

The Coldstones Cut

An essay by

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One way or another every sculptor is preoccupied with the changing (or not changing) dispositions of the physical world. It's not a petty preoccupation nor is it a new one. It was with a sculptor's eye that, in ancient times, landscapes were assessed for fortify-ability and with a sculptor's eye that teams of quarrymen and stonemasons were organised to construct walls and ramparts designed both to improve the view outwards and to be seen from without as strong, impressive and impregnable. And from those ramparts of the ancient world a landscape more virginal, more threatening and perhaps more romantic than our own would have disported itself for scrutiny.

The landscape of the Yorkshire Dales displays itself in a more sophisticated manner; dressed from head to foot in managed heather, lead-mine spoil, dry-stone walling, tar-macadamed roads, villages and settlements, farms and fields, telegraph poles, street lights and signage, reservoirs and dams; not a square foot that isn't owned, managed, transformed and the subject of planning applications for further transformations. The high points in the landscape are no longer critical defensive look-out points but places sought out for contemplation of the extraordinarily complex place we occupy.

As extraordinary a place as any and as good an example of super-managed contemporary landscape that I know is the Hanson's limestone quarry at Pateley Bridge. More extensive than any James Bondian lair a mountain top has been created to render invisible an enormous puncture in the landscape. Not only has the bride been stripped bare but her flesh has been extracted creating an apocalyptic chasm deep into the earth. Like the commandant of Stalag Luft III one could reasonably ask where could such an enormous quantity of matter be hidden without our seeing it and the answer is the same as it was in 1944; it is all around us. It is in the roads, in the bollards, in the paving, in the foundations of our homes and our fence posts.

This was what impressed me most when I first came to Coldstones; looking outwards, a fabulous landscape, once dressed by Nature, now dressed by Man and, looking inwards, the cloths stripped away and the hard reality, compacted towards the centre by the tyranny of gravity, revealed. There can be few places on earth where there is so much to see and so much to think about. To the East Menwith early warning station, the Drax power station and the beautiful valley of the Nidd with Pateley Bridge in the foreground, to the North Stonebeck Down and the valley housing Gouthwaite and Scarhouse reservoirs, to the South Simons Seat and the Yorkshire Dales and to the West, the quarry pit.

As a child I used to stand for hours in a particular spot in our back garden and imagine a smooth sided circular hole through the earth. At the far extremity of the hole, the Australian landscape, burnt and burnished, spread itself in my imagination and into that hole I would leap. Even at that young age this was where the problems began. I knew I would accelerate to the centre and decelerate as I neared Australia. Head first I would catch a glimpse of the aboriginal land before being drawn back into the hole; foot first and I ran the risk of missing it. Foot first and, as I fell away

from Australia and back to my garden, I stood a chance of pushing my arms out and dragging over the rim of the hole and back into the warm embrace of our summer lawn. Failure meant an eternity at the centre of the earth, a small circle of sky above and below me.

The hole at Coldstones is shallow by comparison. The rock is carboniferous limestone formed over a 40 million year period 325 million years ago when Nature dressed the Yorkshire earth in warm soup of shallow sea teeming with organisms. Billions of generations flourished in the sunlight, ended, and were drawn towards the centre, at first in a froth of mud, and then compacted and compacted and hardened and dried. Even a casual examination of Coldstones rock will reveal the fossilised marks of crinoids and brachiopods encased in a jacket of carbonate mud.

One can only speculate as to the commissioning process of a Mycenae (c.1500BC) but perhaps one could say that the stone was there, that the desire and the need was there as were the power and the skills. The same could be said of The Coldstones Cut though in the intervening 3500 years the methodologies and decision making processes have been modified. Perhaps a thousand Mycenaees were planned and even started around the world but in the end there is only one and that is in the location that had the right ingredients and the will to see it through.

For The Coldstones Cut to become an actuality the first ingredient was a socially responsible aggregates business in Hanson Heidelberg and a local management team with vision and a beautiful form of romance – they loved their quarry, they loved what it revealed to them and they wanted to share it (Bob Orange, Hansons Unit Manager, trained as a sculptor, lives as quarryman and breaths as a naturalist and Shirley Everett, the Coldstones Quarry Manager, geologist and local mine historian). The Coldstones Cut is only the latest iteration of this notion of sharing, of give and take. The quarry has given employment and material and created wealth but it also impacts on the environment. These impacts have been ameliorated and offset not only by the creation of bund around the rim of the quarry but also by a long established and varied interaction with the local community.

The second ingredient was community itself which had a history of getting things done and which contained within itself individuals of great experience, patience and know-how. One centre of this know-how was Nidderdale Visual Arts who had established themselves with gallery, workshops and studios in Pateley Bridge. They had done many projects with the quarry management and when the quarry needed permission to expand and enlarge the bund, they saw an opportunity. There had been a small viewing platform before at Coldstones so why not insist that, in order to offset the negative of the disruption, a positive in the form of new platform, which could be an artwork as well, should be built.

An artist was found, drawings were made, consultations were had, drawing were modified and re-modified, all the differing interests of the community were gradually drawn in and just as gradually the benefits and interest of the project was recognised. Planning permission was granted, funding bodies financed with tax levied by enlightened governments on environment bashing industries were approached alongside more conventional arts funders and suddenly after years of patient endeavour everything was in place.

Now, with the construction work almost complete, I have been asked to write a short text about what it is that I think has been built. The first thing to say is that it is a thing that, like the hole it sits

next to, will be present for a very long time. It will see the quarrying business that gave rise to it cease to operate. It will see the walls of the pit become a verdant habitat where now they are barren. It will see land use evolve, habitats and industries come and go, it may see catastrophe and crises but its decline will be a gradual one measured in millennia rather than single years.

Modern day Mycenae attracts many visitors who roam amongst the ruins imagining the way it might have worked, the habits and lives of both the builders and the occupants. Some of the clues are readily available whilst others require painstaking effort and prodigious vision to arrive at a conclusion, right or wrong. Unlike Mycenae, once a fortress now a place of contemplation, The Coldstones Cut has been built for the sole purpose of stimulating thoughts in visitors.

From the ramparts of Mycenae the Aegean Sea glitters in the on the Southern horizon, olive groves, adorn the hillsides; settlements nestle in the haze, Argos and the port of Napflion all connected by a network of tracks and roads. Well might one imagine the choices made by the designers of Mycenae to see and be seen as controllers of the trade routes of the region. The choices made in the design of The Coldstones Cut are the clues from which visitors now and in the future will hope piece together a story or a set of motivations.

The ramparts of the Coldstones Cut are not formed to repel unwelcome visitors; quite the reverse, they are designed to draw you in. They do not rise imperiously above rock but rather are the device by which the bund is parted and a connection formed between the internal world of the quarry and the external world of the landscape. The base of the Cut is adorned with the dressing of modern towns and the paraphernalia of contemporary streetscapes and rightly so because the pit that lies at the end of the Cut was formed to supply the road builders and landscape makers of 20th century Britain.

That is a rational explanation of the curious streetscape at the bottom of the Cut but for me it doesn't stop there. In my lengthy preamble to get to the point of what the Cut is about I hope I have succeeded in provoking the image of a hard sphere with fabulous wafer thin mantle of fecundity of which we, our triumphs and disappointments, are a small part. Green is not necessarily the only colour of this fecundity. For me there is little more pleasurably provoking than an abandoned tarmac road, its markings still visible under the leaves and its surface broken by the energy and force of young plants establishing themselves where their seed has fallen but I also feel the heat on the Western Approaches of J.G. Ballard's Crash and respond to the blacktop linear arena of Easy Rider. The roadscape is not simply a functional strip; it is a means of connection, a tactile entity.

The street opens on the hillside facing East over the Nidderdale landscape. It cuts a straight line Westward up a gradual slope until it opens onto an arced apron on the very rim of the quarry. Travelling the line of the cut takes the visitor from a place where they can only see the landscape to another place where they can only see the pit of the quarry.

The linear choice from A to B is not the only one; near the centre of the street is a dome masquerading as roundabout. It is the hub around which the work revolves. Here, at the deepest point of the Cut, there are two narrow paths; one to the South and one to the North each twisting upwards out of the ground in a high walled spiral. In keeping with regulations each spiral sports a handrail and on the Northern spiral, as the path finally works its way above ground the handrail transforms itself into a compass that runs for 18 metres and 360 degrees around the perimeter of

the platform. The compass has its centre at the centre of the North platform and was made according to Google Earth. It measures the shortest distance around the sphere, at all points of the compass, to places and features with names. It can be read outwards or in a linear manner as a poem to the size of the globe and our propensity to travel and name things.

The Southern path again spirals upwards but this time opens onto a platform paved with limestone flags cut to continue the twist of the spiral and forming the shape of an ammonite. At the centre a limestone cone rises out of the flags and forms a plinth for an etching recording the flora and fauna of the Nidderdale present at this time.

The compass and the plinth are two of 3 permanent works of interpretation which enhance the interpretation inherent in the form and material deployment of The Coldstones Cut. A third permanent interpretation work can be found at the entrance to the Cut in the form of a stone bearing the title of the work, the date and the signature of the author, myself, Andrew Sabin.

Two other interpretation works have been commissioned for the project one for the car park and one for the apron. These are to be designed and fabricated by others. One in the car park will introduce visitors to the Cut and inform them of the background to the work and one on the apron will give an outline of the history and geology of Coldstones itself.