

Salt Ways

We are always being told that we eat too much salt. And even if we curb the instinct to reach for the cruet over dinner, there's enough of the white stuff in supermarket food to harden the arteries without our help.

Salt, along with its equally evil twin sugar, is one of those banes of the modern world. We can't live with it; we can't live without it. Yet its risks and terrors would be lost on those who grew up in the Middle Ages.

In those days before the freezer, the fridge and the pantry, salt was the crucial ingredient to get one through the long winter months. Keeping livestock alive through the winter was expensive and hardly cost-effective. Better to slaughter them in what was called the "blood month" - November - and preserve the meat in salt until the spring arrived.

Likewise, in an era that relied heavily on fish - between a third and a half of all the days in the medieval calendar were designated "meat-free" - salt and brine were crucial in getting sea fish from the coast to the inland towns and villages in anything resembling an edible condition.

In such conditions, then, a place like Droitwich was worth its weight in gold. The Worcestershire town was the saltiest in England; only in the 20th Century was it overtaken by the salt mines of Cheshire.

Droitwich, as the geologists will tell you, sits on rock rich in minerals. And therefore the water that passes through those rocks and emerges as natural springs is heavy with salt, around ten times more salty than sea-water. It is a relatively straightforward process to trap the briny water in lead pans, and then boil it off until all that's left is a cake of salt.

The Romans, who knew all there was to know about water, were the first to exploit the Droitwich brine on anything like an industrial scale. Indeed, the name for the Roman legionaries' salt ration gave us our word "salary".

By Saxon times, to own a salt-pan in Droitwich was to have seriously lucrative real estate in one's portfolio; little wonder, then, that the English kings jealously protected their interests there, and made much of the tax revenues the produce yielded. Here was a town well worth its salt.

The story of how the Wich exploited its natural reserves - from the pans of the Anglo-Saxons through to the great factories of John Corbet, the Salt King, in the 19th Century - is a well-known one. What's perhaps less well appreciated is the enormous impact the Droitwich salt industry had on its surroundings.

Take the road system, for instance. You could say that salt created the arteries, as well as hardened them. Courtesy of the Romans and their successors, Droitwich was necessarily at the centre of a network of routes that took the precious commodity out across the country. Perhaps the most

important were the Upper and Lower Saltways. The former led the salt carriers east and north through Northamptonshire and out to the coast of Lincolnshire. The latter took traffic south through the Cotswolds down to Cirencester, and further south to the Hampshire sea-board.

Feeding into those arterial routes were other roads, including the one (Icknield Street) that skirted Birmingham and then cut through to Wall and Wroxeter, and the "Salt Straete" (now the A4538), which headed south to Worcester. It would be hard to calculate how many settlements established themselves purely because they lay on or close to one of the busy salt ways.

But the impact of the salt trade on the local environment was much more extensive (and noticeable) than that. The continuous fires under the salt-pans consumed vast quantities of wood, and all that timber had to be felled locally. The manor of Martin Hussingtree, for example, was under contract to supply Droitwich with one hundred cart-loads of timber per year, and received a designated quantity of salt in return.

So the pack-horse trade on the salt ways was two-fold, carrying salt in one direction, and timber and faggots in the other.

It's likely that the great forest of Feckenham, which once stretched to the very gates of Worcester city, was swallowed up and consumed as much by the salt-pans as it was by building and general woodland clearance.

Even by Tudor times the timber reserves in this part of Worcestershire were becoming critical. John Leland, the Tudor antiquary, commented that "the making of salt is a great and notable destruction of wood, and hath been, and shall hereafter, except men use much coppicing of young wood." Leland goes on to say that the increasingly desperate search for fuel had driven the salt-makers as far north and south as Worcester, Bromsgrove, Alvechurch and Alcester.

Long before the Industrial Revolution, then, Worcestershire was facing a crisis of sustainability. Only with the switch to coal as a fuel for the pans - and that involved transportation over considerably greater distances - was the problem solved.

In the meantime, wood was more likely to be seen in as a word in an ancient place-name than on the ground.