

# The Building Stones of Brightwell cum Sotwell



*'The Wellsprings', built 1689 in a characteristic local style of banded chalk clunch, flint and brick*

The older buildings of our village have a distinctive character which reflects the materials from which they were built. Many date from a time when the cost of hauling top quality stone across the county was unaffordable. So, despite their relatively poor characteristics, local stones were used, such as chalk and flint from the hills south of the village. Chalk is rather soft and friable, whilst flint, although hard and durable, cannot easily be worked into regular blocks.

Ground-up chalk was used to make the wattle and daub infill of early wood-framed buildings such as the cruck-framed 'Woodleys'. It was also an ingredient of the cob boundary walls, still to be seen around St. Agathas's churchyard. A cob wall needed protection from rain so was usually provided with an overhanging thatched capping.



*Cob wall, St Agatha's, with its overhanging thatched cap.*

Larger buildings such as the late 16<sup>th</sup> C 'Small's House' in Mackney, used stones of a somewhat more durable form of chalk, known as clunch. Here though, to provide extra strength around windows and corners, a harder Jurassic-age limestone was brought in from the Cotswolds, The clunch is porous and eventually weathers to a flakey texture.



*The wall of a barn in Mackney, - built of chalk clunch which has become soft and flakey over the centuries.*

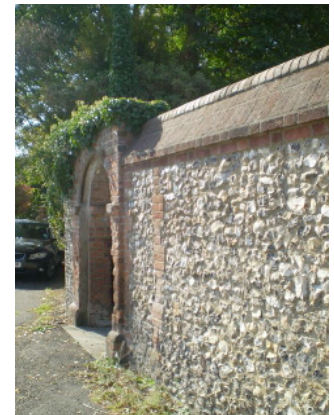
A longer-lasting stone was justified for church buildings. To build St. Agatha's, Jurassic-age Corallian limestone was quarried from the Oxford area. This limestone formation derives its name from the coral fossils it contains, some of which can be seen in the eastern wall of the chancel.



*The radial patterns of fossil Jurassic corals (arrowed) in limestone of St Agatha's church*

Flint is a hard, brittle material found naturally as small rounded stones. Being difficult to shape, the stones were mainly used in rubble boundary walls (see right)

However the village does have some fine examples of carefully shaped or 'knapped' flints in walls built by W. Dobson in the late 17th C. He built 'The Wellsprings' using an attractive, banded combination of flint, brick and chalk clunch.





*'Dobsons'. Knapped flint wall from 1688*

When the building of canals allowed cheaper coal to be brought in to fire local brick kilns, the use of bricks became more widespread. In old timber-framed buildings, bricks could be used to replace the wattle and daub infill. Sometimes a herringbone bricklaying style was adopted to fill the irregular spaces, or (as below) a mix of variably sized, handmade bricks.

Brick also became the preferred option for extending older stone-built houses, such as 'Sotwell Manor' on Bakers Lane, enlarged around 1700.



The brick firing process often produced a grey glaze on the ends of the bricks. This could be used to decorative effect when laying bricks in the Flemish Bond pattern, with the sides and ends alternately facing outwards. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> C, elaborate brickwork patterns had become fashionable- a fine example being the frontage of the Village Hall.



*Flemish Bond brickwork*



*Village Hall (1869-1874)*

Railways brought down the cost of bringing stone and bricks from further afield. Granite tombstones from Cornwall appear in St James' churchyard from the 1880s, and the walls of this church, reconstructed in 1884, are mainly of a hard, quartz sandstone which probably came from Wales.



*St James' church: walls of hard sandstone blocks with corner stones of shaped Jurassic limestone*

By the 20th C, factory-made bricks became the standard building material, and much of the earlier distinctiveness of village buildings, tied to the availability of local materials, has subsequently been lost. But the older buildings in our village remind us of the traditional way of using the natural resources which lay close at hand.

*Brightwell cum Sotwell History Group.  
Text and photos by Bill Horsfield*