

WILLIAM SMITH

One the most famous person to be associated with High Littleton was Willam SMITH, who is remembered by a sign in the hedge of the lane leading to Rugbourn Farm, erected at the instigation of the late Bert BRICE when he was chairman of the parish council. The Dictionary of National Biography contains an extensive entry for William SMITH, but I will restrict myself to his High Littleton connections.

William SMITH was born in Churchill, Oxfordshire in 1769, the son of a blacksmith. He received his early education at the village school and then taught himself enough geometry to obtain a position as assistant to Edward WEBB, a surveyor of Stow in the Wold, when he was 18. In due course he became sufficiently competent to travel round the country on his own, carrying out surveys for WEBB's clients. SMITH was entrusted with the task of surveying Lady Elizabeth JONES' Stowey estate, which she inherited on the death on 13th September 1791 of Mary JONES, her second cousin once removed. At the age of 22 SMITH decided to settle in Somerset, where his new patroness had more than sufficient work to keep him busy.

Lady JONES had also inherited the lordship of High Littleton, together with 396 acres of land and property, including the old manor house called Rugbourn. Soon after his move to Somerset SMITH was found lodgings at Rugbourn with Cornelius HARRIS, who farmed the main part of Lady JONES' High Littleton estate. In 1792 SMITH was asked to survey Mearns Colliery, which Jacob MOGG and seven others leased from Lady JONES. Amongst other things, he reported that the average coal output was then 20 tons per day from a workforce of 16 men and 5 or 6 boys. In 1793, on Lady JONES' instructions, SMITH made a detailed survey and map of the tithing of High Littleton, recording owners' and tenants' names, acreage, type of cultivation and, for Lady JONES' property only, the annual value.

Meanwhile in 1793, John RENNIE, a noted canal builder, was engaged to make a survey for the route of the proposed Somerset Coal Canal between Limpley Stoke and Radstock and Paulton and he promptly hired SMITH as his assistant. Whilst so employed, and also whilst visiting canal works in other parts of Britain, SMITH observed that the various strata of the earth, from chalk to coal etc., always occurred in the same order of succession. The importance of this discovery to coal exploration was obvious. By 1795, when SMITH moved from High Littleton to Bath, he had built himself a fine reputation as an engineer and expert in drainage and water problems as well as geology and surveying. He continued setting out and superintending the work on the canal until 1799 when he left the company's employment. Later that year, using information he had acquired a few years earlier, SMITH took a map of the Bath area and coloured in the geological features. This is acknowledged to be the very first geological map and earned him the sobriquet "Father of English Geology".

William SMITH's last connection with High Littleton was in 1802, when the Vestry commissioned Messrs. SMITH & CRUSE, surveyors of Bath, to undertake a survey of Hallatrow, similar to the High Littleton one of 1793. In the event it was William SMITH's partner, Jeremiah CRUSE, who carried out most of the work, the bill amounting to £37.14/-. Both the High Littleton and Hallatrow maps and surveys may be seen at Somerset Record Office.

After a varied career, which included periods of financial failure as well as fame, William SMITH died at Northampton in 1839. Amongst his writings is a description of his temporary home in High Littleton:

"I resided from 1791-1795 in a part of the large old manor house belonging to Lady JONES called Rugburn in High Littleton. It was then occupied by a farmer [*Cornelius HARRIS*], who lodged and boarded me for half a guinea a week and kept my horse for half a crown a week. I have often said that in one respect my residence was the most singular, it being nearer to three cities than any other place in Britain: it is 10 miles from Bath, 10 from Bristol and 12 from Wells. What is called the lower road from Bath to Wells goes through High Littleton but Rugburn old house is a quarter of a mile east of the village and about half way between it and Mearns coal pit. It is a large quadrangular house, I believe with a double M roof; several of the windows used to be darkened [*filled up*]. There was a square walled court in front with entrance gates between brick pillars on top of a flight of stone steps and on each side of the gates facing the south was a niche in the wall, where I used to sit and study. On the one side of the court was a row of lime trees, which screened it from the farmyard and the east wind, and on the other side was a large walled garden, and over the road of approach there was an avenue of fine elms all across a large piece of pasture.

This had been the coach road when the house was occupied, as I understand, by a Major [Capt. John] BRITTON, who, according to the account of the old farmer, was said to have ruined himself by working the coal upon his own estate [BRITTON's half brother, William JONES of Stowey, baled him out with a loan of £1,200, in return for which BRITTON left JONES his High Littleton estates and lordship of the manor on his death in 1742]. I collected much information from the old colliers respecting the coal, ancient collieries, faults re which I must herein omit; but I must be rather particular in describing the house, through it's relation to the now extensively known science of geology; for, as some of my pupils and friends have called the vicinity of Bath the cradle of geology. I now inform them that RUGBURN WAS IT'S BIRTHPLACE."

Michael L. Browning