

Suffocated in sand

by Melanie Winterbotham

A spate of fatal accidents in the 1820s and '30s reminds us of the risky local occupation of 'sand mining' in the first half of the nineteenth century.

In 1822 Daniel Pritchard was digging sand with two others in a pit on his father's farm when part of the pit gave way. His companions escaped, but Daniel was completely buried.¹ Daniel and his father James lived in Eastcote, but the pit may have been elsewhere, as the family also rented other property and a relative lived next to The Gate in Northwood.

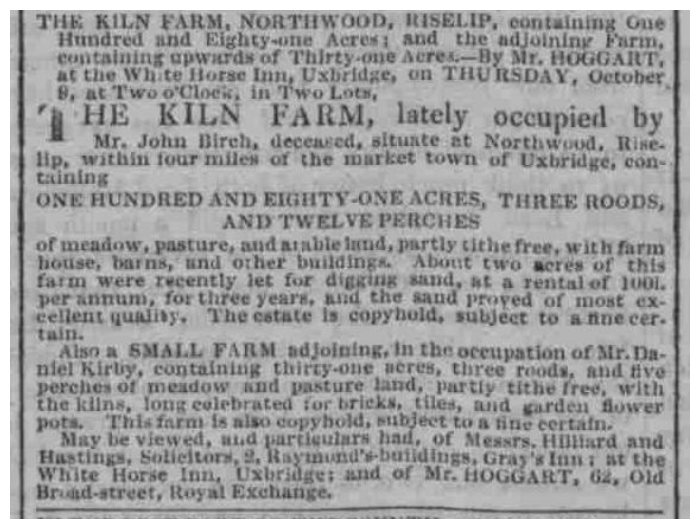
Five years later in 1827, 20 year old Daniel Fox and a boy were foraging for sand on Ruislip Common. According to the *Morning Advertiser*, they were after silver-sand deep in the earth, which was accessed by a well, regularly bricked to the spot where the vein commenced; the vein had been excavated a considerable way from this entrance, forming a long arched passage under the earth. As Daniel and his companion filled their baskets, they hit a land spring and the earth gave way. The boy somehow managed to get his head above the sand and call to another man who was waiting to draw up their load. The boy was brought out alive, but Daniel could not be revived. An inquest was held at the True Lovers Knot and recorded 'accidental death'.²

In 1832, 19 year old Nathan Birch, whose father James rented sand pits, was suffocated in a sand slip.³ Within three years, the Birch family were to rue the day they started mining sand, for in 1835 Nathan's younger brother John was working in a pit in Northwood twenty feet underground when it collapsed. Both he and fellow miner William Woodward lost their lives. James Birch, the father, said he had given up the pits after the first fatality, and had urged John not to go mining.⁴

After this fifth tragedy, in 1835, the *Morning Chronicle* commented that 'the unfortunate circumstance has created a most painful excitement on the spot and in the surrounding villages - eight lives having been lost in the same appalling manner within the last few months in the various sand-pits in this part of the country'. Although not specifically in the south east, over the British Isles it had been a bad year; in fact barely a year went by without at least one fatality

in a sand pit. It is perhaps surprising that there were not more, and some may not have reached the press. Coastal digging was particularly hazardous, with several incidences of rock or cliff falls. Even inland Kent and Sussex had very unstable pits. Sometimes it would appear that diggers had not considered weather conditions, such as heavy rain, and quite a number of the casualties were children or 'lads' who may not have taken care to shore up the pits properly, or have taken risks in tunnels. Shafts, which were brick-lined like wells, could be incredibly deep: one at Plumstead Common was said to be 180 feet deep, with chambers at higher levels as well,⁵ but this may have been an exaggeration, as the newspaper stories are inconsistent.

The pits rented by the Birches and Woodwards were on Kiln Farm, Northwood, owned by the Birch boys' great uncle John who had died in 1827⁶ (in 1797-1803 he had owned a property called 'Sand Pit House'), and rented to James Birch and to William Woodward's father, also William.⁸ The farm was sold in 1834 to Edward Kirby who was related by marriage to John Birch. The advertisement notes that 'About two acres of this farm were recently let for digging sand, at a rental of 100l [*£100*] per annum, for three years, and the sand proved of most excellent quality.'



London Evening Standard
Friday 12 September 1834

Eileen Bowlt wrote in this Journal in 1993 (available online)⁹ about the discovery of a sand mine shaft in Highfield Crescent, Northwood, and the local geology which gave Northwood this unusual resource. Highfield Crescent is within the area where most of the sand was mined, south of the present Rickmansworth Road. Nearby Hills lane was previously known as Sandpit Lane, and Druett writes of a network of white-sand pits on the site of what is now Northwood Golf Club.¹⁰ Northwood and parts of Ruislip Common were clearly blessed with a valuable commodity only found in certain geological locations.

The annual rent of £100 for two pits at Kiln Farm was a considerable sum to pay out, so it must have been seen as a profitable investment, and not just in Ruislip parish. In 1822, so much sand was being removed from Brighton beach that the Lords of the Manor resorted to trying to prosecute the diggers for undermining the cliffs, but they failed¹¹; the next year action was threatened against those mining under hills in Norfolk.¹² In 1837, the *Sussex Advertiser* reported that the price of sand was so high that the Commissioners of Sewers had tried to ban sand digging, and that three Lords of Manors had put up notices claiming rights to beaches, sand and boulders.¹³ When half the silk glove workers of Nottingham were out of work in 1840, many dug sand and dragged it round the streets to sell it.¹⁴

What was the attraction of this sand? As ever, it was needed in building construction, and it is no coincidence that the new owner of Kiln Farm, Edward Kirby, was a brickmaker. However, before the invention and widespread use of commercial cleaning products, sand was an everyday cleaning agent. Kathryn Kane writes that sand would be spread over floors, particularly by the kitchen fireplace, once a week. It would absorb grease and other cooking spills, and help protect the floor from stray coals and sparks, as well as preventing any muck from solidifying and adhering to the surface of the floor; it was both absorbent and abrasive. Even if sand was not applied weekly in this way, it was sprinkled onto floors prior to sweeping, and hearthstones and stone steps were scrubbed with sand.

Sand was also used in a compound to scour metals, often mixed with ground oyster shell; it was especially good for pewter or brass that was expected to shine. Nevertheless, such use had declined with the increase in china tableware which required more careful cleaning. Around the

coast, especially in Cornwall, old women, miners who had been blinded, and children collected sand, which was transported by donkey. In the cities, 'sand men' would sell sacks of sand and other cleaning agents.¹⁵

The sale of sand must have been combined with other commodities, as there is little evidence of the terms 'sandman' or 'sand dealer' in wills or in newspapers. While quite common in the North West and Yorkshire, fewer appear in London. Sand is often mentioned alongside dealerships in coal, lime, wood or bricks; a female blacksmith was dealing in sand in Leeds in the 1820s¹⁶ and not surprisingly, a London lighterman was also dealing in this bulky and heavy commodity.¹⁷ A versatile operator advertised in 1835 his business of nightman (i.e. sewage collector), sand merchant and carman, which he claimed earned £5,000 a year: one hopes he did not use the same vehicles for each service!¹⁸ London sand 'merchants' or 'dealers' seem to have had a reputation for over burdening their horses or donkeys, for in an extract from a West Indian paper of 1830 sand dealers and hucksters are compared to slave owners.¹⁹ Indeed in 1823 a London sand man had his animal confiscated for treating it very cruelly.²⁰

It is probable that Ruislip dealers took their own sand to London to sell. It is difficult to identify the sales people before the first census in 1841, but then we find two women 'sand merchants', Fanny Alday, who lived near Ruislip Common, and Mary Bray on Ducks Hill, as well as the aforementioned Edward Kirby at Tile Kiln. Also dabbling in mining or trading are brickmakers Daniel and John Kirby (either brothers or cousins of Edward) in Northwood and John Saunders at Tile Kiln, and Edward Bray, wood dealer of Sharps Lane.

In 1851, Edward Kirby junior at Kiln Cottage²¹ and his neighbour Alfred Woodward near the True Lovers Knot are sand miners, as is twelve year old William Woodward of Northwood. There are five sand dealers - Henry Lavender and John Weatherly on Ruislip Common, James Bunce at St Catherine's, William Clarke next to the True Lovers Knot, and John Bray of Ducks Hill who also deals in wood.

By 1861, the trade is showing signs of waning, perhaps due to a combination of falling demand (substitutes were now available and sand could be brought in bulk into towns by rail) and depletion of the pits. There are still three dealers -

Joseph Birch in Sandpit Lane, Rachel Brill in St Catherine's End, and Henry Lavender on Ruislip Common – but the only miners or 'diggers' are Thomas Crawley at Hill Corner, Wiltshire Lane, and Henry Kirby and his thirteen year old son Edward, whose main business is a grocery store near the True Lovers Knot. No one is recorded as working with sand in 1871, but there is one final entry in 1881 - William Woodward in Ruislip Village is still selling sand. Perhaps he and others are scraping the mines in their spare time.

Perhaps it was a good thing that Ruislip folk ceased to risk their lives in the sand pits – no other single parish recorded such a death toll – but the demise of the trade may also have inflicted hardship on those families scraping a living by whatever labour they could secure. When you next vacuum sand from your car or carpets after a holiday, think not of its annoying ability to get into and cling to everything, but of its wonderful cleaning properties and the livelihoods of those who lived here nearly 200 years ago.

¹ *Oxford University and City Herald* 18 May 1822.

² *Morning Advertiser* 03 October 1827.

³ *Bell's Weekly Messenger* 30 September 1832.

⁴ *Hertford Mercury and Reformer* 24 March 1835; *Morning Chronicle* 26 March 1835.

⁵ *Evening Mail* 9 April 1817.

⁶ Will: TNA PROB 11/1724/209.

⁷ He owned the 'Sand Pit House' 1797-1803: Ancestry.com. London, England, Land Tax Records, 1692-1932 MR/PLT/0997 (originals at LMA).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *RNELHS Journal* 1993, p40-45 (online at rnelhs.btck.co.uk/Journals).

¹⁰ Walter W Druett, *Ruislip Northwood through the Ages*, Uxbridge 1957.

¹¹ *Morning Post* 8 Aug 1822.

¹² *Norfolk Chronicle* 29 March 1823.

¹³ *Sussex Advertiser* 9 Jan 1837.

¹⁴ *Derby Mercury* 4 Dec 1839.

¹⁵ <https://regencyredingote.wordpress.com/2011/11/11/sand-a-regency-cleaning-agent/> (accessed 28.08.2017).

¹⁶ *Leeds Intelligencer* 16 December 1843.

¹⁷ *Public Ledger and Daily Advertiser* 05 February 1833.

¹⁸ *Morning Advertiser* 28 February 1835.

¹⁹ Extract from 'The Watchman' in *The Examiner* 20 Jun 1830.

²⁰ *Morning Advertiser* 22 December 1823.

²¹ Colleen A Cox, *A Quiet and Secluded Spot*, *RNELHS* 1991, p80.

Further Reading:

RNELHS Journal 1993, p40-45 (online at rnelhs.btck.co.uk/Journals).

Colleen A Cox, *Ruislip in 1841*, *RNELHS Journal* 1998 p22-28 (online at rnelhs.btck.co.uk/Journals).

Colleen A Cox, *A Quiet and Secluded Spot*, *RNELHS* 1991.

Melanie Winterbotham, *Cutting through the Wood*, *RNELHS Journal* 2015, p32-33.