

Industry to Forest: Kilns of Limehouse

by Patti Post Images courtesy Credit Valley Conservation except where noted



Hikers who explore the conservation trails in the pastoral village of Limehouse, situated off Hwy. 7, between Georgetown and Acton, wouldn't recognize the bustling industry that was in full swing at the turn of the 20th century. Like many communities nestled along the Niagara Escarpment, Limehouse carved its beginnings from what nature provided. Limestone kilns, whose remains still stand in the conservation area, provided raw material for many structures that still function locally and nationally.

The mortar that fortifies Toronto's Osgoode Hall, Old City Hall, as well as most Canadian universities and grand old hotels like the Royal York, are enduring reminders of the limestone industry that

operated in Limehouse from the 1840s to 1915, with kilns running 24 hours a day.

Far from the forested park it is now, this was an industrial area, with

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▲ Trees have reclaimed the once-industrial area of Limehouse. Here, the ruined Draw Kiln, circa 1870, has been partially reconstructed. A new fence surrounds the site. More funds are needed to complete the specialized reconstruction.



▲ Mary Shier, president of The Limehouse Kiln Society, at the powder magazine, once used to store explosives safely away from the operating kilns. This was the first structure to be restored, done by local stone mason Gerry Inglis. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

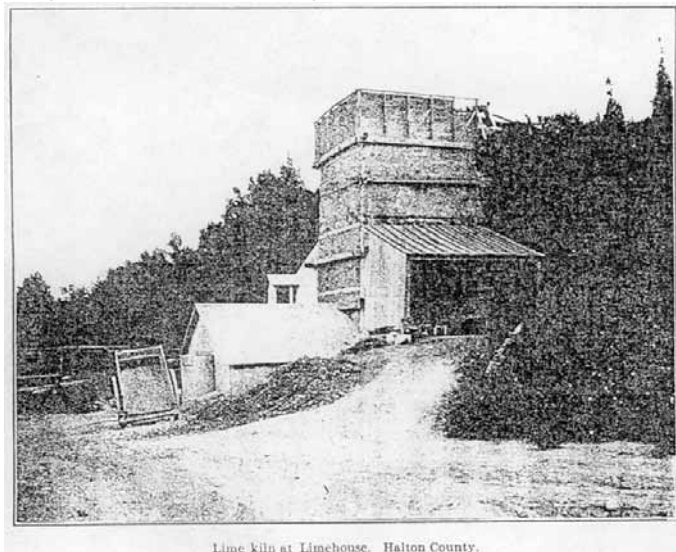


▲ Looking like a temple found in a tropical jungle, this is the ruin of the Draw Kiln before research and restoration.



▲ The front face of the Draw Kiln after restoration and stabilization to date. The Society would like to restore the structure to the top wooden rail. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

An old image of the Draw Kiln when operating. At the very top, a ramp from the top of the Escarpment let a horse back up a wagon load of rock to the opening of the kiln shaft. ▼



Lime kiln at Limehouse. Halton County.



Lime Kilns, Limehouse, Ont., Canada

a saw mill, grist mill, and a paint factory surrounding the limestone works. Three limestone companies that operated during this time were Bescoby & Worthington 1850-1857; Gowdy & Moore 1857-1885; and the Toronto Lime Company 1885-1915.

Restoration

The remains of this once thriving industry now form unique monuments at the Limehouse section of the Bruce Trail, where the old kilns are slowly in the process of being restored.

The first structure to be rebuilt was the powder magazine: the arched enclosure near the entrance to the conservation area, where explosives were stored. Blasting was necessary for extracting limestone from bedrock.

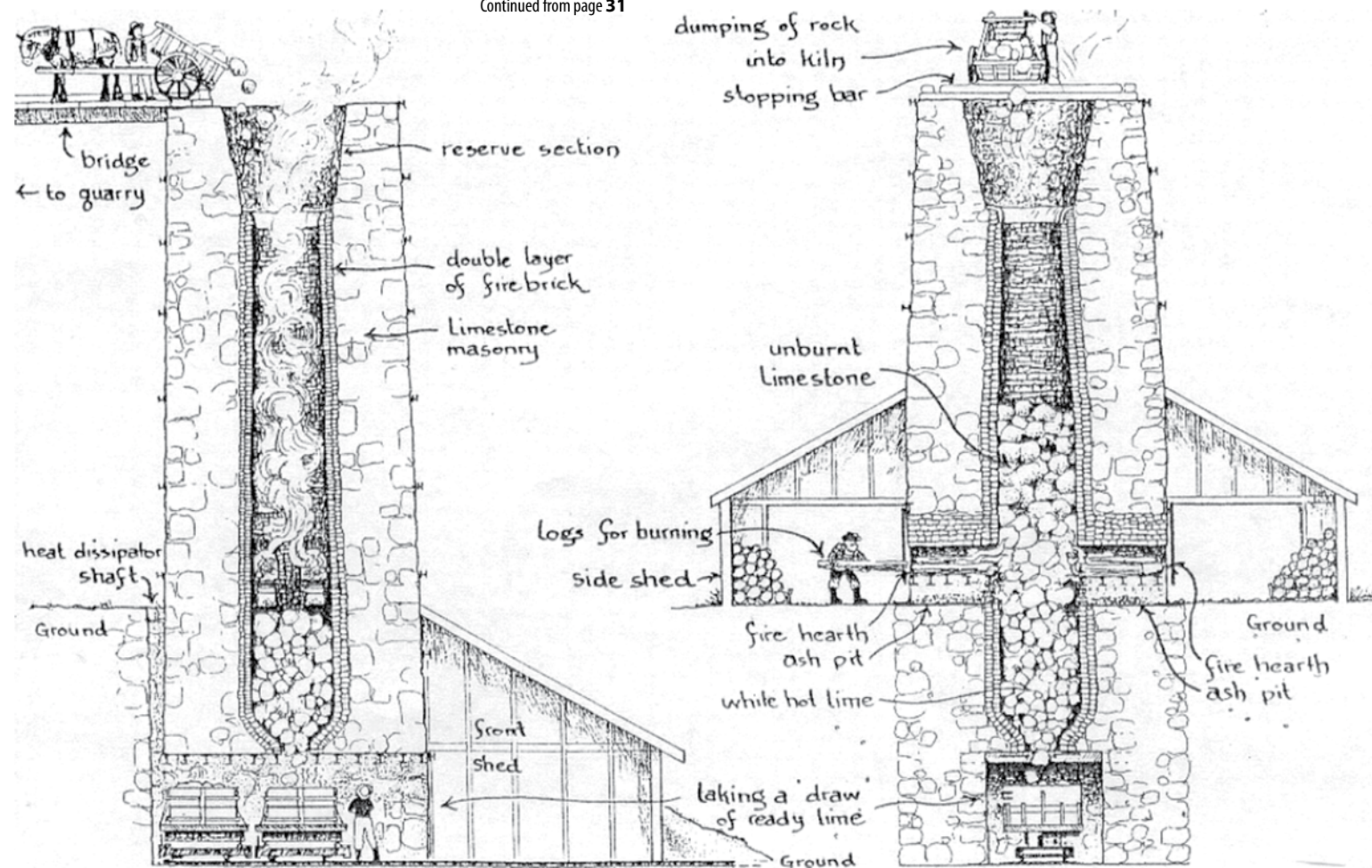
This specialized restoration was a project for Gerry Inglis, a third generation stone mason whose family ran a local aggregate business.

Local author and historian, John McDonald, said “Limestone production was one of the

◀ Limehouse used to be a thriving industrial area. The train track continues to be used. Also visible today, are the remains of the loading platform on the left side of the tracks in the centre of this photo. The long white roof sheltered a row of five to seven set kilns, which predate the Draw Kiln. Ruins of these set kilns can be seen today, almost completely overgrown.

more significant industries in its day. There’s a lot written about saw mills and grist mills in establishing communities, but the lime industry was just as important along the Niagara Escarpment.”

McDonald himself cherishes boyhood memories of exploring along the Limehouse trails in the early 1960s, when he could still see the roadways and tracks where limestone carts would shift material from the kilns to the railway loading docks nearby. His own grandfather



◀ Diagram of how a draw kiln works. Built against a cliff of the Niagara Escarpment, it was fed rocks from a horse-drawn wagon, top left. Heated by wood or charcoal, it burns limestone, separating out the lime needed for construction.

and great-grandfather worked on those kilns. "I've always been proud to come from Limehouse," he says.

In response to residents' concerns that local history was being lost with the deterioration of the kilns, The Limehouse Kiln Society was formed in 1999. Mary Shier, president of the society since that time, has, along with her husband and other dedicated volunteers, given a lot of effort and time to this restoration project, keeping this important part of local industrial history alive. The Society manages the kilns in co-operation with Credit Valley Conservation and the Town of Halton Hills.

Besides many historic buildings, limestone was vital to building railway bridges like the one that still stands over Black Creek. Lime was also widely used for agricultural fertilizer. "For an agricultural-based

country, that was very important. It was one of our great natural resources," adds McDonald.

Oldest Kilns

The smaller kilns still standing along the trails were the first ones used to cook the limestone, fueled by wood, which took three to four days to heat up, and the same length of time to cool down, between operations. Later, the much larger draw kiln (now in reconstruction) was quicker, and ran constantly.

Limestone rocks were deposited into the top of the kiln, while wood was constantly fed into the sides, partway down. Then, through an opening at the bottom, the lime powder was extracted.

In 1915, blasting started to encroach upon local homes, so all limestone operations were moved to the nearby village of Dolly Varden, where kilns were already in operation. They continued until 1931.

Lime production was crucial to the development of Georgetown and Acton, but gradually, as modern technologies emerged, the lime companies amalgamated and more products could be brought into the area, local manufacturing dwindled.

Historical restoration is a painstaking, costly endeavor. Funding has come from a Trillium grant, and from T.D. Friends of the Environment, but it will take a lot more. When asked what makes the society want to keep going on the project, Shier says, "Perseverance... Heritage preservation is a slow process."

It's also perseverance fuelled by a strong belief in the value of social history. As another author, Steve Berry, whose thriller novels always include a historical quest, says on his History Matters website, "A concerted effort to preserve our heritage is a vital link ... quit literally (to what makes) us who we are."

The Limehouse kiln site



Besides being used to make mortar, lime was also used in the following ways:

- ▶ The leather tanning industry to remove hair from hides
- ▶ In alkali paints such as Calcimine or Casein (white wash).
- ▶ The manufacture of iron, pulp and paper, soap, fertilizer, insecticides, sugar refining, and calcium carbide for the generation of acetylene, the purification of coal gas in the later part of the 19th century as well as a topical disinfectant, and sometimes in glass production.

◀ A view inside one of the better preserved set kilns. One of several in a row near the train track, these wood-fired kilns were not as efficient as the larger, charcoal-fired Draw Kiln. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

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▲ Ruins of the two-storey Gowdy mill, powered by Black Creek, are steps from the Draw Kiln, although the mill was not part of the lime industry. Debate continues over whether the building was a saw mill or grist mill. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

◀ Treasures remain to be discovered. What looks like a three-foot diameter grindstone was found at the side of Black Creek, opposite and somewhat removed from the mill ruins. Mary Shier says there is more to uncover of the bustling industry of Limehouse. PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

has been vandalized – an all too common occurrence in all Canadian parks. But as Berry says, “The greatest loss of history is through neglect.”

It’s a genuine pleasure to explore the Limehouse conservation pathways, and discover the fascinating rock formations and curious oven-like structures along the way, but it’s even more enjoyable to know why they’re there, and what a difference they made to how our great-grandparents and grandparents lived, and therefore to how we live today. **NEV**

Patti Post is a freelance journalist living in Halton Hills. She has a special interest in writing about community history, life stories, and travel.

The railway was crucial to the lime industry.