

“A Week in the Isle of Portland in 1837”

(Part 1 of 2)

In *The Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*
February 17, 1838

Presented on Stone Quarries and Beyond web site

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THE PENNY MAGAZINE

OF THE

Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge.

377.]

PUBLISHED EVERY SATURDAY.

[FEBRUARY 17, 1838.]

ISLE OF PORTLAND.



[View of Portland, from Sandsfoot Castle.]

A WEEK IN THE ISLE OF PORTLAND IN 1837.

[From a Correspondent.]

DESIROUS of enjoying a little relaxation from the business and bustle of London, I resolved, in the month of June last, to go down to Dorsetshire, and spend a few days in the Isle of Portland. "Portland stone" was a subject of some interest to me. I saw it daily as I passed St. Paul's, or crossed Blackfriars Bridge—while the extensive repairs rendered necessary in the latter structure (Penny Mag, No. 275), drew my attention still more strongly towards the nature and commercial history of a material, which enters largely into the composition of many of the public edifices of the metropolis which were built immediately after the great fire of London. Such of your readers as may glance at a map—say, the Society's map of the western part of England—will remark that the Isle of Portland seems to be in shape not unlike a breast of mutton suspended from the mainland by a string. This is rather an odd sort of comparison; but it is, I think, a very fair one, bearing in mind that a map exhibits only a flat surface. Old writers affirm that Portland was once separated from the coast of Dorsetshire, and that it was, therefore, really an island: but now it is joined by a ridge which I have likened to a

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string. It is called the Chesil Bank, and an extraordinary bank it is. Its surface or upper portion is composed of rounded loose pebbles, resting on hard blue clay. From the northern extremity of the Isle of Portland it runs along the coast of Dorsetshire, separated from it by a narrow channel or arm of the sea, to near Abbotsbury, ten miles from Portland; it then joins the land, and forms the outline of the Dorset coast, from Abbotsbury to near Bridport, a distance of about six miles. Chesil Bank is in some places about a quarter of a mile broad, but its general breadth is much less. Mr. Smeaton, the engineer of Eddystone Lighthouse, thought it had been formed at a comparatively recent period: "but it is very difficult to account satisfactorily either for its first formation or its continued existence. There is a similar and still more extensive ridge, bounding the Frische Haf, on the coast of Prussia."*

Weymouth has been already described in the 'Penny Magazine' (vol. vi., No. 321); I shall only, therefore, remark, that the bay between it and the Isle is called Portland Road; and that it is this bay which in the wood-cut above is represented as lying between Sandsfoot Castle and Portland. Sandsfoot Castle (old spelling,

* M'Culloch's 'Statistical Account of the British Empire,' vol. i., p. 64. See also, the 'Penny Cyclopædia,' article DORSETSHIRE.

Sandes Foote) was built by Henry VIII. It is now, as the wood-cut represents it, a ruin. The usual approach from Weymouth to Portland is by Sands-foot Castle and Smallmouth Sands,—Small-mouth being the name of the mouth of the narrow channel between the coast of Dorset and the Chesil Bank. A walk of a mile on the Smallmouth Sands conducts the tourist to a ferry, where, for a penny, he is rowed across the "Fleet" to the Chesil Bank. Here he may remark the nature of this curious ridge. The pebbles by which it is covered to the depth of four, five, and six feet, are chiefly of a white calcareous spar (these are called Portland pebbles), but partly of quartz, chert, jasper, &c., so loose that a horse's legs sink almost knee-deep at every step. The bank slopes on the one side toward the open sea, and on the other towards the narrow inlet of the Fleet; it rises gradually towards Portland, being there composed of pebbles as large as swans' eggs; but in its course along the Dorset coast the stones gradually diminish in size; at Abbotsbury they are about the size of horse-beans, and more westward they degenerate into mere sand. The smugglers, who used to land at night, were thus furnished with a natural gauge, by which they could tell where they were, whether near to Portland, or on the coast. The pebbly covering is continually shifting; a north-east wind sometimes clears away the pebbles in parts, leaving the blue clay exposed, but the bare spaces are soon covered again by the heavy sea which the south-west wind drives against the bank. At the north-west extremity of the Chesil Bank there was once a "Swannery," consisting of several thousand swans; wild swans still build in the neighbouring swamps, and the Fleet is much frequented by different kinds of water-fowl.

It was late in the afternoon when I was landed on the Chesil Bank; the sun was setting, and the evening was delightful: but I must confess that my thoughts were as much occupied with a speculation on the nature of the accommodation I might meet in Portland, as with the beauty of the scene. Before me rose the Isle, sloping upwards from the Chesil Bank, but presenting on other sides a precipitous front to the sea; and westward from the Bank was the Race of Portland, the turbulence of whose waters is typified on an old map by a fierce-looking monster or "sea-dragon" lashing the surface into foam. The people of Portland formerly shared with the inhabitants of other parts of the western coasts of England in the odious character of "wreckers." They were said almost instinctively to scent the approach of a storm; and while others might be anxiously breathing a wish that some gallant vessel which had crossed the Atlantic might pass in safety through the Channel, they were reputed nightly to embody their malignant wishes in a couplet—

"Blow wind and rise sea,
Ship a-here 'fore day!"

I knew not how much of this imputed character might be true, or, if it had been true, how much of it was modified by other influences. In this instance I found what we often find through life, that to take the characters of individuals or communities from vague rumour or imperfect data, is an injustice to ourselves as well as to others.

As I approached the end of the Chesil Bank, I distinguished a line of houses disposed along the slope of the rock: this was the village of Fortune's Well, my intended resting-place. On reaching it, my first inquiry was, naturally enough, for an inn; and I was directed to the "Portland Arms," the only house of any repute in the island for "the entertainment of man and beast." Here I met with comfortable quarters and considerate attention. The "Portland Arms" is not a wayside house, where travellers are coming and going every hour, and where, therefore, you have no right to expect more than prompt but general civility. It is rather one of those

retired country inns, where visitors are treated with a homely but warm-hearted attention, which places them almost on the footing of friends. And though the inn cannot boast of being as fine as a London hotel, it has, nevertheless, its reputation. George III., during his visits to Weymouth, had several times made a tour of the Isle of Portland; and on those occasions he made the "Portland Arms" his head-quarters, and used to finish his day by dining at the house. The then landlady had a recipe for making a certain famous Portland pudding, and the king never failed to order this pudding, in honour of the island. She bequeathed the recipe to her daughter, the present landlady; and though the pudding may now be ordered by the humblest visitor, the honour of the king's visits is still felt in the "Portland Arms" with something of that satisfaction which another royal visit left in the Castle of Tillietudlem.

The Isle of Portland is about four miles long, and in the widest part nearly one and a half broad. It is a bed of rock of freestone. The highest point in the island is 458 feet above the level of the sea; the cliffs on the western side are very lofty, but those at the Bill of Portland are not more than twenty or thirty feet high. There is sufficient depth of vegetable soil to render the island tolerably productive, but not sufficiently so for the entire sustenance of the inhabitants, who get much of their provisions from Weymouth. Water is somewhat scarce; there is no stream in the island, and the necessary supply is obtained from springs and wells, which are not numerous, but in which, however, the water is copious and good. The whole island is included in one parish, which contained, in 1831, a population of 2670.

Portland stone came into repute in the time of James I., who used it, by the advice of his architects, in rebuilding the banqueting house at Whitehall. Mr. Smeaton, in his narrative of the building of Eddystone Lighthouse (Penny Mag., No. 20, vol. i., p. 163—165), has given a description of the quarries of Portland.

The road from Fortune's Well to the Western Cliff is very steep, and commands fine views of the Chesil Bank and the low but picturesque shores of Western Dorsetshire; and from the top, on a clear day, Torbay in Devonshire may be distinguished. Having attained the summit, the road runs to the right, on the extreme edge of the cliffs, from which a number of smaller roads, recurring at every hundred yards, run between lofty gullies in the face of the rocks, which rise about twenty feet above the main road. These "bye-paths" lead to the Quarries. If the visitor take any one of them, it will lead him through a series of well-stacked piles of sandstone, into a stone-pit of irregular form, measuring perhaps 200 feet or more each way, and shut in by solid walls of variously stratified stone to the height of about sixty feet. The scene is now a beautiful one: blocks of stone as large as good-sized rooms lie tumbled about in the most picturesque confusion—white intermingled with shades of yellow, grey, and red; and enormous orange-coloured stalactites, called by the quarry-men "congealed water," hang from the projecting rocks. Stains, the slow result of various decaying mosses and lichens steeped in the little rills, which are strongly impregnated with iron, give their mellowing hues to the picture. Before the visitor can have had time to express his astonishment at the novelties before him, he may chance to have it still further heightened, by a wild and oft-repeated cry of "High, high, high, boys, high," repeated in tones which to a stranger seem to be those of a madman. This cry proceeds from a party of quarry-men engaged in moving a block of roach-stone from the pit; and as the whole operation of quarrying is now before the stranger's eye, I shall proceed to describe everything worthy of attention.

[To be continued.]