



*View of Middleton Moor looking South from the edge of Bonsall Moor.*

## **LOCKDOWN BALLADS OF MIDDLETON MOOR**

Brian Roy Rosen

2020

### **BACKGROUND**

*This poem arose from my experience of the first COVID-19 Lockdown in Spring 2020 and the rules and restrictions on everyone introduced by the Government. My wife and I were in Cromford, Derbyshire, when the Lockdown was announced and spent the whole of that first Lockdown period there. Cromford lies close to Middleton Moor and was one of our own main 'escapes'.*



*View of Cromford with Middleton Moor on right skyline looking Southwest across the valley of the River Derwent from Bilberry Knoll.*

*The poem reflects on the Government's Lockdown restrictions at that time, and the political 'style' of its public statements, focusing on how older people (like us), and others officially labelled as 'vulnerable', were treated, and, more generally, how everyone was told to stay indoors. To enforce that, local and national authorities and organizations banned, locked or barricaded access to open spaces, inducing a melancholic mood and overlooking the health importance of access to open spaces and the very low probability of virus transmission between well-spaced people out of doors. Many people in the area responded with unvoiced defiance and common sense, taking advantage of the sparsely inhabited uplands of this area. The particular restrictions in question were eventually (sometime after I wrote this poem) recognized as an over-reaction and a threat to health and well-being in their own right, and were revised. Disclaimer: please note that the poem does not otherwise question intentionally other core restrictions and advice.*



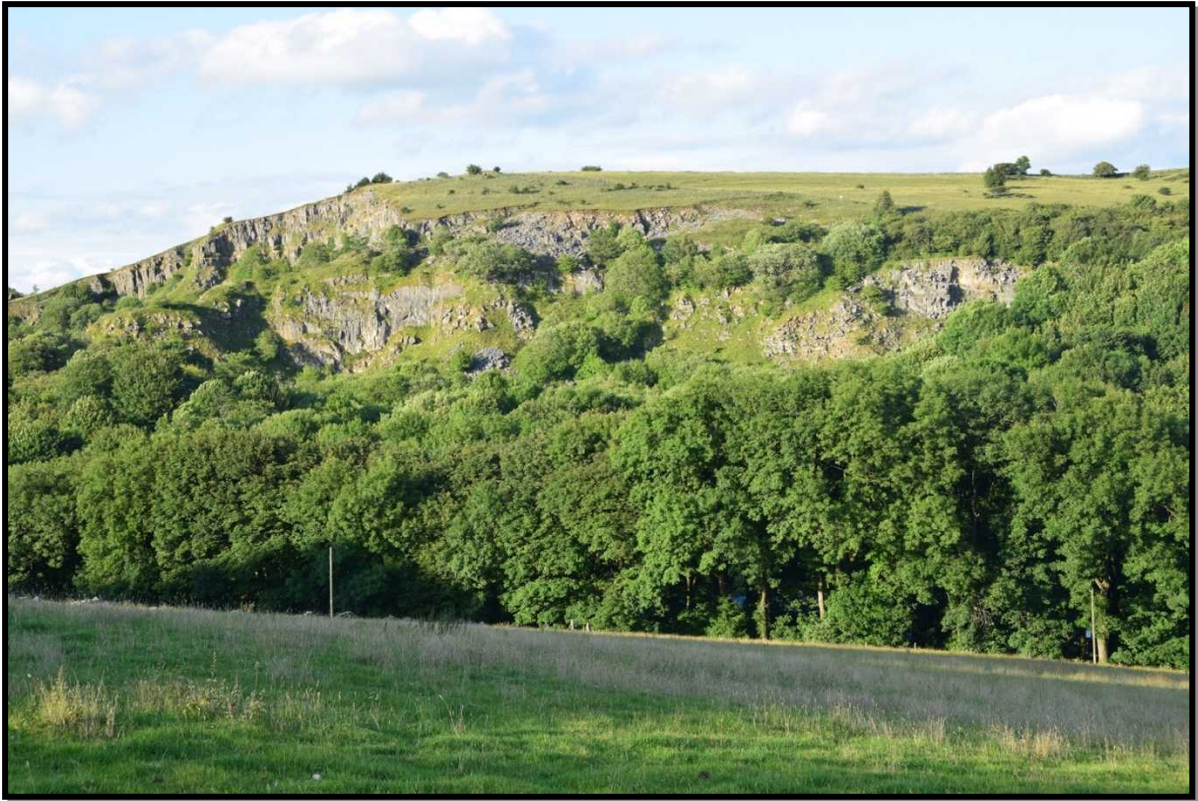


*Runner on 'the gentle swells and hollows of Middleton Moor' with carpets of cowslips.*

*This is a 'geopoem' which sets my Lockdown experience against the particular combination of landscape, natural history and former industrial history of Middleton Moor — and also, as it happens, to an unusually dry, sunny but cold, spring. It consists of a cycle of loosely narrative sections ('ballads' in effect), punctuated with a chorus, giving the poem a loosely ritornello-like structure as in classical music form.*

*The images in the accompanying slideshow ( <https://www.edinburghgeolsoc.org/earth-lines/>) portray the character and history of Middleton Moor and complement these particular subjects of the poem while also highlighting other related points. In many cases, the images directly correspond to particular lines, but I preferred to make all the images appear randomly in the slide show, to counterpoint the poem, rather than timing them to match specific parts of it. A selection of the slide show images is also included in the text below.*

*There are separate notes to explain particular references in the poem, if readers require them.*



*Middleton Moor from the West, with disused Middleton Wood Quarries (used for extraction of Hopton Wood stone).*

## LOCKDOWN BALLADS OF MIDDLETON MOOR

They've blocked off the car park at Middleton Top.  
 Can't drive anywhere.  
 And talky-walkies *verboden* too.  
 Stay home to save lives,  
 But stand by your window  
 To admire the sun from afar,  
 To look at the stars  
 Or the walls of your yard  
 Or at anything else  
 Through the Government's bars.  
 That vitamin D  
 They worried about  
 Matters no longer to them,  
 But you can do  
 A keep-fit stretch or two,  
 And do wash your hands —  
 It's good for you, you know  
 To keep the virus out — or in.  
 So please just fade from view,  
 Unvisited, old and brainless,  
 Patronised and 'vulnerable',  
 Deep frozen  
 Under house arrest  
 Into Lockdown obscurity,  
 With endless time  
 To eat and breathe.  
 And watch TV Gold all day  
 Exiled in your carpet slippers.

They've blocked off the car park at Middleton Top,  
 Once an excellent place for everyone,  
 Even the vulnerable  
 To start a walk or bike-ride  
 Across virus-free expanses  
 Of the White Peak's  
 Dry limestone upland meadows.  
 But somewhat stealthily  
 (You never know  
 Who might blow the whistle  
 On your Cummings-and-Goings),  
 The empty open car park  
 Of the 'Rising Sun'  
 Becomes our tunnel of escape  
 To give our lungs  
 A workaround of common sense



To move and stretch,  
 And draw in blasts  
 Of cold clear sunny air,  
 And steal forbidden daylight  
 To feed our winter skin  
 In this 'unprecedented' spring.  
 Of cloudless skies.

*A few sheep watch  
 A lone runner in black  
 Affirming her steady pace  
 Into the distance  
 In the sun  
 Against cold wind  
 Amongst the yellow haze  
 Of brave cowslips  
 Over the gentle swells and hollows  
 And open space  
 Of Middleton Moor.*

They've blocked off the car park at Middleton Top,  
 And those at the mill and canal.  
 The National Trust slammed shut  
 Its gracious gates  
 On members pleading merely  
 To walk its grounds.  
 The workplace has locked us out,  
 With no caring contact  
 For its 'vulnerables'  
 Stalling our projects  
 As if they don't matter any more.  
 They've shut the theatres,  
 And my favourite stadium's roar,  
 Banned meeting-places,  
 Parks and squares,  
 Street corners,  
 Pubs and restaurants.  
 And left us to sing on alone,  
 In hollow concerts and rehearsals  
 In our heads.  
 But on the telly,  
 Tinpot Churchills  
 Wave the Union Jack  
 'Following the science' they tell us,  
 Defending our island  
 (Though far too tardily),  
 Fighting COVID on the beaches,

On the trains and in the streets,  
 And in the apocalyptic skies,  
 Above the cow-munched fields  
 And sheep-strewn hills  
 Of Derbyshire —  
 Whatever it takes  
 To stop the virus getting in — or out,  
 From here — or there,  
 While locking loss, and lack and needs  
 Into our hearts and souls,  
 Perhaps indefinitely.

*But at many paces  
 Of Social Distance,  
 A couple — surely even older than us —  
 Pick with their sticks  
 Their careful way,  
 Affirming their thoughts  
 In the distance  
 In the sun,  
 Against cold wind,  
 Through the yellow haze  
 Of resilient cowslips,  
 Over the gentle swells and hollows  
 And open space  
 Of Middleton Moor.*

They've blocked off the car park at Middleton Top,  
 For the common good.  
 It's nobody's fault,  
 Apart from some unknown far-off  
 Scapegoat in Wu-Han,  
 Perhaps a butcher's boy,  
 Recalling the baker's boy  
 Said to have started  
 The Great Fire of London,  
 In 1666  
 One year after  
 Another 'unprecedented' Plague  
 Reached Eyam  
 Just up the road from here.  
 And we're all Eyams now,  
 Locked down — or up,  
 Or in — or out,  
 To meet our destiny  
 With 'herd-immunity',  
 While the media,

Obsessive in their cacophony  
 And column-inches  
 Of could-be might-be may-be  
 Direst doom and gloom,  
 Wield their clumsy numbers,  
 Without a hint of optimism.

They've blocked off the car park at Middleton Top,  
 Locked out the contagion  
 Of museums, festivals and shows,  
 Toxic galleries, shops and markets,  
 And poisonous takeaways and cafes,  
 But on the sky line,  
 Fine bold trees  
 Of a summit copse  
 Frame a solitary sheep,  
 Silhouetted on the horizon,  
 Lost in its solitude,  
 Indifferent to our plague.

Here also a derelict lead mine  
 Beckons us to the ruined ledges  
 Of its broken walls  
 To our very own mock-up pop-up café,  
 Serving solo to ourselves  
 Playing as waiters,  
 Pouring from a vacuum flask,  
 And handing out  
 Affirming tea and cake,  
 Through a jagged, gusty,  
 Paneless, frameless  
 Serving hatch,  
 While snapping carefree selfies  
 Of our sadly passing moment  
 For our families far from here.

*Then to sit and follow in our gaze  
 Dry limestone walls  
 Now crumbling sadly  
 Before our eyes,  
 All lines and angles  
 In a mesmerizing maze,  
 Fine black shadows  
 Pencilled in  
 By sky-bright light  
 Defining a monochromic craze  
 Of hard-laboured coursework*



*In affirming half-tone greys,  
 All in the distance,  
 In the sun,  
 Against cold wind,  
 Across the yellow haze  
 Of defiant cowslips,  
 Over the gentle swells and hollows  
 And open space  
 Of Middleton Moor.*

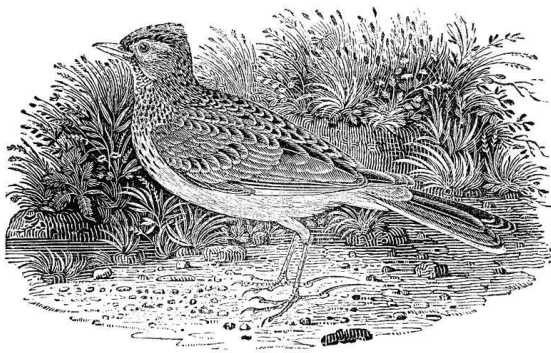
They've blocked off the car park at Middleton Top  
 But cannot stop us conjuring  
 From desolate uncaring ruins  
 And long-silent layers  
 Of tropical Carboniferousness  
 This moor's rocks and history,  
 Thriving industrial noise.  
 Here a clanking ancient railway,  
 Rope-hauled improbably  
 Up impossible inclines  
 By the hissing see-saw bumps  
 Of a beam-engine,  
 The now empty chimney  
 Of its engine-house  
 Still a simple beacon  
 For those who quietly dare  
 To cross this locked down moor.  
 The crack and thud  
 Of lead miners' picks  
 In shafts and pits  
 Now muffled beneath us.  
 The blasts and shouts and rock-fall roars  
 In the quarried chasms  
 Now crumbling and silent.  
 But in the infinite forbidden labyrinths  
 Deep below the Moor,  
 Nothing less would do  
 Than the elegant stone  
 Of Middleton and Hopton Wood,  
 Hewn as bright marble  
 From deep dark galleries  
 To make white ranks and files  
 Of headstones and crosses  
 For memories and losses  
 Of another 'unprecedented' scourge.  
 On the Western Front.

*Now ends our tea charade  
 With panoramas  
 Fending off cold winds  
 Of pervading premonition,  
 Loss and longing,  
 To briefly affirm  
 Our warmth and laughter  
 In this silent ruin in the copse,  
 As we look into the distance,  
 In the sun,  
 Against cold wind,  
 At the yellow haze  
 Of yearning cowslips,  
 Over the gentle swells and hollows  
 And open space  
 Of Middleton Moor.*

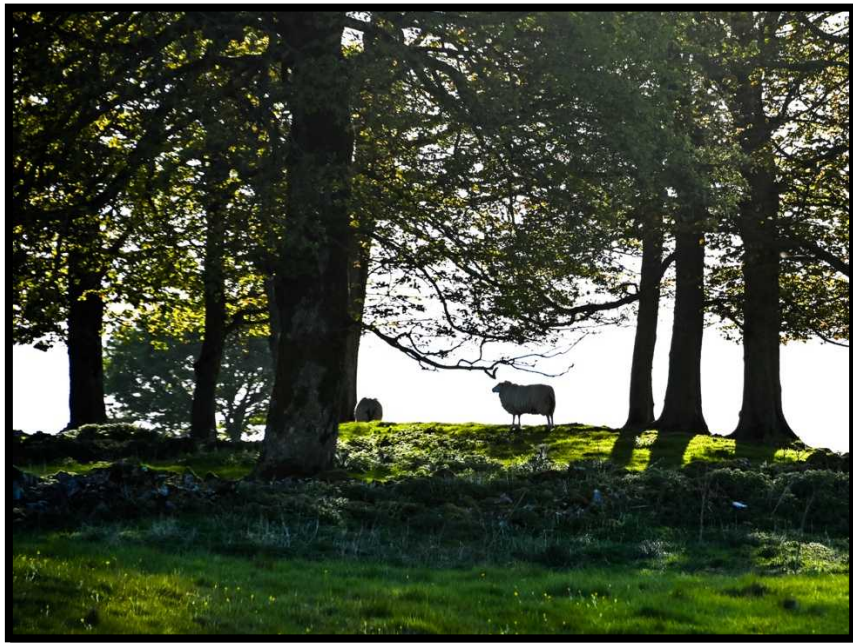
They've blocked off the car park at Middleton Top  
*No pasaran* they tell us  
 Even across this fine sane void  
 Of untransmissible airy safety  
 Where fellow humans,  
 More sparse than sheep,  
 Keep safe distance,  
 Gauging for themselves their need  
 To breathe the views  
 Beneath broad bright skies  
 And feel the light and beauty  
 Of these high meadows.  
 Nor could they ban the tears which surged  
 To Bach's *Dona Nobis*,  
 Echoing from the radio  
 Beyond our kitchen  
 Through my memories  
 And into his universe,  
 Evoking the *hwyl* and grandeur,  
 Of singing profound *finales*  
 Sung in concert halls,  
 Now so out of bounds —  
 Shall we ever sing like that again?

*But in the blue skies,  
 They could not lock out  
 The trilling bubbling concerto  
 Of ever-rising skylarks  
 Bringing tears again*

*For a joy-of-spring  
 So yearned for,  
 Their soaring song,  
 In the distance,  
 In the sun,  
 Against cold wind  
 In matching affirmation,  
 Of the yellow haze  
 Of reassuring cowslips,  
 Over the gentle swells and hollows  
 And open space  
 Of Middleton Moor.*



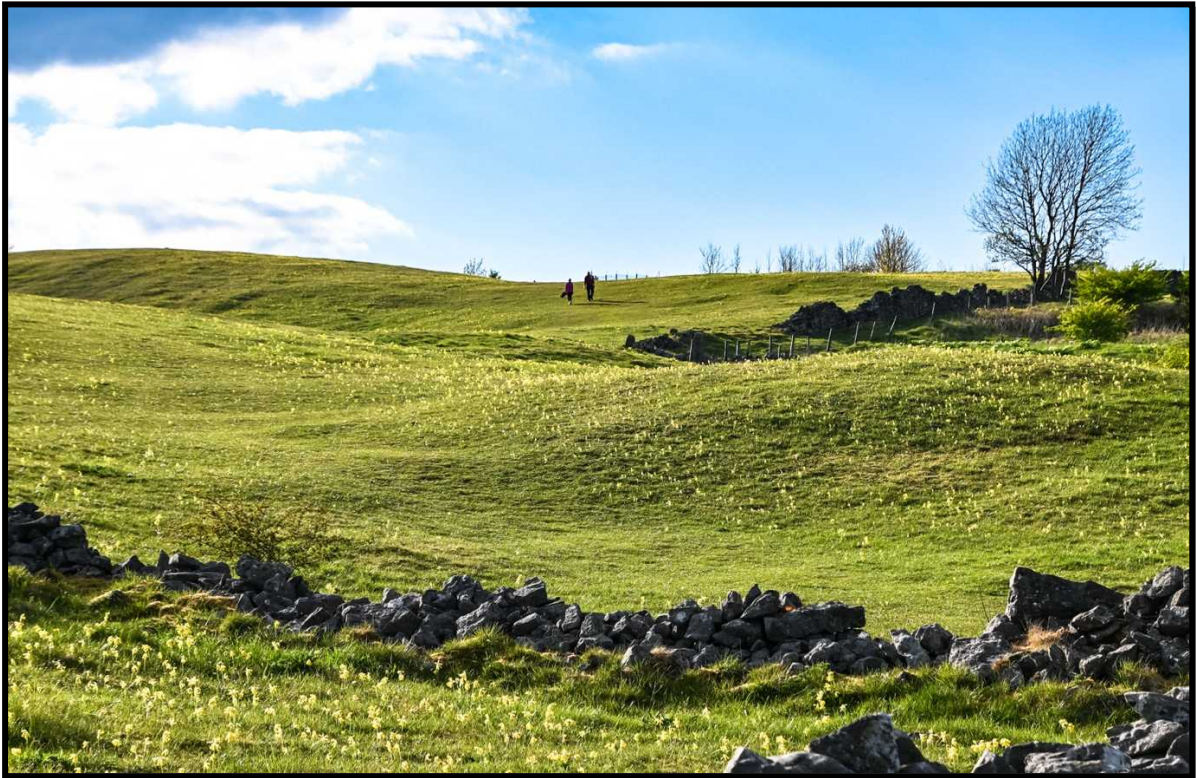
*Woodcut of the Skylark (Alauda arvensis) from Thomas Bewick's The History Of British Birds Volume I, 1797.*



*'a solitary sheep, / Silhouetted on the horizon / Lost in its solitude / Indifferent to our plague'*



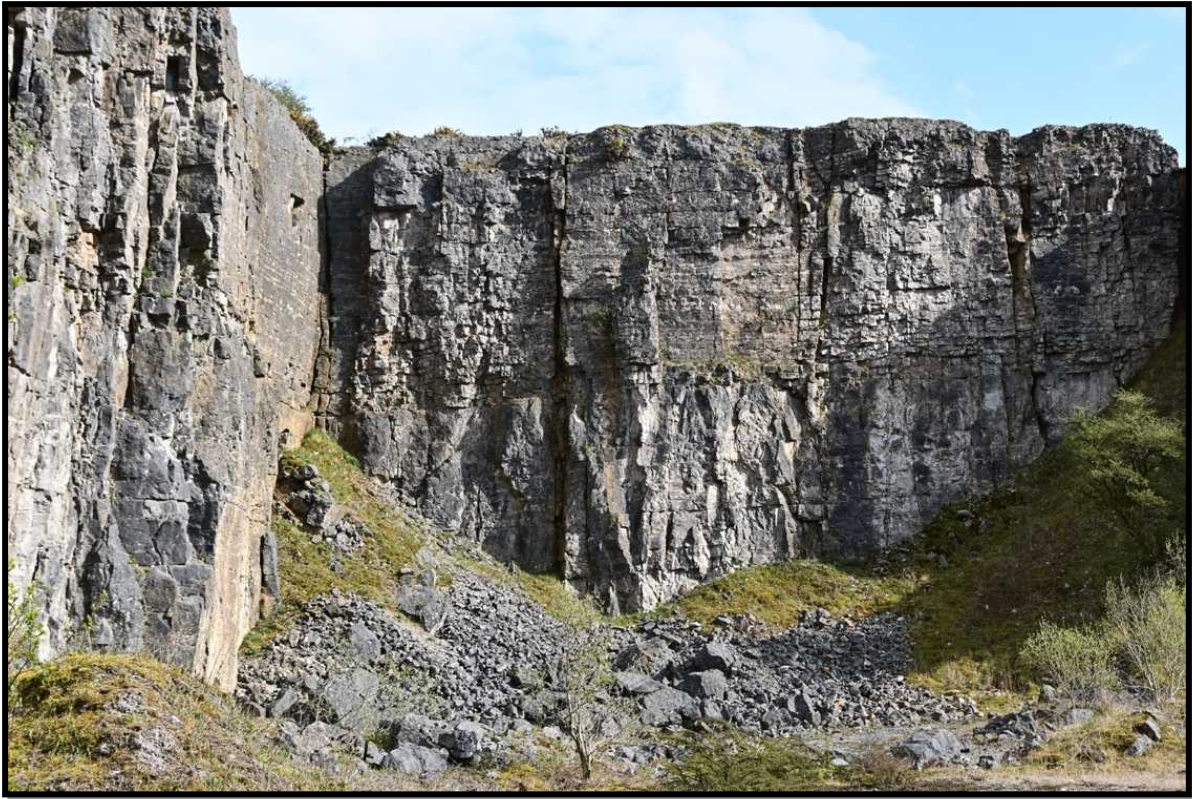
## ANNOTATIONS AND EXPLANATIONS



*'Affirming their thoughts / In the distance / In the sun, / Against cold wind / Through the yellow haze / Of resilient cowslips'*

*This is a guide to words, phrases and references in the poem whose meaning, significance or background, may not be obvious to all readers, though others may find them obvious and well-known. It is also likely that over time, the significance of topical matters in the poem will become more obscure or forgotten. It is of course also a question of how far literal explanations detract from poetic allusion and deliberate ambiguity, or even from the fun for readers in working things out for themselves. This list therefore does not necessarily cover all possible explanations.*

**'Carboniferousness'** — The bedrock of Middleton Moor is entirely Dinantian (Lower Carboniferous / Mississippian), consisting of three main formations: Bee Low Limestone (Asbian) including the Hopton Wood ornamental stone, the Monsal Dale Limestones (Lower Brigantian) and Eyam Limestone (Upper Brigantian), all deposited on what was once a shallow warm-water marine platform. Together, their age range is approximately 360 Ma to 330 Ma.



*'quarried chasms now crumbling and silent'*

*Intake Quarry is cut into the South corner of Middleton Moor. This face on the Eastern side shows finer bedded Eyam Limestone disconformably overlying more massively bedded Monsal Dale Limestone (both Brigantian).*

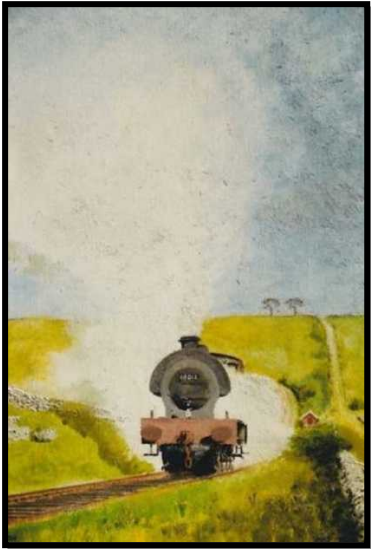
**Churchill** (and related lines in the poem) — Winston Churchill (obviously), whom the Tory Prime Minister at this time, Boris Johnson, regards as a hero, and whom he publicly invokes, directly or indirectly, in the context of fighting the COVID-19 virus, especially through allusions to, and quotations of, Churchill's famous World War II speeches in response to the Blitz, military operations, etc., etc.

**'clanking ancient railway'** — a reference to the Cromford and High Peak Railway. This very early railway is long gone, and its track is now a walking, cycling and horse-riding trail, the High Peak Trail. This runs along the Southern edge of Middleton Moor. The line, over 50 km long, crossed the White Peak area of the Peak District between High Peak Junction, over 3 km away on the Cromford Canal, and Whaley Bridge on the Peak Forest Canal. It was notable for its very steep inclines at each end of the line, for which trains had to be cable-hauled by steam-powered beam engines (also referred to in the poem), such as the electrically-restored one in the old engine house at Middleton Top.

— <http://middleton-leawood.org.uk/midtop/history.html>

— see also: Middleton Top, below

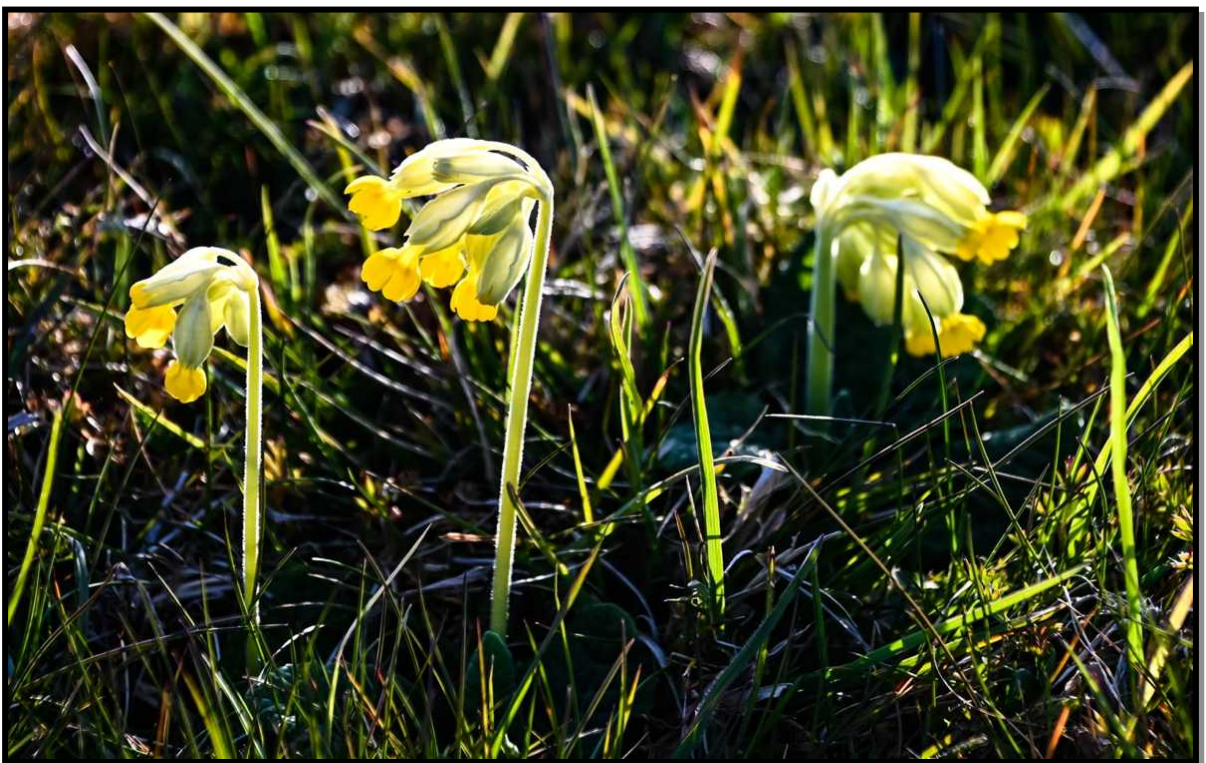




*'Here a clanking ancient railway, / Rope-hauled improbably / Up impossible inclines'*  
 The former Cromford & High Peak Railway. Left: On the Hopton Incline with Middleton Moor in the background (painting by John Holroyd, courtesy of Matlock Railway Club and Steeple Grange Light Railway). Right: Wagons by the Middleton Top Engine House waiting to be wound down the Middleton Incline (photographer unknown).

**'clumsy numbers'** — In the early months of the pandemic in particular, British politicians and media were quoting data, like cumulative numbers of cases (which by definition, can only increase or stay the same, but never go down), seemingly without understanding the basic rules of using and presenting numbers, such as correction for sample size, the different implications of absolute numbers and percentages, and without data on recoveries. Number presentation did improve, but is still often flawed.

**Cowslips** — (scientific name *Primula veris*), a yellow primrose-relative which flowers in spring in extensive drifts across much of Middleton Moor.







*Cowslips on Middleton Moor (both photos above)*

**Cummings-and-Goings** — a reference to Government special adviser Dominic Cummings, reported for his infamous breaking of the Government’s travel restrictions during the first Lockdown.

***Dona Nobis*** — shortened title from the phrase *dona nobis pacem* (‘Give us peace’) (Latin). This is the final phrase of the *Agnus Dei* (‘Lamb of God’), which is also the final section of the Christian Mass. The *Dona Nobis* has been set to choral music by numerous composers as a separate movement, in this case, by J.S. Bach in his famous *Mass in B minor*. Cited here for Bach’s music rather than for personal religious reasons.

**‘elegant stone’** — a reference to Hoptonwood Stone / Hoptonwood Marble / Middleton Stone (etc.), varieties of which include a fine, even-grained, very pale limestone, sometimes called ‘marble’ (though not a true marble), which occurs in the Bee Low Limestone (Asbian) in the Carboniferous (Mississippian) Limestones of the Middleton Moor area. The stone has been one of the main industries of the Middleton Moor area and has been widely used for ornamental purposes, carving and sculpture, and including numerous First World War gravestones for memorials and cemeteries (also referred to in the poem) in Britain, Belgium and elsewhere in Europe and the Far East. In a geological sense, much of the massif of Middleton Moor consists of Bee Low Limestone capped by younger limestones.

— <http://hoptonwoodstone.co.uk/>

— [https://englishstone.org.uk/York\\_files/ESF - Ian Thomas.pdf](https://englishstone.org.uk/York_files/ESF - Ian Thomas.pdf)



*Left: Extraction of Hopton Wood Stone from now disused Asbian Bee Low Limestone in Middleton Quarry. Right: WWI commemorative stone made of this stone, located where the sidings from this quarry joined the Cromford & High Peak Railway at Steeple House (now on the Steeple Grange Light Railway). (Photographer of quarry photo unknown.)*

**Eyam** — (pronounced ‘Eem’), the Derbyshire village which famously isolated itself from the outside world when the 17th Century Plague reached the village. Plague can be carried by fleas, and these were found in cloth brought into the village. Following its discovery, the villagers locked themselves down to limit its spread to others in the same area — perhaps the first recorded case in Britain of a self-imposed lockdown in response to a threat of infectious disease.

— <https://www.eyamvillage.org.uk/plague>

**‘following the science’** — a frequent quotation by Government officials and spokespeople, including the Prime Minister, that its response and policies to COVID-19 was based on advice by its teams of scientific advisers.

**‘herd immunity’** — a much-mocked phrase used by the Government in the earlier days of the Pandemic. It is a technically valid concept, being the point when a high enough proportion of a population have become immune to an infectious disease (or otherwise died from it), so that, in theory at least, the communal infection rate falls significantly and (ideally) approaches zero. This might happen naturally or through medical controls like universal vaccinations. When the phrase was first used by the Government, there were no vaccines available and it seemed that the Government were (notoriously) in favour of a now-discredited, natural ‘sink or swim’ community response to the virus, rather than, say, control of transmission by rigorous imposition of Lockdown rules, track-and-trace testing, etc.

**hwyl** — (‘hoo-eel’) (Welsh). A stirring feeling of emotional motivation and energy, often communal.



**Middleton Moor** — a small scenic upland plateau of Derbyshire, over 300 m above sea-level, between Middleton-by-Wirksworth and Wirksworth. It is an almost self-contained miniature version of the surrounding White Peak and has a long, varied and important industrial history of lead mining, and limestone extraction, now mostly gone. Old lead workings and mine ruins litter its landscape and it is surrounded by now disused quarries which were once served by industrial railway lines like the Cromford and High Peak Railway (see ‘Clanking ancient railway’, above), and underlain by a labyrinth of tens of kilometres of mine adits and galleries.



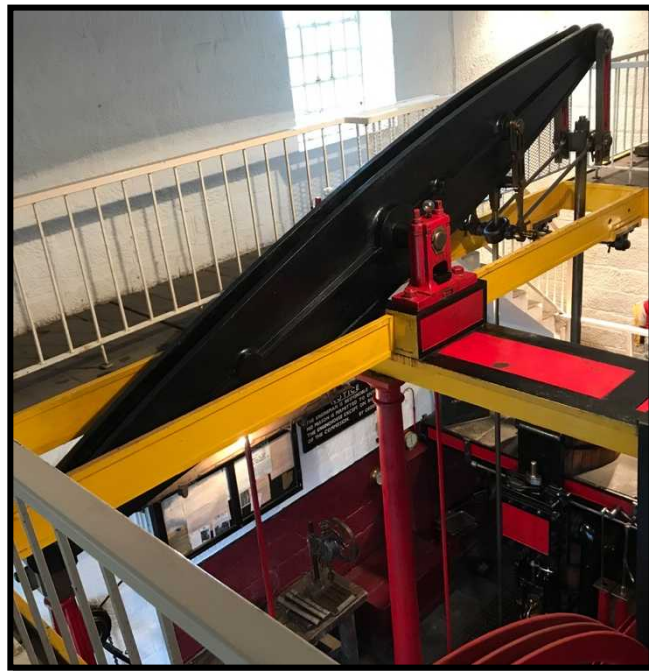
*‘The crack and thud / Of lead miners’ picks / In shafts and pits / Now muffled beneath us.*  
 Left: ‘T’Owd Man of Bonsall’. A fragment of Saxon stone-carving depicting a lead miner in St. Mary’s Church, Wirksworth, probably 8th century. Right: Series of old lead mining bell-pits aligned along a vein on the North side of Middleton Moor.

**Middleton Top** — named for being located at the top of the set of inclines of the now disused Cromford and High Peak Railway (see ‘Clanking ancient railway’, above), which started over 3 km away at High Peak Junction on the Cromford Canal. Middleton Top is the last remaining engine house which once cable-hauled trains up one of the inclines. The buildings nearby are now a visitor and cycling centre, providing an important access point to Middleton Moor, the High Peak Trail and the White Peak generally. Its generous car park was heavily barricaded with large concrete blocks by the local authorities, who claimed they were fulfilling Government regulations to ban people from outdoor activities. Similar barricades were also erected at almost all other access points to open spaces, parks and other outdoor leisure areas throughout this part of Derbyshire. Although this ban was progressively eased during subsequent anti-COVID measures, the barricades remained in place for many months afterwards. Derbyshire police also carried out a rather zealous campaign, including use of drones, confronting people who were deemed to have broken the rules and fining them.





*'The now empty chimney / Of its engine-house / Still a simple beacon'*



*Upper photo: the engine house at Middleton Top, at the upper end of the Middleton Incline on the former Cromford & High Peak Railway. Lower photo: the electrically restored beam engine which cable-hauled the trains up and down the incline.*

**No pasarán** — 'They shall not pass' (Spanish), often used in political and military campaigns.

**Pop-up café** — a reference to a recent, mostly city-based, trend by small local traders and service providers for setting up temporary stalls or making short-term use of empty commercial spaces, derelict sites etc.





*'Our very own mock-up pop-up café' in a derelict lead mine building on Middleton Moor.*

**Social distance** — a reference to the Government's 'two-metre rule', the required distance of person-to-person separation (at that time) to minimise transmission of COVID-19.

**'tardily'** — the widespread public feeling, supported by various journalistic investigations, that the Government delayed taking serious and effective action against the Pandemic in its earliest days, in spite of strong warning signs here and abroad. This is perceived to have led to more widespread, numerous and fatal infections than might otherwise have happened. There has since been a campaign to carry out a public enquiry into the Government's initial handling of this, and of various other ways in which it responded (or not) to the Pandemic, but at the time of writing, this is still awaited.

**TV Gold** — an allusion to British television channels devoted to long running soaps, sitcoms, and comedy and thriller series, which were very popular in the past. They are generally watched by older people who fondly remember them from when they were first shown.

**'unprecedented'** — the much-loved and overworked word used by the Government and media for the COVID-19 Pandemic crisis and almost all matters arising from it, though as a crisis it is actually rather less unprecedented than is commonly realised, as alluded to in the poem.

**'unvisited'** — a consequence for most people of the Government's heavy restrictions on people meeting socially indoors or outside.

**Vitamin D** — as recognized in various Government campaigns before the COVID-19 Pandemic, this is important for bone growth and maintenance in conjunction with sunlight. It is especially important for young, elderly and unwell people. During the first Lockdown, however, Government regulations required people to remain indoors to help contain virus transmission. In the event it was also a risk to their Vitamin D uptake especially at the time, because day length was increasing and the weather was unusually sunny. This risk was not realised by many people and was only later admitted officially as a problem, and policy changed. Moreover, and ironically, later medical thinking has emphasised that transmission rates of the COVID-19 virus are much lower in outdoor places than in crowded indoor places. (In parallel with this, lack of outdoor exercise also became a Government concern, especially in the context of its pre-Pandemic campaigns about physical fitness and obesity.)

**verboten** — ‘forbidden’ (German) — associated (often in parody) with formal notices and warnings by former authoritarian governments and organizations in German-speaking countries, but now rather out of favour.

**‘vulnerable’** — officially used word for people who have known medical conditions deemed to make them more susceptible to a life-threatening response to COVID-19, but also applied more loosely and generally to older people.

**White Peak** — the limestone upland plateau of the Peak District, with its pale-coloured crags, grey dry stone walls and bright meadowland landscapes lies between 300 m and 400 m above sea level. This contrasts with the Dark Peak, the darker-hued higher moorlands, often boggy and heather-covered, which surround much of the White Peak. The limestones of the White Peak, including Middleton Moor, are Lower Carboniferous (Dinantian / Mississippian) in age, and cause these uplands to be relatively dry with scenic gorges and numerous other characteristic (karstic) features of limestone weathering.

**Wu-Han** — the province of China where COVID-19 infections were first identified.





*'a monochromatic craze / Of hard-laboured coursework'. Dry stone limestone walls on Middleton Moor.*

### AUTHOR DETAILS

I am a research geologist and marine biologist. I live in Dulwich in South London. For most of my career, I have worked as a research scientist at the Natural History Museum in London, and have contributed to several major long-term exhibitions there. I am now retired, but continue with my research as a Scientific Associate in the Department of Earth Sciences. For my research I have concentrated on the geology and biology of living and fossil corals and reefs with subsidiary interests in biogeography and the history of science, with field work and other travel to numerous locations around the world including many tropical islands in Atlantic and Indopacific. Current projects include contributing to a guide to the geology of the Peak District, and the evolutionary and ecological history of living and fossil scleractinian corals and its implications for climate change. Other interests include architecture, choral singing, football, hill-walking, industrial history, landscape history, languages, natural history, photography, and railways ancient and modern. Favourite British landscapes include North Wales, Pennines and North Devon. My parents inspired my interest in poetry and writing, and the wider world of politics, education, countryside, sport and travel.

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*At Harborough Rocks in the White Peak between Middleton Moor and Brassington, Derbyshire, May 2021.  
(Photo: © George Darrell)*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Sarah Tremlett and Angus Miller (Edinburgh Geological Society), together with Jill Darrell (my wife), for respective help and encouragement, and also my step-mother, Betty Rosen, a writer and poet herself, who has been an informal poetry mentor to me over recent years. Thanks also to my son, George Darrell, for his photography and video-making expertise.