

Timeline re Craven Quarry

The Craven Quarry site is an 11-acre field on the western side of Park Lane, Hamstead Marshall, immediately above Craven Keep (RG20 0JQ). It lies within the North Wessex Downs AONB and there is an SSSI site in the south-western corner.

1940s

Wartime Interim Development Order (IDO) permit issued for gravel extraction at Hamstead Marshall, valid to 2042.

1940s/50s

Hills of Swindon work the site to provide material for runway construction at Greenham airbase.

1960s/70s

Gravel extraction resumed by Hills of Swindon in the field above Craven Keep, and the adjoining field opposite Craven House, after which it is agreed that all material relevant to IDO has been extracted.

The northerly field is restored for grazing, the Craven Keep quarry site is not.

1992

Berkshire County Council (BCC) grants application #147683 to Steven Kirkland Smith (site landowner) of GeoPlan Consultants of Tilehurst to re-register permission granted by IDO, subject to operational conditions, still valid to 2042.

1995/96

Earthline Ltd (Coplestone family business, thought to be acting under licence from Smith) to be contractor, and main protagonist in pursuing permit.

IDO was for gravel only. Earthline was believed to be more interested in the underlying sand, not covered by the IDO.

1997

Earthline drills boreholes to obtain core samples (to determine whether remaining gravel deposits viable) which were submitted to BCC consultants Babtie but rejected as insufficient.

1998

Earthline proceeds to work on site: trim hedges, tarmac site access. Legality of this is contested and, under local pressure, WBC enforcement order is issued. The notice is torn down and activity on site continues.

Craven Hill residents mobilise an action group and open a fighting fund. 50 households sign up.

Pressure put on (about to be abolished) BCC and Babtie to stop Earthline's continuing activity on site.

J Hawkins of Craven House buys the upper field, presumably to prevent same happening there.

Independent surveyors' sampling finds no gravel, but 50,000 tons of low-grade hogging.

Dept of Environment Planning Inspectorate public enquiry is scheduled but cancelled.

Earthline appeals against BCC/WBC's enforcement notice (which it continues to defy) but later withdraws appeal.

BCC (about to become WBC) dismissive of controversy, apparently believing it will come to nothing.

1999

WBC revokes the permit BCC granted in 1995.

2001

High Court ruling validates BCC's original endorsement of permission to extract until 2042, ruling WBC cannot revoke it, but does allow imposition of stringent operating conditions. Possible need to reinforce the river and canal bridges, and instal at least two sets of traffic lights between site and A4. Plus limits on volume of traffic. All potentially at Earthline's expense.

2003

Another public enquiry/appeal confirms Earthline's right to quarry subject to conditions. WBC considers this to end the matter, as expense of conditions far outweighs likely return. Earthline seeking compensation from WBC.

Thereafter the 11-year controversy, having cost unknown thousands from the public purse, ends in stalemate.

As an area of more than 10 acres with no agricultural usage, the site falls into the "Right to Roam" category (although unfilled boreholes could be a hazard). Flytippers tend to be the only visitors.

Not known whether Stephen Kirkland Smith is still the owner.