

Matlock Bath and the High Tor Gorge

The Spa town of Matlock Bath is a popular tourist destination for a day out particularly for the inhabitants of the local East Midlands towns and cities. The rock precipices seem to stand in ageless glory and have been the target of early landscape painters through to the film based photographer and, today, the cameras of every visitor with a mobile 'phone. How times change!

I speak of ageless glory and in their work, **Classic Landforms of the White Peak**, Roger Dalton, Howard Fox and Peter Jones discuss the formation of the High Tor Gorge and the evolution of the River Derwent. They claim that, "The Matlock Gorge is anomalous because the River Derwent could have followed a simpler route along the shale outcrop only a few hundred metres further east." To qualify their observations they explain that, "There is reason to suspect that the Derwent was diverted to its present position from a former course along the shale outcrop to the east of High Tor. This is because, at Matlock Bridge (SK 298602), the river seems to undertake a deliberate change of direction in order to flow over the limestone".

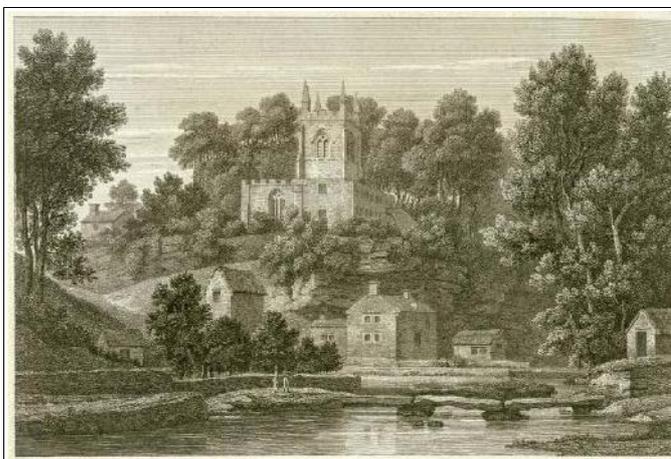
In trying to understand and explain possible reasons for the diversion of the River Derwent they suggest that, "Diversion might have been caused by glaciation although there is no independent evidence to support this view. An alternative possibility is that the river was deflected onto the limestone by a major landslide on the eastern valley side at Matlock". Dalton, Fox and Jones suggest an age for the Matlock Gorge when they conclude that, "diversion of the River Derwent must have taken place well before the post-glacial period". However, Dalton, Fox and Jones do admit, "Such an hypothesis is difficult to prove".

I have been drawn to the dating of Matlock Gorge for reasons of history and not geology and this has caused me to dispute the findings of Dalton, Fox and Jones but not the process of formation which is clearly from the effect of the Derwent eroding the landscape. I argue that the diversion was post Roman and possibly around the time of the Norman conquest. Such rapid development of a natural landscape may jar the beliefs of most people but I would counter that rapid natural change is not uncommon. Ask the inhabitants of the many East Coast villages that are constantly being lost to the sea if they think erosion by water can be rapid and I think they will agree with me. To understand why I have reached the conclusion that the Matlock Gorge is recent, in geological terms, it would first be worth looking at the historical documented evidence for the place-name 'Matlock'. In doing this we find that any study of literature mentioning Matlock shows the development of the modern towns of Matlock and Matlock Bath to be mostly eighteenth and nineteenth century. Recent books describe modern day Matlock but none of them are able to describe historic Matlock in any detail and maps of the locality show little habitation in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

Starting with the Present Day and working back in time.

The **Ordnance Survey Outdoor Leisure Map 24** gives the area around St Giles Church as "Old Matlock" SK309598. It seems that the present town of Matlock has grown independently of 'Old Matlock' suggesting a diminishing importance of the area of the old town and an increasing importance of the area of the new town. This could have been the effect of the new road, the modern day A6, and the bridge over the river. 'Old Matlock' is well above the present river level. The O.S map shows that the church is 15 metres or more above the present river bank level on the lower portion of a rock outcrop. The old route to Matlock, the road from Starkholmes, passes the church on the east suggesting that the foundation of the town is based on this road and this is reinforced by the P.P Burdett county map. The outcrop, called Pic Tor, rises to a contour height of 50 metres and hosts a War Memorial.

The church of 'Old Matlock' which stands at the centre of this 1850 picture, (courtesy of Peter Naylor), can be seen overlooking the Bentley Brook. The artist has clearly shown the elevated position of the church which today seems to isolate it from the modern town of Matlock. This choice of site suggests that it is either built in a defensive location or that the surrounding area has changed and left the church marooned on its hill. There is no evidence for the requirement of a defensive position so I suggest the latter argument.



The church, St Giles, is generally dated to AD 1291 but Peter Naylor claims a date of AD 1130. (Page 16, **A History of the Matlocks**). These dates may allow us to suggest that 'old' Matlock came into being sometime in the twelfth to thirteenth century .

I find it more than a little curious that the church was built in what is today an out of the way place. Churches are usually the most prominent feature of towns and in many places the town has grown up around the church. In Matlock the town has grown up well away from the church. However, it would seem that the oldest buildings in Matlock are to be found near the church which is adjacent to the ancient road from Cromford to Matlock, a tortuous route which climbs the Riber hill past Starkholmes and drops back down into the Derwent valley. This observation is supported by the distribution of buildings shown on P P Burdett's County map. As discussed earlier, this suggests that normal development was taking place but then some circumstance altered the focus of the town causing it to be built on the lower ground near the bridge. Peter Naylor claims the Matlock bridge to be sixteenth century, three to four hundred years or so after the church.

What is also interesting is the rock that the church is built upon. This outcrop of rock, known as Pic Tor, shows graphic evidence of having been carved by the waters of the Bentley Brook. The brook, which runs down Lumbdale, joins with the Derwent at the foot of the outcrop. A footpath from Matlock Park crosses the brook and skirts the outcrop. It leads to a footbridge that crosses the Derwent and gives access to the A6.

My picture, right, shows the rock viewed from the footpath at it's base. The deep, almost horizontal, etchings in the rock are clearly visible. Closer examination shows that these are not the results of quarrying but of gouging by the force of water.



2003

Peter Naylor in his work, **A History of the Matlocks**, analyses the Domesday survey claiming that it gives us our first insight into the Matlocks. He says that it, "suggests that Mestesforde and Meslach were separate communities and the Morgan edition of the Domesday Survey calls the former Matlock Bridge. This is unlikely as the ford in question is at Nestes or Nestus - a corruption of new stowse or windlass - the mine on the Heights of Abraham (Nesterside), which would place this river crossing where the bridge to Matlock Bath station is today, the banks being built up at the coming of the railway. Meslach therefore must be Matlock Bridge, a location which would not have been fordable and which name over the centuries became corrupted to Matlock".

1903

A look at the mystery of the Matlocks is undertaken by Benjamin Bryan in his 1903 book **Matlock manor and parish, historical & descriptive, with pedigrees and arms, and map of the parish reduced from the ordnance survey**. Bryan considers the source of the name Matlock and comes to the conclusion that Mellach, (actually spelled Meslach¹ in **Domesday**), was "the mead on the loch or lock". He says, "In formulating the history of a parish or any larger area, it is not only desirable, but necessary, to endeavour to trace the derivation and evolution of the name by which it is known. In this process many authors have indulged in fanciful speculations, and in regard to Matlock itself there has been by no means an absence of ingenious guessing. In an early translation of the record of the parish in the **Domesday Book**, the name was spelt Mellach, as to which a commentator has said : " Mellach was the easy but corrupt pronunciation of Methlock; so from Mathfield we have now Mayfield. The sense of Methlock is the mead on the loch or lock, which last signifies a lake as the word is used in the north parts (Camden, Remains, p. 118), and it is certain that the river Derwent is at this place deep and still near the church. As later translators of the record of William I have decided that the spelling of the name therein is Meslach, all this falls to the ground, and it is not proposed to set up any competing theory. What is certain is that the name of the area comprising the present parish was at the date of the **Domesday** Survey Mestesforde ; that one of its berewicks was designated Meslach ; and that since that time the name Mestesforde has entirely disappeared, and Matlock has taken its place".

(Note 1 – The spelling in Domesday seems to have been misidentified possibly because the original was with the old style 'f' for 's' hence Meflach or Meslach).

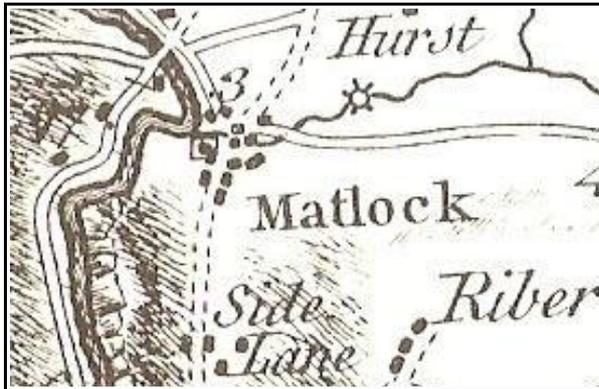
1815

According to the website at <http://www.peakdistrictonline.co.uk/scarthin-c10154.html> in 1815 a huge outcrop of rock was blasted away to create Scarthin Nick and to make a way through for the newly laid turnpike road which was later to become the A6. This adds to the information for 1698 below.

1782

Going back in time to before the birth of the Railways and the rapid expansion in tourism we can find Karl Moritz, **Travels in England** in 1782. His description of Matlock is dismissive. "From Matlock Baths you go over Matlock Bridge, to the little town of Matlock itself, which, in reality, scarcely deserves the name of a village, as it consists of but a few and miserable houses".

1757



The County Map of Derbyshire surveyed by P P Burdett shows Matlock as a small habitation where the present day O.S. Map shows "Old Matlock". There is a church and no more than a dozen houses scattered about, perhaps the "but a few and miserable houses" described by Moritz above. The bridge across the Derwent is some distance away and does not seem intimately associated with Matlock at all.

The location known today as Starkholmes is described as "Side Lane" on the section of Burdett's map shown here.

1727

Daniel Defoe, **A tour thro' the whole island of Great Britain, divided into circuits or journies** published between 1724 and 1727 says the following of Matlock.

"Near Wirksworth, and upon the very edge of Derwent, is, as above, a village called Matlock, where there are several warm springs, lately one of these being secured by a stone wall on every side, by which the water is brought to rise to a due height, is made into a very convenient bath; with a house built over it, and room within the building to walk round the water or bath, and so by steps to go down gradually into it.

This bath would be much more frequented than it is, if two things did not hinder; namely, a base, stony, mountainous road to it, and no good accommodation when you are there: They are intending, as they tell us, to build a good house to entertain persons of quality, or such who would spend their money at it; but it was not so far concluded or directed when I was there, as to be any where begun: The bath is milk, or rather blood warm, very pleasant to go into, and very sanative, especially for rheumatick pains, bruises, &".

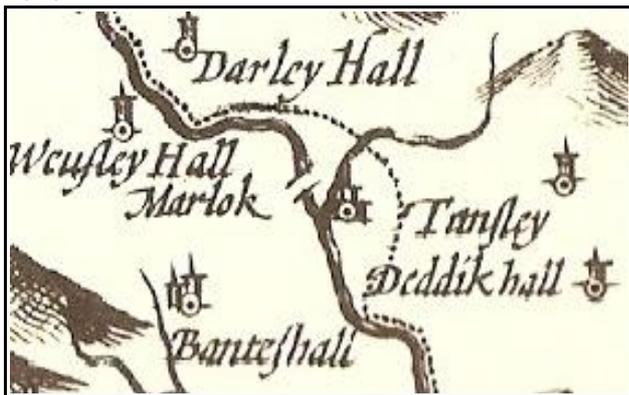
1698

Discovery of the Springs - James Pilkington, author of, **A View of the Present State of Derbyshire**, published in 1789, explains the foundation of the spa, which justifies the criticism of Moritz and Defoe, with the following extract from his book.

"The warm springs at Matlock have not been so long discovered, nor are they possessed of so high a reputation as those situated at Buxton. They were first noticed about the year 1698, when the bath was paved and built by the Rev. Mr. Fern of Matlock and Mr. Heyward of Cromford. It was afterwards put into the hands of George Wragg, who to confirm his claim and title took a lease of it from the several lords of the manor for 99 years, paying them a fine of 150 pounds and the yearly rent of six-pence each. He then built a few small rooms adjoining to the bath, which, it is said, were but a poor convenience for strangers. The lease and property of Wragg were afterwards purchased by Messrs. Smith and Penel of Nottingham. These gentlemen crafted two large commodious buildings with stables and other conveniences, and made a coach road to Matlock Bridge. In a short time afterwards this road was carried down the valley towards Cromford, and a passage blasted thro' the rock near that place, by means of which a communication was opened with the southern part of the county".

The foregoing quotation explains two things about Matlock Bath. Firstly, it is possible that there was no habitation prior to 1698 when the springs were discovered. Secondly, there was no route into Matlock Bath from the south until the rock barrier was blasted away by Smith and Penel.

1610



This section of the 1610 County Map by John Speed is interesting in that it shows Matlock under the name "Marlok" which seems to be a corruption of either Methlock or Meslach as discussed in the 1903 work by Benjamin Bryan who suggested that it meant the "mead on the loch or lock". In this spelling we see the two water based words of Mar and Lok joined to form a name and it is not difficult to arrive at the current name of Matlock from Speed's Marlok.

There is no mention of Matlock Bath on this section Section from John Speed's **Derbyshire County Map**.

1607

Britain, or, a Chorographical Description of the most flourishing Kingdomes, England, Scotland, and Ireland, by William Camden, does not mention Matlock. In his travels in "DARBYSHIRE" he says that, "Besides Workes-worth, lately mentioned, wee meet with never another place worth the remembrance, unlesse it be Haddon by the river Wie".

The comments made by Camden seem to suggest that in his day Matlock was quite insignificant and may well have been smaller than the habitat shown on the P P Burdett map some one hundred and fifty years later.

1086

Domesday talks of Mestesforde and Meslach, (Matlock), lies within it. "In Mestesforde, King Edward had two carucates of land without geld. It is waste. There are eight acres of meadow and a lead work. Wood, pasturable in places, three miles long and two wide. Adjoining this manor lie these herewites: Meslach, Sinitretone, Wodnesleie, Bunteshale, lbeholon, Teneslege. In these are seven carucates of land paying geld. Land for seven ploughs.

There eleven villeins and twelve boors have six ploughs and twenty-two acres of meadow. Wood, pasturable, two miles long and one mile wide. Underwood as much."

Summary

What can be gleaned from the above historic review is that the significance of Matlock diminishes the further into the past one travels and is reduced in **Domesday** to an outlying district, not a town. What is also apparent is that the name Matlock retains core elements of previous names and that the 'lock' element is close to 'lake' and 'loch'. Early maps give the name 'Marlok' showing the transition from the 'Meslach' of **Domesday** to the present Matlock thus demonstrating the evolution of the name to it's current form. The review also suggests that 'Old Matlock' may not have existed until after the time of **Domesday** and this fact could be possible dating evidence.

Archaeology

There is another curious omission from the historical record and that is archaeology. There seems to be no pre-conquest finds or artefacts below the 160 metre contour either in the Matlocks or within the Derwent and Wye valleys. What makes this observation curious is the abundance of ancient finds above this contour line. The Nine Ladies Stone Circle on Stanton Moor is just above the 295 metre contour whilst Ball Cross hill-fort, Bakewell is at 265 metres. These examples are just two of the numerous neolithic sites that include barrows and tumuli all above the 160 metre contour.

In **Vestiges of the Antiquities of Derbyshire**, published in 1848, Thomas Bateman catalogues the many barrows and grave sites that he and others excavated in the locality. Every site listed seems to be above the 160 metre contour and nothing with a provable context has been discovered below this level in the Derwent and Wye valleys. The only claim of anything pre-Norman is a paragraph that I have seen quoted on many web sites but without reference to where the information originated:-

"There was an Anglo-Saxon settlement at Rowsley before the Norman Conquest, and in the Domesday Book 'Rowesley' is recorded as being an outlier of the Royal Manor of Bakewell, occupying the tongue of fertile land between the Derwent and the Wye".

It is quite probable that if this quote does have any provenance then the text has been wrongly interpreted. The "tongue of fertile land between the Derwent and the Wye" could simply be the section of high ground above the two rivers occupied today by Lees Moor Wood and Lindop Wood.

I was drawn to historic Matlock by my investigations for my book, **The Rivers of Time**. I had observed that there are many Holmes on the Derwent and Trent rivers which is to be expected because this is a Viking/Saxon word for an island and the Derwent and Trent areas were prominent in the histories of settlement for both groups. However, Starkholmes is a location that is high above the Derwent, behind High Tor so how did it get its name? Additionally there is 'Crich Carr' and a number of 'Carr' lanes in the local area and quite high above the Derwent. A Carr is an ancient name for a wetland so what are these Carr references doing high above the river? There could be geological reasons unrelated to the Derwent but considering them along with the other evidence does raise a question or two.



My curiosity regarding Starkholmes led me to examine the local geology and viewing it from above, via **Google Earth**, I noticed a significant feature below Starkholmes which appeared to be water-cut. This feature is used as a footpath so I was able to follow it to identify its route. Passing under the railway bridge and through the stile near the High Tor Cable Car Station the feature becomes visible in the hillside as a prominent bank. The picture, left, is taken from the path and looking back towards the railway bridge. The feature runs east to west down the hillside and the mound on the far left is the southern bank. The western bank is lost under a wall adjacent to the footpath. The feature is less distinct beyond the end of the embankment suggesting that this was the height of the water-line prior to the cutting of the High Tor route.

The picture, right, is from the same position but looking up the hill towards Starkholmes. The southern bank is seen on the right of the path. The terrain flattens somewhat as can be discerned from the picture but the course can still be traced through a boggy area to a probable waterfall in some private gardens below Tor Road at Starkholmes.



The area surrounding the old water course has many geological features which may indicate the evolution of the water course prior to the cutting of the High Tor Gorge which cut off its flow leaving it as a scar in the hillside.



This picture, left, is taken from the same location as the previous two and looks south.

The bank is very obvious in this picture and I find it difficult to explain the formation of this geological feature other than through erosion by a consistent water flow. However, not being either a geologist or archaeologist I shall, of course, bow to superior knowledge should such evidence be presented.

That being the case I would need all of the evidence explaining to me because this feature ties in with the rest of the local geology and the expectations aroused by Dalton, Fox and Jones regarding the ancient route for the River Derwent.

Support for the above geological feature being an early route for the Derwent comes from an examination of the landscape. The following picture is taken from Black Rocks near Wirksworth and the depression at Starkholmes, which lies just above the old water course, is clearly visible.



Also visible to the left of Starkholmes is High Tor and its gorge whilst to the right of Starkholmes is Riber Hill. It is apparent from this view that the only route for the Derwent before the formation of the High Tor gorge was through the Starkholmes depression. If by Saxon or Viking times the water had started to pass both sides of what is now High Tor then it could have appeared to be a 'Stark Holme'. This, in turn, begs another question. Where did the river run before the Starkholmes depression was cut by the river then the most obvious route had to be east of Riber Hill. Study of the Ordnance Survey Map suggests that the depression near Tansley could have been formed by water erosion indicating an even earlier route for the water draining from the Peak.

What Caused the Breach at High Tor ?

There are a number of possibilities that can be considered to explain the eventual change of course for the River Derwent from its route through the Starkholmes depression to the present course west of High Tor.

Earthquake

Although we seem to be immune from major earthquakes today this has not always been the case and the **Anglo-Saxon Chronicles** record a substantial quake in A.D 1048, one of six that took place in England over a period of eighty-one years. "This year also there was an earthquake, on the calends of May, in many places; at Worcester, at Wick and at Derby, and elsewhere wide throughout England; with very great loss by disease of men and of cattle over all England; and the wild fire in Derbyshire and elsewhere did much harm".

This earthquake was felt from the north-east of Scotland through to the south-west of England, a distance of over 500 miles, which suggests that it was a violent event on a major scale. The wild fires reported in Derbyshire could have been due to the release of flammable gasses from the various mine-workings and caverns throughout the county.

The fact that disease was rampant and affecting both humans and cattle adds to the suspicion that this was a big quake. Was it sufficient to cause a collapse of the limestone ridge that runs from Masson Hill towards Riber Hill? Below this limestone ridge are thermal springs which may have contributed to weakening the formation.

The Chronicles record another earthquake twelve years later in A.D. 1060, "there was a great earthquake on the Translation of St Martin".

Twenty-nine years after the A.D. 1060 event the chronicles document another nation wide event, "There was also over all England much earth stirring on the third day before August".

In a period of forty-one years there were three large earthquakes with the worst one apparently causing severe damage in Derbyshire.

Erosion

If the name, 'Starkholmes', reflects a Viking or Saxon description of an island then water was passing either side of High Tor when these people were settling giving us a date for the start of the formation of the gorge. That such a name persists suggests that the 'Holm' had been a long standing feature. This could indicate that the commencement of the cutting of the gorge was by normal erosion.

Lead Mining

A feature of lead mining in Derbyshire that is noted by early writers is that the lead seams are close to the surface and it is still possible to see the remains of lead workings throughout the county. Deeper mines were also dug and both Peter Naylor and Benjamin Bryan mention the mine close to the High Tor Gorge and known as 'Nestes', "Nestes or Nestus - a corruption of new stowse or windlass - the mine on the Heights of Abraham (Nesterside)". The Heights of Abraham are opposite High Tor and would have been part of the same hillside before the cutting of the gorge. Is it possible that lead-workings had weakened the limestone dam?

REVISION 1

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In accepting that the Derwent river flowed through Starkholmes before the High Tor gorge was cut then it is also necessary to ask where the river flowed prior to the breaching of the Starkholmes gap. Studies of the aerial photographic evidence to be found on Google Earth and Bing Maps show it is probable that the ancient, higher, flow of the Derwent was diverted east at Riber Hill and flowed towards Ashover. It may well have carved the various features in this locality. The probable course of the river could then have been down the Amber Valley which could explain why the 'little' River Amber is conveyed through such an impressive valley. It could also explain the presence of the Roman Road above the flood plain. (A Roman Fortlet is shown at SK385 – 541). This is, of course, assuming that the course of the river was through the Amber Valley at the beginning of the Roman period although, as we have already noted, the Rykneld Street is considered to be an ancient British Road and could date from well before the Roman conquest.

This reasoning does not necessarily alter the suggested chronology for the Millford location. (Page 4.3 of Chapter 4)