

THE DUMBLE HOLE

For anyone interested in local history or topology, the study of field- and place-names of a parish can often prove a fascinating source of information. In our own county we are fortunate in having Ken Cameron's three volume work, *The Place-Names of Derbyshire* (Cambridge, 1959), in which the Chaddesden entry alone runs to well over two pages. Yet despite the hard work of Cameron and his team many local names were not included in the pages of his book, as was indeed the case with the subject of this article, the Dumble Hole.

It was my father, Frank Cholerton, who first pointed out the Dumble Hole (SK 3937 3763) to me sometime in the late 1960s. About fifty yards across, it was a semi-circular depression in the ground and seen to good effect from the public footpath which ran to the south-east from the bridle path off Morley Road. In this east-facing 1970 photograph the Dumble Hole is in the centre of the picture.



A rummage through an old family photograph album eventually produced an even earlier picture of the scene taken in the late 1940s, this time with Dad sitting at the end of the little footbridge which crossed an un-named brooklet with the Dumble Hole in the background.

When we first discussed it, Dad could offer no suggestion as to how the Dumble Hole got its strange name, but later I discovered that Dumble is derived from the Old English word *dumpeþ* meaning a hollow, a deep hole or a pit, quite an apt description for this Chaddesden feature cut into the slope of the ground and perhaps five yards deep at its east end.

Initially we were uncertain whether the Dumble Hole was a purely natural feature or something that had been created by scooping considerable quantities of soil out of the gently-sloping field. Exactly when the Dumble Hole received its name is not clear; it was definitely known as such from at least the mid-twentieth century onwards and I suppose (but cannot substantiate) that it would have been known to Victorian residents of Chaddesden by the same name.



Further investigation has led me to the conclusion that the Dumble Hole probably originated as a marl-pit, for such pits do occur in adjacent parishes and are the result of farmers digging for marl, a friable type of mudstone principally comprised of clay and calcium carbonate, formerly spread on fields to improve the texture of light soils (*structural* benefit) and as a fertiliser by rendering acidic soils more neutral (*chemical* benefit).¹ Such acidic soils would often be called 'sour', and it is worth mentioning that more than 200 years ago a field on Chaddesden Common was actually known as Sour Close and might therefore have been a prime candidate for the application of some marl.



The process of locating a deposit of marl was not an exact science and involved considerable trial and error. Guided perhaps by some promising lumps of the material turned up by the plough, a long auger would be used to probe deep into the ground to determine if excavating the area might prove to be worthwhile. Only a few miles away, some of Allestree's farmers had clearly been using marl from an early date, for a document of 1647 mentions Marle Pitt Furlong.²

This photograph of Jason, our family dog, sitting on top of the Dumble Hole was taken in 1969. West is at the top of the picture, with the Bridle Path just visible at top right. The gradual downward slope of the Dumble Hole can be made out over on the right as it merges with an adjacent field boundary in front of the tree.

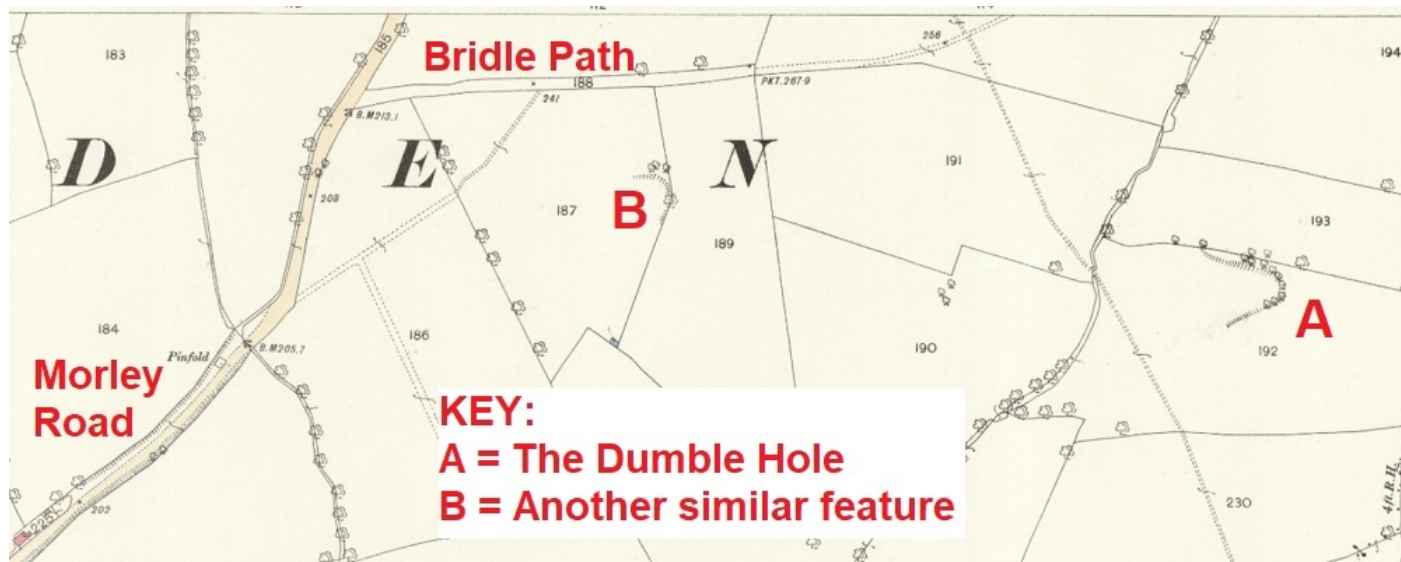
As the Allestree example mentioned above demonstrates, the practice of digging pits in order to extract marl was of some antiquity. Earlier still, John Norden, writing in 1607, put these words into the mouth of his main character, a land surveyor:

But I do not a little wonder of men in this age, whom, whether I may rather accuse of idlenesse, or ignorance, I cannot tell: for where I have trauelled in sundry parts of England, I haue in many of them found many old drie pits, anciently digged in fields, Commons, Moores, and other grounds, many of them bearing still the names of Marle-pits, and by search haue bin found to yeeld very excellent Marle, first found and digged by the prouidence and industrie of our forefathers, and left by the negligence of later times.³

Norden was writing of the time when marl was typically dug out of a village's waste land and carted to new areas of ground about to be brought under cultivation, however, once the fields of a village had been enclosed (usually late 18th to mid 19th centuries) it became more common for individual owners to dig marl pits in their own fields in order to reduce the cost of carriage.⁴ Thereafter the use of marl fell out of favour as new transportation networks – firstly canals and then railways – allowed more effective products such as lime and imported fertilisers to be delivered to local towns throughout the country.

- 1 Note that marl was usually intended for light soils. Since marl was primarily comprised of clay, there would be little point in using it to improve the texture of a heavy clay soil, although it might have been used on such soils to reduce their acidity. The terms *chemical* and *structural* benefits are taken from W. D. Shannon, 'An excellent improver of the soil: Marl and the landscape of lowland Lancashire', in *Agricultural History Review*, Vol. 68, pt.2, 2020, 141–167, p.148.
- 2 K. Cameron, *Place Names of Derbyshire*, 3 vols., Cambridge, Vol. 2, 1959, p.424.
- 3 John Norden (1607), *The surveyors dialogue Divided into five bookes: very profitable for all men to peruse, that have to do with the revenues of land ...* University of Michigan Library Digital Collections, Early English Books Online <https://name.umdl.umich.edu/A08310.0001.001>, p.226.
- 4 W. D. Shannon, 'An excellent improver of the soil: Marl and the landscape of lowland Lancashire', in *Agricultural History Review*, Vol. 68, pt.2, 2020, 141–167, p.141.

Was the Dumble Hole here at Chaddesden the remnant of an old marl-pit and thus a relic of a bygone agricultural practice dating back perhaps to the early years of the nineteenth century? It certainly appeared to display all the main features of a typical marl-pit, being roughly oval in shape with three vertical faces, the fourth forming a long gentle approach slope allowing the marlers' carts and wagons to be backed in. The men would then work down the faces, excavating the marl, loading the carts and driving them out when full. There is also the possibility that the Dumble Hole originated as a clay-pit, providing the raw material for a local brickworks, but on balance I feel the first solution is most likely to be the correct one.

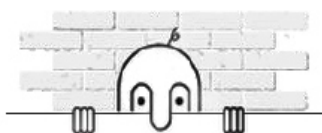


1883 OS Map reproduced by permission of the National Library of Scotland (<https://maps.nls.uk/index.html>).

The First Edition large-scale (1:2,500) Ordnance Survey map of 1883 clearly shows the Dumble Hole (marked A on the plan above) as well as a similar but smaller feature some 35 yards in diameter (marked B) just a few fields away to the west.

The Dumble Hole remained a prominent feature in the local landscape until it was bulldozed out of existence in the 1980s during the construction of Acorn Way, remaining as enigmatic to the end as it had always been! The second feature (B) shown on the map was ploughed out some years ago and this must surely be the fate of countless other marl-pits, although if filled with water some may survive to the present-day as ponds, thereby making useful watering-holes for cattle.⁵

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⁵ In his *General View of the Agriculture and Minerals of Derbyshire*, (London, Vol. 1, 1811, p.457) John Farey suggests that the 'large Pit on the south of Morley Church' was formerly a marl-pit. He must surely be describing that part of Lime Lane now known locally as Donkey's Hollow (SK 3959 4074), which runs right through the middle of a sizable depression, roughly oval in shape, measuring some 90 yards x 100 yards.