spectacular setting. Indeed, the power that the Edge holds over those that dwell in its shadow – mostly benevolent, inspiring, infused with a sense of *genius loci*, but occasionally terrifying, dangerous and other-worldly – once again sets this volume apart from other landscape studies.

I am biased. I have had the great privilege, since the start of my teaching career at Manchester University in 2005, to be able to converse with the editor of this volume, Prof. John Prag, and to work with the author Alan Garner (in very small ways) as part of the Blackden Trust. Both have been inspirational. In their company, and through walks and talks about the Edge, I too have come to know it. If you can, visit it. If you can't, read this book. Preferably, do both.

And so it seems fitting to end with a few words from Alan Garner himself: 'our lives are composed of stories: some valuable in themselves; others filling out the completeness of a larger story or supplying a missing detail that explains a conundrum. We each have a unique knowledge of importance, and if that knowledge is not passed on and recorded in some way it will disappear with us and be irretrievable. There is an African proverb that says it all: 'When someone dies, a library burns.' (p.564).

Heed his words: re-ignite your library instead, through the quiet but expert voices of these entertaining, engaging and knowledgeable men and women, and their distinctive stories of the Edge.

Reference

Timberlake, S. & Prag, J. (eds) 2005. *The Archaeology of Alderley Edge – Survey, Excavation and Experiment in an Ancient Mining Landscape*. Oxford: British Archaeological Reports 396

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