

## NOTES FROM THORNHAM

The Hills and Holes nature reserve, famous for its lime loving vegetation, sits 70 miles from us in Barnack near Peterborough. The rare purple and orange pasque flowers were out when we visited in April. Later there will be orchids.

This peaceful but bleak and bumpy site is the remains of what for hundreds of years was a busy and important stone quarry. We connect to it very directly as in



the absence of any Suffolk stone it proved a useful but distant source when it came to building our own churches. Fortunately for us the quarry was owned by the monks of Peterborough who permitted its use for religious purposes in exchange for, amongst other things, large numbers of eels for Lent.

From Barnack the cut stone was taken on sleds to riverside quays for loading on to small barges that were sailed, rowed and punted through the shallow undrained Fens. Vast tonnages went direct to the gates of the abbeys of Peterborough, Ely and Bury St Edmunds, as well as other abbeys and churches in the region. For more easterly destinations, including Norwich and our area, the cargo probably came round by sea via Wisbech and up the rivers from Yarmouth.

Barnack Rag, as the stone is known, is a distinctive coarse stone with thin layers of broken shells and fossils weathering out of the harder 'cement' to leave a surface pitted by horizontal grooves. Some of this stone can be seen at the Magna church, but much more at Parva. Although coarse and hard, skilled masons can carve it into intricate sculpture, most famously to be seen at Ely Cathedral.

By 1500 the Barnack quarries were considered exhausted and they closed down. It has often been said that there is more good stone in the area, perhaps left behind by primitive quarrying methods. So it was that in 1999 a source was found nearby and 1,800 tonnes were quarried and used to clad the Cathedral tower in Bury St Edmunds with stone to match the nearby mediaeval work.

**JUNE EVENTS IN THE THORNHAMS** ● **Monday 10th:** Women's Tour bike race ● **Wednesday 12th and Thursday 13th:** Concerts, Music at Thornham ● **Saturday 22nd:** Village gathering, Parish Hall, 7.30